

God's Measure of Creation

BY NORMAN WIRZBA

When God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind, he realizes that God delights in a wild creation that exceeds the vision and interest of humans. Understanding our place in the creation requires that we see it in terms of God's intention and scale. Attempts to reduce it to the scale of human significance invariably result in pain to ourselves and in death to creatures around us.

Our working assumption for centuries has been that even if the earth does not exist exclusively for us, it is proper that we use it to serve our needs and wants. Our needs take precedence over the needs of the rest of creation. We say that when it comes to choosing between human flourishing and the flourishing of other members of creation, the choice is obvious: human need is of the greatest importance. We even may believe that the whole of creation serves as the backdrop for the execution and satisfaction of human dramas. After all, isn't the biblical plan of salvation devoted exclusively to *our* salvation?

There are many reasons for thinking that this view of creation is misguided and naïve. For starters, there is clear evidence that whenever we turn creation primarily toward human satisfaction we invariably destroy or maim the creation we deem to be beneath us. Rampant environmental destruction, both in the past and more clearly in the present, shows that inattentiveness to the integrity of the wider creation has serious effects for human and non-human populations. Ecologists, the scientists who study the interrelationships of living creatures, clearly demonstrate that we cannot separate ourselves from or live at the destructive expense of the rest of creation. Our health and fate depend directly upon the creation's health

and fate.

The book of Job offers an equally compelling reason to rethink the significance of creation and our place within it. Job learns from God that the creation does not exist for him. While it may be true that creation, for the most part, is exceptionally well suited for satisfying human beings' needs and desires, it is false to think that the scale of creation may be reduced to our conceptions of fairness and use. In other words, Job learns that the scope of creation exceeds any human measure of right or wrong, useful or useless, and beautiful or ugly. An adequate understanding of creation and an honest estimation of our place within it require that we see creation in terms of God's intention and scale. Attempts to reduce creation to the scale of human significance invariably result in pain to ourselves and in death to creatures around us.

Job is the quintessential person: he is blessed with family, wealth, and the respect of his peers. He is morally virtuous and spiritually pious (Job 1:1-5). We might say he is living an ancient version of the American Dream: after working honestly and hard he now enjoys the just rewards that come from his labor. The assumption that runs through the early chapters of Job is that God has ordered the world so that if we do our part, then God will protect and guarantee a safe outcome for us. As the drama unfolds, however, we see that it is precisely this assumption that will be put to the test.

God permits Satan to inflict terrible suffering on Job, first by taking away his family and wealth, and then by afflicting him with terrible sores that cover him from head to foot. Not yet having cursed God for his calamity, Job wishes he were dead. Job's friends, noticeably disturbed by this cry, plead that Job is being rash in his speech. God is on the side of (humanly conceived) justice, they say; therefore if Job has done justly, he will be dealt with in a just manner. But Job will have none of their response. Job declares that he is blameless. God is at fault for destroying the blameless as well as the wicked (9:21-22). Alluding to the covenantal conception of creation in which God is morally bound to preserve and protect the creation, Job exclaims: "Your hands fashioned and made me; and now you turn and destroy me. Remember that you fashioned me like clay; and will you turn me to dust again?" (10:8-9) Job suggests that his suffering indicates a capricious, cruel creator and a meaningless creation. In short, creation is not working out the way Job believes it should, and it is God's fault.

Job's friends turn against him for turning against God. They sense that they are at the limits of meaning here, for if their world-view and assumptions of justice are false, then the whole world will come tumbling down. Job, however, has traveled farther than they down this road toward despair. His view of himself and the universe is now in shreds. He does not know how to think or speak. He feels abandoned by God and hounded by

his peers. He is now completely vulnerable, knowing that the conventional responses to suffering and justice will not do. What he desires is an honest accounting, an authentic understanding of the creation and his place within it before the creator: “let me be weighed in a just balance...” (31:6). With this request Job announces that he is willing to see things differently and ready to be instructed about the true character of creation. His instruction will come from God.

Whereas Job was inclined to view the creation through the prisms of his own success (the world is a just place) or his own misery (the world is an unjust place), God forces Job to take a wider and more honest view of the universe. Creation is far more than Job can comprehend, imagine, or control since it is framed to the divine rather than a human scale.

God challenges Job with a series of questions in chapter 38: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” “Have you commanded the morning since your days began?” “Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?” The effect of these questions, William Brown notes, is “to challenge Job in his creaturely status and finite experience as well as broaden the horizons of

his moral worldview.”¹ In the encounter with God, Job learns about the inadequacy of the self-serving, human-centered views he and his supposedly wise peers held. He learns about the injustice of his moral, spiritual, and economic measures.

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The world appears here to be more dynamic and complex than any-

where else in Scripture. It is not the orderly world of the Priestly account in which humanity sits proudly above the rest of creation (Genesis 1). God's world, as revealed in the questioning of Job, contains forces of chaos that are not entirely subdued but instead are given a limited freedom to exercise their power. God sets bounds to the chaotic waves without obliterating them altogether (38:8-11). This is a wild God who delights in wildness: "Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their covert? Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?" (38:39-41) This is a wild creation that exceeds the vision and interest of humans. Job learns that its value and significance do not end with his own being. God reveals a "world without dominance and subservience, filled with unique identities and intrinsic worth," Brown writes. "Each species is an indispensable thread woven into the colorful fabric of life. And Yahweh proudly points to each of them in order to recontextualize the provincial world of Job and his friends."² Whereas Job sees in wildness the marks of fragility and impoverishment, perhaps even cruelty and capriciousness, God sees dignity and strength.

So God's questioning of Job changes his understanding of himself and the creation. Job's view, which was the received wisdom of the day, had been that the creation and its creator, though not existing for the exclusive benefit of human interests, were in clean and stable alignment with human flourishing. To be sure, Job's peers insisted that his flourishing depended on Job acting justly. What they failed to perceive, however, was that their conception of justice was too centered upon human beings, or too anthropocentric. They failed to consider whether or not their perceptive and evaluative faculties were naïve or self-serving.

One of the most important lessons Job learns is that creation must be perceived as centered upon God, or theocentrically. All creation, even those elements that are of no interest or benefit to us, has value to its creator. God notices every creature and enjoys their activities even when they verge on the chaotic (38:8-9). In the speeches from the whirlwind God says that creation has an integrity all its own (38:1-41:34). The parts and processes of creation form a dynamic whole in which chaos and order, work and play, and life and death together contribute to the glory of God. Moreover, God does not rule creation with an iron fist. God extends to it a fair measure of freedom, like a mother watching over her sometimes obedient, sometimes rebellious, child. There is, in other words, an openness and unpredictability that follows from its divinely bestowed freedom and integrity. Creation does not exist solely to suit or benefit us. It has a sublime character that can stun and amaze us, if we care to look. It also can cause us pain.

Following God's speeches from the whirlwind Job can offer only the

response of one who is properly humbled. The dramatic portion of the text ends with the enigmatic words: “therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (42:6). This verse is notoriously difficult to translate. It could also be rendered “I retract [my case or complaint against you] and give up my dust and ashes,” or as Stephen Mitchell suggests, “Therefore I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust.” Mitchell’s translation may well be

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the most appropriate since it makes the best sense of Job’s experience. Job does not despise himself, for he has learned that God created him with the same care as the rest of creation. To despise himself would be to insult God directly. Nor should Job consider himself a complete fool because, unlike his friends, he was prepared to see that

human justice may be naïve and short-sighted. He spoke more truthfully of God than his friends (42:7). What Job does learn, however, is that his complaint was misplaced and misinformed.

Job is illuminated by the greater light of creation. No longer lord and master, or sole beneficiary, of the created order, Job survives his plight as one prepared to surrender his life to the wisdom of God and the larger drama of creation. Having seen God and no longer relying on what he merely has heard about God (42:5), Job has been introduced to a much larger vision of the world. His perception has been altered to sense in all things the majesty of God, a majesty that encompasses suffering and joy, benefit and loss. He undergoes the shift from an anthropocentric to a theocentric understanding of the cosmos. “It is as if the world we perceive through our senses, that whole gorgeous and terrible pageant, were the breath-thin surface of a bubble, and everything else, inside and outside, is pure radiance. Both suffering and joy come then like a brief reflection, and death like a pin.”³ He is but dust and ashes, and for him, particularly when creation is understood in terms of its divine scale, that is enough. His own mortality, rather than being a curse, is no less a part of God’s plan than the calving of the deer and the hunger of young lions.

Job’s new vision of justice based in the sublimity of creation leads him to a transformed engagement with the world. In the epilogue to the story God restores and even doubles Job’s fortunes. He receives comfort and new sons and daughters. But Job no longer deals with these gifts in the way that he previously did. Significantly, we are told the names of Job’s

three daughters and that they are beautiful (an indication of Job's welcoming the goodness of blessing). More importantly, the daughters are given a share in the inheritance as are the sons. This gesture would have been unheard of in ancient Israel given its patriarchal assumptions and institutions. Job now is ready to welcome the world on its own good terms rather than in terms of the conventional understanding that relegated daughters to a subordinate role. His welcome reveals his newly found compassion and delight in creation that are grounded in God's own compassion and delight. Job emerges from his long plight ready to embrace the creation with the selfless care and joy that marks God's own involvement with the world.

Job now will risk mirroring in his own life the creation and Creator newly revealed to him. It will be difficult for him to live in a manner fitting with a dynamic world that is not geared to suit human ends exclusively. Job must reshape his identity and vocation so that they promote the well-being of the whole creation, rather than simply his own interests and concerns. He must expand his accounting systems so that they reflect as much as possible the diversity and sublimity of creation. Job's task was certainly counter-cultural in his day; it will be perhaps even more difficult in today's egocentric, consumer-driven culture.⁴

NOTES

1 William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 91.

2 *Ibid.*, 97.

3 Stephen Mitchell, "Introduction" to *The Book of Job*, tr. Stephen Mitchell (New York: HarperPerennial, 1987), xxviii.

4 Bill McKibben, *The Comforting Whirlwind: God, Job, and the Scale of Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), relates the lessons of Job to our contemporary ecological context.



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