

On the Limits of Job's Theology of Nature

Bruce Ballard (Lincoln University)

It isn't easy to see what science and religious faith have to do with one another. Or, rather, it is all too easy to simply conform our beliefs to the cultural majority and count that as the most rational course. In academia and parts of the larger culture, the default belief is that science alone gets the truth about reality and that religion may serve as a comforting fiction or mystification of life by and for the weak. Needless to say, such sentiments generally proceed from religious illiterates. The best accounts of the relation(s) between the two must come from those with advanced study and training in both. These are comparatively few. Fewer still and much farther between are those who think as acutely and carefully about this topic as Prof. Carlson. So it is no small privilege to have him with us today.

That being said, philosophy will always raise challenges even to the best thinkers.

First of all, Carlson has a very tight reading of the biblical text of Job—much more careful and insightful than typical commentaries provide. This is in part due to his identification of the centrality of created nature for interpreting “natural” evil. As Carlson puts it: “Our understanding of creation is the key to understanding God’s plan for creation, and this is a prerequisite for understanding such natural evils as earthquakes, storms, devastating illnesses, birth defects, and death.”

As it turns out, natural evils are part of the created world. They are the ineradicable consequences of naturally beneficial processes. So sickle celled blood helps protect against malaria yet can lead to a number of other health problems. In his example of the destruction by tornado in Joplin, Missouri, Carlson compares the evil of the death of 158 people to the “many more” Missourians who benefited from the rains. These claims raised a number of questions for

this reader. First we may ask for evidence to support the claim that such negative consequences are really necessary. As we know from miracle accounts, God does not bind himself to precedent. Yet on Carlson's interpretation of nature in Job, it could seem to make little sense to pray for God's reversal of some typical pattern of disease since nature is not seen as needing repair. Perhaps such a prayer would be wrong per se. Jesus' miracles might also seem out of place.

A common danger to well-conceived apologetics on the problem of evil is to end up with evil not being a problem, ordinarily through a stoic lowering of expectations. But Christian hope makes sense as a looking forward to a corrected/perfected nature in a new heaven and earth where the lion lays down with the lamb (and not for leg of lamb) and where the whole creation groans no more.

Finally, while Carlson is surely right to say that nature in Job is not characterized as fallen, it is not clear to this reader that Job's account is incompatible with the fallen nature described in other biblical treatments of nature. I would be interested to know how we ought to synthesize doctrine here from a variety of biblical sources on Prof. Carlson's account.