

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

Hebrew Thought about God and Nature and its Contemporary Significance

One of the problems which constantly faces the student and teacher of the Old Testament is that of its relevance. In a society where pragmatism is often predominant, one cannot but ask: 'In what way (if any) is a book containing the traditions of the Israelite people either significant or relevant to twentieth century man?'

The traditional Christian use of the Old Testament has been in terms of its Christological significance;¹ whatever inhibitions may be felt about this method when carried to extremes, the Old Testament does indeed set the stage for the New Testament events. But the Christological interpretation, although satisfactory in places, carries with it considerable difficulties. Thus, the 'cursings' of the Psalms are at first sight markedly out of harmony with the spirit of the New Testament.² Or again, the glorying in a 'God of Battles' in the Old Testament may seem very remote from God who is the 'Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' in the New Testament.³ This kind of problem has led some theologians to adopt a modern Marcionite view of the Old Testament.⁴

Furthermore, some of the dominant themes of Old Testament scholarship, which have also been considered significant for the understanding of the New Testament and modern society, have been cast into a new (and perhaps less significant) perspective by some important recent studies. To take an example, the concept of God's activity in history has been a central theme in many recent works on the Old Testament;⁵ this, it is held, was one of Israel's unique contributions to religious thought. Nor was the theme without its significance for the study of the New Testament.⁶ And in quite a different context, the idea of God's activity in history has been used in modern works dealing with society and religion. Harvey Cox, for example, places considerable weight on the influence of Hebrew ideas on modern society and thought. Of the more signifi-

1. Cf. S. Mowinckel, *The Old Testament as the Word of God* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1959), pp. 47ff.

2. But see C. S. Lewis' sympathetic treatment of the problem in *Reflections in the Psalms* (London: Fontana Books, 1961), p. 25.

3. Exodus 15:3; cf. my attempt to deal with the problem theologically in 'Yahweh is a Man of War,' in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 22 (1969).

4. E.g. C. E. Raven, *War and the Christian* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1938), p. 51.

5. G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1952); Th. C. Vriegen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (Oxford: 1958); S. Mowinckel, *The Old Testament as the Word of God*.

6. G. E. Wright and R. H. Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God* (New York: Anchor Books, 1960), pp. 255ff.

cant Hebrew concepts, he notes that the Hebrew idea of God's activity in history was important for subsequent thought, and, he says, it was a view which was startlingly at variance with the views of Israel's neighbours.⁷

Yet this theme of God's activity in history can no longer be considered unique to Hebrew thought and religion. There has been discontent with the notion for some time in certain circles,⁸ and recently a book by a Scandinavian scholar has shown clearly that the same concept was held in Mesopotamia and among the Hittites.⁹ It remains true that God's activity in history was a concept held by the Israelites, but it can no longer be considered unique to Israel.

Is there then another line of study which may help to explain parts of the Old Testament and also clarify the question of its contemporary significance? One such approach will be suggested in this article. It is not new, but it is an approach which, in the writer's opinion, has been given insufficient weight in the study of the Old Testament. The purpose of the article is thus exploratory in nature; it makes no claim to be exhaustive. If the suggestion stimulates further thought on the matter, it will have served its purpose.

The line of thought is a simple one, though with profound implications: it is the very sharp distinction which is drawn in Hebrew thought between God and nature. This is, of course, another way of describing God's transcendence, but since *transcendence* has become somewhat loaded with theological and philosophical content in Christian and other writings,¹⁰ we shall continue to talk more simply of the clear distinction between God and nature. This terminology is perhaps more akin to the unsophisticated manner in which the Hebrews expressed their ideas.

A brief sketch of the ancient Near Eastern intellectual context on this topic will serve as a background to our view of Hebrew thought.¹¹ In the mythologically expressed religious ideas of Egypt and Mesopotamia, there was an essential correlation between nature, man, and the gods. Society was intimately connected with nature, just as nature was inseparable from the gods. The lack of clear distinction between the gods and the phenomenal world was determinative to an extent for the potential of man's intellectual development. As Frankfort expresses it,¹² for modern scientific man the phenomenal world is an 'It' while, for the ancients of Egypt and Mesopotamia, it was a 'Thou.' Frankfort continues with the observation that since the 'subject-object' correlation is essential to all scientific thinking,¹³ the Hebrew distinction between

7. H. Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1968 edition), p. 49.

8. J. Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1966), pp. 65ff.

9. B. Albrektson, *History and the Gods* (Lund: Coniectanea Biblica, Old Testament Series 1, 1968).

10. Cf. G. F. Woods, 'The Idea of the Transcendent', in A. R. Vidler, ed., *Soundings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966 ed.), pp. 45-65.

11. On this topic, see H. Frankfort *et al.*, *Before Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 1964).

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 12f.

13. Although this may be overstating the case; there is an element of rudimentary science and pseudo-science in man at a much more primitive stage than this period in the ancient Near East. Cf. B. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1954), pp. 26ff.

God and nature was the emancipation of man's thought from its mythological restrictions.

The great breakthrough for the Hebrews, then, was the formulation of a concept of God distinct from the natural world. God was the creator of the natural world, apart from it and yet concerned with it.¹⁴ Thus, for the Hebrews, creation was a once-for-all act and God stood outside that act. Chaos was subdued, never to return.¹⁵ In Mesopotamia, and possibly Ugarit, there are creation stories, but in this case the gods themselves were participants in the drama of creating order out of chaos; they represented aspects of the drama and of the natural world. Or again, in Egyptian thought, the establishing of order was not a once-for-all act; there was constantly the threat of the return of chaos.¹⁶ Thus, outside of Hebrew thought, the balance of power between the gods (themselves representative of the natural world) had an immediate influence on the stability of the phenomenal world of nature.

The distinction drawn among the Hebrews between God and nature did not mean that God was *transcendent* only. Rather, both nature and history were the spheres within which God operated,¹⁷ but the sphere of activity was not itself God. God gave to man authority over the rest of the natural world.¹⁸ But, more significantly, God was believed to use natural forces for his own ends. Thus, in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5) – a battle song celebrating a victory over the Canaanites – victory was ascribed to Yahweh, but it was achieved by means of natural forces such as storm and rain,¹⁹ which were not in themselves identified with Yahweh.²⁰

With this brief background in mind, we may pass on to an examination of the broader possibilities of this theme for Old Testament studies, and after that look into the question of its contemporary significance.

Firstly, it can be stated that the concept of God's activity in history returns to its unique status when it is linked with this distinction between God and nature. For example, in the Assyrian Tukulti-Ninurta epic, the Assyrians won a victory over the Cassites with the aid of their gods.²¹ Likewise, Israel's victory over the Canaanites under Deborah's leadership was achieved by the aid of Yahweh. In both cases, there is thought to be divine action in an his-

14. For a fuller examination of Israel's world-view, cf. G. von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966), pp. 144–65.

15. It is true that the chaos-order theme returns in Hebrew poetry, but this is probably in terms of poetic imagery rather than a reflection of developing Hebrew religious thought; e.g., Psalm 74:13ff, and see von Rad's comments on this subject, *ibid.*, pp. 151ff.

16. E. Hornung, 'Chaotische Bereiche in der geordneten Welt,' *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Alterkunde*, 81 (1956), 28–33.

17. Cf. von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and other Essays*, p. 155.

18. Genesis 1:26ff.

19. Judges 5:20ff; cf. J. Gray, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth* (London: Nelson, 1967), p. 289.

20. For a comparison of Hebrew thought with Assyrian here, see P. C. Craigie, 'The Song of Deborah and the Epic of Tukulti-Ninurta,' *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 88 (1969).

21. The text of the Epic can be found in the following articles: R. C. Thompson in *The Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology*, 20, 116ff., and also in *Archaeologia*, 29 (New series, 1926), 128ff.; also W. G. Lambert, *Archiv für Orient-Forschung*, 18, 38ff.

torical event. The difference lies in the nature of the divinity. For the Assyrians, the gods who won the victory were representative of the natural order.²² For the Israelites, Yahweh used natural forces to win the victory, but Yahweh was considered to be distinct from the natural world.

A second way in which this concept may be valuable in understanding the Old Testament is in relation to the problem of understanding what is meant by *Imago Dei*.²³ The natural world was the creation of God, as was man within the natural world. But in Hebrew thought, 'God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion ...'²⁴ The problem related to this concept is essentially twofold. In what manner is man in God's image, and in what way is man distinct from the natural order? These two questions are really one question approached from different angles. As for the latter part of the question, man is not obviously different from the rest of the created natural order. He too is created, made from the same substance as that which surrounds him. There are quantitative differences, certainly, as, for example, the relatively higher degree of intelligence man has compared with the animal world. But what is the qualitative difference? Hebrew thought did not express it either in terms of a soul or of a personality, but in terms of man's function, namely, his dominion over the natural order. Now this dominion takes on significance in the light of the Hebrew distinction between God and nature. God, as Creator and as distinct from the natural world, is Lord of the world of nature. Man is part of the natural world, and yet, in that he is given dominion over it, he too becomes distinct from it. He is in the image of God in that he is peculiarly distinct from the natural world and has been delegated authority over it. This idea becomes even more clear if we accept Clines' argument for translating Genesis 1:26, 'Let us make man *as* our image ...'; the force of the statement lies not in man *having* God's image or being made *in* God's image, but rather that man himself *is* the image of God.²⁵ Thus the concept of man for the Hebrews is an extremely lofty one; he is the image of God; he too in a special way is distinct from the world of nature. The concept of the natural world as an 'It' is not simply an emancipating factor in man's intellectual and scientific development, but is also a source of religious emancipation. It indicates a relation between God and man which is distinct from any relation within nature. In the context of the ancient Near East, on the other hand, the relation between man and the gods was conceived of as essentially within the natural world.

Another example of the significance of the theme for the study of the Old

22. Thus Shamash, the Sun-god, was in the forefront of the battle (poetically speaking).

23. For the most recent studies on this topic, see J. Barr, 'The Image of God in the Book of Genesis,' *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 51 (1968), 11-26 (which deals with linguistic and exegetical problems), and D. J. A. Clines, 'The Image of God in Man,' *Tyndale Bulletin*, 19 (1968), 53-103, (a comprehensive coverage of the whole topic).

24. Genesis 1:26 (RSV).

25. The argument for this translation depends on the *beth* in *b'salmēnū* having the force of *beth essentiae*, which Clines argues for cogently, 'The Image of God in Man,' 75-80.

Testament is in its relationship to the Decalogue. 'You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make yourself a graven image ...'²⁶ Early Israel's situation in Canaan was one in which there was constant danger of syncretism with Canaanite religion. Syncretism would have been a defiling of the pure Yahweh faith. But at a deeper level, what was the danger against which the commandments guarded? Taking the former of the commandments quoted above, the adoption of another god or religious system would be in effect a blurring of the distinction between God and nature. Thus, worship of Baal would carry with it the implications of the Canaanite (or Ugaritic) pantheon. Baal was but one of the gods in the pantheon, one who struggled, for example, with Yam and Mot for supremacy under El.²⁷ The members of the Canaanite pantheon represented aspects of the natural world;²⁸ they were not distinct from it. Thus the tendency to faith in a god other than Yahweh was a tendency to lose sight of Yahweh's absolute distinction from the natural world. To worship Yahweh *and* Baal would have been a contradiction in terms; to leave the worship of Yahweh for that of Baal would have been to jettison the religious and intellectual emancipation from the natural world which the Yahweh-faith had brought.

The question of idolatry is closely related to this theme.²⁹ To an extent, it may be only symptomatic of the position represented in the previous paragraph. But idolatry could easily degenerate to a worship of the object. If the idol was worshipped, the object of worship would be part of the natural world; unlike Yahweh, the object would not be distinct from nature. Even if idolatry was only a symbolic form of worship, the implication would be that God was one who could be represented visually in terms of the natural world. The tendency to idolatry once again makes for a blurring of the distinction between God and nature.

Up to this point, some of the avenues have been explored in which the sharp distinction between God and nature can be helpful in the study of the Old Testament. But in what way is it significant for contemporary thought? The Hebrew presentation of the concept was on the one hand simple affirmation, without delving into the philosophical implications, and on the other hand a guarding against the blurring of the distinction. Perhaps the same approach can be adopted for the remaining pages of this article.

The affirmation of the distinction can be in both intellectual and religious terms. In terms of its intellectual significance, it is an affirmation of one of the most significant 'breakthroughs' in man's thought, one which was of profound

26. Exodus 20:3-4.

27. As in the Baal-cycle; cf. G. R. Driver, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1956), pp. 72-119.

28. E.g., Baal was related to the rain and storm, Mot (primarily 'Death'), was related to drought, etc.

29. Cf. von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, pp. 146ff., and on the contemporary significance of the theme, H. Cox, *The Secular City*, pp. 28ff. (for whom the significance here is the relativization of all human values).

significance for western man's intellectual development. The affirmation is not simply one of antiquarian interest, but a challenge to re-examine our systems of thought in terms of the way in which they have developed. Some of the implications are well stated by Frankfort.³⁰ A more recent affirmation was made in a television interview with Eric Hoffer.³¹ Hoffer claimed forcefully that the Hebrew view of nature was the greatest contribution of the Jewish people to human thought, the foundation of our present technological society.

The concern here, however, is more related to the religious affirmation. It is primarily affirmation, not the result of complex philosophical analysis. There is, of course, a need for a reworking of the concept into more relevant terms for modern man,³² but it remains an affirmation. The most useful way of dealing with the concept in contemporary thought may be to take two examples in which this classical definition is being blurred. A preliminary critique of a negative position is to some extent a positive affirmation. The two examples will be taken from different sources, one from within the Christian tradition and one from outside it. J. A. T. Robinson, the Bishop of Woolwich, will be the subject of the first critique. The second will be centred on 'Evolutionary Humanism,' particularly as it is represented in the writings of Julian Huxley.

The concern here is not a critique of the whole of Robinson's position, but rather an examination of the thesis with which he begins his book, *Honest to God*.³³ He states that the Bible speaks of God 'up there.' The background to the expression, he says, is the concept of a three-decker universe, which was once taken literally but was probably regarded as symbolic by the more sophisticated Biblical writers. The Bishop notes that the New Testament writers also use the same framework of thought. Later in the book, he quotes Bultmann as saying, 'There is nothing specifically Christian in the mythical view of the world as such. It is simply the cosmology of a pre-scientific age.'³⁴ The context of the latter remark is a discussion of Christianity, but Bultmann has been discussing the earlier world view on which the New Testament was dependent.

Is Robinson correct in stating that the Bible speaks of God 'up there'? In the light of the foregoing study, this kind of Biblical language can be seen to be essentially secondary. The primary affirmation of the Old Testament, expressed in the Creation narrative, is that God is distinct from nature. Thus, in a sense, God could not be talked of in terms of the natural world. He belonged to a different dimension. For the Hebrews, however, it was possible to speak of God 'up there' only *after* the initial declaration that God was not *within* or *part* of the natural order. The basis for this secondary type of reli-

30. *Before Philosophy*, pp. 241ff.

31. CBS news special, one-hour programme, 28 January 1969.

32. Cf. G. F. Woods' positive approach in terms of analogy, 'The Idea of the Transcendent,' pp. 50ff.

33. London: S.C.M. Press, 1963, pp. 11ff.

34. Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 34 referring to Bultmann in *Kerygma and Myth*, I, p. 3.

gious language, God 'up there,' followed from this initial declaration *and* the concept of man as the image of God. That man is the image of God is the ground of all anthropomorphic language. For the Hebrews to speak of God 'up there' was as much an anthropomorphism as it was to refer to God in more simple anthropomorphic terms. The writings of the Hebrews were not of a philosophical nature. They first affirmed – in our language – God's transcendence, and then realized God in anthropomorphic language. But we should beware of reducing the Hebrew concept of God to the limits of their anthropomorphism. Further, with reference to Robinson's quotation of Bultmann, the Hebrew concept of God and the related world view was not so much a pre-scientific cosmology as a cosmology which was one of the catalysts in producing a situation within which the scientific world could develop.

Thus the Bishop's opening thesis is itself over-simplistic. His remarks may be pertinent at this point to the Russian astronaut, who – if he was serious! – claimed on his return from space that it was now certain that God did not exist. Whether his words would be as pertinent to the American astronauts, who, faced with the wonders of space, read again the early part of Genesis, is another question. These remarks do not necessarily negate the Bishop's subsequent attempt to 'recast the mould,' but they do cast serious doubts on his starting-point. For to say that the Old Testament speaks of God 'up there,' even in a sophisticated manner, without first noting the Hebrew distinction between God and nature, and subsequently the secondary nature of anthropomorphic language, is to attack a position which is not held. The position will be returned to briefly in the summary, but first a few words must be said on the topic of 'Evolutionary Humanism.'

Over the last century, the Humanist movement has been growing in strength and during the last few years, especially in the United Kingdom, it has grown dramatically in numbers and influence. Whereas in previous years the movement was primarily atheistic,³⁵ a recent trend in certain parts of the movement has been in the direction of religious reconstructions. This trend may be seen in the writings of such men as Ronald Hepburn³⁶ and Julian Huxley.³⁷

Julian Huxley is a convenient example of both the trend and (in the writer's opinion) the blurring of the distinction between *god* (or the *divine*) and the natural world. The two most important essays for our purpose are 'The Humanist Frame' and 'The New Divinity.'³⁸ Huxley's position may be briefly summarized as follows. He starts with the assumption that, since the two world wars, there has been a complete breakdown in the traditional sys-

35. Certain branches are still atheistic, represented in the United Kingdom by the Rationalist Press Association, the National Secular Society, etc.

36. R. Hepburn et al., *Religion and Humanism* (London: BBC, 1964). Hepburn also has a chapter in H. J. Blackham, ed., *Objections to Humanism* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 29–54.

37. The most convenient summary of his position is in J. Huxley, *Essays of a Humanist* (London: Penguin Books, 1964).

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 76ff. and pp. 222ff.

tems of religious belief. These are to be replaced by a new system of ideas which he calls 'Evolutionary Humanism.' 'The evolutionary vision,' he says, is enabling us to discern, however incompletely, the lineaments of the new religion that we can be sure will arise to serve the needs of the coming era.³⁹ Appreciating that much of Humanist thought has been negative, he goes on to say that 'what the world now needs is not merely a rationalist denial of the old, but a religious affirmation of something new.'⁴⁰ The raw materials from which the new religion is to be formed are religious experiences for, in Huxley's opinion, science has not abolished mystery. In the light of the new religion, the universe is seen as a unitary and evolutionary process. Discussing the 'New Divinity,' Huxley is careful not to use the term *god*, for he considers the god-hypothesis to be no longer scientifically tenable.⁴¹ Instead he uses the word *divine*. 'The divine is what man finds worthy of adoration, that which compels his awe.'⁴²

We lack space to embark on a full critique of Huxley,⁴³ and shall confine ourselves to a few remarks on the relationship between the divine and the natural world in his position. He begins with the process of *reason* (which is of prime significance in Humanism) in order to negate the old religious beliefs.⁴⁴ But then, as an observer of the human scene, he notes that religious experiences and mystery still exist, and that they are valuable for mankind. Despite the initial negation, there is need to provide an object (that which inspires awe) to which these religious experiences can be directed. Having taken this step, he has now taken a step of faith (in a general sense), and can no longer justify his position purely on the grounds of reason. This, however, is not the point at issue. The significant point is that the new object of worship (or awe) is the *natural world*, the whole awe-inspiring evolutionary process. It would seem then, that in Huxley the course of human thought has turned full circle. The scientific age was triggered, so to speak, by the Hebrew distinction between God and nature. It was the incorporation of this distinction within the development of Greek philosophy, first in medieval scholasticism, but principally in the development of philosophical thought in the post-Reformation period, that created the intellectual climate within which the modern scientific age was to develop.⁴⁵ But, within the scientific age, the emancipating factor has become for some an hypothesis no longer tenable; man can no longer think of God existing outside the natural world. There is a return in Huxley's thought to the mythological age, the myth that the *divine* is somehow intimately connected with the natural world.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 227.

43. Cf. Hepburn's remarks in *Objections to Humanism*.

44. Huxley, *Essays of a Humanist*, p. 76 and pp. 107ff.

45. A fuller account of this process is given in M. Foster's study, 'The Christian Doctrine of Creation and the Rise of Modern Natural Science,' in D. O'Connor and F. Oakley, eds., *Creation: the Impact of an Idea* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), pp. 29-53. Several other essays in this collection are also relevant to the topic.

In sum: there is a tendency in modern times to blur the classical distinction in Hebrew thought (and subsequently in the Christian tradition) between God and nature. This may be through either a misapprehension of the Old Testament concept (so Robinson), or through a return to what is essentially a pre-Hebraic system of thought (so Huxley). The affirmation of the Hebrew distinction has its positive values. It is primarily one of faith; it may be made more *reasonable* through theological examination, through systems of analogy etc., but it remains basically an affirmation of faith. However, once the affirmation has been made, the natural world is then set in a context in which reason may be the principal manner of man's thought process. More than this, the Hebrews, having affirmed God's distinction from the natural world, immediately continued unabashedly and paradoxically to speak of God in terms of nature, history, and the regular affairs of man. It is this very paradox which at once sets man in a place of high responsibility in the world and at the same time gives a starting point for man to look for God's activity in history, the sciences, and all that is going on around him.