

The Book of the Word: Reading God's Creation

BY ELIZABETH THEOKRITOFF

The world is not simply a resource, or a garden entrusted to our care, but above all a revelation of the ways and will of God. How might we recover a robust yet nuanced understanding of nature as truly a book of God's words with several levels of meaning?

There is an oft-quoted saying of the father of monasticism, St. Anthony (251-356), which captures well the ancient Christian attitude to the world around us.

A philosopher once asked St. Anthony, "How do you manage, Father, deprived of the consolation of books?" Anthony replied: "My book is the nature of created things, and this is before me whenever I wish to read the words of God."¹

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The image of "the book of creation" has been remarkably enduring in the Christian world, both East and West. But that very fact easily masks some major changes in the understanding of what sort of book it is, how we are to read it, and what we may properly expect to learn from it. The original analogy between nature and Scripture suggests that nature too has not only a literal meaning, but spiritual and moral significance as well. But this shifts gradually into an emphasis on two separate books, each with its own proper language. Yes, God is author of both; but a growing preoccupation with reading nature in "the language of mathematics" progressively overshadows other levels of interpretation. Nature may still have been valued by Christian apologists as the source of a rationalistic "natural theology"

aimed at those unconvinced by the Bible, but it became increasingly irrelevant to the spiritual life of believers and their experience of God.

One of the most bizarre outcomes of this divergence between nature and Scripture can be seen in the late Stephen Jay Gould's doctrine of "non-overlapping magisteria," in which the empirical universe falls firmly within the "magisterium" of science, while the sphere of religion is "moral meaning and value." The irony of this (doubtless well-intentioned) effort to avoid conflicts is that, while Gould quite properly expects Christians to recognize levels of non-literal interpretation when reading the Genesis creation stories, he maintains a rigid literalism in reading the book of the universe. The entire handiwork of the Creator is thus declared irrelevant to our knowledge of its Author—a strange proposition indeed. Rather than accepting Gould's gracious offer that we can now be "spared from the delusion that we might read moral truth passively from nature's factuality," we need to re-discover a way of discerning in the depths of "nature's factuality" the spiritual and moral truth placed there by its Author.²

How, then, might we recover a robust yet nuanced understanding of nature as truly a book of God's words, with several levels of meaning? We might start with the insights of St. Maximus the Confessor (580-662), perhaps the preeminent "theologian of creation" in the Christian tradition but still frequently neglected in discussions of Christian cosmology in the West.

For Maximus, there is a distinction but no division between the two books in which the Creator Word has inscribed himself for our sake. The distinction serves to show how quite different expressions are actually teaching the same thing in complementary ways, and he never tires of exploring the congruences between the two. Creation and Scripture (by which he means, during his era, primarily the Old Testament) are equal in value and dignity, both equally essential for drawing near to God.

Creation and Scripture alike are fulfilled in Christ, in the "law of grace"; and the relationship between the three is so close that the Incarnation of the divine Word may be seen as the culmination of a "triple embodiment." Creation thus contains a paradox parallel to that of the Incarnation: the Word is wholly present within it even while being in himself wholly transcendent. The Word embodied in Jesus has also "hidden himself for us in the 'words' of existent things, so as to be spelled out by each visible thing as by letters," and been "embodied" for our sake in the letters and syllables of Scripture.³ The Word desires us to read him in both books; but both require effort, and carry an equal danger of misreading. The letter can blind us to the Spirit, and the outward appearance of natural things to their meaning.⁴ The letter kills, if we love it for its own sake, and "literalism" in reading the creation is no less dangerous: the beauty of created things can easily rob us of appropriate reverence if it is not looked at to the glory of its Creator.⁵ Modern examples of this pitfall are too numerous to mention.

In both Scripture and creation, then, we need to go beyond the letter to

discern the meaning of the words. But what exactly are the “words” of creation? Here we reach the core of Maximus’s cosmological vision, his understanding of the “words” of things, their link with the Word through and for whom all things were made, in whom all things hold together (John 1:3, Colossians 1:16-17). “According to Maximus, Christ the Creator-Logos has implanted in each created thing a characteristic *logos*, a ‘thought’ or ‘word’, which is the divine presence in that thing, God’s intention for it, the inner essence of that thing, which makes it to be distinctively itself and at the same time draws it towards God.”⁶

The notoriously untranslatable term *logos* is not only a “thought” or “word,” however; it is also rationality, meaning. A *logos*-filled cosmos is one that *makes sense*. We may see a “low-level” manifestation of the *logos* of things in the accessibility of the cosmos to mathematics (*logos* also means “ratio”), or in the breath-taking wisdom encoded in DNA, which we also describe in terms of “letters” forming “words.” What we should today call the “information” contained in a living organism often comes remarkably close to the concept of the *logos* that makes a thing itself.

At the same time, entities are inter-connected through their particular “words,” all of which inhere in the Creator Word. Maximus’s sense of solidarity-in-createdness, often eclipsed in recent centuries, is potentially restored to us by evolutionary biology and modern understandings of cosmology. Certainly, the world presented to us through these new discoveries is sometimes “read” in ways that make Christians uneasy: “the sacred” (if any) is located firmly within nature itself; man is merely a part of a great organism; “salvation” is to be found in integrating ourselves into the cosmos. But such ideas often arise because they are falsely seen as the only alternative to a sort of “watchmaker” deity manipulating creation from outside. An understanding of the “words of things,” however, enables us to embrace without fear the “sacred depth of nature” and give it its true Name, which is Christ. It is therefore no diminution of the human person that we should resonate to the frequency of nature, since nature is set ringing by the Creator Word in whose image we too are created.

Where Maximus, and the Eastern Christian tradition generally, take us beyond the insights of many contemporary scientists is in the conviction that the *logoi* in creation are also words addressed to us. They do not address only our reasoning brain, enabling us to understand how other creatures function; the book of creation is also filled with “words of [spiritual] knowledge” and even “manners of virtue.”⁷ Striking though this contention is, it is actually hard to avoid if one takes seriously the parallel between Scripture and creation. The preparation for such a reading of creation is not intellectual or mathematical, but ascetic. It means laboring to “put off the old man,” to acquire a state of inner peace in which we are not the plaything of our passions. Paradoxically, it is in this state, when we cease to see creation in relation to our own wants, that we become “king” and have all cre-

ation subject to us. Not that this royal position permits us to dictate the meaning and purpose of other creatures. Rather, it makes us in a certain sense their figurehead, allowing us to convey to God creation's own offering through what is usually termed "natural contemplation," that is, perceiving the spiritual sense in created things. (The very terminology here evokes "creation as bible," for "contemplation" or "vision" [*theoria*] is a technical term for interpretation of Scripture according to the spiritual meaning).

The need for ascetic preparation is no less obvious when it comes to garnering "manners of virtue" from the laws of nature. If we try to read the book of nature when we are still at the spiritual stage of piecing together sounds and syllables, it is not surprising if we come up with nothing more edifying than "nature red in tooth and claw," or at best the Creator's "remarkable fondness for beetles." "The soul's understanding of creation...is dependent on its relation to God. Only to the degree that the soul is itself ordered can it see the genuine order of creation as love, as goodness and as truth."⁸ Yet surely, with nature as with Scripture, we do not wait to be perfectly prepared before we ever start to read; the effort to read with understanding is itself part of our life-long ascetic struggle.



What more can we learn, then, about reading the book of creation? More specifically, what might we learn from the way we read Scripture? Concerning Scripture, contemporary Orthodox theologian Metropolitan Kallistos Ware highlights four principles: reading with obedience, understanding the Bible through the Church, emphasizing the centrality of Christ, and understanding the Bible as personal.⁹ We will look at how each of these might be applied to the book of creation.

The first principle is *reading creation with obedience*. "Obedient receptivity to God's word," Bishop Kallistos reminds us, involves a sense of wonder and an attitude of listening. Nature, like Scripture, possesses a fundamental unity and coherence: we cannot read nature, or discern our proper role in it, without looking at the total picture. This is true even on a purely physical level: how often have humans decided that some sort of creature or natural feature is expendable because it is inconvenient to us (e.g., predators or swamps), with disastrous results? But on a deeper level, we can draw also on the coherence between the two books to discern the deep structure of creation to which ecological interdependence points. It is on this level that we may grapple with the "hard sayings" of creation – things that seem to us pointless, cruel, or "bad design."

Our sense of wonder should be constantly intensified as discoveries of new intricacies in living organisms and complexities in physics reveal ever more compellingly the wisdom expressed in things; not only majestic mountains and pristine wilderness, but weeds and compost heaps and patterns in running water daily proclaim the dynamic presence of the Word. Natural

systems, whether flourishing or struggling, call us to listen for that pattern and meaning which governs our own lives no less than the rest of creation.

The book of creation is to be understood through the Church. Environmentally aware Christians generally recognize the importance of integrating the material world into worship, spiritual life, and our relationship with God. In urbanized societies, making the connection requires some effort; and within less liturgical and sacramental traditions, there can be a temptation to draw elements of “eco-worship” from non-Christian sources. Knowing about other people’s practices or rites can certainly help us see our own tradition with new eyes, but incorporating such material into Christian worship seems neither advisable nor necessary. From earliest times when Christians gathered to receive their Lord in bread and wine, the Church has developed a profoundly theological reading of creation which shows it in relation to the Creator Word, transformed by his presence within it, a chosen instrument for his communication with us. The annual cycle of worship celebrates Christ announced by a star, received by the waters at his baptism, transfigured on the mountain so that his very clothes partake of his glory, mourned by earth and heavens at his crucifixion, filling all things with radiance at his resurrection. Early Eucharistic prayers speak of the earth and sea praising the Lord (in the *Liturgy of St. James*) or offer thanks for flowers and bird-song (in *Apostolic Constitutions*, 8.2).¹⁰ Water and oil, fruits and houses and wells are blessed, uniting spiritual gifts with material blessings. Wood, stone, and mineral pigments come together in an icon to bring us face to face with Christ and convey his power. His saints infuse matter with the Spirit to such a degree that their bodies and clothes work miracles, and the places where they lived are suffused with holiness. All this should provide the lens through which Christians look at the world we live in and read its meaning.

The book of creation is Christ-centered. The “words” of things are the “Christ beneath me, Christ to my right, Christ to my left” of Celtic tradition. This is why modern Orthodox writers can speak of praying the Name of Jesus over all aspects of the natural world: “By pronouncing the Name of Jesus upon the natural things...the believer speaks aloud the secret of these things, he brings them to their fulfillment.”¹¹

A reading of nature as Christ-filled can subtly shape our perception of natural processes. The role in the evolutionary process of death, failure, and even extinction begins to look different in the light of him who gave his life as a ransom for many and his flesh for food. And when we come to the humbling realization that our survival depends on the earthworm and the honey bee, we recall that our Archetype “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Philippians 2:7), and realize that we neglect our servanthood to other creatures at our peril.

On the other hand, a Christ-centered reading of creation keeps bringing us back to the neighbor in whom we serve him. Loving service to non-human creatures is a natural extension of love for our brother, as we see time

and again in the lives of holy people; but it can never be an alternative.

To say that *the book of creation is personal* is not to invite an individualistic reading of it, or to say that it concerns only my inner life. The point is that, in addition to other levels of meaning, I can look for what God might be saying to me, today, through the natural world around me.

At one time or another, we have probably all heard a personal "word" in nature without much thought—a "Robert the Bruce's spider" moment.¹² But a more conscious reading can take us further towards learning "manners conducive to virtue." We should not despise the time-honored exegetical tool of allegory as one way of applying the "text" to oneself. This does not mean reducing other creatures to mere ciphers, denying the inner coherence of their behavior in terms of their own world or glossing over their suffering: we are talking about "both...and" interpretations, not "either...or." What allegory can do very well is to help us translate wisdom in creatures devoid of choice, or of moral choice, into wisdom for creatures with free will. As Maximus says, it invites us to "make a matter of deliberate choice virtues that are present in natures by necessity."¹³

This approach can help us with some of the most "difficult" features of the natural world: realities such as parasitism or infanticide, which can easily scandalize our belief in a loving God if we stick to a literal reading of nature. To take one example: we look with unease at the eagles who hatch two chicks, apparently as an insurance policy, but then often feed only the larger and stronger. A literal reading yields classic social Darwinism—a "winner-take-all society." A spiritual interpretation, however, confronts us with the mystery of "to all those who have, more will be given" (Matthew 25:29), reminding us that "having" in this case depends not on an accident of birth but on what we do with our "talent." Nothing prevents me becoming that eaglet that calls incessantly on its heavenly Father until it is nourished and grows strong on his grace.

There are many ways of hearing God's word in nature, but we cannot confine ourselves to contemplating those aspects of nature that strike our own logic as beautiful, good, and harmonious. As in our own lives, it is imperative to discern God also in the darkness.

We are under no obligation to use allegory; there are other ways of hearing God's word in nature. Just so long as we do not confine ourselves to contemplating those aspects of nature that strike our own logic as beautiful, good, and harmonious. Such contemplation too easily fixates us on a supposedly benign "mother nature," without forcing us to look deeper in search of mean-

ing. In the natural world, as in events of our own lives, it is imperative to discern God also in the darkness: the King of glory reigning from the Cross.



So what can we learn about “caring for creation” from reading the book of nature? First and foremost, our reading confronts us with the One who cares for his creation, and mediates his care *for all through* all. Spiritually as well as physically, our life and our growth towards God are made dependent on the entire nexus of other creatures with which we share the universe.

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4); and the world also is a word which comes from the mouth of God.”¹⁴ We are therefore to return the favor, serving other creatures both spiritually (making their wordless praise our own) and physically (considering their needs whenever our lives impinge on theirs).

The most basic way of taking care of a book is to maintain it in legible condition. Our yardstick in treatment of our environment will not, therefore, be the notoriously elusive notion of “nature” untouched by man, but rather the transparency of natures to the divine words within them. When we shape the natural world, the result should make God’s word in matter more and not less audible and legible. But our shaping is never so transparent that we can dispense with the “reality check” of places and creatures that speak to us of a power and a will beyond our own.

There is little point having a beautifully preserved book if we do not read it faithfully. A book is not an ornament. It instructs us; and if it is God’s book, it also judges us. We should not feel that we are being naïve or primitive if we read the gathering environmental crisis in precisely this light: as a wake-up call from God, an indication that all is not well in humans’ relationship with our common Creator. Such a perspective will color all our exploration of physical causes and possible solutions to environmental problems. And the “judgment” is a message of hope, for God’s warnings are always conditional: we need only turn to him to find ourselves on the path to restoration.

Above all, perhaps, the recognition of creation as charged with the words of God has the power radically to change our attitude toward everything we touch. It calls us to an attitude less of stewardship than “studentship,” humble receptiveness to what creation can teach. Limiting our wants and appetites ceases to be simply a moral obligation for the sake of sharing resources more equitably; it becomes the fast that prepares us for reading, placing between ourselves and the world “a wondering and respectful distance” from which everything becomes an object of contemplation.¹⁵ And our reading will keep sending us back with renewed awe to the book we hold in our hands.

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!”

Genesis 28:16

NOTES

- 1 Evagrius Ponticus tells this story in *Praktikos*, 92 (my translation).
- 2 Stephen Jay Gould, "Non-overlapping Magisteria," *Natural History* 106:2 (March 1997), 16 (10).
- 3 Maximus, *Ambigua*, my translation from J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, 91 (Paris, France, 1865), 1285D-1288A.
- 4 Maximus, *Questions to Thalassius*, 32, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, 90 (Paris, France, 1865), 372CD.
- 5 Maximus, *Ambigua*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, 91, 1129D-1132A.
- 6 Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, *Through the Creation to the Creator* (London, UK: Friends of the Centre, 1996), 11.
- 7 Maximus, *Questions to Thalassius*, 51, in *Patrologia Graeca*, 90, 476C-482D.
- 8 Bruce Foltz, "Discovering the Spirit in Creation: Orthodox Christianity and Environmental Science," in Daniel Buxhoeveden and Gayle Woloschak, eds., *Science and the Eastern Orthodox Church* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 105-118, here citing 117.
- 9 Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, "How to Read the Bible," in *The Orthodox Study Bible: New Testament and Psalms* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 762-770.
- 10 Texts of *The Divine Liturgy of James the Holy Apostle and Brother of the Lord and Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* are available in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Anti-Nicene Fathers, Volume VII – Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries* (1885), online at *Christian Classics Ethereal Library* (accessed May 9, 2012), www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf07.pdf.
- 11 A Monk of the Eastern Church, *On the Invocation of the Name of Jesus* (London, UK: Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1949), 15-16.
- 12 According to the famous children's story, when the good king of Scotland, Robert Bruce, was defeated six times and on the run from Edward I, he despaired of ever winning freedom for his homeland. Seeing a spider persevere to complete a difficult web on its seventh try encouraged Robert to carry on the fight for liberty. For a retelling of the story, see Rohini Chowdhury, "Robert Bruce and the Spider" (accessed May 10, 2012), www.longlongtimeago.com/llta_history_bruce.html.
- 13 Maximus, *Questions to Thalassius*, 51, in *Patrologia Graeca*, 90, 481B.
- 14 Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (London: New City, 1993), 141.
- 15 *Ibid.*
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