

Essay

Biophilia, Biodiversity, and the Bible

William P. Brown

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA 30031, USA; BrownB@CTSnet.edu

Abstract: For all its anthropocentric focus on human agency in history and creation, the Hebrew Bible's valuing of nonhuman life and its diversity cannot be gainsaid among certain traditions. Such is the case in three major creation texts: Genesis 1, Psalm 104, and Job 38–41. Each in its own way, these biblical accounts affirm the intrinsic worth of biodiversity, the expansiveness of life, and a God who values the flourishing of all creation.

Keywords: biodiversity; animals; Bible; biophilia; creation; creator; God; Leviathan; Behemoth; lions; cedars

1. Introduction

Animals in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures are legion, but many have gone unnoticed or have been at most segregated into a brief chapter in general studies of biblical theology and even, more specifically, biblical creation theology until recently.¹ Such oversight may be due in large part to the traditional overemphasis on Genesis 1 as the quintessential creation text of the Bible and its anthropocentric focus on humankind made in God's "image" to exercise dominion over the rest of creation (Gen 1:26–28). Nevertheless, biblical scholars are just beginning to give significant attention to the Bible's animals as a source of theological reflection (see the assessment in Stone 2018, p. 2). Common in twentieth-century biblical scholarship was the tendency to identify "salvation history" or the "recital" of God's acts in human history as definitive of Israelite religion, while any emphasis on "nature" in biblical tradition was considered a carry-over from pagan Canaanite religion (Brueggemann 1996, pp. 177–90). Such was the theological bias of much biblical scholarship in the heyday of "biblical theology" in the twentieth century. Not until the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first have biblical scholars begun to appreciate the theological value of "nature," and specifically that of nonhuman life, in the Bible (See, e.g., Hiebert 1996; Tucker 1997, pp. 3–17; Tucker 2000, pp. 215–25; Strawn 2005; McKay 2002, pp. 127–41; Forti 2008; Brown 2010, pp. 115–60; Foreman 2011; Bauckham 2011; Way 2011; Moore 2011, pp. 71–94; Moore 2014, pp. 1–16; Gilmour 2014; Whitekettle 2001a, pp. 345–62; Whitekettle 2001b, pp. 17–37; Whitekettle 2011, pp. 173–87; Whitekettle 2002, pp. 163–83; Whitekettle 2005, pp. 250–64; Whitekettle 2003, pp. 163–82; Whitekettle 2009, pp. 243–56; Whitekettle 2006, pp. 749–65; Walker-Jones 2017, pp. 1005–28; Strømmen 2018; Stone 2018), even as the discipline of animal (and plant) studies was emerging in ethics and religious scholarship decades earlier (e.g., Stone 1972, pp. 450–501; Singer 1976; Cavalieri and Singer 1993; Linzey and Cohn-Sherbok 1997). Today, fortunately, biblical studies that focus on the place of animals in the Bible and in ancient Israelite society have themselves become legion.² In this modest exegetical contribution to this growing focus in biblical research, I take up the specific issue of biodiversity and its theological value in the Hebrew Bible.

This essay examines three creation accounts, each examined exegetically through the lens of biodiversity to discover anew the theological significance of animals in the Hebrew Bible: Genesis 1, Psalm 104, and Job 38–41. While Genesis 1 features humanity at the pinnacle of creation, a deeper examination reveals a strong affirmation of biodiversity and an expansive view of what constitutes life, all part of creation's "goodness." Psalm 104



Citation: Brown, William P. 2021. Biophilia, Biodiversity, and the Bible. *Religions* 12: 981. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12110981>

Academic Editor: David J. Bryant

Received: 4 October 2021

Accepted: 3 November 2021

Published: 9 November 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

depicts creation as a *Terra sapiens*³, in which biodiversity is considered a feature of divine wisdom. YHWH's answer to Job stresses the spectacular qualities of wild animals to elicit a sense of awe that proves transformative for Job's character at the end. One theological claim shared among these creation accounts is that God is a committed "biophile," one who finds "innate pleasure from living abundance and diversity," to quote E. O. Wilson (2006, p. 231). The eco-theological implications for human beings are profound. We begin "in the beginning."

2. Genesis 1: Biodiversity in the Abstract

The first creation account in the Bible, typically called the "Priestly" account, is the most densely structured text in the entire Hebrew Bible.⁴ This is no accident: Genesis 1 depicts creation performed decently and in order. Here, the medium is the message. Compared to other ancient accounts, Genesis 1 reads like a dispassionate treatise, given its methodical presentation. Beginning with watery, empty "formlessness" (Gen 1:2), God creates the world in six days through eight acts and ten utterances. More than simply speaking creation into being, God acts in various ways throughout the creative process: calling into existence, dividing, making, naming, seeing, and blessing. However, if there is one prevailing feature to the creative process, it is separation: light from darkness, day from night, the "waters above" from the "waters below," and the land from the waters. As the final step, the last day is separated from all previous days, given its uniquely holy status. Sabbath constitutes creation's capstone. All in all, creation in Genesis 1 is a graduated process of differentiation leading to a diversity of domains, on the one hand, and the diversity of life, on the other, life "of every kind." The result is a self-sustaining cosmic ecosystem deemed "very good" (1:31).

Creation's "goodness" acknowledges, among other things, the plenitude and diversity of life, both animal and botanical. A "good" creation is one that is stable, habitable, sustainable, and flourishing. Indeed, part of creation's goodness is that creation itself is creative. In fact, God does not often create alone in Genesis 1. For example, God enlists the "land/earth" ('*ereṣ*) and the "waters" (*mayim*) to help bring forth life (1:11, 20, 24). The Earth and the waters exercise their own creative agency at the behest of God's command. Moreover, God enlists the divine council in the creation of human life in "our image" (v. 26). Creation in Genesis turns out to be a collaborative affair, one that results in a world filled with the diversity of life.

An Expansive View of Life

The account of this well-ordered cosmos unfolds according to a literary symmetry that provides further insight into how life is viewed (see Brown 2010, pp. 33–66).

"Day 0" (1:1–2)	
(formless and void)	
Day 1 (1:3–5) Light	Day 4 (1:14–19) Lights
Day 2 (1:6–8) Sky Waters (below)	Day 5 (1:20–23) Avian life Marine life
Day 3 (1:9–13) Land Vegetation	Day 6 (1:24–31) Land life Human life Food
(form—full and filled)	
Day 7 (2:1–3)	

According to their thematic correspondences, the first six days line up to form two parallel columns. Days 1–3 delineate the cosmic domains (i.e., sky, water, and land), which

are then populated by the various inhabitants of these domains (Days 4–6). Vertically, the two columns address the two abject conditions of lack registered in 1:2, formlessness, and emptiness (*tōhū wābōhū*). The left column (Days 1–3) recounts the cosmos being *formed*, while the right column (Days 4–6) describes the cosmos being *filled*. With the stars, sun, and moon set in the heavens and the various forms of life “of every kind” filling the sky, land, and sea, creation proceeds from emptiness to fullness in the right column, a fullness that is by no means homogenous.

The symmetrical structure of creation profiles an expansive view of life. On the surface, Genesis 1 seems to define life as anything that can “be fruitful and multiply,” that is, reproduce (1:22, 28) according to its “kind” (1:11, 12, 21, 24, 25). However, such a definition proves to be too limited as one reads the text more closely. Plants, for example, are created on the *third* day and thus are not deemed living in any sexual/reproductive sense. Nowhere are they commanded to “be fruitful and multiply.” Otherwise, the author would have placed the creation of vegetation on the fifth or sixth day accompanied by God’s command to “fill” the earth. Instead, plants are deemed an indelible (and edible) feature of the land, an integral part of the earth’s domain. Elsewhere in biblical tradition, plants are considered alive (e.g., Job 14:7–10; Ezek 17:24; Zech 11:2). The emphasis, moreover, on plants bearing “seed” in Genesis 1 points to the power of botanical succession. Indeed, the term for “seed” in biblical Hebrew (*zeraʿ*) often designates progeny, that is, procreated life (e.g., Gen 4:25; 15:3; Jer 31:27; cf. 1 Cor 15:36). Moreover, plants are created of “every kind” (Gen 1:11, 12), comparable to animals (vv. 21, 24). Hence, plant “life” is marked as both similar to and different from animal life. Moreover, vegetation serves to provide for life, making the land inhabitable for animals, human and nonhuman (Gen 1:11–12, 29–30). As the land hosts plant “life,” so plants host animal life, turning the earth into an edible landscape, indeed a living landscape.⁵

Also suggestive is the creation of “lights” on the fourth day of creation: the sun (“the greater light”), moon (“the lesser light”), and “the stars” (1:14–18). These astral bodies are considered inhabitants of their own domain (“light”) as much as the birds and the fish are of theirs (“sky/heavens” and the “waters”). Moreover, the celestial spheres and human beings bear a functional correspondence: the former are to “rule” the day and the night (1:14–18), while the latter are to exercise “dominion” over all creatures (1:26–28). Stars and human beings share in the task of ruling.

Although life seems to be defined categorically by reproduction in Genesis 1, structural considerations noted above suggest a more complex and expansive picture. The mobility of celestial bodies and their designation as members of their primordial domain, light, coupled with their assigned tasks to rule both day and night, indicate a functional correspondence with life, particularly human life, on the earth. As often observed, Genesis 1 de-divinizes, or de-mythologizes the sun and the moon, which are given only functional designations in the text rather than their common names (*šemeš* and *yārēah*). Nevertheless, Genesis does not “de-animate” them. As bona fide creations of God, the sun and the moon exhibit some sense of life in their prescribed agency vis-à-vis life on Earth. Thus, we have in Genesis various forms of life that exercise agency yet are distinguishable from procreation.

One of the most repeated phrases in Genesis 1 is “of every kind” (so NRSV), or alternatively translated, “each according to its kind” (so CEB),⁶ repeated 10 times. This literary marker of biological diversity applies to “plants yielding seeds,” “fruit trees,” marine and avian life, and, finally, all land animals, both domestic and wild. Such is the Priestly author’s formulaic way of acknowledging biodiversity. More specifically, Genesis 1 identifies certain biological distinctions: plants are distinguished between those that yield seeds and those that bear fruit with their seeds inside (1:11–12). Marine life includes the “great sea monsters” (*hattannînim haggēdōlîm*), creatures that swarm in the waters (*šereš nepeš hayyā*), and creatures that “creep” or crawl in the waters (*hārōmešet*). Aviary life bears no distinction except for having wings (*ōp kânāp*). Land animals are distinguished between domestic animals (*bēhēmā*), crawling animals (*remeš*), and wild animals (*hayyat-hā’āreš*). Lastly, humanity is distinguished as “male and female” (*zākār ûnēqēbā*), a biological

distinction that is also assumed for all animal life (see Gen 7:3, 9, 16). All in all, Genesis 1 validates the diversity of life, even if abstractly. Biodiversity is in part what makes creation “good.” Filling the Earth and seas with life is coupled with diversifying life, each created “according to its kind.” Genesis 1 leaves us, however, without specific names to illustrate life’s manifold forms. That gap is ably filled by two other creation accounts.

3. The Joy of Biodiversity in Psalm 104

An elaborate hymn praising God’s providential care, Psalm 104 is the most extensive psalm of creation in the Bible (see [Brown 2010](#), pp. 141–51). Its other distinction lies in its portrayal of creation as a place of abundant provision and capacious accommodation for all forms of life. The psalm is a self-described “meditation” (*śīlāh*), or poetic deliberation, offered to YHWH in joy (v. 34) so that YHWH would rejoice in creation (v. 31). Similar to Genesis 1, this creational liturgy proceeds from the cosmic to the zoological. Specifically celebrated are the myriad ways YHWH establishes and sustains creation, including its various creatures: onagers, birds, cattle, plants for cultivation, trees, cedars, storks, wild goats, coneys, lions, people, and Leviathan, a rich sample of the vast “encyclopedia of life,” one could say. Together, they give stirring testimony to the “manifold” nature of creation and to YHWH’s encompassing wisdom (v. 24). The psalm concludes with praise in the final verse, which also includes a brief imprecation designed to motivate YHWH to complete creation by exterminating the wicked (v. 35a). All in all, Psalm 104 gives witness that creation is not simply a matter of the primordial past; it is present and ongoing.

In the psalm, creation begins with YHWH constructing YHWH’s own royal abode “above the waters,” heaven as habitat for divinity (v. 3). In describing the earth’s creation, Psalm 104 describes the waters covering the earth’s surface, similar to Genesis 1. Whereas, in Genesis, the waters are separated by the emergence of land, in the psalm, the waters “flee” (v. 7) at the sound of God’s thunderous rebuke (v. 7). While no resistance is registered, the waters do require containment (vv. 7–9; cf. 74:12–14), making possible the provision of flowing streams for quenching thirst, providing habitation, and ensuring the earth’s fertility. The combination of stream and soil results in the rich sustenance of life. By providing grain for bread, grape for wine, and olive for oil, plants sustain life and provide joy for human beings (v. 15).

Often noted is the parallel movement featured in Genesis 1 and Psalm 104 (e.g., [Gottlieb 2016](#), pp. 32–33; [Fullerton 1921](#), pp. 43–56), so evident, in fact, that one can delineate the psalm’s structure in terms of the “days” of creation set forth in Genesis: Day 1 = Ps 104:1–2; Day 2 = vv. 3–4; Day 3 = vv. 5–9; Day 4 = vv. 19–20; Day 5 = vv. 12, 17, 25–26; and Day 6 = v. 23. As one can see, however, the parallels work well only for the first three days, the days that establish the creational domains of light, heaven, and land (vs. the sea). Thereafter, the psalmist veers away from the methodical progression of Genesis 1 to revel in the sheer wonder of creation’s diversity, particularly among animals sustained by YHWH’s providential care. As for humanity, dominion takes a back seat and human beings are no more than an afterthought:

You bring on the darkness, and it is night;
when every animal of the forest prowls.
Young lions roar for their prey;
seeking their food from God.
When the sun rises, they withdraw,
and to their dens they retire.
Humans go forth to their work,
to their labor until evening. vv. 20–23⁷

If one did not know any better, the only difference between humans and lions within the created order seems to be that the lions take the “night shift” to pursue their living, while humans go forth during the day to earn theirs. Day and night, the diurnal and the nocturnal, are part of creation’s natural rhythm, a rhythm in which each species has its

time as well as place in the created order, including *Homo sapiens*. No humanly defined hierarchy is evident in Psalm 104. Creation is a mutually shared home, a living, diverse “household” (*oikos*).

The psalm’s primary focus is set on animals: mountain goats, storks, coneys, lions, and Leviathan, all populating Earth’s various domains, each lovingly referenced in a tone of rapturous praise to their creator: “How manifold are your works, YHWH! With wisdom you have made them all. The earth is full of your creations!” (v. 24), so the psalmist proclaims. Creation in all its diversity is reflective of divine wisdom, no less. Earth, in effect, is a *Terra sapiens*. God’s wise creations extend beyond the zoological; they also include the botanical. Trees, for example, have standing in Psalm 104:

The trees of YHWH are well watered;
the cedars of Lebanon, which he planted,
it is where the birds build their nests;
the stork has its home in the cypresses. vv. 16–17 (cf. v. 12)

The psalmist lingers admiringly over the mighty cedars of Lebanon, the prized building material in antiquity given their unsurpassed quality of wood for building temples, palaces, and boats ([Biblical Archaeology Staff 2020](#)). By contrast, the psalmist prizes these trees not for their lumber but for their majestic stature and for their hospitality: The cedars are literally for the birds! This seemingly minor detail is representative of how the psalmist views creation as a whole. Commentators have marveled over the central theme of provision in the psalm, and appropriately so (e.g., [Miller 2000](#), pp. 87–103; [Berlin 2005](#), pp. 71–83). God provides drink to wild animals (v. 11), “waters the mountains” and “the trees” (vv. 13, 16), causes “grass to grow for the cattle” (v. 14), provides bread, wine, and oil for human beings (v. 15), and supplies “prey” for the lions (v. 21) as well as food for all creatures “in due time” (v. 27). God’s “open hand” and “renewing breath” are evocative images of such provision (v. 28).

However, in addition to the theme of divine provision in the psalm is another central feature, for which the cedar trees offer but just one example. In the beginning, God created a home, a domicile for divinity, and, in turn, established habitats for every living creature: streams and trees for the birds (vv. 12, 17), mountains for the wild goats (v. 18a), and rocks for the coneys (v. 18b). Even the waters have their “appointed” place (v. 8–9). The lions have their dens, just as humans have their homes (assumed in vv. 22–23), and Leviathan has the sea (v. 26). The earth is not just “habitat for humanity” but habitat for diversity (v. 24).

The psalm thus views creation in thoroughly eco-centric terms; the earth is created to accommodate myriad creatures great and small, people included. Humanity is merely one species among many, each having its home or habitation, each with its own set of habits for flourishing. The earth is host and home to all living kind, and as such it is a source of joy for God. The sea, home to innumerable marine creatures, is a playfield for both YHWH and Leviathan (vv. 25, 26b). In short, creation is cast in the *imago habitationis*.

However, there is one challenge to creation’s habitability identified by the psalmist, a source of creation-threatening chaos whose identity may come as a surprise from this ancient hymn of praise. The key begins with Leviathan:

There is the sea,
both vast and wide
There go the ships and Leviathan,
with which you fashioned to play.⁸ vv. 25–26

The vast sea accommodates a multitude of creatures, including Leviathan, the monster of the deep. Elsewhere in biblical tradition, Leviathan is a multi-headed sea dragon, a chaos monster, God’s mortal enemy slated for destruction (see Ps 74:12–14; Isa 27:1). A particularly terror-inspiring description of Leviathan can be found in Job 41 (see below). It is a creature clearly not for play but for combat, and its defeat is deemed an urgent

necessity for creation's sake in certain biblical traditions. However, in Psalm 104, no hint of horror is to be found. Leviathan presents no threat to creation's order in the psalm, just as in Gen 1:21, which includes the "great sea monsters" within God's good creation. What the poet behind the psalm has done is take a symbol of monstrous chaos and turn it into an object of playful wonder. In the poet's hands, Leviathan, the monster of the deep, becomes Leviathan, God's partner in play!

If Leviathan is divested of chaos, does chaos have a foothold elsewhere in the psalm's view of creation? For all of its celebration of nature's beauty and bounty, the psalm ends on a resoundingly sour note. There is something wicked in this world of lions and Leviathans, which the final verse exhorts YHWH to destroy:

May my meditation be pleasing to him;
I will rejoice in YHWH.
May sinners perish from the earth,
and the wicked be no more.
Bless YHWH, my whole being!
Hallelujah! vv. 34–35

The transition in this concluding passage from praise to imprecation and back again is abrupt. The psalm's cosmic scope, which includes even the monstrous Leviathan within the orbit of God's providential (and playful) care, has no room for the wicked. By exhorting YHWH to destroy the wicked, the psalmist effectively transfers the evil and chaos traditionally associated with mythically monstrous figures such as Leviathan and places them squarely on human shoulders. Chaos, the psalmist claims, has its home among human animals.

We do not know whom specifically the psalmist had in mind regarding the "wicked." Whoever they were in the eyes of the psalmist, they were considered a serious threat to creation's habitable order. Hence, the wicked must be evicted. The psalmist acknowledges both predator and prey among the non-human animals, as well as the wicked among the distinctly human animals. The psalm recognizes predation as part of the natural order of creation in the psalm, but distinctly unnatural are the purveyors of chaos, which are not mythically theriomorphic—monsters made in the image of animals—but monstrously human.

That the "wicked" pose such an existential threat to creation so as to warrant their extermination suggests that the wicked see themselves operating hierarchically rather than interdependently with other creatures. In other words, the wicked do not know their place in creation, the place of co-existence. With or without the wicked, the biocentric world of Psalm 104 represents a significant shift from the anthropocentric world of Genesis 1 (or Psalm 8). God enjoys creation not for its hierarchy but for its mutual diversity of life and place. As wine "gladdens the human heart," so creation's biodiversity gladdens the divine heart, so claims the psalmist.

Nevertheless, Psalm 104 issues an implicit warning, particularly for such a time as this. Given that God is a committed "biophile," the psalm poses the haunting question: If biodiversity is what motivates God to rejoice in creation, what would be God's response in the face of severe biodiversity loss? The answer is clear: a diminishment in divine joy. In addition, if God's joy is what sustains creation, then its diminishment can only entail creation's demise. The theo-logic of the psalm makes entire eco-logical sense.

4. Biodiversity Gone Wild in Job

Job chapters 38–41 feature one of the most evocative and detailed portrayals of creation in all of Scripture, surprisingly so in a book that focuses almost exclusively on a single person's suffering (for more detail, see [Brown 2010](#), pp. 116–34). In two fell swoops, a man of unassailable moral rectitude and unrivaled wealth, the "greatest of all the people of the east" (1:1, 3), is stripped of all security, prosperity, and health, all the while his character is attacked with increasing vehemence by his friends in the guise of "comfort" (2:11). With Job's own world turned upside down, socially, economically, and existentially,

YHWH responds by describing a world, indeed a cosmos, that extends far beyond Job's own imagination (chs. 38–41).

YHWH's answer to Job's plight consists of two speeches (38:1–40:2 and 40:6–41:34), each of which is introduced with the challenge for Job to "gird" himself. The first challenge addresses YHWH's cosmic "design" (*'ēṣā* [38:1]); the second deals with God's "justice" or governance (*mišpāṭ* [40:8]). The overall movement of YHWH's twofold answer is telling: It begins with detailing the cosmic expanses and moves toward recounting various phenomena, meteorological and biological, concluding with a detailed study of one particular creature, Leviathan. As creation's purview zooms from the cosmic to the particular, YHWH's cosmic poetry runs counter to the narrative logic of the ancient mythos of creation, which typically begins with chaos, proceeds to conquest, and finally to creation. The Joban account of creation, in other words, proceeds in the opposite direction of most creation counts: *from* creation to chaos. Lacking, moreover, is any human created in the "image of God" to rule the Earth.

From beginning to end, YHWH's discourse depicts creation as expansively pluriform. Geographically, God's creation is replete with domains and dimensions that far exceed Job's perceptual purview, as the first half of YHWH's answer makes clear (38:4–33), from the "pathway to where light dwells" (v. 19) to the "gates of deep darkness" (v. 17) and "recesses of the deep" (v. 16), as well as the "storehouses" of snow and hail (v. 22) and the "expanse of the earth" (v. 18). There also lies the "waste and desolate land," where channels of rainwater irrigate the desert (vv. 25–27). These are all places of which Job has little to no experience. Yet they testify, in Job's earlier words, to the "outskirts of [God's] ways" (*qēṣōt dēṛākāyāw* [26:14]), now brought front and center to his attention. YHWH has turned Job's world not so much "inside out" as outside in. The Joban account of creation is fundamentally centripetal in its orientation: YHWH presents a world in which the peripheral becomes centered, the world of the wild, while Job himself, as well as all humanity, is de-centered.

The major part of YHWH's answer features various wild creatures, each one given its poetic due in God's cosmic collage of life (38:39–39:30; 40:15–41:26). Continuing the cosmic tour, YHWH presents a veritable cavalcade of animals, specifically five pairs: lion and raven, mountain goat and deer, onager and auroch, ostrich and warhorse, and hawk and vulture. With the exception of the raven and the warhorse, all of the animals listed constituted wild game for Egyptian and Mesopotamian kings. The royal hunts were not conducted for entertainment purposes, thrilling as they may have been. They were staging grounds for the king's prowess on the battlefield, a symbolic exertion of royal power. By slaying wild animals, the king was "fulfilling his coronation requirement to extend the kingdom beyond the city to include the wilderness" (Dick 2006, p. 255), not to mention all the world. In the lion hunt specifically, the king identified himself as both the hunter and the lion; hence, the leonine carcass was never mutilated (Dick 2006, pp. 244–45). It is no coincidence, then, that the lion is the first animal prominently featured in YHWH's litany of the wild, and it is introduced with a challenge cast as a question, effectively turning Job's world on its head: "Can you hunt prey for the lion?" (38:39). Job is not to gird up his loins to kill the lion, as if on a royal hunt. He is to do so to *provide* for the lion!⁹

Another animal that is key to YHWH's answer is the onager or wild ass (*pere'/'ārôd*), a quintessentially free creature, according to YHWH (39:5–8). It despises the "tumult of the city," a place of oppression (v. 7). Instead, the salt lands, the wilderness, and the mountains are its preferred habitats (vv. 6, 8). The onager is no beast of burden, unlike its domestic cousin, the donkey (*hāmôr*), yet in Job's eyes it serves as an apt metaphor for struggling outcasts who must eke out their survival on the margins: "Like onagers (*pēṛā'im*) in the desert they go out to their toil, scavenging for food" (24:4b). From Job's perspective, the onager metaphorically maps the poor as pitiable scavengers subsisting in the wilderness. Harsher are Job's words six chapters later:

Among the bushes they bray (*yinhāqû*);
under the nettles they huddle.

A senseless and nameless brood they are,
stricken from the land. 30:7–8

Job is speaking of the impoverished. However, from YHWH's perspective, the onager is anything but pathetic or disreputable. It is a quintessentially free element, and the wilderness is its natural element:

Who has set the onager free?
Who has loosed the bonds of the wild ass,
to which I have given the desert for its home,
the salt land for its dwelling place?
It laughs at the city's commotion;
it does not hear the taskmaster's shouts.
It roams the mountains for its pasture,
searching after all manner of greenery. 39:5–8

The onager reverses Job's cultural map: Whereas Job identified chaos with the wilderness, a place of danger and demons, the onager looks toward the city as the center of "commotion" and oppression.

The animals featured in YHWH's answer are not named or defined in any way by Job, as in the *ādām*'s case in the garden (Gen 2:19–20). Far from it, Job is transported through the power of divine poetry into the wild to behold their dens and nests, their mountain lairs and vast plateaus, their livelihoods *in situ*. Job is driven imaginatively into the wilderness to encounter the beasts on their own turf. Yet he discovers the wild to be full of alien life filled with inalienable value, denizens endowed with strength, dignity, and freedom. The mountain goat kids "go forth and do not return" (39:4); the onager freely roams beyond human reach (v. 5); the auroch resists domestication (vv. 9–12); the ostrich fearlessly flaps its wings before the hunter (vv. 16–18); the warhorse exults in its thunderous strength (v. 22); and the raptors spy out their prey and clean up the battlefield (vv. 26–30).

All these animals live and move and have their being as YHWH intended, who serves as their provider, hunting the lion's prey (38:39), responding to the raven's cry (v. 41), and directing the raptor's flight (39:26). YHWH admires each in loving detail, and with such detail, Job is afforded a perspective that lies outside himself, a perspective that is YHWH's own but is one also shared by the animals. Job is invited to see the looming battle through the eyes of the warhorse, to spy out corpses through the eyes of the vulture, to roar for prey as the lion, to cry for food like the raven's brood, to roam free on the vast plains, to laugh at fear, and to play in the mountains.

In YHWH's second speech, two magnificent, terror-inspiring animals are profiled: Behemoth and Leviathan, perhaps drawn in part from the water buffalo or hippopotamus and the crocodile, formidable creatures in their own right. Whatever they are, these larger-than-life beasts are the quintessential embodiments of chaos, yet they are highly esteemed by YHWH. Nothing is said of YHWH's intent to subjugate either Behemoth or Leviathan, although YHWH's capacity to do so is acknowledged (40:19b); freedom reigns for both these fearsome creatures. Behemoth is claimed as the "first (or chief) of God's works" (v. 19a):

Behold Behemoth, which I made with you!
It eats grass like an ox.
Behold its potency in its loins,
and its power in the muscles of its belly.
It stiffens its tail like a cedar;
the sinews of its thighs are intertwined.
Its bones are tubes of bronze;
its limbs are like a rod of iron.
It is the first of God's works;
[Only] the one who made it can approach it with sword. 40:15–19

Lacking is any mention of humanity, let alone humanity's dominion. This is no anthropocentric world that is profiled by YHWH. However, here, in YHWH's presentation of Behemoth, Job receives a clue regarding his place in YHWH's wild creation: "Behold Behemoth, which I made with you (*'immāk*)." Job shares a connection "with" this monstrous creature. The preposition connotes a fraternal connection, such as the one that Job complains about regarding the jackals and ostriches in 30:29 ("I am a brother of jackals, and a companion of ostriches"). What Job bitterly laments, YHWH discloses as revelation, namely, Job's inextricable connection, whether desired or not on his part, with the wild. Behemoth and Job are deemed fellow creatures, and by extension, all the creatures of the wild. For all the alien otherness of creation, Job finds his place *in the company of* such creatures, a stranger among strangers. This single preposition invites reflection on what Job shares with these creatures of the wild, beginning with Behemoth: alien identity, resistance to control, fierceness. In YHWH's creation, Job not only discovers himself sharing common creaturehood *with* the wild; he also sees something of himself in each of these creatures, all sharing in the irrepressible exercise of life. In his bewilderment, Job is "be-wilded."

YHWH's answer to Job concludes with Job 41, the only chapter in the Bible devoted entirely to a single (albeit mythic) animal. With Leviathan, Job takes the plunge into the depths of chaos. This monstrous figure marks the culmination of creation in Job with these final words:

On the earth there is nothing like it,
a creature made without fear.
It surveys all who are lofty;
it is king over all the sons of pride. 41:25–26

In YHWH's world, this monster of the deep not only thrives but also assumes unrivaled royal status (41:26; cf. 40:11–12). It is Leviathan, not Job, who bears such status. So much for Job's self-fancy as king (29:25).

What kind of world does YHWH present to Job? A world that is terrifyingly and wondrously vast and alien, teeming with life characterized by fierce strength, inalienable freedom, and wild beauty (O'Connor 2004, pp. 48–56). Land, sea, and sky are host to myriad life-forms, all alien to the human eye and untamable to the human hand but all affirmed and sustained by YHWH. YHWH's world is filled with scavengers and predators, even monsters (cf. Gen 1:21), all co-existing and thriving. This world is God's wild kingdom.

In Genesis 1, creation is hierarchically defined with humanity receiving the "blessing" of dominion. In Psalm 104 and Job, humanity assumes no such role. If one wants to find a royal figure in creation, Leviathan, the quintessential creature of chaos, is the only candidate that qualifies in Job. Likewise, language of the "image of God" applied to humanity in Genesis is nowhere evident in Job, perhaps because the Joban poet considers all creation is made in God's image in so far as creation reflects in varying degrees God's wisdom and might. Often noted is the theophanic imagery associated particularly in the figures of Leviathan and the warhorse (see Newsom 2003, pp. 243, 251, 261; Habel 1985, p. 547). In any case, Job offers a radical revision of Irenaeus's often quoted line, "The glory of God is a living human being" (*Adversus Haereses*, 4.20). In Job (and in Psalm 104), the glory of God is a fully living creation, one that is biologically diverse.

Job's response to seeing creation redescribed by YHWH begins as a confession, one that is filled with wonder and humility:

Therefore, I declared what I did not understand,
things too wonderful (*nīplā'ôt*) for me, which I did not know. 42:3b

Job admits that he has spoken out of ignorance, but ignorance of what exactly? What specifically are the objects of Job's failed understanding, the "wonderful things" to which he refers? Clearly, they have something to do with what YHWH has revealed to Job, namely, a world filled with wild and fiercely free creatures. Job's response, in fact, shares similar language with Prov 30:18:

Three things are too wonderful (*nīplē'û*) for me;
 four I do not understand:
 The way of a raptor in the sky,
 the way of a snake on a rock,
 the way of a ship on the high seas,
 and the way of a man with a woman. v. 19

This numerical saying lists four “ways” that evoke for the sage a sense of bewildering wonder, two of which are drawn from the wild: the raptor (*nešer*) and the snake (*nāḥāš*). In Job’s case, however, many more than two examples of “wild” wonder are given in YHWH’s answer. Twelve animals, no less, are highlighted, most presented as objects of wonder and, in two cases, outright terror. The wide range of YHWH’s “wondrous things” have all to do with creation’s biodiversity, a diversity shot full of awe. Job’s response is fitting, indeed necessary in a time of severe biodiversity loss: wonder, not dominion.

From the lion to Leviathan, YHWH’s “wild things” are fully “served”: They are allowed to be who they are in the wild. No supremacy, whether human or divine, is exercised within YHWH’s wild kingdom, unless it is Leviathan, the designated “king” over human pride. The great biologist E. O. Wilson refers to what he calls the “Grizzly Bear Effect”:

We may never personally glimpse certain rare animals—wolves, ivory-billed woodpeckers, pandas, gorillas, giant squid[s], great white sharks, and grizzlies come to mind—but we need them as symbols. They proclaim the mystery of the world. They are jewels in the crown of the Creation. Just to know they are out there alive and well is important to the spirit, to the wholeness of our lives. If they live, then Nature lives. (Wilson 2006, pp. 57–58)

“And so we live,” Job might respond. Such is what Job experienced: YHWH’s wild things as signs not only of the “mystery of the world” but of the mystery of God, their creator. The Joban poet gives no indication why these creatures exist within the orbit of YHWH’s providential care. They simply are. However, together they make an impact on Job. Leviathan and Behemoth, as well as the lion and the ostrich, are all “glimpsed” by Job via the power of divine poetry, and Job comes away from the experience renewed for life as he raises a new family in a very different way, one that acknowledges his daughters as bona fide recipients of his inheritance, equal to his sons, countering patriarchal norms (42:15). In the course of YHWH’s answer, Job moves from terror to awe to a new way of being, all thanks to YHWH’s wild kingdom. Call it the “Leviathan Effect” (Brown 2010, p. 137).

In sum, one can agree with Terence Fretheim that “with God there are no alien creatures, no outsiders” (Fretheim 2005, p. 282). Granted, no creatures stand outside the orbit of God’s providential care. However, alien they remain, utterly strange and fully wild. As Job is compelled by God to behold Behemoth, and by extension, all the creatures of the wild, he also discovers something of his own “wild and precious” self (with apologies to Mary Oliver).

5. Conclusions

The evolutionary biologist J.B.S. Haldane (1892–1964) was asked what biology could say about God. He allegedly replied, “I’m really not sure, except that the Creator, if he exists, must have an inordinate fondness of beetles” (Beerling 2007, p. vi). Indeed, beetles, with their 400,000 species, make up close to 25% of all known animal species (Beerling 2007, p. vi). The three creation texts discussed above vividly illustrate, each in its own way, just how immensely “fond” God is of biodiversity. In Genesis 1, all of life created according to its “kinds” is declared not just “good” but “very good” (1:31), an approbation of creation’s intrinsic value, reflected in its diversity. Moreover, the first creation account of the Bible posits an expansive view of life that includes even the life-sustaining domains of the “earth” and the “waters,” which themselves are considered creative agents.

Psalm 104 and Job 38–41 go further to name certain “kinds” of life, from lions to Leviathan, as objects of God’s joy and praise. The psalmist lists various kinds of life, both botanical and zoological, and celebrates the various niches or settings each has in creation. The Joban poet describes various wild creatures in admiring detail for Job’s edification, emphasizing both their strangeness and their connection to Job, each sharing common creaturehood with him and even certain characteristics. Together, these biblical texts claim a high theological valuation of biodiversity by depicting God as a “biophile,” evident not only in God’s primordial creation of a life-filled world but also in God’s sustaining of it. The current crisis of severe biodiversity loss, due to anthropogenic causes, from climate change to deforestation and pollution, constitutes nothing less than a theological abomination.

Funding: This research received no funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ See, e.g., (Feldmeier and Spieckermann 2011; Keller 2003, pp. 129–35; Fretheim 2005, pp. 249–68; Keel and Schroer 2015, pp. 46–50; Levenson 1994; Middleton 2014, pp. 42–43, 106). At the same time, animal studies pertaining to the Bible are growing. See below in the main text.
- ² See above. For more historically focused studies, see, e.g., (Borowski 1998; Collins 2001; Sasson 2010).
- ³ The phrase is borrowed from (Grinspoon 2016, pp. 206–78).
- ⁴ For ancient Near Eastern background and theology, see (Smith 2010).
- ⁵ For an illuminating study on the “living landscapes” portrayed in the Hebrew Bible, see (Jørstad 2019).
- ⁶ The Hebrew is *lēmînô/lēmînēhû/lēmînāh*.
- ⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author’s.
- ⁸ The syntax is ambiguous, given the possible antecedents for the suffixed preposition *bô*. Thus, the text could be translated: “Leviathan, which you fashioned to play in [the sea]” (so NRSV, CEB). But this possibility is less likely in view of the syntactical proximity of “Leviathan” in the verse.
- ⁹ For background, both literary and iconographic, see (Strawn 2005, pp. 64, 161–74, 187–90).

References

- Bauckham, Richard. 2011. *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology*. Waco: Baylor University Press.
- Beerling, David. 2007. *The Emerald Planet: How Plants Changed Earth’s History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Berlin, Adele. 2005. The Wisdom of Creation in Psalm 104. In *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays in Honor of Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*. Edited by Ronald L. Troxel, Kelvin G. Friebe and Dennis R. Magary. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, pp. 71–83.
- Biblical Archaeology Staff. 2020. Lebanese Cedar—The Prized Tree of Ancient Woodworking. Available online: <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-artifacts/artifacts-and-the-bible/lebanese-cedar-the-prized-tree-of-ancient-woodworking/> (accessed on 4 November 2021).
- Borowski, Oded. 1998. *Every Living Thing: Daily Use of Animals in Ancient Israel*. Walnut Creek: Altamira.
- Brown, William P. 2010. *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brueggemann, Walter. 1996. The Loss and Recovery of Creation in Old Testament Theology. *Theology Today* 53: 177–90. [CrossRef]
- Cavalieri, Paola, and Peter Singer, eds. 1993. *The Great Ape Project: Equality beyond Humanity*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Collins, Billie Jean, ed. 2001. *A History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East*. Leiden: Brill.
- Dick, Michael B. 2006. The Neo-Assyrian Royal Lion Hunt and Yahweh’s Answer to Job. *JBL* 125: 243–70. [CrossRef]
- Feldmeier, Reinhard, and Hermann Spieckermann. 2011. *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology*. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. Waco: Baylor University Press.
- Foreman, Benjamin A. 2011. *Animal Metaphors and the People of Israel in the Book of Jeremiah*. *Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Forti, Tova L. 2008. *Animal Imagery in the Book of Proverbs*. *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*. Leiden: Brill.
- Fretheim, Terence E. 2005. *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Fullerton, Kemper. 1921. The Feeling for Form in Psalm 104. *JBL* 103: 43–56. [CrossRef]
- Gilmour, Michael J. 2014. *Eden’s Other Residents: The Bible and Animals*. Eugene: Cascade.
- Gottlieb, Fred. 2016. The Creation Theme in Genesis 1, Psalm 104, and Job 38–42. *Jewish Biblical Quarterly* 44: 29–36.
- Grinspoon, David. 2016. *Earth in Human Hands: Shaping Our Planet’s Future*. New York: Grand Central.
- Habel, Norman C. 1985. *The Book of Job: A Commentary*. OTL. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- Hiebert, Theodore. 1996. *The Yahwist’s Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Jørstad, Mari. 2019. *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics: Humans, Non-Humans, and the Living Landscape*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Keel, Othmar, and Silvia Schroer. 2015. *Creation: Biblical Theologies in the Context of the Ancient Near East*. Translated by Peter T. Daniels. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns.
- Keller, Catherine. 2003. *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*. New York: Routledge.
- Levenson, Jon D. 1994. *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Linzey, Andrew, and Dan Cohn-Sherbok. 1997. *After Noah: Animals and the Liberation of Theology*. Herndon: Mowbray.
- McKay, Heather A. 2002. Through the Eyes of Horses: Representation of the Horse Family in the Hebrew Bible. In *Sense and Sensitivity: Essays on Reading the Bible in Memory of Robert Carroll*. Edited by Alastair G. Hunter and Philip R. Davies. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, pp. 127–41.
- Middleton, J. Richard. 2014. *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Miller, Patrick D., Jr. 2000. The Poetry of Creation: Psalm 104. In *God Who Creates: Essays in Honor of W. Sibley Towner*. Edited by William P. Brown and S. Dean McBride Jr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pp. 87–103.
- Moore, Stephen D. 2011. Why There Are No Humans or Animals in the Gospel of Mark. In *Mark as Story: Retrospect and Prospect*. Edited by Kelly R. Iverson and Christopher W. Skinner. Resources for Biblical Study Series; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Publications, pp. 71–94.
- Moore, Stephen D. 2014. Introduction: From Animal Theory to Creaturely Theology. In *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology*. Edited by Stephen D. Moore. New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 1–16.
- Newsom, Carol A. 2003. *The Book of Job: A Context of Moral Imaginations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- O'Connor, Kathleen. 2004. Wild, Raging Creativity: Job in the Whirlwind. In *Earth, Wind, & Fire: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Creation*. Edited by Carol J. Dempsey and Mary Margaret Pazdan. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, pp. 48–56.
- Sasson, Aharon. 2010. *Animal Husbandry in Ancient Israel: A Zooarchaeological Perspective on Livestock Exploitation, Herd Management and Economic Strategies*. London: Equinox.
- Singer, Peter. 1976. *Animal Liberation*, 1st ed. New York: Random.
- Smith, Mark S. 2010. *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Stone, Christopher D. 1972. Should Trees Have Standing?—Towards Legal Rights for Natural Objects. *Southern California Law Review* 45: 450–501.
- Stone, Ken. 2018. *Reading the Hebrew Bible with Animal Studies*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Strawn, Brent A. 2005. *What Is Stronger than a Lion? Leonine Imagery and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*. OBO 212. Fribourg: Academic Press, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Strømmen, Hannah M. 2018. *Biblical Animality after Jacques Derrida*. Semeia Studies 91. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Tucker, Gene M. 1997. Rain on a Land Where No One Lives: The Hebrew Bible on the Environment. *JBL* 116: 3–17. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Tucker, Gene M. 2000. The Peaceable Kingdom and a Covenant with the Wild Animals. In *God Who Creates: Essays in Honor of W. Sibley Towner*. Edited by William P. Brown and S. Dean McBride Jr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pp. 215–25.
- Walker-Jones, Arthur. 2017. Naming the Human Animal: Genesis 1–3 and Other Animals in Human Becoming. *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 52: 1005–28. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Way, Kenneth C. 2011. *Donkeys in the Biblical World: Ceremony and Symbol*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns.
- Whitekettle, Richard. 2001a. Rats Are Like Snakes, and Hares Are Like Goats: A Study in Israelite Land Animal Taxonomy. *Biblica* 82: 345–62.
- Whitekettle, Richard. 2001b. Where the Wild Things Are: Primary Level Taxa in Israelite Zoological Thought. *JSOT* 25: 17–37. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Whitekettle, Richard. 2002. All Creatures Great and Small: Intermediate Level Taxa in Israelite Zoological Thought. *SJOT* 16: 163–83. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Whitekettle, Richard. 2003. Of Mice and Wren: Terminal Level Taxa in Israelite Zoological Thought. *SJOT* 17: 163–82. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Whitekettle, Richard. 2005. Bugs, Bunny, or Boar?: Identifying Zîz Animals of Psalms 50 and 80. *CBQ* 67: 250–64.
- Whitekettle, Richard. 2006. Taming the Shrew, Shrike, and Shrimp: The Form and Function of Zoological Classification in Psalm 8. *JBL* 125: 749–65. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Whitekettle, Richard. 2009. Oxen Can Plow, but Women Can Ruminant: Animal Classification and the Helper in Genesis 2.18–24. *SJOT* 23: 243–56. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Whitekettle, Richard. 2011. A Communion of Subjects: Zoological Classification and Human/Animal Relations in Psalm 104. *BBR* 21: 173–87.
- Wilson, Edward O. 2006. *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*. New York: W. W. Norton.