

SECTION 1 – THE BIBLE

Chapter 1 – God's relationship to Creation

O let the earth bless the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye mountains and little hills, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O all ye things that grow in the earth, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye mountains, bless ye the Lord: Praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye seas and rivers, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O ye whales, and all that move in the waters, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O all ye fowls of the air, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

O all ye beasts and cattle, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

Prayer of Azariah¹

Yahweh as Creation's Governor

A number of biblical passages are habitually cited to support the doctrine of a fallen Creation, of which the most important are in the first three chapters of Genesis. However, before I deal with those in detail, it will be instructive to look at what the Bible says about God's relationship with the natural Creation in our world *as it is* – the world after the Fall of mankind. I will deal with the usual key passages in the next chapter.

I propose to bypass, for the most part, God's relationship to human agency, although it is important in its own right, in order to concentrate on the non-human Creation, which is the matter in question. In Scripture, God's sovereignty over nature is not sharply distinguished from his sovereignty over human affairs, but the aim of this study is to point out that what happened to mankind in the garden did *not* spread to the rest of the world, the "irrational creatures".

Another reason for steering clear of the interface between sovereignty and sinful human will is that, particularly amongst theistic evolutionists, there is a chronic confusion between "free-will" and various concepts of "autonomy" applied improperly to inanimate nature, a confusion that I do not propose to perpetuate here. For both reasons I'm concentrating on the Creation apart from man.

As is generally the case, the Old Testament is the best source from which to establish the basic foundations of Biblical religion on which the Gospel is built. And a good place to start this study, for our purposes, is the list of blessings and curses associated with the Mosaic Covenant.

It is now pretty well accepted in Old Testament scholarship that the Jewish "law" or *torah*, the first five books of our Bible (= the *Pentateuch*), has a close affinity with ancient near eastern treaty documents, and particularly with those of the Hittites in the second millennium BC². The pattern of

¹ Prayer of Azariah (Benedicite), *Greek version of Daniel vv52-60*.

² Quite probably other nations had such treaties at the time: the Hittites' are those which have come down to us, giving the most convincing geo-historical setting for the Pentateuchal covenants.

Israel's Covenant with Yahweh follows that of the treaties which powerful kings would make with their vassals.

The Book of Deuteronomy, which consists largely of Moses's discourse to Israel as they prepare to cross the Jordan, follows the pattern of such a treaty in its entirety. The pattern in the rest of the Pentateuch is broken up with law codes, narrative and so on, but one can still discern part of the pattern of such a covenant document in the account of Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus, and in Leviticus. The covenant is also restated in the Book of Joshua.

Old Testament and ancient near east scholar John H Walton gives the basic elements of an ancient near east treaty as follows:

- Introduction of the speaker
- Historical prologue
- Stipulations
- Divine witnesses
- Curses and blessings³

In the Exodus account of the making of the Covenant, the first heading (*introduction of the speaker*) is limited to 20.2:

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."

The *historical prologue* occurs in 19.3-6, in which God describes how he has brought Israel to himself, out of Egypt, and offers them the Covenant – that they will be his treasured possession if they are faithful to him.

The *stipulations* are primarily the Ten Commandments of 20.3-17. A typical ANE treaty would, at this point, have items such as the paying of tribute, providing military support and showing general faithfulness to the king making the treaty. The Ten Commandments however, being part of a treaty with God as King rather than with an earthly ruler, instead embody faithfulness to Yahweh in the "first table", and faithfulness to brother-Israelites in the "second table".

Their role as covenant stipulations explains their global scope and ethical basis. They are not "laws" as such, for they would be practically unenforceable. Instead they stipulate what kind of people the Israelites are to be, if they are to stay faithful to the gracious covenant God has made with them, having rescued them from Pharaoh's power. And, like the treaties made elsewhere in the ANE, Israel's copy is kept for reference in the temple of their god – in this case, of course, the two tables of stone kept in the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle.

Coming to the matter in hand, the Ten Commandments are backed up by a series of blessings and curses, just as were ANE treaty stipulations. Walton says that even in these political treaties, it was the gods who were the agents who would bless compliance or, more often, punish violation⁴. The biblical blessings and curses are most clearly set out in Leviticus 26 (though they are also seen in Deut. 28 and Josh. 24):

³ Walton, John H, *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1989) p.101.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 104-5.

“If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees their fruit. Your threshing will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting, and you will eat all the food you want and live in safety in your land.

“I will grant peace in the land, and you will lie down and no one will make you afraid. I will remove wild beasts from the land, and the sword will not pass through your country. You will pursue your enemies, and they will fall by the sword before you. Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you.

“I will look on you with favour and make you fruitful and increase your numbers, and I will keep my covenant with you. You will still be eating last year's harvest when you will have to move it out to make room for the new. I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt so that you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians; I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high.

“But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant, then I will do this to you: I will bring on you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and sap your strength. You will plant seed in vain, because your enemies will eat it. I will set my face against you so that you will be defeated by your enemies; those who hate you will rule over you, and you will flee even when no one is pursuing you.

“If after all this you will not listen to me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over. I will break down your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze. Your strength will be spent in vain, because your soil will not yield its crops, nor will the trees of your land yield their fruit.

“If you remain hostile toward me and refuse to listen to me, I will multiply your afflictions seven times over, as your sins deserve. I will send wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children, destroy your cattle and make you so few in number that your roads will be deserted.

“If in spite of these things you do not accept my correction but continue to be hostile toward me, I myself will be hostile toward you and will afflict you for your sins seven times over. And I will bring the sword on you to avenge the breaking of the covenant. When you withdraw into your cities, I will send a plague among you, and you will be given into enemy hands. When I cut off your supply of bread, ten women will be able to bake your bread in one oven, and they will dole out the bread by weight. You will eat, but you will not be satisfied.

“If in spite of this you still do not listen to me but continue to be hostile toward me, then in my anger I will be hostile toward you, and I myself will punish you for your sins seven times over. You will eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters. I will destroy your high places, cut down your incense altars and pile your dead bodies[b] on the lifeless forms of your idols, and I will abhor you. I will turn your cities into ruins and lay waste your sanctuaries, and I will take no delight in the pleasing aroma of your offerings. I myself will lay waste the land, so that your enemies who live there will be appalled. I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste, and

your cities will lie in ruins. Then the land will enjoy its sabbath years all the time that it lies desolate and you are in the country of your enemies; then the land will rest and enjoy its sabbaths. All the time that it lies desolate, the land will have the rest it did not have during the sabbaths you lived in it.

“As for those of you who are left, I will make their hearts so fearful in the lands of their enemies that the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to flight. They will run as though fleeing from the sword, and they will fall, even though no one is pursuing them. They will stumble over one another as though fleeing from the sword, even though no one is pursuing them. So you will not be able to stand before your enemies. You will perish among the nations; the land of your enemies will devour you. Those of you who are left will waste away in the lands of their enemies because of their sins; also because of their ancestors' sins they will waste away.”⁵

For our purpose the key thing to notice here is that Yahweh uses the *Creation* as his reliable and obedient agent both for blessing *and* for cursing. In fact, the very same elements are used in both ways. And so in the blessings section, we read that God promises to send regular rains and bring forth crops from the soil. He will grant Israel peace, and remove wild animals from the land (which in practice, of course, means they will go to live elsewhere). He will also grant them fertility, and dwell among them.

If they break the covenant, however, he will bring defeat, wasting diseases, fevers and anxiety. He will withhold rain and bring famine, send wild animals against them, and destroy them with plagues.

Now, unlike some other episodes in the Bible (such as the plagues of Egypt), these actions are not presented as signs, or miraculous interventions against the usual run of things, but as the way that God routinely manages the nation he has established and brought into covenant relationship. Israel will *always* be experiencing either God's blessing or God's punishment, and most often these will be manifested through God's deployment of the powers of the natural Creation.

A major doctrinal point can be made quite clearly from this: one reason for Yahweh's creation of the natural world is in order for it to be his instrument of government *for* the world, and especially for the human world which is the prime focus of his concern. The things in world exist not, primarily, for their own sake, but in order to serve Yahweh's governing purposes day by day.

The blessings and curses demonstrate that everything in Creation does, indeed, do his bidding quite willingly to achieve his ends. According to what he commands, the weather will either be beneficial and productive, or violent and destructive. The wild beasts will either withdraw harmlessly into uninhabited places, or act as marauders in town and villages, according to his purpose. The bacteria and parasites (if we may view things in that modern manner) will be harmless or will produce epidemics, just as he wills.

God, then, actively commands all aspects of nature, and whether these act benignly or wreak destruction depends on the outworking of God's sovereign justice and mercy. Nature itself, therefore – by which we mean nature in the world after the Fall – must surely be regarded as “good”, for it is utterly obedient to the will of its maker.

We may well conclude that, had mankind not become guilty of sin, God would employ the elements more uniformly benignly towards us, always bringing blessing rather than cursing. But that they do

⁵ Lev. 26:3-39.

not reflects the change in our relationship with God to one of enmity⁶, and not a change in the character of the elements themselves.

Now the collection of blessings and curses in Leviticus brings these elements of Creation together in one place, but there is a multitude of other passages that show how God actually exercised his lordship over nature through Israel's history. There are many more to show that his active rule, through an obedient nature, is not confined to his dealings with the covenant people, but characterises his rule over the world as a whole.

Weather

The weather, in particular, is said in Scripture to be God's agent of government:

*He makes the clouds his chariot
and rides on the wings of the wind.
He makes winds his messengers,
flames of fire his servants.⁷*

For example, Ps. 65 describes God's care for the land through his control of rainfall:

*You care for the land and water it;
you enrich it abundantly.
The streams of God are filled with water
to provide the people with grain,
for so you have ordained it.
You drench its furrows and level its ridges;
you soften it with showers and bless its crops.
You crown the year with your bounty,
and your carts overflow with abundance.
The grasslands of the wilderness overflow;
the hills are clothed with gladness.
The meadows are covered with flocks
and the valleys are mantled with grain;
they shout for joy and sing.⁸*

The Book of Job, in a remarkable passage in 36-37, not only describes the hydrological cycle accurately, but shows that God's judicial use of the weather is broader both geographically,

*This is the way he governs the nations
and provides food in abundance,⁹*

⁶ Rom. 5.10, Col. 1.21.

⁷ Ps. 104.3-4.

⁸ Ps. 65.9-13.

⁹ Jb. 36.31.

and in the range of divine purposes it serves: it provides abundance (36.28,31; 37.13), punishes sin (37.13), or simply shows his glory (36.29-30; 37.4-8). In some cases his reasons (as well as his methods) for bringing the weather he does remain mysterious and simply excite wonder (37.14-18). The last, in particular, reminds us that part of God's sustaining work is in keeping the systems of the world running smoothly quite apart from issues of justice towards humanity – what we would consider to be “maintaining the natural order.”

Other examples of God's complete control of the weather include his sending of an east wind to drive back the Reed Sea (Ex. 14), sending thunder and rain out of season to highlight Israel's sin (1 Sam. 12.18), showing his sovereignty against Baal (a storm god) by bringing and ending drought through Elijah (1 Ki. 17ff) and commanding wind, earthquake and fire to teach Elijah (1 Ki. 19). He is also responsible for snow, frost, hail and insupportable icy winds – and then for melting them again with his word and with the breeze (Ps. 147.15-18). In the New Testament too Paul tells the Lystrans that God witnesses to himself by giving them rain, crops, plenty and joy (Acts 14.17).¹⁰

Crops

The weather, as some of the passages above indicate, is inextricably linked to times of plenty and famine. And crops themselves are uniformly said to be under God's control in Scripture. Even before the settlement in Canaan God blesses Isaac with an exceptional crop (Gen. 26.12ff), and makes both Laban and Jacob rich by blessing their livestock (Gen. 30.27ff; 32.9ff).

The seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, described in Gen. 41 and the ensuing chapters, is explicitly explained by Joseph, interpreting Pharaoh's dream, to be what *God* is about to do. In this case God's purposes are described in some depth, and are complex. God is honoured by the fulfilment of the prophecy, and through Joseph's good management. Joseph himself is honoured, making him able to benefit his family to the point of their settling in Goshen. Pharaoh's power increases through the changes in land ownership in Egypt. The malevolence of Joseph's brothers is turned to God's intended good. And, of course, the course determined for Israel's history at the time of God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15.13-14) is fulfilled, and the Covenant preserved. God's management of nature is therefore not to be seen in a simplistic way as the caprice of a bad-tempered deity.

Even the Jubilee law is predicated on God's undertaking to give triple harvests to allow the land to lie fallow (Lev. 25.20-22). His rule is an active one in every way.

The elements are never independent of God

Now there are instances in Scripture where natural phenomena of extreme weather, famine and so on are mentioned without any specific references to God's actions or intentions. But it should not be understood from this that these things “just happen” apart from God's will. That would be alien to the whole Hebrew worldview. Rather, when things are described phenomenologically, without reference to divine intent, we are to suppose that God is going about his “own business” and that his particular motives are hidden from us, or just irrelevant to the narrative.

¹⁰ Other weather references include Jb. 38.23-30, 34-38; Ps. 29.3-9 (where the elements are actually God's voice); Jer. 10.12; Jon. 1.4; Hag. 1.5-11.

And so the famine of Gen. 12, which takes Abraham to Egypt, and that of ch.26, which takes Isaac to Abimelech, cannot be ascribed to “chance” or forces alien to God in the light of what is revealed about the great events of the famine sent by God in Joseph’s time, even though the earlier situations appear to threaten the Covenant. God is at work even in these.

In a similar way the storm that shipwrecks Paul in Acts 27 is presented as a happenstance, and so could be taken as a convulsion of uncontrolled nature, or even as Satan’s attempt to prevent Paul getting to Rome – though the latter is not in the least hinted. Yet the storm is set in the context of Paul’s whole apostolic calling, and of several prophecies regarding his trip to Rome, and within a theology of Christ’s sovereignty over all things because of his glorification (including over the chaos that goes with “sea” in Hebrew thought).

On the one hand, such a storm was a seasonal possibility – though not anticipated by the experienced sailors. Yet Paul prophesied it, with its catastrophic results on the voyage, when they reached Fair Havens in Crete. God’s control was such that he undertook to save all 276 on board, through a foretold shipwreck, only on condition that (in a rather allegorically charged way) they all stay on board with Paul. The storm becomes the very means by which God is glorified in Malta, and the means by which Paul gets to Rome. It would seem to belong within the realm of “mysterious providence” better than within any idea of nature working against God.

Regarding this passage one must also note the close, and probably deliberate, parallel/contrast with the story of Jonah. Jonah was an unwilling prophet fleeing from God; Paul a faithful apostle braving everything to go where God wanted him, despite prophetic warnings from God that his death would ensue. In Job, the storm is overtly sent by God. Why would Paul’s not be?

Another instance, back in the Old Testament, of a major disaster not accorded great theological significance is the earthquake during the reign of King Uzziah. This was severe enough to have left destruction levels in archaeological sites of that period. The earthquake is referenced as a time marker in Amos 1 (whose initial oracles came two years before). There is little sign that the earthquake is regarded as judicially significant there apart, perhaps, as a rumbling warning of future judgement. The same earthquake is mentioned historically in Zech. 14.5 – also in relation to God’s future judgement. Such catastrophes may occur, then, without clear “messages” as to their divine purpose, but never apart from God’s intentions, albeit hidden. The elements are doing God’s bidding, not bucking his rule.

A few passages in the Old Testament do speak of God’s ability to rescue from the elements, as if he were in conflict with them. Such is Ps. 46:

*God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,*

*though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.*¹¹

Yet even here the psalm ends with an invitation to see the works of Yahweh, “*the desolations he has brought on the earth.*” Similarly, in Ps. 75.2-3, God’s judgement is expressed in terms of an earthquake, but its destruction is held in check by his holding the earth’s pillars firm. God’s power over the wildest elements, not their rebellion against him, is what is in view in such passages.

Another infrequent theme that, superficially, might suggest a natural element opposed to God, is the occasional reference to the sea-monster Rahab and God’s subduing of it (Jb. 9.13; 26.12; Ps. 89.10; Isa. 51.9). Whilst these few references certainly refer to the Canaanite myth of the subduing of the chaotic primordial ocean at Creation, they appear to represent the borrowing of a graphic folk-tale rather than of pagan theology. “Rahab” may well represent the theme in Gen. 1 of “chaos” (*tohu wabohu*) being pushed aside to bring order, and the term is also used figuratively of Egypt, as the “monster” that God comprehensively defeated when he delivered Israel across the Reed Sea (Ps. 87.4; Isa. 30.7).

There is a strong reminder of this in Jesus’s calming of the storm on the Sea of Galilee. The word used by Jesus in all three gospel accounts, “rebuke”, is that used in the Septuagint version of Psalm 104, in which God’s creative power over primal disorder, not his quelling of an evil rival, is in view:

*He set the earth on its foundations;
it can never be moved.
You covered it with the watery depths as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.
But at your rebuke the waters fled,
at the sound of your thunder they took to flight;
they flowed over the mountains,
they went down into the valleys,
to the place you assigned for them.*¹²

God’s first work here is to cover the earth with waters, and his second to “rebuke” them into separating the oceans from the land, on the third day of the Genesis creation account. Jesus likewise is controlling his own creation, not opposing an alien one. And so there is no sense in which nature’s elemental forces are ever portrayed with any rebellious attitudes against God – he remains their ruler, and they remain his instruments for blessing or cursing.

One more word on the elements, and that is on the idea that *Satan* might ever control them. The person of Satan appears only sketchily in the Old Testament, but once (and once only) he is said to exercise some control over nature. That is in the story of Job, which although clearly set as a theological discourse rather than as *réportage*, nevertheless employs serious theology.

¹¹ Ps. 46.1-2.

¹² Ps. 104.5-8.

In ch.1 Satan sends a destructive fire (v.16) and a mighty wind (v.19), and of course in ch.2 the most famous boils in history (2.7). But it's essential to understand that Satan is represented here as a morally ambiguous, but obedient, "son of God" (ie a member of the "heavenly council"), who acts only under the direct permission of God, and as the rest of the book shows, ultimately in a mysterious way for Job's blessing. It therefore seems no coincidence that the tools he uses, especially in the first chapter, are those most commonly associated with God's own judgements: the fire is "the fire of God", and the "mighty wind" is like those everywhere else ascribed to God's agency.

Health and disease

Good health is one of the Covenant blessings promised to the children of Israel, and it is specifically contrasted with the ill-health of the Egyptians they have left behind (Ex. 15.26; Deut. 7.15) – don't believe all those fit-looking people in idealised Egyptian art! Those diseases, God says, he himself had "*brought on the Egyptians*" – not meaning the final plagues before the Exodus, but the general state of the nation Israel had inhabited for four centuries. We might refer to it as an unhealthy climate. The pattern of routinely blessing and cursing is evident, once more, in God's treatment of the nations apart from Israel.

In like manner, under the Covenant curses and in other contexts, God is said to be the direct cause of sicknesses and diseases. Those Covenant curses are mentioned elsewhere in imminent or actual fulfilment (eg Jer. 14.12; Ezek. 14.19-20; Amos 4.9-10). In Hab. 3 the glorious coming of God in deliverance is *marked* by sickness:

*God came from Teman,
the Holy One from Mount Paran.
His glory covered the heavens
and his praise filled the earth.
His splendour was like the sunrise;
rays flashed from his hand,
where his power was hidden.
Plague went before him;
pestilence followed his steps.¹³*

But other examples of God's active use of ill health in governance include the disease put on Pharaoh's household because of Sarah (Gen. 12.17), the sterility put on Abimelech's wives (Gen. 20.17) and tumours inflicted on the Philistines for taking the Ark of the Covenant (1 Sam. 5.9-12).

Even the Levitical laws refer to the treatment of spreading mildew in a house as enlisting priestly help for an affliction that God himself has caused (Lev. 14.34).

Lest we think that the idea of God using illness in his (righteous) judgement is restricted to the Old Testament, we should remember Paul's attribution of weakness and sickness, and even death, to chastisement for the abuse of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11.30-32).

¹³ Hab. 3.3-5.

As in the case of the “elements”, though, there are instances in both Old and New Testaments of illnesses being treated as mere happenstance. For example, King Asa had bad feet (2 Chron. 16.12), King Hezekiah had life-threatening sepsis (Isa. 38.1-22), Paul got sick in Galatia (Gal. 4.13) and Epaphroditus nearly died from a disease possibly caught visiting Paul in prison (Phil. 2.25-27).

Like Job's boils, Jesus himself attributes diseases to the agency of Satan (eg Luke 13.16), whom he is committed to defeating. And yet even then there are hints that God's “active” permission, and mysterious providence, are as operative here as in the case of Job: in Jn. 9, when the disciples ask Jesus whose sin caused a man to be congenitally blind, Jesus emphasises that *“this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.”*¹⁴ Jesus makes no attempt either to blunt the mystery of God, nor to exonerate him as the sole final Cause of all things.

Wild animals

Considering that the beasts are the area of Creation most often considered to have become corrupted in the Fall of man, they are remarkably commonly used by God in his government of the world.

Wild animals bringing direct blessing are comparatively rare, but one notable exception is the pair of ravens (largely carnivorous birds) which God sends to feed Elijah during the drought, and which obediently bring him bread and meat until their instructions change (1 Ki. 17.4-6).

As for judgements, perhaps it is worth taking a whistle-stop tour through the animal kingdom to give examples of those creatures which God names as his agents:

- Gnats (Ex. 8.16-18)
- Flies (Ex. 8.20-31)
- Locusts (Ex. 10.1-19; Joel 1-2; Amos 4.9, 7.1)
- Frogs (Ex. 8.1-14)
- Snakes (Num. 21.4ff)
- Birds (Jer. 15.3)
- Dogs (Jer. 15.3)
- Bears (2 Ki. 2.23)
- Generic wild beasts (Jer. 15.3; Ezek. 14.15-16)

In addition to these, the general judgement of God himself is likened figuratively to another menagerie of fierce creatures:

- Lions (Isa. 31.4; Jer. 4.5, 5.6)
- Wolves (Jer. 5.6)
- Leopards (Jer. 5.6)
- Birds of prey (Isa. 46.11)
- Snakes (Jer. 7.17)

It is odd to consider God identifying his own actions with such creatures if, as the “traditional view” says, they are corrupted and evil. That is especially so since most of the animals he uses, or emulates, in judgement are the carnivores alleged to result only from sin. If, however, as the old theologians said, each of God's creatures reveals some aspect of God's character, then each has its

¹⁴ Jn. 9.3.

appropriate place in his works. There is, after all, *“a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven.”*¹⁵

God's care of creation “for its own sake”

Although I have shown above that God's Creation should be seen as the instrument he has designed for his own use, and which now faithfully serves his purposes in his kingly government of the world, this is not to suggest that he is careless of its welfare. In that sense he is both a careful workman looking after his tools, and a kind husbandman having regard to the welfare of his stock. Anything less would be quite alien to the biblical concept of his loving character. The clearest descriptions of his care towards the non-human creation are in passages from Job, and in the Psalms.

Job

In Job 12 the animals are called to witness their dependence on God's care moment by moment:

*“But ask the animals, and they will teach you,
or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you;
or speak to the earth, and it will teach you,
or let the fish in the sea inform you.
Which of all these does not know
that the hand of the LORD has done this?
In his hand is the life of every creature
and the breath of all mankind.”*¹⁶

But a key passage comes later in ch.38, in which God is showing Job the wisdom of his dealings with his world, at this stage stressing his care – even workmanlike pride – in the details of what he has made.

*“Do you hunt the prey for the lioness
and satisfy the hunger of the lions
when they crouch in their dens
or lie in wait in a thicket?
Who provides food for the raven
when its young cry out to God
and wander about for lack of food?
“Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?
Do you watch when the doe bears her fawn?
Do you count the months till they bear?
Do you know the time they give birth?
They crouch down and bring forth their young;
their labour pains are ended.
Their young thrive and grow strong in the wilds;
they leave and do not return.”*

¹⁵ Eccles. 3.1.

¹⁶ Jb. 12.7-10.

*“Who let the wild donkey go free?
Who untied its ropes?
I gave it the wasteland as its home,
the salt flats as its habitat.
It laughs at the commotion in the town;
it does not hear a driver’s shout.
It ranges the hills for its pasture
and searches for any green thing.
“Will the wild ox consent to serve you?
Will it stay by your manger at night?
Can you hold it to the furrow with a harness?
Will it till the valleys behind you?
Will you rely on it for its great strength?
Will you leave your heavy work to it?
Can you trust it to haul in your grain
and bring it to your threshing floor?
“The wings of the ostrich flap joyfully,
though they cannot compare
with the wings and feathers of the stork.
She lays her eggs on the ground
and lets them warm in the sand,
unmindful that a foot may crush them,
that some wild animal may trample them.
She treats her young harshly, as if they were not hers;
she cares not that her labour was in vain,
for God did not endow her with wisdom
or give her a share of good sense.
Yet when she spreads her feathers to run,
she laughs at horse and rider.
“Do you give the horse its strength
or clothe its neck with a flowing mane?
Do you make it leap like a locust,
striking terror with its proud snorting?
It paws fiercely, rejoicing in its strength,
and charges into the fray.
It laughs at fear, afraid of nothing;
it does not shy away from the sword.
The quiver rattles against its side,
along with the flashing spear and lance.
In frenzied excitement it eats up the ground;
it cannot stand still when the trumpet sounds.
At the blast of the trumpet it snorts, ‘Aha!’
It catches the scent of battle from afar,
the shout of commanders and the battle cry.*

*“Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom
and spread its wings toward the south?
Does the eagle soar at your command
and build its nest on high?
It dwells on a cliff and stays there at night;
a rocky crag is its stronghold.
From there it looks for food;
its eyes detect it from afar.
Its young ones feast on blood,
and where the slain are, there it is.”¹⁷*

It seems hard to conceive how anyone could read this and still think that God considers his creatures to be corrupt in any way. He is equally enthusiastic about the carnivores whose prey he procures (lions, ravens, hawks and eagles) as the herbivores (mountain goats, wild donkeys, wild oxen, ostriches and horses). He delights in the quirky stupidity of his ostriches, and glories in the very untameability of his donkeys and wild oxen. His showcase example of a horse is, of all things, a warhorse.

In Jb. 40.15ff God begins his long descriptions of *behemoth* and *leviathan*. *Behemoth* might be the hippopotamus, or perhaps the elephant, and *leviathan* the crocodile rather than the mythical sea-monster of that name. But the whole point is that these are the most dangerous and unfriendly of all creatures – and yet these are the very characteristics in which God exults as their maker and custodian. There is no sense of God's simply being able to master “fallen monsters” better than can man: “Who has a claim against me that I must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to me.”¹⁸

Psalms

Psalm 104 is another important passage about God's intimate care of his creatures, which once more shows no distinction between fierce and gentle. He directs his streams of water to feed all things – wild donkeys, birds, cattle, crops, wild goats and rock hyrax. He brings night specifically so the forest hunters and the lions can get their prey whilst mankind rests. He cares for all the creatures in the sea, even the leviathan he “formed to frolic there”¹⁹. They all look trustingly on God for their food, who governs their birth, death and replenishment.

In Ps. 65 God's care of the land through the rain fall not only benefits mankind, but nature too “shouts for joy and sings”²⁰, as though nobody had told it that it was supposed to be corrupted. And this is not surprising since Ps. 145 tells us that God is loving to all he has made, feeding them at the proper time and satisfying all their desires.

God the householder

To draw together this picture of God's relationship to his natural Creation, Scripture often speaks of the Lord as a landowner. In Lev. 25.23 he reminds Israel, in the context of social justice, that he is the

¹⁷ Jb. 38.39-39.30.

¹⁸ Jb. 41.11.

¹⁹ Ps. 104.26: in this case perhaps “leviathan” signals the whale, several species of which are seen in the Eastern Mediterranean.

²⁰ Ps. 65.13.

landowner of Canaan, and they only his tenants. Psalm 50.10 extends his ownership to the beasts of the forest and the cattle on a thousand hills. Jer. 27.5 tells us that this proprietorship extends to the whole world, since he created its people and all its animals, and that he gives the earth to whoever he pleases (in this case, unfortunately for Judah, to the Babylonians). Deut. 10.14 extends his ownership even to the highest heavens.

But there is a danger that this description can summon up the image of an “Eastern Potentate” exercising absolute despotism over an empire from a distance. Apart from the fact that the average eastern potentate was a good deal more in touch with his people than, say, a US President, the “king” image may lead us to forget just what a hands-on kind of care has been shown in the passages I have cited.

A complementary image, with a good basis in the Creation narrative itself, is of God as a householder, with the world as his household, and mankind as his children (though the “house” in Genesis 1 is actually a temple²¹). Now those of us who are the heads of families know that, although our house provides a roof over our head, it’s primarily a home for the nurture of a family.

We may give our growing children increasing responsibilities, just as Ps. 8 tells us that God has delegated the rule of earth’s creatures to man, and we also give them house rules to follow and discipline them when they don’t follow them, just as we have seen that God judges the world daily through the Creation. But at least until our children are close to adulthood, they have little understanding of how much we do to run the whole household on their behalf, and that we allow nothing into it which will detract from that.

The children are unaware of our regular maintenance, of our paying the bills, and of our making sure there is always food on the table. If there are pets it will usually be the householder who thinks about their vaccinations and problems (or perhaps working livestock is a better analogy than pets, like the back-yard chickens that provide eggs as well as enabling us to train the children in their proper care).

Just as in God’s world, there is a sense in which our house exists “for its own sake” – we care for it because it is valuable and fill it with beautiful things. Houses even make some kind of statement about their owners, just as the glory of Creation speaks of God’s own majesty. But in the end, it is the family – the kids – around whose development the home revolves, or should. The house is an instrument, or a whole set of instruments, for their benefit, albeit that it is loved and cared for in its own right.

²¹ The temple imagery in Genesis 1 was identified by the unconventional 6th century monk Cosmas Indicopleustes, but he has received little credit for what, in recent years, has become increasingly recognised by scholars as a key theme. A full account of its use in Genesis is set out in Walton, John H, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 2011), but the centrality of the theme in Hebrew thought right up to New Testament times can be found in, for example, Beale G K, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission* (Downers Grove, IVP, 2004); Middleton J Richard, *A New Heaven and a New Earth* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2014) and Wright, N T, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London, SPCK, 1996).

A household is also a personally-established world, and not a public institution. It's vitally important to retain the truth that God is the *sole* Creator (Isa. 44.24, 45.18; Jer. 27.5, Amos 4.13; Jn. 1.3, Col. 1.16; Heb. 1.3). The biblical picture we have covered really leaves no place for the idea, common in theistic evolution, that God delegates to Creation the ability to help create itself²² (which is a pretty incoherent idea philosophically anyway²³). But neither does it leave a place for Creation to be partly a work of "sin", and still less of Satan, *contra* the quotation from C H Spurgeon in the Introduction to this book.

Nothing in what we have examined in this chapter, covering the whole sweep of Old and New Testament teaching about the Creation as it is, gives any hint that some other agent has corrupted the natural world; nor that God himself has altered it for the worse because of human sin. If he uses it for harm, it is because of man's desert, not because of nature's corruption. We now need to turn to examine the Scriptures that are most often cited to claim the opposite.

²² "I prefer to see the same history in the light of a God who desires to share aspects of his nature with his creation, notably including his creativity. Just as he has made humans to be creators (with a little 'c'), he has given the rest of our world the gift of being instrumental in its own creation through the process of evolution." Tice, Mike (geobiologist), *Oxygen and Co-Creation*, <http://biologos.org/blogs/archive/oxygen-and-co-creation> accessed 07/01/2016.

²³ "Nothing can be the efficient cause of itself" (Aquinas). "...whereas one understood an evolution in which the less issued from the greater wherein it was contained, that form of evolution in which the greater continually springs from the less is incomprehensible. It at least deserves no more to be called e-volution." (Gilson, Etienne, *From Aristotle to Darwin and Back Again*, San Francisco, Ignatius, 2009, p.103).