

Phenomenon

A Theological Analysis by Joel T. Kershaw



The drive to Buckhorn United Methodist Campgrounds overflows with anticipation. The mind races with thoughts of the overwhelming scenery of the mountains in northern Colorado that wait at the end of this familiar pilgrimage. The road turns from paved to dirt, and my truck bounces over the bumpy road as it winds its way through the forest coming over a small hill and down into the main camp. An evening stroll to my favorite place on Earth brings me to a bench at Green Cathedral. Green Cathedral is an outdoor sanctuary with a rugged cross at the front next to a fire pit. A center isle divides the log benches into right and left, and a small makeshift pulpit stands in front of the cross. (Attached picture—not of Buckhorn Campgrounds—taken from <http://www.campglenarden.com/campustour.shtml>, 1/28/05)

I sit on the horribly uncomfortable log bench with splinters pricking my legs, but it will never matter. I feel nothing of pain or sorrow, neither the stress of life nor pain of loss. I look out across the meadow onto the most beautiful mountains rising far in the west. They rise out of the Earth like waves of rock across the sea of mountain evergreens. The colors melt from white to purple and blue. The forests below add hints of green. It is July and still the snow lingers on the 14,000+ foot peaks, and I wonder how these mountains of my home came to be so beautiful. How did these sights develop and who or what is behind it? Who is the artist creating such wonder here in the Rocky Mountains? Is God somehow sculpting the world into a sanctuary? One fit for the worship of God. How must we respond to such beauty? These questions occur to me only after night has fallen for in sight of this wonder of God's creation I am unable to think. I can only stare in awesome wonder at the Rocky Mountains casting their giant shadow across the landscape.

Analysis

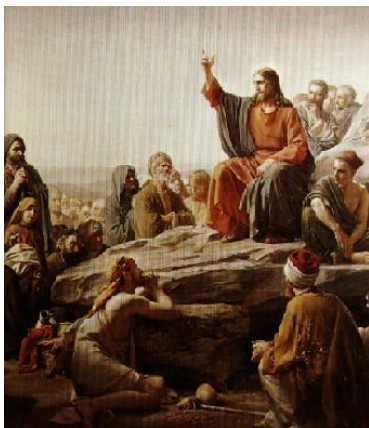
Now that I sit here in Boston far from my home and that wondrous landscape, I reflect on those questions that were so overpowered by my experience. As I begin to examine my experience of mountain beauty theologically it seems very natural to first look at the biblical witness. Mountains are found throughout both testaments of the Christian Bible. The Hebrews, having been delivered from slavery in Egypt are brought by Moses to a mountain where they set up camp. This is Mount Sinai (also Mount Horeb in other biblical traditions) While there are no physical descriptions of this holy mountain it is clear from the Torah that this mountain will be important in the history of these people. Most importantly this is where they come into covenant with Yahweh. It is at Mount Sinai/Horeb that Yahweh calls upon Moses to act in the freeing of his people. In Exodus 3:12 Yahweh tells Moses, "..., when you have brought the people out of Egypt,

you shall worship God on this mountain.”¹[1] Here this specific mountain is to be a sanctuary for the worship of God.

This mountain is also to be where the Hebrew people will receive the law, and enter into covenant with Yahweh their liberator. In Exodus chapter 19, we find an account of God revealing God’s self to the Israelites at the base of Mount Sinai. The mountain is described as like a physical manifestation of God as it is wrapped in a cloud. The people are even warned not to touch any part of the mountain under penalty of death. Here the Lord brings the Law for the people to follow. Then in Chapter 24 we find God and the Israelites entering into a covenant. This covenant is to become the basis of the relationship between God and the Hebrew people. The backdrop of all of this is the mountain. Like the scenery in a play, this mountain almost becomes a character in this story. It is the site of communication between God and the people. (Attached picture of Mount Sinai taken from <http://www.rc.net/wcc/israel/sinai100.jpg>, 1/28/05).



Like this mountain there are other sets found in the Torah. The encampment at Sinai is a part of the larger time spent in the wilderness. These times are often seen as a troubled time in the story. The people grumble about the provisions of God, and long for the diet of their captivity. The wilderness is not a safe place to live, and yet these years of wondering in this wilderness prepare the people for their final destination. As R.J. Berry notes, this time in the wilderness is “a formative time in the emerging nation of Israel.”²[2] Berry also notes that this is but only one example of the many important events in the Christian biblical account, which take place in the wilderness, and sites examples like John and Jesus’ time in the wilderness, among other.



As we turn from the Torah of the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament we now return to mountains as the site of some of Jesus’ ministry. In Matthew chapter five we find Jesus going up on a mountain to teach his disciples in what is known as the “Sermon on the Mount” Of course when one compares this scene with the different settings of these sayings found in Luke it is unlikely that this scene of a mountaintop sermon is an actual account. However it is significant that the author(s) of Matthew’s gospel placed this group to teachings in a sermon set on a mountain. In another account from Matthew chapter 14, after feeding a large crowd Jesus sends the disciples across the sea and retreats up the mountain to pray. Again we see both public and private worship of God located on a mountain. Regardless of the historical accuracy of these stories from the Old and New Testament they show the important place of the mountain as a sanctuary for the worship of God. (Attached picture of the Sermon on the Mount taken from <http://www.angelfire.com/al/Jesusexperience/images/mountain.jpg>, 1/28/05).

¹ All biblical quotations are taken from the “New Oxford Annotated Bible” NRSV translation.

² Berry, R.J. *God’s Book of Works*, p.212

Having now explored the significance of mountains in the biblical witness we now turn to a more basic question inspired by my mountain experience. Upon viewing these impressive mountains I wonder how they came to be. There are geological explanations having to do with water erosion over centuries, and the movements of tectonic plates deep within the Earth's crust thrusting dirt and rock toward the sky. But of course these explanations only scratch the surface. How did these mountains, or anything for that matter come into being at all? Assuming, with my Christian background, that there is a God and that God created the world, the question is how does God create and how does this creation reveal God to me as I sit gazing on the Colorado Rockies?

John Carmody, in his book *Ecology and Religion*, talks about this creation, exemplified for me in the Rockies, as a gift. Not that this gift is for the exploitation or even the control of human kind, but that creation, or nature, is a gift of God's grace.^{3[3]} In this work Carmody finds inspiration in Tillich's *Systematic Theology, vol.1*. "God is essentially creative, giving the power of being to everything that has being out of the creative ground of divine life."^{4[4]} Carmody admits that Tillich was referring primarily to human beings but sees an extension of this continuous creativity to the natural world. This would mean that God sustains the existence of everything including the Colorado mountains, so that, "the observer with eyes to see can catch a glimpse of the divine power and beauty, the divine mystery of the world's origin and end."^{5[5]}

This glimpse of the divine power in the natural world is characterized by Carmody as grace. James Nash reminds us in this discussion that we must resist a grace-nature dichotomy. Nash points out that the church has often limited grace to matters of personal salvation. But this overlooks God's role in sustaining creation. "Grace is not only the forgiveness of sins but the "givenness" of life."^{6[6]} This sustaining of creation is the expression of God's love for creation. God's grace comes to us not only through liturgy and worship but also through creation itself.

Another pondering related to creation is creation from what? As I look at the mountains I understand them to be made of rock and earth, tree and grass, but how did God create all of this. Are these mountains simply God's assembling creation out of the chaos of God's bag of Legos? Does the stuff of creation coexist with God at the beginning, or does God create ex nihilo, out of nothing, and what does it matter? If we return for a moment to the biblical witness, we find in Genesis God creating out of the dark waters. There is no mention of God creating these dark waters, however later thinkers developed this notion of God creating out of nothing. Nash also lends insight into this debate when he claims that this debate should be understood in light of a radical monotheism. Nash claims that this doctrine appears "vacuous from the perspective of philosophical speculation" therefore "it is hardly an explanation of origins."^{7[7]} Instead Nash claims that the purpose of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo is meant to support the divine sovereignty. If God is not coexistent with these dark waters of Genesis then God not only sustains the order of creation but also sustains the very being of all of creation.

³ Carmody, John. *Ecology and Religion: Toward a New Christian Theology of Nature*, p71-76

⁴ Tillich, Paul. *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, p.262

⁵ Carmody, p.75

⁶ Nash, James A. *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility*, p.95

⁷ Nash, p.96

In reality there is no witness to the creation of God so there may never be a resolution to this question, however Nash proclaims that the point should not be God created in a particular way. It should be instead that God created and therefore has sovereignty over creation.

Finally we consider the implications of God's having created the world in light of the mounting ecological crisis. Carmody writes in an attempt to jumpstart a theological treatment of this ecological crisis and forms a groundwork for a Christian response to that crisis. He outlines in the first four chapter of his text the massive abuse of nature by humankind. These abuses range from over use of non-renewable energy sources, air pollution from industrial expansion, and ground and water pollution of every kind to the social abuses of world hunger, and the fare distribution of wealth and resources. In light of this fact, my mountain scene becomes less an object of beauty and more a cry for help. If creation (nature) is a gift of God's grace and is created and sustained by God it seems we have a responsibility to coexist with nature. The coexistence does not mean that humanity has even a lopsided co-ownership of creation with God. As Nash points out, animals and Humans are created out of the same stuff in the second Genesis account, and the first account shows animals and humans created on the same day. These accounts bind humans to nature in relationship. Both are creatures of God the creator despite the variety of details discussed above. Human existence is linked through this relationship to the existence of nature, and this is further supported by scientific theories of evolution that claim humanity and every other form of life is connected through the very first living organisms.^{8[8]}

In returning to the biblical discussion, it seems that if we can experience nature as a sanctuary in the Hebrew tradition; as a place to worship and communicate with God and we can see this continued in the accounts of Jesus from the gospels, then we have a responsibility to preserve nature as a sanctuary. Modern Churches spend large portions of their financial resources on



building and maintaining man-made sanctuaries for the worship of God. It then seems imperative, given our discussion, that we as Christians have a responsibility to actively preserve a natural sanctuary created and sustained by God. I personally experience that natural sanctuary in the beautiful and towering Rocky Mountains of northern Colorado, but one could see it in the rolling waves of the ocean, the silent darkness of a cave, the breeze blowing over an endless field or the sound of children laughing. Ultimately nature it self is a sanctuary created and sustained by God's grace and it should be treated as such by those of us who are ourselves creations. (Attached picture of Rocky Mountains taken from http://www.blueplanetbiomes.org/images/rocky_mountains_sml.jpg, 1/28/05).

⁸ This discussion off relationship is based on Nash, p. 97-98

Works Cited

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