

Evangelical Review of Theology

A Global Forum

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 41 · Number 2 · April 2017

Published by



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

The Ecosapiential Theology of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job

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IN THE 2013 FILM *Snowpiercer* a catastrophic attempt to reverse global warming triggers an ice age that wipes out nearly all life on earth.¹ The only survivors consist of a lucky few who board a train that unceasingly circumnavigates the globe. The perpetual-motion train serves as a futuristic Noah's Ark in which the remnant of humanity struggles to survive. The movie allegorically illustrates the environmental hubris that characterizes mankind. Humans abuse the environment to the breaking point, and then in greater acts of arrogance attempt to restore the world through intelligence and might. Even *Snowpiercer's* train, the pinnacle of human innovation, eventually shatters under the weight of human folly.

When people take liberties that belong to God alone, disaster is the natural outcome. The visceral human worry over having enough to survive has long been overtaken by the drive for greater affluence. While God's creation has the

capacity to sustain all life, the earth was not intended to sustain the kind of excess in which humans regularly and consistently indulge.² The human tendency to elevate the self regardless of the consequence has become more obvious due to the increasing attention to ecological damage. People have made idols of themselves, consuming the goodness of God's creation like parasites. The only antidote is a humble use and enjoyment of creation that holds the perverse self-elevation of humankind in check.

Perhaps the best resource for restoring the biblical perspective on creation is the Wisdom Literature. Proverbial sayings are a key to creaturely stability, offering invaluable insight in times of crisis. More specifically, the

¹ Joon-ho Bong, *Snowpiercer*, DVD (CJ Entertainment, 2013).

² Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 35, 74; Jonathan A. Moo and Robert S. White, *Let Creation Rejoice: Biblical Hope and Ecological Crisis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 11-18.

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primary emphasis of biblical wisdom is the harmonious functioning of all elements of creation within God's created order. Sapiential theology teaches that true religion entails love of God, as well as love for fellow humans, fellow creatures, and all of nature.³

This paper is therefore developed upon the hypothesis that understanding ecosapiential theology can help restore the divinely ordained relationship between God, people, and the natural world.⁴ Through an analysis of biblical wisdom literature it will be shown that when people reflect the image of God by care for fellow creatures and the land, the natural resources of the world will flourish and God's plan of redemption will reach its fullest expression.

Although wisdom elements appear throughout the Bible, the current paper will focus specifically on Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. These books offer a sustained presentation of sapiential thought and utilize frequent ecological references. The large number of verses that employ ecological terminology cannot be examined in detail. Instead, passages that give sustained attention to ecotheological issues will be examined in greater detail than the remainder of the material. The methodology employed will be a theological interpretation of the passages, by which ecosapiential themes will be evaluated and practical implications will be noted.

3 Moo and White, *Let Creation Rejoice*, 15, 24-27.

4 Ecosapiential theology is defined as the interconnectedness of all elements of visible creation in relationship with God and each other as presented in biblical wisdom literature.

I An Ecosapiential Apologetic

The Judeo-Christian viewpoint has often been accused of pitting humans and spirituality against nature and the physical world.⁵ Yet, Christian theology is inherently 'green'. William Brown writes, 'Central to the Christian faith is a doctrine that resists the temptation to distance the biblical world from the natural world: the incarnation.'⁶ Jesus does not merely save individuals from sin, but he becomes part of creation and restores it.⁷ A faith in Christ thus calls believers to respect the natural world and all the wonders it holds.

The drama of redemption finds greatest expression when applied to all of nature.⁸ Salvation includes the healing of all of creation, and is as broad as creation itself. Believers are called to participate in a new creation – a new and embodied reality.⁹ Such a reality is impossible to understand without wisdom theology. Wisdom literature reintegrates the doctrine of salvation with the sapiential emphasis on all of creation. Wisdom invites hearers to encounter God in a broader way than

5 Victorino Pérez, 'A Espiritualidade Ecológica: Uma Nuova Manera de Acercarse a Dios desde el Mundo', *Theologica Xaveriana* 60 (2010): 191-214.

6 William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 7; cf. D. C. Jones, 'Nature, Theology of', *EDT* 817-18; Pérez, 'A Espiritualidade Ecológica', 200.

7 Bartholomew and O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 14.

8 Jones, 'Nature', 817.

9 Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 194-97; Snyder and Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, 146-50.

simply salvation from sin.¹⁰

The reversal of the environmental crisis will not come about through activism or conservation alone. An ecosapiential approach seeks to address not only the abuses of the environment, but also the underlying spiritual causes. Change will come only when humans recover a deeper sense of the relationship between human life and the biosphere as a whole.¹¹ Amy Pauw opines, 'In our own time, environmentalists are perhaps the voices closest to the sages of Proverbs.'¹² Just as Proverbs conveys a sense of communal moral urgency, modern environmentalists warn of the folly of ecological abuse. Christian environmentalism is not naive utopianism or an attempt to halt technological progress, but a multifaceted response to industrial society, its economy, its technology, and its institutions.¹³

II Proverbs

A close study of Proverbs¹⁴ reveals a general character-consequence framework. However, a strict deed-consequence-retribution theology would be

misleading as punishments and rewards are not mechanistic or automatic.¹⁵ The wisdom of Proverbs describes a long-term trajectory. Biblical and Ancient Near East (ANE) wisdom is not intended as legislation, but as practical advice whereby life decisions are based on complex factors.¹⁶ Van Leeuwen describes the primary concern of Proverbs as 'the relation of ordinary life in the cosmos to God the Creator'.¹⁷ Proverbial wisdom reveals that God engages every facet of creation and takes delight in it.

1. Proverbs 8:22-36

²² The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his way,
Before His works of old.

²³ From everlasting I was established

From the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth.

(Prov 8:22-23, NASB)¹⁸

A major theological element of wisdom literature can be found in creation and primeval history.¹⁹ Sapiential texts

¹⁰ Pauw, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 61.

¹¹ Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, 122.

¹² Pauw, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 8.

¹³ Pérez, 'A Espiritualidade Ecológica,' 194-95.

¹⁴ References to the natural world in Proverbs: 1:17, 27; 3:19-20; 4:18-19; 5:15-19; 6:5-11; 7:22, 23; 8:22-31; 10:5; 11:25, 26, 28, 30; 12:9-12; 13:23; 14:4; 15:11, 17, 19; 16:15, 24; 17:12; 18:4, 20, 21; 20:4, 5; 21:19, 31; 22:2, 5; 23:5, 10, 34; 24:13; 25:3, 13, 14, 16, 23, 25, 26; 26:1-3, 8, 9, 11, 13, 17, 20, 21; 27:3, 4, 7, 8, 15-27; 28:1, 3, 4, 15, 19; 30:4, 14, 18, 19, 21, 24-31.

¹⁵ Russell Meek, 'Wisdom Literature and the 'Center' of the Old Testament', *Criswell Theological Review* 11 (2014): 63-77.

¹⁶ Susan Power Bratton, 'The Precautionary Principle and the Book of Proverbs: Toward an Ethic of Ecological Prudence in Ocean Management', *Worldviews* 7 (2003): 253-273; Bartholomew and O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 271.

¹⁷ Raymond Van Leeuwen, 'Proverbs', in *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 171-78.

¹⁸ All scriptures are reproduced from the NASB.

¹⁹ Hans-Jürgen Hermission, 'Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom', in *Crea-*

portray wisdom as existing before the world and the foundation upon which it was created.²⁰ Because Wisdom was present at creation, she can therefore guide humans into successful interactions with God, fellow men, and nature.²¹ Through wisdom the Creator grants humankind the ability to master creation and perform the tasks that have been assigned from the beginning. Humans are entrusted not only with the earth, but also with the work and maintenance of it. The success of such an endeavour is the concern of wisdom literature.²²

Proverbs 8:22-36 implies that wisdom is the binding material that holds creation together. Biblical wisdom reflects God's character by 'filling the earth with creativity, generosity, con-

cern for the other and a longing for all creation to flourish before God'.²³ Creation is the habitation of wisdom, and when creation flourishes, wisdom likewise flourishes.²⁴

Along similar lines, when wisdom deteriorates, the created order also suffers. The abuse of the earth creates a trajectory toward greater abuse and evil in the world. Proverbs teaches that nature cannot indefinitely withstand abuse and evil.²⁵ According to Proverbs 8:36, 'He who sins against [wisdom] injures himself; and those who hate [wisdom] love death'.

2. Proverbs 12:9-12

⁹ Better is he who is lightly
esteemed and has a servant
Than he who honors himself and
lacks bread.

¹⁰ A righteous man has regard for
the life of his animal,
But even the compassion of the
wicked is cruel.

¹¹ He who tills his land will have
plenty of bread,
But he who pursues worthless
things lacks sense.

¹² The wicked man desires the
booty of evil men,
But the root of the righteous yields
fruit.

These four verses from Proverbs 12 address the importance of honest work and productivity. The somewhat difficult verse 9 points out that reality is more important than appearance. One

tion in the Old Testament, IRT 6, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 118-134; J. Lindblom, 'Wisdom in the Old Testament Prophets', in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East: Presented to Professor Harold Henry Rowley*, SVT 3, ed. M. Noth and L. Winton Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 192-204; Claus Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982); R. Dennis Cole, 'Foundations of Wisdom Theology in Genesis One to Three' (MTh thesis, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1978); Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament*; Roland E. Murphy, 'Wisdom and Creation', *JBL* 104 (1985): 3-11; Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 1994); John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

²⁰ Compare Prov 3:19-20.

²¹ Bartholomew and O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 89.

²² Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology*, 11, 100; Bartholomew and O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 86; Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, 162-63.

²³ Bartholomew and O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 88.

²⁴ Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, 169.

²⁵ Bratton, 'The Precautionary Principle', 268.

who lives humbly, but has sufficient resources, is better off than one who is highly esteemed, but has 'no food'.²⁶

The desire for status and acclaim is a familiar vice in modern society. Families drown themselves in debt to appear affluent and prosperous. Davis aptly writes, 'Contrary to popular wisdom, a massive cash flow does not in itself make an economy healthy. People spending no more than they can afford constitute a healthy economy.'²⁷

The disembedding of people from nature through human commerce has also distanced the human consciousness from the created order.²⁸ Verse 10 instructs humans to be attentive to the needs of their animals. Bauckham interestingly notes that the terminology here, to have regard for (*yāda'*) the life (*nepeš*) of an animal, is strikingly similar to that of Exod 23:9, in which Israelites are to know (*yāda'*) the condition (*nepeš*) of the alien in their midst.²⁹

Wisdom from Proverbs 8 can be applied also to 12:10-12. All of creation is connected such that caring for livestock and farmland benefits humans. Protecting the welfare of livestock is beneficial to their caretakers. Animals are a self-renewing resource. In the ANE they provided a range of provisions, including food, clothing, instru-

ments, and wine skins.³⁰

Before moving on it should be noted that the Bible does not portray animals preying on other animals, or even humans eating animals as immoral. Rather, the moral problem is in the mistreatment of animals through 'modern methods of factory farming and intensive rearing', in which animals are raised in 'spaces which allow no room for movement, and the chemically and genetically altered environment which farm animals increasingly inhabit, are all indicators of unnecessary suffering, and of the denial of any possibility of life quality...'³¹ Human actions toward animals should reflect God's own compassion for his creatures.

Moving on from the value of creatures to the value of the land, the sagacious author of verses 11-12 lauds the value of hard work. Israelite family units learned that their plot of land could quickly come to ruin if not cared for properly. In order to leave an inheritance for posterity they had to carefully serve their small plot of land and guard its fertility. Working the land was both a familial and a spiritual obligation, 'for Israelites understood that God, too, was invested in the health of their land'.³² The Israelite perspective on the land is instructive for modern humans. If productive land is to be left

²⁶ Tremper Longman, III, *Proverbs*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 273.

²⁷ Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, WBC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 85.

²⁸ Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, 78-83.

²⁹ Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology*, 138-39; cf. Norman Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs: A Survey of Modern Study*, HBIS 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 193.

³⁰ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 390.

³¹ Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, 101.

³² Ellen F. Davis, 'Just Food: A Biblical Perspective on Culture and Agriculture', in *Creation in Crisis: Christian Perspectives on Sustainability*, ed. Robert S. White (London: SPCK, 2009), 122-136.

for posterity, it must be cared for properly.

3. Proverbs 24:30-34

³⁰ I passed by the field of the sluggard

And by the vineyard of the man lacking sense,

³¹ And behold, it was completely overgrown with thistles;
Its surface was covered with nettles,
And its stone wall was broken down.

³² When I saw, I reflected upon it;
I looked, and received instruction.

³³ 'A little sleep, a little slumber,
A little folding of the hands to rest',

³⁴ Then your poverty will come as a robber

And you want like an armed man.

The comments from the previous verses apply again here in chapter 24. Instead of extolling the benefits of hard work, however, these verses warn against the consequences of sloth. Laziness is the height of foolishness and the antithesis of wisdom.³³ Poverty is personified as a vagrant who comes to steal the sluggard's possessions. Though a man may sleep, his enemy is alert and ready. Perhaps the human failure to change course can be likened to the inactivity of the 'sluggard' of Prov. 24:30.³⁴

4. Proverbs 27:23-27

²³ Know well the condition of your flocks,

And pay attention to your herds;

²⁴ For riches are not forever,
Nor does a crown endure to all generations.

²⁵ When the grass disappears, the new growth is seen,
And the herbs of the mountains are gathered in,

²⁶ The lambs will be for your clothing,

And the goats will bring the price of a field,

²⁷ And there will be goats' milk enough for your food,

For the food of your household,
And sustenance for your maidens.

Structural and topical similarities between 24:30-34 and 27:23-27 may indicate that the units are to be heard in tandem. The wise man who works harmoniously with nature in chapter 27 contrasts with the sluggard who neglects his fields in chapter 24.³⁵ The mention of 'riches' in 27:24 indicates that even a surplus of resources will eventually run out if one neglects one's work, just as the sluggard does in chapter 24. By refusing to act as good stewards of the environment, people are impoverishing future generations.

From an ecological perspective, these verses call for an appreciation of the earth's resources. Longman explains; 'This proverb unit seems to advocate a fundamental dependence on renewable resources, such as letting fresh grass replace dried grass and gathering vegetation from the mountains as crops for food. Lambs and goats provide food, milk, and clothes.'³⁶ Everything the human family needs is

³³ Longman, *Proverbs*, 443.

³⁴ Compare Prov 6:6.

³⁵ The verses also conclude consecutive poetic units; Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 390.

³⁶ Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs*, 483.

available through responsible dominion and stewardship of the land.

Such sage advice is especially needed in relation to modern methods of farming and animal husbandry. While slothfulness is hardly a problem, the rush to obtain greater and greater yields prompts unethical practices. The fertility of the land is being leeched through the erosion of topsoil and chemical agents.³⁷ Animals are removed from their natural habitats, thus inhibiting the natural fertilization process and simultaneously contributing to pollution problems.³⁸ The teaching in Proverbs 27 provides a needed corrective to such practices. Human caretakers can 'know their flocks' by engaging in 'constant information gathering, and repeated assessment of the state of the resource'.³⁹

5. Proverbs 25:16

¹⁶ Have you found honey? Eat only what you need,

That you not have it in excess and vomit it.⁴⁰

In between the passages that laud

37 DeWitt, Calvin B., 'Unsustainable Agriculture and Land Use: Restoring Stewardship for Biospheric Sustainability', in *Creation in Crisis: Christian Perspectives on Sustainability*, ed. Robert S. White (London: SPCK, 2009), 137-56.

38 Northcott notes that, 'The methane emitted by the billions of cattle in the world is one of the largest sources of the enhancement of the greenhouse effect, and the effluent from intensive animal rearing represents a serious pollution problem.' Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, 101.

39 Bratton, 'The Precautionary Principle', 268.

40 Compare 25:27.

hard work, there are proverbs that warn against the human tendency to overindulge. Proverbs 25:16 counsels restraint, self-control, and moderation. Even with something as delightful and beneficial as honey, over-consumption leads to sickness. God's desire for people to enjoy life and partake of the bounties of the earth is counterbalanced by the admonition to take only what is needed.

Greed prompts the exploitation of natural resources, which in turn has detrimental effects on individuals and society.⁴¹ Greed is similar to pride in that it leads to abusive relationships with other creatures in a struggle for mastery and dominion. Indulging in avarice sets humans outside the created order rather than within it. As a result, humans unwittingly debase themselves as the harmonious interconnectedness of creation is disrupted.⁴²

6. Proverbs 30:24-28

²⁴ Four things are small on the earth,

But they are exceedingly wise:

²⁵ The ants are not a strong people,
But they prepare their food in the summer;

²⁶ The shephanim are not mighty people,
Yet they make their houses in the rocks;

²⁷ The locusts have no king,
Yet all of them go out in ranks;

²⁸ The lizard you may grasp with the hands,

41 Bratton, 'The Precautionary Principle', 260.

42 Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, 145-46.

Yet it is in kings' palaces.⁴³

The 'four wee but wise beasties' of 30:24-28 survive and succeed through adhering to God's wisdom in the created order.⁴⁴ The creaturely wisdom stands in contrast to those who overturn the social order in the previous verses of chapter 30.

By personifying the insects as people in verse 25 the author intends the ants to serve as a model for humans. While the exceptional achievement of the ants seems out of proportion to their diminutive size, they nonetheless provide an example of industriousness, discipline, and foresight.⁴⁵ In a fascinating study of ants Bert Hölldobler and Edward O. Wilson draw the following conclusions:

If all humanity were to disappear, the remainder of life would spring back and flourish. The mass extinctions now under way would cease, the damaged ecosystems heal and expand outward. If all the ants somehow disappeared, the effect would be exactly the opposite, and catastrophic. Species extinction would increase even more over the present rate, and the land ecosystems would shrivel more rapidly as the considerable services provided by these insects were pulled away.⁴⁶

In contrast to the ant, human indus-

triousness often lacks foresight and sustainability. The wisdom of the natural world offers a better way forward, one by which the cancer of pride and greed can be remedied with the salve of compassion.

II Ecclesiastes

At first glance Qohelet's musings⁴⁷ seem to reflect an epistemology that is antithetical to that of proverbial wisdom. Proverbs articulates a loose deed-consequence theology, whereas the opening lines of Ecclesiastes lament the meaninglessness of human effort. The author of Ecclesiastes writes as if his relationship with God has led him to 'expect certain outcomes—such as justice and righteousness—and yet he observes just the opposite over and again'.⁴⁸ Further, Qohelet does not begin, as Proverbs recommends, with the fear of the Lord. His insights are based upon observation, reason, and experience alone.

Rather than opposing the message of Proverbs, however, Ecclesiastes complements proverbial wisdom by exploring the paradox between faith and pragmatism. Even after his empirical investigation Qohelet ends just where Proverbs begins, with the fear of the Lord.⁴⁹

Thus, the overarching message of Ecclesiastes is that the wise person will fear God, trust him, and enjoy what blessings are possible, even in the face

⁴³ Compare 6:1-11.

⁴⁴ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 495.

⁴⁵ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 496-97; Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, 55.

⁴⁶ Bert Hölldobler and Edward O. Wilson, *Journey to the Ants: A Story of Scientific Exploration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 206.

⁴⁷ References to the natural world in Ecclesiastes: 1:3-7, 14, 17; 2:4-7, 11; 3:2, 5, 16-22; 5:9; 7:6; 8:8; 9:12; 10:7-9, 11, 20; 11:1-7; 12:1, 2, 4, 5.

⁴⁸ Meek, 'Wisdom Literature', 73.

⁴⁹ Prov 1:7; Ecc 12:13.

of life's difficulties.⁵⁰ Creaturely life is most fulfilling when shaped in conformity to God's design. Qohelet discovers that a life lived in pursuit of selfish desires is ultimately self-debasing.⁵¹

1. Ecclesiastes 1:3-7

³ What advantage does man have in
all his work

Which he does under the sun?

⁴ A generation goes and a
generation comes,

But the earth remains forever.

⁵ Also, the sun rises and the sun
sets;

And hastening to its place it rises
there again.

⁶ Blowing toward the south,
Then turning toward the north,
The wind continues swirling along;
And on its circular courses the
wind returns.

⁷ All the rivers flow into the sea,
Yet the sea is not full.

To the place where the rivers flow,
There they flow again.

The introductory verses of Ecclesiastes link people to the ground. Just as the, sun, wind, and rivers are cyclical, humankind returns to dust and is created anew from it.⁵² A range of interpretations is possible for these opening verses, from exultation over the constancy of God's creation to frustration over life's monotony. This paper argues that a cynical interpretation best fits

the tone of the passage.

Pauw contends that the actions of the natural world here give the indication of movement without progress, effort without change. She writes, 'The wearisome repetition of the cosmos also finds an echo in the insatiability of human desire: just as the sea is never filled by water flowing from the streams, so human yearning is never fulfilled by what flows to the eye and ear (1:8b).'⁵³

Qohelet's opening meditations on the created order are still relevant today. Despite modern scientific advances, mankind is still seeking—and failing—to control and direct the mysteries of the natural world. Humans are not satisfied with incomplete knowledge and incomplete power.⁵⁴ Yet the perspective of Ecclesiastes 1:3-7, and indeed the entire book, encourages believers to be at peace with unknown elements in the world. .

Qohelet may also be warning readers to stay within boundaries set by the creator.⁵⁵ If the constancy of natural cycles falters due to human intervention, the beneficiality of nature may turn into a harsh new reality.⁵⁶ Knowledge and progress are not inherently good.

The lack of any mention of God in the verses is telling. Brown explains that,

Whereas the great creation tradi-

⁵⁰ Meek, 'Wisdom Literature', 73; Pauw, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 61.

⁵¹ Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, 161.

⁵² Nili Samet, 'Qohelet 1,4 and the Structure of the Book's Prologue', *ZAW* 126 (2014): 92-100.

⁵³ Pauw, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 146; cf. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, 196.

⁵⁴ Micah D. Kiel, 'Ecclesiastes', in *The Old Testament and Apocrypha: Fortress Commentary on the Bible*, eds. Gale A. Yee, Hugh R. Page Jr., and Matthew J. M. Coomber (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 627-42.

⁵⁵ Meek, 'Wisdom Literature', 75.

⁵⁶ Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*, 90.

tions of Genesis, Psalms, Isaiah, and Job boldly claim the world as *created*, wrought by a beneficent deity, Qohelet's cosmology, for all intents and purposes, excludes cosmogony. As there is no beginning, there also seems to be no point. Qohelet's world is a creation void of creation, and *hebel* is its name (1:2; 12:8).⁵⁷

Such a nihilistic view indicates that progress without the wisdom of God is not progress at all. Peter Brunner eloquently explains, 'The striving toward nothing is therefore the opposite of a redemptive movement; it is a never-ending self-contradiction and therefore a never-ending torment.'⁵⁸

2. Ecclesiastes 3:16-22

¹⁶ Furthermore, I have seen under the sun that in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness.

¹⁷ I said to myself, 'God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man,' for a time for every matter and for every deed is there.

¹⁸ I said to myself concerning the sons of men, 'God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts.'

¹⁹ For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the

other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity.

²⁰ All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust.

²¹ Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth?

²² I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?

The circular conduit of Ecclesiastes 1 is portrayed now as a pendulum swing. The constant movement emphasizes the value of life and death, both of which are ordained by God.⁵⁹ The juxtaposition of justice with creaturely mortality is an intentional statement on interrelatedness of creatures. Injustice involves one entity failing to acknowledge another entity as a creature of God. On the other hand, justice 'means respecting the needs and the dignity of each of my fellow creatures, acknowledging that we are more similar than different, for we depend for our existence entirely upon God's gracious acts of creation and preservation'.⁶⁰

The mention of work in proximity to creaturely life is also significant (3:9). 'Work' (*ʾāśah*) does not necessarily denote toil. Rather, the same term is used of God's creative activity in Genesis.⁶¹ Work can be defined as healthy,

⁵⁷ Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, 181; cf. Pauw, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 145.

⁵⁸ Peter Brunner, 'Gott, das Nichts und die Kreatur: eine dogmatische Erwägung zum christlichen Schöpfungsglauben,' *KD* 6 (1960): 172-93; as translated in Hendry, *Theology of Nature*, 194.

⁵⁹ Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, 185.

⁶⁰ Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, 187.

⁶¹ Genesis 1:7, 16, 25, 26; 2:2, 4.

productive activity, and based on observations from Psalms, a chief means by which humans form a beneficial connection with the rest of creation. Productive work contributes meaningfully to the world and fosters a sense of satisfaction, thankfulness, and interconnectedness. On the other hand dissatisfaction often leads to mistreatment of others and various forms of injustice.⁶²

The relationship between man and animals is of obvious interest in the passage. Qohelet's statement seems to throw into doubt mankind's superiority over animals. He regards a man as but a beast (*šəhem-bəhēmāh*) and declares that humankind has no advantage over animals (3:18-19). When taken in the broader OT context, however, the kinship of people with the earth is balanced by their distinct role as caretakers of the natural world.

Psalm 8:6-8 clearly articulates man's dominion over all animals, birds, and aquatic creatures.⁶³ Nonetheless, Qohelet encourages humanity to come to terms with the symbiotic nature of creation.⁶⁴ Meek goes so far as to propose that verbal and thematic parallels between Genesis and Ecclesiastes evoke an 'alternate vision' of a return to paradise where humans, animals,

and God enjoy perfect harmony.⁶⁵

III Job

As with Ecclesiastes, the book of Job⁶⁶ should be heard against the backdrop of Proverbs. The expansive theological perspective of Job provides a necessary counterpoint to the ordered world that is presented in Proverbs. Like Ecclesiastes, Job serves as a corrective to an overly literalistic understanding of character-consequence wisdom (Prov 3:9-10; 10:27-32). In fact, Job's friends personify such an erroneous view with their contention that Job's suffering must be due to some moral failure.⁶⁷ Waltke explains,

[God's] government transcends a simple calculus that rewards good and punishes evil. If God's actions do not conform to earthlings' understanding, that does not mean that he is dark and/or disinterested. He rules by containing darkness and wildness within a government that transcends human 'wisdom,' not by

⁶⁵ The echo of Gen 3:19 in Ecc 3:20 is clear: dust to dust, good, man/adam, eat; Meek, 'Wisdom Literature', 74.

⁶⁶ References to the natural world in Job: 1:19; 3:8-9; 4:10; 5:10, 22, 23, 25, 26; 6:3, 5, 15-18; 7:5, 9, 12; 8:11-17; 9:5-10, 17, 26; 10:8, 16; 11:8, 9, 12, 16; 12:7-10, 15; 14:2, 7-9, 11, 18, 19; 15:32-33; 18, 3-4, 16; 19:10, 25; 20:14, 16, 17, 27; 21:10, 11, 18, 26, 33; 22:8, 12, 14, 16, 24, 25; 24:2-8, 11, 18-20, 24; 25:5, 6; 26:5-14; 27:18, 20-22; 28:1-28; 29:19, 23; 30:1, 4-8, 14, 22, 29; 31:8, 20, 26, 38-40; 33:6; 34:13, 15; 35:5, 11, 12; 36:27-33; 37:2-12, 15-18, 21; 38:1-41; 39:1-30; 40:1-4, 15-24; 41:1-34; 42:1.

⁶⁷ Lindsay Wilson, 'Job', in *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 148-156.

⁶² Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, 188.

⁶³ ⁶ You make him to rule over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, ⁷ All sheep and oxen, And also the beasts of the field, ⁸ The birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, Whatever passes through the paths of the seas.

⁶⁴ Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, 188; Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 165.

eliminating it.⁶⁸

Even elements that appear 'evil' by human standards are not beyond God's control.⁶⁹

In Job chs. 38-42 God speaks directly to Job. God's monologue describes the origin of the universe, meteorological phenomena, and a variety of wild animals. Both wild and domesticated animals, uninhabited and cultivated land, the heavens, and the depths are all listed, 'even symbolic places such as Sheol and the 'innermost parts' of human beings'.⁷⁰

A primary theme of 38-42 therefore appears to be that no aspect of creation is beyond God's control. Further, the way that Job portrays God's ordering of creation indicates that God's concern for creation goes far beyond the human realm.

1. Job 38:1-3

¹Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said,

²'Who is this that darkens counsel By words without knowledge?

³Now gird up your loins like a man,

And I will ask you, and you instruct Me!

Job is granted a rare privilege when Yahweh speaks directly to him. However, God does not respond to Job's

questions about justice and injustice. In fact, God's comments have very little to do with human beings at all. God shifts the focus from Job's suffering to the ordering of all creation. The Lord meets the needs of Job while also broadening his understanding of his place within creation.⁷¹

Chapters 38-42 present a non-anthropocentric view of the world.⁷² God describes a world without people, a world that has meaning independent of human activity.⁷³ In the light of such, the passage reminds people of their finitude and limited ability.

Job 38:4-7 carries an allusion to Proverbs 8:22-31, which describes wisdom as being present at the creation of the universe. The statement suggests that if Job was present at creation then he must also have access to the wisdom of God.⁷⁴ The implication is that Job was neither present, nor does he have access to God's wisdom.⁷⁵

Further, God does not ask man to name the creatures, as he did in Genesis, or to dominate them in any way. Job is simply asked to behold the 'strength, dignity and freedom' of the wild beasts.⁷⁶ With the exception of the horse (38:19-25) all the creatures listed are beyond man's control.

2. Job 39:13-18

¹³'The ostriches' wings flap joyously

⁶⁸ Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 942.

⁶⁹ Alissa Jones Nelson, 'Job', in *The Old Testament and Apocrypha: Fortress Commentary on the Bible*, eds. Gale A. Yee, Hugh R. Page Jr., and Matthew J. M. Coomber (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 519-546.

⁷⁰ Nelson, 'Job', 538.

⁷¹ Wilson, 'Job', 152.

⁷² Rae, 'Response to Mark I. Wallace,' 75.

⁷³ McKibben, *The Comforting Whirlwind*, 36.

⁷⁴ 'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding.' (Job 38:4).

⁷⁵ Whybray, *Job*, 158-59.

⁷⁶ Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, 128.

With the pinion and plumage of
love,
¹⁴ For she abandons her eggs to the
earth
 And warms them in the dust,
¹⁵ And she forgets that a foot may
crush them,
 Or that a wild beast may trample
them.
¹⁶ 'She treats her young cruelly, as
if they were not hers;
 Though her labor be in vain, she is
unconcerned;
¹⁷ Because God has made her forget
wisdom,
 And has not given her a share of
understanding.
¹⁸ 'When she lifts herself on high,
 She laughs at the horse and his
rider.

Creation, as portrayed in Job, teaches man that the created order is both rational and irrational. Even the aspects of creation that do not make sense from a human perspective are ordered and controlled by God.⁷⁷ Some creatures, such as the clumsy ostrich are certainly more puzzling than others. God seems to find his creation beautiful and take enjoyment in it.

Wilson suggests, 'God's delight in his ordered creation is reflected in the leisurely nature of the guided tour, in his care for those bearing young (39:1), and in his evident pleasure in animals such as the warhorse (39:19-25).'⁷⁸ Additionally, no moral or didactic lessons are offered in the passage. One might surmise that God intends creation to be

appreciated in its own right.⁷⁹

The passage teaches also that God continuously maintains an ordered creation. The meteorological phenomena and the wild animals operate within the limits set by God. The natural elements are fearsome or uncontrollable only from a human perspective, not from God's.⁸⁰ The myriad of wild life forms are not an object of divine or human micromanagement, yet all are 'affirmed and sustained by God'.⁸¹ God's rulership is one of care and freedom, as creatures who operate within their prescribed boundaries flourish without intervention.⁸²

3. Job 40:15-16; 41:1, 12, 33

¹⁵ 'Behold now, Behemoth, which I
made as well as you;

He eats grass like an ox.

¹⁶ 'Behold now, his strength in his
loins

And his power in the muscles of his
belly.

¹ 'Can you draw out Leviathan with
a fishhook?

Or press down his tongue with a
cord?

⁷⁹ Hilary Marlow, 'Justice for All the Earth: Society, Ecology, and the Biblical Prophets', in *Creation in Crisis: Christian Perspectives on Sustainability*, ed. Robert S. White (London: SPCK, 2009), 192-208; Francis I. Andersen, *Job* (Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), 273-78; Moo and Robert S. White, *Let Creation Rejoice*, 36.

⁸⁰ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 940; Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology*, 44.

⁸¹ Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, 129.

⁸² Stewart W. Herman, 'Between Text and Sermon: Job 31-41', *Interpretation* 70 (2016): 75-77; Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, 129.

⁷⁷ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 941-42.

⁷⁸ Wilson, 'Job', 155.

¹² 'I will not keep silence
concerning his limbs,
Or his mighty strength, or his
orderly frame.

³³ 'Nothing on earth is like him,
One made without fear.

Chapters 40 and 41 present a poignant statement about humankind's place in the cosmos that should not be read out of context. Together, the behemoth and the leviathan, representing the strongest beasts of land and sea, reinforce the notion that God's creation is expansive, mysterious, and beyond human control.

The terminology once again evokes the creation account of Genesis 1. The 'behemoth' (*bāhēmôt*) of Job 40:15-24 is the same term as that which is used of the earthly beasts created in Genesis 1:24 (*bāhēmāt*). The behemoth is also characterized as the 'first' (or chief) of God's great acts (40:19), which raises him to a status similar to the wisdom of Proverbs 8 and the light of Genesis 1.⁸³

The portrayal of these great beasts contrasts their mythical associations of chaos. God easily controls the beasts, the forces of chaos, the earth, and everything within it.⁸⁴ All the seemingly pointless excursions into nature now make more sense. Job can no more 'exercise jurisdiction in the moral realm than he is able to control the natural'.⁸⁵ To control the universe Job would have

to be as powerful and wise as God himself. Much to Job's dismay (40:4-5), God vividly demonstrates that Job is not.

4. Job 40:3-5; 42:2, 6

³ Then Job answered the Lord and said,

⁴ 'Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You?

I lay my hand on my mouth.

⁵ 'Once I have spoken, and I will not answer;
Even twice, and I will add nothing more.'

² 'I know that You can do all things,
And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.

⁶ Therefore I retract,
And I repent in dust and ashes.'

The behemoth was created *with* Job, which implies a common identity, and by extension a common identity with all creatures. Job had earlier complained that he was a 'brother to jackals and a companion of ostriches' (30:29), and exiled from his family. He can now exult in being part of the community of creation. Brown quips that Job has something of a 'Copernician revolution' when he finally realizes that the world does not revolve around himself.⁸⁶ In the light of God's expansive creation Job finally grasps his own creatureliness, and finds comfort in the One who is Creator and Sustainer.⁸⁷

Humility is the antidote to anthropocentrism and the abuse of God's crea-

⁸³ Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, 128-29.

⁸⁴ The behemoth and leviathan may be normal creatures described in mythical or fanciful language; Bartholomew and O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 146-47; Nelson, 'Job', 538; Wilson, 'Job', 155; Andersen, *Job*, 288; Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, 128.

⁸⁵ Andersen, *Job*, 287.

⁸⁶ Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, 130-33; cf. McKibben, *The Comforting Whirlwind*, 42.

⁸⁷ Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, 131; Rae, 'Response to Mark I. Wallace', 74.

tion. By viewing the cosmos from God's perspective, humans can see their limited role within creation.⁸⁸ Although science can now explain many of the mysteries presented by Job, modern scientific discoveries always lead to new avenues for further investigation.⁸⁹ Instead of an exploration that involves cruelty and exploitation, the book of Job recommends a humble approach to the mysteries within the community of creation. When human set themselves above nature, transcend God's boundaries, and attempt to overcome finitude in ways that dishonour creation, they set themselves against the Creator.

A further insight that can be gleaned from Job 38-42 is that nature can provide a sense of nearness to God in times of trial. Andersen points out:

a long-standing tradition in western Christian thought that belittles the knowledge of God gained by thinking about the world. 'Natural theology' was kept within bounds by the scholastics, and denied altogether by Neo-orthodoxy. The book of Job does not take this discouraging attitude. Just as Jesus invited us to 'consider the lilies of the field', so the Lord is like a friend who asks you to join Him in a walk around His garden. God enjoys His world, and He wants us to enjoy it with Him. But it is only when God Himself conducts the tour that the excursion is profitable.⁹⁰

The overarching theme of ecosapi-

ent theology is encapsulated in the final chapters of Job. All of creation testifies to the power, wisdom, and mystery of the Creator. A profound encounter with God and his creation is the fundamental experience of man when he occupies his God-ordained place in the natural world.

IV Conclusion

To conclude, a brief survey of insights garnered from the foregoing examination of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job will be offered.

Proverbs teaches that God orders his creation and sets boundaries to ensure its proper operation. Both the human and the natural world are endowed with a purpose and a role within the functioning whole. Rejection or transgression of the created order results in a destructive trajectory for all of the natural world. Proverbs exhorts believers to live in harmony with fellow humans, living creatures, and the land itself.

The ancient sages advocate an intimate and caring relationship with the various elements of creation. When people reflect the image of God by care for fellow creatures and the land, the natural resources of the world flourish. When people are distanced from the natural world, apathy and abuse are the result. The resultant overconsumption of natural resources impoverishes future generations.

The wise teacher of Ecclesiastes demonstrates that progress is not inherently beneficial. A respect for the value and dignity of other creatures is more important than the values of consumption and comfort. Greed leads to a constant striving for more, which leads

⁸⁸ Bratton, 'The Precautionary Principle', 260; cf. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 941; Nelson, 'Job', 539.

⁸⁹ Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology*, 46.

⁹⁰ Andersen, *Job*, 270-71.

to dissatisfaction, which leads to injustice. Seeking after God is a corrective that leads to contentment and a harmonious relationship with all of creation.

Finally, the book of Job displays an omniscient and omnipotent God who cares for every element of his creation. The intimate relationship between humans and God is counterbalanced by a non-anthropocentric view of God's relationship with his creation. Humans are not the centre of the universe, and God has purposes for his creation that sometimes have nothing to do with humans. Further, the mystery and beauty of nature teaches man about God and draws humanity closer to him. In the light of God's glory in creation man should approach nature with an attitude of humility, expecting to encounter the presence of God.

All three books also teach that people experience a deeper understanding of self through nature. Human beings do not have a monopoly on wisdom.⁹¹ Ecosapiential wisdom teaches that creation can, in fact, impart wisdom to humans. The proverbial ant offers lessons on resourcefulness and foresight while the locust teaches the value of cooperation (Prov 6:6; 30:24-33).

Additionally, learning from God's creatures may break through hearts hardened to the natural world. Humans should be humbled by the realization that most of the qualities they pride themselves on are also shared by the natural world: persistence, cooperation, stability, power, grace, beauty

and artistry.⁹²

While ecosapiential themes from all three books overlap, one common thread underlies the entire wisdom corpus. At the heart of biblical wisdom literature stands God's design for the world. Faithful stewardship announces and embodies the full reign of God in every aspect of life. The work of redemption is what God does in and for believers, but also through them.⁹³ The efforts of believers must not be limited to 'conversion evangelism'.⁹⁴ A mission that desires to reach all nations and all peoples should embody the full scope of God's salvific plan. Snyder and Scandrett exhort, 'If we are passionate about people, we will be passionate about their world.'⁹⁵

Stewardship of the natural world has too often been exerted in the form of exploitation and domination, when it should instead be care and service on behalf of God. Ethical stewardship is not an opposition to human progress and scientific advance, but rather a type of progress that respects the value and limitations of the natural world. Therefore, ecosapiential theology includes caring stewardship of the environment, vigilant attention to the condition of nature, and redemptive activity in all aspects of creation.

⁹² Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, 147-48.

⁹³ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 200.

⁹⁴ Snyder and Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, 141-42.

⁹⁵ Snyder and Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, 152.

⁹¹ Pauw, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 130.