

God's Creation: How shall we understand God's Creation?

The Kinship of All Creatures

Mari Joerstad's careful reading of scripture reveals that the biblical world teems with beings, many of whom are nonhuman creatures with emotional lives, and nonhuman moral agents who are participants in God's covenant. Throughout the scriptures, nonhuman animals, and nonhuman elements of nature have personal relationships with God and human beings.

Joerstad organizes her exegesis according to the traditional Hebrew divisions of the Bible: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. Her writing style invites readers to take notice of personalities that run through various texts, while her descriptions fill in the features of nonhuman creatures as she introduces them: trees and stars, sea and soil, all of whom exhibit characteristics of personhood.

The land is a central character which engages in a personal relationship with God and human beings. As Joerstad points out, the ground itself takes personal offense at human transgressions. In Genesis 4, for example, the soil witnesses Cain's murder of Abel. In response to this violence, Joerstad explains, "the ground does not passively soak up blood; it actively takes the blood off Cain's hand." As the Hebrew text reads, "the ground has opened its mouth to take your brother's blood" (Gen. 4:11). The soil then curses Cain and promises never to produce food for him or let him rest: "a vagrant and a wanderer you will be in the earth" (Gen. 4:12). As the narrative develops, Joerstad notes, "the ground is now in control of Cain's life."

Later in the Bible, Job speaks directly to the earth, requesting that the land not treat him the way it treated Cain (Job 16:18). Job then calls upon the ground to bear witness to his innocence. "If my farmland has cried out against me, and its furrows have wept together," Job declares, "may thorns come forth" (31:38-40). He knows that the soil adjudicates; that the land judges sins. He knows that the earth which presses between his toes, which assembles under his fingernails, which reaches into the pores of his skin, is a companion who knows his secrets, the intimacies of his life. "In both cases, the ground assesses human conduct and responds accordingly," Joerstad observes, as it "reacts to human transgression."

Job is in relationship with the land and with other creatures. Eliphaz calls this relationship a covenant with the stones of the field and a peace covenant with the animals (Job 5:23). However, as Joerstad notes, translators shy away from using

covenantal language here. Both the KJV and the NRSV translate the Hebrew word *berith* in this verse, usually translated as *covenant*, as “in league with.” Translation committees seem to be uncomfortable with inter-creaturely covenantal unions.

Leviticus invites humans into a posture of mutual recognition with the ground, since the two moral actors are bound up together in relationship with the same God. Joerstad points out that Levitical ordinances guide farmers to see their resemblance in the earth: “Leviticus 19:9 says not to reap the corners of your field; 19:27 makes the same suggestion for the farmer’s hair: ‘do not trim the corner of your temples.’” One mirrors the other: “the farmer’s head is like the farmer’s field—you cannot look at one without thinking of the other.” Agricultural labor is a form of self-knowledge, a reminder of kinship between *adam* and *ollow*. As Joerstad puts it, “Leviticus 19 reminds me of a childhood delight in coming to school in an identical outfit as my best friend.”

Other personalities emerge in Joerstad’s book, like the trees who fight alongside David’s army. And, the description of arboreal warfare in Samuel 18:8 (“the forest consumed more people than the sword”). But commentators have spent little time on this verse, despite the lingering idea of tree soldiers.

Joerstad also describes other biblical war scenes where nonhuman actors play decisive roles. The prophet Deborah, for instance, rejoices in gratitude to the stars and to a wadi which joined forces to defeat the Canaanite commander Sisera (Judg. 5:20-21). Trees, stars, and water all participate in warfare when their beloved people, their companions, are under threat.

Joerstad also tracks the emotional life of nonhuman creatures, like a landscape’s joy at the return of exile people, which causes mountains and hills to burst into jubilation and forests to applaud (Isa. 55:12). In the prophetic writings, Joerstad observes, “trees will clap their hands, not because humans are the most important creatures, but because humans, animals, plants, and lands desire each other and depend on each other for well-being, flourishing, and joy.

There is joy and also mourning: the grief of the soils and trees, of plants and rivers. In a key reflection on her hermeneutics, Joerstad explains how she understands the biblical attributes of human grief to nonhuman creatures: “These texts do not betray a naïve anthropomorphism or an escape into rhetorical fancy, but a concerted effort to observe and respect the perspective of all persons, be they human, animal, or other-than-animals.” In other words, “if the earth acts in ways characteristic of a person’s grief, it is likely that the earth is grieving.”*

To recognize the personhood of nonhuman creation in these Bible texts,

Joerstad argues, one must participate in a shared form of life. To know God's interpersonal relationship with all members of creation means drawing close to birds and fields and compost living alongside God's beloved animals and plants and hearing their communication. "Understanding biblical text is not simply an intellectual exercise, but an exercise in how to live," Joerstad writes. We are ill equipped to interpret the text of the Bible, because our daily life is so far removed from the people who produced them.

For this reason, Joerstad doesn't restrict her conversation partners to the realm of biblical scholars. She also turns to contemporary indigenous voices for exegetical guidance. Quoting Kim TallBear, a Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate scholar, Joerstad explains that "to indigenous peoples 'nonhumans are agential beings engaged in social relations.'" Nonhuman "forces," including stones, thunder, and stars, TallBear writes, "are known within our ontology to be salient and knowing persons." Joerstad interprets scripture in conversation with contemporary animistic traditions**as she demonstrates how indigenous people experiences of nature resonate with biblical worldviews.

Her book offers spiritual groundwork for cultivating the kind of religious imagination that makes sense of the spiritual need people have for a holy space in which to confess environmental sins together and repent for the harm they've caused. Confession of our sins to plants benefits a biblical spirituality of interpersonal relationships with nonhuman creation as the prophet Joel demonstrates when he reassures the nonhuman neighbors with words of hope for mutual flourishing: "Do not be afraid, O soil, be glad and rejoice...Do not be afraid, O animals of the field" (2:21). To repent is to commit to a life where our neighbors no longer have reasons to fear us. It means, as Joerstad urges, committing to "live in such a way so as to not only stave off ecological apocalypse, but so that animals, trees, and pasture lands may be pleased to host us.

Joerstad's arguments adds another layer of relationships to environmental concerns. She bears witness to the impossibility of loving the North American landscape without loving indigenous people. The living landscape, as she calls our environmental context, are the familiar relations of indigenous peoples who have been entrusted with the care of their ancestral home, their natural siblings. To confess sins to nonhuman life should also include repentance to indigenous life, for the two are our family, each as kin to the other. "This project is an exercise in waiting, in listening to others who have listened to the world."

--Isaac S. Villegas, "All Earth is Grieving," *Christian Century*, January 1, 2020, pp. 30

-32 is a book review of *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics: Humans, Nonhumans, and the Living Landscape* by Mari Joerstad.

*Paul writes in Romans 8:22-23, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait....”

*Francis of Assisi also understood the kinship between human and nonhuman creatures as expressed in his Cantic to Brother Sun:

Be praised, my Lord, for all your creatures.

In the first place for the blessed Brother Sun, who gives the day and enlightens us through you,

He is radiant and beautiful with his great splendor, giving praise to you, most Omnipotent One.

Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Moon and the stars, formed by you so bright, precious, and beautiful.

Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Wind, and the airy skies, so cloudy and serene;

for every weather, be praised for it is life-giving.

Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Water, so essential yet so humble, precious. And chaste.

Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Fire, who lights up the night. He is beautiful and carefree, robust, and fierce.

Be praised, my Lord, for sister, Mother Earth, who nourishes and watches us,

while bringing forth abundant fruits, with colored flowers and herbs.

Praise and bless the Lord. Render him thanks

Serve him with humility. Amen.

**The Lenape, aka Delaware, Indians’ animistic worldview explains how and why they prepared and used herbal medicines as they did:

The entire world was under the control of invisible beings, or spirits. Some were great and powerful; others had lesser influence. In some, good seemed to dominate; in others, evil. The supreme power over all the spirits,

Kee-shay-lum-moo-kwng, resided in the twelfth or highest layer of the heavens. When a Delaware prayed, he repeated the prayer twelve times to

make sure his supplications reached the Creator. The lesser spiritual agents (the *Manitowuk*) served as messengers who transmitted prayers to the Creator, and also assisted in the control of the natural forces. The influence of these *Manitowuk* was seen in the sunrise and sunset, the stars, the winds, the snow, the spring rains that nourished Mother Corn, and in all the plants and trees—including those used for medicine.

The Creator gave the four quarters of the earth and the winds that came from them to four other powerful *Manitowuk* to supervise. He made the Sun and Moon, who were called Elder Brothers, and assigned them the responsibility of providing light for the creatures on earth.

In the mountains, and also in the heavens, lived Thunder Beings, who had the task of watering the earth. The Delaware visualized the *Manitowuk* as man-like creatures with wings, carrying bows and strong arrows that could shatter trees and destroy longhouses. Tornados were also *Manitowuk* in human form, but of giant size, and their long hair became entangled in the forests and villages, sweeping them away during windstorms.

Not only did the Delaware believe they were under the control of spirit forces, but they lived in a biological-related universe. Human beings, celestial bodies, physical forces, animals, and herbs that cured illnesses were all included in the kinship cycle of this family-oriented world where the earth was “Our Mother” and the forces of Nature were ‘Elder Brothers,’ ‘Grandfathers,’ and ‘Grandmothers.’

In summation, heavenly bodies, birds, animals, vegetation, and, in fact, all animate and inanimate things in Nature were believed by the Delaware to be under the control of spirits that were placed within them by the Creator. The herbs used for medicines were thought to possess attributes given to them by their indwelling spirits. Consequently, the relationship of the herbalist to the herbs he gathered also had significant religious connotations, because the healing was the work of the spirits.

The most vital and intimate phase of Delaware religion was a belief in dreams and visions. The vision was a point of contact, a line of communication between the everyday world and the supernatural world dominated by the Creator.

It is important to distinguish between the sought, or induced dream or vision, experienced by visionaries, and the unsought or spontaneous dream, which did not have religious significance. It is difficult for a non-Indian to

understand how one differed from the other, but to those to whom a meaningful dream was given were able immediately to recognize its difference from a casual or unsought dream. A vision is not a dream but occurred when an individual was wide awake and in full possession of his senses.

A Delaware Indian whose grandfather had been a medicine man specializing in children's ailments, told the following story of his vision:

My grandfather was hunting one time as a boy. He wounded a deer, but it got away. He was sad and felt bad. He cried and cried. The pines sang a beautiful song to him. He stopped crying and listened to the singing and the things they were telling him. The song was so beautiful that he no longer cared that the deer escaped. Later he had a second vision of a large bone in the sky. In a third vision he saw a serpent with twelve eyes. The serpent could see everything. His fourth vision was of tiny babies and unborn babies. All the babies were glad to see him. When he was mature he became a shaman and excelled at curing diseases of childhood.

Usually, a Delaware who experienced a vision received the revelation in his youth, but, as indicated above, it could also come later in life. It was also possible for a person to have more than one vision. Both boys and girls were

eligible to receive visions, provided they were *pilsu*, or 'spiritually pure,' which meant that they were chaste, and had faithfully observed all tribal customs, taboos, and any ceremonial responsibilities inherited by their families.

All visions regardless of their nature made a strong impression on an individual's life, often changing his mode of living. As long as he lived, the spirit revealed to him in his vision was something on which he could rely upon for assistance in time of need.

Among the herbalists and medical practitioners, whose visions qualified them as the intermediaries through whom the Creator had sent his healing powers was a woman known in her tribe as *Swam-xkway*, meaning 'great lady'. Her vision occurred when she and her aunt were riding together on horseback in the evening through the woods. Suddenly, the elder woman was taken ill with a kind of seizure, and she tumbled from the horse, and the child tumbled to the ground with her. The little girl was almost paralyzed with fright as the horse ran away, leaving her lying on the ground in the darkness beside her unconscious aunt. As she trembled with fear she looked around at the bushes and shadowy trees, and in fright she experienced a vision. The trees

suddenly took the form of friendly men and women, nodding and smiling to her. They spoke kindly to her in the Delaware language, uttering comforting words, as the winds rustled in their leaves. They told her not to be frightened, reassuring her that they would protect her, and that no harm would befall her. True to their promise the tree-spirits provided aid, and the little girl and her aunt were found by members of the tribe who went out looking for them. No harm came to them, and the older woman recovered from her illness. The girl's vision became a great religious experience in her life.

The meaning of the vision is clear: the plants and the trees growing wild in the woods came to the rescue of the Indian girl, as they had promised her. This gave her an intimate spiritual association with the woodland flora which would befriend her throughout life. It also gave her the spiritual authority to prescribe cures delivered from the plants and trees.

--C. A. Weslager, *Magic Medicine of the Indians*, Middle Atlantic Press, 1973, pp.38-50.

**Regrettably, the globally dominant Western European culture, including much of its institutionalized Christianity, relegated animism to being a "primitive" religion, falsely elevating its own form of religion. In actuality, animism is an extremely well-developed conceptualization of the world in which indigenous people live and provides a deep personal spiritual relationship with our Creator and a balanced relationship within his creation. Animistic societies acquired precise knowledge of their immediate natural surroundings which was vital for their very existence. Such knowledge was retained and communicated solely by means of oral story-telling, ceremonial rites and rituals, and, in some instances, pictographs. That is, without a written language.
