Nature in Creation Stories

By Chris Lentz

When walking along a path in a forested park, it is easy to pass by parts of nature without giving them a second glance. Everything from a woodpecker making holes in a maple tree to the slow, silent moving of the mountains can be taken for granted. These things happen every day in our world today, but there had to be a point in time where these occurrences came into being, gained character, and became what they are today. Various cultures have different views of how the earth, as well as nature, was born. Several noticeable examples are the Bible's view, that of the Penobscot, and the Crow people. Each believes something different about how nature came into existence, therefore each has a different view of nature.

Within the beginning chapters of the book of Genesis in the Bible, creation of the world, nature, and man according to the Judeo-Christian beliefs are chronicled. Over the course of six days, God creates everything from the heavens to nature to humankind, man and woman. After creating man, he says, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” (Genesis 2:18 NRSV) He then created the multitude of living creatures and brought them to the man. Whatever the man called the creatures, that was their name. In the beginning, nature was the companion of humanity given from heaven by God. But after Adam and Eve ate of the tree, one of the ramifications involved nature:

“...in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your face...” (Genesis 3:17-18 NRSV)
At this point, what was once a gift to man from heaven has become a necessity of survival.

Some time later, God simultaneously saves nature while he destroys it. In the time when humankind becomes so wicked that God actually regrets creating it, he instructs Noah, the last righteous man in the world, to create a boat, the ark, for God plans on destroying the life of the world with a massive flood. But God does not wish to destroy all life on the planet; he explains his plan to Noah:

“And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive.” (Genesis 6:19-20)

God then floods the earth, blotting out all life. He uses a force of nature, water, to destroy nature. In the Bible, nature is something created by God. He creates it at will, gives man dominion over it, but still reserves nature’s forces as a tool for his uses.

The Native American people known as the Penobscot have a much different view of nature. This is apparent in their tale of the origin of corn, called “Corn Mother.” After people are created by the All-maker known as Kloskurbah, population increases. These were people who lived off nature by hunting a finite supply of game. The more people there were, the less food there was: “They lived by hunting, and the more people there were, the less game they found. They were hunting it out, and as the animals decreased, starvation came upon the people.” (Corn Mother)

People then come to a deity known as First Mother asking for help, for food has all but run out. However, First Mother has no food to give, and she weeps. Curious, her husband asks her what is wrong. At this point, she explains to him her plan to feed the people. She tells him
that he and their sons must kill her and drag her back and forth on an empty patch of land, gather her bones, and bury them in the middle of the patch. She gives them instructions: “Wait seven moons and then come back, and you will find my flesh there, flesh given out of love, and it will nourish and strengthen you forever.” (Corn Mother)

When the family returns, they find corn, which they eat and plant. After they bury her bones, they find tobacco. In this sense, nature is deity, is in a way God. First Mother’s husband even says that the food is her goodness manifested physically. There is a similarity here with Genesis: both stories involve giving nature (part of it or as a whole) to humanity as a gift. In Genesis, it was the gift of companionship, while in the Penobscot tale it is the gift of food. The difference is nature flows forth from God’s hands in the Bible, while a part of nature is actually physically of a higher power in Corn Mother.

Yet another story involving higher powers and nature is the creation of all things according to the Crow people: Old Man Coyote Makes the World. In the beginning there was nothing but water, Old Man Coyote, and two ducks with red eyes. There was no single deity that created nature. In the beginning, there was only nature. After a while, they discover that there is ground beneath the water, and roots. Old Man Coyote brings up the ground and plants the root, creating vegetation; nature creates nature. Shortly after this, a striking similarity with Genesis pops up in a dialogue between the ducks and Old Man Coyote:

“Ah that’s fine, elder brother,” said the ducks after Old Man Coyote has made all these things. “How very clever you are.”

“Well, is something still missing, younger brothers? What do your hearts believe?”

“Everything is so beautiful, elder brother. What could be missing?”

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“Companions are missing,” Old Man Coyote said. “We are alone. It’s boring.” (Old Man Coyote Makes the World)

After this, Old Man Coyote makes people out of mud, in much the same way God makes man out of clay. The similarity in the dialogue is the fact that there are beings who are lonely, and a higher power creates companionship. Despite this similarity, the differences are evident in the same passage. In Genesis, God creates nature for people; in the Crow story, nature creates people. The view of companionship involving nature is reversed.

Throughout the creation stories, it becomes evident that there is one underlying major difference. According to the Bible, God creates nature; before God, there was nothing. God creates humanity, creates animals as companionship for humanity. Nature flowed forth from his fingers. According to the Native American tales, the higher power is actually nature. Nature itself creates humanity and/or keeps it alive. Nature creates humanity as companions for itself. Where man has dominion over nature according to Judeo-Christian thought, nature is the one in control according to Native Americans. The superior and inferior parties are laid out for all to see. Just who the inferior and superior are is all up to what you believe.

Sources

Corn Mother [Penobscot]. CORE Coursepack, Fall 2005.

Old Man Coyote Makes the World [Crow]. CORE Coursepack, Fall 2005.