
Job through the Eyes of Science: Designed for Survival

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Scholars and teachers at the November 2014 Society of Biblical Literature/ American Academy of Religion meeting crowded in to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Bill McKibben's *The Comforting Whirlwind*, first published in 1994. This slender volume introduced the book of Job as a resource for spiritualizing the environmental movement. It retains its timeliness in arguing that we are in a position not unlike Job's, where our old orthodoxies have failed us—their explanations of how the cosmos works have lost plausibility.¹ Like Job who lost all, we face the strong possibility that the Anthropocene Era for our children and our children's children will bring the collapse of major natural systems—along with the collapse of our current orthodoxies of anthropocentrism and growthism (what McKibben calls “More on a pedestal”²). Trapped in a stifling greenhouse we cannot escape, wracked with guilt for the tons of carbon we generate, and most painfully aware of what we and our descendants are going to lose, we might succumb to a soul-bleaching despair. We might become like the Job of chapter 3, cut down almost to the point of suicide by natural and social disasters, cursing the day we were born and even creation itself.

But Job recovered. By chapter 31, he was back on his feet, furiously angry at how he had been treated by his friends and the rabble in his city, and more than ready to haul God into court (Job 23). What happened? How did he recover from suicidal depression and grab hold of life once again? To answer these questions, I propose we deploy a hermeneutic appropriate to eco-Reformation—that is, a hermeneutic which takes science seriously as a partner for interpreting Scripture. This would not be unprecedented. After all, the author of the book of Job drew upon the best science of his or her day to interpret God's involvement with the cosmos (chapters 38–42). And Bill McKibben in 1994 pioneered an ecological hermeneutic when finding in God's extended speech the theocentric wilderness that shames our anthropocentrism and growthism. For McKibben, that revelation served to tear Job away from an obsession with his own suffering and introduce him to a deep joy derived from the wildness God designed into the world. Indeed, God's speech makes for a marvelous environmental exhortation to anthropocentrism overturned³. But we need to go a step beyond a critique of ideologies, to develop a fresh interpretation of Job himself, as the heroic figure who emerged from the ashes to a re-

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newed life. I will argue that this Job is an actor set within a drama about the value of God's design. And the way that God designed him, I contend, is what saved his life and makes him an inspiration for us as we face the dolorous consequences of climate change.

Retelling Job's story as an ecological fable

Being of a skeptical bent, I never found conventional interpretations of Job's character convincing because they seem contradicted by the text itself. If Job is to be celebrated for his patience, how then to account for his sarcastic ripostes against his friends? If God's ways are too lofty to be understood by humans, why does God spend four chapters equipping Job with knowledge of how the cosmos works? If Job was wrong to question God's governance of the universe, then why does God admit that Job has spoken rightly (42:7)? Christian interpreters of Job traditionally look to the long debate between Job and his friends (Job 4–37) for clues on how to interpret his suffering. Like McKibben, I made the ecological turn to God's extended speech, where an important clue was provided by Terry Fretheim in *God and World in the Old Testament*. At issue is God's design, not God's governance, of the cosmos.⁴ In chapters 39–41, God delights in a series of creatures, pointing to their capacities to take care of themselves, to survive on their own without help or control by human beings. God apparently designed each creature to thrive in its niche. That caused me to ask: what capacities did God design into Job, capacities that would enable him to survive in his particular niche?

1. Bill McKibben, *The Comforting Whirlwind: God, Job and the Scale of Creation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 2005), 1–16, 64–66. Reprint from 1994 edition published by Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mich.

2. *Ibid.*, 7.

3. *Ibid.*, 32–51.

4. Bill McKibben, *Earth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (New York: Times Books [Henry Holt], 2010), 228–231. Old Testament scholar William Brown agrees: despite poetic hints of God's providing sustenance to the wild creatures, “...the world is not an object of divine micromanagement.” *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science and the Ecology of Wonder* (New York: Oxford, 2010), 128–129.

So let me retell Job's story as an "ecological" fable.⁵ From the point of view of modern biology, creatures live out their lives in environments, living or dying within the bounds set by their instincts and abilities. Similarly, human creatures are embodied beings, with a natural interest in surviving and flourishing. Individual fitness is the standard by which striving for survival is understood. My retelling is "ecological" in a granular sense: it focuses upon one individual of a species: how that individual functions in relation to its environment—what capacities are evoked by the challenges it experiences, and what enables it to survive and flourish within its particular niche. Here I view Job as a character inhabiting a social niche. I am less interested in McKibben's broad cosmological view of creation than in Job's particular place within his corner of creation, particularly as presented dramatically in chapters 29–31. I suggest re-reading the book of Job in this granular ecological way for it might carry weight with Christians who find ecology and natural selection a powerful trope for explaining how the world works. It opens up a fresh perspective on a figure usually seen to deserve being put in his place by God. And finally, it turns us away from the three friends' long and sterile debate about whether God governs the cosmos to the more promising question of what features God built into that cosmos.

Retold ecologically, the story goes like this. Once there was a man named Job who had all he needed to flourish in his human environment—wealth, social status, and progeny. He then lost it all through no fault of his own. A "satan" figure (not the devil, but a divine underling) challenged God to prove that Job had the right kind of piety to survive adverse circumstances (Job 2). The satan figure in effect forced God to bet that Job would not lose his faith when his life crumbled around him. This challenge opened up the question of how well God designed the world. A well-designed world is one which conduces to the survival and flourishing of its constituent creatures. The satan figure argued, in effect, that *if* God's most virtuous human creature was not tough enough to survive the loss of everything he held most dear, then God must not have designed a very good human creature in the first place.

Not surprisingly, God proceeded to prove that the overall design of creation is good. Here we need to read God's magnificent description of wild creatures in chapters 39–41 as a justification for the design of creation rather than an explanation of how God is governing it. In a series of rhetorical questions directed at Job, God sketched ten familiar animals and two imposing beasts. These descriptions emphasize that all live on their own, neither domesticated by humans nor micromanaged by God. Mountain goats and deer instinctively know when and how to give birth. The ostrich is a lousy parent, but God gives it speed enough to

outrun hunters. Even the warhorse needs no tutelage, human or divine, in courage; it plunges instinctively toward battle. And the monsters Behemoth and Leviathan neither permit human control nor need divine control. In short, design, not governance, is God's primary mode of involvement in living creation. The book of Job presents God as a biologically minded artist who hugely enjoyed observing the creatures living out the attributes designed into them. The wild joy that McKibben sketches so well is shared by God as well as the reader. However sarcastically God hammered Job with questions, it is clear that God also wanted to show him how well the cosmos of living creatures operated on its own, without divine micromanagement.

Integrity as a resource for survival

Hammered by God's endless rhetorical questions, Job by chapter 42 was cowed to silence. If he had had presence of mind, he might have asked God: "I get it! You made these creatures to flourish on their own. So then, what capacities for survival and flourishing did you design into *me*?" It would have been a reasonable question; God did not include Job, let alone the human species, in the catalogue of wild creatures. But an answer already was suggested back in the first chapter, where God addressed the heavenly court. There God described Job with the same kind of loving admiration extended toward creatures in chapters 39–41. God lauded Job as "blameless" and "upright," as someone who "fears God" and "turns away from evil" (Job 1:8).⁶

From an ecological perspective, these attributes might not seem terribly relevant indicators of fitness for survival. After all, they provided Job no protection against the particular evils which assailed him in chapter 2: the Sabeans and Chaldean bandits, and the heavenly fire and windstorms that killed his children, destroyed his property, and undermined his health. Yet his piety and integrity provided exactly the kind of resilience that enabled him to get up, dust off the ashes, and start rebuilding his life.

The integrity that saved him is ecological in the sense that it was an attribute fit for the specific environment in which he lived. Unlike the wild animals of Job 39–41, who tend to be solitary, Job lived among others of his species. By his account they had a nasty capacity to turn viciously on their fellows. In chapter 29, it was this social evil that appears to haunt Job, rather than the more natural and impersonal evils that destroyed his family. He recalled that he used to be respected by all for his wealth, generosity, and sense of justice; his seasoned counsel was sought, and all deferred to him as "king among his troops" (Job 29:25). Then when his fortunes fell, the people of his city abandoned him, and worse, tormented him. In deep agony, Job described how an unrestrained

5. Both sides of this trail were blazed by William Brown, who first published an extended character study of Job (*Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 50–119), and then an ecologically minded analysis of God's speeches, focusing on the sheer otherness of God's creativity (*Seven Pillars of Creation*, 115–140). Next, I hope, he merges the two approaches as a further exercise in literary imagination.

6. William Brown explores the transformation of Job's integrity in exhaustive detail, arguing that it first was "deformed" and then "reformed", principally along the axis of his relationship with God (*Character in Crisis*, 50–140). My analysis evolved without reading his. I happily note some convergences of emphasis and conclusions, but should confess that while his is based upon close scholarly textual analysis, my method is more informal—a lay reading of the text through the lens of one particular scientific trope.

rabble mocked and attacked him (Job 30).⁷ To compound the bitterness, his three friends also turned on him. From chapter 4 through 28, their initial consolations morphed relentlessly into blustery, abusive, and altogether unwelcome advice. Like the city people who once fawned over him, they ended up trying to crush his spirit with their simplistic ideology that his suffering must be a sign of his wickedness and God's punishment.

Job fought back against those who turned on him with the one resource left to him—his integrity. This struggle started in chapter 6 and climaxed in chapter 31, where he declared his innocence with a remarkable string of oaths. These “oaths of closure” effectively established a perimeter of defense against the attacks by all those around him, friend and enemy. He catalogued every kind of wrongdoing that he conceivably might have committed, proclaiming that if he was guilty, he gladly would submit to wrenching physical pain. While shockingly raw and graphic, these oaths do not come as a surprise. They echo and extend his earlier practice of making preemptive offerings to protect his children from accidental blasphemy while they were partying (Job 1:5). Now he extended the prophylaxis to encompass his whole life. The oaths in chapter 31 cover every conceivable wickedness he could have committed, on his unshakeable conviction that he had committed none of them.

Job's oaths signaled that God's design proved sound. The Job who despaired almost unto death in chapter 3 now was roaring back from the social death sought by the rabble and his friends to regain his full stature as a human creature. What Job experienced—humiliating ostracism by his society and windy rejection by his friends—needled his sense of justice and provoked him to fight back. His reckless lawsuit against God exemplified the piety and uprightness God designed into the human species. While the pre-disaster Job exemplified a bland conventional and squeaky clean uprightness, the post-disaster Job of chapter 31 showed a hard edge to his integrity. This hard edge was sharpened by raw outrage into a daring challenge to the God he had deferred unquestioningly to in chapter 3.

Traditional interpreters might argue that Job fell back into self-doubt after God hammered him from the whirlwind. In his last words recorded by the text, he confesses: “I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” in the standard translation (Job 42:6). “Dust and ashes” indeed seem to signify the despair he felt when convinced he was being attacked by God (Job 30:19). Unfortunately, this closing comment by Job has been corrupted beyond linguistic repair, but it also might be translated, “I am sorry for, and repent of, dust and ashes.” In other words, he may have been recanting the depression and mourning he fell into more than his reckless

claim that God was attacking him. After all, God proceeded immediately to reassure Job that Job had “spoken of me what is right” (Job 42:7–8). Since God nowhere actually endorsed anything Job says, the reference is elusive. Yet seen through the ecological lens developed here, God may be affirming that Job indeed lived out God's good design for the human species, just as other creatures “speak rightly” by living out their good design.

Had God chosen a more transparent revelation, Job may have heard something like the following:

Why do I go on at such length about my creation, Job? Because I am educating you. I love this world. I delight in watching my creatures live out my design for their lives. I enjoy watching the ostrich run like the wind, even if her chicks barely survive her neglectful maternal instincts. I enjoy watching you survive everything that my clever underling Satan threw at you. I made you to be blameless and upright, and you have fulfilled my design. These are not trivial gifts; they are a blueprint for survival. Had you lacked that inborn sense of justice, you would have given up. You would have died. But you had that spark of sturdy rectitude, and your friends, as foolish and pretentious as they are—again, thanks to my design—fanned that spark into a roaring flame. I was rooting for you the whole way. Do I micromanage and manipulate the lives of my creatures, so that the good might thrive and the wicked be punished? Absolutely not. Is there evil? Definitely yes. But I am a good architect, and the quality of my design is demonstrated in your capacity to take care of yourself.

The confidence to live— with no guarantee of being right

Job lacked the presence of mind to call forth such a speech from God, but we can query the text: what about us? Like Job, we need to believe that we have a future. We need to survive, if not prevail, in the brawling public square of climate politics. What capacities did God design into us that will enable us to survive our heedless and destructive mismanagement of the natural systems that support our lives? Bill McKibben in *The Comforting Whirlwind* argued from God's speeches that we need to cultivate the humility of seeing ourselves as only a small part of creation, and experience an ecstatic joy in the wildness around us. Surely he is right that we need to stop thinking that the cosmos exists primarily to serve our species. But that's not enough. Humility of a self-negating sort invites despair as we ponder our full complicity in the carbon-intensive economy. We might come to feel that our species has replicated so cancerously as to kill off its natural host. We might even conclude that planetary ecosystems would be better off without the human species, as Alan Weisman argued in *The World Without Us*.⁸ Such is the way of despair, and it is a reasonable path for grieving scientists and other close observers of environmental trends to take.

7. Literary critics such as Carol Newsom point to the “poly-
phonic” discourse in the book of Job, where multiple voices contend and none enjoys the hegemonic certainty of being the one completely right voice (*The Book of Job* [Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003], 3–31). The text is awash in sarcasm, badgering, howls of pain, mob mockery, and the other communicative devices deployed in a social environment where creatures—and God—turn upon each other in judgment and contempt.

8. Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: St. Martins, 2007), 53–67.

Christians and other theists need to inscribe the humility McKibben commends within a robust confidence that God has designed humans to survive and flourish in a way that doesn't destroy the planet. Here Job's passage back to life expresses that confidence—a confidence based not on being right, but on the capacity to keep going even when wrong. Consider how Job responded to God after having been exposed to the dazzling array of creatures who flourish on their own. Job retrenched in a pious confession: "I know you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). Apparently he failed to put on his listening ears when God was hammering him with rhetorical questions. The parade of wild creatures did not show God "doing" anything, let alone pursuing a "purpose." Job was still stuck in the pious illusion that God was governing the life of creatures, an illusion shared by his friends. He still failed to understand that God loves, admires, and enjoys but does not micromanage the denizens of the cosmos. He believed that God was attacking him; that belief was utterly wrong. Still, it gave him a reason to stand up and keep on living.

Similarly, we are stuck with a dispiritingly confusing account of how to proceed in response to the climate crisis. Growthism and anthropocentrism have us locked in a death-dance as carbon loading into the atmosphere ticks inexorably past 400 ppm. Yet we can't simply cast these two ideologies aside, contrary to McKibben's arguments. While growthism and anthropocentrism sanction greed, they also provide an underpinning for the economic growth that is indispensable for social justice. We are hardly in a position to deny economic increase to the countries that need it more than we do. Given the carbon intensity of the world's economy, we may have to accept climate change so that material wealth may be enjoyed by those who need it, as well as taken by those who don't.

The character Job exhibits suggests that God designed human creatures not to be impervious to ignorance and error, but to survive despite ignorance and error—under caustic social conditions. Indeed, Bill McKibben's more recent *Eaarth* outlines some dimensions of the ecologically responsible integrity that is needed.⁹ Apocalyptically minded Christians may give up the struggle; they may plead for a powerful God to put a merciful end to our pigheaded misunderstanding and short-term, self-centered profit-taking. But according to the book of Job that's not going to happen. We human creatures are on our own, like God's other creatures. The book of Job comforts us with the knowledge that we are designed to respond with integrity when faced with a social environment in deep conflict over climate change. Indeed, integrity is the key to survival in an acid social environment. This conviction may seem quaint but it is needed. Climate activists might be reassured to learn that their unwillingness to give up is actually a survival strategy implanted by God. It enables them to survive the unease of ongoing complicity with the ideologies of anthropocentrism and growthism, and the resultant guilt of contributing carbon to the crisis they are trying to solve.

The ecological fable ends with a cautionary note relevant for those of us who are so angrily righteous at climate-change deniers that we become isolated, as Job did by chapter 31. Job could have careened toward a lonely death of self-justification, ending his days alone on a mountaintop of furious judgment against God and society. But that is not what happens. The book of Job ends on a note of reconciliation between tormentors and tormented. God commanded the friends who tormented him to make a burnt offering, and then commanded Job to intercede for them (42:8–9). Job complied without complaint, presumably relinquishing his bitter anger toward them. God restored Job's wealth (an apparent exception to the non-intervention policy), and with it, his social position. In short, integrity as the courage to fight for what is right is not an end in itself. Rather, it is fulfilled when the human social order once again thrives according to God's original harmonious design. Ecologically, Job's social environment—and ours—is not "nature red in tooth and claw"—a nightmarish jungle featuring the relentless clash of traits in the struggle to survive. The powerful scientific trope of natural selection is valid for us in a powerful but limited way. Our social environment is a complex mix of conflict and cooperation for which we become fit by rising to the struggles that our inborn integrity rouses us into.

Conclusion: designed for integrity

The character of Job and God's array of wild creatures converge in posing the question of how well creation is designed. This is a durable question for Christians and others who believe that the universe is not a product of chance. As heirs of Darwin, Christians can pose this theological question in a new and specifically ecological way: what capacities did God design into human creatures that enable us to survive and flourish in our own particular niches? The answer implied by the text is encouraging. God gave the ostrich speed, and Leviathan invulnerable armor. And to humans, God gave uprightness and integrity, not as fixed and rigid constructs, but as properties that emerge and take on a distinctive cast in response to particular challenges. Job's friends and the city rabble provoked him to rise out of his suicidal depression by outraging his sense of justice. Similarly, we are faced with a dysfunctional political context for addressing the planetary emergency of climate change. Current trends might well prompt despair—or self-destructive righteousness. From Job's own struggle, we can take heart in the fact that God designed integrity into us as a resource for survival. This integrity rounds out the humility that Bill McKibben rightly commends. While our inveterate anthropocentrism certainly needs to be dethroned, we also need to retain confidence that God indeed wants us to survive—and that perhaps is the enigmatic message of the book of Job for our particular situation.¹⁰

9. *Eaarth*, chapters 3 and 4.

10. My thanks to Ellen Aho of the Concordia Biology Department, Phil Hefner, and colleagues in the Concordia Religion Department for comments on earlier drafts.