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Abstract

This essay seeks to utilize ideas and texts found in the Hebrew Bible in order to historically contextualize the COVID-19 pandemic and to illuminate various existential, religious, political, and ethical issues raised by the current pandemic and our responses to it.

Keywords

Pandemic; Plague; Hebrew Bible; Environment; COVID-19; Creation

“An epidemic is a collective catastrophe that must be experienced separately.”¹

Introduction

Several decades ago, my mentor, Jon D. Levenson, contributed an essay to an anthology titled: *Confronting Omnicide: Jewish Reflections on Weapons of Mass Destruction*.² His thesis was quite novel and surprising, leading one scholar to muse aloud that Levenson’s contribution was the only essay in the collection that advocated for omnicide (the destruction of everything). In actuality, Levenson was not advocating either for a genocidal or a nuclear holocaust (the concerns addressed in the anthology). Rather, he was questioning certain assumptions presumed by most of the other essayists and by many other contemporary thinkers. One such assumption is that humans living today have for the first time been in a position to cause a worldwide cataclysm, and another is that

1 Nicholas Christakis, *Apollo’s Arrow: The Profound and Enduring Impact of Coronavirus on the Way We Live* (New York: Little Brown Spark, 2020), 211.

2 Jon D. Levenson, “Cataclysm, Survival, and Regeneration in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Confronting Omnicide: Jewish Reflections on Weapons of Mass Destruction*, ed. Daniel Landes (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson, 1991), 39–68.

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God always stands against such mass calamities. Levenson pointed out that for most of recorded history, reaching back to the Bible, it was widely believed that human misbehavior might anger God enough to unleash a cataclysmic punishment, an idea prominent in apocalyptic thought. It was only in the previous two or three centuries that those living in the modern world began to presume that scientific achievements would inevitably bring about ever better times, leading most of us to forget long held ideas that human behaviors could produce a worldwide cataclysm. Levenson was careful to distinguish between the older religious notions of provoking the Deity (who acted to destroy humanity along with portions of the natural world) and the contemporary realities of human-caused genocide or potential nuclear destruction. But he also illuminated many useful parallels between various biblical/classical Jewish and Christian religious ideas of actual or potential omnicide and contemporary secular views of humans causing worldwide destruction.

I will begin the task of placing the COVID-19 pandemic and the Hebrew Bible into productive conversation by highlighting a parallel to Levenson's insight concerning our forgetful contemporary mindset. One refrain commonly heard about the current pandemic is that it is *unprecedented*. Yet, even a cursory look over human history suggests that this is far from the case. Plagues, not to mention other natural disasters, are not unprecedented. Plagues have occurred with some regularity throughout human history, sometimes with devastating effect.³ The COVID-19 pandemic seems unprecedented to many living in the modern world, particularly to those living in first world nations, because we have had an unprecedented period of lifespans growing longer, coupled with our scientific ability to control, cure, or completely eradicate ever more diseases. The fact is, in 1900, the average U.S. lifespan was 47 years, partially due to much higher infant mortality rates.⁴ "More recently, average U.S. life expectancy increased from 68 years in 1950 to 78.6 years in 2017, in large part due to the reduction in mortality at older ages."⁵ My point is that our ability to manage many communally spread diseases, particularly in the past century, has been so effective that in the developed world, we tend to forget how often serious disease outbreaks have occurred throughout recorded history and still do occur in less developed nations even today.

Wrestling with Complex Issues in Thoughtful and Balanced Ways

In late August 2017, shortly after Hurricane Harvey deluged the east coast of Texas, a visiting professor of Sociology at the University of Tampa was fired for suggesting that since most Texans had voted for Donald Trump, and Trump tended to deny or at least had refused to acknowledge any major connection between human uses of carbon based fuels and climate change, these east Texas residents were receiving a type of "instant karmic" payback for their support of the GOP and its policies.⁶ Several years earlier John Hagee, along with a few other conservative evangelical pastors, suggested that the level of sin in New Orleans led to the destructive flooding that Hurricane Katrina left in its wake.⁷ A wide swath of politicians and commentators have criticized both these

3 For a discussion of the history of a number of earlier pandemics and how the COVID-19 pandemic is similar to and/or distinct from earlier pandemics, see Christakis, *Apollo's Arrow*.

4 <https://www.seniorliving.org/history/1900-2000-changes-life-expectancy-united-states/>

5 <https://www.prb.org/aging-unitedstates-fact-sheet/>

6 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/08/29/university-fires-professor-who-suggested-harvey-was-karma-for-texas-republicans/?utm_term=.997027817322

7 https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=_DwHRcvfYI

simplistic causal linkages between particular behaviors and specific natural disasters put forward by people on opposite ends of the political spectrum.⁸

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has raised questions concerning whether it is possible to understand such an event through the lens of biblical categories or the larger Jewish and Christian theological traditions. Anecdotally, I have heard several members of the clergy say that it is bad theology to think that one could derive any theological meaning from the current pandemic. Of course, even those who hold this view would acknowledge that many acts of charity and selfless behavior exhibited toward the sick and the vulnerable during the recent pandemic may have theological meaning. It seems to me, that just because one must be cautious about finding meaning in events that involve great human tragedy and suffering does not mean that no such meaning exists or that it is wrong to probe tragic events for potential meaning.⁹ Humans in general, and religious humans more particularly, are in the meaning finding and meaning making business.

Simplistic attempts to link human (mis)behaviors to particular natural disasters are often not only scientifically questionable but also troubling on moral and theological grounds. Even certain nuanced and thoughtful attempts to articulate the ways that various human actions have contributed to a particular natural disaster may be ill-timed or strike the wrong tone. Still, there are times when our resistance to acknowledging any connections between our behaviors and various difficulties or tragedies that we may experience reflects a failure to be self-critical and an unwillingness to learn from our errors and change our ways.

Here a few specific examples may be useful. When a bridge that was poorly designed fails and innocent people on it or below it are killed or seriously maimed, as happened in Minneapolis-St. Paul in 2007, or a building suddenly collapses and kills scores of people, as occurred in 2021 in Florida, no one objects if an inquiry is immediately opened into what went awry and whether some party involved in constructing or maintaining the bridge or building was at fault. Yet, even where human error may be the primary cause of a tragedy, it may not be easy to apportion blame. Thus, the liability for the Florida building collapse is likely to take years to sort out, and as is the case with the bridge collapse in Minnesota, it may turn out that many factors and parties own some share of the responsibility for this tragedy.¹⁰

However, in other recent cases, having an honest discussion about whether certain ways in which we live and conduct our daily business might be linked to harms we are experiencing or will experience in the near future has become politicized. This in turn short-circuits the conversation that one hopes should and would take place. For example, in 2017 when Hurricane Harvey inundated the east coast of Texas with over forty inches of rain, Scott Pruitt, then head of the EPA under Donald Trump, was asked if the recent spate of storms of record-breaking intensity in the Atlantic Ocean may be linked to rising ocean temperatures caused by human contributions to global warming. Furthermore, if this was actually the case, some journalists inquired: might the EPA now consider developing a plan to attend to this growing threat? He responded that those raising concerns

8 As just one of many examples I found with a Google search, this article highlights that both John McCain and Barack Obama rejected the attempt to link Katrina to the sinfulness of New Orleans: <https://www.mypainview.com/news/article/McCain-rejects-pastor-s-endorsement-8479792.php>.

9 For an interesting collection of Jewish reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic, several of which explore the tension in Jewish tradition between interpreting plagues theologically as opposed to seeing them as just an arbitrary part of nature, see Erin Leib Smokler ed., *Torah in a Time of Plague: Historical and Contemporary Jewish Responses* (Teaneck, NJ: Ben Yehuda, 2021).

10 <https://www.maslon.com/jacobs-engineering-i-35w-bridge-collapse-litigation>.

over global warming were being insensitive and acting in a politically motivated fashion, asserting that this was not the time to discuss such issues because doing so would distract from helping those many people in dire need of assistance.¹¹ In turn, some of those raising these questions responded, correctly in my view, that this was exactly the right time to be discussing such matters inasmuch as any plans to rebuild lost housing and infrastructure should be designed to withstand or at least mitigate against the effects of future major storms that are occurring more frequently and with greater intensity.

A growing number of experts think that human behaviors are intensifying the destructive force of certain natural disasters and might in some instances even trigger some natural calamities. Thus, there is currently a strong scientific consensus that humans are contributing to an acceleration of global climate change and that some recent patterns of human settlement and development have led to enhanced flooding, producing more devastating consequences for humans living in these flood-prone areas. Similarly, it seems that waste water injection wells and fracking have at times caused minor earthquakes and also polluted groundwater in the vicinity of such activity.¹² While the exact source of COVID-19 has not yet been determined, it seems likely that we humans, whether by living in ever closer proximity to wild animals (putting us in closer proximity to animal diseases),¹³ or due to laboratory research gone awry, are connected to its nascence. And of course, the contemporary highly interconnected world in which we live, something humans have fostered, has facilitated the rapid and wide spread of this novel virus.

Biblical Texts that Provide Perspective on the Current Pandemic

Unsurprisingly, the tendency to link human misbehavior to destructive natural phenomena is ancient and occurs with regularity in the Hebrew Bible. For example, it seems likely that the report in Amos 1:1 that Amos had prophesied “two years before the earthquake” serves to show that Amos’s prophecy in 9:1, where he relates that he heard God say, “Strike the capitals until the thresholds shake, and shatter them on the heads of all the people,” had indeed come to pass. In Amos 4:6–11, the prophet links famine, drought, and crop blight in a list of natural disasters that God utilized to get Israel’s attention and demand their renewed fulfillment of God’s religio-ethical demands. Many other connections between human sin and natural disasters are found throughout the Hebrew Bible and also occur within allied ancient Near Eastern texts. For example, a passage from Deuteronomy 11, recited as the second paragraph of the *shema* in liturgically traditional synagogues, suggests that the expected seasonal rainfall and hence the fertility of the land was tied to Israel’s religious fidelity while living in the land.

If you will only heed his every commandment that I am commanding you today— loving the LORD your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul—then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil; and he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you will eat your fill. Take care, or you will be seduced into turning away, serving other gods and worshiping them, for then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain and the land will yield no fruit; then you will perish quickly off the good land that the LORD is giving you. (Deut 11:13–17)

11 <http://www.cnn.com/2017/09/07/politics/scott-pruitt-hurricanes-climate-change-interview/index.html>.

12 https://www.usgs.gov/faqs/does-fracking-cause-earthquakes?qt-news_science_products=0#qt-news_science_products

13 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/science/2020/04/03/coronavirus-wildlife-environment/>

Within wider Near Eastern culture one only need turn to any of the Hittite emperor Mursilis's plague prayers to see that the ancients thought that a nature-based plague may have been sent as a punishment for previous or ongoing human offenses (cf. Exodus 7–14; Joel 1).¹⁴ While these examples involve a particular nation's sinful behavior, the biblical flood narrative in Genesis 6–9 implies that pervasive human violence and immorality resulted in a divinely induced worldwide natural cataclysm (cf. Gen 6:5–7, 11–13 and 8:21 in particular).

Of course, affirming that the universe is constructed in a way that the righteous ultimately receive their just reward and the wicked are done in by their own evil behavior, an idea that occurs with regularity in texts such as Deuteronomy and Proverbs, does not prove that the authors of these texts assumed that everyone experiencing a tragedy committed a sin. While Proverbs 26:27 states: "Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on the one who starts it rolling," the converse of such a statement need not be true. One cannot deduce from Prov 26:27 that whoever finds oneself in a pit is the one who dug the pit into which they have now fallen. The numerous complaint psalms in which the supplicant describes being persecuted by the wicked suggest that many who experience evil are not being punished for their own sins (e.g., Psalms 9–10). Still, it seems clear that the ancients often connected various disasters to previous or current human sinfulness as one sees from the host of biblical passages linking Israel and Judah's destruction and exile to national sinfulness or from the fondness for biblical authors to link specific sins to later punishments (e.g., David's sinning with Bathsheba results in several consequences articulated in 2 Samuel 12:7–14).

In contrast to this worldview, many secular and religious thinkers today understandably, but perhaps too quickly, reject many of the connections these ancient peoples drew between human actions and the occurrence of various natural catastrophes. Yet, there are a number of reasons not to be overly dismissive of those who make such linkages. First, it is a rather common, and I would suggest also a potentially productive response, to ask probing and self-critical questions when disaster strikes. Of course, victims or survivors of such an event want to know if some particular person was responsible and should be held accountable. But because many tragic events are complex in nature, victims and the larger community often tend to inquire whether their own or their forebearers' previous behaviors or the ethos of their larger society may have contributed to, exacerbated, or perhaps been the primary cause of a disaster that has occurred. Even if ultimately the conclusion is reached that no wrong actions on the part of the victims/survivors or of the larger community contributed to a particular disaster, conducting a moral inventory in the wake of a major tragedy and deciding to recommit to one's highest ideals is rarely, if ever, a bad response to a disaster. It should be noted that Psalm 44, an excerpt of which is cited below, contains a case of moral introspection in the wake of a catastrophic military defeat that is then *also* followed by an indictment of God for failing to protect his people, Israel. This indictment carries weight precisely because it occurs only *after* the supplicants in the psalm have taken moral stock of themselves to be sure they were not at fault.

All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten you, or been false to your covenant. Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way, yet you have broken us in the haunt of jackals, and covered us with deep darkness. If we had forgotten the name of our God, or spread out our hands to a strange god, would not God discover this? For he knows the secrets of the heart. Because of you we are being killed all day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O

14 For several extant examples of such prayers, see Itamar Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, Writings from the Ancient World 11 (Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 47–69.

Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? (Ps 44:17–24)

Another point to highlight is that although some today might view the tendency to conduct a moral self-inventory as a form of victim blaming or self-flagellation, doing so can in some instances empower the victims of such disasters and their broader community. Moral introspection may allow community members who feel that their behavior contributed to a disaster to make changes and take decisive action in order to rebuild their lives and strive for a better future. The prime biblical example is Israel and Judah's destruction and exile. One could argue that the Jewish people's long continuity owes much to the Israelite, Judean, and later Jewish proclivity to attribute the destruction of Samaria in 722 BCE, and Jerusalem in 587 BCE and 70 CE to national sins and not simply to the greater military strength of Assyria, Babylonia, and Rome.

Of course, regardless of how useful it might be, one could argue that the ancient Israelites or their Hittite counterparts or many people living today may be incorrect or self-deceived when they attempt to link their past behaviors to particular tragic events over which they may have had little to no control and that in some cases happened by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. However, as noted earlier, humans are meaning-seeking creatures. Many, or perhaps even most of us, tend to resist the notion that a given disaster happened in a totally random manner and that nothing could have been done to prevent or to ameliorate it. The truth is, quite often even when a disaster occurred for reasons beyond our control, there are things that we might have done to mitigate it, or things we failed to do that made matters worse. Finally, even if there was no way in which any individual or communal failure exacerbated the effects of a given disaster (in my view a rather unlikely possibility in most cases), people will want the losses not to be in vain, and thus they will seek to link their future activities of rebuilding after a particular devastation to the memory of friends, relatives, and community members injured or lost in the tragedy. In other words, while we want to be careful not to blame innocent victims, we also want to allow those suffering devastation the ability to rebuild, which often involves finding some type of meaning in what a hard-headed rationalist might perceive as either an event for which the victims bear no responsibility or simply a meaningless tragedy. Note Geertz's thoughtful reflections on how religion is in the business of such meaning-making, particularly when inexplicable suffering occurs:

Bafflement, suffering, and a sense of intractable ethical paradox are all, if they become intense enough or are sustained long enough, radical challenges to the proposition that life is comprehensible and that we can, by taking thought, orient ourselves effectively within it—challenges with which any religion, however 'primitive,' which hopes to persist must attempt somehow to cope.¹⁵

Returning to the COVID-19 pandemic, while it is wrong to blame people who contracted the virus even though they did not act recklessly, one should be able to question the behavior of those who acted foolishly or flouted health guidelines and then contracted the virus or, worse yet, spread it unthinkingly to others. Furthermore, the pandemic has revealed the shortcomings in various countries' abilities to respond well to such a crisis and also laid bare larger societal issues that should be remedied.

In terms of various governmental responses to the pandemic, the process of acquiring and distributing medical supplies/treatments in an equitable and sensible fashion (e.g., proper PPE, reliable and fast testing, vaccines, medicines to treat the severely ill) was frequently inadequate,

15 Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic, 1973), 87–125 (100).

inefficient, and chaotic. Even at this point in the pandemic the messaging is not always as clear as one would hope and at times the policy recommendations do not accord with the latest science.¹⁶ When one examines the shortcomings of larger socio-political structures, perhaps most prominent may be the substantial disparities in economic security between wealthier and poorer individuals and nations, which often directly affected one's ability to work from home, to socially isolate, and to access medical care. One can draw an analogy between social critiques arising out of the current pandemic and prophetic critiques of Israelite society that frequently arose in times of great societal upheaval caused by external military threats or natural disasters (e.g., famines, plagues), in turn often exacerbating or exacerbated by political turmoil. Of course, many biblical texts see these threats as stemming from immoral socio-religious behaviors on the part of Israel or Israel's elite. In a somewhat similar manner, the pandemic situation has led many today in the U.S. and elsewhere to proclaim that simply returning to conditions as they were before 2020 is inadequate because the pandemic has revealed longstanding injustices in the socio-political arrangements of our contemporary society. While these systemic injustices did not, so far as we currently know, set off the pandemic, many poorer and more marginalized populations experienced much worse outcomes than their wealthier more connected counterparts did. In short, it may be productive to ask larger and even transcendent questions about why we may be experiencing various tragedies and what we might learn from them.

Biblical Portraits of the Relationship between Humans and the Natural World

The current pandemic also sheds some new light concerning how the Bible might be placed into dialogue with contemporary debates surrounding ecology and humanity's responsibilities toward the natural world. Over the last few decades, the Hebrew Bible has been indicted by some as authorizing humans to exploit and degrade the natural environment, while held up by others as providing a model for how a culture can live in tune with nature. If one could list a single essay that sits at the root of these discussions it is Lynn White's, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis."¹⁷ Interestingly enough, White's essay is not focused on the Bible but rather on certain medieval Western Christian understandings of creation and the place of humans and nature within the created order. Yet a number of scholars writing after White, both those who find fault with the Bible and those who think the Bible is being unfairly blamed for our ecological crisis, frequently cite White's essay either to endorse or critique it.¹⁸ The one passage from White's argument that most clearly links our current ecological crisis back to the Hebrew Bible's creation ethos reads as follows:

16 As an example, the most recent science suggests the bivalent booster that targets the Omicron strain of COVID-19 is of limited benefit, mainly to those over 65 or those with co-morbidities. But the messaging seems to suggest even people already fully vaccinated and previously boosted would benefit from this updated vaccine: <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp2215780>
<https://www.news-medical.net/news/20230105/How-effective-is-the-bivalent-mRNA-SARS-CoV-2-vaccine-in-preventing-COVID-19-hospitalizations-and-deaths.aspx>

17 Originally published in *Science* 155.3767 (March 10, 1967), 1203–7 and then reprinted in David and Eileen Spring, eds., *Ecology and Religion in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 15–31.

18 The literature on this topic is extensive. Two examples with opposing viewpoints are Keith Carley, "Psalm 8: An Apology for Domination," in *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, ed. Norman Habel (Sheffield: Sheffield, 2000), 111–24 endorsing White's conclusions, while Richard Hiers, "Ecology, Biblical Theology, and Methodology: Biblical Perspectives on the Environment," *Zygon* 19.1 (March 1984): 43–59 critiques White's argument.

Like Aristotle, the intellectuals of the ancient West denied that the visible World had a beginning. Indeed, the idea of a beginning was impossible in the framework of their cyclical notion of time. In sharp contrast, Christianity inherited from Judaism not only a concept of time as nonrepetitive and linear but also a striking story of creation. By gradual stages a loving and all-powerful God had created light and darkness, the heavenly bodies, the earth and all its plants, animals, birds, and fishes. Finally, God had created Adam . . . Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes.¹⁹

Following James Barr's critique of both Lynn White's essay and of some of the wider philosophical and theological discourse that White's essay drew upon, it is highly dubious to assert that the creation theology of the Hebrew Bible is a major contributor let alone the primary cause of the current ecological crisis. As Barr cogently demonstrated in an essay published 50 years ago, White's essay built upon the work of some modern theologians who sought to champion the view that the Hebrew Bible's separation of God from the natural world ultimately laid the foundation for the rise of Western science.²⁰ White agreed with this general thesis, but rather than seeing this as a positive development, he sought to blame the environmental crisis on Western Christian theology (even while he argued that St. Francis' alternative theological outlook might be the solution to the environmental crisis). In particular, White suggested that the Hebrew Bible's creation story when linked to certain medieval developments that led to the melding of science and technology over a broad expanse of Western history gave rise to our current ecological crisis. Barr dismantles this claim in a number of ways, but perhaps most powerfully, by arguing that if the Hebrew Bible sits at the root of modern science, then why did it take so many centuries to bear fruit and why indeed did science and the industrial revolution bloom in Western Christian nations and not in Eastern Christian ones, or for that matter in rabbinic Jewish culture! He goes on to argue that the Hebrew words in Genesis 1:28 translated as "subduing" the earth and "ruling" over the animals only quite recently came to be read as implying domination over nature. He also noted that in Genesis 1 humans are not yet even permitted to kill and eat animals, but rather are originally vegetarians.

However, even if the Bible is not the root-cause of the current ecological crisis, White's essay and the many responses to it raise the following question: in what ways can the Hebrew Bible deepen our respect for the environment and in what ways might the biblical worldview be in tension with a contemporary ecological ethos? Certainly, many Hebrew Bible texts may provide scriptural support for contemporary environmental concerns. For example, the Hebrew Bible contains at least two of the earliest and rather rare instances of what might be called "environmental legislation" found in any ancient text. Deuteronomy 20:19–20 prohibits a scorched earth approach to warfare and mandates that the Israelites are not to destroy fruit producing trees during a siege. Only non-fruit producing trees can be cut down to make siege works. This legislation likely is critiquing actual Assyrian war practices. In Deut 22:6–7 one finds a commandment that prohibits Israelites from killing a mother bird when taking either fledglings or eggs from a nest over which the mother is brooding. The mother bird is to be shooed away and left alive to produce additional young in the future.

There are also the regulations surrounding the sabbatical year found in Leviticus 25 in which the Israelites are commanded to let the land remain fallow for a whole year once every seventh year. While it is unclear that the sabbatical land law was motivated by any type of environmental ethic, it accords with current scientific knowledge surrounding agricultural land use and crop rotation. Importantly, the text emphasizes that observing this practice not only gives the land rest but also benefits the wild animals (Lev 25:5–7).

19 Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," 1205.

20 James Barr, "Man Nature-The Ecological Controversy and the Old Testament," *BJRL* 55.1 (1972): 9–32.

Furthermore, the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2, rather than suggesting that humans are to despoil the environment, characterize humans as caretakers of the natural world (this is especially emphasized in the second creation account). And humans in both accounts are creatures themselves, not God, and thus are part of the natural world and by definition are limited in how they might act toward nature. Another place where the Bible may deepen our ecological ethos is in the many majestic invocations of nature imagery such as one finds in Psalm 104 or Job 38–41, the latter declaring that God created and cares for various wild animals and remote natural areas that appear to have no utility to humans and may even threaten them.

Having pointed out places where the biblical and contemporary outlooks on the environment may share commonalities, it is equally important to note that other ancient Israelite views of the natural world do not comport easily with the ethos of those engaged in environmentalism today. And, I would contend that some of the very passages that trouble contemporary readers may also be the most relevant in helping us think about today's pandemic situation. As just noted, some passages in the Bible highlight the more threatening and destructive aspects of nature. People living in the ancient world had far fewer defenses against the harsher aspects of nature than most of us living today. While many living in the developed world think of vacationing in or making pilgrimage to wilderness areas, in biblical times the wilderness was perceived as dangerous (Deut 8:15–16), and humans had to work much harder at keeping the dangers posed by nature from encroaching on human settlement areas.

It may be that the ancient awareness of nature's more destructive aspects gave rise to biblical assertions that God granted humans dominion over nature. While a number of scholars have pointed out that dominion over nature is linked to stewardship, the Bible does suggest in several places that humans have been granted permission to utilize and to exert control over parts of the natural world. A brief example is in order: After the flood God placed the fear of humans on the animal kingdom, and humans were then given the right to kill and eat animals as well as to protect themselves from animals that attack humans (Gen 9:1–6). Eco-conscious readers may well see such a passage as evidence that the Bible's view of humans having dominion over nature is indeed at the root of our environmental crisis and must be rejected.

Yet, in the wake of the pandemic, one might ask whether at least some aspects of the modern environmental outlook might need to be rethought. Although COVID-19 probably arose naturally like several other recent viruses, such as SARS and Ebola, few people have argued that we should let nature take its course and let the virus take its full human toll. Going further, I have not heard anyone object to scientists finding a way to eradicate the natural scourge of the COVID-19 virus.²¹ My point here is that the Bible's complex view of nature and its nuanced view of humanity's relationship to nature may now seem less outmoded and thus more relevant than it did before the pandemic. In short, the Bible acknowledges that at times humans and certain aspects of nature might be pitted against each other in a zero-sum game of survival. Simply put, whether said explicitly or not, we today value human life more highly than pathogenic viruses, even though such viruses are part of nature.

Ironically, it may have been the success of the modern technological manipulation of nature that created the sense that humans can live in easy harmony with nature and that humans threaten nature more than nature threatens humans. In fact, the romantic notion that before Western civilization

21 In contrast, one can find a discussion concerning whether we should or should not kill off all mosquitoes through genetic manipulation here: <https://www.wncystudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/kill-em-all>

arose, humans lived completely in tune with nature cannot hold up under scrutiny. While some traditional societies have lived more or less in tune with nature, since the dawn of human civilization humans have wrought tremendous changes on the natural world.²² In summary, scientific and technological advances almost certainly bear more responsibility for causing the current environmental crisis than do the Hebrew Bible's views of God's creation of the world and of humanity's relationship with nature. But the Bible can shed helpful light on how we might think about the current COVID-19 pandemic, as well as how we might imagine our larger relationship with and responsibilities toward each other, and our relationship with and responsibilities toward the natural world.

Where to Strike the Balance? Individual Rights and Communal Responsibilities

Many passages in the Hebrew Bible express both the human drive to exert some control over our natural environment and the awareness that ultimately our knowledge is quite limited, and we are often rendered helpless by forces beyond our control. In some ways the current pandemic has reminded us that even though we have a vastly superior knowledge of the cause, the course, and the possible eventual resolution of the COVID-19 pandemic as compared to what the ancients experienced, we still have far from perfect knowledge about exactly how things will unfold, not to mention our lack of control over the pandemic. The current pandemic has also revealed the limits of human autonomy and driven home that we are all part of a larger community to whom we owe various responsibilities. On this latter front, the Bible has much wisdom and insight to offer. Of course, we are unlikely to return to the biblical mindset that placed much greater emphasis on the community than the individual and highlighted the individual's responsibilities to the community more than any notion of individual autonomy, let alone a set of individual rights. Still, perhaps the pendulum will move just a bit back so as to remind us of our individual responsibilities toward the larger human groupings in which we live (family, town, religion, culture, nation, and world) and to reemphasize that any respective individual rights come in tandem with responsibilities we owe to others in our various communal settings.

Regardless of exactly where we strike the balance between individual rights versus an individual's responsibilities toward their larger communities, the recent pandemic raises complex ethical issues about which reasonable people may indeed disagree. Unfortunately, too much of the news coverage surrounding the pandemic left the impression that the moral decision calculus is fairly straightforward. Left leaning sources tended to endorse shutting down as much of society as possible for as long as need be, to stem the spread of COVID-19 until a vaccine could be widely distributed. However, with new variants occurring and vaccine inoculations waning, such caution has been extended into the indefinite future. Right leaning sources tended to argue that destroying the economic livelihood of millions of people is also likely to result in many deaths and perhaps engender other more dire societal consequences. One need only look at the large number of drug overdoses in 2021 and 2022 to see the knock-on effects of the social isolation caused by the current pandemic and likely by some of the pandemic protocols.²³

22 Lucas Stephens, Erle Ellis et al, "Archaeological assessment reveals Earth's early transformation through land use," *Science* 365.6456 (2019): 897–902.

23 Statistics showing over 100,000 U.S. overdose cases in 2021 and 2022 can be found here: https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2021/20211117.htm
<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm>

There are a number of vectors that we might explore here. How do we value both younger and older members of our society? How do we hold life sacred while recognizing that even when not living in a pandemic we regularly tolerate a certain number of illnesses, injuries, and deaths because we want to reap the benefits of societal goods such as travel by cars, trains, and planes? To be more specific, one can legitimately ask how much of our normal daily lives need to be substantially altered or totally shut down to protect the most vulnerable among us versus requiring the most vulnerable among us to take greater social isolation measures to allow most others to function more freely, albeit with some additional risks.²⁴ Ultimately, the preservation of human life must be balanced against other worthy goals such as allowing children and teenagers to attend school in person or enabling working adults to maintain jobs and support their households. If we opt to preserve the lives of elderly citizens even when this imposes very high economic and social costs on younger members of society, might younger citizens in turn expect older ones to pay higher estate taxes that could be redistributed to compensate those younger people for their lost lifetime earnings?²⁵

A related quandary is how far one should go in protecting the very aged and frail from COVID, when doing so may cut them off from family visits and other social interactions, causing their physical and mental health to deteriorate. I know of families who had an elder parent/grandparent in the final months of their life, and who, if they had been given the option, would have preferred maintaining daily contact with that relative even if it ran the risk of their loved one contracting and dying from COVID-19. The question they faced was which would be better for a family member who was nearing the end of their lifespan: to enjoy an enhanced daily quality of life produced by regular social interactions with close family and friends or to protect this relative from COVID-19 but by means of several months of intense social isolation from those dearest to them? While preserving human life is a high priority, COVID-19 may help us openly acknowledge the inevitability of death rather than reflexively avoid thinking about it, so that individuals and families can make end-of-life decisions in line with their own values. As I discussed in a previous essay critiquing our contemporary approach to illness and death, unlike ancient Israel, we tend think one is either fully biologically alive or dead, rarely acknowledging that we age, become frail, and may die over an extended timespan. Too often we treat death as if it is a curable disease rather than a part of life.²⁶

The Bible as a Resource for Communal Questioning and Lamenting

There are also some areas where the Bible might provide spiritual, psychological, and imaginative resources to those of us living in secularized societies that too often think in technocratic ways that fail to account for our fuller humanity. The COVID-19 pandemic is a tragedy that has left many feeling helpless and traumatized. When these situations occurred in antiquity, people mourned and lamented in a communal fashion, praying to God, not only for the strength to endure, but also to express a range of other emotions, including at times anger with God for God's failure to protect the community from seemingly unwarranted suffering. Many of the biblical Psalms articulate the complex set of feelings that pain and suffering—especially when experienced as undeserved or

24 See Yascha Mounk, "Open Everything: The time to end the pandemic restrictions is now," *The Atlantic* (Feb 9, 2022), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/02/end-coronavirus-restrictions/621627/>.

25 Along these lines, some U.S. states like Minnesota are already crafting legislation to compensate front-line workers who labored during the pandemic. <https://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/sessiondaily/Story/17076>.

26 For deeper discussion of our contemporary tendency to avoid openly acknowledging illness and death, see my essay "'Is there no Balm in Gilead?'" cited in the author note on the last page of this essay.

excessive—evokes in human beings and religious communities. Recent experiences of having to pray these psalms at home privately, attend funerals via Zoom, or meet in churches and synagogues either masked or outdoors or both—standing apart from each other rather than worshiping together in close community—adds a new dimension to our understanding of the psalmist’s expressions of alienation, and may speak to our feelings of anxiety aroused by prolonged physical isolation from one another. These communal and individual complaints, directed not just toward God but often pointedly *at* God, constitute a central part of ancient Israel’s worship and can serve as an important spiritual resource today.

The book of Lamentations and certain psalms (e.g., 137 and possibly 74 and 89) were likely penned in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of much of Judah’s populace. And as reported in prophetic texts like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as well as in Lamentations, the conditions during and following the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem frequently prevented those who lost family members the ability to mourn properly according to ritual protocols (see Jer 7:33; 16:5–9; Ezek 24:15–24; Lam 4:4–9). While the Babylonian siege was likely much more traumatic than most people’s experiences during the current pandemic, at certain points during the pandemic loved ones died intubated and in near total isolation, not infrequently separated from all of their family and friends. Then to add insult to injury family and friends were prohibited from gathering together to mourn the deaths of those they loved. While we had Zoom funerals, in my view these are a poor substitute for what occurs at in-person funerals and in the homes of those mourning dead relatives following funerals. Although the parallels are inexact, a variety of biblical texts may provide useful resources as Jews and Christians reflect on the pandemic and the losses and trauma it has caused and continues to produce.

The Continuing Value of Mytho-poetic Understandings of Catastrophes

At the start of this essay, I highlighted how Jon Levenson compared and contrasted ancient Israel’s mytho-poetic outlook on the human ability to anger the Deity and in turn cause a worldwide cataclysm to our contemporary notions of humans now having the ability to wreak worldwide destruction. One might even grant that this is an illuminating thought experiment, especially as it reminds us of aspects of human historical experience we have elided or forgotten. Yet many today presume that our scientific view is not only superior to ancient mythic understandings of our existential situation but that such a mythic outlook is at best unhelpful and at worst harmful.

However, a look at our contemporary situation suggests the limits of science in at least three ways. First, the scientific paradigm and scientific discourse are often not persuasive to many people in our society. This reality is being openly acknowledged by some scholars and scientists. For example, Harvard professor and historian of science Naomi Oreskes is convinced that science has proven that global climate change caused by humans is engendering a major environmental crisis. But she also has come to the conclusion that science alone is unlikely to persuade many if not most non-scientists to accept this technocratic assessment of global climate change, let alone to motivate them to modify their lifestyles in order to mitigate the potential effects of this slow-motion catastrophe. In light of this reality, she co-authored a science fiction novel set in 2393 but narrating a global collapse that occurred in 2093 because she thinks that using a science fiction novel to convey the potential impact of the environmental crisis is likely to be more persuasive to most non-scientists than having scientists spout data at them.²⁷

27 Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

Second, even among the portion of the populace that claims to follow scientific guidance on pandemic protocols one, witnesses behaviors that seem closer to levitical views surrounding the transmission of impurity than to following the current science about how to avoid contracting COVID-19. Thus, in more liberal areas one still encounters quite a few people masking in open uncrowded outdoor settings even though transmission rates are exceedingly low in such spaces.²⁸ Displaying a lawn sign that reads “We believe science is real” (sounding oddly like a secular credal statement) does not mean that one acts in accord with the most recent scientific thinking. In short, many who claim to follow the science have often behaved in ways that may be more ideological, less rational, and not in accord with the latest scientific evidence.

Thirdly, science is not simply a set of facts, but involves ongoing arguments over how to construe those facts. Scientists, just like those who listen to them, may have tendencies toward confirmation bias or may be influenced by other factors that may distort how they construe the data. One can see an example of the potential distortions in the science surrounding the pandemic in the recent uproar over what should count as a COVID-19 death and whether COVID-19 deaths have been or currently are being over or under counted.²⁹ If we cannot agree on such basic facts, it will be difficult if not impossible to set out the best guidelines for dealing with COVID-19 from this point forward or for being better prepared for any future pandemic. Furthermore, even as we strive to find common agreement on the facts, policy decisions surrounding global issues such as the current pandemic or our environmental crisis inevitably involve thorny ethical trade-offs. The Bible and the religious traditions it spawned have much to contribute to the discussions surrounding how one might best balance competing ethical priorities.

In conclusion, the Bible’s religious language and imagery that appeals to the imaginative, poetic, and mythic sides of our psyches can be useful in illuminating contemporary events like the current pandemic and our environmental crisis, in providing resources for communally lamenting the many pandemic and environmental related losses we are experiencing, in enriching the ethical dialogue surrounding difficult policy decisions, and possibly in motivating many unmoved by scientific evidence alone to act in more responsible ways. Yet, this need not mean we must accept every religious, mythic, or non-rational way of thinking. Just as we critique rational scientific or philosophical arguments, we can critically interrogate various religious and mythic ideas that often reside behind and affect how we think and act. Even while we strive to recover those religious/mythic ideas that enable us to better assess the complexity of our contemporary situation and help us act in thoughtful ways, we should critique and at times reject those religious ideas that may cloud our vision and impede us from meeting the many challenges humanity faces as we move deeper into the twenty-first century.

Author Note

This is the second reflection I have written exploring how one might place the Hebrew Bible into conversation with our contemporary approach to public health. The first essay, “‘Is there No Balm in Gilead?’: Health, Illness, Death, and Dying in the Hebrew Bible and Today,” *Int* 75.3 (2021): 196–206, was completed in early 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic began. The current pandemic has raised many new questions and issues, warranting this second reflection.

28 <https://missionlocal.org/2021/04/as-cdc-and-experts-say-throw-off-the-mask-outdoors-san-franciscans-remain-apprehensive/>

29 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/01/19/covid-pandemic-deaths-hospitalizations-honest-accounting/>