Ancient Israel

~~Nature in Biblical Perspective~~

Until very recently the approach to nature characteristic of Ancient Israel was widely seen by scholars and theologians to be akin to that of much modern Protestant theology(on the latter, see below), namely a pronounced insular humanism. Israel's religion, it was thought, was primarily a religion of human history, set over against the polytheistic, pantheistic religions of nature the Ancient Near East. Only secondarily, scholars such as G. Ernest Wright argued, did Israel introduce nature into its theological perview, "as a servant of history." Nature, in other words, was seen chiefly as a stage for history, as far as Israel was concerned, particularly a stage for Redemptive History(Heilsgeschicte). The apparent absence of any articulated "creation-faith" in Israel's formative pre-monarchial period(ca. 1300-1000 B.C.E.), the great emphasis Israel evidently placed on the constituting historical events of the Exodus and Sinai, and the concomitant polemic against the Canaanite nature deities throughout Israel's history, seemed to make the interpretive framework of the Redemptive History school incontestible. Along with this dfflininaiifli^emphasis on history^apart from nature, biblical interpreters as a matter of course tended to see Israel's understanding of the human creature's relationship with nature as focusing mainly on transcendence and dominion^ both themes being clearly attested in various biblical writings).

It now seems clear, however, that the interpretative Framework taken for granted by the Redemptive History school and its many popularizing proponents, does not fully reflect the complexities^ in the history of Israel's approach to nature, ***nof,*** consequently, does it allow full justice to be done to the richness of Israel's theology of nature.

Israel's cultural milieu was

^&^iniA«TniiZdominated~~bv a mythological nature-monism (this expression more aptly describes Ancient Egyptian religion than the faith of Babylon, which

gave a much larger place to cosmic strife than was characteristic of Egyptian religion; still, Babylonian religion was monistic ultimately, in a sense that later Persian religion waxxHafc^x , for example, was not).

In this context, Israel^develop a definite historical humanism , as we have emphasized. But this humanism was not insular , by it large. It was much more holistic, as a general rule. In a cultural world which saw nature as essentially divine , in other words, Israel dtd desacralized nature, but it did not devalue nature. On the contrary , Israel consistently and vividly affirmed the integrity of nature, the goodness of nature, and the glories of nature in the eyes of God, a story we must now attend to >n «aome^detzaizl^.

The mythologies of most of Israel's neighbors envisioned a primordial world of chaos in which the gods were born and in which a victory was enacted, to some degree, of the god(s) of life over the powers of chaos. In this perspective, the mundane world of human experience exists in a fragile postion, constantly threatened by primordial chaos,^in the shadow of th^-t primordial victory of life. It is only by participating in that drama, by xeteaix reenacting it in festivals, th$ retelling of the myth, in citM-and hornedoskts^sZMsn^snd in the exigencies of politics, especially victories in war, that the human creature ^ss'life and is spared the ultimhl^ destructive encounter with the powers of chaos still inherent in the world. So this mythological framefcook —with things that Mircea Eliade calls an "ontological obsession," a nostalgia, a drive, to re ttzvnto the primordial, supramundane events in order to renew and to sustain the reality of life experiencei'/in the here and now. The other side of the same ontological obsession is what Eliade also calls "a responsibility on a cosmic plane.I^[1] That is to say, it is only by humanity's reenactment!^ of the primeval drama of the gods that the world is sustained in being.

In practice the obsession with primordial being LZ closely related, according to the Mythological framework, to the rhythms of nature, variously perceived as capricious and willful(as in Babylon) or permanently and harmoniously established(as in Egypt, where the regular rising and falling of the Nile set the tone). The world of the gods may not-**ba** precisely identi^M with the world of nature, but nature Us viewed, **innany rnee.,** as an immediate, coextensive expression of the life of the gods; "The cosmos as a whole is an organiyistj at once real, living, and sacred, it simultaneously reveals the modalities of being and sacrality. "(ElichM)

In such a world, furthermore, with the primordial drama of the gods implicated pervasively in the vast sempiternal rhythms of nature, all events of mundane **human** experience in themselves tend to be reduced to';vi!a^wn 1' inconsequdnne, except insofar as they are reenactments of diKXHKXKKaHkxxx pretemporal divine events. The real is the "eternal return" of the finite to its primeval source: "the end is like the beginning." The primordial drama of creation in the realm of the gods is al**kha**t is real, after everything human has been said and done.

In contrast, Israel's fundamental apperception of reality was primarily historical, not ontological in the foregoing sense. Indeed, it might be said that Israel's faith, especially in its formative years, displays a historical obsession. What real for Israel, especi**ally** in its early yflars,x^re the events at the Reed Sea and Sinai, pointing toward the conquest of Canaan, not some primordial drhma leading to a world creation. When Israel settled in Canaan in a tribal confederacy (1200-1000), the cultic centers of the land were used mainly, it seems, to celebrate Israel's own history. During this period, apparently^, — and for understandable reasons — no extensive story of creation, qua story of origins, was recited in Israel. But this should not lead us to concude that natural reality was unimportant or otherwise devalued by Israelyt?[4]"*

Nature as the paradigmatic expression of the primordial realm of the gods was surely desacrdtlized, overall, by Israel; but nature was not devalued. SttSwas affirmed, Israel's historical obsession was holistic, not insular. It encompassed the material-vital sptnrui irl human experience, no less than the moral, intellectual, and spiritual sphere. Alrea## at the Exodus, the formative event of Israel's historical faith, Yahweh is recongized as one who exercisies perfect governance in and over nature(Ex. 15:8, 10; JoshuaX 24:7). Nature, no less than history, is entirely subservient to Yahweh's will and power(cf. Joshua lffl:12ff.; Judges 5:4). In Israel's eyes, in other words, nature was stripped of its primordial, supramundane sacrality, and embused, as it were, with a new kind of XMXLL **aura** — the dynamic presence of a God who was encountered as One fatefully enmeshed in ~~the~~ Btotit, 'a God who was nevertheless^ working out his purposes in the sphere of immediacy, in a seqence of historical/natural events, beginning with the Exodus.

Retrospectively, with regard to our theme, we can say that the demoralizations although not the devaluation)^of nature was the chief historical task of the period of the confederation in Canaan. The burden of this challenge continued to be felt in Israel, surely, particularly in the Northern Kingdom where the Eloistic strain of Genesis(apparently without a creation story) and the Deuteronomic histories(which show very little interest in nature as such)- ~~found their home.~~ But by the time of David's establishment of the monarchy, the way had been prepared, the theological space was opening up, for the development of *C* explicit creation theology within Israel's own historical framewo: on Israel's own terms. This began to happen, especially at the new center of Jerusalem(where nnder David's influence, ZpKLk the priesthood, both Yahwistic and indigenous,^ ewyrjiumjiy brought together classical pre-monarchical- Yahwistic elements with more native Canaanite motifs).

The xXkK cultic recital of the events of Isael's history was enlarged with a pre-history of Israel, probably reflected in the Priestly creation account(Gensis 1) and with a parrative of a Diimne covenant with David.

Within the context of the monarchy Israel apparently expedience d a new freedom to celebrate the works of mts God in nature, âuLjfche way from the identif ication of Yahweh with the powerful workings of the now dethroned Canaanite Baal in the storm(Psalm 29^originally a poem to Baal, indiciative of the "Babylonian-type" terrordfull apperception of nature) to the fecund, beneficently serene workings throughout the whole cosmos of Etz long rejected Egyptian deities tl smos. (Psalm 104 parallels in significant ways the Egyptian "Hymn to the Sun") which was allegedly composed apparently by Pharoh Aknaton).

Also, in conjunction with poems like Psalm 104. elements of a wisdom theology, with its pronounced interest in the natural order, probably began to appear in promine't ways in^ the cult center in Jerusalem at the same time (see the book of Proverbs). All this interest in nature and the works of God in nature, it should be stressed,was not a qualitative innovation in Israel's faith, Surely not any kind of vast deteriorization(as ^W^4«H^suggested by the HeiisgKxxhxiskBx Redemptive History s«teo»l). It stood in continuity with the kxsfcHKXKai holistic ihumaaism of earlier XXX centuries. But, with the desacralization of nature largely accomplished, the theology of nature of the monarchical period'^represents^an^enlargement of -that holistic motif, an enhancement of its ^nek early forms and an imaginative exfoliation of remarkable proportions. MWXL

ThifiL exieli ation is nowhere more clearly evident than in the Priestly creation narrative which has its roots in the traditions of Jerusaelm during the monarchical per5od(1000-586). Here there is no primordial struggle in the world of the gods. Rather. the;faith in

Yahwehxxx

Yahweh's present governance in nature-history, wrrridLTig—our^is--' his powerful and righteous accomplishment of his gracious purposes in the given, mundane wor&d, is extended back to a universal beginning and also insofar as the theme of Divine Rest ("eschata" = last things) is eschatological in scope|^orward to a universal consummation. more generally, Israel's creation-faith and its eschatology are, as it were, *rs***-^***^ in this sense, extensions, XsKHaxdx back and forward, of its providence-faith. The picture of the cosmos we see^rfc. xwdEadxaakixfciKx historical(cf. the temporal structure, seven days), but it is just as vividly holistic. Every level of the creation is good. The whole, as it approaches its final fulfilment in the Divine RestjII Isaiah **w&a£d** developzth-L" omega-theme, along with the theme of Hxxgxis&sxx origins, the alpha, much more fullyis seen to be "very good." God looks at evedyuthing he has made, not just at the human creature, and rejoices in its goodness, s^LUmplicitly, in the ultimate vindication of his blessings on all things, on nature no less than humanity(cf. Psalm 104j and II Isaiah passim).

Within this panoramic vision of nature-history, under the constant governance of Yahweh,,the identity of the Human creature is understood very much HS rooted in nature, no less than history. There is no body-soul^ dualism^ The self is a psychosomatic u^ity. The self is an animated body, not an incarnated soul(H.W. Robinson). The "image of God" of Genesis 1 probably refers first of all to the human body, and -interes tinglyX. The identity of the self extends, moreover, into the world of nature more generally, beyond the human body, The nephesh ("soul") of the invidiaul and the community("corporate personality") permeates the land. There is no disjunction.-- although there is surely a distinction (e.g. in Genesis 2; ^tztzXE^dam needs another human being to be complete)^ between humanity and nature. Concomitantly, there is no real evidence of any pervasive Hebrew arrogance toward nature, in the modern sense of domination. Humanity is given dominion, but that means an overall

responsibility for nature (to till the garden and keep it), not any' **right** to exploit nature. "The relation between the earth and its owner... is a covenant realtion, a psychic community, and the owner does not solely prevail in the XHa£&xi$Hx relation. The earth has its nature, which makes itself felt, and demands respect."(Pederson) Human dominion, moreover, is delimited by the Divine dominion, which establishes certain — relative rights for nature, as well as various important^human prerogatives. Further, a certain contemplative relationship with nature, along with the xfcan r&Te-of can ~~~ etaking, is also envisioned. In this context, the earth, as a whole and in its various interrelated parts, is envisioned as resplendent with the glory of Yahweh and giving him praise.

Not to be neglected, furthermore, is the il minors, but not for that reason unimportantywhen taken in conjunction with everything else) ifijjthe Yahweh has his own purposes with nature, in addition to his purposes with humanity. Nature is not simply a stage posited for God's history with the human creatureX. ?Mature is good<atAU levels. It exists to serve the Dvine good pleasure^^/tftl-z-^eVeil,s, as well as to serve human well-being. Nature has^spects, indeed, which in themselves are alien to human sensibilities(cf. Psalm 104:), but which are nevertheless reflections of Divine purposes, however unknown and mysterious.i?od created the sea monsters, we are told, to play with them(Ps. 104:21). The whole of nature, finally , along with the immediate sphere of human life in nature-history , will one day be brought to its fulfilment in the day of the new heavens and the new earth. There will be no "eternal return" to **the** ultimate^beginning. On the contrary, the whole cosmos will be transformed and fulfilled all things, the ~~extensive~~ world of nature, no less than the mo: re familiar, Lmore immediate world of human-**hasten** -y. This is the Ls»tz- **world** of the Old Testament's holistic, humanism