9. Mortality and the natural order

There is no question that the association of the natural world with Jesus’ death is a construction of the evangelist. It indicates Matthew’s effort to bring meaning to a human event, to make death significant. Matthew had a number of concerns and traditions informing that effort: a floundering community of faith, a Roman imperial counter-story of the death of Jesus of Nazareth as a criminal, written interpretations of natural phenomena, a cosmology that had a long hold on the Jewish, and sometimes non-Jewish, mind. These were important to Matthew at the time, even though we would recognise the limitations of any of these elements for an ‘ecological reading’ today. However, the potential of Matthew’s interpretation of Jesus’ death for us today lies in

i) the search to understand mortality and new life in the context of the whole natural order and its processes

ii) attending to natural phenomena especially for their interconnection rather than their isolation

iii) the effort to interpret natural phenomena in connection with rather than in subservience to human life

iv) the responsibility to bring that understanding to others—a mission context if you want an ecclesial formulation for it.

This potential will be realised if there is an embrace of the contemporary concerns of communities of faith, political realities, scientific worldviews and phenomenological observation. It will remain unfulfilled if older concerns and traditions are dogmatically held or revived as the meaning-making of the present and future.

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Design, Diversity and Dominion: Biodiversity and Job 39

Norman Habel
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1. Introduction

Biodiversity has become a buzz-word in recent years. With the tempo of extinction increasing, we have become aware of the remarkable interdependency of all life forms on our planet. The frightening force of this awareness has only really become apparent as humans realise that by destroying their living habitat they will in the end become their own victims.

Not only will we be creating a soulless place, devoid of birdsong with ever expanding vistas of plastic and concrete, but the biodiversity we need to protect our bodies and sustain our spirits is the one thing we can never replace.¹

Biodiversity, however, is more than a concern for healthy human habitats. A healthy planet also involves what Wendell Berry calls ‘the survival of a diversity of wild creatures’.

We know too that we cannot imagine ourselves apart from those necessary survivals of our own wilderness that we call our instincts. And we know that we cannot have a healthy agriculture apart from the teeming wilderness in the top soil in which worms, bacteria and other wild creatures are carrying on the fundamental work of decomposition, humus making, water storage and drainage. ‘In wilderness is the preservation of the world’ as Thoreau said, may be a spiritual truth but it is also a practical fact.²

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2. The Old Testament context

Before we analyse this text from Job we need to be conscious of the broad background of God's relation to most living creatures in the Hebrew Scriptures. In recent eco-theology much has been written about how the stories of God creating and sustaining Earth highlight God's continued affirmation of creation as good. All living creatures can be depicted as kin, all created from clay and the breath of life from God.

There is, however, a dark side to the tradition. Time and again God feels free to destroy various forms of life. When God is portrayed as angry at individual human beings, nations or communities, God often brings various forms of destruction on the animal or plant world. Living parts of Earth suffer innocently for what humans have done.

The story of the flood is a case in point. God is grieved because humans seem to think evil thoughts continuously. The human experiment seems to have failed. God therefore decides to start again, to destroy human beings. What is extraordinary, however, is that all other life forms must also die. The creatures of the wild are not guilty of the same evil thinking, yet they too must be annihilated. God, it would seem, has no empathy for wild animals.

A handful of humans and animals are saved in a boat. And some conservationists have taken the ark as a symbol for the preservation of wild species. The flood narrative, alas, is not a story of biodiversity but biodestruction. God destroys all life on Earth, except for a favoured few.

The flood story is frequently remembered with an idealised picture of a boat, a few animal heads poking out and a rainbow over the top. Imagine for a moment leaning over the edge of that boat while the carcasses of all kinds of creatures, in various stages of decay, float by. The ark is floating on a sea of death, the stench unbearable. And God watches this scene for twelve months. Perhaps it is no wonder God is delighted with the smell of fresh animals sacrificed by Noah after the waters recede.

3. The Joban context

The wisdom literature, it seems to me, offers quite a different perspective on God and the natural world. And Job 39 represents a significant alternative to—and perhaps a correction of—the classical prophetic tradition of how the natural world was viewed.

The plot of Job is governed by a legal metaphor. In the course of that plot, Job takes God to court and brings at least two charges against God: a) violating the principle of justice by unfairly bringing evils on Job rather than defending Job's innocence, and b) failing to create an orderly universe where justice flows to all. It is this second charge that concerns us in this study.

In Job 12, for example, Job accuses God of misusing God's power and wisdom to 'overthrow Earth' (12: 13-16; cf 9:5). The Hebrew term for 'overthow' is used in connection with the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:25) and suggests that God reduces Earth to chaos. Job claims that God likewise reduces society to a leaderless world, 'a chaos with no way out' (12:24). The word for chaos or wasteland is the term tohu that appears at the beginning of Genesis one (Gen 1:2).

Job accuses God of bringing disaster on the innocent without reason. Job contends that this reality is something that only his human friends refuse to recognise. The whole natural world is aware of the chaotic ways of the creator.

Now ask the cattle and they will instruct you,
The birds of the sky and they will tell you.
Or speak to Earth and it will instruct you,
The fish of the sea and they will inform you.
Who among all these does not know
That the hand of Eloah has done this? (12:7-9)

God's answer to the charges of Job is pronounced from the whirlwind. This answer tends to avoid the issue of Job's personal innocence and the wrong God seems to have done against Job. Instead, God focuses on the way the cosmos is ordered with mysteries
The diversity of the wild’ might well be a caption for chapter 39 of Job, the key text for our consideration in this study. The writer of Job, of course, was not informed by the current discussion about endangered species and diverse life forms. We wonder, however, whether this writer’s sensitivity to the wild can contribute to our contemporary understanding of biodiversity on our planet.

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Perhaps my portrait is a little gruesome, but an anthropocentric reading of the text tends to ignore the suffering of the natural world at the hands of an angry God. Similar texts describing or predicting devastation of the natural environment because of human sin are found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, especially in the prophets.

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apparently beyond Job’s comprehension. Nevertheless, God does not treat Job as a fool or a victim. God challenges Job to be strong and face the truth. Three central themes emerge from this speech, especially from chapter 39, that may be relevant to our consideration of biodiversity and theology.

4. Design

The cosmos is characterised by a particular design. Every component of the cosmos has its own inner driving characteristic, its essential nature. The technical term for this feature is the term derek, which is usually rendered ‘way’.

This term (derek) refers to the driving characteristic of a given entity. Perhaps the German equivalent from Kant is the term bildende Kraft, a term used by scientists seeking to classify creatures such as the platypus. Every component of nature, according to Kant, has its bildende Kraft, its own inner formative force, or as I suggest, driving characteristic. This concept of derek is crucial, I believe, for an understanding of the created order of things in Job.

When God confronts Job from the whirlwind God does not challenge Job’s capacity to think about the disasters of life that have befallen him or his general knowledge about the created world. Rather, he challenges his critical capacity to grasp the underlying blue-print or design (etsa) of creation (Job 38:2), a task that requires insight and wisdom. The very first challenge, one that focuses on Earth, makes it clear that God is questioning Job’s critical cognitive capacity, his bina:

Were you there when I laid Earth’s foundations,
Tell me if your knowledge includes discernment (bina) (Job 38:4).

With each of the components of creation that God introduces, there is a challenge to identify or locate what is equivalent to its inner structural identity, its governing feature. In relation to Earth that determining feature is its hidden foundations, all meticulously measured and set in place (38:4–6). The sea has a statute or law (cheq) that determines and fixes its place in the order of things (38:10). The dawn has a specific place (maqom) assigned to it (38:12). Darkness, too, has a place, a house on Earth (38:19). Thus everything has its assigned locus in creation.

Another way of expressing this concept of the determined dimension of things is to speak of their ‘way’. Job is challenged to identify the way of lightning when it flashes and the way of the thunderstorm (38:24–25). He is also challenged to discern the ‘laws’ (chuqquim) of the sky as well as the order of Earth (38:33). The ‘law’ inherent in something is parallel to the ‘way’ of something. In contemporary terms, we could say that according to Job 38 everything has its own inner code.

And as if to raise the intellectual stakes to another level, the last challenge in relation to the inanimate domains of creation, is for Job to find something even more elusive—wisdom. ‘Who put wisdom in the cloud canopy?’ (38:36). The inner code of the clouds is designated its wisdom.

Consider the range of features that Job is challenged to discover by exercising his critical cognitive skills: the hidden meticulously measured foundations of Earth, the inner design that controls the boundaries of the sea, the laws that govern how the sky functions, the unseen place where Dawn resides, the way that characterises thunder and lightning, and finally the wisdom in the clouds. It is not the phenomena themselves, but the inner mystery or code within these phenomena that Job is challenged to discern, a code which itself can be called ‘wisdom’.

The physical universe, it seems, is a complex of components, each of which has a distinctive ‘law’, ‘way’, ‘place’ or ‘dimension’ that characterises it in relation to the rest of the cosmos. Ultimately, this mysterious distinctive feature can also be designated the wisdom in that thing itself. All the phenomena of Earth, it seems, have wisdom within them; wisdom is not only something humans acquire by observing nature. It also seems to be something imbedded in nature that humans are challenged to discover.

5. Diversity

The ‘way’ or ‘code’ that characterises the design of the cosmos is also evident in the biological world. The wise are encouraged to observe and analyse living creatures to discern their way and learn the lessons of life from their ‘ways’.


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Go to the ant, you sluggard,
See its ways and be wise.
Without having any chief
Or officer or ruler,
It prepares its food in summer
And gathers its sustenance in harvest.
How long will you lie there, O sluggard?
When will you rise from your sleep?

The injunction to the would-be sage is to analyse the ant and thereby discover its ‘way’. The person who can identify the driving force that is typical of ants or any other creature gains wisdom, at least in one area of life.

We also recall the famous lines:

Three things are too wonderful for me;
Four I do not understand:
The way of an eagle in the sky,
The way of a snake on a rock,
The way of a ship on the high seas,
And the way of a man with a young woman. (Prov 30:18–19)

The eagle has a way that is distinctive to the eagle, a way that is evident as it flies in the sky. Yet, that way remains a marvel and a mystery, something distinctive located within the eagle. Each of the phenomena cited has an innate way that characterises it and makes it mysterious.

Job is challenged to understand the diversity of ways exhibited by creatures in the wild, everything from lions in their dens to hawks in the sky.

The first challenge from God is for Job to comprehend the feeding habits of lions and ravens, or more specifically, the way in which these creatures find food for their young and satisfy their needs (38:39–41). Both are ultimately said to be dependent on God for their food, yet they mysteriously know the strategies needed to care for their offspring.

The second challenge is for Job to discern the remarkable process of birth in the wild, the way shy ibex and hinds gestate for the appropriate period and give birth to healthy infants without the aid of a mid-wife (39:1–4). The diverse design of natural life includes not only ‘ways’ and ‘places’ of a creature in the order of things, but also ‘times’ (‘et) that govern and regulate life in the most remote corners of Earth.

The final challenge is for Job to try and grasp the way of the hawk in the sky:

Is it by your discernment that the hawk soars,
Spreading its wings to the South?
Does the eagle mount at your command
And build its nest on high? (39:26–27)

The term rendered ‘discernment’ is another word for wisdom. Birds of prey which soar freely in the sky have an inner wisdom, an inner code, which enables them to be what they are and do what ‘comes naturally’. Job can only watch and wonder! It is this inbuilt way or wisdom that characterises and classifies each species of the wild.

The wise man or woman who wrote the book of Job does not focus primarily on the interconnection or interrelationship of life in the wild, but on the inner code that differentiates life in all its forms. Difference or differentiation is celebrated as an essential and wondrous feature of biodiversity.

Ironically, one creature does not seem to fit the pattern of wise creatures in the wild. The ostrich is an anomaly! The writer, following popular folklore of the day, believes that the ostrich, in spite of her spectacular plumage, abandons her eggs, treats her young harshly and does not seem to care about all her labour (39:13–17). Given the biology of the wild enunciated above, there can be only one explanation. God did not give her the inner wisdom required to be caring breeding bird. She was deprived of the discernment that characterises all other birds.

The ostrich is the exception that proves the rule. The diversity of the wild is characterised by a wisdom biology. Each living thing has an inner wisdom, way or impulse that governs its biology and distinguishes it from other living beings.

6. Domination

This speech of Job 39 is not only concerned with the overall design of the world or how each creature plays its role in the wild. Job is also challenged to understand the relationship of humans to the diversity of the wild. To understand this challenge we need to recall the mandate to dominate Earth (dominium terrae) found in Genesis 1:26–28 and consider whether the speech of Job offers a subversive alternative.
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This text from Genesis has God extending to humans a mandate to dominate, to rule over the earth community and to subdue Earth. This mandate is problematic, whether or not the interpreter links it with the imago dei of verse 26.

In the current ecological context, the various interpretations of this text can be divided into three main categories. The first approach reads the role of humans ‘ruling’ (rada) and ‘subduing’ (kabash) Earth as a hierarchical mandate to dominate which unjustly reduces Earth and Earth community to an inferior status. The second approach, emphasising the royal innuendos in terms like ‘rule’, maintains that humans are given the power to be responsible ‘royal’ stewards who should govern Earth and Earth community with knowledge and justice. The third approach softens the import of the key terms ‘rule’ (rada) and ‘subdue’ (kabash) even more and suggests that they mean something akin to ‘care for’ and ‘show kindness’. Typical of the ‘softening’ approach is that of Brueggemann who suggests that ‘the dominance is that of a shepherd who cares for, tends and feeds the animals’. It is my contention that the key verbs in question—‘rule’ and ‘subdue’—necessarily imply domination and oppression. For a more complete discussion of this text and its relevance for Job 38-39 see my article in Earth Bible, volume 5.

The text of this mandate in Gen 1:26-28, when taken in isolation, may suggest that domination of Earth and Earth community is the normative biblical orientation for human-Earth relations. Several important elements both in the Genesis context and the Wisdom context illustrate that, while this text may be been important for one school of Israelite thought—presumably the priestly school—it is subverted by alternative perspectives. Such a bold image of domination is challenged, I believe, by the specific wording of Job 39.

The author of God’s speech meticulously works through the possibilities. Having eliminated any possibility that Job has power over the cosmic realm, God turns Job’s attention to domains where manifestations of domination by humans are more likely to be seen. Job cannot command the dawn, penetrate the underworld, bind the Pleiades or dispatch lightning on its mission, and so rule the physical universe. But can Job, like the First Human, dominate—even domesticate—living creatures in line with the mandate of Genesis 1? When God takes Job on a journey through the kingdom of wild creatures, this possibility is put to the test. In the process, the mandate to dominate seems to be subverted.

If Job has authority over lions, then he should be able to match their hunting skills and provide prey for their cubs and enter their lairs to feed them (38:39-40). Ironically, it is humans that are likely to become the prey of lions. If Job understands the mysteries of birth among wild creatures, he should be able to monitor where and when they give birth (39:1-4). But the capacity of wild creatures to survive birth and infancy in the wild, without human aid, is beyond Job’s comprehension. The wild is full of mysteries and mysteries are never really dominated.

It is especially the questions that God poses about the wild ass and the wild ox that contradict the belief that humans are destined to have dominion over all living creatures (38:5-12). The wild ass has been set free (chaphash) and roams without the bonds that humans seek to impose (38:5). The wild ass defies the world of humans associated with cities and refuses to hear the voice of a human taskmaster. The wild ass is the symbol of freedom in the wild, freedom from human control. God has set free the wild ass and in so doing negated any claim that humans have to dominate this natural domain.

In the case of the wild ox, the use of the term ‘bed (servant/s)lave’ immediately evokes a comparison with the rule/servant polarity of Genesis 1 (Gen 2:8) and Genesis 2 (Gen 2:15). God asks whether the wild ox is willing to be Job’s servant, to treat Job as master, to consider Job his ruler (39:9). The answer is obviously, No! It is not the norm for wild creatures to be subjugated by humans; the mandate to dominate is here exposed as contrary to the impulses of nature or God’s intent. And, as if to illustrate how ludicrous it would be for wild oxen to be the servants of humans, God creates a delightfully absurd scenario, a parody of the idea that humans could have dominion over wild beasts:

Is the wild ass willing to serve (‘bed) you?
Will he spend the night beside your crib?
Can you hold the wild ox in the furrow with ropes?
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If Job has authority over lions, then he should be able to match their hunting skills and provide prey for their cubs and enter their lairs to feed them (38:39–40). Ironically, it is humans that are likely to become the prey of lions. If Job understands the mysteries of birth among wild creatures, he should be able to monitor where and when they give birth (39:1–4). But the capacity of wild creatures to survive birth and infancy in the wild, without human aid, is beyond Job’s comprehension. The wild is full of mysteries and mysteries are never really dominated.

It is especially the questions that God poses about the wild ass and the wild ox that contradict the belief that humans are destined to have dominion over all living creatures (38:5–12). The wild ass has been set free (chedophshi) and roams without the bonds that humans seek to impose (38:5). The wild ass delays the world of humans associated with cities and refuses to hear the voice of a human taskmaster. The wild ass is the symbol of freedom in the wild, freedom from human control. God has set free the wild ass and in so doing negated any claim that humans have to dominate this natural domain.

In the case of the wild ox, the use of the term ‘ebed (servant/slave) immediately evokes a comparison with the rule/servant polarity of Gen 1:28 and Gen 2:15. The ox is willing to serve Job’s servant, to treat Job as master, to consider Job his ruler (39:9). The answer is obviously, No! It is not the norm for wild creatures to be subjugated by humans; the mandate to dominate is here exposed as contrary to the impulses of nature or God’s intent. And, as if to illustrate how illogical it would be for wild oxen to be the servants of humans, God creates a delightfully absurd scenario, a parody of the idea that humans could have dominion over wild beasts.

*Is the wild ass willing to serve (*ebed*) you?
Will he spend the night beside your crib?
Can you hold the wild ox in the furrow with ropes?
Will he harrow the valleys behind you?
And leave your toil to him?
Can you trust (amman) him to harvest your grain,
Can you rely (batach) on his great strength?
And gather it in from the threshing floor? (39:9–12; translation mine).

The idea that the wild ox would be a faithful servant, sleeping at
the bedside and trusted to carry out the duties of the master, is here
viewed as ludicrous. Beyond the parody, however, lies an implied
rejection of the tradition that humans are commissioned, as part of
their basic role under God, to rule over all living creatures. The fact
that a few creatures, like the ass or the cow, are domesticated, does not
negate the challenge of YHWH that the world of the wild is beyond
human control and dominion.

In the world of the wild in Job 39, the creatures described live free
lives, independent and unafraid of human beings. The suggestion that
these animals might ‘serve’ humans and fear them as terrifying
masters is a proposition reduced to the absurd. Even so-called
domesticated animals are inherently wild and beyond total human
control.

7. Conclusion

The poet of Job may not have understood the complexities of
biodiversity, but this wise writer is akin to an ancient scientist who
discerns a cosmic design that incorporates a wisdom biology. Each
animate and inanimate component of creation has an inbuilt code or
wisdom that determines its role and place in the design of things.
These codes also determine the differences that characterise the
diversity of species in the wild.

Humans are to respect the inner wisdom of living things and not
dominate them. Biodiversity in wisdom terms means bio-respect for
the differences and domains of each species. Neither the survival of the
fittest nor domination by the most intelligent species has any place in a
wisdom biology. Wisdom is not, first and foremost, something we
possess, but something we discover deep in Earth, life and the passage
of time.