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SARUM THEOLOGICAL LECTURES

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BIBLE AND ECOLOGY

Rediscovering the Community of Creation

Richard Bauckham

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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.²³ 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'.²⁴ 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).²⁵ But the most extensive example in the Hebrew Bible is the magnificent Psalm 148.²⁶

Psalm 148

Praise the LORD!

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

²Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his host!

³Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!

⁴Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!

⁵Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for he commanded and they were created.

⁶He established them forever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

⁷Praise the LORD from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps,
⁸fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command!

⁹Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!

¹⁰Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!

¹¹Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!

¹²Young men and women alike,
old and young together!

¹³Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.

¹⁴He 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-psychism 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'.³⁵ There is a certain reciprocity in our praise.³⁶ 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 fulfilment of creation. Psalm 148 invites all its hearers, singers and readers into just such an eschatological fulfilment. 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 characterising 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 ... [T]he 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.³⁷

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.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'.³⁹ It has also become popular in the Orthodox tradition⁴⁰ (to which Jürgen Moltmann's account of it is indebted⁴¹), 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.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.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.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.*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.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.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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 them 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 CREATION⁵⁰

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.⁵¹ 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.⁵²

[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.⁵³

Whether interdependence as such can impose moral obligations that would not otherwise exist is debatable,⁵⁴ but it need not concern us here.⁵⁵ 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'.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷

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).⁵⁸ 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,⁵⁹ 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 'hypoethral 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).⁶¹ 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.

²Swearing, lying, and murder,
and stealing and adultery break out;
bloodshed follows bloodshed.

³Therefore 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.

²⁴I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro.

²⁵I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,
and all the birds of the air had fled.