

2009

Nature, Natural Phenomena

Hector Avalos

Iowa State University, havalos@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/philrs_pubs

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [History of Religions of Western Origin Commons](#), and the [History of Science, Technology, and Medicine Commons](#)

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/philrs_pubs/11. For information on how to cite this item, please visit <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html>.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy and Religious Studies at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy and Religious Studies Publications by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

Nature, Natural Phenomena

Abstract

Nature refers to the entire realm of entities that human beings experience, and which includes animals, plants, and the greater cosmos. There is no word in the OT that corresponds to our English nature (from Lat. *natura*), which is often used to translate the Gk. word *physis*. The term *physis* does not necessarily mean the opposite of supernatural. Aside from some weak exceptions (Luke 24:39; 1 Cor 15:40-44), any juxtaposition of natural with supernatural is not well maintained in the Bible. *Physis* generally refers to essential or inborn features (a common meaning in Greco-Roman literature) and may be found in some NT texts such as Rom 1 :26; 1 Cor 11: 14; Gal 2: 15; and Jas 3:6.

Disciplines

Biblical Studies | History of Religions of Western Origin | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine

Comments

This is an encyclopedia entry from *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* 4 (2009): 238. Posted with permission.

Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties (1999); Terence L. Donaldson. *Judaism and the Gentiles: Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)* (2007); Robert Goldenberg. *The Nations That Know Thee Not: Ancient Jewish Attitudes Towards Other Religions* (1997); Jonathan M. Hall. *Hellenicity: Between Ethnicity and Culture* (2002); John North. "The Development of Religious Pluralism." *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*. Judith Lieu et al., eds. (1992); Kenton L. Sparks. *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel* (1998).

TERENCE L. DONALDSON

NATURAL HISTORY. See ANIMALS OF THE BIBLE; BIRDS OF THE BIBLE; INSECTS OF THE BIBLE; NATURE, NATURAL PHENOMENA; PLANTS OF THE BIBLE.

NATURE, NATURAL PHENOMENA [φύσις *physis*]. *Nature* refers to the entire realm of entities that human beings experience, and which includes animals, plants, and the greater cosmos. There is no word in the OT that corresponds to our English *nature* (from Lat. *natura*), which is often used to translate the Gk. word *physis*. The term *physis* does not necessarily mean the opposite of supernatural. Aside from some weak exceptions (Luke 24:39; 1 Cor 15:40-44), any juxtaposition of *natural* with *supernatural* is not well maintained in the Bible. *Physis* generally refers to essential or inborn features (a common meaning in Greco-Roman literature) and may be found in some NT texts such as Rom 1:26; 1 Cor 11:14; Gal 2:15; and Jas 3:6.

There is no systematic biblical description of the structure of the cosmos. However, many scholars have reconstructed a triad consisting of Heaven(s), Earth, and Underworld. Genesis 1 assumes a triad of Heaven(s), Earth, and Sea. In addition, the OT often uses "heavens and the earth" to designate the entire cosmos (e.g., Gen 1:1). See COSMOGONY, COSMOLOGY.

The exact shape of the cosmos is unclear. The "circle of the earth" in Isa 40:22 is probably a reference to the circle formed by the horizon rather than a reference to any spherical shape of the earth. Many scholars think that the ancient Hebrews conceived of the cosmos as a flat disk (earth) surrounded by water, and with a metallic dome for a sky (*raqi'a* in Gen 1:7). The sky was supported by pillars (Job 9:6). Cardinal directions were related to the direction from which the sun rose.

Genesis 1 provides the most familiar biblical story of how "nature" emerged (see CREATION). The cosmos began as a chaotic mass of water stirred by a divine wind. God shaped that mass by division and differentiation, and added, through the divine spoken word, many of the entities that populate it. A watery beginning is posited by some Greek cosmologists (Thales, 6th cent. BCE) and by the Babylonian creation epic *Enuma Elish* (early 1st millennium BCE). Fragments of other

creation stories involve battling a sea monster (see Job 26:12-13), something also seen in the *Enuma Elish*.

Genesis 2 depicts God as more of a craftsman, especially in forming Adam from clay, and Eve from Adam's rib. Breathing is recognized as a crucial component of human and animal life (Eccl 3:19). A process of growth and decline of the body within a set lifespan is part of the normal course of nature (compare Ps 90:10). The menstrual cycle and its relation to impregnation is recognized (2 Sam 11:4-5). However, death and other bodily functions could be viewed as conferring impurity (Lev 12, 15).

The etymology of the word *shamayim* (שָׁמַיִם), translated as "heaven(s)" in the OT, has generated much debate, but one postulated meaning is "place of waters." The idea of many heavens is even more developed in deuterocanonical literature and in the NT (compare 2 Cor 12:2). In any case, heaven was thought to be the residence of Yahweh and his entourage (see Gen 11:5; Job 1:6-7). The earthly Temple mirrored important aspects of the cosmos (1 Kgs 8:12-13).

HEAVEN contained the objects we identify as sun, moon, and stars, which were sent into the dome (Gen 1:17). The sun and moon illuminated the earth and marked time, which is a necessary tool of agricultural and ritual cycles. It is uncertain whether the OT recognized planets as a specific category of heavenly objects.

The earth ('erets [אֶרֶץ] or 'adhamah [אֲדָמָה]) is the place where human beings normally lived. The major features of the EARTH included mountains, plains, valleys, rivers, and wilderness (versus settled areas). Mountains were the abodes of the gods, and the meeting place between heaven and earth. The higher mountains, such as the snow-capped Lebanon Mountains, were associated with God's majesty (Ps 29:6). The earth was a source of raw materials used in construction tools, and weapons (e.g., 1 Kgs 6:7).

There was also a subterranean world. Water is stored there (Gen 7:11). Because of the widespread custom of burying the dead, the underworld, especially as designated by the term SHEOL (she'ol [שְׁאוֹל, שְׁאֵל]), also became associated with death (1 Sam 28:13). The underworld was also where rebellious angels could be imprisoned (2 Pet 2:4). See DEAD, ABODE OF THE; UNDERWORLD, DESCENT INTO THE.

The seas were the home of marine creatures, many of which served as food. Sea monsters, such as Leviathan (Job 41:31) and Rahab (Job 26:12; Isa 51:9-10), inhabited the seas. The slaying or domination of the SEA, personified as a monster, has parallels in Babylonian stories of creation such as the *Enuma Elish*. The sea was a means of transportation for human beings (Ps 104:25-26).

Acquiring fresh WATER is a primary challenge in arid lands. Rivers provided water supplies and transportation. Springs, with origins deep in the ground, were often seen as miraculous (see Exod 17:1-7). Some springs became vital to fortified cities, which were vulnerable to sieges, and great effort was spent to build

tunnels for access (e.g., at Megiddo). Otherwise, rain could be stored in cisterns.

Many biblical authors distinguished sharply between human beings and animals. In the story of Nebuchadnezzar's madness, for instance, part of his animalistic behavior included eating directly from the ground and being exposed to the elements (Dan 5:21). For Gen 1, however, humans are like other living things in their being created by God and thus in their relation to him. Vegetation is for both humans and animals (1:30). Animals share with humans the command to reproduce, increase, and fill the seas and the earth (1:22); and animals like humans have "life" (nefesh נֶפֶשׁ). The additional vocation given humanity, "to subdue" and "to have dominion" over the earth (Gen 1:26, 28), calls for human care and cultivation of nature. Ecclesiastes (3:19-21) suggests human beings bear no advantage over beasts.

Otherwise, animals were used for food and transportation. The classification of animals could be based on their utility for ritual or food (clean vs. unclean/pure vs. impure in Lev 11). Animals may also be classified into the main theater of the cosmos that they inhabit (earth, sky, sea as in Gen 1). Composite creatures, common in Near Eastern iconography, were used in biblical imagery (Dan 7:4-7; Rev 13:1-2). See ANIMALS OF THE BIBLE.

Plants are conceived as entities that grow while anchored to the earth (Gen 1:11-12; Matt 13:3-8). Plants served primarily as a source of food (Gen 1:29; Ps 104:14-15). Trees served in construction of homes and monumental buildings (1 Kgs 5:10; 6:15). Medical use is seen in, among other plants, figs (2 Kgs 20:7) and balsam from Gilead (Jer 8:22). Biblical imagery and poetry often appealed to various dimensions of plants, including their aesthetic value, to illustrate moral and theological themes (e.g., Ps 1; Isa 5; John 15:1). See PLANTS OF THE BIBLE.

Within biblical scholarship, at least two approaches can be observed on the question of the relationship between God and nature. Some scholars see the Bible as exhibiting a stark contrast between God and the natural order he created. The personal Hebrew God is then contrasted with the deities of the ANE who were identified with natural phenomena.

More recent scholarship questions such a stark distinction. Yahweh creates wind by blowing through his nostrils (Exod 15:8-10), has thunder for a voice (Job 37:5), and rides upon the clouds (Ps 68:4). Thus, Yahweh often resembles the storm gods in neighboring cultures (Baal at Ugarit; Zeus on Mount Olympus) so much that even Israelites could confuse them (Hos 2:8-9). Other biblical writers, however, strove to differentiate Yahweh from other storm gods (see 1 Kgs 19:11-12).

The study of attitudes toward nature in the Bible has become prominent in the last four decades. This prominence is often attributed to responses by biblical scholars to the widely influential critique by Lynn

White, the medievalist who argued that the biblical idea of nature as an object to be used and mastered by human beings was a principal cause of our current ecological crisis (see ECOLOGY). Some biblical scholars (especially Simkins) believe, however, that at least three attitudes may be discerned in the biblical materials: 1) subjugation of human beings by nature (Job 38-41); 2) harmony between humanity and nature (Deut 11:13-17; Hag 1:9-10), which Simkins views as the predominant model; and 3) subjugation of nature by human beings (Gen 1:26-28).

Nature could be a teacher, and some theological concepts could be derived from the observation of nature (Rom 1:20-24; 1 Cor 11:14). Some biblical authors saw the destruction of nature by God as a means of punishment and renovation (e.g., Noah's flood). The destruction or renewal of "nature" will occur in the end of time (2 Pet 3:7; Rev 21:23-25). Otherwise, some authors recognized that human beings could damage or overtax the environment (Gen 13:6; compare 2 Kgs 2:19-20).

Bibliography: Gerard Naddaf. *The Greek Concept of Nature* (2006); Ronald A. Simkins. *Creator and Creation: Nature in the Worldview of Ancient Israel* (1994); Lynn White. "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis." *Science* 155 (1967) 1203-07.

HECTOR AVALOS

NAVE נַאֵב נַאֵב בַּיִתְּ הַקֶּדֶשׁ bayith, הַקֶּדֶשׁ hekhhal]. The largest room in the tripartite interior of the Solomonic Temple, between the holy of holies and the PORCH. Forty cubits long, twenty wide, and thirty high, with gilded wall-carvings, it contained a golden altar, ten lampstands, a table for displaying bread, and numerous small golden implements (1 Kgs 6-7; 2 Chr 3-4; Ezek 41). Scholars use archaeological evidence from ANE temples to reconstruct what the sections of the Temple might have looked like. See TEMPLE, JERUSALEM; TEMPLES, SEMITIC.

LJUBICA JOVANOVIĆ

NAVEL CORD שׁוֹר shor]. Shor refers to the navel or navel cord (Ezek 16:4), and can be translated more generally as "flesh" (Prov 3:8). In its description of Jerusalem as an abandoned infant whose navel cord has been left intact, Ezek 16:3-7 presupposes the customary procedures that followed the delivery of a newborn: cutting the umbilical cord with a sharp reed, washing the infant, then rubbing it down with salt and swaddling it. In ANE cultures, cutting the umbilical cord was especially meaningful because the physical separation from the mother signaled the moment when the newborn gained status as an independent human being. See BIRTH.

Bibliography: M. Stol. *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting* (2000).

MARY F. FOSKETT