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SARUM THEOLOGICAL LECTURES

BIBLE AND ECOLOGY
Rediscovering the Community of Creation

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Chapter 3

THE COMMUNITY OF CREATION

A major proposal of this book is that the image of a community of creation, in which we humans are fellow-members with God's other creatures, is a helpful way of synthesising important aspects of the relevant biblical material. It also provides a broader context within which to situate the special and distinctive roles of humans in creation, recognising these without lifting humans out of creation as though we were demi-gods set over it. All God's creatures are first and foremost creatures, ourselves included. All earthly creatures share the same Earth; and all participate in an interrelated and interdependent community, orientated above all to God our common Creator. It is a community of hugely diverse members whose mutual relationships are therefore enormously rich and diverse. Modern ecological science is constantly revealing more and more of the complex balance and flux of interrelationships within the biosphere of the Earth and its component ecosystems,1 but a great deal remains to be known, probably much more than we already know. Biblical writers were not able to plot such interconnections scientifically, but they articulate a vision of creation that is coherent with the science, while focusing, as science properly cannot, on matters of value, ethics, responsibility and, especially, the creation's relation with God.

PSALM 104 – SHARING THE EARTH

There are some striking resemblances between Job 38—39 and Psalm 104 (which is the second longest biblical account of the non-human creation).2 Both begin with poetic evocations of God's initial creation of the world, more like each other than either is to

Genesis 1, and both move smoothly from there into a panoramic view of the parts and members of creation. Both deny humans a place of supremacy. But Psalm 104 puts us in our place in the world in a much gentler way than God's answer to Job. Here, there is no indication that human hubris needs shattering. Rather there is a sense that within the praise of God for his creation we fall naturally into the place he has given us alongside his other creatures.

Bless the LORD, O my soul.
O LORD my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honour and majesty;
2 wrapped in light as with a garment.
You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
3 you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,
you make the clouds your chariot,
you ride on the wings of the wind,
4 you make the winds your messengers,
fire and flame your ministers.

5 You set the earth on its foundations,
so that it shall never be shaken.
6 You cover it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.
7 At your rebuke they flee;
at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.
8 They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys
to the place that you appointed for them.
9 You set a boundary that they may not pass,
so that they might not again cover the earth.

10 You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills,
11 giving drink to every wild animal;
the wild asses quench their thirst.
12 By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;
they sing among the branches.
13 From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.
14 You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate, so as to bring forth bread from the earth, 3 and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.
16 The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. 4
17 In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees. 5
18 The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the coney. 6
19 You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting.
20 You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.
21 The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God.
22 When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens.
23 People go out to their work and to their labour until the evening.
24 O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.
25 Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great.
26 There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.
27 These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
29 When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.
30 When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.
31 May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works –
32 who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke.
33 I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
34 May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD.
35 Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more.
Bless the LORD, O my soul.
Praise the LORD!

REFLECTIONS ON PSALM 104

(1) This is a psalm of praise to God for his ‘generous extravagance’ in creation and in provision for his creatures, for a world of huge diversity and complexity, a world of fecundity and abundance of life. There is a pervasive sense of the world as God’s gift to all living creatures. The God of this psalm is God the generous giver from whom all good things come (cf. Jas. 1:17).

(2) God’s ‘extravagance’ in creating so many diverse creatures appears in what William Brown calls the psalm’s ‘veritable taxonomy of zoological species’, as well as in the particular mention of the fecundity of the sea (v 25: ‘creeping things innumerable ... living things both small and great’). Indeed, the psalmist interrupts his ‘taxonomy’ in order to comment: ‘LORD, how manifold are your works!’ (v 24).

(3) God’s generous provision for all these living creatures (humanity, animals (domestic and wild), birds and sea creatures) can be put into the following six categories:
**the breath of life** — This is life itself, the fundamental gift that underlies all others and determines the limit of all others. The life, the breath of living things, is God’s breath (‘spirit’) that he gives and takes as he pleases, continually renewing life on Earth (vv 29–30). As Odil Steck puts it, humans ‘and all living creatures are “elementally dependent” on God’. 9

**water** — This is essential for all life — and its need is especially obvious in the Middle East. It is very prominent here (vv 10–13 and 16).

**food** — According to verse 28, God opens his generous hands and provides good things for all of his creatures. Even the lions, hunting in the forest at night, seek their prey from God (v 21) — an image we have already encountered in Job.

**habitat** — The availability of water and the appropriate food depends on the specific habitat God has provided for each kind of creature: trees by water for birds, mountains for mountain goats, rocky crags for conies, arable land for humans, forests for lions and many others, sea for the innumerable creatures of the ocean. Our contemporary awareness that we are destroying creatures by destroying their habitats follows very directly from the kind of ecological understanding of nature that is to be found already in Psalm 104.

**times and seasons** — The alternation of day and night, the regularity of the seasons of the year are an essential aspect of the Earth’s habitability for living creatures, which accommodates different creatures differently (vv 19–23 and 27).

**joy** — The life God gives and resources is no mere utilitarian survival, but has its goal in God’s creatures’ joy in life: the birds sing for joy (v 12). 10 God’s provision for humans includes wine to gladden the heart and oil to make the face shine (v 15), while the great sea monster Leviathan was created by God to play in the ocean (v 26). There is a hint (v 31) that the creatures’ joy is a participation in God’s own joy, the pleasure he takes in all he has created.

(4) The psalm portrays creation as completely and directly dependent on God’s generous giving. There is a strong sense of God’s immediate and constant involvement with his creatures. But, at the same time as stressing dependence on God, the psalm sees this as empowerment. Birds build their nests, humans work the land and sail ships, Leviathan plays.

(5) As well as the general categories of birds, wild animals, domestic animals, animals of the forest and sea creatures, seven living creatures are specifically named: wild asses, humans, storks, wild goats, conies, lions, Leviathan. The number seven may be deliberate, since, as the number of completeness, it can be used to indicate that seven specific items are representative of the whole. More significantly, it is worth noticing that, of the six non-human creatures listed here, three are also among the ten animals in God’s challenge to Job: wild asses, mountain goats and lions. This highlights the fact that the animals named are especially those that were beyond the control of humans. Of course, this is also true of Leviathan, who appears here in a much more innocent role than he has in Job.

(6) What place do humans have in this panorama of creation? They do receive a little more attention than other living things (vv 14–15, 23 and 26). 11 There are hints at a certain exceptionality: references to domesticated animals (v 14: God makes the grass grow for cattle), to agriculture (v 14), viticulture and arboriculture (v 15), and to ships on the ocean (v 26). But there is no trace of human supremacy over the creatures in general. The impression is rather of fellow-creatureliness. Like other living creatures, humans have their own place in a creation where there are also innumerable fellow-creatures for whom God also provides life, place and sustenance. Humans are part of God’s wonderfully diverse creation. Brown comments that, compared with the anthropocen-
tricity of Psalm 8, Psalm 104 ‘moves toward an ecocentric profile’.

I would prefer to say that this psalm is primarily theocentric, and that its picture of an ecological creation belongs within its theocentric praise of God for his creation. ‘With no stain of human dominion, this Psalm plays out joy in God and nature both.’

(7) The whole picture is almost without exception positive. There is reference to death, but it seems to be simply accepted as a part of the natural cycle of life and death (v 29). God apparently causes earthquakes and volcanic eruptions (v 32: he ‘looks on the earth and it trembles’, he ‘touches the mountains and they smoke’). But these are probably understood as aspects of theophany, as they were at Mount Sinai, manifestations of God’s glory (v 31), rather than as causing innocent suffering. This entirely positive view of creation resembles that of Genesis 1.

For whatever reason, the psalmist resolutely withholds any indication that there might be anything wrong in God’s created world – except (and the exception is therefore all the more remarkable) that, almost at the end of the psalm, interrupting his praise, the psalmist prays: ‘Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more’ (v 35a). Humans are the creatures who spoil the otherwise rosy picture of the world. Walter Brueggemann suggests that the sinners are those who refuse to receive life in creation on terms of generous extravagance, no doubt in order to practice a hoarding autonomy in denial that creation is indeed governed and held by its Creator. Creation has within it the sovereign seriousness of God, who will not tolerate the violation of the terms of creation, which are terms of gift, dependence and extravagance.

This human despoiling of creation is in fact the psalm’s strongest indication of human exceptionality.

(8) In the account of the sea there is specific mention of ‘ships’ and ‘Leviathan’ (v 26), as though both were species of sea creature, illustrations of the ‘small’ and ‘great’ creatures mentioned in the preceding verse. Humans sailing the sea can certainly feel very small, while Leviathan is perhaps the only creature sufficiently large to seem at home in the vast ocean. The reference to ships might suggest that humanity is not so limited to a particular habitat as other animals are, but it also portrays humans at their most vulnerable. Knowing Leviathan from other passages of the Hebrew Bible, including Job, we may see him as personifying the chaos that God overcame at creation and must thereafter keep at bay lest it reduce creation back to chaos. As such he is closely associated with the sea, itself a manifestation of the primeval waters of chaos. The vulnerability of humans foolhardy enough to travel by sea (ancient Israelites rarely did so) appears in the juxtaposition of their ships with Leviathan. And yet Leviathan is not here the agent of destruction, as he is in Job, but merely a monster (a whale?) playing in the ocean. Similarly, he appears in Genesis 1, if at all, only in the reference to sea monsters, created with other sea creatures, on the fifth day (Gen. 1:21). Thus both Genesis 1 and Psalm 104, by contrast with Job, have tamed the chaos monster and so have already eliminated the conflict of chaos with order and the threat of cosmic destruction that Leviathan represents. In this respect, as in others, they both portray creation in an ideal or utopian or eschatological way.

(9) After instancing many species individually, stressing their diversity, the psalm goes on to bring them all together, humans and other animals alike, in their common dependence on the Creator (vv 27–30). What gives wholeness to this psalm’s reading of the world is not human mastery over it or the value humans set on it, not (in contemporary terms) globalisation, but the value of all created things for God. This is a theocentric, not an anthropocentric world. God’s own rejoicing in his works (v 31) funds the psalmist’s rejoicing (v 34), as he praises God, not merely for human life and creation’s benefits for humans, but for God’s glory seen in the whole creation. In a different way from Job, the psalmist is taken out of himself, lifted out of the limited human preoccupations that dominate most of our lives, by his contemplation of the rest of God’s creation. This is the kind of appreciation of God’s
creation, sharing in God’s appreciation of it, 18 that can enable us to live rightly within it, to join with other creatures in living for the praise of his glory.

MATTHEW 6:25–33 – SHARING GOD’S PROVISION FOR HIS CREATURES

From the great creation psalm of the Old Testament, we turn to a New Testament passage, part of the Sermon on the Mount, 19 in which Jesus draws on the creation theology of the Hebrew Bible, probably on Psalm 104 itself,20 in order to teach his disciples the kind of lifestyle that is appropriate to living in such a world, the world of God’s generous extravagance, in which God provides abundantly for all his creatures.

Matthew 6:25–33

‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you— you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” 32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.’

Jesus’ teaching was, of course, deeply rooted in the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish tradition, but it is probably not sufficiently recognised how far Jesus draws on the creation theology of the Old Testament. There seems to be no reference in the Gospels to the human dominion over the animals of Genesis 1:26, but here in the Sermon on the Mount we find that Jesus has very much made his own the psalmist’s understanding of the creation as a common home for living creatures, in which God provides for all their needs. The consequence Jesus draws, in turning the teaching of the psalm into advice on how his disciples should live, is that we need have no anxiety about our day-to-day material needs, but should live by radical faith in the Father’s provision for us. Because the generous and wise Creator takes care of all these things for us, we are free to give our attention instead to seeking God’s Kingdom and God’s righteousness in the world.

Jesus holds up for us the example of the birds, for whom God provides, as he does for all his creatures. But he adds a reflection not in the psalm: ‘Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.’ Interpretations of this verse have varied. Some interpreters suppose that Jesus contrasts the birds who do not work with people who do. The point would be that, if God feeds even the idle birds, how much more will he provide for people who work hard for their living? Other interpreters suppose that Jesus compares the birds who do not work with his disciples who do not work either. But note that the saying does not actually say that the birds do not work. It does not deny the rather obvious fact that many birds spend a lot of energy and effort in finding their food. It merely says that they do not then have to process their food (‘they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns’) the way humans do.

Probably neither of these explanations is correct. Rather the point is that, since the birds do not have to labour to process their food from nature, but eat it as they find it, their dependence on the Creator’s provision is the more immediate and obvious. Humans, on the other hand, preoccupied with the daily toil of supplying their basic needs, may easily suppose that it is up to them to
provide themselves with food. This is the root of the anxiety about basic needs that Jesus is showing to be unnecessary. The way in which humans get their food by farming allows them to focus on their own efforts and to neglect the fact that much more fundamentally they are dependent, like the birds, on the resources of creation without which no one could sow, reap or gather into barns. The illusion is even easier in modern urban life. But the birds, in their more obvious dependence on the Creator, remind us that ultimately we are no less dependent on the Creator than they. It follows that Jesus is not here talking about special providential provision by God for followers of Jesus. He is speaking of our dependence on the resources of creation that God provides for all, humans and other living creatures, to live from.

He is, of course, speaking of basic needs. The presuppositions of Jesus’ creation theology are very far from the wasteful excess and the constant manufacture of new needs and wants in our contemporary consumer society. Jesus intends to liberate his disciples from that anxious insecurity about basic needs that drives people to feel that they never have enough. But in our society that instinctive human anxiety about having enough to survive has for most people long been superseded by the drive to ever-increasing affluence and an obsessive anxiety to maintain an ever-rising standard of living. It is this obsessive consumption that is depleting and destroying the resources of nature and depriving both other species and many humans of the means even of mere subsistence.

It would be easy to regard Jesus’ teaching here as cruelly unrealistic in the light of the famine and scarcity of food and water that afflict many parts of the world (and that climate change is likely to exacerbate). Is not Jesus, like the author of Psalm 104, seeing the world through rose-tinted glasses? An important consideration is that, just as Jesus here presupposes the ordinary agricultural means by which food reaches people, so he can presuppose the provisions of the Torah that are intended to supply the basic needs of the poor who do not have economic resources of their own. Such institutions as the triennial tithe (Deut. 14:28–29 and 26:12–15) and the requirement that farmers should leave some of the harvest for the poor to glean (Lev. 19:9–10) can be taken into account along with the ordinary generous almsgiving of which Jesus himself speaks in the Sermon (Matt. 6:2–4). Both hard work and community sharing are channels by which the Creator’s provision supplies the needs of all.

Both Psalm 104 and Jesus challenge us with the conviction that the God-given resources of creation are sufficient for all God’s creatures – that is, for the reasonable needs of all God’s creatures, not for the kind of excess in which, of all God’s creatures, only humans indulge. God’s provision is sufficient if equitably shared. Living from God’s provision means also living within limits, those ecological limits of creation that we in the affluent parts of the world are finally having to recognise. For Jesus and the psalmist the world around them spoke of God’s extravagant generosity in providing for all. It is because we are so addicted to excess that we feel instead the painful necessity of reducing our consumption to reasonable limits.

Living within ecologically necessary limits may seem more possible if we can enter the way of seeing the world that Jesus offers us when he directs our attention to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. These are not mere picturesque illustrations of his argument, as modern urban people have been apt to suppose. The birds and the flowers are essential to the argument. We cannot appreciate Jesus’ message in this passage unless we place ourselves as creatures within God’s creation, along with our fellow-creatures the birds and the wild flowers. We cannot appreciate Jesus’ message unless we see ourselves not as masters of creation entitled to exploit its resources to our heart’s desire, but as participants in the community of God’s creatures. No doubt we are eminent participants. Jesus does say we are of more value than the birds, though he says this not in order to disparage the birds, who do have value of their own, but to reassure the anxious. No doubt we are eminent participants in the community of creation, but participants nonetheless. Considering these other creatures we see a natural world of abundance and beauty that exists by the Creator’s gift, independent of all our efforts to create our own world of
plenty and beauty for ourselves. If we can recover our own real relationship to that world of God's creatures, then we can begin to seek God's Kingdom and further his purposes for his creation.

Jesus' teaching may seem extreme, and it is true that hyperbole is characteristic of his pedagogic technique. However, our addiction to excess is also extreme. Most of us in the affluent parts of the world have a long way to go in learning to live within reasonable limits before we get anywhere near even the level at which most ordinary people lived in Jesus' time. In the contemporary West, with our frenetic pursuit of more and more, we have lost the very concept of 'enough'. But the changes that ecological limits require of us concern not only our personal consumption but also the broad economic assumptions and goals that drive our consumer society and its globalisation.

PRAISING OUR MAKER TOGETHER

Psalm 104 can help us recover a sense of co-creatureliness through recognising that we share the Earth with God's other living creatures and that we depend, with other creatures, on God's generous provision of the resources from which we live. But the most profound and life-changing way in which we can recover our place in the world as creatures alongside our fellow-creatures is through the biblical theme of the worship all creation offers to God. The theme of the worship of God by all creatures, animate and inanimate, is widely present in the Psalms (65:12-13; 69:34; 89:12; 96:11-12; 97:7-8; 103:22; 145:10 and 150:6) as well as in some other parts of the Bible (1 Chr. 16:31-33; Isa. 35:1-2; 40:10; 43:19 and 55:12; Phil. 2:10; Rev. 5:13). But the most extensive example in the Hebrew Bible is the magnificent Psalm 148.

Psalm 148

Praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!

Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his host!

Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!
Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created.
He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.
Praise the Lord from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command!
Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!
Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!
Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
Young men and women alike,
old and young together!

Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the Lord!

The catalogue of creatures who make up this cosmic choir of praise is comprehensive: more than thirty categories of creatures are addressed. Some of these are representative of a whole class of creatures: for example, 'fruit trees and all cedars' (v 9) doubtless stand for the whole vegetable creation. In the injunctions to praise,
the word ‘all’ occurs eight times, scattered through the text. The catalogue of creatures is in two parts, representing the heavens (vv 1–4) and the Earth (vv 7–12). Both spheres praise their Maker, who himself is categorically beyond all creation: ‘his glory is above the earth and the heavens’ (v 13). Two passages explaining why it is appropriate that God’s creatures should praise him (vv 5–6 and 13–14) follow, respectively, the two parts of the catalogue of creatures. He is to be praised because he is the Creator of all (vv 5–6) and the only One exalted above all creation (v 15). Finally, at the only point where Israel comes into the picture, God is to be praised for exalting his own people to a place of honour within the created world (v 14).

I spoke of the depiction of creation in this psalm as a ‘cosmic choir’. Perhaps an even more appropriate analogy would be a symphony orchestra. The various creatures contribute to a symphony by being both individually different and mutually complementary. As Terence Fretheim notes, ‘Each entity has its own distinctiveness, with varying degrees of complexity. But each is also part of the one world of God contributing to the whole.’ (This raises the possibility that, if one member of the orchestra is incapacitated or missing altogether, the praise of the whole will be adversely affected.27 We shall return to this possibility towards the end of this chapter.)

Humans are placed at the end of the catalogue of worshippers, just as they come at the end of the works of creation in Genesis 1 and at the end of the survey of creatures in Psalm 104. In this case, no more than in those, can they be the climax of an ascending scale of value. There is no reason to suppose that angels are the least valuable of creatures or that reptiles are more valuable than fire. In any case, the notion of such a scale of value makes no sense: how could one weigh the value of a mountain against that of a sea monster, snow against a fruit tree? But it may be that humans are the creatures who are most reluctant to praise their creator, and are placed last so that they may be encouraged to worship by the vision of the whole of the rest of the cosmos praising its Creator. After all, it was not actually true, in the psalmist’s world, that all the kings of the Earth and the peoples of the Earth were actually worshipping YHWH. The psalm is an invitation to them to do so, and presumably relates to the hope of the prophets that all the nations of the Earth would come to worship YHWH in the future. Within such a context, the worship of the creatures who do praise God has a witnessing role, declaring God’s praiseworthy reality to the human world (cf. Ps. 19:1–4).28

When modern Christians encounter the theme of all creation’s worship of God in Psalm 148 or in other passages of Scripture, they are apt not to take it very seriously. They may take it to reflect some kind of pre-scientific animism or pan-psychoism that attributes rational consciousness to all things, even mountains, rain and trees. Or they may take it to be mere poetic fancy.29 Both reactions miss the significance of this biblical theme. These passages about creation’s praise are, of course, metaphorical: they attribute to non-human creatures the human practice of praising God in language (or, in the case of the trees in Isa. 55:12, clapping their hands).30 But the metaphor points to a reality: all creatures bring glory to God simply by being themselves and fulfilling their God-given roles in God’s creation. A tree does not need to do anything specific in order to praise God; still less need it be conscious of anything. Simply by being and growing it praises God:

Creation’s praise is not an extra, an addition to what it is, but the shining of its being, the overflowing significance it has in pointing to its Creator simply by being itself.31

It is distinctively human to bring praise to conscious expression in voice, but the creatures remind us that this distinctively human form of praise is worthless unless, like them, we live our whole lives to the glory of God.

Before the modern period, the praise of all the creatures seems to have been more widely appreciated in the Church. The reasons why it has fallen out of most modern Christians’ consciousness must be urban people’s isolation from nature, which deprives them of a living sense of participation in nature, and the modern
instrumentalising of nature, which turns it into mere material for human use. But these reasons also suggest how valuable it might be to recover a living sense of participation in creation's praise of God. It is the strongest antidote to anthropocentrism in the biblical and Christian tradition. When we join our fellow-creatures in attributing glory to God, there is no hierarchy and no anthropocentricity. In this respect all creatures, including ourselves, are simply fellow-creatures expressing the theocentricity of the created world, each in our own created way, differently but in complementarity. As Psalm 148:13 says, in this worship God's name alone is exalted: there is no place in worship for the exaltation of any creature over others. Moreover, to recognise creation's praise is to abandon a purely instrumental view of nature. All creatures exist for God's glory, and we most effectively learn to see other creatures in that way, to glimpse, as it were, their value for God that has nothing to do with their usefulness to us, when we join them in their own glorification of God.

There is another aspect of this call to universal worship that Christians in earlier periods felt more at home with than most modern Christians do: the participation of the angels in heaven. Many traditional liturgies and hymns express the notion that in human worship we join the choirs of heaven. The cosmology of Psalm 148 is not, of course, ours. It envisages the created universe as composed of 'the heavens' and 'the earth', and the heavens as comprising the highest heavens where the hosts of angels worship and the lower heavens where the sun, moon and stars move across the sky in the courses ordained for them at creation (vv 1–6). We should note that no part of 'the heavens' or the creatures that inhabit them is included in the human dominion of Genesis 1:26 and 28. The dominion is over the sea creatures, the birds and the land animals only, while the heavenly bodies, according to Genesis 1:14–18, have a dominion of their own. So we should not be tempted to see the psalmist's role in calling on all creatures to praise God as some kind of exercise of the human dominion.32 The psalmist invites both the creatures of the heavens and the creatures of the Earth to worship. Were we to read the psalm hierarchically, we should have to recognise that the whole of the first half of its catalogue of worshippers are superior to humans, not subject to human dominion. In fact, however, the praise of God by all creation levels all creatures before their common Creator, angels and heavenly bodies included.

We can take the cosmology figuratively. It functions as a way of classifying the creatures. But we need not abandon the idea that there are intelligent creatures of God who worship him in his manifest presence. It is not easy to recover the sense of connection with them that pre-modern Christians had, but the psalm should remind us that the visible world we know is not the sum of created reality and we are certainly not the only creatures who worship with conscious awareness of God and of the wholeness of his creation.33 Too many modern Christian comments on human uniqueness ignore the angels.

What then, finally, are we to make of the fact that the psalmist invites all the creatures of the heavens and the Earth to praise God? Does it indicate a special role for humanity in the cosmic choir? It cannot be that other creatures do not praise God until called on to do so by humans. The angels undoubtedly do not await a human invitation before praising their Creator. Nor do the other creatures form a choir of harmonious praise only when humans 'conduct' them. The cosmic order has been given them by God in creation. An attractive suggestion is that what is unique about humans enables 'us to see the created world whole, and offer it up in praise'.34 This probably is unique to humans among the creatures of Earth, but it is also one of those statements about human uniqueness that ignores the angels. In this context of cosmic praise the angels clearly matter, and they presumably are able to see the created world whole, perhaps even more adequately than we can.

The psalmist does not assemble the universal choir in fact, nor are humans the only creatures able to do so in thought. But the psalmist does assemble the cosmic choir for us, in our human awareness, so that we can worship in conscious participation in the worship of all creation. The psalmist invites us into a world that is wholly orientated to the glory of God. He enables us to see it as it
is, which is at the same time to be directed by it to the glory of God. He 'profiles the non-human world as “models of praise” for the human world to emulate'. There is a certain reciprocity in our praise. The other creatures help us to worship, while we add to their worship by drawing it into our own. The more we appreciate the other creatures, the more they help us to worship, and the more we can take up their worship into the particular sort of thanksgiving for the whole creation that is possible for us humans. The interrelated and interdependent community of creation, embracing all creatures in heaven and on Earth, comes to fullest expression in the vast range of different but complementary ways of glorifying God that come together in the cosmic choir.

The choir is not yet complete. As we have noted already, verses 11-12 are an invitation to which all human societies and individuals have not yet responded. But the psalm does not mention this lack. By dealing in imperatives rather than indicatives, it can give a wholly positive impression of creation’s universal praise of its Creator. This unqualified positivity matches that of Genesis 1, which, as we have noted, is an ideal or utopian account of creation that already anticipates the eschatological fulfillment of creation. Psalm 148 invites all its hearers, singers and readers into just such an eschatological fulfillment. This universe of praise is what creation was made to be, and every human voice that joins this worshipping community enables the whole to be more fully what it was made to be.

COSMIC CELEBRATION

Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry speak of ‘celebration’ as characterizing the whole universe:

If we were to choose a single expression for the universe it might be ‘celebration’, celebration of existence and life and consciousness, also of color and sound but especially in movement, in flight through the air and swimming through the sea, in mating rituals and care of the young ... The universe as a community of diverse components rings with a certain exultation and joy in being ... Everything about us seems to be absorbed into a vast celebratory experience. Whatever be the more practical purposes of existence it appears that celebration is omnipresent, not simply in the individual modes of its expression but in the grandeur of the entire cosmic process.

This is a powerful vision, but essentially a pantheistic one. The universe celebrates itself, revels exuberantly in its own life. From a biblical perspective we may warm to the image of cosmic celebration, but may also wish to give it another dimension: the relationship of creation to Creator that turns celebration into celebratory worship. Worship is more than exultation and joy in being. It is that ecstasy of being that takes one out of oneself into thanksgiving and praise to the Source and Goal of one’s being. Because all creatures, by virtue of being creatures, are intrinsically related to their Creator, they can fully celebrate their own life only by also praising their Creator.

ARE HUMANS PRIESTS OF CREATION?

The praise of God by all creation levels all creatures before their common Creator. To say this is not to eradicate the vast diversity of the creatures, who worship in a vast variety of ways that corresponds to their own diversity. But, in my view, it would be a mistake to try to assimilate this aspect of our human place within creation to any of the hierarchical models that seek to interpret the Genesis dominion. Such models highlight our God-given power over and responsibility for the other creatures. They work well only when combined with a lively sense of our own creatureliness, our co-creatureliness with the other creatures, and it is that sense that our participation in all creation’s worship of God can foster. Hierarchy seems inappropriate in this context. When we are taken up into the praise that the other creatures are constantly offering to God we probably do best to forget the dominion. It certainly has no place in the biblical depictions of creation’s praise.
For this reason I do not warm to the idea that humans are the priests of creation, mediating the praise of creation to God.\textsuperscript{38} This notion was given classic expression in the Anglican tradition by the poet George Herbert, who pictures the creatures as unable to put their praise into words and so requiring humans to ‘present the sacrifice for all’.\textsuperscript{39} It has also become popular in the Orthodox tradition\textsuperscript{40} (to which Jürgen Moltmann’s account of it is indebted\textsuperscript{41}), where it is associated especially with the idea of an offering of all creation to God in the Eucharist. The idea has recently been taken up also by Christopher Southgate, who integrates it into his evolutionary theodicy and interprets it to mean that humans are not only ‘contemplatives of creation’ but also co-redeemers, engaged with God in the redemption of creation from evil.\textsuperscript{42}

Priesthood in this connection implies some form of representation and mediation: humans represent the rest of creation in offering creation’s praise up to God. In some accounts, humans form the necessary and only link between God and the rest of creation. John Zizioulas, for example, writes that the Christian regards the human being as the only possible link between God and creation, a link that can either bring nature in communion with God and thus sanctify it; or condemn it to the state of a ‘thing’, the meaning and purpose of which are exhausted with the satisfaction of man.\textsuperscript{43}

But the view that other creatures are related to God only through human mediation is surely a relic of some of the more grossly anthropocentric views of the creation in Christian history, and has no support from the Bible, where other creatures have their own direct relationships with God (Gen. 9:10 and 16; Job 38–39; Pss. 50:4; 104:21 and 104:27–28; Isa. 45:8; Joel 1:20; Matt 6:26; Rev. 5:13).

In response to such criticism of Orthodox theologians, however, Elizabeth Theokritoff points out that in most Orthodox writing about humans as priests of creation it is not denied that other creatures do relate directly to God.\textsuperscript{44} She herself places the emphasis on the ‘eucharistic offering’ of creation to God as thankfulness for creation:

The connection between creation’s own offering of praise and our offering on behalf of all might be set out in these terms: in the other creatures around us, we encounter a ‘wordless word’ expressing God’s will for that creature and its own natural response, which is its ‘praise’ in a real though metaphorical sense. This is the praise it offers on its own behalf. But it is our specific gift to have a conscious awareness both of the creature and of the Creator whose Word it echoes, and to articulate the connection by offering up the creature’s praise as our thankfulness to the Creator.\textsuperscript{45}

This comes close to the implications of Psalm 148 as I suggested them above, so long as we recognise that the angels are as capable as humans of this kind of holistic appreciation and offering of creation’s praise, and so long as we see it as one side of a reciprocal relationship, in which the other creatures help us to worship and we develop theirs by taking it up into our own thanksgiving for all creation. But to call this human role priesthood seems to me to obscure the reciprocity and to accentuate hierarchy inappropriately. I am certainly not suggesting, as Theokritoff fears, an individualistic world in which each creature praises God independently of all others, but: I do not think the wholeness of creation’s worship is created by human mediation. Human acknowledgement of it and rejoicing in it are the channel by which the other creatures help us to worship.\textsuperscript{46}

The psalmists and we ourselves can put creation’s wordless praise into human words, but we cannot suppose that God needs us to do this before he can hear and appreciate other creatures’ praise. When Psalm 19:1–4 declares that the heavens are telling the glory of God, doing so without words, the point is that they manage very well without words. Their voice does go out through all the Earth, even though they speak no audible language. Perhaps, in order to hear creation’s praise, to echo it in our own praise and thus to join the universal choir, we need to set words
aside for a while. We need to attend to the wordless praise of the other creatures. Then we may be inspired to 'translate' it into human language, or, alternatively, into music or visual art. These distinctively human gifts can make it our praise too and add our own praise to it. All good translation is both less and more than what it translates. We may enhance but at the same time we do not exhaust creation's praise. The more we attend to the creatures, the more they will lift our hearts to God, borne on their praises.

**NATURE – DIVINE, SACRED OR SECULAR?**

The biblical and Christian tradition has been both praised and blamed for de-divinising and de-sacralising nature. For supporters of the modern project of scientific-technological domination of nature, it was of great value that the Bible and the Christian tradition had allegedly de-divinised nature, opposing all forms of nature religion, clearing away all superstitious reverence for nature, clearing the way for objective scientific investigation of nature and technological use of nature for human benefit. Modern green criticism of the Christian tradition has often accepted this account but held it against the Bible and Christianity. By de-divinising nature, Christianity exposed it to the ruthless exploitation that has brought us to the brink of ecological disaster. We need to recover religious reverence for nature.

From the biblical material we have considered in this chapter, we should be able to see that such judgements pose a false alternative between, on the one hand, a pantheistic or animistic vision of nature as divine (and so to be worshipped) and, on the other hand, a modern scientific and secular view of nature as a mere object of human use. The biblical vision of the worship of God by the whole of creation illuminates another possibility.

We can usefully distinguish the words 'divine' and 'sacred'. These are not synonyms. 'Sacred' means, not 'divine', but 'dedicated to or associated with the divine'. In the Bible (and the Christian tradition before modern times), nature is certainly de-divinised but it is not de-sacralised. The creatures are not divine, but they belong to God, are valued by God, and point us to God. Adequately perceived, they do not let our attention rest purely on themselves, but take us up into the movement of glorification of God that is their own existence. To deny them divinity is not to depreciate them but to let them be truly themselves in all the variety of their endlessly specific ways of being and doing. Pantheism absorbs them into a vague divine synthesis. Seeing them as creatures of God allows their quiddity, their being each precisely that specific and different creature God has made them. It is attention to that quiddity that continually assists our praise of the God who gives them themselves and always surpasses them and us. They belong to a theocentric community of creation whose purpose is to give back to God in praise the being he has given them.

**THE COMMUNITY OF CREATION**

The use of the term 'community' to describe the ecosystems in which humans and the rest of nature interrelate probably originates in the work of Aldo Leopold, the pioneering American conservationist. He used the terms 'land community' and 'biotic community' interchangeably, but his stress on the former particularly indicates the fundamental importance of the intricate, organic interdependence of soil, water, flora and fauna, in which humans also belong. One of his concerns was to develop an ethic in which humans have obligations not only to each other and to human society but also to the whole land community:

We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.

[A] land ethic changes the role of Homo Sapiens from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his [sic] fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.
Whether interdependence as such can impose moral obligations that would not otherwise exist is debatable, but it need not concern us here. What is important for us about Leopold’s image of a biotic community is that it models the kind of commonality and interdependence of humans and all other creatures that the Hebrew Bible recognises and which, at the same time, is so clear from our contemporary ecological plight, especially the effects of climate change. Differently from Leopold, who brings no religious perspective to his thought, the community the Bible envisages is a theocentric community of creatures.

Hence Wendell Berry speaks of humans as ‘creatures of God, members of the holy community of Creation’. Elsewhere, speaking of the ‘Great Economy’ (a term for the whole creation in its interconnectedness), he says that

It is not the ‘sum of its parts’ but a membership of parts inextricably joined to each other, indebted to each other, receiving significance and worth from each other and from the whole. One is obliged to ‘consider the lilies of the field’, not because they are lilies or because they are exemplary, but because they are fellow members and because, as fellow members, we and the lilies are in certain critical ways to be alike.

What we have in common with the lilies of the field is not just that we are creatures of God, but that we are fellow-members of the community of God’s creation, sharing the same Earth, affected by the processes of the Earth, affecting the processes that affect each other, with common interests at least in life and flourishing, with the common end of glorifying the Creator and interdependent in the ways we do exactly that.

A community may consist of a great diversity of members. This is obviously true of many human communities. In the community of creation the diversity is much greater but this by no means reduces the interdependence that constitutes community membership. In some respects the interdependence is greater: a human may at least survive without other humans, but not without earth, air, water and plants, and not outside a natural context that has been shaped by many other creatures into a form that can accommodate human life. Membership of a common community does not, of course, preclude different roles for different members within the community. The community of creation again requires a very much greater diversity of roles within it than the human community. Species of life and inanimate forms of nature are all highly specialised in the diverse contributions they make to the whole. A realistic understanding of the natural world must recognise that these roles often entail fierce competition, but even more co-operation (something that the Darwinian emphasis on ‘survival of the fittest’ tended to obscure but which ecology has made us much more aware of). The diverse roles operate within the community, and the distinctive roles of humans (of which there are surely many) are no exception. Exceptional though we may be in various ways, our exceptionality is embedded in the community of creation to which we belong and would be impossible without it. We are not aliens imposing ourselves on, or intruding ourselves within, the community of creation, but natural members of it.

Among other distinctives, humans have exceptional power over the rest of creation on this planet. We are very far from omnipotent, and we do well to remember that the rest of the biotic community would thrive in its own ways without us, just as it did long before we appeared on the scene. Our huge destructive potential consists, of course, in our ability to trigger vast forces and operations of nature other and much greater than ourselves, especially without our intending to. All of our positive and creative achievements are ways of working with the potential of other creatures. We would be nothing without them. It is highly misleading to contemplate our power over the rest of creation without remembering our even greater dependence on the rest of creation. Because urban people now live in such a humanly constructed world this is less immediately obvious than it has been to most people in history, and that is part of our current problem, but it does not take much thought, let alone ecological catastrophe, to remind ourselves of it. We understand both ourselves and the biblical understanding of us much
better the more we attend to the prominence of the non-human creation in the Bible, instead of passing over it as not part of the Bible’s relevance to people in a technology-encased culture such as ours. Wendell Berry makes the point:

I don’t think it is enough appreciated how much an outdoor book the Bible is. It is a ‘hypaethral book’, such as Thoreau talked about — a book open to the sky. It is best read and understood outdoors, and the farther out of doors the better.60

To realise our membership of the community of creation does not mean abdicating the distinctive sort of powers we undoubtedly have. It does mean being alert to their limitations. Much of the ecological problem of the modern age has been the result of an illusory aspiration to omnipotence which duped us into all sorts of well-meaning technological projects that turned out to have unforeseen results we could not control. Climate change is the climactic sum of many such miscalculations, as well as reckless irresponsibility. Realising our membership of the community of creation dispels the illusion of omnipotence and enables us to think more realistically about the power we do have. It is the way to begin to exercise that power with the caring responsibility that is our ‘dominion’ over other living creatures.

The distinctively human role of ‘dominion’ is not something that sets us apart from the rest of creation, as though we were independent of it and external to it. It is a role that we should exercise within the community and precisely as members of the community relating to fellow members. When we see it in the context of all the other aspects of what it means for humans to be part of the interdependent network of relationships in the community of creation, when we realise that our distinctive power is rooted in a more fundamental dependence on the rest of creation, then we can see that the dominion has its place within a wider pattern of reciprocity. It has nothing to do with the modern project of liberating ourselves from the rest of nature, as though we could stand over and above it and make of it what we wish.

Leopold saw *Homo sapiens* as a ‘plain member and citizen’ of the land community. We can certainly endorse ‘member and citizen’, but perhaps not ‘plain’. Leopold himself speaks of an ‘ecological conscience’ which clearly only humans can have, and proposes a land ethic that only humans can consciously practise. We might say that humans are eminent members and citizens, but members and citizens nonetheless.

Who are the members of the community of creation according to biblical depictions? In Genesis 1 and Psalm 104 it looks as though the members are the animate creatures (humans and animals), while the rest of creation, including vegetation of all sorts, is environment and provision for them. But in those psalms where the creatures are called on to praise God, all parts of the natural world are included. Besides the comprehensive coverage of the whole creation in Psalm 148, we might note Psalm 96:11–13a:

> Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD ... (cf. also Ps. 98:7–9; Rev. 5:13)

All creatures worship God, and God values them all for their own sakes as well as for the roles they play within the complex interrelationships of creation. However, the distinction between the environments and the living creatures in passages such as Genesis 1 and Psalm 104 is also significant. In the modern period the words ‘nature’ and ‘the environment’ have often been used in ways that obscure differentiations within the natural world, especially that between sentient creatures and inanimate nature. Such usage perpetuates the impression that all the other creatures are more like each other than any of them are like human beings, and therefore the tendency to set humans apart from the rest of creation. In various contexts it is no doubt necessary or useful to refer to, on the one hand, humans and, on the other, the non-human creation, just as British people may sometimes distinguish Britain and ‘the rest of the world’ without implying that all other
countries are more like each other than any are like Britain. This kind of distinction can be useful so long as it is recognised as a matter of perspective, not ontology.

If creation is a community of creatures living in complex interrelationships, then the activities of some must have consequences for others. Human life is not a self-contained affair, but takes place in relationship both to the Creator and to the rest of the creation. Our modern ecological awareness of the disorder and destruction wrought in the natural world by human activities is already foreshadowed in the Hebrew prophets, as we shall see in our next section.

THE WHOLE CREATION MOURNS

As well as passages which depict all the creatures praising their Creator, there is another series of passages in the Hebrew Bible that also metaphorically attribute voice to the non-human creatures but depict them not rejoicing but mourning. (The parallel and contrast between praising and mourning is the more striking in that the mourning, like the praising, is directed to God (Jer. 12:11). Creation's mourning is for what we might call ecological death, the kind of devastation of land, through severe drought or desertification, that leaves its vegetation withering and its animal life failing. Usually it is 'the land' or 'the earth' (sometimes it is hard to decide whether 'eretz refers to the land of a locality or to the whole Earth) that mourns (Isa. 24:4 and 33:9; Jer. 4:28; 12:4 and 23:10; Hos. 4:3; cf. Joel 1:10, where the soil ('adamah) mourns; Jer. 12:11; Amos 1:2). What the land mourns is the effect human wrongdoing has had on all its non-human inhabitants, both flora and fauna. For example, Jeremiah asks:

How long will the land mourn,
and the grass of every field wither?
For the wickedness of those who live in it
the animals and the birds are swept away,
and because people said, 'He is blind to our ways'. (Jer. 12:4)

While in some cases the effect is on the domestic sphere of nature—agriculture and domestic animals—and so functions as judgement on humans for their wickedness (as in Deut. 28:15-44), in other cases the non-human creation is blighted on a much larger scale. Especially instructive is this passage from Hosea:

Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel;
for the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants
of the land.

There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land.

Swearing, lying, and murder,
and stealing and adultery break out;
bloodshed follows bloodshed.

Therefore the land mourns,
and all who live in it languish;
together with the wild animals
and the birds of the air,
even the fish of the sea are perishing. (Hos. 4:1-3)

The destructive effect even on the creatures of the sea seems extraordinarily hyperbolic, but this is an example of a phenomenon we find in some other cases in biblical prophecy. What can only seem grossly hyperbolic in its original context looks only too realistic in the context of our own situation of worldwide ecological catastrophe.

It may be that verse 3 depicts a kind of 'un-creation', because it lists the creatures (humans, wild animals, birds, fish) in the reverse order to the sequence in which they appear in Genesis 1. Another passage about the mourning of the Earth undoubtedly portrays a kind of reversion to the chaos or nothingness before creation:

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;
and to the heavens, and they had no light.

I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro.

I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,
and all the birds of the air had fled.
26 I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

27 For thus says the LORD: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end.

28 Because of this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black; for I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented nor will I turn back. (Jer. 4:23–28)

The curious phrase 'waste and void' (tohu vabohu) in the first line of this passage occurs in the Hebrew Bible only here and in Genesis 1:2, where it describes the state of nothingness before anything was created. Again we have a hyperbolic image, suggesting the un-creation of all creation, but a more limited image of the desolation of the land of Israel apparently occurs in the midst of the universal one (v 26).

Human evil has ecological consequences. As Walter Brueggemann puts it, 'Covenantal Israel held the staggering notion that human conduct matters for the well-being of creation.' This idea coheres with the Hebrew Bible's strong sense of a created order by which relationships in the community of creation should be ordered. Most of the time other creatures observe this order, but humans all too often flout it:

Even the stork in the heavens knows its times; and the turtledove, swallow, and crane observe the time of their coming; but my people do not know the ordinance of the LORD. (Jer. 8:7; cf. also 18:14–16)

Their 'not knowing' is wilful ignorance; they do not wish to know the moral order of things that God has ordained. Humans are the disorderly factor in the world, disrupting its harmony and its natural rhythms, with destructive consequences both for humans themselves and for other creatures. Sometimes the prophets can speak of these consequences of human evil as the direct interventions of God in judgement (e.g. Isa. 24:1–4; Zeph. 1:2–3), sometimes as though they are processes built into the order of creation as God has created it (e.g. Hos. 4:1–3). The two are not necessarily in contradiction. The prophets understood that the behaviour of humans and the well-being of the rest of creation are intimately interconnected, but they did not, of course, have the scientific understanding of the connections that modern ecology is giving us. On the whole, we have become aware of such connections only as our ignorance of them has led to consequences too considerable to be ignored. But in many such cases the human activities that have led and are leading to such destructive consequences have not been pursued through pardonable ignorance or simple foolishness. They have been driven by greed or the will to power, arrogance or aggression, and not infrequently injustice and oppression in human society have gone hand in hand with ecological destruction. The natural order and the moral order are by no means unconnected.

The prophets' image of the mourning of the Earth is taken up by Paul in Romans 8:18–23.

Romans 8:18–23

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning and in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.
What exactly is the plight of creation, from which it longs for deliverance? Understanding of this has been obscured by the habit of interpreters and translators of assuming that the 'groaning' of verse 22 is the groaning of a woman in birth pains. Modern translations therefore tend to run the two Greek verbs (sustenaizein, meaning 'to groan together', and sunodinein, meaning 'to be in travail together') into one English verb with an adverbial expression, e.g. the NRSV's translation: 'the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now.' But the two verbs can equally well be understood as making two different points. The first echoes the passages in the prophets that say that the Earth mourns, while the second takes up an Old Testament metaphor for experiencing God's judgement (e.g. Jer. 4:31; and cf. 1 Thess. 5:3). The verb translated 'to groan' (sustenaizein) is actually the verb stenazein with the prefix sun ('with'), and so should be translated 'to groan with' or 'to groan together'. Without the prefix, the verb recurs in verse 23 ('we ourselves ... groan inwardly') and is echoed by the corresponding noun (stenagmos, 'groan' or 'sigh') in verse 26. The verb could be translated 'to mourn', which would make the connection with the passages in the prophets more obvious, but I have kept the familiar translation 'to groan'.

According to verse 20, the creation was 'subjected to futility' by God. Most exegetes have seen here a reference to the fall of Genesis 3, where God curses the ground because of Adam's sin, with the result that farming will be harder work (Gen. 3:17). But this does not seem an adequate basis for Paul's claim that the whole creation is in 'bondage to decay', 'groaning and in travail' as it longs for future liberation. In the prophets, on the other hand, we find the notion that the non-human creation as a whole suffers the effects of human sin and God's judgment on it. Though the effect, in particular contexts in the prophets, may be localised, it is often, as we have seen, portrayed in universal language, extending even to the ocean (Isa. 24:1–7; Jer. 4:23–25; Hos. 4:3; cf. Zeph. 1:2–3). What the Earth mourns is the withering and destruction of its inhabitants, flora and fauna, and so Paul's phrase 'bondage to decay' or 'bondage to a process of destruction' (v 21) is an appropriate description of the state to which God has assigned the creation because of human sin. When Paul says that 'the creation was subjected to futility' (v 20), using the noun mataios, he may mean, as the translation 'futility' suggests, that creation was emptied of meaning or purpose by its condemnation to decay and destruction, much as human death, if it is conceived as the end of existence, makes life seem pointless. This seems the most likely meaning. But the root meaning of mataios is 'empty', and the related verb mataioun means 'to bring to nothing', and so it is possible that Paul has in mind Jeremiah's vision of the whole Earth as 'waste and void' (tohu vabohu), returned to the nothingness that preceded creation. In that case, Paul would mean that, because of human sin, God set creation on course for un-creation.

If this line of interpretation is correct, then Paul is not referring to some drastic change in the natural world that followed from the fall of Adam and Eve, such as the introduction of death for the animal creation. This traditional view is impossible to reconcile with modern knowledge (animals were dying many millions of years before the first humans appeared on Earth) and, in any case, is not really supported by Genesis 3. On the interpretation that I have suggested, Paul is thinking of ecological degradation and desertification of the kind the prophets indicated when they portrayed the Earth mourning, the soil losing its fertility, plants withering, animals dying. Joel's account is the most vivid and may serve to fill out Paul's rather abstract language:

The fields are devastated,  
the ground mourns;  
for the grain is destroyed,  
the wine dries up,  
the oil fails.

Be dismayed, you farmers,  
wail, you vinedressers,  
over the wheat and the barley;  
for the crops of the field are ruined.
12 The vine withers, 
the fig tree droops. 
Pomegranate, palm, and apple — 
all the trees of the field are dried up; 
surely, joy withers away 
among the people …

17 The seed shrivels under the clods, 
the storehouses are desolate; 
the granaries are ruined 
because the grain has failed. 

18 How the animals groan! 
The herds of cattle wander about 
because there is no pasture for them; 
even the flocks of sheep are dazed. 

19 To you, O LORD, I cry. 
For fire has devoured 
the pastures of the wilderness, 
and flames have burned 
all the trees of the field. 

20 Even the wild animals cry to you 
because the watercourses are dried up, 
and fire has devoured 
the pastures of the wilderness. (Joel 1:10–12 and 17–20)

It is notable that in this passage, whereas the other prophets speak of the mourning of the Earth, Joel depicts all kinds of creatures mourning, lamenting and groaning to God: the ground (v 10), the domestic animals (v 18), the wild animals (v 20), as well as the farmers (v 11), the people (v 12) and the prophet himself (v 19). It is easy to see here how Paul could generalise the mourning as that of the whole creation. The desiccation and devastation of nature, also extensively depicted by Joel, are the object of the mourning, and represent, in Paul’s terms, creation’s subjection to futility. Joel’s panorama of creation is not unlike Psalm 104, but here their environments no longer support the living creatures that depend on them. In effect, the Creator’s provision for his creatures, so lavish in Psalm 104, has been withdrawn, and the joy depicted in that psalm has given way to lament and desperate supplication to the Creator.

According to Romans 8:20–21, ‘the creation was subjected to futility … in hope that the creation itself will be set free’. If I am right to find the background to this idea of subjection to futility in the prophets, then perhaps Paul also found in the prophets the warrant for representing it as a subjection ‘in hope’. For the prophets expect the degradation of creation to be reversed in the future through a divine regeneration of the natural world. For example:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, 
the desert shall rejoice and blossom; 
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, 
and rejoice with joy and singing. 
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, 
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. 
They shall see the glory of the LORD, 
the majesty of our God. 
(Isa. 35:1–2; cf. 32:15–20; and 51:3; Amos 9:13–14; Joel 3:18)

In such passages, these revivifying effects on the natural world accompany the redemption of the people of God who have suffered judgement for the wrongdoing that brought degradation on the natural world. If there is hope for the people, then there must also be hope for the non-human creation. To the extent that it is humans who have brought devastation on the rest of creation their hopes and destinies are bound up together. This is precisely what we see also in Romans 8:19–21.

The liberation of creation is to happen at the end of history, when Christian believers will attain their full salvation in the glory of the resurrection (vv 21 and 23). Since creation’s bondage is due to human sin, its liberation must await the cessation of human evil at the end. It might seem, therefore, that this passage cannot
mandate human activity for the relief of creation from the burden of human mistreatment now. It is true that that is not Paul's concern in the passage. But, if we accept the diagnosis that human wrongdoing is responsible for ecological degradation, it follows that those who are concerned to live according to God's will for his world must be concerned to avoid and to repair damage to God's creation as far as possible. Like the coming of the Kingdom of God, we cannot achieve the liberation of creation but we can anticipate it.79

Romans 8:19–23 has been described as 'an environmental mantra',80 meaning that appeal is often made to it as a kind of ecological proof-text, mandating environmental activity by Christians, without engaging in exegetical detail with the problems of interpreting the passage. I hope that reading the text against the background of the theme of the mourning of the Earth in the Old Testament prophets has helped to elucidate it. Crucially, what becomes clear is that Paul assumes the same kind of close relationship between human wrongdoing and the well-being of the non-human creation that the prophets do. Paul and the prophets share what Ellen Davis calls 'the biblical understanding of the world, in which the physical, moral and spiritual orders fully interpenetrate one another – in contrast to the modern superstition that these are separable categories'.81 This is not to say that Paul or the prophets understood the connection between human behaviour and ecological degradation in the way that we are now able to do, but what modern scientific knowledge makes possible is mainly a fuller understanding of how human physical behaviour (burning fossil fuels, over-fishing the oceans and so forth) has extensive and destructive consequences for the ecosystems of the planet. For the ethical and spiritual dimensions that pervade such human behaviour it is we who can learn from the biblical writers.

For many contemporary Christians, the most difficult matter in the biblical material we have discussed in this section will be the understanding of ecological destruction as divine judgement. It can be helpful to recognise that frequently in the Bible language of divine judgement describes the way acts have consequences in this world.82 Disruptions of the created order of things cause further disruption that rebounds on the perpetrators. This can be conceptualised either as a process inherent in the created order or as the intervention of God, but the two are treated by the biblical writers as perfectly compatible. God's just purpose for creation works out through the processes he has ordained, though it would be a mistake to think of these operating in a fully automatic way that would allow no scope, for example, for God's merciful delay of judgement or revocation of judgement in response to repentance, both of which are prominent in biblical accounts of God's ways with the world. God's justice and mercy are both at work, but it is recognised that this kind of judgement on a large scale is bound to be, the world being as it is, relatively indiscriminate.83 Those most responsible are by no means always those who suffer most. In the case we are considering here, there is clear recognition in both the prophets and Paul that, while there is some justice in human wrongdoers suffering from the lack of the essential resources of the Earth, the non-human creatures themselves are the undeserving victims of the consequences of human behaviour. What is being said is that God leaves humans and the rest of creation to the consequences of human actions, and this occurs within God's overall providential ordering of the world. However, it is also essential to say that the biblical writers look for the coming liberation of the whole created order from the entail of human sin. The biblical response (not solution) to the problematic of evil in the world is to a large extent eschatological, and this is Paul's approach in Romans 8:19–23. The eager longing of the whole groaning creation will be satisfied by God's unimaginable transformation of that whole creation to reflect his own glory and to participate in his own eternal life.

PRAISE AND LAMENT

I began the last section by pointing out that the Bible depicts the whole created world both as joining in praise of its Creator and as directing laments to its Creator on account of the devastation of the Earth and its creatures. This is parallel to the way in which the
Psalms depict and direct human address to God as both praise and lament, in probably equal quantities and in a variety of relationships. Lament does not stifle praise, nor does praise suppress lament. A clue to the way they relate in the relationship of the non-human creatures to God may lie in the passage quoted above from Isaiah 35:1–2:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.

Here it is at the fulfilment of creation's eager longing for liberation that the Earth breaks out into joyful praise (as also in Isa. 44:23 and 55:12–13).

The non-human creation glorifies God for making it what it is and by being what he has made it. The non-human creation mourns before God for the ways in which God's human creatures have polluted, degraded and destroyed it, in so many ways preventing it from being what God made it to be. Its very ruin is a lament to its Creator. It reflects God's glory but it also reflects humanity's desecration of God's glory in it. Psalm 148 then is not just a paean of undiluted praise. For those who read or sing it with the desecration of God's world in mind, it is praise in defiance against evil and in hope of new creation. Its invitation to all to praise the Creator will continue to ring out until the day when mourning is subsumed into the eschatological joy of all creation.

Chapter 4

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

Among the ecological failings of which the Bible has been accused is that it promotes a negative view of wilderness. Roderick Nash, in his classic work, Wilderness and the American Mind, claims that the Old Testament portrays wilderness as 'a cursed land', 'the environment of evil, a kind of hell'. Although wilderness also features in the Bible as a place of spiritual testing and encounter with God, there 'was no fondness in the Hebraic tradition for wilderness itself'. Speaking of the American Puritans, he comments: 'their Bibles contained all they needed to know in order to hate wilderness'. More recently, Robert Leal, while allowing that there are also positive evaluations of wilderness in the Bible, focuses on what he sees as a widespread biblical attitude to wilderness as the realm of chaos, lawlessness and evil.

THE GARDEN OF EDEN – ORCHARD OR FOREST?

A good place to start a response to such claims is in the Garden of Eden, which may or may not be wilderness.

Genesis 2:8–15

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. 9 Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. 10 A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four