



Comfort in the Whirlwind? Job, Creation, and Environmental Degradation

SARAH STOKES MUSSER

Many of the headlines that have dominated the news in recent years have painted a picture of nature in revolt. Soaring food prices, tornadoes, cyclones, earthquakes, droughts, and flooding have ravaged human communities. Given recent assessments of the impact of global warming on natural and human systems by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, there is good reason to fear that environmental calamities may continue to wreak havoc across the globe.¹ With the horror and suffering that accompany massive droughts and storms, we humans will surely return to the perennial question of theodicy: Where is God in the hurricane? Why are so many innocents afflicted? While the book of Job is famous for wrestling with many of these large questions, it more clearly addresses humans' proper placement within creation, providing particular insights,

¹M. L. Parry et al., eds. "Summary for Policymakers," in IPCC, *Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 7–22.

While the book of Job does not ultimately answer the question of the righteous sufferer, it offers a critique of human manipulation of God and creation that should cause us to repent from our habits and practices of undisciplined management. This call to repentance is particularly urgent now that we have knowledge about the fragility of ecosystems and the disproportionate negative impact environmental calamities exact on the poor who are least responsible for them.

warnings, and words of hope for us as we suffer the consequences of environmental degradation.

JOB AND CREATION

Bill McKibben presents Job as a helpful analogue for contemporary readers, for we too are struggling against prevailing orthodoxies: while Job is challenging a strict notion of divine retributive justice, we are beginning to acknowledge the hubris and harm intrinsic to the reigning economic principles related to unlimited growth.² For McKibben, this analogy rests on similar dispositions. Like Job's friends, we who embrace unrestrained economic development assume that humans are the center of the universe.³ McKibben posits that the divine dialogues in Job can teach us moderns about our rightful place as humble members of God's creation.⁴

This lesson of humility is particularly germane in this era of anthropogenic climate change. However, it is important to take McKibben's conclusion even further, probing the assumptions about creation implicit in the human-centered orthodoxy held by Job's friends. It is not *just* that the "popular" wisdom being challenged by Job holds humans in undue esteem; it is that this privileging of the human comes at the cost of a proper estimation of the rest of the created order.

As Kathryn Schifferdecker observes, the problem in the book of Job is that both he and his friends have an incorrect view of creation. Schifferdecker characterizes this problematic view as "fencing in," introduced by the Satan at the very beginning of the book: "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land" (1:9–10). According to this view, blessing comes to Job because God has ordered creation to his benefit.⁵ This is the same logic that informs Job's friends' view of the world: the righteous prosper through material well-being and security, protected from the wild elements of creation. The awesome creatures displayed at the end of the book, creatures that God cares for and in which God delights—Leviathan, Behemoth, lions, and wild oxen—have no place in a "fenced-in" life. Human flourishing is conceived in terms hostile toward elements of the created order that do not serve human ends.

Not only does this view presuppose a negative assessment of much of creation, but it also functions as a justification for humans to seek control over their environment. Pious living becomes a way to guard against contingency. According to Schifferdecker, Job's rejection of this orthodoxy is but an example of its inverse:

²Bill McKibben, *The Comforting Whirlwind: God, Job, and the Scale of Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 4–21.

³Ibid., 33.

⁴Ibid., 42.

⁵Kathryn Schifferdecker, *Out of the Whirlwind: Creation Theology in the Book of Job* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) 31.

Job's experience of suffering is seen as a capricious act of God whereby Job is unduly "fenced in."⁶ Job holds creation itself to be chaotic, lacking any moral logic. This self-centered estimation manifests itself most strikingly in Job's futile attempt to undo creation in chapter 3. Thus, both Job and his friends understand creation in terms of how they experience it: it is either a means of divine blessing or curse. It is not fundamentally a gift of a generous Creator.

Through the divine discourses at the end of the book, Job learns both that creation is under God's benevolent care and that God's justice and ordering are beyond any easy human reckoning. Job is privileged to see the One in whose image we are made: he sees God exercising dominion in a sphere incomprehensible to human ken apart from divine revelation. Remarkably, Job sees in relief the poetry of creation, expressed in Gen 1: God laying the foundation of the earth, setting bounds to the sea, bringing rain to dry land, and feeding wild animals. Job sees the goodness of creation in all its wonder, awe, and glory, and he sees that God's purposes for fruitfulness and blessing extend far beyond notions of human calculation and retribution. As Schifferdecker notes, Job learns that the world is indeed divinely ordered but, more important, that it is not necessarily safe for humans, given the limits of human understanding.⁷ Consequently, Job's transformation and redemption are anchored in reconsideration of what it means to be human.⁸

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The arrogance evident in the book that Job graciously unlearns is but a more pious flavoring of the prevailing orthodoxy of wealth acquisition that McKibben critiques, whereby security, prosperity, and abundance are unquestioned ends. While Job's friends believe such goods could be attained through righteousness, we "enlightened" moderns hold human ingenuity and industry as the means by which we might experience what many call "blessing." To this end, we have committed ourselves to human economic practices at odds with what Wendell Berry calls nature's "Great Economy."⁹ With a narrow view toward short-term gains, we all too easily exploit land, labor, and ourselves in order to maximize profits and productivity at the expense of sustainable ecosystems and communities.

From the perspective of environmental degradation, there is much to be said for the piety of Job's friends. The pursuit of righteousness, especially as envisioned by Torah, entails restraint on human acquisition and striving. Nonetheless, the book of Job reveals the deep inadequacy of measuring sanctification by security. As

⁶Ibid., 31–32.

⁷Ibid., 75–76.

⁸Ibid., 105–106.

⁹Wendell Berry, "Two Economies," in *Home Economics* (San Francisco: North Point, 1987) 56.

Ellen Davis helpfully notes, Job is a man of integrity because of his devotion to God.¹⁰ Job remains committed to God even when life seems most inexplicable and unfair. Job painfully shows us that a true life of faith is not constituted by attempts at control. Instead, Job learns that blessing comes from seeing oneself within God's larger purposes of care for the cosmos and from living into the gratuity that constitutes being a creature.

CREATION AND CONTROL

The lesson of Job most pressing for people now facing the consequences of human-induced climate change is its challenge to our wrongheaded notions of control. Attempting to base our relationship with God on securing our personal well-being is not only woefully misplaced (indeed, many would claim idolatrous) but also utterly futile. The divine discourses in Job stress our human limitations in relation to exercising control over the created order. Despite all our advances in science, we will not be able to give an account of that time when the earth was formed and the “morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy” (38:7). Neither will we be able to command the dawn nor change the course of the stars, binding the chains of the Pleiades or loosing the cords of Orion (38:12, 31–32). God guides and limits the cosmic elements like a parent, and we are best advised to assume our place among the great diversity of God’s children. To do otherwise is to be irreverent and, by extension, irresponsible.

Sadly, human history witnesses to our folly in endeavoring to domesticate our fellow creatures. As a part of God’s display of the grandeur of nature and his care for it, God parades before Job a litany of wild animals: lions, ravens, mountain goats, wild asses, wild oxen, ostriches, horses, hawks, eagles, Behemoth, and Leviathan. These animals are exalted for their wildness. With the exception of the horse, all are portrayed as beyond human control and use, reflecting the extravagant nature of creation.

Most stunning about these animals presented by God to Job is their modern fate. The wild ox is now extinct. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species, all but the raven, horse, and ostrich are at risk of global extinction (even the common raven is considered a threatened or imperiled species by some US states).¹¹ The mountain goat and wild ass face an extremely high risk of extinction in the near to immediate future. The ostrich, lion, and crocodile are regionally extinct in Israel, and the hippopotamus (what many scholars consider to be Behemoth) is extinct in Egypt. The Syrian wild ass, the species that once roamed throughout the Negev desert in Israel, became ex-

¹⁰Ellen F. Davis, “Job and Jacob: The Integrity of Faith,” in *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992) 219.

¹¹International Union for Conservation of Nature, *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2011.1*, at <http://www.iucnredlist.org> (accessed April 25, 2012) and “*Corvus corax*,” *NatureServe Explorer*, at <http://www.natureserve.org/explorer/servlet/NatureServe?searchName=Corvus+corax+> (accessed April 25, 2012).

tinct in 1927.¹² On a positive note, because of conservation efforts the Nile crocodile (perhaps the origin of Leviathan) in 1996 was deemed by the IUCN to be no longer a threatened species; the same, however, cannot be said for all crocodile species.

Unlike the inexplicable suffering Job experiences, the demise of these animals extolled by God can be explained by human behaviors such as habitat encroachment, hunting, poaching, pollution, and “pest” elimination. Similarly, the human suffering resulting from the effects of climate change—for example, droughts, flooding, and storms that produce an increase in refugee populations, food insecurity, and the need for disaster relief—can be linked to human exploits.¹³ In pursuit of profit and security, humans have “fenced in” our surroundings at the expense of many of our fellow creatures, the atmosphere, and indeed even ourselves. We have sought to exercise direct control over the natural world. These activities proclaim both arrogant assumptions about our place in the cosmic order—anything not of direct use to us being unworthy of our care and preservation—and the futility and recklessness of many of our managerial efforts.

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Unfortunately, we moderns are able to read with irony God’s words meant to inspire, challenge, and humble Job. God’s questions about the mountain goat—“Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the deer?” (39:1–3)—seem trivial in an age of professional biology and zoological entertainment. Surely there are experts on ibex who can cite statistics about their natural history, and many people have the opportunity to observe these animals “up close” in zoos or wildlife preserves. While this information is not necessarily to be dismissed, the perilous fate of various wild ibex populations stands as an indictment of all the gains in knowledge we humans have accumulated. Wisdom has not accompanied expertise. God’s proclamation that the wild ass “scorns the tumult of the city; it does not hear the shouts of the driver” (Job 39:7) no longer rings with pride now that the wild ass, along with the once similarly free wild ox, derides human mastery to its own demise.

Perhaps the most tragic—and ironic—of God’s questions to Job concern the mighty beasts Behemoth and Leviathan. They are presented as creatures par excellence: Behemoth is “the first of the great acts of God” (40:19), and Leviathan “has

¹²P. D. Moehlman, N. Shah and C. Feh, “Equus hemionus,” *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2011.1*, at <http://www.iucnredlist.org/apps/redlist/details/7951/0> (accessed April 25, 2012).

¹³Tyler Edgar and Lee Xu, “Climate and Church: How Global Climate Change Will Impact Core Church Ministries,” *National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program Office*, at <http://www.nccecojustice.org/network/forms/download.html> (accessed April 25, 2012).

no equal....it is king over all that are proud" (41:33–34). While these creatures are best understood as mythological beings, it is nevertheless relevant to read God's challenges about them with first hippos and then crocodiles in mind:

Can one take it with hooks or pierce its nose with a snare? (40:24)

Can you draw it out with a fishhook, or press its tongue with a cord? Can you put a rope in its nose or pierce its jaw with a hook?...Will traders bargain over it? Will they divide it up among the merchants? Can you fill its skin with harpoons, or its head with fishing spears? (41:1–2, 6–7)

These questions acknowledge the human propensity to dominate and exploit other living things, though the Joban poet surely would be shocked at the ease with which modern readers can answer these rhetorical questions about human mastery in the affirmative. Currently, both hippos and crocodiles have been greatly impacted by hunting and trading. According to a 2003 report, the hippo population in the Democratic Republic of Congo has declined 95% since 1994 due to unregulated hunting for meat and ivory amidst civil unrest.¹⁴ Unlike hooks and snares, firearms easily overcome such fearsome beasts. The relative success and recovery of the Nile crocodile are due in large part to conservation measures that encourage crocodile ranching, a sustainable use practice whereby crocodile eggs and hatchlings are captured in the wild, raised in captivity, and then harvested for their skins for trade in international markets.¹⁵ Thus the challenge God presents to humankind about its relationship to Leviathan has been completely subverted: for the Nile crocodile, its commodification is essential to its survival. It may be that similar "farming" practices will be necessary for hippo populations as well.

McKibben warns that through human control and management of the world, we are fashioning nature in ways that make God mute.¹⁶ However, this concern is compelling only to the extent that human technology and ingenuity are successful in managing something far beyond our capabilities. It is not simply a matter of knowledge that we humans lack: it is wisdom.

WISDOM—CONTROL'S CURE

Chapter 28 of Job powerfully meditates on the nature of wisdom and humans' relationship to it. This chapter begins with an extended description of human industry, describing the work of mining for precious stones and metals. In this pursuit, humans "put their hand to the flinty rock, and overturn mountains by the roots. They cut out channels in the rocks, and their eyes see every precious thing. The sources of the rivers they probe; hidden things they bring to light" (28:9–11). In carving up the natural landscape in search of valuable natural re-

¹⁴R. Lewison and W. Oliver, "Hippopotamus amphibius," in *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2011.1*, at <http://www.iucnredlist.org/apps/redlist/details/10103/0> (accessed April 25, 2012).

¹⁵"Conservation—Nile Crocodile," ARKive, at <http://www.arkive.org/nile-crocodile/crocodylus-niloticus/#text=Conservation> (accessed April 25, 2012).

¹⁶McKibben, *Comforting Whirlwind*, 83.

sources, human activity is likened to that of the divine. Job describes God as one who “removes mountains” (9:5), and God declares that he is the one who “has cut a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt” (38:25).

According to the poet of chapter 28, human skill, in all its divine-like dominion, lacks wisdom. Job affirms that wisdom cannot be possessed by means of human craft and that its value cannot be reduced to the world’s riches (28:12–19). Only God possesses wisdom, and it is through wisdom that God “gave the wind its weight, and apportioned out the waters by measure; when he made a decree for the rain, and a way for the thunderbolt” (28:25–27). Despite what might seem to be similarities between human and divine control over the natural order, the presence of wisdom makes all the difference.

Wisdom is the logic with which God created the world good: it is through wisdom that each created element has been ordered, blessed, and oriented toward flourishing.¹⁷ Apart from God’s wisdom, human striving is at best vain and at worst destructive. Whereas God’s wisdom orders rain to fall in the desert “to satisfy the waste and desolate land” (38:27), human technology has been employed in such devastating pursuits as mountaintop removal for coal extraction. In this exercise of human ingenuity, both mountain ecosystems and human communities are destroyed, as over a million acres of forest are obliterated, and flooding, airborne pollution, and toxic contamination of water supplies plague surrounding mountain populations.¹⁸

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The human search for security too often witnesses to such folly. We seek wealth by extracting natural resources. We eliminate dangerous wild animals. We burn fossil fuels to feed countless manifestations of power. These activities display our rejection of Job’s understanding that wisdom consists in “fear of the Lord” (28:28). Fear for our own well-being has animated much of our doing and striving at the expense of the rest of the creation. We may have become technologically savvy, but we cannot rightfully claim to be wise. Proverbs’ warning that we eschew wisdom at our peril takes on added significance in our age of technological prowess.

¹⁷See Proverbs 3:19 and 8:22–31. Ellen Davis observes that the playful portrayal of Wisdom in 8:22–31 “both complements and amplifies the picture of creation in Genesis 1, with its more somber statement of divine approval: ‘And God saw that it was (very) good.’” In Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 68.

¹⁸John McQuaid, “The Razing of Appalachia: Mountaintop Removal Revisited,” *Yale Environment 360*, at <http://e360.yale.edu/content/feature.msp?id=2150> (accessed April 25, 2012); M. A. Palmer et al., “Mountaintop Mining Consequences,” *Science* 327/5962 (8 January 2010) 148–149.

Job's message for us consists of both caution and comfort. Job clearly emphasizes that God does not bless human efforts to control the natural world—either by pious living or our trust in human technology—for our individual flourishing. God may speak to Job out of a whirlwind that McKibben describes as “comforting,” but we should not be surprised to hear God speak to us through storms and natural disasters. Just as Job experienced the futility of ordering creation through personal righteousness, so too should we expect to suffer the consequences of our flawed attempts to order and domesticate our environment. In our efforts to make life safe, we have unwittingly made it *more* dangerous—for ourselves and for our fellow creatures. While the book of Job does not ultimately answer the question of the righteous sufferer, it offers a critique of human manipulation of God and creation that should cause us to repent from our habits and practices of undisciplined management. This call to repentance is particularly urgent now that we have knowledge about the fragility of ecosystems and the disproportionate negative impact environmental calamities exact on the poor who are least responsible for them.

At the same time, however, Job teaches us that the cosmos is mysteriously and miraculously in God's hands. We can trust that God does indeed set a limit to human wickedness (38:12–15), and that blessing comes from reconsidering what it means to be human: relinquishing our pursuit of security in exchange for wisdom, seeking to live righteously with all of God's creatures in praise, wonder, and gratitude. While embracing the hope of Job means reckoning that human safety according to our own understanding will not necessarily be preserved, we could do far worse than to fear the Lord, trusting in the one who guides the stars and blesses the wastelands with rain. 

SARAH STOKES MUSSER is a PhD candidate at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. She is working on a dissertation in theology and ethics entitled “Sacrifice, Sabbath, and the Restoration of Creation.”