

CREATOR & CREATION



Chapter Four

God, Humans, and the Natural World

History and Nature

Until recently, few biblical scholars gave any attention to the Bible's views of the natural world or the role of the natural world in the religion and culture of ancient Israel. Attention instead was directed toward Israel's view of history and its interpretation of God's activity in history. This scholarly focus has been shaped in part by the Bible's own emphasis on historical events. At the heart of the Bible's presentation of Israelite religion stands Israel's story in which God is repeatedly described acting in historical events to create, discipline, and redeem Israel to be his people. For example, God calls Abraham to leave his ancestral home in Mesopotamia for the purpose of creating a new people in the land of Canaan. When Abraham's descendants are later enslaved in Egypt, God intervenes in human history by delivering them from the oppressive power of Pharaoh. At Sinai God establishes a covenant with Israel; Yahweh chooses Israel to be his people, and Israel pledges to faithfully worship Yahweh alone. God again acts in history by settling his people in the land of Canaan, fighting with the Israelites to drive out its inhabitants. God also designates David to be king over Israel, to be God's regent and a shepherd for his flock. God empowers him to build a large empire and establishes a dynasty in his name. Throughout Israel's existence God's actions are discerned in the events of history. Times of famine, drought, and oppression from enemies are not random or without purpose. The prophets recognize in these events God's actions of judgment against his people. Similarly, times of agricultural bounty, prosperity, and peace are interpreted as God's blessings. According to the biblical tradition, the events of history are filled with meaning and purpose, for "everything Israel experienced in history is an act of Yahweh" (Ringgren: 113).

History clearly plays a prominent role in the Bible's presentation of Israelite religion. But the emphasis that scholars have placed on the importance of history for understanding the religion of Israel has excluded the role of the natural world from consideration. Although the reasons for this narrow emphasis on history are manifold, the overriding impetus has been an apologetic concern to distinguish Israelite religion from the religion of its ancient Near Eastern neighbors. If the religion of Israel could be shown to be significantly different from the polytheistic religions of its neighbors, then the truth of the biblical faith was thought to be more persuasive. Biblical scholars thus drew upon a conceptual dichotomy between history and nature, derived from the philosophy of Hegel, as a model for

differentiating between Israelite and other ancient Near Eastern religions (Simkins, 1991: 3–30).

A logical reflex of this dichotomy between history and nature is the distinction between linear and cyclical time. Linear time is the time of history. It has a definite beginning and end. Although like a graph it might have many ups and downs, it nevertheless marches unrelentingly forward. Because it is unidirectional, each moment is new and unique. It is the time of change and progress, and so brings freedom. Cyclical time, on the other hand, is the time of nature (“nature” understood in a pre-Darwinian sense). With no beginning and end, an ordained order of events continually repeat themselves. Each moment is merely the latest reiteration of a primordial moment. Nothing is new or unique. Like the changing seasons, time is an endless repetition with no progress. Therefore, cyclical time enslaves for it is devoid of change.¹

According to this conceptual model, the Israelite religion was a religion of history. The Israelites worshipped a God who acted and was revealed in the events of human history in order to guide that history towards its appointed goal. Each event was new and filled with human potential. The natural world was viewed simply as the stage for the historical drama. It possessed no divine meaning. It was neither a manifestation of God, nor an active agent in the fulfillment of the purposes of God. In contrast, the ancient Near Eastern polytheistic religions, the religions of Israel’s neighbors, were embedded in nature. The gods were personified natural powers, and the peoples were servants to the never ending cycles of nature.

The biblical scholars who employed the history-versus-nature model to interpret Israelite religion recognized that Israel was born from these ancient Near Eastern nature religions – for example, Abraham came from Mesopotamia and his descendants were enslaved in Egypt – but they claimed that a new religion was born at the exodus. As slaves in Egypt, the Israelites were immersed in the static cyclical world of nature. According to the Egyptian cosmologies, societal roles were determined in the primordial era. A slave was destined to remain a slave; change within the established order was not possible. However, when Yahweh delivered the Israelites from bondage and made them his people, the myth of nature and cyclical time was shattered. The natural world was not divine; the given was not the inevitable. History offered the possibility of change, and Yahweh was the agent of change. By disenchanting the natural world, the Israelites opened themselves to the potential of history, and by recognizing God’s activity in history, the Israelites were able to interpret all the events of history to be the unfolding of God’s purposes. Therefore, according to this model, the religion of Israel emerged in contradistinction to the other ancient Near Eastern religions.

Although I have discussed and rejected this model in the preceding chapters, I introduce it again here to illustrate why previous biblical scholarship has neglected the role of the natural world in the religion of Israel. In an attempt to distinguish between Israelite

¹ Cyclical time, when projected onto ancient societies is anachronistic. It is an image derived from our mechanical view of the world. This type of time is better understood as oscillating time – as a “rhythmically swinging back and forth between recurrent markers” (Kearney: 99).

and other ancient Near Eastern religions, biblical scholars have claimed that the Israelites, in contrast to their neighbors, had little interest in the natural world. G. Ernest Wright, the most vocal proponent of this model, made the following comparison:

The contemporary polytheisms, having analyzed the problem of life over against nature, had little sense of or concern with the significance of history. Nature with its changing seasons was cyclical, and human life, constantly integrating itself with nature by means of cultic activity and sympathetic magic, moved with nature in a cyclical manner. But Israel was little interested in nature, except as God used it together with his historical acts to reveal himself and to accomplish his purpose. Yahweh was the God of history, the living God unaffected by the cycles of nature, who had set himself to accomplish a definite purpose in time (1957: 71).

Not only did the Israelites have a different, i.e. superior, understanding of the natural world – that it was merely raw material to be used by humans and God – but they also viewed their God differently. Whereas the polytheistic gods were immanent in nature, Israel’s God transcended the natural world. This distinction is also made by Wright:

In polytheism the central and original metaphors and symbols for depicting the gods were drawn for the most part from the natural world. With the growth of social complexity the gods increasingly took on social functions, and such terms as king, lord, father, mother, judge, craftsman, warrior, and the like, were used. Yet Baal of Canaan and Enlil of Mesopotamia never shook off their primary relation to the storm which typifies nature’s force. Anu, the head of the pantheon in Babylon, originated as the numinous feeling for the majesty of the sky. He was thus given form as heaven, though subsidiary forms were the king and the bull of heaven. The mother of the gods was Ninhursaga, who arose from the feeling for the fertility of the earth and was thus given form as the earth, with subsidiary forms ascribed as mother, queen and craftsman. Ea was the sweet waters, who could be given form in the ram and the bison, but more especially as the knowing-one, the craftsman, the pundit and the wizard. . . In the Bible, on the contrary, God is known and addressed primarily in the terms which relate him to society and to history. The language of nature is distinctly secondary. God is Lord, king, judge, shepherd, father, husband, and the like, but these appellatives are not superimposed upon a central image in nature. Nature as God’s creation contains no forms on which one can focus a religious attention (1952: 48–49).

Biblical scholars, therefore, gave no attention to the role of the natural world in the religion of Israel because their use of the dichotomy between history and nature as a model for interpretation precluded any such role. The natural world was an appropriate category of discussion only for polytheistic religions.

As argued in the preceding chapters, the history-versus-nature model is inadequate for interpreting both Israelite and other ancient Near Eastern religions. The Israelite religion was not simply a religion of history, nor were the ancient Near Eastern polytheistic religions

merely religions of nature. The dichotomy between history and nature does not correspond to the differences between the religion Israel and the religions of its neighbors.

A long-lasting effect of biblical scholarship's use of the history-versus-nature model for interpreting Israelite religion has been the presumption of a particular worldview for both Israel and its neighbors along these dichotomous lines. The worldview of ancient Israel, which scholars had presumed in their use of this model, ascribed no active role to the natural world. As diagrammed in figure 9, nature was perceived simply as raw material. It was the product of God's creation like humans, but it remained distinct from humans. Moreover, humans could act as independent causal agents in nature. Although nature could serve as God's instrument to affect humans, it had no intrinsic capacity to affect change. Acting as God's representatives in this world, humans could autonomously utilize nature's resources for their own purposes. The material world was subject to both divine and human control.

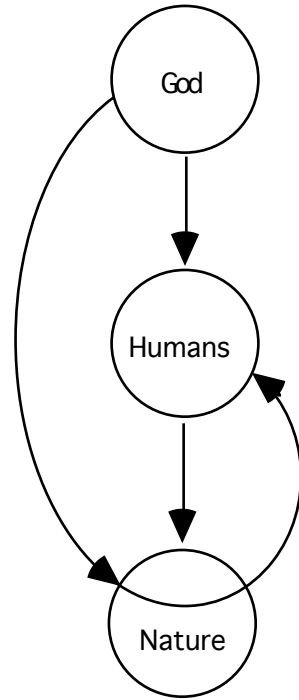


Figure 9. A History-Oriented Worldview

Scholars who embraced the history-versus-nature model presumed a worldview of Israel's neighbors which stands in contrast to their presumed worldview of Israel. As illustrated in figure 10, this commonly presumed polytheistic worldview credited the natural world with an active role in the interaction with both gods and humans. (Of course, the apologetic agenda of these scholars suggests that this worldview gives a *too active* role to nature!) According to this worldview, the gods were merely the personified forces of nature. Even when they took on social roles such as king, judge, or craftsman, they were unable to transcend their connection to nature. The gods thus affected humans through the manifold forms of the natural world. Humans, from the perspective of this worldview, were

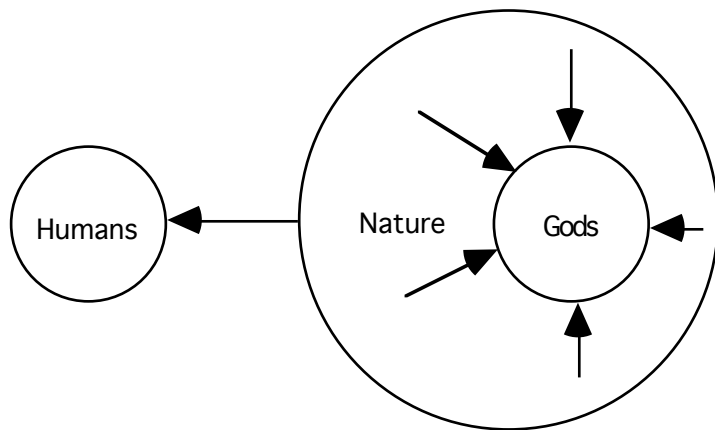


Figure 10. A Nature-Oriented Worldview

completely subject to nature. They were unable to escape the unending cycles of nature to effect lasting change in the world. Human society was characterized by its static quality, lacking in progress.

Although biblical scholars interpreted what they had presumed to be the Israelites' worldview in a positive light for apologetic reasons, it has not received such a favorable treatment at large. As discussed in the Introduction, this worldview was accused of fostering the current environmental crisis. Indeed, this presumed worldview promotes an ethic of exploitation, and has justifiably been rejected by people concerned about the condition of the natural environment. But this worldview is not the worldview of the ancient Israelites! It is derived from a dichotomous model that cannot account for the diversity within the religion of Israel. Israelite religion is concerned with both history *and nature*. The religion of Israel cannot be understood in exclusively historical categories. The role of the natural world in the religion of Israel must be taken into consideration.

In Chapter Three I constructed a model for understanding the basic worldview of the ancient Israelites. This model, diagrammed in figure 8, illustrates the basic assumptions of the Classification and Relationship universals. In contrast to the history-oriented and nature-oriented worldviews illustrated in figures 9 and 10, the basic Israelite worldview posits a fundamental distinction between the creator and the creation. The essential unity of the creation is only secondarily differentiated between humans and nature. As a result, God's activity cannot be accounted for in strictly historical or natural terms. God's activity is in relation to the whole creation.

God the creator is the primary and most comprehensive biblical metaphor that describes God's activity in and on behalf of the creation: God the creator brings the creation into existence (through the many ways discussed in the preceding chapters) and acts in the creation to sustain it and to shape it according to his purposes (Westermann, 1971: 23–24). As this opening statement implies, creation in the biblical tradition, and in the ancient Near East in general, is not just a single event that happened at the beginning of time. The Deist's image of God as a cosmic clock-maker is foreign to the biblical text. According to the Bible, God's activity in creation includes both sequential events in the linear course of time, such as the numerous occasions in which God redeemed Israel, and ongoing processes that are more characteristic of cyclical time – more appropriately called “oscillating” time – such as the seasonal-cycle of agriculture and the life-cycle of animals and humans. For this reason, some scholars have described the Israelites' view of time as spiral – an oscillating repetition that is infused with change and development (Cross, 1988: 95–96; Fretheim, 1991b: 358). It is necessary to examine both of these disparate aspects of God's activity in creation in order to elucidate fully God's role as creator.

In the following sections of this chapter I have chosen to present God's interaction with the creation according to two categories or models: theophany and covenant. Each category describes a particular feature of God's role as creator. Moreover, each category cuts across the distinction between linear and oscillating time, blending characteristics of each dimension into a holistic presentation of God's activity in creation. By exploring the metaphor of God the creator from the perspective of these categories, I will further detail

God's relationship to the creation, and by extension, humankind's relationship to the natural world.

The Significance of Theophany

Theophany literally refers to God's appearance. Both Christian and Jewish theology claim that God is always and everywhere present in the world. Theophany is simply an intensification of God's presence at a particular place during a particular time. God's presence in the world is made known in such a way that humans recognize it as distinctive (though not always immediately). It is a means by which God engages in human affairs. But this intensification of God's presence also affects the natural world. God's presence is often revealed through a spectacular display of meteorological phenomena, and reverberations of God's presence echo throughout the natural world.

Two issues have dominated scholarly discussion of theophany: the origin and the categorization of the diverse biblical accounts of theophany. Some scholars argue that the biblical descriptions of God's appearance had their origin in the ritual celebrations of Yahweh's kingship in the New Year festival, and that the theophanies themselves were modeled on God's revelation on Mount Sinai (Weiser; Mowinckel, 1992: I.142–43), whereas other scholars trace their origin to either celebrations of Yahweh's victory in the pre-monarchical holy wars (Jeremias, 1965: 118–50), or Canaanite descriptions of the theophany of Baal as storm-god (Cross, 1973: 147–77). Although some scholars would lump together all biblical examples of theophany (Kuntz), most scholars recognize at least two different types of theophanies. Westermann distinguishes the biblical theophanies according to the purpose of God's appearing. The term "theophany" is reserved for those accounts in which God appears in order to reveal himself and to communicate with his people through a mediator. God's appearance to Moses and the people on Mount Sinai (Exod 19, 34) is the fullest example of this type of theophany. The biblical accounts in which God appears in order to aid his people, such as God's fighting against Sisera and the Canaanites (Jud 5), Westermann prefers to call "epiphanies" (1965: 99; Fretheim, 1984: 80–81). Jeremias similarly distinguishes between two types of theophanies according to the function of their basic form. One type of theophany is intended for individuals and represents for them a special demonstration of God's favor. A second type of theophany is God's appearance as a warrior through the powers of nature which causes alarm among his enemies (1976: 896).

Although this scholarly discussion of the origin and categorization of theophany is not without merit, it has tended to direct attention away from other aspects of theophany. Specifically, little discussion has been given to the significance of God's appearance in the creation, especially with regard to the implied relationship between God and the creation. Two exceptions are noteworthy.

In a recent dictionary article on theophany, Theodore Hiebert focused on the form and location of theophanies rather than on their origin and function (1992a). In his differentiation of the diverse biblical theophanies, he recognized both natural forms (phenomena associated with the thunderstorm) and societal forms (king, warrior, judge) of God's appearance. Although this differentiation is not absolute – the natural and social forms coalesce in most descriptions of theophany – this categorization draws attention to

the crucial role that the natural world plays in the manifestation of God's presence. The importance of the natural world in relation to God's appearance is further highlighted by Hiebert's discussion of the location of theophanies. According to Hiebert, "one of the fundamental characteristics of theophany in Israel is its occurrence at locations in the natural environment which were considered particularly sacred, particularly conducive to contact and communication between the divine and human spheres of reality" (1992a: 505). God appears at springs, rivers, trees, and especially mountains, and by so doing endows the natural world with sacredness. The natural world serves as a symbol of God's presence.

The other exception is the work of Terence Fretheim. Although he has followed scholarly convention by highlighting the function of theophanies, he has also explored the particular significance of the natural forms of God's appearance. By emphasizing the metaphorical character of the biblical descriptions of theophany – noting that natural metaphors are frequently used to describe God – Fretheim has argued that there is a definite correspondence between God and the natural world. The biblical theophanies function primarily to reveal God, and nature often serves as the means by which God is revealed. But the natural world does not simply play an instrumental role in theophanies. According to Fretheim, if the "natural metaphors for God are in some ways descriptive of God, then they reflect in their very existence, in their being what they are, the reality which is God" (1987: 22). The natural world is internally related to God and is thus capable of revealing God (1984: 37–44). "The fact that theophanies function as revelatory events means that the function of nature in theophany is only an intensification of what is true of nature otherwise" (1987: 25).

Both Hiebert and Fretheim have persuasively argued that the natural world is more than raw material that God might use to achieve his historical purposes. The natural forms of theophany give intrinsic value to the natural world. Nature is capable of symbolically representing God because the creator has bound himself to the creation (Fretheim, 1984: 38). Of course, it has long been recognized that humans are capable of revealing God. This is in part the meaning behind the statement that humans are created in the "image of God" (Gen 1:26–27), and it is given fullest expression in the incarnation. Hiebert and Fretheim have simply demonstrated that this insight extends to the rest of the natural world. All of creation – the natural world and humans together – stands in relationship to God and is a suitable vehicle of God's presence.

The focus that Hiebert and Fretheim have given to the natural aspects of God's appearance serves as a good starting point for our discussion of theophany and its value for understanding the Israel's worldview. In their work they have drawn attention to three significant facets of theophany that will form the basic parameters of our investigation: The natural setting of theophanies, the natural form of theophanies, and the implicit relationship between the creator and the creation that is revealed by theophanies. Exploring theophany according to these parameters will enable us to confirm and to illustrate our basic model of the Israelite worldview, and at the same time give further nuance and precision to the model.

Theophany and Sacred Space

An appropriate place to begin our investigation of theophany is with the location of theophanies. Hiebert has already pointed out that theophanies frequently occur at a variety of settings in the natural environment and especially at mountains. These locations are considered to be holy, i.e., set apart as distinctive from the rest of the natural environment, by both those who directly experienced the theophanies and those who pass on the tradition of them. The classic biblical example of such a theophany is God's appearance to Moses in the burning bush:

¹Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

(Exodus 3:1–5)

The theophany ascribes meaning and value to the place at which the theophany occurred. The location of the theophany is no longer simply one place among many in the natural environment. It is distinctive and extraordinary; it is holy ground.

In the scholarly jargon these holy sites have been called sacred spaces, and they are not unique to the religion of Israel. Mircea Eliade, a pioneer in this field of study, has demonstrated that most cultures of the world, both past and present, have had some notion of sacred space (1959: 20–65). Human awareness of sacred space is simply the recognition that space is not homogeneous. Some space is qualitatively different from other spaces. Profane space is arbitrary, undifferentiated, ordinary space. Sacred space is the place where the sacred ("God" in the biblical tradition) has broken into profane space by bringing order and differentiation. By breaking into the randomness of profane space, the sacred provides an absolute fixed-point of reference around which human life can orient itself. Sacred space enables a "world" to be found; it enables humans to order and structure the arbitrariness of ordinary space.

Sacred space represents a symbolic perception of reality. It is the reification of a people's myths and rituals.² Humans have a fundamental need for orientation in the world; order and structure are necessary for a meaningful life. Without a point of orientation randomness would dominate. Value and meaning would become relative. The experience of the sacred provides the necessary point of orientation, and so it enables humans to create an

² According to Eliade, the awareness of sacred space is a primordial human experience, preceding all theoretical reflection on the world (1959: 20-21). In other words, humans first experience the distinctiveness of sacred space and then begin to theorize and formulate the significance of that experience through myths and rituals.

orderly, meaningful, and thus *real* world. Through their myths and rituals, people give structure and order to the world around them.

The experience of the sacred and the awareness of sacred space is a common experience of humankind. Sacred space fulfills a basic human need. The creation of an orderly world around the sacred space, however, is an expression of its significance for a particular people. Although similarities can be detected across diverse cultures, reflecting the common human experience of sacred space, each culture orders its world in relation to sacred space according to its own particular concerns.

As in the understanding of creation, the cultures of the ancient Near East, including Israel, shared a similar understanding of sacred space. This is not coincidental. Sacred space and the world ordered in relation to it are the geographical expressions of creation. Through the process of creation certain places are endowed with sacredness. According to the *Enuma Elish*, for example, Marduk chose Babylon to be the special place of his temple and organized the rest of the creation around it. In the *Creation of the Pickaxe* humans sprout from the ground at Uzumua, and Duranki is the place at which heaven and earth were originally attached. In the Egyptian creation myths, the land of Egypt is the hillock that first emerged out of the primeval ocean Nun. Babylon, Uzumua and Duranki (both sites in Nippur), and the land of Egypt (Klimkeit: 268–70) are each considered to be sacred space. Each place is a symbolic geographical expression of the structure of creation. This relationship between creation and sacred space, however, should not be interpreted to mean that a people’s understanding of creation was prior to their perception of sacred space. The ideas of creation and the experiences of sacred space are mutually dependent upon one another. People’s perceptions of sacred space affirm their particular views of creation, and creation myths serve to explain and ascribe significance to their awareness of sacred space.

A Horizontal Model of Sacred Space

There are two related and complementary models at work in the ancient Near Eastern perception of sacred space. The most fundamental perception of sacred space is represented by a horizontal model, illustrated in figure 11, in which the life-sustaining creation is located at the center of a plateau (the “real” world) and diminishes in its significance and affect as one moves to the periphery (Wyatt, 1987a: 378; compare also Leach: 81–93; Davies; Jenson). The sacredness of creation is experienced as divine, and at the center of the world it provides the absolute point of reference around which the world is oriented. The

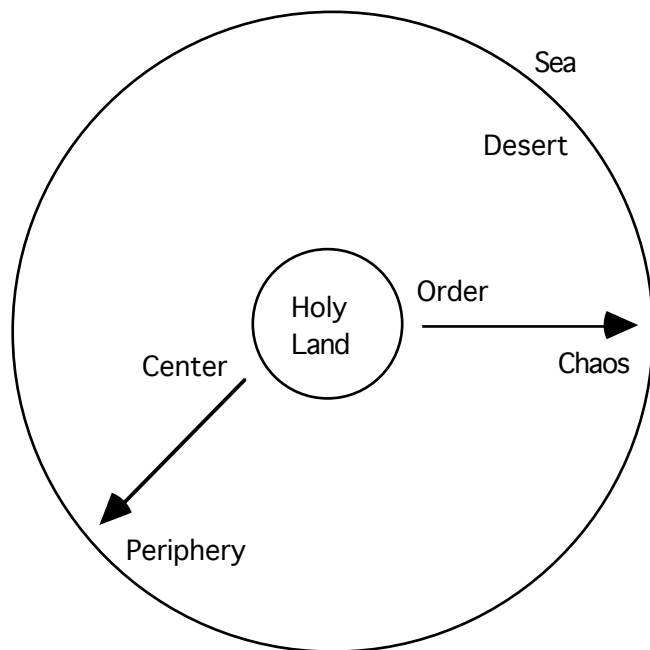


Figure 11. A Horizontal Model of Sacred Space

creator makes the land at the center holy in a cosmological sense. The land is characterized by divine order; it is the point from which the creation originated. The divine sacredness of the center stands in contrast to the sacredness of the periphery. This sacredness is experienced as demonic and diabolical (Smith: 97–98, 109). The periphery is chaotic, hostile to life. It is symbolized by both the desert and the sea which form the boundary between the land of the living and the netherworld (Haldar). The boundary at the periphery is a sterile region inhabited by demons, wild animals, and sea monsters (Pedersen: 454–59; Talmon: 43). Humans are unable to dwell there apart from divine assistance.

It is important to note that both the center and the periphery are experienced as sacred, although each in different ways. The sacred has an ambivalent character. In his classic and influential study, *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto described this ambivalent encounter with the sacred as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. This formulation, which does not readily yield a good English translation, attests to the fundamental human experiences that are inspired by the sacred. The encounter with the sacred can produce both terror and joy, dread and wonder. Although seemingly contradictory, these paradoxical experiences actually complement one another. The God who lovingly bestows peace and bounty on his faithful servants is also the one before whose wrath his enemies tremble. This is analogous to the experience of the sacred at the center and the periphery. Although the sacred is a unity, humans are often unable to reconcile its diverse, opposing aspects, choosing instead to hold them in tension. The divine aspects of the sacred are ascribed to the center, the demonic to the periphery. Each is an extension of the other; each is defined in contrast to the other. As recognized by the insightful few (cf. Job 9:22–24; Isa 45:5–7), however, the unity of the sacred transcends both the center and the periphery.

The symbolic perception of space represented by the horizontal model undoubtedly has its origin in the human perception of the body and by extension personal space (Wyatt, 1987a: 378), but it also has roots in the actual human experience of the ancient Near Eastern environment. In this environment both the desert and the sea were inhospitable to human life. The sterile desert was the domain of noxious plants and beasts. The sea, although teeming with life, was both violent and unpredictable, unable to be tamed. The fertile and habitable land was experienced as an oasis surrounded by the hostile periphery. Although this model is anchored in the ancient Near Eastern environment, it describes a symbolic rather than an actual geography. It attests to the sacredness that the people of the ancient Near East perceived in the natural environment.

The clearest and most elaborate example of this symbolic geography attested in the biblical literature is found in Israel's foundational story of exodus from Egypt, wandering in the wilderness, and conquest of the land of Palestine. This story begins with the Israelites' escape from Egypt and Yahweh's destruction of the Egyptian forces at the *yam suph*, "Red Sea" (Exod 15:4). Although the *yam suph* has traditionally been associated with the Red Sea, scholars have preferred to interpret it as referring to an unknown sea of reeds along the course of the modern day Suez Canal. But there is no evidence to support this interpretation (Batto, 1983: 27–31). Nor does it appear that the specific reference to the *yam suph* in Exodus 15 originally referred to the Red Sea, for none of the narrative traditions preserved in Exodus 14 make this connection. Instead, the *yam suph* probably denotes the sea at the edge of the world. The noun *suph* is attested with the meaning of "edge, end, border," and carries

the connotations of “non-existence, extinction, destruction” (Batto, 1983: 32–34; Snaith: 395–98). The *yam suph* reflects symbolic geography: God defeated Pharaoh at the chaotic sea that encompassed the world. This sea was later identified in the biblical tradition with the Red Sea and the southern oceans.

For the Israelites Egypt is the land of death; it is symbolically identified with the netherworld (Exod 14:11) (Wyatt, 1987a: 375–76). By defeating the Egyptians at the sea, God delivers the Israelites from the land of the dead and begins to lead them to the land of the living, the land of God’s abode (Exod 15:13, 17). But the Israelites first have to pass through the desert which, bordering on the sea, stands between the world of chaos and the real world of the holy land. Although the actual geography of the Sinai peninsula, the region between Egypt and the land of Israel, is characterized by desert, the references to the desert in the wilderness wandering narratives do not simply describe the setting of the Israelites’ trek to the promised land. Rather, they ascribe a symbolic significance to Israel’s journey. Through the wilderness wanderings the Israelites participate in a symbolic rite of passage from death to life (Cohn: 7–23). The desert in these narratives is ambiguous. The desert is chaos in contrast to the order of the promised land. It is characterized by hunger and thirst, dangerous creatures, and hostile peoples. The desert is reminiscent of the death of Egypt. On the other hand, the desert is where the people of Israel experience divine favor. God provides food and water in the wilderness. God makes a covenant with the people at his desert abode. Moreover, God’s presence remains with his people, represented by both the pillar of fire and cloud and the ark of the covenant. The people’s experience of God in the desert foreshadows God’s presence in his land (Propp, 1987).

Through the trek in the desert Israel is in transition, in liminality (V. Turner: 94–97). Israel is neither living nor dead, but betwixt and between. The desert life is not the ideal but the means of entry into the holy land. The land is holy because it is the land of God’s dwelling, the land where God is experienced. The holy land is the land flowing with milk and honey, the land of creation. It is the land of the living, and the only place where *real* life is possible. For this reason, when the prophets threaten Israel with exile, they threaten to cut Israel off from life itself. Exile from the holy land is equivalent to returning to the land of Egypt. Consider the prophecy of Hosea:

¹When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
²The more I called them,
the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,
and offering incense to idols. . . .
⁵They shall return to the land of Egypt,
and Assyria shall be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.

(Hosea 11:1–2, 5)

Although the Israelites will be exiled to the land of Assyria, the prophet can characterize it as Egypt because it is symbolically the land of death. Israel will return to the netherworld from which it came.

Two further examples will suffice to illustrate the horizontal model of sacred space. In an oracle from Second Isaiah, the prophet of the exile proclaims that Yahweh is going to gather his people from the edges of the earth:

⁵Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
⁶I will say to the north, "Give them up,"
and to the south, "Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth –
⁷everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made."

(Isaiah 43:5–7)

This oracle attests to a symbolic geography in which the holy land, the land of Israel, is placed at the center (compare Ezek 5:5). The exiles are at the chaotic periphery, far from the land of the living. But their situation is temporary. The prophet proclaims that Yahweh is going to bring them to the center just as he did in the original exodus-conquest story (Chapter Six will present a fuller discussion of the new exodus-conquest theme).

In the book of Joel the prophet laments the destruction of agriculture by a severe locust plague. Moreover, Joel identifies this locust plague with the day of Yahweh (Simkins, 1991: 101–69). Joel attributes cosmological significance to their destructive activity: Their ravaging of all vegetation signals the collapse of the created order. The desolation left in their wake is evidence of this:

Fire devours in front of them,
and behind them a flame burns.
Before them the land is like the garden of Eden,
but after them a desolate wilderness,
and nothing escapes them.

(Joel 2:3)

This passage presents more than a simple description of the all-consuming destruction caused by the locusts. The locusts are rather presented as agents of chaos. They are marching from the periphery to the center, assaulting the life-giving powers of the center. The center is being transformed into the sterile desert of the periphery. For the prophet this event must surely be the day of Yahweh (Chapter Six will present a thorough discussion of the day of Yahweh).

A Vertical Model of Sacred Space

Although the horizontal model reflects the more primitive human understanding of sacred space, the vertical model elucidates the more dominant understanding within the biblical tradition. According to this model, the world is oriented around a cosmic mountain.

The mountain is cosmic in the sense that it serves as a microcosm of the whole world and participates in the government and stability of the world. Figure 12 illustrates the vertical dimension of this understanding of sacred space. The base of the mountain is the ordinary world of humans beings. It is profane space. As one ascends to the summit of the mountain, one reaches heaven, the dwelling of the gods. Thus, temples and shrines are frequently erected on mountain peaks. Beneath the mountain lies the underworld, the realm of the dead. Often a spring issues from the base of the mountain, originating from a source of water in the underworld. Uniting heaven, earth, and the underworld is the *axis mundi*, “axis of the world.” This is the center pole around which the world is oriented, making communication between the three realms of the world possible.

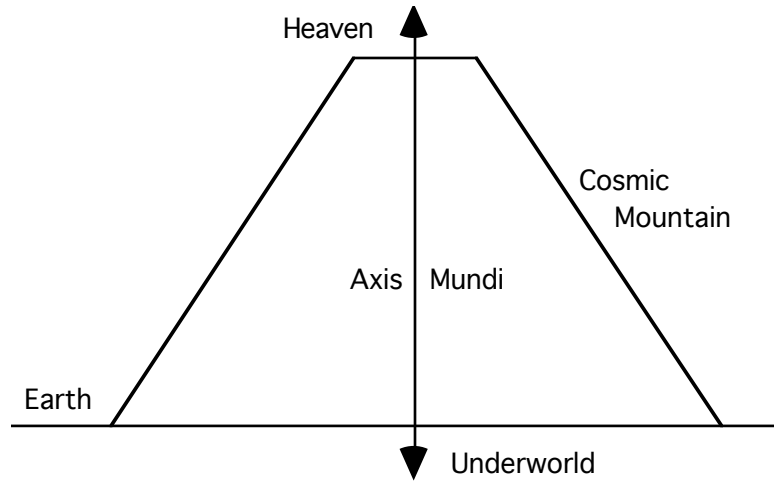


Figure 12. A Vertical Model of Sacred Space

The correlation of heaven, earth, and the underworld along a central axis is most clearly illustrated in an Isaianic oracle directed against the king of Babylon:

¹²How you are fallen from heaven,
 O Day Star, son of Dawn!
 How you are cut down to the ground,
 you who laid the nations low!
¹³You said in your heart,
 “I will ascend to heaven;
 I will raise my throne
 above the stars of God;
 I will sit on the mount of assembly
 on the heights of assembly in the far north;³
¹⁴I will ascend to the tops of the clouds,
 I will make myself like the Most High.”
¹⁵But you are brought down to Sheol,
 to the depths of the Pit.

(Isaiah 14:12–15)

³ The text of the NRSV has been altered slightly to read “assembly in the far north” rather than “Zaphon.” The background of this oracle, which has its origin in a myth of the rebellion of an astral deity, centers upon El’s unnamed mountain dwelling, the meeting place of the divine assembly, which is located in the far north, rather than Baal’s mountain abode, Zaphon, which is also located in the north. See Cross (1973: 38).

According to this oracle, the king of Babylon considers himself to be more powerful than God. He intends to ascend the cosmic mountain and take God's place in the divine assembly. But God does not tolerate this hubris. Instead of ascending to the top of the mountain, the king is sent below the mountain to the depths of the underworld and is reckoned among the dead (Isa 14:19). The symbolic geography underlying this oracle is clearly oriented vertically. The top of the mountain is symbolic of heaven, and the depths beneath the mountain are symbolic of the underworld.

Building on the work of Eliade, Richard Clifford has outlined five distinct characteristics of the cosmic mountain in the comparable religions of Israel and Ugarit (Canaanite): The mountain is (1) the meeting place of the gods or divine beings; (2) the meeting place of heaven and earth; (3) the place where the divine decrees are issued; (4) the battleground of conflicting natural forces; and (5) the source of fertilizing waters (1972: 3). Each of these characteristics will be illustrated below. Although there were several cosmic mountains throughout the history of Israel – Sinai, Horeb, Carmel, Gerizim, Ebal, Paran, Seir – the most important and influential mountain for the religion of Israel was Mount Zion. Zion is a medium sized hill in Jerusalem on which Solomon built his temple. Today it is the site of the Dome of the Rock, the spot from which Mohammed, according to Islamic tradition, ascended into heaven. But during the period of Israelite occupation of the land of Palestine, Zion was the sacred place where Yahweh dwelled.

Numerous psalms acclaim Yahweh's selection of Mount Zion from all the hills in Israel to be his special dwelling:

¹In Judah God is known,
his name is great in Israel.
²His abode has been established in Salem,
his dwelling place in Zion.

(Psalm 76:1–2)

¹On the holy mount stands the city he founded;
²the Lord loves the gates of Zion
more than all the dwellings of Jacob.
³Glorious things are spoken of you,
O city of God.

(Psalm 87:1–3)

Zion, and especially the temple built on Zion, was the foremost place in Israel where God's presence was experienced. Zion was sacred space; it provided the focal point of orientation for the people of Israel.

As the abode of God, Zion served as the meeting place for all the divine beings and the place where heaven and earth intersect. The first and second characteristics of the cosmic mountain are most clearly illustrated in Isaiah 6, the passage describing Isaiah's call to prophesy:

¹In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in

attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

(Isaiah 6:1–5)

This text suggests that Isaiah served as a priest in the temple on Mount Zion. On the occasion described by this text, Isaiah is in the temple, possibly engaged in his usual priestly duties, when he unexpectedly finds himself standing in the midst of the divine assembly. The correlation between the earthly temple on Zion and God’s heavenly temple becomes transparent; the gap between heaven and earth is removed.

With God and his retinue filling the temple, Isaiah is privy to the deliberation of the divine assembly. According to the ancient Near Eastern conception of deity, God does not govern the world alone. Rather, God is supported by an assembly of divine beings who deliberate with God and enact God’s commands (cf. Gen 1:26; 3:22; 1 Kgs 22:19–23; Job 1:6–12; 2:1–6; Ps 82). In Isaiah’s vision, Yahweh, the king and leader of the divine assembly, poses a question to the members of the assembly: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” (Isa 6:8). Isaiah is not about to let this exceptional opportunity pass, and so he volunteers to be the assembly’s messenger. In this manner Isaiah was called to prophesy God’s judgment against the people of Israel (compare Koch, 1982: 108–13).

God’s commissioning of Isaiah in the temple on Zion to be his herald is also an example of the third characteristic of the cosmic mountain – the place where divine decrees are issued. The famous mountain in this regard, however, is Mount Sinai. From Sinai God gave his law, *torah*, to the people of Israel and established his covenant with them. In the biblical tradition, Sinai functions as an archetype for the giving of the law. Regardless of when the laws were formulated during the history of the people of Israel, they are all attributed to God’s revelation on Sinai (Levenson, 1985: 17–19). Although during the monarchy Zion inherited the earlier traditions of Sinai, Sinai continued to remain the locus of the law. The decrees issued from Zion, in contrast, focus on God’s judgment of the people because of their rebellion against the law. Psalm 50 attests to this type of decree: God judges his people from Zion.

Although the cosmic mountain is the battleground of opposing forces, in the biblical tradition this fourth characteristic of the cosmic mountain is expressed in terms of the inviolability of Zion. Because God dwells in Zion, it is unconquerable. Yahweh will defend his mountain city against all assaults. Israel’s enemies, who are also God’s enemies, will be unable to assail it; the very appearance of Zion will spark panic among them. A number of psalms attest to this theme of *Völkerkampf*, “war of the nations” (Pss 2; 46; 48; 76).

Underlying the *Völkerkampf* is the conflict myth. The nations are agents of chaos bent on assailing Yahweh's kingship and rule over the creation. In response, Yahweh fights against the nations in a new cosmogonic battle, securing the order of creation. Because Yahweh defends his holy mountain against the ravages of chaos, Zion serves as a refuge for the people. Zion is a haven of order in a chaotic world. In the first stanza of Psalm 46 the psalmist extols God as a secure refuge even when the creation itself begins to crumble:

¹God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
²Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
³though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

(Psalm 46:1–3)

Because God is the creator, he can protect his people against the collapse of the creation. In the second stanza the creation's reversion to chaos is connected to the nations' assault on Zion:

⁴There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
⁵God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
⁶The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
⁷The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

(Psalm 46:4–7)

At the end of the psalm God is again exalted as the one who is both victorious over all the nations of the earth and a refuge for his people.

The fifth and final characteristic of the cosmic mountain is that the mountain is often the source of a spring or river endowed with special fertilizing powers. In Psalm 46:4 quoted above a river is associated with Zion. In an Isaianic oracle the inviolability of Zion is also connected to a river:

Look on Zion, the city of our appointed festivals!
Your eyes will see Jerusalem,
a quiet habitation, an immovable tent,
whose stakes will never be pulled up,
and none of whose ropes will be broken.
But there the Lord in majesty will be for us
a place of broad rivers and streams,
where no galley with oars can go,
nor stately ship can pass.
For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our ruler,

the LORD is our king; he will save us.

(Isaiah 33:20–22)

In both of these passages the river flowing from Zion is used metaphorically to symbolize the peace and security offered by Zion.

A perennial spring actually does erupt from the base of Mount Zion. The spring is known as Gihon, and it flows into the pool of Siloam. It served as a water source for the city of Jerusalem, and so symbolized the city's ability to withstand a lengthy siege. The spring of Gihon also became a symbol of God's power to fertilize the earth. This is especially true in late prophetic texts. In book of Joel, Yahweh's defeat of the nations in a cosmogonic battle will result in a fertile land: "In that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, the hills shall flow with milk, and all the stream beds of Judah shall flow with water; a fountain shall come forth from the house of the LORD and water the Wadi Shittim" (Joel 3:18). A similar vision is heralded in an anonymous oracle appended to the prophecies of Zechariah: "On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea; it shall continue in summer as in winter" (Zech 14:8; cf. Ezek 47). In these prophetic oracles the vertical model of sacred space is integrated with the horizontal model. Out of the mountain of God at the center will flow a river that will bring fertility and life to the barren periphery.

By employing the horizontal and vertical models of sacred space, we have described ancient Israel's symbolic understanding of the structure of God's presence in the creation. The significance of this cannot be understated. According to the biblical tradition, God is not transcendent, if by "transcendent" one means "unattached to the world." God is transcendent only in the sense that God is in the creation, related to the creation, yet remains distinct in substance from the creation (Fretheim, 1984: 70–71). God's presence in the creation ascribes the creation with value. The creation itself becomes a symbol of God's presence.⁴ God can be encountered in the creation. This insight is further confirmed by the natural form of theophanies.

God's Form in Theophany

The form of God's appearance in theophany is problematic. In many biblical accounts of theophany God's form is clearly anthropomorphic. This type of theophany is described most frequently in the patriarchal narratives (Gen 18; 28:10–17; 32:22–32 are the most explicit examples). There are many more descriptions of theophany, however, in which God's appearance is described in natural terms. Specifically, God's appearance is described overwhelmingly as a thunderstorm. Does this imply that God's form is the thunderstorm? Most biblical scholars answer, "No" (Barr, 1960: 33). Fretheim, in making the best argument for this conclusion, argues that God appears in human form, but is veiled by natural phenomena. For example, Exodus 3:2 claims that God appeared "in" a flame of fire out of a bush. Similarly, Exodus 19:18 states that Yahweh descended "in" smoke and fire, and

⁴ A similar insight is encompassed in the metaphor of Lady Wisdom (Murphy, 1985: 8-10; Yee: 90).

although God is veiled, Exodus 24:9–11 claims that Moses and others see the feet of God (Fretheim, 1984: 93–97).

Fretheim's observations are decisive in recognizing that God is not identified with the natural phenomena that is characteristic of his theophany. In this sense, God is transcendent. But Fretheim's arguments are not convincing with regard to the form of God. The description of God's appearance with both anthropomorphic and natural images does not imply that God appears in human form, though clothed by natural phenomena. Rather, it attests to the necessary anthropomorphism of nature. In order for nature to interact with humans it must be given human characteristics, it must be personified. Humbaba, the guardian of the cedar forests of Lebanon in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for example, is envisioned as a mighty cedar tree. Nevertheless, the Humbaba tree is personified with human traits: Humbaba can speak and fight; Humbaba has a neck and a heart. Humbaba is not a divine figure that is simply clothed in the guise of a tree. Similarly, the biblical descriptions of theophany suggest that Yahweh appears in natural form.

Perhaps the question, Does God appear in natural form? is misleading. The ancient Israelites do not appear to be addressing this question. As James Barr notes, "form" and "appearance" are correlative in Hebrew thought (1960: 32). The Israelites would have made no distinction between God's form and appearance. The above discussion on God's form, on the contrary, assumes this distinction. A more appropriate question might be: Did the ancient Israelites recognize an intensification of God's presence in natural phenomena? The answer to this question is undoubtedly, "Yes."

The most prominent natural phenomenon associated with Yahweh's theophany is the thunderstorm. Even many of the other biblical examples of God's appearance in natural form, such as the pillar of fire and cloud, the so-called volcanic eruptions on Sinai, and the repeated references to the wind of God, can be traced to the thunderstorm (Mann; Cross, 1973: 163–69; Luyster). Psalm 18 (= 2 Samuel 22) presents the fullest example of this type of theophany:

- ⁷Then the earth reeled and rocked;
the foundations also of the mountains trembled
and quaked, because he was angry.
- ⁸Smoke went up from his nostrils,
and devouring fire from his mouth;
glowing coals flamed forth from him.
- ⁹He bowed the heavens, and came down;
thick darkness was under his feet.
- ¹⁰He rode on a cherub, and flew;
he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.
- ¹¹He made darkness his covering around him,
his canopy thick clouds dark with water.
- ¹²Out of the brightness before him
there broke through his clouds
hailstones and coals of fire.
- ¹³The LORD also thundered in the heavens,

and the Most High uttered his voice.
14And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them;
he flashed forth lightnings, and routed them.
15Then the channels of the sea were seen,
and the foundations of the world were laid bare
at your rebuke, O LORD,
at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.

(Psalm 18:7–15)

Numerous other biblical examples of God's appearance in the thunderstorm could be marshaled, but this example is sufficiently illustrative for our purposes. The violent phenomena of the thunderstorm – raging winds, lightning that causes smoke when it strikes the earth, hail, darkness, torrential rains, and earth-shaking thunder – signal the presence of God.

The ancient Israelites' recognition of the presence of God in the thunderstorm attests to both the particular environment of Palestine and their own perception of the relationship between God and the creation. In the eastern Mediterranean environment the thunderstorm was the single most powerful natural phenomenon experienced by the people of the region. (Earthquakes, which were not uncommon, would appear to be an exception to this statement, but the linguistic evidence suggests that the Israelites connected the earthquake with the reverberations caused by the thunderstorm.) On the one hand, the thunderstorm was the source of great destructive power. Its torrential rain, fierce winds, hail, and lightning could destroy crops and demolish homes and other structures. On the other hand, the thunderstorm brought the seasonal rains that were essential for the region to support life. Without a regular cycle of rains, the eastern Mediterranean coastal lands quickly become arid and inhospitable (Hiebert, 1992a: 509).

The thunderstorm with its destructive and life-giving powers served as a fitting symbol for God's presence in the creation. But this was only possible because the Israelites recognized God's presence in nature. God was not so transcendent that he remained outside of the natural world. The creation was the means by which the creator was made known. An important axiom of biblical scholarship has been that God was made known through human affairs and actions. But this axiom does not tell the whole story. The rest of creation, the natural world, is also revelatory of God. God's presence is manifest equally in the formation and destruction of a nation as in the rolling thunderstorm bringing the fructifying rains of winter.

Creation's Response to God's Theophany

In analyzing the similar theophanies of both Yahweh and Baal (both appear in the thunderstorm), Frank Cross identified a four-fold mythological pattern:

1. The Divine Warrior goes forth to battle against chaos (symbolized by the sea or waters, death, dragons like Leviathan, or historical enemies).
2. Nature convulses (writhes) and languishes when the warrior manifests his wrath.

3. The Divine Warrior returns to take up kingship among the gods, and is enthroned on his mountain.
4. The Divine Warrior utters his voice from his temple, and nature again responds. The heavens fertilize the earth, animals writhe in giving birth, and people and mountains whirl in dancing and festive glee (1973: 162–63).

According to this pattern, the natural world responds to God's theophany with both convulsions and fertility, death and life. Although not explicitly stated by Cross, this is the pattern of the conflict myth, and thus the response of nature can be explained in terms of the order of creation. In the first movement of the myth God marches out to battle because his kingship over creation has been challenged by chaos. The creation begins to crumble because the challenge made against God's kingship is real, not simply an elaborate foil for God to demonstrate his supremacy. Chaos has disrupted the order of creation; the future of life is uncertain. But the collapse of creation is not due solely to the assault of chaos. Yahweh's march to battle itself appears to accelerate the collapse.⁵ The order of creation can only be reconstituted through the destruction of creation (this theme will be taken up further in Chapter Six). Despite the challenge of chaos, God is always victorious. The second movement of the myth celebrates God's victory over chaos and the reestablishment of his kingship. Because God returns to his throne, the creation can flourish again. God the king and creator recreates the world. The cosmic damage done by chaos is reversed, and the creation is restored to its original condition.

Although most biblical examples of theophany attest to only one movement of this mythic pattern, the hymns that have been juxtaposed in Isaiah 34–35 present the complete pattern. The first movement of the myth is presented in Isaiah 34. In this hymn, the prophet addresses all creation – the earth and all that fills it, the world and all that sprouts from it. Yahweh is marching to battle against the nations because they have challenged his kingship by oppressing his people. They have exiled the people of Judah from the life-producing center to the sterile periphery. The nations, by their assault on the people of God, had assailed God's rule over creation. Their challenge will not succeed; Yahweh will defeat them in a new cosmogonic battle. Nevertheless, the consequences of their challenge and the need for Yahweh's battle is the disintegration of creation.

All the host of heaven shall rot away,
and the skies roll up like a scroll.
All their host shall wither
like a leaf withering on a vine,
or a fruit withering on a fig tree.

(Isaiah 34:4)

⁵ Cross connects the collapse of creation to the fear that the personified natural world experiences before the fierce anger of the Divine Warrior; see also Loewenstamm. This trembling of nature in fear is certainly present in the biblical texts, but this interpretation is not sufficient in itself to explain the biblical descriptions of theophany. Yahweh is marching to battle, nature is trembling, but the reason for both is the new cosmogonic battle that the Divine Warrior must fight.

The remainder of the hymn further describes this cosmic collapse: The soil will be turned into sulfur, the rivers into pitch, and the land will be drenched with blood and inhabited only by wild demonic creatures.

Upon Yahweh's victory over the nations, however, the creation will be restored. Yahweh will return victorious to his throne, reclaim his kingship, and recreate the world.

¹The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ²it 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. . . .
⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
⁶then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For the waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
⁷the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

(Isaiah 35:1–2, 5–7)

In challenging Yahweh's kingship the nations had placed themselves at the center. They had claimed the powers of life and death; they had usurped the power of the center. But there they will not remain. When Yahweh goes out to defeat them, the fertile land of the nations will become a sterile desert and worse. Their land will be like the chaotic land of the periphery. In contrast, the people of God who had been exiled to the periphery will experience the fertility and life of the center. The desert of the periphery will blossom with life. God will bring order and life to the periphery so that even human ailments, those aspects of chaos that afflict the human body, will be healed.

As a result of God's recreation of the world in which the chaotic periphery is transformed into the life-giving land of the center, the exiled people of God will be able to return to Zion. The barren desert will no longer be an insurmountable obstacle to the center. In response, the people rejoice in God's salvation:

The ransomed of the LORD shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

(Isaiah 35:10)

The praise of God, however, is not the prerogative of humans alone. At the beginning of this salvation oracle the personified desert itself rejoices in God. The impression from this text is that all of creation praises God as God creates it. The creation, both humans and the natural world, praises God in its very being as the living product of God's creative desires. The creation as it is designed by the creator is a vehicle of praise. Although implicit in this oracle, creation's adoration of God is expressed explicitly in Psalm 148. Both humans and the natural world are called to praise God because they are the creation and God is the creator:

- ⁵Let them (elements of nature) 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...
¹³Let them (humans) praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.

(Psalm 148:5–6, 13)

The creation itself attests to the glory of God and so praises God (Fretheim, 1987: 23).

Theophany and the Israelite Worldview

Our examination of theophany has enabled us to refine further our model of the basic Israelite worldview, especially with regard to the relationship between God and the creation. But to ensure that we employ an appropriate model for elucidating this relationship, it is helpful to examine this relationship from the perspective of two inappropriate models. At one extreme, the relationship between God and the creation can be viewed through the model of pantheism. According to this model God is identified with the creation. There is no distinction between the world and God; every part of the world is some element of divine being. This is a model of total immanence. At the other extreme, a dualistic model suggests that God is totally independent from the creation. God and the creation are uninvolved, unrelated parts of reality. Dualism can also imply a basic opposition or antagonism between the two parts of reality, but in this context I am using a dualistic model simply to describe what has been called God's transcendence: God remains apart from the creation. Neither pantheism nor dualism, however, can adequately explain the biblical descriptions of theophany. According to the biblical descriptions, God is intimately involved in the creation, yet remains distinct. The creation can reveal God's presence, but the creation is not equated with God.

An alternative model for describing the God-creation relationship that is in accord with the experience of theophany is an organismic model (Fretheim, 1984: 34–35). This model emphasizes the intimate relationship between God and the creation. Clearly, the creation is dependent upon God. The habitable world was created by God and is continually affected by God's actions in it. God is involved in the creation, but God is also dependent upon the creation to fulfill his purposes. God does not stand outside of the creation acting independently of it (see the similar conclusion by Murphy, 1990: 114). The frequently attested Hebrew expression "heaven and earth" attests to God's presence in the creation.

This expression describes the division between the terrestrial and the extra-terrestrial realms. God reigns uncontested in the heavens, whereas God shares the domain of the earth with humans. However, this expression also attests to the totality and unity of creation (Knierim: 76–80; Fretheim, 1984: 38–39). There is no reality apart from God and the creation. There is no realm for God to dwell in other than the creation. Therefore, God’s presence is necessarily in the creation, and God’s actions are limited by and expressed in terms of the creation. According to our model of the basic Israelite worldview (figure 8), the relationship between God and the creation must be represented by a bi-directional line of causality.

Although theophany illustrates primarily the relationship between God and the creation, it also confirms the unity of humans and the natural world that is outlined in our model of the Israelite worldview. God’s appearance occurs in both natural and societal forms. No distinction is made between God’s appearance in human affairs and in the natural world. On numerous occasions, for example, the biblical text celebrates God’s victory over a human army, but in the same text God’s appearance in battle is described as a thunderstorm (Hiebert, 1992b). Equally significant, both humans and the natural world respond in praise to God’s theophany. The praise of God is the ultimate fulfillment of creation. As a vehicle of praise, the natural world is an intrinsically valuable aspect of the creation. Humans are not sufficient by themselves to fulfill the purposes of creation. All of creation must participate.

God’s Covenant with Creation

The Bible describes the relationship between God and the creation as a covenant, a formal union between two parties. Covenant has long been recognized as a central, if not *the central*, institution of the religion of Israel. The structure and meaning of the biblical covenants have been thoroughly explored by previous scholars (McCarthy, 1963; Hillers, 1969; Baltzer; Levenson, 1985) and need not be elaborated upon here. The reader is directed to these works for further discussion. For our purposes, we will focus only on those ways in which covenant defines the relationship between God and the creation, and by extension the relationship between humans and the natural world.

The covenants described in the Bible are not all of one type. God establishes covenants with both individuals (Abraham and David) and a people (Israel). The covenant that concerns us first, however, is God’s covenant with all creation. This covenant provides the foundation for all other covenants. It is given by God in response to his prior destruction of the created order with a flood, and occurs in two different yet complementary forms: Genesis 8:20–22 and 9:8–17.

The Yahwist’s Covenant

The first passage has been attributed to the J (the Yahwist) source, and is the earlier of the two texts.⁶ Although the Yahwist does not use the word “covenant,” his reference to

⁶ Through the use of source criticism, biblical scholars have been able to isolate four literary strands in the Pentateuch--J (the Yahwist), E (the Elohist), D (the Deuteronomist), and P (the Priestly writer)--each written during a different period of Israelite history, and each characterized by a distinctive purpose. For a clear demonstration and assessment of this “documentary hypothesis,” see Friedman. Recently, this interpretation of the literary character of the Pentateuch as come under attack. Nevertheless, virtually all scholars continue to

God's promise is semantically equivalent (Dequeker, 1974: 116). The passage itself is set at the end of the flood, after Noah and his family safely leave the ark:

²⁰Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. ²¹And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odor, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

²²As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night,
shall not cease.

(Genesis 8:20–22)

We will have more to say about this passage in the context of the flood and the creation myths in the next chapter. At this point it is sufficient simply to note how God's relationship to creation is envisioned. According to this passage, God's covenant with creation entails two components: First, God will never again destroy the creation, and second, God will ensure a regular seasonal cycle so that the ground is no longer cursed because of humankind.

Because of the first human's rebellion against God, humankind is forced out of the garden of God to live in a dry and barren landscape. The ground is cursed; it will produce only thorns and thistles. Eventually, human rebellion leads to God's regret that he created the world and humankind. Because humans are continually inclined toward evil, God seeks to destroy the earth and all humans with it (Gen 6:5–7). Only Noah and his family find favor in God's sight. Despite the fact that the flood destroys all humans except Noah's family, it failed to change the basic inclination of the human heart (Petersen: 441–44). Because humans are still inclined toward evil (Gen 8:21), it is inevitable that humans will again rebel against God, and God will again regret their creation. God's covenant with creation, however, rectifies this precarious situation. God acknowledges that humans are evil at heart, and then promises not to destroy creation again because of human rebellion. The creation will continue because God has committed himself to its preservation.

What is the sign of God's preservation of the creation? According to this J passage, the regular cycles of nature, characteristic of the eastern Mediterranean seasons and Israel's own experience of the natural world, attest to God's preservation. The land of Palestine is a region characterized by two seasons: A cool, moist winter during which crops are planted and harvested, and a hot, dry summer during which vegetation withers but fruit ripens on the trees and vines (Baly: 43–53). These seasons and even the alternation between day and

recognize the presence of two distinct strands in Genesis 1-11, J and P. The date of the Yahwist is widely debated. Traditionally, J has been assigned to the period of Solomon, though some scholars date him as early as David and as late as the exile. Scholars are generally agreed that the Priestly writer dates from the period of the exile or the early postexilic period, though he also incorporated earlier material.

night are not random. The implication of this passage is that they serve as symbols of God's continual ordering or preservation of the creation.

The Priestly Writer's Covenant

The covenant that is implicit in the J passage is made explicit in the second passage which is attributed to the P (the Priestly writer) source. This passage explicitly states that God established a covenant with all creation:

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹²God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

(Genesis 9:8–16)

The Priestly writer's formulation of God's covenant with the creation has the same basic meaning as the Yahwist's formulation: God will never again destroy the earth with flood. The Priestly writer, however, specifically claims that God's covenant is with all of creation. It encompasses every living creature and the earth itself. Like the Yahwist, the Priestly writer asserts that the natural order, in the form of a rainbow, attests to God's covenant with creation, but whereas the natural order for the Yahwist serves as a sign to humans of God's preservation of creation, the bow according to the Priestly writer serves as a reminder *to God* of his own covenantal pledge. In other words, the rainbow reminds God to actively maintain the order of creation so that the naturally occurring storm will not escalate into a cosmic flood that threatens the life of creation (L. Turner).

The corollary to God's covenant with creation is God's activity in blessing. God acts within the cycles of the natural world to sustain the created order (Wehemeier; Westermann, 1978; Mitchell: 29–78). For the Priestly writer, God's blessing is symbolized by human procreation. In the context of establishing a covenant with creation, the Priestly writer states: “God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth’” (Gen 9:1). This is the reiteration of God's blessing at creation when God blessed both humans (Gen 1:28) and other living creatures (Gen 1:22; oddly, God explicitly blesses the fish and the birds, but not the land animals, which were possibly included with the blessing of humans in an earlier form of the text). Moreover, the Priestly writer demonstrates

God's activity in sustaining the creation through two extensive genealogical lists, one placed after God's initial creation (Gen 5) and one after God's recreation of the world in connection with the flood (Gen 10–11). These genealogies are not simply chronological notes, nor do they exclusively serve antiquarian interests. Rather, they attest to God's continuing commitment to the creation. God is bound in covenant with the creation and displays his obligation to the creation through his blessing.

Other writers of the Bible also emphasize this correlation between God's covenant with creation and God's activity in blessing. The Yahwist, for example, highlights God's sustaining activity in creation by linking God's blessing in procreation to God's covenant with Abraham, which is itself based on God's covenant with creation (Dequeker, 1974). In Psalm 65 God's blessing is presented as an extension of God's activity in creation. In verses 5–8 the psalmist praises God for defeating his enemies in a cosmogonic battle and establishing the created order. Praise of God's blessing in creation then ensues:

⁹You visit the earth and water it,
 you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
 you provide the people with grain,
 for so you have prepared it.
¹⁰You water its furrows abundantly,
 settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
 and blessing its growth.
¹¹You crown the year with your bounty;
 your wagon tracks overflow with richness.
¹²The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
 the hills gird themselves with joy,
¹³the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
 the valleys deck themselves with grain,
 they shout and sing together for joy.

(Psalm 65:9–13)

The experience of God's blessing is not limited to procreation. As the creator, God provides the earth with fertility and water so that it will sustain life. The flourishing of life itself – human, animal, and vegetable – is the result of God's covenant with creation.

God's Covenant with Israel

The most familiar and well-studied of the biblical covenants is the covenant God made with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. According to the biblical tradition, God brought Israel to his desert mountain after delivering them from bondage in Egypt. At the mountain of God the people swore by oath to follow all the laws that God had given the people through Moses. In turn, God would make Israel his people and bless them. Otherwise, God would bring curses upon them. God's covenant was offered to the people, but the people were not free to refuse the covenant unscathed. They could accept the covenant and live, or

reject the covenant and die, but they could not remain neutral. God's covenant was not a relationship that Israel could safely refuse.

Despite a few dissident voices, most scholars compare the structure and significance of this covenant with the suzerain-vassal treaties made by the Hittites, the Assyrians, and other ancient Near Eastern peoples. This type of treaty established a political alliance between a mighty emperor and a subordinate king who was dependent upon the emperor for his throne. The suzerain-vassal treaty is characteristically comprised of six parts: (1) A preamble by which the suzerain identifies himself; (2) a historical prologue in which the suzerain's previous dealings with the vassal are outlined, especially how the suzerain has acted benevolently on behalf of the vassal; (3) a series of stipulations that are imposed on the vassal; (4) provisions for the deposit and public reading of the treaty; (5) a list of witnesses; and (6) the curses and blessings that will befall the vassal depending on his faithfulness in following the stipulations of the treaty.

Although the Sinai covenant is not itself a treaty, biblical scholars have been correct to draw attention to the numerous similarities between the form of the Sinai covenant and the suzerain-vassal treaties. In particular, this type of political treaty serves as a model for understanding the significance of the numerous laws that form the condition of God's covenant. According to the suzerain-vassal treaty, the vassal has an obligation to keep the stipulations of the suzerain *because* the suzerain had acted graciously on his behalf. In the Hittite treaty of Mursilis, for example, Duppi-Tessub of Amurru is obligated to Mursilis because Mursilis established him on the throne over the land of Amurru:

When your father died, in accordance with your father's word I [Mursilis] did not drop you. Since your father had mentioned to me your name with great praise, I sought after you. To be sure, you were sick and ailing, but although you were ailing, I, the Sun, put you in the place of your father and took your brothers and sisters and the Amurru land in oath for you.

(Pritchard: 203–4)

The historical prologue describes in detail all the deeds that the suzerain had done for the vassal for the purpose of pressing upon the vassal his obligation to the suzerain. Similarly, Yahweh's covenant with Israel does not arise out of a vacuum. Yahweh has already delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt. Israel is obligated to follow the laws of God. For this reason, the people of Israel cannot respond with indifference to God's covenant. God is the emperor, and God has already acted on the people's behalf by redeeming them. The people must then accept God's reign as suzerain and respond accordingly, or else the people rebel against God and must accept the consequences. The Sinai narrative of the Pentateuch and the laws contained therein (Exod 19:1–Num 10:28) cannot be separated theologically from the story of exodus and the history of God's redemption of Israel (Exod 1–15).

God's covenant with Israel, however, cannot be understood on a strictly historical level. God's right to rule is not derived solely from God's acts in history. Rather, God's covenant with Israel is founded ultimately on God's covenant with creation. Israel owes God allegiance because God has secured the created order from the threats of chaos.

The Sinai covenant and the suzerain-vassal treaties are based on a similar historical pattern: The vassal is threatened by some enemy force; the suzerain intervenes on behalf of the vassal, defeats the enemy, and delivers him from the threat; and the suzerain establishes his treaty with the vassal to which the vassal is obligated. For Duppi-Tessub, the enemy were those who contested his succession to the throne. Mursilis thus secured his position on the throne. For the people of Israel, the enemy was Egypt, and God's deliverance of the people was the exodus. This historical pattern, however, is the same pattern that lies behind the conflict myth (Levenson, 1988: 131–39). In the *Enuma Elish*, the most elaborate presentation of this pattern, the existence of all the gods is similarly threatened by Tiamat and her army. At the request of the gods, Marduk marches out to battle and defeats Tiamat. But Marduk exacted a price for his service. In exchange for their deliverance, the assembly of the gods must grant him kingship over all the gods. Marduk's right to rule over the gods and their allegiance to him in response is the corollary to his victory over the menacing Tiamat.

The demonstration of Marduk's kingship was the creation of the world. The ordered world attested to Marduk's defeat of Tiamat and his rule over all the gods. Similarly, in the biblical tradition Yahweh's right to rule over Israel and to establish his covenant with the people is demonstrated by the exodus. But the exodus is not simply God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt, for through the exodus Yahweh also defeated the agent of chaos (Pharaoh) and restored the created order. The exodus-Sinai narrative is simply the historical analogue to the conflict myth.

The lists of witnesses that are present in all suzerain-vassal treaties confirm our conclusion that covenant is grounded in creation. These lists contain the names of the gods of both parties, many of which are creation deities, and elements of the creation itself. In his treaty with Duppi-Tessub, Mursilis calls upon "the mountains, the rivers, the springs, the great Sea, heaven and earth, the winds and clouds" (Pritchard: 205) to bear witness. In the biblical tradition there are no other gods to witness God's covenant with Israel. Nevertheless, the creation stands as a testimony of God's commitment to the people and of the people's oath to be faithful to God. In the reformulation of the Sinai covenant in the book of Deuteronomy, for example, God explicitly summoned the creation to witness the covenant: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses" (Deut 30:19). Similarly, when Israel breaks God's covenant, the creation stands as a testimony against her:

¹Rise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.
²Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD,
and you enduring foundations of the earth;
for the LORD has a controversy with his people
and he will contend with Israel.

(Micah 6:1–2)

The creation can serve as a witness to the terms of the covenant because the covenant is grounded in the order of creation. On the one hand, the creation itself attests to God's supremacy over all enemies. God has defeated all threats to the order of creation, and has thus secured the redemption of Israel. On the other hand, the creation attests to Israel's

fidelity to the covenant. As long as Israel remains faithful to the covenant, the creation will flourish. However, if Israel rebels against the covenant, the creation itself will show the effects. It will become sterile and hostile because Israel's rebellion constitutes a threat to God's own supremacy over the creation.

Creation's witness to Israel's fidelity to the covenant is formalized in terms of blessings and curses. If Israel is faithful to the covenant – that is, if Israel keeps the stipulations of the covenant – Israel will experience the blessings of the covenant. On the other hand, if Israel rebels against the covenant and refuses to follow its stipulations, then Israel will experience the curses of the covenant. The blessings and curses of the covenant indicate a direct relationship between Israel's actions and the condition of the natural world.

¹³If you will only heed his every commandment that I am commanding you today – loving the LORD your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul – ¹⁴then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather your grain, your wine, and your oil; ¹⁵and he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you will eat your fill. ¹⁶Take care, or you will be seduced into turning away, serving other gods and worshiping them, ¹⁷for then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain and the land will yield no fruit; then you will perish quickly off the good land that the LORD is giving you.

(Deuteronomy 11:13–17)

The blessings and curses listed in the above and other covenantal passages should not be interpreted simply as God's reward or punishment for Israel's fidelity to the covenant. Rather, the evidence suggests that the blessings and curses reflect the structure of creation. According to the covenant theology, God established in the creation an act-consequence construct so that there is a built-in and inherent connection between an action and its consequence. One scholar has even labeled this act-consequence construct a cosmogony: "The act/consequence cosmogony envisions such pervasive order in the closed circuit of creation that whatever humans do, whether for good or for ill, will necessarily have repercussions in nature as easily as among people" (Knight: 150). Consequently, when the people of Israel rebel against God's covenant, they are corrupting the order of creation. Through transgression they do objective damage to the creation which responds accordingly. Similarly, when the people follow the covenant, they live in accord with the creation which flourishes as God intended. Yahweh's role as creator, then, consists in setting in motion and bringing to completion those effects which he established in the created order (Koch, 1983).

The covenant relationship between God and Israel provides a framework for understanding the Israelites' relationship to their natural environment. By employing the value orientation preference model, we can discern ancient Israel's preference for the harmony-with-nature solution to the human-relationship-to-nature problem. In other words, the Israelites perceived the condition of the natural world to be linked to their status as a covenant people. If the Israelites were faithful to God, then the land would be fruitful and the people would prosper. Drought, plague, pestilence, infertility, and the resultant poverty

and death, on the other hand, would be the inevitable results of the people's transgressions against God and the created order. The natural world would serve as a witness to Israel's faithfulness to God. This reciprocal relationship between Israel and the natural world is represented in the model of the basic Israelite worldview (figure 8) by the bi-directional horizontal arrow. The Israelites' actions cause ramifications in the natural world, according to their faithfulness to the covenant, which will affect them in turn – causing them to prosper or suffer, to live or to die.

Job and the Breakdown of the Israelite Worldview

The book of Job challenges the Relationship assumptions of the basic Israelite worldview, namely, that the condition of the natural or material world is an indication of the people's fidelity to God. For Job the harmony-with-nature solution to the human-relationship-to-nature problem is inadequate to explain his miserable plight. Job suffered the loss of his family, his possessions, and his health, yet Job claims that he is innocent of any transgressions against God. His friends repeatedly try to explain his suffering in terms of the covenant theology, but Job successfully refutes their explanations at every turn. Job's unhappy experience of the world cannot be resolved in terms of lack of faithfulness to God. Thus Job makes two charges against God: First, God has failed to rule the creation properly so that the righteous are blessed and the wicked are cursed; and second, in the case of Job's own suffering "God is guilty of criminal negligence" (Crenshaw: 71). Job demands a hearing before God in order to force God to justify his actions, and thereby remove the implied guilt that has been placed on Job.

When God finally confronts Job, however, it is Job and not God who must account for his actions. In two speeches God assails both Job's understanding of creation and his ability to create:

⁴Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me if you have understanding.
⁵Who determined its measurements – surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
⁶On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
⁷when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

(Job 38:4–7)

¹Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook,
or press down its tongue with a cord?
²Can you put a rope in its nose,
or pierce its jaw with a hook?
³Will it make many supplications to you?
Will it speak soft words to you?
⁴Will it make a covenant with you
to be taken as your servant forever?

(Job 41:1–4)

In accusing God of failing to act as the creator, Job uttered ignorant words against God. Job has no understanding of creation: How can he assert that God has failed to maintain the created order? Job has no ability or power to participate in God's creative activity: How can he accuse God of criminal negligence? No explanation for Job's suffering, however, is forthcoming.

The implications of the book of Job for the Israelite worldview are twofold. First, the character of Job gives preference on the subjugation-to-nature solution of the human-relationship-to-nature problem. The created order is an uncontrollable, unpredictable mystery. There is no necessary correlation between human fidelity and the condition of creation. The righteous do experience a creation that appears to be out of order. Yet humans have no choice but to accept the creation that God provides for them. The character of Job reflects a worldview that has been challenged by the external inconsistencies of the world. Job's suffering was at odds with the basic assumption that human actions have a reciprocal effect on the natural world. Therefore, the character of Job falls back on his second order value orientation preference, subjugation-to-nature, in order to make sense of his experience of the world.

Second, the book of Job serves as a critique of some implications of the Israelite worldview. The Israelite worldview assumes a reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world. The book of Job does not deny that human sin, for example, results in the corruption of the natural world, that nature is affected by human actions. It does deny, however, that nature is an unambiguous *witness* to the character of human actions. As reflected in the speeches of Job's friends, some formulations of the covenant theology placed humans at the center of creation, and fidelity to God as the exclusive factor in determining the order of creation. The condition of creation was thought to be dependent upon human actions. The speeches of Yahweh, however, emphasize the cosmic insignificance of humankind and human actions (Crenshaw: 80–84). They neither understand the workings of the creation, nor are they able to replicate God's creation. The speeches themselves consist primarily of meteorological (snow, hail, wind, rain, lightning, dew, frost, clouds, constellations) and zoological (lion, mountain goat, wild ass, wild ox, ostrich, horse, hawk, Behemoth, Leviathan) surveys. Humans have no role in the creation of these animals and natural phenomena. Moreover, the wild animals were not created for any human benefit but for God's own delight. The world was not created with humans at the center. Therefore, the creation and its creator cannot be judged from the human perspective (Gordis).

God's Covenant with the King

According to the biblical tradition, two individuals found favor with God so that God made a covenant with them: Abraham and David. These two covenants are not unrelated. Especially in the J source, God's covenant with Abraham foreshadows God's covenant with David. The Abrahamic covenant, for example, is stated in terms of promises to be fulfilled in the future: God will make Abraham into a great nation, and he will be a source of blessing for all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1–3). It is not Abraham but his descendants who will

experience the blessings of God's covenant. After Abraham left his homeland and entered the land of Palestine, God formalized his covenant with Abraham. God promised him countless descendants (Gen 15:5–6) and land:

¹⁸On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I will give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates, ¹⁹the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites."

(Genesis 15:18–21)

The land that God promised Abraham in fact corresponds to the borders of David's kingdom. Scholars have reasonably concluded, therefore, that the Yahwist modeled the Abrahamic covenant on the Davidic covenant so that David's kingdom would become the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham.

The hallmark of the Davidic covenant is the unique paternal relationship that God establishes with David and his heirs. God will be a father to David and his heirs, who in turn will be sons to God. The formulation of this covenant is placed in the context of David's desire to build a temple for God. Using a play on the word "house," the Deuteronomistic Historian shaped originally unrelated traditional material (Cross, 1973: 241–62) in order to emphasize that although God would not allow David to build a house (i.e., temple), a task that was expected of kings (Kapelrud, 1963), God will establish for David a house (i.e., dynasty):

¹⁴Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. ¹²When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. ¹⁵But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. ¹⁶Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

(2 Samuel 7:11b–16)

This paternal relationship between God and the king was not unique to Israel but rather was characteristic of the common royal ideology of the ancient Near East (Frankfort). The king was considered to be the earthly representative (i.e., son) of God, and the deeds of the king were symbolic of the deeds of God. This correlation between king and God is attested in numerous psalms, but nowhere more clearly than in Psalm 2:

⁷I will tell of the decree of the LORD:
He said to me, "You are my son;
today I have begotten you.

⁸Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.”

(Psalm 2:7–8)

This psalm begins by describing how the nations gather together in an assault against God’s anointed king on Zion. But their attack will not be successful because God and the king are like one. Because the king is God’s representative, an assault against the king is an attack against God. Therefore, just as God is victorious over all his enemies, so also will the king be victorious. Just as God rules over all creation, so also will the king rule over all the earth from Zion.

Human kingship is modeled on divine kingship. But what is the basis of kingship itself? According to the biblical tradition and the ancient Near Eastern royal ideology, kingship was earned through military victory (Halpern: 51–109). In heaven, kingship was acquired by the Divine Warrior who defeats chaos and subsequently creates the world. The biblical enthronement psalms (Pss 47, 93, 95, 96, 97, 98, and 99) celebrate Yahweh’s kingship because he has secured the world from the threat of the unruly waters:

¹The LORD is king, he is robed in majesty;
the LORD is robed, he is girded with strength.
He has established the world; it shall never be moved;
²your throne is established from of old;
you are from everlasting.
³The floods have lifted up, O LORD,
the floods have lifted up their voice;
the floods lift up their roaring.
⁴More majestic than the thunders of the mighty waters,
more majestic than the waves of the sea,
majestic on high is the LORD!

(Psalm 93:1–4)

On earth, kingship was established and maintained through military victory over human armies. But because of the correlation between king and God, these armies were identified as the agents of chaos. In Psalm 89, a composite psalm reflecting numerous aspects of Israel’s royal ideology, God’s covenant with David is explicitly connected to God’s defeat of chaos and his creation of the world:

³You said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to my servant David:
⁴I will establish your descendants forever,
and build your throne for all generations.”
⁹You rule the raging of the sea;
when its waves rise, you still them.
¹⁰You crushed Rahab like a carcass;
you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.
¹¹The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours;

the world and all that is in it – you have founded them.

(Psalm 89:3–4, 9–11)

Because God is king in heaven, he can guarantee David's kingship on earth (Levenson, 1985: 102–11). God will secure David's kingship by defeating all his enemies:

- ²²The enemy will not outwit him,
the wicked shall not humble him.
²³I will crush his foes before him
and strike down those who hate him.
²⁴My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him;
and in my name his horn shall be exalted.
²⁵I will set his hand on the sea
and his right hand on the rivers.

(Psalm 89:22–25)

Just as God is victorious in heaven, so will David be victorious on earth. The last verse of this passage is especially significant: David is given control over the aquatic symbols of chaos. This text could simply mean that David's enemies are equated with chaos, but the verse itself focuses on David's role rather than that of his enemies. As the representative of God, David has been placed in the position of the creator in relation to the earth. David himself, enabled by God's covenant with him, secures the created order by defeating his enemies.

A different, yet complementary, argument for the integral link between the actions of the king and the order of creation has been given by Hans H. Schmid. He has argued convincingly that legal order in the ancient Near East, including covenant in the Bible, belongs to the order of creation (1968; 1984; compare Scullion, 1971). Cosmic order is characterized by righteousness, and, according to the ancient Near Eastern royal ideology, the king, whether he be the divine king or the earthly representative of the deity, was the guarantor of the created order. "Upon him and his acts depend the fertility of the land as well as the just social and political order of the state" (Schmid, 1984: 105). Through the promulgation of laws and his accompanying execution of justice, the king demonstrates righteousness which was not simply an attribute of moral character but the action of world-ordering. For this reason, the promulgation of law is connected to the time of creation. In the prologue to his famous law code, for example, Hammurabi claims that he was appointed by the gods at the creation of the world to bring justice to the people (Pritchard: 164). His law is thereby equated with the order of creation.

In the biblical tradition it is foremost Yahweh who is righteous, and he demonstrates his righteousness as the ruler over creation by maintaining the covenant which ensures that the heavens will provide the needed rain for the land, that the land will be fertile and produce an abundance of crops, and that the people will know peace. But the Davidic king is Yahweh's earthly representative. His task is to demonstrate God's righteousness, and thereby secure the order of creation (cf. Ps 72).

In contrast to the covenant theology and the book of Job, the biblical texts that stem from the royal ideology reflect the mastery-over-nature solution to the human-relationship-to-nature problem. Because of the correlation between king and God, the king stands in the same relationship to the creation as does God the creator. Just as God defeated the agents of chaos, the king secures the order of creation by defeating all his enemies. The king's deeds are world-ordering. The king's mastery over nature, however, is only by virtue of God's covenant which is bestowed upon him as a gift. Many scholars have emphasized the unconditional character of the Davidic covenant, but this can be misleading. The king is not given absolute power over the creation, nor is the king's rule without qualification. Rather, the king's rule is dependent upon God and should be characterized by God's righteousness. The king is merely the representative of God. To assume otherwise is hubris. The king should act as God's agent of righteousness on the earth. Through righteousness he should dispense justice on the people and secure the fertility of the earth. Therefore, the king's deeds should also conform to the order of creation. The royal ideology also reflects the harmony-with-nature solution which is characteristic of the basic Israelite worldview.

Covenant and the Israelite Worldview

Through our investigation of the covenant, we have detected all three solutions to the human-relationship-to-nature problem. God's covenant with creation and with Israel at Sinai reflect the harmony-with-nature solution. The book of Job presents Job's preference for the subjugation-to-nature solution as a critique of the covenant theology. The royal ideology gives preference to the mastery-over-nature solution, but the harmony-over-nature solution is also reflected. The reflection of these diverse solutions in the biblical texts is to be expected, for the value orientation preference model presupposes that all alternative solutions are present in every society. These solutions might simply reflect the preferences of different subgroups within the Israelite society (the royal establishment, wisdom circles, the masses). Or the different solutions might reflect different circumstances, and thus second or third order preferences of the same basic value orientation (this interpretation was suggested for the character of Job). In any case, these alternative value orientations pose a problem for understanding the ancient Israelite worldview. As discussed in Chapter One, there is a direct correlation between the solutions to the human-relationship-to-nature problem and the assumptions of the Relationship universal. Do the diverse value orientations indicate diverse worldviews, or can these value orientations be integrated into a single worldview?

Because the assumptions of the Relationship universal are contingent upon the Classification universal, the latter might serve as a key to understanding the relationship of these value orientations. A primary Classification assumption of the ancient Israelites, as a collectivist society, was the distinction between ingroup and outgroup. This assumption takes precedence even over the three-fold division between God, humans, and nature, but it is subordinate to the fundamental distinction between the creator and the creation.⁷ The

⁷ The classification of god along ingroup/outgroup lines is problematic. The biblical texts clearly differentiate between Yahweh, the God of Israel, and the gods of the nations. Yet the Israelites are repeatedly condemned by the prophets for worshipping "foreign" or "Canaanite" gods. Many of the Israelites simply did not recognize the ingroup/outgroup boundaries in relation to the gods. The boundaries between creator and creation served to demarcate a more fundamental distinction. Those gods which the Israelites associated with

Israelites' classification domains can be diagrammed as in figure 13. A distinction thus needs to be made between a person's value orientation toward ingroup nature and outgroup nature (which will tend to replicate a person's attitude toward other ingroup members in contrast to outgroup members).

The distinction between ingroup and outgroup explains why two different value orientations are detected in the royal ideology. The texts which reflect the mastery-over-nature orientation also emphasize the king's ability to defeat all his enemies, whereas the texts which imply a harmony-with-nature orientation emphasize the king's role in maintaining the created order by dispensing justice on the people. These texts reflect the king's orientation toward outgroup and ingroup members respectively. He will demonstrate his mastery over all those outside of his group (Israel), just as God displayed mastery over the agents of chaos in the battle of creation. By defeating his enemies, the king secures the order of creation. In relation to Israel, however, the king will act according to righteousness, that is, the order of creation, and thereby guarantee the blessings of creation.

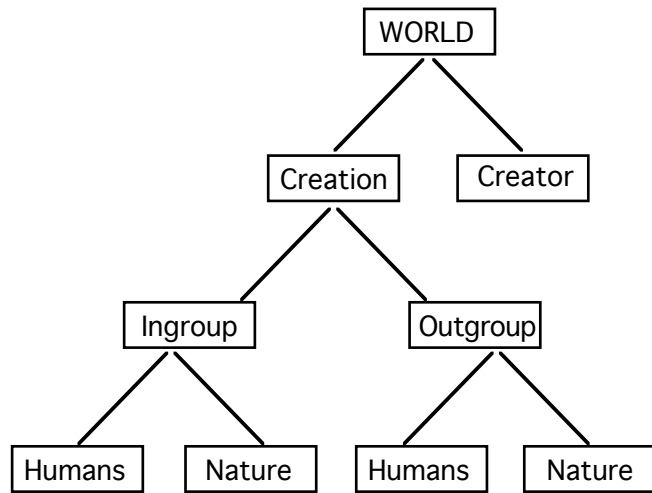


Figure 13. Ingroup/Outgroup Domains

The Sinai covenant reflects only ingroup relations. The faithfulness of the Israelites to the covenant affects their own experiences of the natural world. Their land will be either fertile or sterile; their land will experience either plenty of rain or drought; their animals will either give birth to offspring or miscarry; they will either live or die. The harmony-with-nature orientation is characteristic of the relationship among ingroup members – the relationship between the Israelites and their land.

People do not always experience nature as belonging to their ingroup. Like an invincible foreign army which wantonly invades and devastates a society, nature can be experienced as an overpowering enemy from which there is no retreat. The natural world can be viewed as an outgroup to which one is subjugated. This was the experience of Job. This was also the experience of the peasants, the populace of ancient Israel. With no land, they were subject to the control of the land owners (outgroup). They were similarly powerless before nature, unable to effect any real change in the natural world. Subjugation-to-nature, like mastery-over-nature, is an orientation toward the natural world of the outgroup, but unlike the

the powers of creation--Yahweh, Baal, and Asherah were the more popular gods--were worshipped by the people. Monolatry (worship of one god) among the Israelites can be tied to their recognition of Yahweh as the sole creator.

mastery-over-nature orientation, this orientation experiences the natural world as dominant and overwhelming.

Each solution to the human-relationship-to-nature problem replicates different societal relations according to ingroup/outgroup boundaries. The harmony-with-nature solution replicates internal ingroup relations. The mastery-over-nature solution replicates ingroup-outgroup relations from the perspective of a dominant ingroup. The subjugation-to-nature solution replicates ingroup-outgroup relations from the perspective of a dominant outgroup. These alternative value orientations are thus complementary and can be integrated into a single model of the Israelite worldview, illustrated in figure 14.

This model of the Israelite worldview is essentially an expansion of our basic Israelite worldview model. The mastery-over-nature and the subjugation-to-nature orientations replicate the (positive-negative) relationship between God the creator and the creation, where the ingroup replicates the role of the creator or the creation respectively. The

harmony-with-nature orientation simply defines the relationship between humans and nature to be between members of the same ingroup. This worldview was shared by all ancient Israelites, but they differed according to their value orientation preferences. They would have preferred one solution to the human-relationship-to-nature problem over another, depending on external circumstances and group relations.

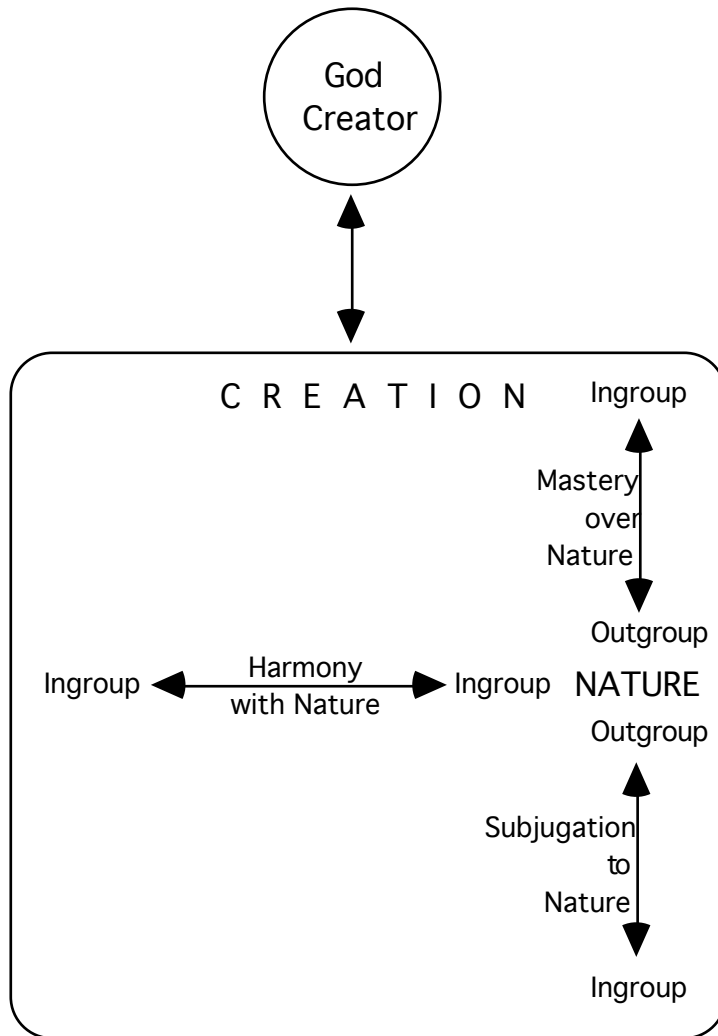


Figure 14. Israel's Worldview and Values Toward Nature