

THE WESLEYAN THEOLOGY SERIES

Creation

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Driving Reflections

My own love for camping and hiking—especially in national parks—was cemented when I lived in Kings Canyon National Park in California for two summers during my college years. Having the Sierra Nevada as my playground made my hours at a humble summer job worth it. I logged hundreds of miles hiked and thousands of feet climbed in my attempt to take in the features of the park: starry nights, mountain vistas, alpine lakes, surging rivers, giant sequoias, flowering meadows, and the many animal species. The beauty and vastness of God’s creation never failed to delight me in every journey I took. I wanted to see *everything*. I still do! No matter our personal approach to the outdoors, it is likely that, at some time or another, each of us has been awed by its wonders and moved to offer words of praise and thanksgiving to its Creator.

Different experiences can spark our thoughts about God as our Creator. With all the tools we have for looking into outer space, we may lose our breath not only because of the beauty but also due to how vast all the distances are, the sheer size and number of objects, and the mind-blowing forces at work in the universe. These considerations may lead us to reflect about the God who could create on such a massive scale. Perhaps we may equally marvel at the smallest details we can observe. Whether we are investigating subatomic particles or the smallest structures of our world, there is astounding complexity in the tiniest of features. It

is humbling to think of our Creator taking such thoughtful care of the little details. Beyond the big and small, any number of pleasures from all our senses and experiences of life could lead us to delight in God's masterful artistry and generosity. It is easy to be thankful to God for the beauty and many joys of creation. God's reliability may comfort us as we live year by year through the cycle of seasons or as we note the regularity of physical properties in the world. And ever-new delights, never exactly like before, may lead us to celebrate the unfolding journey of God with the world. So many things may lead us toward thinking about the character of our Creator and toward worship.

It is a privilege to have these times of reflection and worship—these moments that halt our labor. It is especially a privilege if we have extended time to reflect. Yet few people around the world have the luxury of time and stockpiled resources that would allow them to sit and contemplate anything that does not have to do with meeting basic needs or pressing concerns. As we address the demands of our days, it is possible to be struck with amazement at a glimpse of a sunset, the smell of rain, a singing bird, the taste of honey, or the tickle of snowflakes on our faces. Yet, most often, the more urgent issues of life get our attention. Moments to reflect, to indulge our curiosity, or to delight in God are not necessarily what dominate our days. Sweet moments are a blessing beyond our daily needs.

There are, however, life experiences that may make our reflections about our Creator more urgent and all-consuming. Crisis moments leave little room for savoring and delighting. It is difficult, in a crisis, to think beyond the intensity of the moment. Our thoughts and prayers during crises are less a pastime or luxury than critical cries for deliverance. These cries hold in them the weight of our lives and futures. So much more is at stake about who God is when we are being crushed. It is not a matter of curios-

ity who God is; it is a matter of salvation. While we may at first think the doctrine of creation belongs to moments of peaceful reflection—as a surplus doctrine for a surplus time—its real home is in the high-stakes times of crisis. Instead of speculative thoughts about God, God’s identity matters most at those critical points, when who God *really* is matters *right now*.

In the history of Israel, they did not immediately start writing down beliefs about God as Creator. Rather, at first they were journeying with God and getting to know God across a history of profound events. God called Abraham and Sarah, made promises to them in a binding covenant, and gave them a child who was otherwise impossible for them to have. As their descendants became more numerous and were bound to Egypt in slavery, God not only delivered them and cemented their future in a covenant, but God also gave them their inheritance of the land of Canaan. Israel’s memories of these historic moments of promise and salvation were the foundation for their present existence and their hoped-for future.¹ God’s faithfulness through each stage in their history gave them confidence that God would ultimately fulfill every covenant promise. Thus, through much of Israel’s history, the source of their confidence was not a belief about God as Creator—a topic that predated their lived experience with God.² Instead, they lived according to what they knew firsthand; they had no reason to doubt their Redeemer, who always had been a faithful Companion.

Eventually, however, a national crisis made Israel question God and whether their confidence in God’s character and ability had been warranted. The crisis pressed them to

1. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 297.

2. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 298.

think beyond their experience and question the broader categories about God as the world's Creator and the nature of creation itself. That crisis was Babylon's invasion, which climaxed with the destruction of Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple (in 587/6 BCE). God's covenant people were led away into captivity in Babylon. Their world—and, it seemed, their future—had been stripped away. During their exile, they had many reasons to doubt God's place in the world, the extent of God's power, the dependability of God's promises, and the goodness of God's character. Was their God really Lord of all? Was their God only a small player in the world? Had they witnessed God being defeated by Babylon's chief god? Was God incapable of delivering on God's promises? Did their downfall mean God was unfaithful and God's promises void? Or could God still be King of kings and this devastation be God's act of judgment against them?³

During their *present* crisis—when they had every reason to doubt God and the *future* of God's covenant with them—they confirmed their views about Creator and creation. What they said was based on what they had learned of God in their history. They learned to affirm the nature of God as Creator and the character of the salvation this Creator would bring precisely when such statements seemed contradictory to their crushing circumstances, just

3. See Thomas W. Mann, "Stars, Sprouts, and Streams: The Creative Redeemer of Second Isaiah," *God Who Creates: Essays in Honor of W. Sibley Towner*, ed. William P. Brown and S. Dean McBride, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 136. David L. Peterson notes that the prophets were not the first people in Israel's history to say anything about creation. It is not as though they did not have a tradition from which to draw. At the same time, "There has been something of a consensus that creation traditions were only important fairly late in Israelite religion and literature. Though this consensus is breaking up, it remains the case that the most powerful exemplar of creation language in prophetic literature occurs in what has hitherto been known as Deutero- or Second Isaiah, prophetic poetry dating to the mid-sixth century B.C.E." (Peterson, "The World of Creation in the Book of the Twelve," *God Who Creates*, 206f.).

as Christians later affirmed God's power in Christ's cross and Christ's enthronement during their own persecution. In their time of crisis it truly mattered to Israel whether God is the incomparable, uncontestable Creator of all there is—that the Creator surpasses anything in all creation. Who God is as Creator had direct bearing on the salvation they could expect. While it may seem backward, the *future* was in question when they reflected on the beginning.

The Hebrew word *bara* ("create") is celebrated as a key Old Testament word for God's unique capacity to create. The second part of Isaiah (chapters 40–66), which was written during and after Israel's exile, "is likely among the first (if not the first) of all biblical writings to use the verb *bārā'* to speak of God as creator."⁴ It was a bold affirmation that rose up within Israel in the midst of their crisis. Modern scholars also date the writing of Genesis 1 to the time period around Israel's exile—after they had experienced both devastation and the promise of redemption.⁵ From this perspective, Genesis 1:1–2:3 then refers "to the original act of creation but in terms of the questions of the exilic community concerning the fate of Israel."⁶ What would it mean for the God who has created from the beginning to create Israel anew out of complete desolation? Even though it stands at the beginning of the Bible, the probable age of Genesis 1 places it among several capstone statements in

4. Mann, "Stars, Sprouts, and Streams," 136. Mann divides Isaiah into First Isaiah (chapters 1–39) and Second Isaiah (chapters 40–66). Some scholars divide Isaiah into three parts, chapters 1–39, 40–54, and 55–66. In the three-part division, the writing of the third portion is attributed to the time when Israel returned to the promised land after exile.

5. Biblical authorship is a popular topic of debate, and it is prudent to acknowledge here that ancient tradition dates Genesis far earlier, attributing the book to Moses. However, modern scholars have mostly moved on from that assumption.

6. Andrew R. Angel, *Chaos and the Son of Man: The Hebrew Chaokampf Tradition in the Period 515 BCE to 200 CE* (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 11. Angel is explaining the view of Richard J. Clifford here.

the Old Testament about the Creator and creation. These various passages represent Israel's faith in God during their exile. Thus, these texts served as assurances about God in Israel's *present* crisis, upon which their hopes for the *future* were justified.

Based on Israel's own experience of crisis that led them to explore what it means to say God is Creator, we can see that the doctrine of creation in the Bible is not *solely* interested in saying how the world came to be.⁷ The doctrine was not for the sake of curiosity about the past, nor was it worked out in a relaxed time when God's relationship to the world was not of immediate importance. Even in the early history of Christianity, "the Christian development of this doctrine is less concerned with how the world came to be than with how it is sustained and governed."⁸ These Christian writings were for the sake of stating our *present* life with our Creator.

In keeping with the biblical background, the doctrine of creation is first a reflection on God, answering not only, "Who is this God to whom we pray?" but also, "Who is the God who will come to our aid in [our] time of need?"⁹ The Scriptures again and again link God as Creator with God as Redeemer. God's power and loving-kindness as our Creator is our *present* hope and assurance in God as our Redeemer.¹⁰ In their history, Israel saw God's loving-kindness at work in significant acts of redemption. That precious history came to be nestled in broader affirmations about God as Creator. Whatever mighty acts God has done as Creator, God can

7. Gary A. Anderson, "Creatio ex nihilo and the Bible," *Creation ex nihilo: Origins, Development, Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Gary A. Anderson and Markus Bockmuehl (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 22.

8. Markus Bockmuehl, "Introduction," *Creation ex nihilo*, 4.

9. Janet Soskice, "Why *Creatio ex nihilo* for Theology Today?" *Creation ex nihilo*, 41.

10. Soskice, "Why *Creatio ex nihilo*?", 41.

do now to create new, life-affirming situations in the world. God's present creative work brings salvation in our circumstances. Moreover, whatever creative acts God is doing now, we know God can and will bring them one day to their ultimate fulfillment.

If there is a dominant biblical theme about God as Creator, it is that God is *Ruler*. All things are under the scope of God's governance; God legislates, administers, and judges. As this theme ripples across the Scriptures, God is not both queen bee and worker bees all in one. Rather, the world is full of actors, over whom God has authority. God's rule is positive for the world, since God is loving, just, and wise. Creation's Ruler is also majestic and regal. When God appears, creation quakes at God's greatness. As the world's Ruler-Creator, God is unequalled, unsurpassable, and unshakeable. As the Nicene Creed opens: "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen."

Even so, Israel did not affirm that God is simply raw power and might, even more ferocious and destructive than the empires of Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon. God is also not *coldly* just and wise. All of God's power and authority are characterized with affirmations that God is faithful, loving, and nurturing. "The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made" (Ps. 145:9). Our Ruler is caretaker and savior for creation.

From the Old Testament to the New, God's roles as Ruler, Creator, and Redeemer are inseparably interwoven with one another. The Nicene Creed captures this too. First, each of the three Persons of the Trinity are named in God's creative activity: the Father as "maker of heaven and earth," the Son as the one "through whom all things were made," and the Spirit as "the Lord, the giver of life." These affirmations about the triune God as Creator frame the Creed's middle claims about God's work in Christ—what God is

doing “for us and for our salvation.” God is not Creator, or Almighty, in order to act for God’s self-interest. Rather, the Almighty Creator is the very one acting “for us and for our salvation.” As the apostle Paul suggests in Philippians 2:4–11, it is precisely because it is God’s nature to work for the benefit of others that the divine Son emptied himself to become human and suffer crucifixion.¹¹ *The character of divine power is revealed in God’s care, even to the point of enduring suffering and death.* While, in the distorted thinking of the world, this may seem weak or foolish, God’s loving-care is powerfully effective; it is divinely powerful.

Beyond just our salvation, all God’s activities in the Creed have everlasting implications for the coming of God’s kingdom and “the life of the world to come.” Divine creative dominion functions faithfully, lovingly, and nurturingly for creation’s everlasting well-being. God’s love is the very life of the world. The Bible teaches further that the nurturing care God has for creation also expresses itself in play, joy, and delight. The relationship between God and creation is not all business. Creator and creation are meant to enjoy each other without end.

Under the umbrella of God as Ruler, there are many metaphors used in the Bible to describe God’s creative work. The metaphors run the spectrum of human occupations: artist, craftsperson, farmer, cheesemaker, designer, textile worker, stylist, builder, smith, midwife, teacher, etc. The use of these metaphors means that “create” (*bara*) is not the only creation-related verb that is used in the Bible. God establish- es, makes, founds, and forms.¹² God speaks, fills, breathes,

11. See Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); and Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul’s Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

12. James L. Mays, “‘Maker of Heaven and Earth’: Creation in the Psalms,” *God Who Creates*, 76.

separates, stretches out, sets boundaries, and blesses. Metaphors abound: God hems in with protection, weaves, knits, fashions, clothes, pours, curdles, and delivers.¹³ God's creative provision also waters, quenches, gives drink, makes a way, brings out, and sprouts.¹⁴ If we only did a word study for "create" in the Bible, we would miss the majority of the passages that speak about God's creative activity and relationship to the world as Creator. But importantly, in all the diversity, God is the one who governs the processes of creation. God is creation's Ruler. This affirmation gave confidence to Israel that God could and would come through for God's precious handiwork—whether it was possible for them to see it in their crisis or not. It sure looked to Israel at the time like Babylon had the upper hand.

Facets of the Doctrine

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DRIVING REFLECTIONS

This is a book on the doctrine of creation. The word "creation" can have different meanings in English. It can refer to all that God makes (i.e., the stuff; the heavens and the earth). Alternatively, it can refer to God's action of *making*. This book could focus solely on the origin of everything (God's action). There is a history in Western cultures, going all the way back to the Greek philosophers, of focusing on the question about origins and the existence of everything. This ancient question has two sides: How does the underlying cause of everything *give* being (existence), and how does everything *receive* being from the underlying cause?¹⁵ Through the centuries, many answers have been given about

13. William P. Brown, "Creatio Corporis and the Rhetoric of Defense in Job 10 and Psalm 139," *God Who Creates*, 110–12, 118.

14. Mann, "Stars, Sprouts, and Streams," 146–49.

15. This question about *being*, and an example of how this question has shaped Christian conversation on the doctrine of creation through the centuries, can be seen in the introduction Steven E. Baldner and William E. Carroll wrote for their translations in *Medieval Sources in Translation* 35 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1997), 4.

the source or cause of our existence. Christians have consistently entered into conversation with Western culture on the question of origins. This discussion has tended to focus our doctrine of creation on that issue of our beginning—specifically, coming into being. Indeed, it is common to summarize the whole doctrine of creation with the belief that God *created out of nothing* (or with the Latin equivalent: *creatio ex nihilo*). However, as we have already seen, reflections about the doctrine of creation are not only about coming into being, the beginning point, or issues about the past. Claims about origins are connected to other ideas.

First, across history, within each suggestion about the origin of existence—when, where, how, and even who—is also a suggestion about the nature of *what* comes to exist (the creation itself). This breadth gives us a history of different views on the structure and dynamics of the heavens and earth, including if there is any *meaning* or *purpose* to the existence of all things. The doctrine of creation cannot help but deal with these additional issues of *what* God creates and *why*. Second, the doctrine is not only about the past, or the first moments in time. It wrestles with questions about our *present*—what we are meant to be and how we are meant to live in the world. Third, the doctrine of creation even deals with creation's *future*. When thinking about *what* creation is and *why* God would create, these are a matter of God's *aim*, the direction in which God has always and ever will be intending for creation to go—that is, what creation's fulfillment might mean. In fact, even though we may give primary attention to the issues surrounding origin, the questions about God, God's relationship to the world, and God's purpose or goal for creation may be the more significant issues the doctrine of creation addresses. These move us beyond curiosity about the past—or things “too lofty” for us to know—to the practical dynamics of our present and future life with God and the world.

The ancient habits of Western culture are not the only factor that has led us, in recent history, to focus our doctrine on origins. Some of the discussions about creation in the last century—especially between religious and scientific viewpoints—have gotten stuck on issues of origins and events of the past. And tragically, many people have been hurt as discussions turned into verbal attacks against people who disagree. As we look at the way God’s people in the Old Testament, New Testament, and history of Christianity have interacted with their surrounding cultures, hopefully we can see how believers today can engage with our own scientific age. Also, we can hopefully see from the witness of Scripture and the Christian tradition what the doctrine of creation means for the present and future. Indeed, the doctrine of creation is one area of biblical teaching with direct implications for Christian action amid the flood of news about animal extinction and habitat loss, pollution from human-created waste, and climate change.¹⁶

The Shape of the Book

There are several general aims of this book. The first is to look at the many facets of the doctrine of creation. This includes not only dimensions of the who, what, and why of creation but also the complexity that Scripture teaches us about living in the world.

Second, the doctrine of creation had practical implications from the time God’s people first started writing about it. In the various chapters, we will pick up ways that this doctrine matters for everyday living.

16. The doctrine of creation is not the only thing Christians affirm that helps us think about a Christian response to environmental issues. Michael Lodahl and April Maskiewicz teach about our environmental responsibilities out of Christianity’s doctrine of the incarnation in *Renewal in Love: Living Holy Lives in God’s Good Creation* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2014).

The last aim is to explore the history of viewpoints about creation. To some degree, this history provides the outline for the book. As we move through the viewpoints, our theology of creation and its everyday implications will rise to the surface.

Chapter 2 will take us into the ancient context in which God's people were first reflecting on the nature and character of God.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine Genesis 1, which has been highly significant in the history of theological reflection.

Chapter 5 explores other Old Testament teachings on the doctrine of creation.

Chapter 6 turns to New Testament teachings about creation.

Chapter 7 continues to examine the history of Christians wrestling with the doctrine of creation in light of the challenges they faced.

The final chapter takes us to our current context in presenting creation out of nothing in a Trinitarian way. It helps us think through creaturely agency and offers some practical implications for believers.