Article

God, Man, and Nature in the Judeo-Christian Creation Narrative

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**Abstract**

This article examines three different aspects of the Jewish-Christian creation story: the first, concerns the separation between God and the world; the second, concerns humanity’s partnership in creation; and the third, discusses creation as a hierarchy. These different aspects will be examined in the context of the ambivalent relationship – rooted in Western culture – between human beings and nature. This relationship is a deep structure whose beginning is religious yet continues in a secular context. Deep structures that orginate in religions remain in culture even after they have undergone processes of secularization.

We will investigate the roots of humanity’s relationship with nature in the creation story as it appears in the biblical text and and the Christian tradition, comparing it also with the classical heritage. Christianity, as a historical religion, attaches crucial importance to God's intervention in history: starting with the creation of the world, through the revelation to individuals, and concluding with the future redemption. Prior to the acceptance of the belief in the Holy Trinity, Pauline Christianity presented the creed that there is one God, the creator of the world Who is separate from nature and its master. In Greek thought, the world was not created by an external force. The gods did not create it, but were created during its development and are also subject to its laws.

Western culture, based on the Judeo-Christian tradition, sanctifies the belief that the world was created for the sake of the human race. Moreover, the biblical foundation presents a pre-existing prominent hierarchy in many areas of creation. Christianity adopted the biblical cosmology and with it the hierarchical gradation between God, humans, and the rest of creation. This relationship of humanity to other creatures forms a cultural basis for the unsustainable relationship between humanity and nature.

**Keywords:** Jewish-Christian narrative, unsustainibility, creation story, hierarchy in creation.

1. Introduction

The Judeo-Christian creation narrative has exercised an enormous influence on Western culture’s attitude toward nature. For Christians, the first three chapters of the book of Genesis are foundational for understanding not only human nature but also the nature of God. The book of Genesis opens with two accounts of creation that have captured both the religious and popular imaginations over the centuries. Indeed, some claim that no other part of Jewish and Christian scriptures has stimulated as much creativity or controversy as the opening chapters of Genesis (Sondy, Gonzaler & Green 2021, 90–91). Lynn White (1967) was one of the first scholars to study the relationship between religious values and environmental attitudes. White maintained that by promoting an orientation of ‘dominance-over-nature’, Judeo-Christian traditions contributed to a culture of ecological crisis. In his view, commitment to the ‘dominion’ belief leads to lower levels of environmental concern and even to environmentally destructive behavior. Since White first published his article, scholars have examined the relationship between religion and environmental attitudes in the Judeo-Christian West and discovered that the relationship is more complicated than White’s thesis assumed (Kanagy and Nelson 1995), with no direct correlation between Christian religious devotion and pro-dominion attitudes toward nature (Hayes and Marangudakis 2001).

Humanity’s alienation from nature constitutes a consistent marker of Western civilization across time, manifesting first as religious beliefs and later evolving into secular mores—and in this way remaining a structural underpinning of Western culture across time, even as religious belief evolved beyond recognition. That is, the structural underpinnings of alienation from nature have persisted in Western culture, even after undergoing secularization that has emptied them of religious significance. This is consistent with Jung’s (1987) assertion that when world views are deeply embedded in religious experience, they have a particular propensity to be preserved in secular experience.

In this paper, I will examine man’s dominion over nature as developed in the Judeo-Christian creation narrative across three axes. The first lies in the idea of God’s separation from the world, the second concerns humanity as a partner in creation, and the third concerns creation as a hierarchical system. Each of these was revolutionary in the context of ancient Near Eastern religion, which assumed the gods’ subservience to nature and fate. This revolution in religious consciousness, while having since undergone countless transformations, continues to be present in Western culture, and has had far-reaching implications that remain evident to this day.

The culture and Christian religion of the West are based on the Jewish scriptures, which were spread across the Roman Empire. Christianity based itself on the Bible along with additional Jewish texts that were cut off from the Jewish canon by rabbinic Judaism over 1500 years ago, and have remained doubtful ever since (Malkin 2003:44). The Bible is perceived by both religions as a sacred text, absolute truth, and a product of divine revelation. The Lutheran Reformation further strengthened the importance of the scriptures, while the Catholic Church augmented the authority of the scriptures with that of tradition. Luther, however, denied this traditional authority with the argument of sola scriptura. The Reformation thus placed the Jewish scriptures at the heart of European identity (HaCohen 2006:23). Thus, I will examine the roots of the pro-dominion attitude toward nature in the biblical text and as relates to the Christian tradition through a consideration of comparisons with the classical tradition.

2. God’s Separation from the World

The conception of the world as created by a creator who determines the design of all things according to his will is agreed upon by the three monotheistic religions and is rooted in the Bible. ‘The fundamental idea of the Israelite faith was bound from the beginning to a total split between God and the world … God and the world are two beings’ (Kaufmann 1971:245). The God of the Bible is not enslaved to nature or to matter; he is the creator of nature by the power of His sovereign will. God does not battle fate or time, because he is ‘calling the generations from the beginning’ (Isa. 41/4). An outgrowth of Judaism, Christianity—which claims that Jesus came to fulfill the prophecies of the prophets of Israel—considers Jewish scriptures to be sacred, including the creation narrative (Kleinberg 1995: 31–32). Paul was the first to regard the opposition between spirit and flesh as central (Klausner B 1954:195; Flusser 1980:54; Flusser 2009:171). Jesus’s resurrection caused the creation of a new person who was ‘born again,’ ‘For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin’ (Rom. 6.6).[[1]](#footnote-1)

In both Judaism and Christianity, Genesis 1 stresses the idea that God created a teleological and ordered cosmos from chaos (Sondy, Gonzaler & Green 2021: 91–92). This is fundamentally different from gods who are bound by the laws and orders of nature, who are born and give birth to every living creature, and who can be defeated and expelled (Gelander 2009:86). According to the biblical belief system, the power of God transcends every phenomenon of nature, and thus, it is crucial that he knows God’s will rather than be familiar with the order of nature itself. The idea of a Greek kosmos, i.e., an entirety of all things, which is complete in itself, is foreign to biblical thought. Biblical thought succeeded in overpowering the tendency of antiquity to endow nature with mysterious power; nature is not an object of worship (Heschel 1976).

The biblical way of thinking has from the beginning separated material being and its orders from the supreme, abstract and timeless entity, even if the latter resides in material reality (Barzel 2004:9). In other words, the innovation of biblical faith is this separation of God from nature. This was, in fact, a complete revolution in the religious world of the ancient Near East, where, for example, the gods of Babylon are subordinate to nature and to fate (Muffs 2006: 28–43). Nature and its immanent laws are no longer the supreme concern. Nature is intended for use and pleasure; it is no longer an objective in and of itself, but it is also not a burden or an obstacle on the path to the highest perfection. In biblical cosmology, God is omnipotent and infinite, and He creates things ex nihilo. He is not ruled by fate (Kaufmann 1971:245). Rather, the world of nature and its phenomena are made by His will.

The clearest manifestation of God as an entity wholly separate from nature is in the story of creation in Genesis. In this story, God clearly existed before the world, and He created humanity and the entire world according to His will. The act of creating the universe seems an absolute miracle, a magnificent manifestation of God’s rule over the world. God is the master of creation and not its subordinate. The stages of creation begin with the expression ‘and God said’ (Gen. 1.3). Creation is accomplished through God’s speech: ‘The world was created with ten utterances’ (Mishna, Avot 5:1), as also described by Augustine: ‘But how do you make them? The way, God, in which you made heaven and earth … you spoke and they were made, and by your word you made them’ (Augustine 1991, 11: v (7), 259).

As a historical religion, Christianity assigns decisive importance to God’s intervention in history: It begins with the creation of the world, continues with His revelation to select individuals, and will end in future salvation. Prior to the crystallization of the belief in the Trinity, Pauline Christianity presented a belief in one God who is the Creator of the world, separate from nature and master over it, and whose children call Him ‘Father, our Father’ (Rom. 8.15; Gal. 4.6). There is ‘one God and Father of all, who is over all’ (Eph. 4.6). ‘But God is one’ (Gal. 3.20). ‘But in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work’ (1 Cor. 12.6).

According to the first official declaration of Christian belief as formulated in the Nicene Creed of 325, the Trinity is described as follows: ‘We [believe in one God](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_in_Christianity%22%20%5Co%20%22God%20in%20Christianity), [the Father Almighty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_the_Father%22%20%5Co%20%22God%20the%20Father), Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one [Lord](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyrios_%28biblical_term%29%22%20%5Co%20%22Kyrios%20%28biblical%20term%29) Jesus Christ, the [Son of God](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Son_of_God%22%20%5Co%20%22Son%20of%20God), begotten of the Father the [only-begotten](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monogenes%22%20%5Co%20%22Monogenes); that is, of the essence of the Father, God of Light, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, [consubstantial with the Father](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consubstantial%22%20%5Co%20%22Consubstantial); By whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth…’ (Cross 1997:91). According to Christian doctrine, the first creation of light is the creation of Jesus. ‘For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation’ (Col. 1.13–15).

Genesis 1 relates the account of the creation of light: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth…And God said: Let there be light; and there was light’ (Gen. 1.1–3).[[2]](#footnote-2) God created light before creating celestial bodies. It was only on the fourth day that God created ‘the two great luminaries; the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night; and the stars’ (Gen. 1.16). According to the biblical text, the light created by God did not need to proceed from either a terrestrial source of light or one of the celestial bodies, but rather proceeded from divinity or from a divine spark, expressing holiness, knowledge, and wisdom. In many sources, light is connected to wisdom, ‘a man’s wisdom illuminates his face’ (Eccl. 8.1), to the path of truth and righteousness, ‘unto the upright He shineth as a light in the darkness’ (Ps. 112.4), and expressions of divine holiness ‘let us walk in the light of the Lord’ (Isa. 2.5).

In the Christian narrative, the creation of the Messiah coincides with the creation of light. As the Gospel of John relates: ‘In the beginning was the Word…He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made…There was a man sent from God whose name is John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light, he came only as a witness to the light…children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God…the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth…No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known’ (Jn 1.1–18). Similarly in chapter 8: ‘When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”’ (Jn 8.12). The Messiah is also described as light in Ephesians: ‘Therefore do not be partners with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness, and truth’ (Eph. 5.7–9); ‘giving joyful thanks to our Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light’ (Col. 1.11).

According to Greek thought, the world was not created by an external force. Gods did not create the world, but rather were created themselves during its evolution and are also subject to the rules governing the world. The Greeks did not view the creation of the world as creation ex nihilo, but as an assembling of the original given material. The gods of Olympus, the epitome of nature and its power, are beings born and giving birth, eternally creating and destroying (Zielinski 1975: 28–103). Gods do not have the power to change the laws of the universe, since they themselves are subject to these laws.[[3]](#footnote-3) These limitations of the Greek gods’ powers are expressed in the ideas of necessity (ananke) and destiny (moira), both of which supersede the gods themselves (Finkelberg 1990: 51–59).

The debate over the question of God’s independence and separation from nature extends throughout written history, as reflected in the question of whether the universe had a beginning, and, if so, how it began. There are two schools of thought regarding this question. The first, which includes Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, claims that the universe was created ex nihilo and that humankind emerged thereafter. The ex nihilo story of creation is based upon the idea of God’s separation from nature. ‘However, no physical entity existed before heaven and earth … Unless it was created by you, it could not exist’ (Augustine 1991, 11: v (8), 260). The second is reflected in Aristotle and Plato’s perceptions of God, according to which God is the designer and the architect of the universe, but not its creator. Matter is understood to be eternal, not created. ‘… and its Constructor good, it is plain that he fixed his gaze on the Eternal … He … took over all that was visible, seeing that it was not in a state of rest but in a state of discordant and disorderly motion, He brought it into order out of disorder’ (Plato 1925: 29–30). ‘Therefore, because of this reasoning, He fashioned it to be One single Whole … He wrought it into a round, in the shape of a sphere’ (Plato 1925, ll. 33a).

In the ancient polytheist Greek religion then, nature, gods, and human beings belong to a single system, governed by the same laws, as described by Heraclitus: ‘<The ordered?> world, the same for all, no god or man-made, but it always was, is, and will be, an ever living fire, being kindled in measures and being put out in measures’ (Heraclitus of Ephesus 1987:30). Greek philosophers sought the basic points of agreement between Moses and Plato (Dihle 1982:5). Philo of Alexandria, for example, tried to prove that Moses and Plato teach the same ‘truth’. ‘Philo was the first who tried to reduce the narratives and laws of Scripture to a coherent system of thought and thereby produced scriptural philosophy in contradistinction to pagan Greek philosophy’ (Wolfson 1960:101).

Philo argues in his essay ‘On the Creation’ that the world comes into being; God creates out of goodness, as a super-architect, and imposes order onto shapeless material. ‘For the substance was of itself destitute of arrangement, of quality, of animation, of distinctive character, and full of all disorder and confusion’ (Philo of Alexandria 1971:5). ‘For before the world time had no existence, but was created simultaneously with it’ (Philo of Alexandria 1971:6). In ‘The life of Moses’, however, Philo describes creation as a unique miracle, ‘looking at the things which are really great and deserving of serious attention, namely, the creation of heaven … animals and plants… ever-flowing rivers and winter mountain torrents…and an infinite number of other beautiful objects’ (Philo of Alexandria 1971:227). The Roman philosopher Lucretius also rejects the idea of creation ex nihilo unique to the Bible: ‘Therefore, when we have seen that nothing can be created out of nothing’ (Lucretius 1924: 150–4).

In the second half of the second century, the Greek philosopher Galen first pointed out the difference between the biblical and the Greek cultures, arguing that the basic distinction between these two cultures is a result of different cosmologies. Galen argued that the principle of God’s ‘free will’ could only develop in biblical cosmology, where God’s will can impose order on chaotic material (Dihle 1982). God’s will fashions a different future, one where he has the ability to create, to change, to renew, to transform, to not repeat, and a chance to improve. Galen adds that the lack of free will in classical Greek culture is also a result of its cosmology (Dihle 1982:1). In this eternal deterministic world, free will does not exist. The world is ruled by fate and necessity. Free will is a product of the Bible. ‘Creation results from the power and the pleasure or will of Yahveh, and from nothing else’ (Dihle 1982:4). The Bible, which assumes ex nihilo creation, also assumes the existence of free will. ‘There is no boundary to his will and his rule… Not the abstraction but the utter supremacy of God’s will—this is the basic idea of the fate of the Israeli unity’ (Kaufmann 1971:244).

On the one hand, God is an abstract ideal, and on the other, in the Bible we encounter an anthropomorphized God: God contemplates, desires, is frustrated, angry, merciful, disappointed, saddened, and grieved: ‘and it grieved Him at his heart’ (Gen. 6.6). The relationship between God and humanity is established as immutable, sealed by law and oath. Yet this all-encompassing relationship is personal and comprises contracts with every individual—extreme anthropomorphism (Muffs 2006:24). According to Fromm (1975), the Bible presents an evolving concept of God: In the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the biblical God is an aggressive and arbitrary ruler; when God establishes a covenant, he ceases to be an absolutist ruler, for he and humanity become two parties to an agreement; after God forged a government with humanity, He forged a covenant with the Hebrews, and became a Father (Fromm 1975: 22–25). Fromm contends that as the concept of God evolves, humanity’s fear of Him diminishes; humanity becomes His partner. In the Bible, the concept of God evolves from a foreign God, unknown to humanity, to a personal God (Fromm 1975:40–41).

In the minds of believers, God is an active force in nature; he is not only the Creator of the world but also its ruler; commanding and exercising providence over humanity. Accordingly, he arouses in his believers fear and a desire to please him (Malkin 2003: 45). Among the attributes ascribed to God in the biblical text is ‘Judge of the Earth’ (Ps. 94.2). Israelite monotheism exalts God above humanity. God is awesome in his holiness and righteousness, which is why Israelite belief rejects the divinity of mortal kings. But the holy, transcendental God does not move humanity toward Him. He descends to earth, walks in the Garden of Eden, speaks with the forefathers, and is hosted by Abraham.

In the biblical story of creation, God is presented as transcending the laws of nature; he is omnipotent and does not depend on celestial bodies to illuminate the world. The act of creation is described not only as an act of God’s free will, but also as an absolute miracle. Miracles interrupt the natural order of creation, proving God’s free will and absolute control over all creation (Zakovitch, 1991). Thus, God halts the movement of celestial bodies in order to glorify Israel’s victory over the Amorites: ‘… and he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon’ (Josh. 10.12), or in order to give a sign to king Hezekiah: ‘Behold, I will bring again the shadow of the degrees … in the sun dial … ten degrees backward’ (Isa. 38.8). God also has the power to set boundaries for the sea: ‘… have placed the sand for the bound of the sea by a perpetual decree, that it cannot pass it’ (Jer. 5.22), ‘When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment’ (Prov. 8.29).

The working of miracles, which constitute proof of God’s separation from and dominion over nature, are also to be counted among Jesus’ activities at the beginning of his journey in the Galilee. Jesus exorcises demons before the crowds in the villages around the Kinneret, heals the sick, restores the sight of the blind, resurrects the dead, walks on water, silences the storm, and feeds thousands with only five loaves and two fish. The four Gospels recount that Jesus worked thirty-three different miracles throughout his career (Nir 2009: 186–189). The miracles recounted in the New Testament, indicating both God’s separation from nature and his omnipotence over it, constitute a direct continuation of the creation narratives in Genesis: ‘but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down’ (Mk 6.49–51); ‘He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm…They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”’ (Mk 4.39–41).

3. Humanity as Participant in Creation

According to the Bible, God and humanity are similar: ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’ (Gen. 1.26). Human beings are thus obliged to imitate the qualities unique to God. The individual is not God, although he or she aspires to adopt his attributes. The biblical author aspires to instill in human beings a feeling of their greatness in the world, to crown them with a sense of humanity’s unique stature: ‘Yet Thou hast made him but little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor’ (Ps. 8.6). The biblical person, similar to the biblical God, is endowed with free will; a free will which exists in the context of production, creation, and the ability to influence the future (Fromm 1966: 62–63), as it is written in 2 Corinthians: ‘And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit’ (2 Cor. 3.18). Free will develops when a benevolent entity exists and watches over human actions (Schechter 2007:7).

Similar to God, human beings are separate from nature. They are superior in the hierarchy of all creatures and participate in creating natural reality. ‘Israelite faith transferred the worldwide godly drama from the domain of nature and its powers to the domain of the human will. God’s will rules all things, but with one “reduction”: man’s will, who was given free choice’ (Kaufmann 1971:472). Paganism, in contrast, perceived existence in its entirety as a material reality of which humanity is but a part; a reality which is certain, albeit unachievable. The innovation of the Bible is in determining human beings’ ability to participate in the creation of natural reality; to determine conditions and givens, as well as to intervene in the course of nature. The Bible commands us to interfere with processes, to initiate changes, and to be responsible for them. Nature becomes the target, the object of human will. The individual, who fashions her own world in a similar way to God, similarly needs free will.

Western culture, rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, sanctifies the belief that the world was created for the benefit of humankind. Humanity’s separation from nature is referred to as ‘Jewish egotism’ by Feuerbach. He argues that the theory of creation adopted by Christianity and rooted in the Bible, has as its basic premise egotism (Feuerbach 1957: 34–35). Only where the individual separates him or herself from nature is there room to wonder about the origin of the universe. According to Feuerbach, the separation entails the diminishment of nature to an object of the individual will. The Hebrews, he claims, combined faith, control over nature, and gorging: ‘At even ye shall eat flesh, and in the morning ye shall be filled with bread; and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God’ (Exod. 16.12).

In the story of creation, human beings receive permission to conquer and rule:’… and God said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth’ (Gen. 1.28), and in Psalms ‘…Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet: All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field’ (Ps. 8.6–7). Human beings are different from other creatures, and, like God, are envisioned as a being external to nature, imposing their own will and rules upon it (Lurie 2007.45).

The separation of humanity from nature is not unique to the story of creation, but is interwoven throughout the Bible. Although in the conclusion of the story of Cain and Abel we find the notion of ‘damned for all times’, the story in fact reaffirms the precedence of agriculture. Although God accepts Abel’s sacrifice, Abel is murdered and Cain is the one who survives. God has, in fact, accepted the idea of humanity’s intervention in the course of nature. It is evident in the biblical story that history is shaped by Cain, by the man who interferes with nature and shapes it to fulfill his needs. Tubal, one of Cain’s descendants, is the father of technological civilization, ‘an instructor of every artificer in brass and iron’ (Gen. 4.22).

Humanity’s intervention in nature is found also in the story of Eden: The first man was brought to Eden in order to make a life for himself, a life in which he will have to work the land and to transform it beyond its raw initial conditions of creation: ‘And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it’ (Gen. 2.15).

Just as the separation of God from nature was foreign to Greek philosophy, so was the separation of humanity from nature. Humanity, according to the Greek view, is merely a small cog within the overall system. Its position is inferior in a world which was not devised by a creator, a world in which even gods are limited in their abilities and are subject to rules. Since the human being is not the lord of creation, ancient Greeks feared transgressing the boundaries of human nature and diverging from their predestined path. Nature, gods, and humanity are part of a single system, governed by the same laws (Finkelberg 1990:57). This understanding finds expression in Homer, who compares human beings to leaves in the forest: ‘As is the race of leaves, even such is the race of men. Some leaves the wind sheds upon the ground’ (Homer 1870:6–147). Similarly, Aristotle, who views humans as rational beings, and as such, a marvel of nature, still understands the individual as part of it. ‘These occurrences are all natural … The arts either, on the basis of Nature, carry things further than Nature can, or they imitate Nature’ (Aristotle 1929–1934, II:viii). Lucretius also does not see the world as created intentionally for the benefit of humanity. On the contrary, humanity’s development entails adaptation to the environment. ‘The nature of the world is by no means made by divine grace for us’ (Lucretius 1924:180).

In Catholicism, humanity’s separation from nature is also expressed in the separation between humanity and the human body. Christian asceticism glorified the human’s control over her body. Ascetics have existed from time immemorial, but developments in Christian society following the Christianization of the Roman Empire constituted a new cultural model (Kleinberg 2000, 110). Asceticism became not only a means for guarding against the corruptions of the flesh, but also the supreme path to salvation. There was no clear precedent for this framework in Christian scriptures, while Judaism, by contrast, rejected asceticism.

Platonism viewed the material world as a veil intervening between humanity and the world of ideas. ‘He [who] sees the beauty on earth, remembering the true beauty, feels his wings growing and longs to stretch them for an upward flight… Now he who is not newly initiated… but gives himself up to pleasure and like a beast proceeds to lust and begetting… is not afraid or ashamed to pursue pleasure in violation of nature’ (Plato 1925: xx). Neoplatonism saw the body as an obstacle to attaining the truth, while the Stoics saw the body as inextricable from the soul. Christian ascetics, by contrast, differed essentially in that they conceptualized the body as separate and the source of all sin and impurity. ‘For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it’ (Rom. 7.18–20). This theological innovation on the part of Christianity is attributed to Paul. But it was not only the theology of Christian asceticism that constituted the latter as a cultural innovation, but also its mode of expression.

Nietzsche (1996) views the separation of humanity from both nature and the human body—the origin of which lies in Christianity—as ‘the contradiction of life, instead of being its transfiguration and eternal Yea! In [God] war is declared on life, on nature, the will to live! God becomes the formula for every slander upon the “here and now”’ (Nietzsche, 2006). Nietzsche claims that the suppression of natural desires, glorified by religions, contains a degree of hubris. ‘When the centre of gravity of life is placed, *not* in life itself, but in “the beyond”—in *nothingness*—then one has taken away its centre of gravity altogether. The vast lie of personal immortality destroys all reason, all natural instinct—henceforth, everything in the instincts that is beneficial, that fosters life and that safeguards the future is a cause of suspicion. So to live that life no longer has any meaning: *this* is now the “meaning” of life’ (Nietzsche, 2006).

4. Creation as a Hierarchy

The Old Testament exhibits a clear and prominent hierarchy in many aspects of creation. At the top, the one and only God reigns supreme; this is the Old Testament God, who is separate and superior to all other gods and who demands exclusivity: ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me’ (Exod. 20.3); ‘thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them’ (Exod. 20.5). And since the world is full of objects that one might worship (Kasher 2004:33), he even orders: ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth’ (Exod. 20.4).

Second in the biblical account’s hierarchy is humanity, the crown of creation: ‘For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels… thou hast put all things under his feet: all sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field; the fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea’ (Ps. 8.5–8); ‘I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High’ (Ps. 82.6). That is, Christianity adopted the biblical cosmology and with it the hierarchy between God, humanity, and the rest of creation. However, according to Christian mythology, there is also another hierarchy. Between God and humanity are the angels, as is written in the Nicene Creed: God created ‘the visible’ and ‘the invisible’ (Barth 1994: xx). The Christian origin story came into being gradually, and with the development of Christian mythology, the belief that God created the invisible world first—i.e., the world of angels—took root (Kleinberg 1995: 9–13)

The Western tradition, which is based largely on biblical cosmology, sees humanity as superior to all other creatures. That same hierarchy further orders people, distinguishing between the chosen people and all others, and further distinguishes between different chosen individuals.

The idea of the chosen people makes frequent appearances in the text of Old Testament: ‘I give waters in the wilderness… to give drink to my people, my chosen’ (Isa. 43.20); ‘the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth’ (Deut. 7.6); ‘for the Lord will not forsake his people for his great name’s sake: because it hath pleased the Lord to make you his people’ (1 Sam. 12.22); ‘we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture’ (Ps. 100.3). The People of Israel are described in the Old Testament as a chosen nation, separate from other nations and essentially unique. As a result, the narrative of the ‘chosen people’ has become a dominant narrative among Jewish communities throughout the ages (Gertz 1995:67). For example, Yehuda Halevi’s celebrated work The Kuzari draws extensively on this narrative. Driven by the desire to bolster the faith in the heart of every member of his nation, Halevi depicts the Jewish people as unique among the nations by virtue of being chosen, of being sanctified by the Lord. He argues his point thus: ‘If we were required to keep the Torah because God created us, then all peoples would be equally obligated… But the Torah was given to us because God brought us out of Egypt and remained attached to us, since we are the chosen of humanity’ (Halevi 2017:45). In his eyes, the People of Israel carry the ‘seed of chosenness’ that distinguishes them from among all other peoples.

The idea of being ‘chosen’ also appears in the Old Testament as a differentiating factor between tribes and groups. For instance, God distinguishes the tribe of Levi from among the twelve tribes of Israel: ‘And I, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel’ (Num. 3.12). Out of the chosen tribe of Levi, God picks the Cohens, his priests: ‘Take the sum of the sons of Kohath from among the sons of Levi, after their families, by the house of their fathers’ (Num. 4.2). Aharon the priest, forefather to all the priests of Israel, is the son of Amram son of Kohath, and Kohath is the second son of Levi son of Jacob, the originator of the tribe of Levi: ‘And to the office of Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest pertaineth the oil for the light’ (Num. 4.16). Their status as a chosen faction confers upon them the responsibility ‘to do the work in the tabernacle of the congregation. This shall be the service of the sons of Kohath’ (Num. 4.3–4).

Among historians and environmentalists, there are those who believe that the fateful passage in Genesis in which God grants humanity control over animals — 'and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creepeth upon the earth’ (Gen. 1.27–30) — condemned Western civilization to a path of destruction that has lasted two thousand years (Patterson 2002:16). However, while the Old Testament sanctifies the superiority of humanity over animals in the name of God, it also contains laws prohibiting the physical or mental abuse of animals, thus restricting this principle to a degree. The Jewish tradition’s relative compassion toward animals stems from the biblical passages prohibiting the employment of animals on the Sabbath and forbidding muzzling a threshing ox, among other things. ‘He that killeth an ox is as if he slew a man…according as they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delighteth in their abominations’ (Isa. 66.3).

Christianity absorbed both the biblical and the Greek views that asserted the dominance of humanity over the rest of creation but left out the restraints dictated by Hebrew law. It would seem then that the hierarchical attitudes of mastership over animals, although based on Old Testament and Hellenistic sources, reach their apotheosis in Christianity. According to Saint Augustine, animals are devoid of a rational soul and therefore one need not pay any attention to their suffering. Augustine proclaims that the sixth commandment, ‘thou shalt not kill’, does not apply to creatures devoid of reason; they do not belong to the community of rational beings and therefore their lives and deaths are only significant in as far as they are useful to us. In his words: ‘When we read “You shall not kill” we assume that this does not refer to bushes, which have no feelings nor to irrational creatures, flying, swimming, or walking… It is by a just arrangement of the Creator that their life and death is subordinated to our needs’ (Augustine 2003: 31–32).

The medieval Christian doctrine viewed animals with contempt because they have no soul. This view, based explicitly on Scripture, prevailed until the beginning of the modern era in Christian Europe. In fact, humanity in the West was defined in terms of the absence of animal qualities or animal behavior (Salisbury 1994:167). Animals were considered impulsive and subject by irrational instincts; conversely, the perfect Christian was expected to control himself by relying on reason and experience. Just as an animal’s natural tendency is to fulfill its sexual desire as soon as it arises, so a Christian must abstain from sexual activity, and the same principle applies to eating and more. Human beings, supreme in the hierarchy of creation, have free will and therefore, so preaches the Christian tradition, can and must successfully overcome their nature.

5. Epilogue

The Western world evolved out of both the biblical tradition and the Greek tradition. The two central masterpieces of Western culture, the Bible and the poetry of Homer, formed the basis upon which subsequent religious and cultural works developed (Knohl 2008:15). Judaism was the native landscape out of which Ancient Christianity emerged and the Hellenistic influence on Christianity came primarily via Jewish Greek-speaking communities, which flourished in the diaspora and in Israel itself (Vallee 1999). The biblical view of creation sanctifies constant action. Human beings are required to create their world every day anew; they are permitted to do so since they are a partner in creation. The Bible presents an image of God as separate from the world He created, free from the laws of nature, and in doing so it increases God’s freedom and strengthens the power of humans’ free choice, in contrast to Greek thought.

Western culture developed on the basis of the Judeo-Christian creation story, in which human beings are likened to God, separate from nature, and impose their will on other creatures. As Nietzsche (1977) claims, the Western approach toward other natural creatures is tyrannical, an attitude that is deeply entrenched in culture and education. He points to four fallacies that form the basis of Western education, one of which is humanity’s mistaken self-positioning atop the order of nature.

For several decades now, some ruptures have begun to form in the pro-dominion Western meta-narrative. Some evidence of this lies in the relatively new scientific discussion on sustainability, which has brought the question of human attitudes toward the planet, its resources, and life forms to the fore of academic, political, and public discourse. The science of sustainability is grappling with the basic nature of the reciprocal relationship between nature and society while attempting to find avenues to promote sustainable development in the political agenda (Clark and Dickson 2003).

Of course, the discussion concerning our attitude toward the planet gains public attention primarily during times of crisis. These include the recent wildfires that destroyed large parts of Australia— an eventuality scientists have been warning against for years, owing to climate change (Yu et al. 2020).

In fact, since pro-dominion attitudes toward nature are so deeply rooted in our cultural and cognitive schemas, many believe that the solution, and anticipated change, will stem from educational outreach that changes attitudes and heightens ecological awareness. Transformative learning, according to this approach, will expand human consciousness and deepen our understanding of nature. Steiner (2013), one of the pioneers of this approach, asserted that humanity, along with nature as a whole, is inextricably intertwined with the cosmos, and that education should be the conduit to altering humanity’s mistaken self-perception as master of nature. Hill et al. (2004) maintain that heightened ecological awareness should prompt growing numbers of people to self-identify as environmentalists and protect the environment, recognizing that there is a correlation between the ecological crises we experience, low levels of ecological awareness, and a culture that is decidedly divorced from nature. In this article, we have deepened this discussion of culture’s divorce from nature by examining its roots in the Judeo-Christian account of creation as expressed along three different axes: One, in the idea of God’s separation from the world; two, in indications that humanity is a participant in creation; and three, in connection with the view that creation is a hierarchical process and that creatures exist in a hierarchy.

Erich Neumann’s Mystical Man (2007) presents another interesting cultural critique. Neumann suggests that our attitude toward the earth is informed by the patriarchal Christian conception, dominant in the Middle Ages, that associated the earth with the crude and the carnal, embodying the inferior and dark unconscious of flesh and femininity. In fact, the archetype of body and earth symbolism as decidedly feminine goes back to the biblical period, in which the paternal god principle was dominant, while the maternal goddess and natural principle were repressed. It was, in fact, theological dogma that associated the earth archetype with the dark underworld of the feminine and the spirit archetype with the celestial, divine upper realm of the masculine. The medieval conceptualization of human nature as marked by binary contrasts, suggests Neumann, stems from the biblical creation story, in which God’s celestial spirit is imparted into carnal man, who materializes out of the earth: ‘The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being’ (Gen. 2.7). Neumann noted that all of human progress notwithstanding, the spirit was still firmly associated with the celestial and divorced from the earthly. In this context, perhaps it is not surprising then, that so many contemporary New Age spiritual groups are calling for an improved relationship with the earth and with the environment, and for cultivating the relationship with the mother goddess element (Taylor, 2011) as part of a re-education toward creating a healthy ecology. New cultural production and continuous investment in education can create new patterns of thinking about our relationship with nature — reducing the enormous divide between humanity and nature that has existed for centuries. However, for this to happen, we must first invest in deep cultural, political, and educational self-reflection, which will form the basis for a process of deconstructing our domineering relationship with nature.

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1. All English citations of the New Testament are from the NIV (New International Version). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All English citations of the Hebrew Bible are from the 1917 JPS Translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In the Mesopotamian world, even though the gods number in the thousands, nature is not chaotic. It has a dependable rhythm and order. The gods have arranged the universe into a cosmic kingdom where each of its powers has its own dedicated role (Wright 1968: 18–19). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)