

‘THE EARTH IS FULL OF YOUR CREATURES’

By ANN JEFFERS

THE GENESIS OF THIS ARTICLE is associated with the Anglican community of St Clare in Oxfordshire where I was recently staying. The general atmosphere of the Franciscan rule with its emphasis on care for creation and the daily readings of the psalms during the offices made the community an ideal starting-point for thinking about the place of human beings in the world and our relationship with its living parts.

Until quite recently it was an accepted fact in theology that creation in the Old Testament was only a sub-theme of salvation and redemption, appearing much later and of secondary significance. This way of thinking has at last been challenged by modern scholarship and the current debate in Old Testament studies radically challenges the literary premises on which such a view depended.¹ Here, leaving the intricacies of the wider debate aside, I will try to show how this renewed understanding of creation in the Old Testament is reflected in the Book of Psalms. I shall not attempt to retrieve hypothetical parts of the psalms or attempt to reconstitute or indeed date them; rather I shall make a sustained effort to read the Psalms as a whole continuous book and pay particular attention to creation themes and images.

Creation psalms do not form a neat category as such, as do, for instance, psalms of thanksgiving, praise, lament or enthronement. Images of creation straddle all these categories; they abound,² starting significantly with Psalm 1, the acknowledged introduction to the Psalter, where the righteous:

... are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

(Ps 1:3)

– and ending significantly with the call for ‘everything that breathes’ (Ps 150:6) to praise the Lord.³

Set in between the blessing of Psalm 1 and the praise of Psalm 150, creation images and themes form the backbone of the book of Psalms.

The created world and the living things the psalms describe have a major role to play. The Psalter is also concerned with blessing: how are we to live that blessing?

Any study of creation must begin with the cosmology it presupposes. What is the Psalmist's world-view? How does he or she perceive the world? How does he or she relate to the other living creatures, to the natural world? Cosmology provides a framework which shapes our perception of ourselves and our relationships, both with other living creatures and, of course, with nature. Once spelled out, the Psalmist's world-view will highlight a number of implications and duties.

A living universe

If cosmology is understood as a 'blueprint or map, in the widest sense, of the universe as a comprehensible and meaningful place',⁴ and if one is not to be put off by the irony of using a Greek word to explain a Hebrew concept, then there are at least two models in the psalms. It is perhaps in this very discrepancy between the Greek world, which has a word *cosmos*, describing a universe rationally understood, and the Hebrew world, which does not have any one word or concept,⁵ that we can best find a way to understand the Hebrew world-view.

Let us start with the few facts we have: the Hebrew universe can be four-storeyed (heaven, earth, sea and Sheol: Ps 139:8-9), three-storeyed (heaven, earth and water: Ps 115:15-17; 33:6-8), or two-storeyed (heaven and earth: Ps 50:4). It is important to note here that far from being static and object-like, rather like an empty house waiting for people to move in, furniture and all, the Hebrew universe encompasses all existing reality, everything that fills the heavens, the earth and the seas. As Keel suggests, it is the powers, rather than the objective structure of the cosmic system, which determine the world.⁶ Creation is alive, it is dynamic, it is not, ever, 'just matter', to be discarded, abused or mindlessly destroyed. A sign of this is that, in the psalms, all creation has the ability to praise God. The whole of creation witnesses the goodness and power of its creator:

Praise him, sun and moon;
 praise him, all you shining stars!
 Praise him, you highest heavens,
 and you waters above the heavens!
 . . . you sea monsters and all deeps,
 fire and hail, snow and frost,
 stormy wind fulfilling his command!
 Mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars!
 Wild animals and all cattle,
 creeping things and flying birds!
 Kings of the earth and all peoples,
 princes and all rulers of the earth!
 Young men and women alike,
 old and young together!

(Ps 148:3-4, 7-12)⁷

This hymn extends the congregation's praise to the whole of creation, the benevolent and the less benevolent. The most notable fact about this psalm is that the western distinctions between inanimate and animate, non-humans and humans are blurred: 'all that exists is one in creatureliness', as Westermann puts it.⁸ This is a radical, not to say a subversive statement: it challenges our self-centred view of the world. This is not our world but God's, and we share it with all that inhabit it, shape it and are part of it. The statement also challenges the human desire to control nature, other human beings and animals. Humankind is one link in the living chain, one part of the whole, and by no means the most important part.

A God-centred universe

The belief in a God who is the sole creator of the universe is expressed over and over again (Ps 8:3; 24:1-2; 89; 96; 104; 147):

You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
 you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,
 you make the clouds your chariot,
 you ride on the wings of the wind,
 you make the winds your messengers,
 fire and flame your ministers.
 You set the earth on its foundations,
 so that it shall never be shaken.

(Ps 104:2-5).

How did God create the world? There are in the psalms echoes of a primordial cosmic battle between the creator God and the forces of chaos.⁹ Some psalms allude to the *Chaoskampf* motif as in Psalm 29:10; some others are more explicit in their recounting of the creation drama:

You divided the sea by your might;
 you broke the heads of the dragons in the water.

You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
 you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.
 (Ps 74:13–14; cf 89:10–14)

The function of such a cosmic battle pattern is to show that the world's foundations have been secured once and for all (Pss 78:69; 104:5) and therefore to extol God's strength and mighty power over his universe. However this is not an event that is confined to the past, but is an ongoing process that calls for God's 'mighty arm' (Ps 89:13).

The picture evoked is that of a theocentric and dynamic universe, as already mentioned above, which incidentally reflects the inner tension of the psalms, mirroring as they do the polar experiences of human life: joy and sorrow, praise and lament.¹⁰

The continuing care of God for God's creation is beautifully expressed in Psalm 104, which declares the greatness and wisdom and glory of God in a cared for and ecologically sound universe, where every species has its place. There is a profound sense of the connectedness of all things, of the inclusiveness and equality of which all created things partake.¹¹ All created things and beings have a place in the world, according to their own habitat.

By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;
 they sing among the branches.
 From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
 the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.
 You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
 and plants for people to use,
 to bring forth food from the earth,
 and wine to gladden the human heart,
 oil to make the face shine,
 and bread to strengthen the human heart.
 The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly,
 the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
 In them the birds build their nests;
 the stork has its home in the fir trees.
 The high mountains are for the wild goats;
 the rocks are a refuge for the coney.

(Ps 104:12–18)

Another expression of God's continuing care – apart from providing a space for each, a perfect ecological order – is the expression of God as the regular supplier of food: Pss 104:15–16; 136:25; 145:15–16.¹²

The eyes of all look to you,
 and you give them their food in due season.
 You open your hand,
 satisfying the desire of every living thing.

Everything points to the continuing creative activity, not only in keeping the world stable but also in providing for all. It is important to point out again that God's love and compassion, far from being exclusively the share of human beings, is dispensed to all.

Creation and covenant: how is God's blessing to be lived?

Psalms concerned with creation not only highlight the origin of the world in God, but also and inevitably, the *creatio continuata*. They express trust in the Creator's saving purpose: God who creates, controls and sustains can also save creation from the chaotic forces of history (Ps 95:1-5; 96). Hence God involves himself throughout the history of his people. Psalm 24:1 illustrates that:

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,
 the world, and those who live in it;
 for he has founded it on the seas,
 and established it on the rivers.
 Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
 And who shall stand in his holy place?
 Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
 who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
 and do not swear deceitfully.
 They will receive blessing from the Lord,
 and vindication from the God of their salvation.
 Such is the company of those who seek him,
 who seek the face of the God of Jacob. *Selah*
 Lift up your heads, O gates!
 and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
 that the King of glory may come in.
 Who is the King of glory?
 The Lord, strong and mighty,
 the Lord, mighty in battle.

This powerful psalm links the kingship of God, who has created and ordered the world, with history: it demonstrates the power of God who once established the foundations of the world and now keeps the enemies of Israel subdued. Order in creation and peace in history are aspects of the same reality. This is rooted in the kingship of YHWH,

itself linked with the Davidic dynasty: the stability of the cosmos is the basis of the security of Zion (Ps 78: 69–71).¹³ A covenant with David is made (Pss 60; 72; 85; 89:3–4; 93) based on God's oath. The idea of a created cosmos, sustained by God yet under constant threat, implies a covenant. The role of human beings, as partners in the covenant, is to participate in that creative sustenance of the world by maintaining justice. This is expressed in a number of psalms, of which Psalm 72:1–4, 16 is a prime example:

Give the king your justice, O God,
 and your righteousness to a king's son.
 May he judge your people with righteousness,
 and your poor with justice.
 May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
 and the hills, in righteousness.
 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
 give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.
 May there be abundance of grain in the land;
 may it wave on the tops of the mountains;
 may its fruit be like Lebanon;
 and may people blossom in the cities
 like the grass of the field.

This psalm¹⁴ illustrates the relationship between God, king, the people and the rest of creation. God's justice is to be exercised by the king for the benefit of both the people and the land. Fruitfulness is dependent on the righteous government exercised by the king, acting as the representative of God on earth. Heaven and earth meet. It is also important to note here the theme of social justice as interconnected with proper service to God and the fertility of the land. God is a God of life, at all levels of creation: 'establishing justice is a life-giving activity'. Peace and well-being (*shalom*) is paralleled with justice (*sedaqah*),¹⁵ all dimensions of life from the political to the spiritual are entwined.

This truly communal dimension, which relates not to 'dominion' but to concern for all, is evoked by the general world-view of the psalms as well as by the study of various themes associated with creation. There are deep implications for us today, moreover, touching simultaneously on the political, economic and spiritual spheres:

The very word creation implies that there is no owner of the planet, with all that live on it, except the living God. To claim the patent of a life form is a direct and total denial of God as a creator, sustainer, breath of life and immanent spirit in the within of all beings.¹⁶

This view is also expressed by ecofeminism: it can never be repeated enough that such a model is an inclusive one: women, children, animals, forests, oceans, the air we breathe, along with men, have rights. But this needs qualifying: they have rights within the limits of their interdependence.¹⁷

Respect for the fruitfulness of the earth is not just a theological concept dreamed up by naïve psalmists, but is common sense: it is that which ensures our livelihood, that on which our survival depends – not the survival of the one species, but of all the species together. But if this is the case, if the Psalmist has such a holistic view of the world, why must we be given 'dominion' over the natural world, and especially over the animals? This is something of great importance to me as one appalled by the outrage caused to the animal community.

The place of human beings in the world: Psalm 8

Psalms, like everything else biblical, should not be read in isolation: their world-view must be taken into account.

Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

(Ps 8:5–8, cf Ps 115:16)

Anyone concerned with ecological issues must grapple with this text. A brief analysis will show that it does not contradict what has been said above.

First of all, it is important to note the theocentricity of that psalm. YHWH is praised from the beginning to the end. The tone is that of wonder and awe and gratitude of Israel before God. Psalm 8 starts with the contemplation of heavens and leads to an almost despairing sense of humanity's insignificance, even nothingness, compared with the vastness of the cosmos. But despite this, God confers dignity on humankind, giving them 'dominion'. Three remarks are necessary here.

First, the vocabulary used ('little less than gods', 'glory and honour', 'you have put all things under their feet') is associated with Psalms of Enthronement of YHWH. All point to the influence of royal ideology – God places humankind as viceroy over his creation.¹⁸ This royal

function defines human privileges and responsibility.¹⁹ Privileges, since this royal position is understood as humankind's estate; responsibility, for their role is not static, and 'requires continuous human response and action'.²⁰

Second, this responsibility is reinforced by the immediate context of Psalm 8. Psalm 7, a prayer of a person falsely accused, and Psalm 9 both extol the righteousness of God. This sense of divine righteousness, justice and compassion significantly qualifies what Psalm 8 says about human dominion over animals.

Third, the broader context: many other psalms, for instance Psalm 36:6, make it clear that both humans and animals are subject to God's protection and concern for their fate (Pss 33:13–15; 104); God provides for the animals (Pss 84:3; 104:10–14; 145:14–15; 147:9).

Psalm 8 sings the gratitude of the psalmist; it is a hymnic meditation on the theme of God's generosity to humankind. This act is rooted in the glory of his creator role, as he now confers stewardship on humankind. That this stewardship excludes abuse, violence and cruelty to the animal is made clear by the vocabulary used and the broader context. Care, awe and a strong feeling of interconnectedness are the qualities inferred from the text for successful stewards.

Conclusion

Creation forms the backbone of the Book of Psalms: this was my initial contention. I hope I have shown that the holistic model provided by the psalms is a permanently valuable one in that it tries to come to terms with life and death – the up-side as well as the down-side – and it tries to make sense of evil, of chaos, of exploitation, of paradoxes. There is no clear pattern in life and this model suggests an explanation: in our interconnectedness we all share in our creatureliness. Creation is an attempt to make sense of the world and to provide a charter for our creatureliness.

Psalms are not just an exercise in piety. To read them in the light of creation is to rediscover its subversive power. Each time we praise God we are urged to reconsider what it means to create and recreate the world. We who hear the psalms must call for a change from the static vision of the world which we have inherited from the Enlightenment. The change is from a view that regards the world as unfeeling matter to be abused as we like for humankind's predatory needs, to a view of the world as a living organism where everything and everyone has its place.

There is great poignancy in reading Psalm 148, with its choir of nature, animals and human beings, and Psalm 104:26, with its mention

of the Leviathan dancing in the waves, in an age where so much animal life has been senselessly slaughtered, where so many species have disappeared for ever, where the world forests are depleted and our atmosphere perhaps irreversibly polluted. By destroying so much life we have set off a chain reaction over which we have no control. God only knows what the effect can be when any one creature fails to render praise to God in creation. This is no naïve picture of the universe, but an attempt to make sense of the world and to provide a charter for our creatureliness.

The Psalmist proposes an alternative view of reality: we are all joined together in praise of the Lord, creator of the universe, who was, is and will be controlling and sustaining the universe. This vision is a challenge, for it offers us the chance to reassess our position as one link in the chain of living, to take an active part in the preservation of the ecological balance of the earth as responsible stewards moved by justice for all, taking sides in the constant and sometimes seemingly hopeless struggle against greed and lust for violence and power. Let us join with the cosmic choir: 'Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Alleluia!' (Ps 150:6).

This article is dedicated to Sister Gillian Clare and to Sister Muriel.

NOTES

¹ See the contrasting positions articulated in 1936 by von Rad and in 1973 by Schmid in *Creation in the Old Testament*, edited by Bernhard W. Anderson (London, 1984), pp 53–64, 104–117.

² I started my quest for psalms related to creation with barely four or five psalms. Here is the non-exhaustive list of references which I had compiled by the end of my research for this article: Pss 2; 8; 19; 24; 29; 60; 65; 72; 74:13–17; 75:3–4; 76; 85:11–13; 89; 93; 95:1–7; 96:10–12; 97; 98:7–9; 103:22; 104; 109; 115:16; 119; 128; 145:1–11; 147; 148; 150:6.

³ Claus Westermann, 'La création dans les Psaumes' in *La création dans l'orient ancien*, edited by Louis Derousseaux (Paris, 1987), pp 301–321.

⁴ Oden, 'Cosmogony, cosmology', *The Anchor Bible dictionary* vol 1, p 1162.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 1163, for some of the Hebrew words used.

⁶ O. Keel, *The symbolism of the biblical world: ancient iconography and the Book of Psalms* (London, 1978), chapter one. For a pictorial representation, see p 57.

⁷ Many psalms express that same idea: Pss 96:11–12; 97:6; 103:22; 145:10–11, 21; 150:6 and many others.

⁸ Westermann, *The living psalms* (Edinburgh, 1989), p 259.

⁹ Although *Chaoskampf* does not appear in Genesis 1, it is a theme common to ancient Near Eastern literature. For references see Keel, *op cit.*

¹⁰ This idea is expressed by J. Pedersen, *Israel: its life and culture*, p 470: the Israelite view of the universe is a dramatic conception of 'the fight for life against death'; life must be stronger.

¹¹ Virgil Howard, 'Psalm 104', *Interpretation* 46 (1992), p 179.

¹² See L. G. Regenstein, *Replenish the earth* (London, 1991), pp 33f.

¹³ A connection is drawn between Zion and the creator God: 'A sense of well-being flows from the conviction that the God who tamed the seas to establish the firm foundation of the earth is the same one who dwells in Zion. God's cosmic power has been and can continue to be harnessed on behalf of Israel'. See H. J. Levine, *Sing unto God a new song: a contemporary reading of the Psalms* (Indianapolis and Bloomington, 1995), pp 39.

¹⁴ For a reading of Psalm 72, see R. Murray, *The cosmic covenant* (London, 1992), pp 41–43.

¹⁵ Murray, *op. cit.*, p 42. On the connection between peace and kingship, see also J. Eaton, *The circle of creation: animals in the light of the Bible* (London, 1995), p 143.

¹⁶ This is cited by S. McDonagh, *The greening of the Church* (London, 1990), p 143.

¹⁷ It is refreshing that the contemporary scientific community is joining in thinking of the world as a giant living organism: see J. E. Lovelock, *Gaia: a new look at life on earth* (Oxford, 1987).

¹⁸ This is expressed in Genesis 1:26–28 although with a different vocabulary: *rdh* and *kbs* are used when *msl* is used in Psalm 8.

¹⁹ P. C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, Westminster Bible Commentary 19, p 108.

²⁰ *Ibid.*