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## Nature in the Bible

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## NATURE IN THE BIBLE

Dinah Shelton

*O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast  
thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches*

Psalms 104

The devotion of Alex Kiss to the environment and its legal protection must be understood as inextricably intertwined with his Christian faith. Taught and inspired by his father's work for the Protestant Church in Hungary, he developed a love of creation and sense of responsibility towards it. Not long ago, he made a presentation on environmental protection and the Book of Revelation, for an anniversary celebration of St. John's apocalyptic vision. It is with this background in mind that the following essay is written in honor of and as a gift to Alex. It attempts to bring together for study the many Biblical references to nature and human relations to it. Therein is the basis for many years of future discussions.

### CREATION

Throughout the Bible, we are reminded that humans do not own the earth and its resources. God is the source of creation:

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. For he hath founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods.  
(Psalm 24:1-2)

The heavens are thine, the earth also is thine; as for the world and the fullness thereof, thou has founded them. The north and the south thou hast created them.  
(Psalm 89:11-12)

...Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come; and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.  
(Rev. 14:7)

The Psalmist calls on all persons to recognize and be thankful for this blessing of creation:

The sea is his, and he made it: and his hands formed the dry land. O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the Lord our maker. (Psalm 95:5)

Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands.  
Serve the Lord with gladness: come before his presence with singing.  
Know ye that the Lord is God; it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves;  
we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and bless his name.

For the Lord is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all generations. (Psalm 100)

The stories of the Creation found in the first two chapters of Genesis are probably the most familiar of all passages concerning nature and man's relation to it in the Bible. In Genesis 1, each day brings creation that God sees is "good." On the fourth day, the fish, birds and great whales are blessed and told "be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth (Gen. 1:22). The blessing is also given to humans when "male and female he created them."<sup>1</sup> God tells them:

Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (Gen. 1:28)

This passage has been the source of considerable debate, commentary and disagreement, especially over the "dominion" given humans. It seems clear that the term does not mean ownership<sup>2</sup> ("for the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" I Cor. 10:26), but rather establishes the power of humans over other creatures and the right to beneficial use of them. It thus would not include the right to destroy what belongs to God.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the best view is that the grant of dominion establishes a guardianship or a trust over the previously blessed and prior created living things. "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." (I Cor.10:31)

In Genesis 2 a different order of creation has God creating Adam just prior to the Garden of Eden, in which grew every tree pleasant to the sight and good for food. Adam is placed in the garden "to dress it and to keep it." Only after this are all the animals created and named; none are found suitable to be with Adam and thus God creates woman. In this recounting of the creation, no reference is made to dominion and the guardianship of Adam over the garden is made clear in his mission to "keep" (i.e. conserve, maintain) the garden. He is also forbidden to utilize one tree. It is the violation of this edict that causes humans to be expelled from the Garden. The ground becomes a site of thorns and thistles, where Adam must toil.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1 recounts the creation together of male and female in God's image. See Gen. 1:27 All quotations are taken from the King James version.

<sup>2</sup> In speaking of the desolation of Egypt, God says "the river is mine and I have made it." (Ezek. 29:9).

<sup>3</sup> In the Revelation, the twenty-four elders worship God by saying "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created." All things being created for God's pleasure, humans do wrong in extinguishing any of them. Indeed, in the Revelation the angels are commanded not to hurt the earth, the sea, the grass of the earth, nor any green thing including any tree. (Rev. 7, 9) Only humans are marked and judged, at which judgment God will "destroy them which destroy the earth. (Rev. 11:18).

In order to preserve the earth, God instructs on the use of land and its resources: agricultural lands shall be left fallow in the seventh year in order to "rest and lie still" (Ex. 23:10- In Leviticus 25, God gives his commands to Moses at Mount Sinai regarding use of the land of Israel:

2. ...When ye come into the land which I give you, then shall the land keep a sabbath unto the Lord.
3. Six years thou shalt sow thy field, and six years thou shalt prune thy vineyard, and gather in the fruit thereof;
4. But in the seventh year shall be a sabbath of rest unto the land, a sabbath for the Lord; thou shalt neither sow thy field, nor prune thy vineyard.
5. That which groweth of its own accord of thy harvest thou shalt not reap, neither gather the grapes of thy vine undressed; for it is a year of rest unto the land.

The fruit of newly planted trees is not to be harvested until the fourth year, when it is to be given to God. Only in the fifth year may the fruit be eaten. (Lev. 19:23-25) God as creator and owner claims the first fruits of cultivated plants and animals. (Ex. 22:29-30; Lev. 1:14) God also instructs that the corners of fields, the gleanings of the harvest, and grapes on the vineyard are to be left for the poor and stranger. (Lev. 19:9-10) Misuse or overburdening of the land is encountered: Abram and Lot together with their flocks and herds and tents are so numerous that "the land was not able to bear them" (Gen. 13:1-6) and they separated after strife broke out between their herdsmen. Esau also is forced to leave Canaan and his brother Jacob because the land "could not bear them because of their cattle." (Gen. 36:7)

The original creation does not last after Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden. The earth becomes filled with violence and those on it corrupt God's way. (Gen. 6:11-12) God repents having "made man on the earth." God saves Noah, his family, and examples of all other creatures "to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth." (Gen. 6:22) God does not preserve humans at the expense of or in preference to other living things. Indeed, even the "unclean" animals, i.e. those unfit to eat and of no utility to humans, are saved.<sup>4</sup> (Gen. 7:2)

A second beginning is made after the flood. This time, Noah is instructed to bring forth the living creatures on the ark "that they may breed abundantly in the earth, and be fruitful, and multiply upon the earth." (Gen. 8:17) Noah and his sons are also told to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth. God gives humans both animals and plants for food.<sup>5</sup> Most importantly, God establishes his Covenant with Noah and his descendants "and with every living creature that is with you, of the fowl, of the cattle, and of every beast of the earth with you; from all that go out of the ark, to every beast of the earth. (Gen. 9:10) The Covenant, not to again destroy the earth by flood, is signified by the rainbow.

The Creation then is not for man's benefit, but for God's. All living things are part of the

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<sup>4</sup> The actual dietary laws are given after the flood. See the discussion below of flora and fauna.

<sup>5</sup> Until this time, only plants were to be eaten by humans and by other animals. Gen. 1:29-30.

Covenant and thus in direct relationship with God. Viewing the Creation, man is to "see Him that maketh the seven stars and Orion, and turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day dark with night; that calleth for the waters of the sea, and poureth them out upon the face of the earth: The Lord is His name." (Amos 5:8)

## **WATER**

Water is the preeminent element of nature in the Bible.<sup>6</sup> It has extraordinary importance literally and symbolically: it is life-giving and life-destroying; power over it is a sign of divinity; and the sources of water are the setting for key events. The hydrological cycle is recounted: "All the rivers run to the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again." (Eccl. 1:7) Psalm 104 affirms the glory of God, who makes the clouds a chariot and who walks upon the wings of the wind. The song gives thanks for the gift of water in a stirring ode to nature:

10. He sendeth the springs into the valleys, which run among the hills.
11. They give drink to every beast of the field: the wild asses quench their thirst.
12. By them shall the fowls of the heaven have their habitation, which sing among the branches.
13. He watereth the hills from his chambers: the earth is satisfied with the fruit of thy works.
14. He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man: that he may bring forth food out of the earth.
- ...
24. O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches.
25. So is this great and wide sea, wherein are things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts.
26. There go the ships: there is that leviathan, whom thou hast made to play therein.

The need for water is a constant theme. When Lot separates from Abram, he chooses to move to the plain of Jordan seeing "that it was well-watered everywhere." (Gen. 13:10) During the Israelite wanderings in the wilderness, there is often no water, causing dissention and complaints. (Ex. 15:22; 17:1; Num. 20:1-2) Once, the thirsty people find only bitter water. (Ex. 15:23) Moses is shown a tree by God with which to purify the bitter water. Another time the people find an oasis where, it is noted, there were twelve wells. (Ex. 15:27) When the years in the wilderness end, God reminds the people to keep the commandments

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<sup>6</sup> It should be recalled here that Prof. Kiss was the President of the Second International Water Tribunal.

for the Lord the God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills...Who led thee through that great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water; who brought thee forth water out of the rock of flint." (Deu. 8:6-7,15)

Life and death depend upon water. The infant Moses is hidden by the river and found when Pharaoh's daughter comes to bathe. (Ex. 2:1-6) The first plague sent to afflict the Egyptians is the deprivation of water, when it is turned to blood, killing all the fish. (Ex. 7:17-25) "And all the Egyptians digged round about the river for water to drink; for they could not drink of the river." (Ex. 7:24) After the Israelites leave Egypt, water again is a curse as the pursuing Egyptians drown in the Red Sea. (Ex. 14:27-28)

Mariners, in particular recognize the power of water. Psalm 106 pays tribute to this:

21. Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!

...

23. They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters;

24. These see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep.

25. For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof,

26. They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble.

27. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit's end.

28. Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and he bringeth them out of their distresses.

29. He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still.

30. Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven.

Both Jonah and St. Paul are caught in storms at sea. Jonah recounts how, after he disobeyed a command of God, the Lord sent a great wind into the sea and the mariners were afraid of the strength of the tempest. In a display of religious diversity, each prays to his own god and the shipmaster calls upon Jonah to do likewise. They cast lots to find out who is responsible and Jonah tells them of his disobedience to God. The crew throw him overboard for having brought the disaster upon them. When the seas become calm, they fear the Lord and make sacrifices to him. Jonah spends three days in the belly of a fish in "the deep, in the midst of the seas" where all the billows and waves pass over him. Jonah describes how "the waters compassed me about, even to the soul; the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head." (Jonah 2:5) Jesus compares his death and three days in the tomb to Jonah's sojourn in the depths of the sea. (Matt. 12:40) St. Paul is shipwrecked after a heavy storm at sea en route to Rome. (Acts 27)

Water sources draw people to them; the name "Beer", which is a common place name means "well", (e.g. Beersheba, well of the oath). When Sarai flees from Abram after Hagar gives birth, an angel finds her by a fountain of water in the wilderness. (Gen. 16:7) Later, when Abraham sends his servant to find Isaac a wife, the servant waits by a well for the women to come. The servant looks for the one that will give him and his camels water to drink. Rebecca appears and gives him water at his request, then volunteers to draw water for the camels. This is viewed as the sign she is God's choice. (Gen. 24:1-28) Jacob also finds Rachel by a well. (Gen. 29:1-12) When Jesus sends his disciples to prepare the Passover, he tells them to enter the city and look for a man bearing a pitcher of water. They are to follow him to his house where a room will be found. (Luke 22:10)

The offering of water is a sign of hospitality and generosity. When three men appear to Abraham his first order is that water be brought for them to wash their feet. Jesus's feet are washed by the tears of a sinner who then dries His feet with her hair; He tells her to go in peace, her faith has saved her. (Luke 7:37-50) Laban also gives water to the servant of Abraham who comes to find a wife for Isaac. (Gen. 24:32) When Hagar is sent into the wilderness of Beersheba, she is given bread and a bottle of water. (Gen. 21:14) In contrast, Joseph's brothers cast him into a pit with no water in it, intending him to die. (Gen. 37:24) Curses include the deprivation of water "Ye mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew, neither let there be rain, upon you ..." (II Sam. 1:21)

Control and power over water is a sign of God. In the beginning God's face moves upon the face of the waters (Gen. 1:2) and he divides land from waters and waters from each other. With the flood, God uses water to destroy the living creatures of the earth. God's power parts the Red Sea (Ex. 14:21) and the Jordan River. (Joshua 3:14-17, 4:17-24) God makes water appear for the Israelites wandering in the desert, when Moses is told to strike a rock with the rod he has been given. (Ex. 17:1-7) Samson, also, cries out in thirst and is provided water when God cleaves a hollow place in the jawbone of the ass. (Judges 15:18-19) The provision of water is a sign of God:

When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue faileth for thirst, I the Lord will hear them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them.

I will open rivers in high places, and fountains in the midst of the valleys: I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.

I will plant in the wilderness the cedar, the shittah tree, and the myrtle, and the oil tree; I will set in the desert the fir tree, and the pine, and the box tree together:

That they may see, and know, and consider, and understand together, that the hand of the Lord hath done this, and the Holy One of Israel hath created it.

(Isaiah 41:17-20)

The prophets Elijah and Elisha both divide the waters of the Jordan (II Kings 2:8, 14) and later Elisha "heals" the waters of Jericho. (II Kings 2:21-22) During the war with the Moabites, the kings of Israel, Judah and Edom marched through the wilderness of Edom to do battle. For

seven days there was no water. They sent for Elisha who is inspired by God to tell them to dig ditches. Although there was no wind nor rain, the ditches filled with water. Not only did this allow them to drink, it won the battle, because the Moabites saw the sun shining blood red on the water and thought the kings had slain each other. When they came to the Israelite camp, they were attacked and defeated.

During the ministry of Jesus, He "rebukes" the winds and tells the sea "Peace be still" (Mark 4:39), calming the tempest that led the disciples to wake him in fear of death. "The men marvelled, saying, what manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him!". (Matt. 8:27; Mark 4:41) Jesus also walks across the sea to the disciples who announce "of a truth thou art the Son of God." (Matt. 14:24-32) The first miracle Jesus performed was changing the water to wine at the marriage in Cana. (John 2:1-11)

The power over water demonstrates the might of God:

Fear ye not Me? saith the Lord: will ye not tremble at my presence, which have placed the sand for the bound of the sea by a perpetual decree, that it cannot pass it: and though the waves thereof toss themselves, yet can they not prevail; though they roar, yet can they not pass over it? (Jer. 5:22)

Are there any among the vanities of the Gentiles that can cause rain? or can the heavens give showers? art not thou he, O Lord our God? therefore we will wait upon thee: for thou hast made all these things. (14:22)

Water is central to Christianity. Isaiah prophesies that in the coming of the Messiah "with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation." (Isaiah 12:3) It is through the act of baptism that one becomes a Christian. Jesus says "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (John 3:5) John the Baptist baptizes many in the Jordan river (Matt. 3:4), preaching it as an act of repentance for the remission of sins. (Mark 1:4) Christ himself was baptised, after which the Spirit descends upon him and a voice from heaven declares God to be "well pleased". (Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:22) Jesus commands the disciples to baptize others (Matt 28:19). Paul suggests that through baptism the believer is identified with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. As He was raised from the dead, so the Christian is raised from death of sin to a new life in Christ. (Rom. 6:4-11).

Even for the first tabernacle, God instructs Moses to put a brass laver full of water between the congregation and the altar that the priests may wash their hands and feet before approaching the altar. (Ex. 30:18-21)

The emphasis on water encompasses its use as metaphor. According to Proverbs, "A poor man that oppressteth the poor is like a sweeping rain which leaveth no food." (28:3). Moses declares "my doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew, as the small rain upon the tender herb, and as the showers upon the grass." (Deu. 32:2). In Psalm 124, David sings of the aid of God, saying that if the Lord had not been on the side of the Israelites "then the waters had overwhelmed, the stream had gone over our soul; then the proud waters had gone over our soul."

In Job, man is said to "drink iniquity like water." (Job 15:16) Jesus says, "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst." (John 6:35). Also, "if any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." (John 7:37-38) Isaiah says that the righteous who care for the hungry and afflicted shall "be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not." (Isaiah 58:11)

The symbolic, metaphorical and literal uses of water are all evident when Jesus meets the woman of Samaria at Jacob's well.<sup>7</sup> Jesus comes to the well after a tiring journey from Judea where His disciples have been baptizing many converts. A woman comes to draw water and Jesus asks her for a drink. She expresses surprise that a Jew would ask a Samaritan, a Gentile, for water "for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans". Jesus replies that if she knew who was asking her, she would instead ask him for a drink because "he would have given thee living water." She asks how He will draw water from the well, when he has no container and the well is deep; where is this living water? He replies:

Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again;  
But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but  
the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into  
everlasting life. (John 4:13-14)

The woman asks for this water. After Jesus tells her things that lead her to proclaim him a prophet, she says that she knows the Messiah, Christ, is coming. Jesus announces that He is Christ. The woman returns to her town to tell of the event and many of the Samaritans come to see and believe as Jesus remained with them for two days. The incredible significance of this story lies in the fact that it is here that for the first time and to a Gentile woman that Jesus proclaims His identity. In this way He makes clear the universality of the Christian message,

## **FLORA AND FAUNA**

Flora and fauna figure throughout the Bible. Their existence itself instructs about God and Creation. Job says:

But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and  
they shall tell thee:  
Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee; and the fishes of the sea shall declare  
unto thee.

Who knoweth not in all these that the hand of the Lord hath wrought this?  
As part of the Creation and Covenant, all creatures are to be preserved and respected.

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<sup>7</sup> John 4:1-42.

For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills.  
I know all the fowls of the mountains; and the wild beasts of the field are mine.  
If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fullness thereof. (Psalm 50: 10-12)

The law establishes conservation protection for birds. Those coming upon a bird's nest either in a tree or on the ground may not take the mother bird, although the eggs and the young may be taken. (Deut. 22:6-7)

During periods of drought and famine, care is given to the animals. Ahab tells Obadiah to search the fountains and brooks to see if he can find grass to save the horses and mules. (I Kings 18:5) Ahab meets Elijah and rain is brought.

Man is often associated with or compared to other animals. After the exodus from Egypt, God tells Moses to sanctify all the firstborn of both man and of beast. (Ex. 13:2) In Genesis 1, God gives the plants for food to humans and to "every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth wherein there is life". (Gen. 1:29-30). Only after the flood are Noah and his descendants told by God that every moving thing that lives shall be meat, just as plants were early given for food.

In Leviticus and Deuteronomy, a detailed dietary code is established, showing considerable knowledge of the natural roles of animals.<sup>8</sup> Certain creatures are not to be eaten, although other uses of them alive is permitted and there is certainly no indication given that these animals should be destroyed because they are unclean. Indeed, it is only the carcasses of the dead animals that are not to be touched.

Many of the prohibitions are understandably excluded for sanitary reasons, pork, shellfish, and carrion in particular.<sup>9</sup> Other unclean animals would have been useful for other purposes, e.g. birds of prey would have hunted the grain-eating rodents.<sup>10</sup> Disease-bearing rodents and other animals<sup>11</sup> were not only declared unclean, but the items on which they died had to be washed. If they fell into food, it had to be discarded.

The role of water in bearing disease seems to be recognized. If the water that has washed items on which these "creeping" animals have died touches meat it cannot be eaten. If there is a

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<sup>8</sup> See Lev. 11 and Deu. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Anti-pollution measures are also mandated. Places outside camps were to be established for human waste. "And thou shalt have a paddle upon thy weapon; and it shall be, when thou wilt ease thyself abroad, thou shalt dig therewith, and shalt turn back and cover that which cometh from thee." (Deut. 23:13)

<sup>10</sup> God tells Moses that birds not to be eaten include the eagle, the vulture, various owls, and the night hawk. Also listed are fishing birds: the osprey, pelican, stork and heron. Bats are included although they are not birds.

<sup>11</sup> These include mice, the weasel, the ferret, the mole, various reptiles, and snails. Lev. 11:29-35

fountain or pit with plenty of water, that part that touches the carcass is unclean, but the rest is clean. Dry seed upon which any part of the carcass falls remains safe, but wet seed is not.

St. Peter's vision eliminates the absence of distinction between clean and unclean animals for Christians.<sup>12</sup> As Peter was praying, he became very hungry. While the food was being prepared he fell into a trance wherein he saw a great sheet descending from heaven. It opened to reveal all manner of beasts. A voice called on Peter to rise and eat but he refused, saying he had never eaten anything common or unclean. The voice replies: "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common." Three times the vision is repeated. Peter understands this as a symbol that Christ's message is not only for the Jews but for the Gentiles. (Acts 9:9 - 10:18) Paul is more direct: "I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean. (Rom. 14:14) Paul warns Timothy that "in the latter times" some will depart from the faith, "commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth." (I Tim. 4:1-3)

For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving;  
For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer. (I Tim. 4:4-5)

Nature is not to be worshipped however, or parts of it made into holy objects. God forbids man to bow down to the likeness "of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth." (Ex. 20:4-5) God condemns those who "saw every high hill, and all the thick trees, and they offered there their sacrifices, and there they presented the provocation of their offering; there also they made their sweet savour, and poured out there their drink offerings." (Ez. 20:28)

Sometimes flora and fauna are cited as examples of how people should behave or a simple metaphors: "Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise." (Prov. 6:6) God tells Moses to remind the people of their escape from Egypt, "how I bare you on eagles' wings". (Ex. 19:4) Balaam compares the people of Israel to "a great lion" which would rise up to take its prey. (Num. 23:24) A good man is compared to a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth fruit in season; his leaf shall not wither and whatever he does will prosper. (Psalm 1:3; Jer. 18:7-8) Isaiah says that "we roar all like bears, and mourn sore like doves." (Is. 59:11)

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<sup>12</sup> Jesus had already rejected some of the dietary restrictions saying "There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man." Mark 7:15

Jesus uses examples from nature familiar to the people of the time in his teaching by use of Parables and metaphors. Comparing men to fruit trees, He asks whether grapes can be gathered from thorns or figs from thistle; every good tree brings forth good fruit while bad trees bring forth bad. "By their fruits shall ye know them." (Matt. 7:20; Luke 6:44) In the parable of the sower, he compares teaching the word to sowing seeds which fall on various soils. Those who hear and respond are like good soil. (Matt. 13:37; Mark 4:3; Luke 8:5) In another agricultural analogy, Jesus speaks of the enemy who plants weeds among the grain. The wise owner lets both grow together until the harvest, when they are separated and the weeds burned. (Matt. 13:24-30) Finally, "the kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof." (Matt. 13:31-33; Mark 4:31-32) If you have the faith of a grain of mustard seed, nothing is impossible. (Matt. 17:20)

Jesus also continues a tradition of comparing humans to sheep and God as the shepherd. The twenty-third psalm begins, "The Lord is my shepherd." Jesus tells his disciples to go "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matt. 10:6) He adds, "I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." (Matt. 10:16) He recounts that at the day of judgment, the saved will be separated "as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats." (Matt. 25:32) To the people, Jesus says, "Fear not, little flock" (Luke 12:32) and "I am the good shepherd and know my sheep, and am known of mine. (John 10:11) In the parable of the shepherd, he compares the effort to redeem a sinner to a shepherd who leaves his ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to go after the one that is lost. (Luke 15:4)

t. Peter compares the temporality of the body to the short life of plants:  
For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away;  
But the word of the Lord endureth forever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.

(I Pet. 24-25)

As creatures of God, animals are often sign-bearers or messengers. The end of the flood is signalled by birds. First Noah sends out a raven which goes to and fro until the waters dried. Then a dove is sent out but returns, for there is no place to rest. The dove is sent a second time and returns with an olive leaf. Finally the dove departs and does not return. The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descends upon Jesus after he is baptised. (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32) During a drought God tells Elijah to go east to a brook near the Jordan, "and it shall be that thou shalt drink of the brook: and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there...and the ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening; and he drank of the brook." (I Kings 17:4-5)

The eagle appears as an image of God:

As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttering over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taken them, beareth them on her wings;  
So the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him.  
He made him ride on the high places of the earth, that he might eat the increase of the fields; and he made him to suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock. (Deut. 32:11-13)

The most notable story indicating the relationship of God to his creatures is the story of Balaam's ass. Balaam is told by God to go with princes of Moab who seek an alliance against the Israelites. On the road God sends an angel to block the way. Incredibly, Balaam does not see the angel, the ass does:

And the ass saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and the ass turned aside out of the way, and went into the field: and Balaam smote the ass, to turn her into the way.  
But the angel of the Lord stood in a path of the vineyards, a wall being on this side, and a wall on that side.  
And when the ass saw the angel of the Lord, she thrust herself into the wall, and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall: and he smote her again.  
And the angel of the Lord went further, and stood in a narrow place, where was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left.  
And when the ass saw the angel of the lord, she fell down under Balaam: and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he smote the ass with a staff.  
And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, What have I done unto thee, that thou has smitten me these three times?  
And Balaam said unto the ass, Because thou hast mocked me: I would there were a sword in mine hand, for now would I kill thee.  
And the ass said unto Balaam, Am I not thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden ever since I was thine unto this day? was I ever wont to do so unto thee? And he said, Nay.  
Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face.  
And the angel of the Lord said unto him, Wherefore hast thou smitten thine ass these three times? behold, I went out to withstand thee, because thy way is perverse before me:  
And the ass saw me, and turned from me these three times: unless she had turned from me, surely now also I had slain thee, and saved her alive.  
And Balaam said unto the angel of the Lord, I have sinned; for I knew not that thou stoodest in the way against me: now therefore, if it displease thee, I will get me back again. (Num. 22:22-34)

In this story, the ass acted not according to man's will, but God's. Balaam, not seeing or

understanding God's plan, violently attempts to force the ass to obey him. He even threatens to kill the ass because it has "mocked him" by going its own way. The ass is permitted by God to speak and rebuke Balaam. The angel warns Balaam that his own perverse way would have led to his death, while the ass would have lived. The lesson here is clear: God's broad plan for nature may be contrary to man's perverse will. When man persists in wrong conduct, nature may "speak" to man to protest. These messages of nature should be taken seriously, for, as the angel points out in this story, forcing nature into man's way and away from God's can be the road to death.

Trees, like birds, are singled out for their beauty and value. The king of Tyre sends David cedar trees as a gift to build his house. (II Sam. 5:11) The house of Solomon, said to have taken thirteen years to build, was made "of the forest of Lebanon" and rested on four rows of cedar pillars with cedar beams upon the pillars, all covered with cedar. David later is told by God that he should look to defeat the Philistines when they are beneath the mulberry trees and he hears sounds though the tops of the trees. (II Sam. 5:23-24) Musical instruments to play for the Lord are made of fir wood. (II Sam. 6:5) Absalom is killed when his mule passes under "a great oak" and his head is caught in the branches. (II Sam. 18:9)

Even in wartime orchard trees are protected:

When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by forcing an axe against them: for thou mayest eat of them, and thou shalt not cut them down (for the tree of the field is man's life) to employ them in siege. (Deut. 20:19)

Psalm 104 praises trees and other wonders of nature:

The trees of the Lord are full of sap; the cedars of Lebanon, which he hath planted;

Where the birds make their nests: as for the stork, the fir trees are her house.

The high hills are refuge for the wild goats; and the rocks for the conies.

He appointed the moon for seasons: the sun knoweth his going down.

Thou makest darkness, and it is night: wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth.

The young lions roar after their prey, and seek their meet from God.

The sun ariseth, they gather themselves together, and lay them down in their dens.

Plants and animals figure in prophetic dreams. The servants of Pharaoh tell Joseph dreams of vines with ripe grapes and of birds eating baked goods out of a basket. (Gen. 40) Pharaoh himself recounts to Joseph his dreams, first of seven fat cattle and of the seven lean cattle who devour them, then of the full ears of corn on a stalk destroyed by seven thin ears. From these dreams, Joseph correctly predicts seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. (Gen. 41) Peter also dreams of the sheet lowered full of all the beasts of the earth; this marks the end of distinctions between clean and unclean animals.

In the same tenor, once permitted animal sacrifices disappear. St. Paul notes that "it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins." (Heb. 10:4) Animals sacrifices are no longer necessary for "we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." (Heb. 10:10)

## **NON-LIVING RESOURCES**

The people being close to nature, mountains, like waters, play a special role in the Bible. There are the "high places" where the Samaritans and other gentiles worshipped ancient gods. The woman of Samaria recalls to Jesus that her people "worshipped in this mountain". (John 4:20) Balak takes Balaam to the high places of Baal. (Num. 22:41) These places are to be destroyed, even when there are trees that would otherwise be protected. An angel appears under an oak to Gideon and God instructs him to throw down the altar of Baal "and cut down the grove that is by it." (Judges 6:25)

High places are also used by the Israelites. Mountains are a place of refuge. When the Midianites conquered Israel, the people hid in dens in the mountains and caves and strongholds. (Judges 6:2) Samuel takes Saul to "the high place" after God instructs him. (I Sam. 9:15-25) God meets Moses and reveals His commandments to Moses on a mountain. (Ex. 19-23) The ark comes to rest on a mountain and Aaron dies on mount Hor. (Deut. 32:50) Jesus is crucified on a mountain and ascends from another.

Other resources are mentioned, clearly they are used. The river flowing through the Garden of Eden separates into four other rivers, one of which passes through a land of gold, and other precious metals and stones. Job indicates the many known riches, by comparing them to the value of wisdom:

It cannot be gotten for gold, neither shall silver be weighed for the price thereof.  
It cannot be valued with the gold of Ophir, with the precious onyx, or the sapphire.  
The gold and the crystal cannot equal it: and the exchange of it shall not be for jewels of fine gold.  
No mention shall be made of coral, or of pearls: for the price of wisdom is above rubies.  
The topaz of Ethiopia shall not equal it, neither shall it be valued with pure gold.  
(Job 28:15:19)

Ezekiel recounts the riches of Tyre, beginning with the cedars of Lebanon and the oaks of Bashan. He adds references to ivory, fine linen, silver, iron, tin, lead, ebony, emeralds, coral, agate, gold and precious stones. (Ex. 27)

The precious metals themselves are not to become idols or objects of worship. (Ex. 20:23) Indeed, the altar of God must be made of unhewn (natural) stone "for if thou lift up thy tool upon

it, thou has polluted it." (Ex. 20:25) After the Israelites defeat the Philistines, Samuel takes a stone and gives it a name (Ebenezer) saying that God has helped them.<sup>13</sup> (I Sam. 7:12) David calls God his rock and fortress: "for who is God, save the Lord? and who is a rock, save our God?...The Lord liveth; and blessed by my rock; and exalted by the God of the rock of my salvation." (II Sam. 22:2, 32, 47)

Greed and over-consumption are condemned. God blesses Solomon in granting his desired wisdom and knowledge: "because this was in thine heart, and thou hast not asked riches, wealth, or honor, nor the life of thine enemies, neither yet hast asked long life; but hast asked wisdom and knowledge for thyself, that thou mayest judge my people, over whom I have made thee king." (2 Chron. 1:11) Jesus warns: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, whether moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, whether neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matt. 6:19-21, Luke 12:34)) In the parable of the rich man, Jesus tells of a farmer whose ground was so fertile he had no more room to store his produce. He planned to build bigger barns right away while putting off caring for his soul. When asked by a rich man what he should do to be saved, Jesus tells him to sell what he has and give to the poor. The man goes away sad, "for he had great possession." Jesus, noting it, says "How hard it is for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God!" (Mark 10:17-25; Matt. 19:16-26) Jesus counsels that man should appreciate natural beauty rather than material wealth: "Consider the lilies of the field how they grow; they toil not, they spin not: and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." (Luke 12:27)

## CONCLUSION

The overall message conveyed by the Bible is that nature is to be respected as part of God's creation, which man has no right to destroy but which should not be worshipped as a holy thing in itself. The voice of God calling to Job from out of the whirlwind most eloquently cautions against human arrogance in the face of natural wonders:

Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare if thou hast understanding.

Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it?

...

Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as if it had issued out of the womb?

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<sup>13</sup> Other rocks have names as well. See I Sam. 14:4.

When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness a swaddlingband for it,

And brake up for it my decreed place, and set bars and doors,

And said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed?

Hast thou commanded the morning since thy days: and caused the dayspring to know his place...?

Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea? or hast thou walked in the search of the depth?

Have the gates of death been opened unto thee? or hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death?

...

By what way is the light parted, which scattereth the east wind upon the earth?

Who hath divided a watercourse for the overflowing of waters, or a way for the lightning of thunder;

To cause it to rain on the earth, where no man is; on the wilderness, wherein there is no man;

To satisfy the desolate and waste ground; and to cause the bud of the tender herb to spring forth?

Hath the rain a father? or who hath begotten drops of dew?

Out of whose womb came the ice? and the hoary frost of heaven, who hath gendered it?

...

Canst thou bind the sweet influences of the Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion?

Canst thou bring forth Massaroth in his season? or canst thou guide Arcturus with his sons?

Knowest thou the ordinances of heaven? canst thou set the dominion thereof in the earth?

Canst thou lift up thy voice to the clouds, that abundance of waters may cover thee?

Canst thou send lightnings, that they may go, and say unto thee, Here we are?

Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts? or who hath given understanding to the heart?

Who can number the clouds in wisdom? or who can stay the bottles of heaven,

When the dust groweth into hardness, and the clods cleave fast together?

Wilt thou hunt the prey for the lion? or fill the appetite of the young lions,

When they crouch in their dens, and abide in the covert to lie in wait?

Who provideth for the raven his food? when his young ones cry unto God, they wander for lack of meat.

Knowest thou the time when the wild goats of the rock bring forth? or canst thou mark when the hinds do calve?

...

Who hath sent out the wild ass free? or who hath loosed the bands of the wild ass?  
Whose house I have made the wilderness, and the barren land his dwellings.  
He scorneth the multitude of the city, neither regardeth he the crying of the driver.  
The range of the mountains is his pasture, and he searcheth after every green thing.

...

Gavest thou the goodly wings unto the peacocks? or wings and feathers unto the ostrich?

Which leaveth her eggs in the earth, and warmeth them in dust,  
And forgetteth that the foot may crush them, or that the wild beast may break them.

She is hardened against her young ones, as though they were not her's: her labour is in vain without fear;

Because God hath deprived her of wisdom, neither hath he imparted to her understanding.

What time she lifteth up herself on high, she scorneth the horse and his rider.

Hast thou given the horse strength? has thou clothed his neck with thunder?

Canst thou make him afraid as a grasshopper? the glory of his nostrils is terrible.

He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his strength; he goeth on to meet the armed men.

He mocketh at fear, and is not affrighted; neither turneth he back from the sword.

The quiver rattleth against him, the glittering spear and the shield.

He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage; neither believeth he that it is the sound of the trumpet.

He saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha; and he smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains and the shouting.

Doth the hawk fly by thy wisdom, and stretch her wings toward the south?

Doth the eagle mount up at thy command, and make her nest on high?

She dwelleth and abideth on the rock, upon the crag of the rock, and the strong place.

From thence she seeketh the prey, and her eyes behold afar off.

...

Behold now the behemoth<sup>14</sup>, which I made with thee; he eateth grass as an ox.

Lo now, his strength is in his loins, and his force is in the navel of his belly.

He moveth his tail like a cedar: the sinews of his stones are wrapped together.

His bones are as strong pieces of brass; his bones are like bars of iron.

He is the chief of the ways of God: he that made him can make his sword to approach unto him.

Surely the mountains bring him forth food, where all the beasts of the field play.

He lieth under the shady trees, in the covert of the reed, and fens.

The shady trees cover him with their shadow; the willows of the brook compass

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<sup>14</sup> The hippopotamus.

him about.

Behold, he drinketh up a river, and hasteth not: he trusteth that he can draw up Jordan into his mouth.

He taketh it with his eyes; his nose pierceth through snares.

Canst thou draw out leviathan<sup>15</sup> with an hook? or his tongue with a cord which thou lettest down?

Canst thou put an hook into his nose/ or bore his jaw through with a thorn?

Will he make many supplications unto thee? will he speak soft words unto thee?

Will he make a covenant with thee? wilt thou take him for a servant for ever?

Wilt thou play with him as with a bird? or wilt thou bind him for thy maidens?

Shall the companions make a banquet of him? shall they part him among the merchants?

Canst thou fill his skin with barbed irons? or his head with fish spears?

Lay thine hand upon him, remember the battle, do no more.

Behold, the hope of him is in vain: shall not one be cast down even at the sight of him?

None is so fierce that dare stir him up: who then is able to stand before me?

Who hath prevented me, that I should repay him? whatsoever is under the whole heaven is mine.

I will not conceal his parts, nor his power, nor his comely proportion.

Job 38-41

Concluding these myriad examples of creatures, their characters and their habitats, God calls the leviathan "a king of all the children of pride." Job understands and repents of his arrogance, "in dust and ashes", acknowledging that he had "uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not." (Job 42:3, 6). Contemplating the panorama set forth in the prior passage, one cannot help but agree with Job, that nature is full of things wonderful which must be safeguarded in all their variety and before which a certain humbleness is appropriate.

Overall, the Bible indicates people close to and dependent on nature, familiar with the habits and habitats of numerous creatures. They are people cherishing the gift of water and in awe of the power of the sea and the wind. They see that man is only a small part of creation which belongs to God. A priori, God cherishes all living things: "Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns: yet your heavenly Father feedeth them..." (Matt. 6:26; Luke 12:24) "One [sparrow] shall not fall on the ground without your Father." (Matt. 10:29; Luke 12:6)

Man must beware of an arrogant abuse of creation. Although Jesus says that "ye are of more

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<sup>15</sup> The crocodile.

value than many sparrows," this does not detract from the concern God has for the smallest of creatures. As Job learned, the dominion granted by God to man should not lead to unwarranted pride and confusion with God's own creative power. The story of Balaam's ass shows that man's way may be perverse and nature may recall us to the right path. In God's image, this path is one of creation and not destruction; the Covenant with all creatures after the flood is to preserve the world and all in it. The disappearance of parts of creation through anthropogenic reduction in biological diversity; the poisoning of the planet by pollution; and the alteration of basic ecological processes are not, therefore, of God but of man. The angel warned that continuation in this path would lead to death. The lesson should not be forgotten. The clear messages of nature today should be heeded lest, like Balaam, man hurtles forward to his own destruction.