

Interrupted by an Ostrich!

A brief interruption in the current series: some clarification is needed of a comment in a well-illustrated article in the 09.2020 issue of the National Geographic magazine. Entitled “Nobody’s Fool”, the reader is invited to “forget the dim-witted stereotype: the ostrich is a shrewd survivor in a world of predators,” which doubtless it has proven to be.

The article opens with, “Most of us happily get by on a single cartoonish idea about ostriches: They’re big birds that bury their heads in the sand in times of crisis, supposedly thinking that if they can’t see danger, danger can’t see them. In our ragbag of stereotypes, ostriches have thus become the quintessential dim-witted animals. Even the Bible says they are dumb, and bad parents too.”

The passage in question says, “The wings of the ostrich wave proudly, but are her wings and pinions like the kindly stork's? 14 For she leaves her eggs on the ground, and warms them in the dust; 15 she forgets that a foot may crush them, or that a wild beast may break them. 16 She is hardened against her young ones, as though they were not her's: her labour is in vain without fear, 17 because God deprived her of wisdom, and did not endow her with understanding. 18 When she lifts herself on high, she scorns the horse and its rider” - Job 39:13.

This is part of the reply from God to Job’s charge of injustice to Him - “He crushes me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause” - 9:17 - a complaint repeated by mankind to this day - “If there is a God, why is there so much trouble in the world?” Those with the humility to accept that the Bible is from God can learn from His reply to Job.

The plan of God - “for whom are all things and by whom are all things” - has been toward “bringing many sons to glory” - to call men and women away from their humanistic way, and to subject them to His instruction and discipline, which involves the pervasive troubles in human life. Their supreme example is seen in how God made “the author of their salvation perfect through sufferings” - Hebrews 2:10.

In preparation for progressing towards God’s objective, He created all the living things, “Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good” - Genesis 1:31, i.e., made according to His design. This includes what God reviewed with Job in chapters 38-39: the lion, raven, mountain goat, wild donkey, cape buffalo, ostrich, horse, hawk, hippopotamus and crocodile. His design of each has ensured a dynamic balance so that they have survived and none have gone extinct over thousands of years - with no help from mankind.

Part of that balance is found in the apparent foolishness of the Ostrich in its reproductive habits - the NG article gives a 10% success rate of nests - which has controlled their numbers in the wild. Only the primary hen and the male care for the nest of eggs. Up to 17 other hens have been seen to lay eggs on the periphery of the nest, with reduced chance of hatching. They then leave the nest and have no further role - “she is hardened against her young ones.”

Another recent publication reports that “When the brood hatch out, the male is their chief care giver. The tiny ostriches immediately learn to follow him... The male shows them how to feed, and protects them from predators and elements, using his wings to offer shelter ... When two (such) males meet, their chicks instinctively group together to form a larger nursery” - Animal Life, ed. C. Uhlenbroek, p. 409.