

CREATOR & CREATION



Conclusion

In contrast to the majority of previous studies of the Bible, this book has focused on the role of the natural world in the religion and culture of ancient Israel. Specifically, I have sought to identify the ancient Israelites' worldview and values toward nature, and thereby contribute to the ecology of ancient Israel. To accomplish this task, I have employed a variety of new models to the biblical data, and have focused especially on the Bible's creation myths and metaphors. New models were essential to this investigation because the previous models of biblical interpretation did not give attention to the role of nature in the biblical texts. The creation myths and metaphors provided the key to ascertaining the Israelites' worldview and values by making explicit the Israelites' assumptions concerning the triangular relationship between God, humans, and the natural world.

In the preceding chapters I developed and illustrated a model of the Israelites' worldview and values toward nature. This model diagrams the basic assumptions of the Classification, Relationship, and Causality universals (the assumptions of the Time and Space universals were discussed in Chapters Four and Five). The Israelite worldview, illustrated in figure 14, posits two fundamental relations: An unalterable distinction between God the creator and the creation; and the correlation of humans and the rest of the natural world as two distinct yet integrally related parts of creation. Within this worldview, three value orientations toward nature are possible: mastery-over-nature, harmony-with-nature, and subjugation-to-nature (figure 5). Each of these value orientations was preferred by the Israelites under different circumstances and in accordance with the ingroup/outgroup classification. In relation to their own land and the land of members of their ingroup, the Israelites preferred primarily the harmony-with-nature orientation. In relation to the natural world of the outgroup, the Israelites preferred either the mastery-over-nature or the subjugation-to-nature orientation. The former was preferred under circumstances in which the Israelites were able to dominate the outgroup, the latter when the Israelites were dominated by the outgroup.

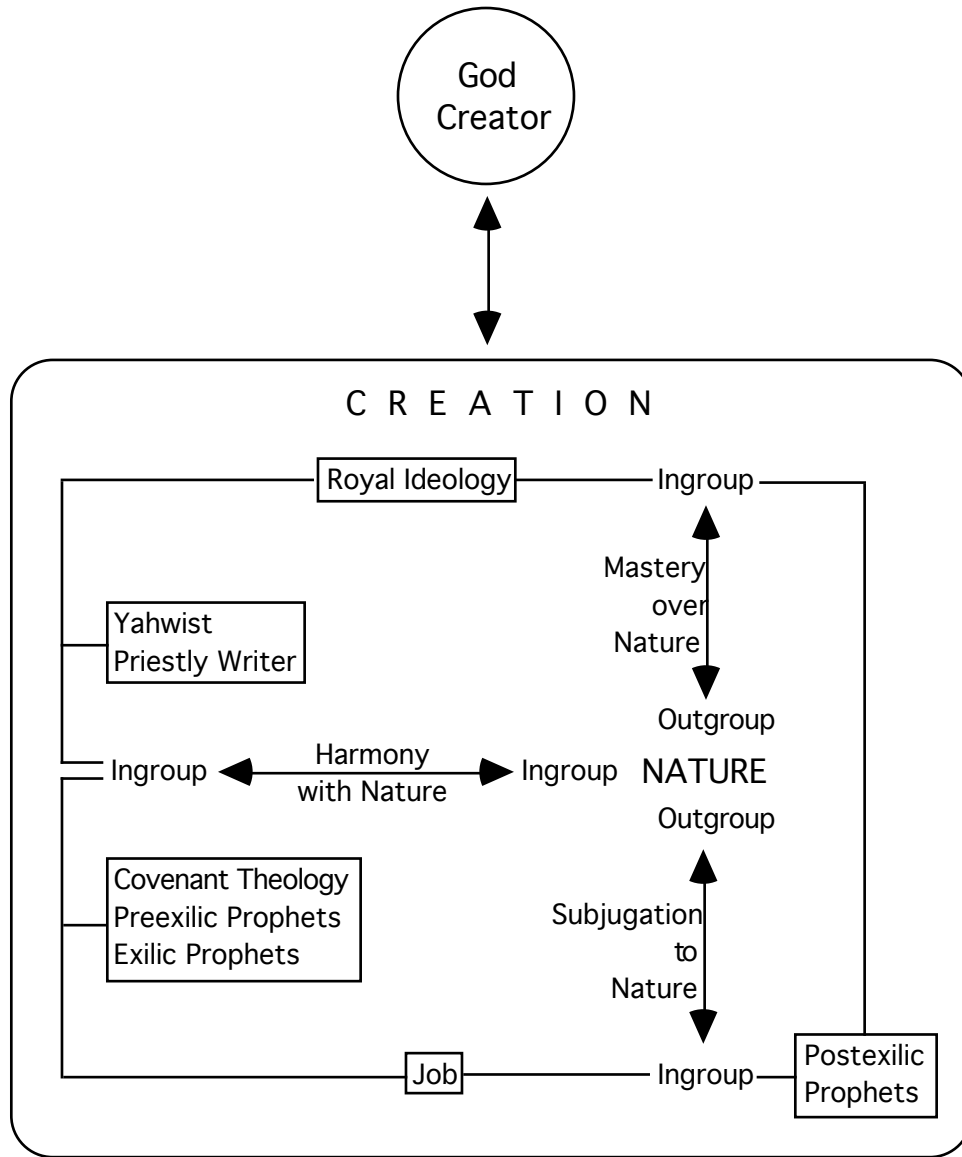


Figure 17. The Biblical Writers' Worldview and Values Toward Nature

In figure 17 I have illustrated how each of the biblical texts treated in this book fit in relation to this model of the Israelite worldview. The texts that present Jerusalem's royal ideology or theology reflect both the mastery-over-nature and the harmony-with-nature orientation. According to this ideology, the king stands in relation to the earth as God is related to the whole creation. As God's earthly regent – the king never is able to escape his creaturely status – the king's mastery over the earth is a manifestation of God's own righteousness and justice. By defeating all his enemies (the outgroup), the king secures the order of creation. But the king's deeds must also correspond to the order of creation. By

administering justice and righteousness, the king secures the blessing of creation for his people (ingroup).

Both the Yahwist and the Priestly writer give preference to the harmony-with-nature solution to the human-relationship-to-nature problem. Humans are creatures, made of the same substance as the rest of creation. The Yahwist and the Priestly writer also emphasize that humans are exceptional in the creation. Humans have cultural knowledge, or humans are made in the image of God, and thus are distinct from all other creatures. Nevertheless, humans cannot escape their creaturely status. Humans must live according to the order of creation, and their fate is bound to the fate of creation.

The prophets and the biblical texts presenting the covenant theology also reflect the harmony-with-nature orientation. Humans are linked to the natural world with the result that human actions have ramifications in nature. Human actions that are in accord with the order of creation, that follow the stipulations of the covenant, result in the flourishing of creation. But actions that violate the order of creation and transgress God's covenant bring disorder to the creation. They ritually pollute the land and cause the creation to collapse. As a result, God's redemption of humans entails a new creation.

The book of Job presents a situation in which the covenant theology's preference for the harmony-with-nature orientation does not correspond to the particular circumstances of Job. The character of Job suffers innocently; his suffering cannot be attributed to transgressions as the covenant theology implies. Job experiences the creation as hostile and overwhelming (outgroup). Therefore, he falls back on his second-order preference, the subjugation-to-nature orientation. Some of the prophets similarly reflect this orientation. The people of Judah had suffered the oppression of the nations (outgroup), which was resulting in the collapse of the creation. But unlike Job, these prophets also envisioned God's new creation when their land will be restored as a new Eden and the land of the nations will be devastated.

As models for biblical interpretation, the ecologically-oriented models introduced in this book, including the model of the Israelites' worldview and values toward nature, provide a viable alternative to the history-versus-nature model which has been dominant in biblical scholarship this century. These models take seriously the Bible's numerous references to the natural world, and enable the interpreter to place these references within a meaningful framework. Moreover, these models facilitate a culturally empathic rather than an ethnocentric reading of the Bible. Biblical references to the natural world, for instance, can be interpreted in light of ancient Israel's own worldview and values rather than from the perspective of our own worldview and concerns. These models, therefore, will enable the Bible to be read on its own terms, and to be employed authentically in discussions of contemporary issues such as the current environmental crisis.