

Terence E. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010. 160 pages. \$19.99.

“God’s approach to a suffering Job is not to take him to a counselor but to the zoo.” (75) This witty observation by Fretheim may serve as a catalyst for us to remember a critical component of his exploration of the nagging issue of the anomaly of natural disasters in what the Bible claims is the good creation of God. As Fretheim points out, Job is the poster child of a person who suffers undeservedly from natural as well as humanly generated disasters. Fire fell from heaven and consumed all his sheep together with all but one of the servants tending them. All his sons and daughters were feasting in the eldest son’s house, and a great windstorm blew the house down and killed them all. When towards the end of the book Job laments his unjust treatment by God, God answers Job out of the whirlwind, a natural force with disastrous potential: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” (38:1-4)

This reply of God is often heard as a putdown of Job for daring to question God, a tactic resorted to because God does not have any cogent reply to Job’s question. But Fretheim proposes that the series of challenging questions about the workings of creation that follow this opening question is not a way of shutting Job down but of expanding Job’s knowledge of the way creation works. God did not create a world in which everything functions in perfect order. There is a basic order and coherence to the world, but there is also significant wildness. God created not only humans but other creatures, including the earth and wind and water, to function according to their nature without God stepping in to prevent anyone or anything from getting hurt. God’s pronouncement in Genesis that the creation is “good” does not mean that it is complete or insulated from suffering. God’s creatures themselves participate in the ongoing development of the world by being what God created them to be without God controlling their every move. The disorder, the risk, the messiness, and the suffering that inevitably results is essential to giving creatures an independent role in the ongoing evolution of the world. Humans are only one species of such independent creatures participating in a highly complex system of varied forces. In order for there to be life and creativity there must also be risk and danger and, indeed, suffering.

We humans cannot control nature. We may have dreamed of being able to do that some day; and we may have imagined a God who should have constructed the world to run like a perfectly functioning machine. But those imaginings do not correspond to the realities either of our own capacities or of God’s qualifications for being God. What we can do is accept God’s invitation to Job to pursue a more adequate understanding of the world as God made it, seek to behave towards it in ways that respect its wildness with both its destructive and creative potential, strive to avoid contributing to its destructive potential through our own ignorance and arrogant disregard of the limitations of our own powers, and through prayer open ourselves to a newness beyond our present understanding and awareness of ourselves, others, the world, and whatever we believe or imagine or experience in relation to “God.”

The above paragraph is an attempt to summarize Fretheim’s response to the recently heightened struggle over the significance of natural disasters for our understanding of a god who is both creator of the world and a good god. In five chapters he leads us through a consideration of the creation accounts in Genesis, the story of Noah and the Flood, the book of Job, a thematic study of suffering and the God of the Old Testament, and finally the role of prayer in the human response to the dangers of the natural world. In the course of these chapters he identifies a variety of views about natural disasters articulated both by Christians and by the Old Testament

itself. The issues include character of the “good” world God created (finished or unfinished, safe or dangerous), the relationship of natural catastrophe to human sin and to the judgment of God, the meaning and nature of God’s “judgment” in the Old Testament, the natural consequences of human ignorance and sin that thread through the “loose causal weave of act and consequence” in the created moral order (49), various sources of human suffering (natural processes, freedom in creation, human sin and fallibility, vocational choice), and concepts of how prayer functions or should function or how God functions or should function in response to prayer.

Fretheim does not offer clear-cut answers to the problem of God and a world where the forces of nature bring suffering and death on innocent animals and arguably innocent human beings. He does draw us into richer reflection on the Bible’s own varied and complex and nuanced ways of speaking about nature, being human, sin, suffering, God, and prayer. Whatever answers we began with or whatever bewilderment we have borne, Fretheim, like God in Job, beckons us onto a path of discovering a world that is wider and more fascinating than the one with which we had started.

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