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SARUM THEOLOGICAL LECTURES

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**BIBLE AND ECOLOGY**

*Rediscovering the Community of Creation*

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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).<sup>61</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup>Swearing, lying, and murder,  
and stealing and adultery break out;  
bloodshed follows bloodshed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>26</sup>I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,  
and all its cities were laid in ruins  
before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

<sup>27</sup>For thus says the LORD:

The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not  
make a full end.

<sup>28</sup>Because of this the earth shall mourn,  
and the heavens above grow black;  
for I have spoken, I have purposed;

I have not relented nor will I turn back. (Jer. 4:23-28)

The curious phrase 'waste and void' (*tohu vabohu*) in the first line of this passage occurs in the Hebrew Bible only here and in Genesis 1:2, where it describes the state of nothingness before anything was created.<sup>62</sup> Again we have a hyperbolic image, suggesting the un-creation of all creation,<sup>63</sup> but a more limited image of the desolation of the land of Israel apparently occurs in the midst of the universal one (v 26).

Human evil has ecological consequences.<sup>64</sup> As Walter Brueggemann puts it, 'Covenantal Israel held the staggering notion that human conduct matters for the well-being of creation.'<sup>65</sup> This idea coheres with the Hebrew Bible's strong sense of a created order by which relationships in the community of creation should be ordered.<sup>66</sup> Most of the time other creatures observe this order, but humans all too often flout it:

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

Their 'not knowing' is wilful ignorance; they do not wish to know the moral order of things that God has ordained. Humans are the disorderly factor in the world, disrupting its harmony and its natural rhythms, with destructive consequences both for humans themselves and for other creatures. Sometimes the prophets can

speak of these consequences of human evil as the direct interventions of God in judgement (e.g. Isa. 24:1-4; Zeph. 1:2-3), sometimes as though they are processes built into the order of creation as God has created it (e.g. Hos. 4:1-3). The two are not necessarily in contradiction. The prophets understood that the behaviour of humans and the well-being of the rest of creation are intimately interconnected, but they did not, of course, have the scientific understanding of the connections that modern ecology is giving us. On the whole, we have become aware of such connections only as our ignoring of them has led to consequences too considerable to be ignored. But in many such cases the human activities that have led and are leading to such destructive consequences have not been pursued through pardonable ignorance or simple foolishness. They have been driven by greed or the will to power, arrogance or aggression, and not infrequently injustice and oppression in human society have gone hand in hand with ecological destruction.<sup>67</sup> The natural order and the moral order are by no means unconnected.<sup>68</sup>

The prophets' image of the mourning of the Earth is taken up by Paul in Romans 8:18-23.<sup>69</sup>

### Romans 8:18-23

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup>For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; <sup>20</sup>for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup>We know that the whole creation has been groaning and in travail together<sup>70</sup> until now; <sup>23</sup>and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

What exactly is the plight of creation, from which it longs for deliverance? Understanding of this has been obscured by the habit of interpreters and translators of assuming that the 'groaning' of verse 22 is the groaning of a woman in birth pains. Modern translations therefore tend to run the two Greek verbs (*sustenazein*, meaning 'to groan together', and *sunodinein*, meaning 'to be in travail together') into one English verb with an adverbial expression, e.g. the NRSV's translation: 'the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now.' But the two verbs can equally well be understood as making two different points. The first echoes the passages in the prophets that say that the Earth mourns, while the second takes up an Old Testament metaphor for experiencing God's judgement (e.g. Jer. 4:31; and cf. 1 Thess. 5:3).<sup>71</sup> The verb translated 'to groan' (*sustenazein*) is actually the verb *stenazein* with the prefix *sun* ('with'), and so should be translated 'to groan with' or 'to groan together'. Without the prefix, the verb recurs in verse 23 ('we ourselves ... groan inwardly') and is echoed by the corresponding noun (*stenagmos*, 'groan' or 'sigh') in verse 26. The verb could be translated 'to mourn', which would make the connection with the passages in the prophets more obvious, but I have kept the familiar translation 'to groan'.

According to verse 20, the creation was 'subjected to futility' by God. Most exegetes have seen here a reference to the fall of Genesis 3, where God curses the ground because of Adam's sin, with the result that farming will be harder work (Gen. 3:17).<sup>72</sup> But this does not seem an adequate basis for Paul's claim that the whole creation is in 'bondage to decay', 'groaning and in travail' as it longs for future liberation. In the prophets, on the other hand, we find the notion that the non-human creation as a whole suffers the effects of human sin and God's judgement on it. Though the effect, in particular contexts in the prophets, may be localised, it is often, as we have seen, portrayed in universal language, extending even to the ocean (Isa. 24:1-7; Jer. 4:23-25; Hos. 4:3; cf. Zeph. 1:2-3). What the Earth mourns is the withering and destruction of its inhabitants, flora and fauna, and so Paul's phrase 'bondage to decay' or 'bondage to a process of destruction' (v 21) is an

appropriate description of the state to which God has assigned the creation because of human sin.<sup>73</sup> When Paul says that 'the creation was subjected to futility' (v 20), using the noun *mataiotes*, he may mean, as the translation 'futility' suggests, that creation was emptied of meaning or purpose by its condemnation to decay and destruction, much as human death, if it is conceived as the end of existence, makes life seem pointless.<sup>74</sup> This seems the most likely meaning. But the root meaning of *mataios* is 'empty', and the related verb *mataioun* means 'to bring to nothing', and so it is possible that Paul has in mind Jeremiah's vision of the whole Earth as 'waste and void' (*tohu vabohu*), returned to the nothingness that preceded creation. In that case, Paul would mean that, because of human sin, God set creation on course for un-creation.

If this line of interpretation is correct, then Paul is not referring to some drastic change in the natural world that followed from the fall of Adam and Eve, such as the introduction of death for the animal creation. This traditional view is impossible to reconcile with modern knowledge (animals were dying many millions of years before the first humans appeared on Earth)<sup>75</sup> and, in any case, is not really supported by Genesis 3. On the interpretation that I have suggested, Paul is thinking of ecological degradation and desertification of the kind the prophets indicated when they portrayed the Earth mourning, the soil losing its fertility, plants withering, animals dying. Joel's account is the most vivid and may serve to fill out Paul's rather abstract language:

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

<sup>11</sup>Be dismayed, you farmers,  
wail, you vinedressers,  
over the wheat and the barley;  
for the crops of the field are ruined.

<sup>12</sup>The vine withers,  
the fig tree droops.  
Pomegranate, palm, and apple –  
all the trees of the field are dried up;  
surely, joy withers away  
among the people ...

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

<sup>18</sup>How the animals<sup>76</sup> groan!  
The herds of cattle wander about  
because there is no pasture for them;  
even the flocks of sheep are dazed.

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

<sup>20</sup>Even the wild animals cry<sup>77</sup> to you  
because the watercourses are dried up,  
and fire has devoured  
the pastures of the wilderness. (Joel 1:10–12 and 17–20)

It is notable that in this passage, whereas the other prophets speak of the mourning of the Earth, Joel depicts all kinds of creatures mourning, lamenting and groaning to God: the ground (v 10), the domestic animals (v 18), the wild animals (v 20), as well as the farmers (v 11), the people (v 12) and the prophet himself (v 19). It is easy to see here how Paul could generalise the mourning as that of the whole creation. The desiccation and devastation of nature, also extensively depicted by Joel, are the object of the mourning, and represent, in Paul's terms, creation's subjection to futility. Joel's panorama of creation is not unlike Psalm 104, but here their environments no longer support the living creatures that depend

on them. In effect, the Creator's provision for his creatures, so lavish in Psalm 104, has been withdrawn, and the joy depicted in that psalm has given way to lament and desperate supplication to the Creator.

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

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

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

The liberation of creation is to happen at the end of history, when Christian believers will attain their full salvation in the glory of the resurrection (vv 21 and 23).<sup>78</sup> Since creation's bondage is due to human sin, its liberation must await the cessation of human evil at the end. It might seem, therefore, that this passage cannot

mandate human activity for the relief of creation from the burden of human mistreatment now. It is true that that is not Paul's concern in the passage. But, if we accept the diagnosis that human wrongdoing is responsible for ecological degradation, it follows that those who are concerned to live according to God's will for his world must be concerned to avoid and to repair damage to God's creation as far as possible. Like the coming of the Kingdom of God, we cannot achieve the liberation of creation but we can anticipate it.<sup>79</sup>

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

For many contemporary Christians, the most difficult matter in the biblical material we have discussed in this section will be the understanding of ecological destruction as divine judgement. It can be helpful to recognise that frequently in the Bible language of divine judgement describes the way acts have consequences in this

*as does Romans 1*

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

## PRAISE AND LAMENT

I began the last section by pointing out that the Bible depicts the whole created world both as joining in praise of its Creator and as directing laments to its Creator on account of the devastation of the Earth and its creatures. This is parallel to the way in which the

Psalms depict and direct human address to God as both praise and lament, in probably equal quantities and in a variety of relationships. Lament does not stifle praise, nor does praise suppress lament. A clue to the way they relate in the relationship of the non-human creatures to God may lie in the passage quoted above from Isaiah 35:1-2:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus <sup>2</sup>it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.

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

The non-human creation glorifies God for making it what it is and by being what he has made it. The non-human creation mourns before God for the ways in which God's human creatures have polluted, degraded and destroyed it, in so many ways preventing it from being what God made it to be. Its very ruin is a lament to its Creator. It reflects God's glory but it also reflects humanity's deseccration of God's glory in it. Psalm 148 then is not just a paean of undiluted praise. For those who read or sing it with the deseccration of God's world in mind, it is praise in defiance against evil and in hope of new creation. Its invitation to all to praise the Creator will continue to ring out until the day when mourning is subsumed into the eschatological joy of all creation.<sup>84</sup>

## WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

Among the ecological failings of which the Bible has been accused is that it promotes a negative view of wilderness. Roderick Nash, in his classic work, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, claims that the Old Testament portrays wilderness as 'a cursed land', 'the environment of evil, a kind of hell'.<sup>1</sup> Although wilderness also features in the Bible as a place of spiritual testing and encounter with God, there 'was no fondness in the Hebraic tradition for wilderness itself'.<sup>2</sup> Speaking of the American Puritans, he comments: 'their Bibles contained all they needed to know in order to hate wilderness.'<sup>3</sup> More recently, Robert Leal, while allowing that there are also positive evaluations of wilderness in the Bible, focuses on what he sees as a widespread biblical attitude to wilderness as the realm of chaos, lawlessness and evil.<sup>4</sup>

### THE GARDEN OF EDEN - ORCHARD OR FOREST?

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

#### Genesis 2:8-15

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