

Chaos Theory: the Book of Job and the Creation Story

The book of Job challenges our comfortable notions that we know how the universe works, that it is an orderly creation where a just God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked, that the world revolves around humans and their happiness, that everything happens for a reason. God's speech to Job in chapters 38-41 should cause us to rethink how we understand the creation story in Genesis, not as the account of a perfect world gone wrong, but rather a world in which chaos, disorder, and darkness are part of that original creation, though contained within limits. As God's vice-regents, humans were given the task of filling the earth and expanding God's rule beyond Eden into the troublesome world outside.

Entering into the book of Job is like grabbing onto a live electrical cable: it will knock you right out of your comfortable chair and flip you upside down. Job hurls us out of a church full of pious, smug, self-serving religious clichés and into the world of turmoil, upheaval, disaster, and uncertainty that we are much more familiar with, our world, a world of tempestuous storms and tempestuous rulers, a world of deadly diseases and deadly weapons. How do we make sense of this world in light of our belief in God? Can we even do so? Job confronts us with some very difficult questions and doesn't provide easy answers.

Because of the horrific suffering which has been inflicted upon him, Job demands an audience with God, challenging God to make sense of his situation, to justify the misery that has come upon him, and to vindicate his innocence. His friends, who have mostly been blaming Job for his own problems, have been skeptical that God would ever deign to appear. But in the dramatic conclusion to their long discussion, God does in fact appear and speak to Job. However, God's bizarre response does not satisfy most readers. George Bernard Shaw said, "If I complain that I am suffering unjustly, it is no answer to say, 'Can you make a hippopotamus?'" God does not say to Job, what the reader has known along—that this was just some sort of test that resulted from a heavenly argument. Rather, God points Job to the vast, mysterious, and strange natural world he has created, basically telling Job that there is no way he could ever understand such a world or its workings. While it is worth exploring, in the context of the book, what this response means for the issues Job raises, that is a longer discussion for another time and place. What I would like to focus on here is how God's depiction of the natural world in Job gives us a new perspective on the creation story in Genesis.

Job 38-41

The book of Job is not a theological treatise but a brilliant work of poetry. The cumulative effect of the poet's images gives us a unique vision of the world and to properly understand it, we must feel the power and scope of its imagery. You have to "get the picture" to make sense of it. Getting the picture in Job will also help us get the picture in

Genesis, to imagine the beginnings of the world and God's purposes for humanity in a new way.

God's speech here focuses on his role as creator and governor of the cosmos, progressing from creation itself (38:4-21) to meteorology, the natural forces that operate within creation (38:22-38), to zoology, especially the wild animal kingdom (38:39-39:40) to what might be called mythic zoology, two larger than life beasts (40:15-41:26). Note that humans are only on the fringes in God's speech: creation in Job does not revolve around humans and their needs.

God speaks to Job out of what the KJV calls "the whirlwind," or a powerful storm. This sets the tone for the whole speech. God is going to take Job out of the domesticated human world, out to where the wild things are. It is a world of vast measurements, immense heights and depths, raging seas, uncontrollable storms, a world of flashing lights and deep darkness, teeming with life and burdened with death. It is a world that Job has no hope of controlling or bending to do his wishes, even the wish for justice. Yet God says that he has put limits to the darkness and chaos (38:11), limits to what even human wickedness can accomplish (38:12-13). Job began his complaint with a kind of "death wish" poem that sought to reverse the process of creation, blot out the light and escape God into the darkness of the grave (ch.3). Here God declares darkness and the grave to be part of his creation, under his control and beyond Job's understanding (38:16-21).

God then turns to the animal kingdom, drawing examples from wild, undomesticated beasts who live their lives independent of humans and uncontrolled by them (38:39-39:40). The ostrich, in particular, is an odd sort of creature, a flightless bird who can run faster than horses and yet seemingly lacks the common sense to protect her young (39:13-18). Here God lays claim to all that humans may find strange or disturbing or ludicrous in nature. Like the desert wasteland which God waters, the wild animals who inhabit those lands are associated with hostile and dangerous forces in creation that are beyond human understanding or control. This section ends with unsettling imagery of the intersection of animal and human worlds: the powerful war horse who is energized and exhilarated by human battle, and the vulture (not "eagle") and its young who feast on the bloody human corpses. This too is part of God's providential design, a "nature red in tooth and claw."

God's final examples, his champions in the dispute with Job, are two strange creatures called Behemoth and Leviathan, land and sea animals. Some have tried to identify them with known animals like the hippopotamus and crocodile but I think they are better understood as mythological creatures akin to the Loch Ness Monster and Bigfoot. "Behemoth" means "the great beast," an intensified form of a word used in Gen. 1:24-25 to describe land animals. Clearly he is larger than life, the "first" of God's creations, a prototype if you will. And crocodiles are not sea creatures.

Leviathan is a dragon-like sea monster or sea-serpent known from Canaanite myth and mentioned elsewhere in Scripture as a powerful, violent and disruptive force controlled by God (Job 3:8; Ps. 74:14; 104:26; Is. 27:1). Leviathan is spoken of in conjunction with other sea monsters (Psalm 74:13-17) precisely in the context of a discussion of God's power at creation to control the forces of the world. The Bible also speaks of Rahab, which may be another name for the same or similar creature (see Job 9:13; 26:12-13; Psalm 89:10; Isaiah 51:9). The sea in both Canaanite and Israelite thinking was a world of chaos that threatened to overtake the land, and which needed to be kept in place by powerful divine forces. Leviathan in the Bible is an embodiment of the dynamic forces that oppose God's positive and orderly purposes in the world. He represents all that is disorderly, chaotic, disruptive and violent with which we contend. At the same time the Bible says that Leviathan is one of God's creatures (Psalm 104:24-27). Leviathan is probably not evil as such but an imaginative symbol of the disorder and chaos in the world (like the sea, like the wilderness, like the night) that God has put on a leash (the Message calls him God's "pet dragon"). Isaiah looks ahead to the day when God will finally overcome Leviathan and the sea monsters (Is. 27:1).

So these are no ordinary animals: Leviathan breathes smoke and fire, and human hunting implements or weapons of war are useless against them. God uses these strange, mythic beasts to remind Job that the enormous forces of nature, whether the docile giant Behemoth or the violent destructive Leviathan, are subject to divine power and limits. Humans have always imagined monstrous creatures residing in the unexplored regions of the world. Medieval maps of distant oceans contained the inscription, "Here be dragons." More recently the dark ocean depths have yielded up horrific looking creatures that live in worlds unknown to us. We imagine strange "aliens" living in outer space and fear their encroachment on our civilized earth. These all represent the limits of our knowledge and of our ability to control the world, our fears about what lies beyond. Most Ancient Near Eastern cultures believed that these chaos creatures, larger than life natural forces, were outside the established cosmic order and were a threat to it. The Bible consistently sees them as under God's control. There are chaotic elements within the cosmos but the cosmos is not chaos. There is evil in the world but the world is not evil. Notice that God does not blame human sin for the turbulent world but rather holds it up as His own doing.

God has asked Job if he can bring down the proud (40:6-14), clearly referring to wicked humans. But Behemoth and Leviathan are held up as examples of non-human grandeur that Job has no hope of bringing down. As a pair they form an imaginative picture of the entirety of God's world. Behemoth may not represent the dark chaos of creation, as many biblical scholars assume, but simply untamed power and singular majesty. He is at peace even in the flooding Jordan, and does not fear capture by humans. He rests easy in his strength. Leviathan in contrast is full of dangerous violence. Unlike in other biblical references, here God's victory over this creature is not proclaimed. Rather, God's speech

celebrates Leviathan's awesome, terrifying power and beauty, unequalled in all the earth, king of the proud (41:34). God has said that if Job could bring down the proud, then God would recognize Job's ability to save himself (40:14). But the magnificent poetic representation of these two proud aspects of God's creation makes it clear that Job has no hope of being able to save himself or impose his version of justice on the world.

One key message in Job is that life is not fair, in the sense that things do not always happen the way we would like them to or think they ought to. Job clearly does not deserve the misery that falls on him. His children and hired hands do not deserve to die because of some heavenly debate. Nothing in the book is fair, not only the bad things that happen but also the good. Job no more deserves his tremendous wealth than he deserves his tremendous suffering. *If the world were fair, we would not have half of what we have.*

God is held responsible for the way his creation operates, for Job's suffering as well as his prosperity. Job says, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away." (1:21). "We accept good things from God; should we not also accept evil?" (2:10). We cannot simply bless God for the good things we have without also seeing him in some way as responsible for our misfortunes (not self-inflicted ones, of course).

Genesis 1-3

God's speech helps us rethink how we understand Genesis 1-3, and ultimately the rest of Scripture.

1. By pointing Job to the vast non-human expanse of his creation, God challenges our anthropocentric view of the world and of God's activity, the idea that "he did it just for me." Nothing could be less biblical than that song. Elihu said that God sends rain as both punishment and blessing on humans (37:13). In contrast, God says that he sends rain to uninhabited regions where it produces lush growth that benefits no humans (38:26-27). God's governance of the world and his reasons for his actions do not necessarily have anything directly to do with human beings (we know that Job's afflictions are not about him). God's purposes are much larger than that, and God's governance cannot be judged by its manifestations in human society alone. The world does not revolve around Job and his happiness. (As the ancient rabbis said, "Why was man created last? In order to say, if he is worthy, all creation was made for you; but if he is unworthy, he is told, even a gnat preceded you.")

Humans are not the center of the universe (people used to believe that the Earth was the center of our planetary system) nor the measure of all things. "When I see your heavens, the works of your fingers, the moon and stars that you set in place—what are humans that you are mindful of them, mere mortals that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:4-5).

Considering what we now know about the vast expanse of outer space, this verse has even more power. Parts of creation exist for their own sake. The OT food laws (which we have

been taught to disdain) teach this lesson (Torah=teaching, instruction). The first law God gave humans in the garden was a dietary law. After the flood, again God addressed human appetites, now permitting them to eat meat, but with restrictions. The message is the same—some of creation must be protected, left alone from human devices and desires. There are some trees that are not to be eaten from. Humans are not to plunder all of earth's resources for their own pleasure and needs. "In the face of nature, there must be reverence and restraint" (Rabbi Jonathan Sacks).

The world does not exist solely for the sake of humanity. Humans were created last in Genesis, not because they were the most important part of creation, but in order to tend to God's garden, to "serve" it and "take care of" it (Gen. 2:15). Both verbs are important here. The first verb is the main verb that means, "to work for" or "to serve, minister to." (By extension it also is used to mean, "worship." Serving the Lord is worshipping the Lord. See Exodus 8:1, 20 in KJV, NIV, where this same verb is used. The Hebrews have been serving Pharaoh but are liberated in order to serve/worship the Lord). The implication here is that humans are servants in the earth's household, and are to render useful service to the earth, which in turn provides for their needs. If we serve the earth badly, it will not provide what we need. So respectful concern for the good of the earth is essential because we are dependent on it for our lives. Healthy food, clean water and air, are necessary for our survival.

The second verb means, "to guard, keep, watch, take care of, protect." So humans were put in Eden as caretakers, servants, guardians. Privilege, material blessings, always bring with them the responsibility to serve. When they are cast out of Eden, God sends them out again "to work/serve the ground/dirt from which they were made (Gen 3:23). Note the interesting reference here. The human (*adam*) is to serve the dirt (*adamah*). They are reminded of their lowly beginnings. Their purpose is the same, only now it will be more difficult service. Righteousness, biblically, not only refers to maintaining a proper relationship with God and our neighbor but also with all of creation, with the dirt itself.

Adamah, earth, dirt, continues to echo throughout the early chapters of Genesis. Cain also "works/serves the dirt" (4:2) and when he kills his brother, Abel's blood cries out to God from the ground/dirt which has opened its mouth to swallow it (4:10-11). As a result, God curses the ground more strongly for Cain: it will not be fruitful at all and he will be a wandering nomad searching for food (4:12). After God almost wipes out humanity with the flood, he decides to reconcile himself to the fact that humans are deeply flawed, sinful beings and if he continues to curse the earth he will destroy his creation. So he vows not to put any more curses on the dirt (8:21-22). The first thing Noah does as a new "man of the dirt" (9:20) is to plant a vineyard and pass out drunk and naked and shame himself in front of his sons. So much for Noah being a righteous man. *God gives humans the freedom to fail.*

2. In Genesis, God’s original creation is formless and chaotic and dark (1:2), and God works to establish order out of the chaos. The author of Job insists that the waters of chaos and the sea monsters have a part in God’s overall creation as does the darkness. God did not do away with them; He only set limits to them, which is the main focus of Gen. 1. Eden is a lush garden, a highly ordered part of creation, but it is only one small part of a much larger world. Outside is the bleak and troublesome wilderness as well as the sea, a disordered world that is not in complete control. There even seem to be other humans who pose a threat to Eden’s offspring (4:14-16). Notice the important verses that are usually passed over when we read this account (2:10-14): the four rivers not only irrigate Eden but flow out into the surrounding lands. Here we have a picture of what Eden was supposed to be: a source of life for the rest of the world.

Adam and Eve were to participate in that life-giving service. They were given the task of expanding that Edenic order by working the garden so that it would grow, and by being fruitful and producing a family to help expand God’s rule over the world, to bring it under control (1:28). Creation is “good,” meaning that it functions the way God designed it to. But it is like a newborn baby: immature, in need of care so that it can grow into maturity. God set humans in the garden to continue his creative work.

The serpent is also part of that primal creation (3:1), not a demonic force or devil, but a creature like Behemoth or Leviathan that God can control but who is a problem for humans. Humans were given dominion over creation, but in the case of the serpent did not properly exercise that authority. Hence they are sent out into the much more difficult world that surrounds Eden (3:23-24), a world that still needs to be brought under God’s ultimate authority.

Their job is still the same: to “serve” the earth from which they were taken. Humans were created as God’s vice-regents to “subdue and rule” the world (1:28), that is, to help bring order out of disorder. We do so through responsible creation care, through working to establish justice and peace, through fighting the “powers and principalities” that work against God’s orderly kingdom. Chaos/disorder are not evil as such, only unfinished creation. We are God’s partners in what the Jewish sages have called *tikkun olam*, repairing or fixing up the world, both in the sense of healing its brokenness and also constructing a home for God, a temple in which God can fully dwell.

3. This also explains what puzzles some people about the final vision in Revelation: “I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no longer....The city had no need of sun or moon to shine on it....Night will be no more” (21:1, 23; 22:5). The darkness and chaos that God had set limits to now will disappear, for the most part, from creation. The sea and the sea monsters that are part of God’s creation (variously identified as the dragon, Leviathan, Rahab; Gen. 1:21; Job 7:12; Psalm 74:13-14; Is. 27:1; 51:9-10) will be finally conquered. Some elements of God’s

“good” creation will no longer be necessary. (Note that in John’s vision, there are two earthly beasts who act with the authority of the heavenly dragon Satan [ch. 13]. As in Job, one is a land animal and one comes from the sea. This is part of John’s re-imagining of traditional Scriptural motifs.)

4. What the book of Job helps us to understand is that creation includes both order and disorder, regularity and chaos. If everything were completely orderly, as Job’s friends and many Christians believe, if the righteous are always rewarded and the wicked punished, if creation is set up so that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice” (MLK, quoting Theodore Parker), then there is no room for freedom, either ours or God’s. If God has to impose justice on people, there is no room for grace, for forgiveness, for mercy. God told Adam that if they ate from the tree they would die “in that day” (Gen. 2:17). Evidently he changed his mind. Nor did He impose the warranted death penalty on Cain. And as we saw, after the flood God decides that he can no longer just react to human sin by imposing curses on them. God has the freedom to bear with us, with our waywardness, with the chaos we create, as painful as that sometimes is both for us and for God. The book of Job, along with the rest of Scripture, affirms God’s absolute freedom to act without the restraints of what has been called the Retribution Principle, the idea that God has to reward good and punish evil. That allows room for God’s grace to operate, for God to be able to forgive sin and shower blessings even on the unjust. The books don’t always have to be balanced; justice, as we understand it, is not the ultimate ruling principle in the cosmos. God simply does not micromanage the forces of nature with justice in mind for each moment’s activity. By depicting for Job a natural world beyond human power and comprehension, God shows Job the folly of devising a simplistic intellectual system (such as the RP) to account for the operations of His world.

5. The poet rejects the notion that our covenant relationship with God is a *quid pro quo* contract where righteousness is always rewarded and evil is always punished. The author puts that relationship solely on the basis of faith, trust, or in the language of the *satan*, “fearing God for nothing” (1:9), which most Christians mistakenly see as a New Testament innovation. We trust God because of God’s wisdom and power as Creator, not because of what God gives us. God is not Santa Claus. That allows our relationship to God to be one of genuine love, freely given by both sides. God and humans are not locked into a relationship of unrealistic expectations, as can happen in some marriages, where love only exists on the basis of, “What have you done for me lately?”

What reasons do we have for being faithful to God, apart from getting a reward either in this life or the next? If there were no heaven or hell (Job and the rest of the OT saints believed in neither), could you still recommend being a Christian to someone else?

6. So God did not make the world as an idyllic place where we simply relax and enjoy ourselves (a misconception about Eden), but a challenging environment where we grow to

maturity by doing God's work and by accepting responsibility for our actions in the midst of circumstances that are not always clear or easy. Even Eden has its serpents. The "goodness" of creation refers to its proper functioning rather than moral perfection. God provides for predators (ravens, lions, vultures) who are part of that world as well. The world is not designed to protect righteous people from suffering. God has brought sufficient order to the cosmos for it to be functional and for us to exist, and at the same time he has allowed sufficient disorder to accommodate our moral integrity as human beings to make free choices. Some of that disorder will continue into eternity, which will still include "hell" or Gehenna (or whatever you want to call it), an eternal pocket of disorder and rebellion under God's ultimate control.

In Genesis, it is not so much that humans fell from a state of bliss and perfection but rather they failed to realize a possibility, failed to become who they were created to be. They "fell short" of God's glory (Rom. 3:23), of God's purpose for them and for the earth. We still have not realized our destiny to serve the earth. A free creator God created free humans in his image, creative beings capable of envisioning and creating worlds. From the beginning they were given creative work to do. God works with us in this creative act of making a world. The rabbis say, "It is not for you to complete the work but neither are you free to desist from it" (*m. Avot. 2:21*). God continues to work with us in the ongoing process of bringing creation into full maturity, in bringing order out of chaos.

The hard question that remains with us after all of this is: why did God create the world this way? Why did God allow the chaos and darkness and serpents to be part of his creation? Neither Genesis nor Job (nor the rest of the Bible) gives us an answer to that question. We are left simply with the mystery, and the challenge, of God's sovereignty and human freedom.