

CHAPTER 4

CREATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES:

A Transvaluation of Values

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KEY TERMS

Babylonian Exile

INTRODUCTION

The creation story in Genesis 1 is often said to have had deleterious effects on people's attitudes toward the environment. It is viewed as making possible a more instrumental view of nature, bidding humankind to "have dominion" over all creation. This chapter suggests, to the contrary, that by looking at the covenantal context within which Genesis 1 was written, we come to understand that Scripture was written precisely to correct these misapprehensions and give humankind a new appreciation for nature. Properly understood, Genesis 1 bids us to leave behind our natural human tendencies to want to use God (or the gods) to dominate and control the world and exhorts us to see the world as a place prepared for human life and human flourishing, where humans can enjoy communion with God and other creatures, as long as humans follow God's laws—that is, the laws of justice, righteousness, dignity, and respect that have been built into the very fabric of creation—acting "in the image of" the Creator-God revealed to us as one who is "with and for the world."

THE TWOFOLD INDICTMENT OF GENESIS 1

One frequently hears the criticism that the creation story in Genesis 1 has had deleterious effects on people's attitudes toward the environment. Often this criticism will be related to one of two indictments of the story. The first of these is that by demythologizing nature, Genesis 1 made possible a more instrumentalist view of creation. Whereas the sun, moon, and stars had earlier been considered gods or the abode of the gods, Genesis 1 told people these were merely "luminaries" that mark the days and seasons for the benefit of humans. So too the mountains, lakes, and rivers were no longer personified as gods or considered the abodes of gods. Rather, they too were said to be created for the benefit of humans. This made possible a view of nature as something before which humans no longer stand in awe, but as something humans *use*—as something made to serve *their* benefit and purposes.

The second indictment involves outrage over the passage in Genesis 1:28 in which God apparently commands the newly created humans to "have dominion over" all living things. "What could be more arrogant?" critics argue. "Isn't this the sort of mindset that has encouraged abuse of the environment?" Even those who find the charge of demythologization not entirely convincing sometimes find this passage troubling.

These two indictments were made famous by a 1967 article, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," in *Science* by Lynn White, a professor of medieval history at UCLA. The charges have been repeated so often since, however, that they have become part of the folklore of the ecological movement.

What makes this reading of the creation account in Genesis 1 especially ironic is that it ends up ascribing to it precisely the sort of worldview this Scripture was written to correct. The creation story in Genesis 1, in fact, was meant to reorient people's way of thinking about their relationship to God and to the world.

THE REAL AGENDA BEHIND GENESIS

Genesis 1 bids us to leave behind our human tendencies to want to use God (or the gods) to attempt to dominate and control the world—a human tendency that found a powerful expression in much

of ancient pagan idolatry. Thus, precisely by demythologizing nature and by counteracting the human predisposition toward control of the world associated with pagan idolatry, Genesis 1 opened a new horizon in understanding the environment. No longer was the world thought to be a threatening place subject to fate, to chance, and to the whim of various gods; no longer, a place where safety was bought at a steep price through sacrifices, sometimes in blood, to appease the gods. Under the influence of the book of Genesis, the world increasingly came to be seen as a place prepared for human life—as a “garden,” in which humans could flourish along with all the other plants and animals. There, humans could enjoy a profound communion with God and other creatures as long as humans walk *with* God, following God’s laws—that is, the laws of justice, righteousness, dignity, and respect that have been built into the very fabric of creation—acting in ways that imitate the Creator-God who reveals himself as (to use Karl Barth’s felicitous expression) one who is “with and for the world.”¹

Indeed, precisely by correcting and clarifying what it means to be “in God’s image and likeness,” Genesis 1 helps humans to realize that their natural tendencies to want to dominate and control others and nature would lead ultimately to their ruin and the devastation of the world, whereas true human flourishing involves a righteous life of service and stewardship in the image and likeness of the God who is both just and loving and who has freely given existence to humans and the world. The real tragedy of misreading Genesis 1 in the way White and others do is precisely that it causes one to miss the original message of the text about human care and responsibility for others and the world, a message desperately needed today.

READING INTO THE TEXT VS. READING IN CONTEXT

The Protestant Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann shows how to avoid these two methods of misconstruing the Bible by

1. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, part 3 (London: T&T Clark, 1961, 2004), 414.

suggesting that one try to read it “like insiders.”² One does that by putting oneself as much as possible into the mindset of the authors and by appreciating the faith convictions that animated their writing. The best place to begin is with what Brueggemann calls “the primal narrative” of the Old Testament, namely, the “simple, elemental, and non-negotiable story line which lies at the heart of biblical faith.” This story, he says, “is presented with the passion of fresh believers and with the simplicity of a community which had screened out uncertainties and felt no reason to explain. It is an affirmation in story form which asserts, ‘This is the most important story we know, and we have come to believe it is decisively about us.’”³ It is the story the community tells itself as a reminder of who it is and from where it has come. All other stories either point forward in anticipation of this watershed event or look backward to it as the decisive center of history. It is the story the community tells when hard times befall it or disaster threatens.

Most scholars agree that the primal narrative was the Exodus, an event that includes the following: (a) God’s liberation of the people from slavery in Egypt, (b) God’s protection of the people during the 40-year period of wandering in the wilderness, (c) God’s establishment of a covenant with them and giving them the Law, and (d) God’s bringing them into the Promised Land.

Because of the way the Bible is currently arranged, with Genesis coming before Exodus, many assume that the creation story in Genesis 1 must have been written long before the Exodus, and thus independently of it. Modern biblical scholarship suggests otherwise, however. It seems clear now that the creation story in Genesis 1 was written by an author who was part of a faith community that had already experienced the miracle of the Exodus. Indeed, many contemporary biblical scholars believe that the creation story now in Genesis 1 was written centuries after the Exodus, by a highly educated Jewish author, sometime during the Babylonian Exile (597–538 BCE).

In such dire circumstances, in the shadow of a shameful defeat, all sorts of questions likely arose for the author and his community:

2. Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 1977), 45. See also Gerhard Von Rad, “The Theological Problem of the Old Testament Doctrine of Creation,” in *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed. Bernhard Anderson, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 53–64.

3. Ibid, 46.

Is God against us? Is God aware of our suffering? Hearing our cries? Is our faith in vain? Is our suffering meaningless? Will the forces of human tyranny have the final word? In the face of defeat and despair, the author of Genesis 1 turned to his faith for answers that opened new horizons of understanding regarding God's true nature. In his commentary on the creation stories in Genesis, Pope Benedict XVI describes the situation thus:

And so, being driven out of their own land and being erased from the map was for Israel a terrible trial: Has our God been vanquished, and is our faith void? At this moment the prophets opened a new page and taught Israel that it was only then that the true face of God appeared and that he was not restricted to that particular piece of land. He had never been: He had promised this piece of land to Abraham before he settled there, and he had been able to bring his people out of Egypt. He could do both things because he was not the God of one place but had power over heaven and earth. Therefore he could drive his faithless people into another land in order to make himself known there. And so it came to be understood that this God of Israel was not a God like the other gods, but that he was the God who held sway over every land and people. He could do this, however, because he himself had created everything in heaven and on earth.⁴

CREATION AND THE COVENANT

Reading Genesis 1 in the light of the Exodus event and God's covenant with the Hebrew people at Sinai can help to correct many common misunderstandings of this text. What might it mean to view God's act of creation in light of the rescue of the Jewish people from their slavery in Egypt? In both instances, God acts freely and is not subject to or limited by any greater force or constraint, whether it be a pharaoh's army or the forces of chaos and pure nothingness. God's creative act is

4. Pope Benedict XVI, *"In the Beginning . . .": A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, tr. Boniface Ramsey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 11-12.

not due to any prior debt or deserving on the part of the people. Thus God's is an act of divine love, not merely of divine power. God does not act, as does the pharaoh, as a powerful tyrant whose actions are the result of fear of the people and whose laws enslave. God acts, rather, as a gracious giver of life, whose commandments are meant to preserve his people's freedom and flourishing in a land God has prepared for them. It is this God of the covenant in whose image humans are made, not the God of power one may have imagined.

Without this prior faith in the God of the covenant, it would be difficult to have faith in the goodness of creation. When one considers the raw, untamed forces of nature—earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, and volcanoes—it is easy to imagine that the world must have been made by an angry or capricious god or gods or that perhaps its fundamental constitution has been determined by cruel fate or blind chance. Either way, the welfare of humankind would be neither essential to the cosmos nor particularly important. It is entirely possible, given this view, to believe that one's lot in life is to offer gifts and sacrifices to placate angry, capricious deities as much as possible in order to curry their favor. This was an altogether common view of the gods in the ancient world.

One may well recognize that this view is closer to one's own than one would care to admit. People sometimes act as though they need only obey and worship God to receive God's favor and gifts, or at least to keep the forces of death and destruction at bay a while longer.

If, however, like the Jewish author of Genesis 1, one thought that the God who redeemed the chosen people from slavery with great signs and wonders, led them dry-shod through the sea, made a covenant with them, gave them laws, and brought them into the Promised Land was the same God who created the entire universe, then one might view creation quite differently. Seeing the God of creation in light of the story about the God of the covenant would reveal that the Creator is not flighty, whimsical, angry, jealous, or domineering, but rather loving, just, and self-sacrificing, who made the universe, not for himself, but for humans. In answer to the question, "Why did God create the universe?" one can say, with Pope Benedict, that "God created the universe in order to enter into a history of love with humankind."⁵

5. Ibid., 30.

CREATION AND THE LAW

And yet, Scripture also teaches that a relationship of love must go both ways. Humans are responsible for acting in ways appropriate to the gifts they have been given. The God who created the world is the same God who not only rescued the Jews from their slavery in Egypt but also confirmed them in their freedom by making a covenant with them and giving them the Law.

Whereas humans in the modern world often tend to think of God's law as a burden, as the willful obligations laid upon them by a God who seems to be, as C. S. Lewis reports an English schoolboy once put it, "the sort of person who is always snooping around to see if anyone is enjoying himself and then trying to stop it,"⁶ the biblical authors understood the Law to be an expression of God's love and concern for his people. So, for example, in Deuteronomy 4:7-8, Moses asks the people: "For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him? Or what great nation has statutes and decrees that are as just as this whole law which I am setting before you today?" By following this law, they come to understand, they will attain wisdom and flourishing. "Observe [these commandments] carefully," says Moses in Deuteronomy 4:6, "for thus will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations, who will hear of all these statutes and say, 'This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people.'" Humans' problem, however, is that they more often think of the covenant as an elevation to a position of privilege rather than as a call to moral responsibility. Given the Jewish view of the Law, it would be more accurate to say that the call to moral responsibility is the privilege, just as the Law is the gift.

That is why it is so important to understand the relationship in the Old Testament between the God of the covenant and the God of creation. Reflecting on creation in the light of the covenant, the Jewish people came to understand the true meaning of creation: that it was an undeserved gift from God. And having been tutored over the generations by the Law, the Jewish people were also prepared for the necessary concomitant of receiving creation as a gift:

6. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 69.

that is, accepting the moral responsibilities and obligations that come along with that gift.

CREATION IN THE PSALMS

That an explicit thematic connection between creation and God's law must have preexisted among the Jewish people before the writing of Genesis 1 can be shown by means of a short survey of earlier Old Testament texts that deal with creation. Two of the most important Psalms that deal with creation are Psalms 33 and 104. In the Roman Catholic lectionary, either of these two psalms is designated for use in the Easter Vigil liturgy to accompany the reading of the seven-day creation account in Genesis 1. (Note that whenever either of these psalms is read in this context, the congregation will always hear them along with the account of the Exodus given in Exodus 14, because that is the one reading that can never be omitted.) Psalms 33 and 104 talk about God as Creator and contain descriptions of God's creative acts, but neither makes use of the seven-day structure of creation in Genesis 1. All three creation accounts, however, enunciate a similar theology of creation.

Let us begin with Psalm 33:6-7, which contain the following short description of God's creative act: "By the LORD's word the heavens were made; by the breath of his mouth all their host. / The waters of the sea were gathered as in a bowl; / in cellars the deep was confined." That text is prefaced by another in which the psalmist sings the praises of the Creator because of God's justice: "Rejoice, you just, in the LORD; / praise from the upright is fitting. / Give thanks to the LORD on the harp; / on the ten-stringed lyre offer praise. / Sing to God a new song; / skillfully play with joyful chant. / For the LORD's word is true; / all his works are trustworthy. / The LORD loves justice and right / and fills the earth with goodness" (Psalm 33:1-5). Note the connections among creation, praise, and justice. The psalmist is clear that praise and worship are not due because humans fear God's great power but because they have become aware that "The LORD loves justice and right and fills the earth with goodness," and so have resolved to love justice and right and fill the earth with goodness themselves.

Psalm 104:2-5 contains another description of God's creative work—one that, like Psalm 33, adopts a different set of images than those used in Genesis 1. It begins:

You spread out the heavens like a tent;
 you raised your palace upon the waters.
 You make the clouds your chariot;
 you travel on the wings of the wind. . . .
 You fixed the earth on its foundation,
 never to be moved.
 The ocean covered it like a garment;
 above the mountains stood the waters.
 At your roar they took flight;
 at the sound of your thunder they fled.
 They rushed up the mountains, down the valleys
 to the place you had fixed for them.
 You set a limit they cannot pass;
 never again will they cover the earth.

(Psalm 104:2-3,5)

Psalm 104 goes on in subsequent verses to recount how God "made springs flow into channels / that wind among the mountains" to give water "to every beast of the field" (Psalm 104:10-11). Moreover, God raises "grass for the cattle / and plants for our beasts of burden." He brings forth "bread from the earth, / and wine to gladden our hearts, / Oil to make our faces gleam, food to build our strength" (Psalm 104:14-15).

Note, however, that it is not just humans for whom God has provided, but for all of God's creatures—plants and animals as well: "The trees of the LORD drink their fill, the cedars of Lebanon, which you planted. / There the birds build their nests; / junipers are the home of the stork" (Psalm 104:16-17). It is not only the great and magnificent creatures for which God cares, but also those whose lives are mostly hidden from human eyes. In a delightful bit of poetic particularity, the psalmist specifies: "The high mountains are for wild goats; / the rocky cliffs, a refuge for badgers" (Psalm 104:18). Even the badgers weren't forgotten! Again, several lines later, the psalmist writes about God's care for the creatures of the sea: "Look at the sea, great and wide! / It teems with countless beings, living things both large and small . . . / here Leviathan [the whale], your creature, plays. / All of these look to you / to give them food in due time. /

When you give to them, they gather; / when you open your hand, they are well filled" (Psalm 104:25-28).

At the dramatic climax of his description, the psalmist, in a kind of marvelous summary, declares: "How varied are your works, LORD! / In wisdom you have wrought them all" (Psalm 104:24). The use of the word *wisdom* in the context of creation is noteworthy because wisdom is something one usually finds associated in the Psalms with the Law, as for example in Psalm 19:8-9: "The law of the LORD is perfect, / refreshing the soul. / The decree of the LORD is trustworthy, / giving wisdom to the simple. / The precepts of the LORD are right, / rejoicing the heart. / The command of the LORD is clear, / enlightening the eye." Indeed, if one were to look more closely at precisely this passage in Psalm 19, one would find that its praise of the Law's wisdom occurs within the context of an especially beautiful praise of the glory of God's creation, which begins: "The heavens declare the glory of God; / the sky proclaims its builder's craft" (Psalm 19:2). When several verses later the psalmist turns to his encomium of the Law, the transition can seem textually a bit startling. In verse 7, a lovely description of the work of the sun appears: "From one end of the heavens it comes forth; / its course runs through to the other; nothing escapes its heat"; and then the psalmist is off and running in praise of the Law:

The law of the LORD is perfect,
 refreshing the soul.
 The decree of the LORD is trustworthy,
 giving wisdom to the simple.
 The precepts of the LORD are right,
 rejoicing the heart.
 The command of the LORD is clear,
 enlightening the eye.
 The fear of the LORD is pure,
 enduring forever.
 The statutes of the LORD are true,
 all of them just;
 More desirable than gold,
 than a hoard of purest gold,

Sweeter also than honey
or drippings from the comb.
By them your servant is instructed;
obeying them brings much reward.

(Psalm 19:8–12)

What explains this odd transition or, perhaps, this odd lack of transition?

One needs to understand that for the psalmist, just as the heavens “declare the glory of God” by obeying the decrees of the Lord, so too do humans when they obey God’s decrees. God, who “in wisdom has wrought all things,” reveals some of that wisdom to humans in the Law. By following the Law, humans learn to be wise; that is, they learn to exist in and for the world in the manner intended by its Creator. The Law is, as it were, the instruction manual God the Creator provides along with his creation, saying in effect: “If you want to know how to flourish in the world I have made, you might want to consider starting with these basic principles: Don’t kill. Don’t steal. Don’t commit adultery. Love your neighbor as yourself.” Such commandments are, as Pope Benedict XVI has described them, “an echo of creation,” signs that “point to the spirit, the language, and the meaning of creation; they are a translation of the language of the universe, a translation of God’s logic, which constructed the universe.”⁷ Put more simply, one might describe God’s law as a translation of the language of love by which God has created the universe.

BACK TO CREATION IN GENESIS 1

Because Genesis 1 was likely written after the other creation texts reviewed thus far—written, indeed, precisely with a view to reaffirming Israel’s traditional faith in the covenant and the Law in the face of their defeat and exile by the Babylonian Empire—one can take what was learned about the ancient Hebrew notion of creation and apply it to the reading of that reputedly “dangerous” text in Genesis 1. One could find evidence there of the themes that have been discussed thus far: the connection between creation and God’s wisdom, and

7. Benedict XVI, 26.

humankind’s response in praise and righteousness. To see it clearly, one needs to take a step back from the text—as one steps back from a great painting to see it whole—and notice the overall structure of the creation narrative in Genesis 1.

Listing the things created on each of the six days—remembering that God rests on the seventh day—one finds the following items:

1. On the first day, God says, “Let there be light.” Light is separated from darkness; the light is called “day,” the darkness, “night.”
2. On the second day, God creates a “dome” and places it in the midst of “the waters,” separating the “water above the dome” from the “water below it.”
3. On the third day God separates the dry land from the water and creates vegetation, more specifically “every kind of plant that bears seed and every kind of fruit tree on earth that bears fruit with its seed in it.”
4. On the fourth day, God creates the greater light to rule the day (the sun) and the lesser lights to rule the night (the moon and the stars), putting them in the heavens to “mark the fixed times, the days and the years.”
5. On the fifth day, God creates only two types of living creature: birds and fish.
6. Finally, on the sixth day, God creates all the land animals—that is, all kinds of “creeping things”—including, of course, that animal created in God’s image, namely humans. (Genesis 1:3–27)

There are some rather odd features of this list, including how, for example, four “days” pass before the sun is created, and what is causing those “seed-bearing plants and trees” to grow if no sun provides them light. However, those problems arise only if one insists on taking the list literally as a historical account—as though those things were being listed like items in a newspaper article titled, “What I Saw at Creation.”

Reexamine the list. Note that the first three days systematically prepare an environment for the inhabitants created on each of the final three days. The creation of day and night makes way for

inhabitants. The creation of the sky and the oceans prepares an environment for the birds that fly in the sky and the fish that swim in the sea. Finally, the preparation of the dry land and the creation of vegetation prepares the appropriate environment for the land animals and for the ones who can praise God with their actions, the humans "made in the image and likeness of God." This fairly simple message might be summarized by Psalm 104:24: "How varied are your works, LORD! / In wisdom you have wrought them all." From the bounty of God's wisdom and love, everything is created, and creation invites one into a covenant; it calls forth from humans a commitment to and responsibility for creation similar to God's own.

ARE DEMYTHOLOGIZING AND INSTRUMENTALIZING NATURE THE SAME?

Recall that the first indictment against the Old Testament accounts of creation was that by demythologizing nature, these passages had thereby instrumentalized it. That is, by making the sun, moon, and stars, lakes and oceans, plants and animals no longer "gods" deserving of "worship," the Old Testament authors present nature as something made solely for human use. By reading the Genesis creation account in context, however, one finds this charge without merit. By affirming their faith in a God who creates in wisdom and righteousness, the Old Testament authors did away with older views that suggested the universe was made by capricious, warring deities and that humans had to make their way in life jockeying for power and position, trying to placate one god or another. Instead, theirs is a theology of creation that envisions the universe as the gift of a righteous and loving Creator. In this view, humans' lot in life is not a constant battle against powerful and impersonal forces that care nothing about them. Rather, humans are called to praise God by living righteously and caring for God's creatures.

In sum, humans call out to the universe to ask: Why are we here? What is life for? The answers the universe gives depend on the story one thinks it tells. If humans think the universe is essentially a battlefield, then it will tell them to "kill or be killed." If they imagine the universe to be the gift of a loving and just God in whose image they

have been made, then it will tell them to imitate God by engaging in acts of justice and love.

TWO VIEWS OF WHAT IT MEANS TO HAVE DOMINION

The second indictment against the Genesis 1 account of creation relates to the notion that humans were to "have dominion" over all creatures. In response to this criticism, one should begin by noting the stipulation that humans were to "have dominion" comes right after the creation of humans "in the image and likeness of God." One could read and interpret what it means to "have dominion" in terms of what it means to be "in the image and likeness of God." The word *dominion* derives from the Latin root *dominus*, meaning, "lord." If one considers the Lord as the one, true, living God who has entered into a covenant with God's people—if that is one's concept of lordship rather than of someone "lording over" a people—then one might conceive of God's command for humans to "have dominion" over Earth differently: as a duty to care for it rather than to command and control it.

There is a tendency to read the word *dominion* in terms of a human appetite for power and wealth rather than in terms of the providential care God displays in salvation history. This tendency has been exacerbated by contemporary technological culture. It is noteworthy that many readers of Genesis 1 fail to notice that the dominion with which humans are entrusted refers only to the plants and animals and not to all of creation, as is often mistakenly supposed. This makes the image of the human person much more like that of a farmer or a shepherd than that of a contemporary technician. Indeed, a farmer would be more likely to understand what dominion over the animals in his or her care entails than would be those who are inclined to think of dominion in either political or technological terms, and usually in the sense of domination.

Anyone who has spent time around farm animals knows that a farmer's dominion has almost nothing to do with control. There is simply no controlling horses, cows, chickens, and hogs—those novices who try end up frustrated and worn out. An experienced farmer understands that one either learns the ways of animals—how and

when to feed them, what and when not to feed them, how large a pen they need, how much exercise they must have, how they give birth to their young, how long they must stay with their mother—or farmer and animals alike will not survive.

CULTIVATING THE GARDEN AND KEEPING THE LAW

Another important corrective to misinterpretations of human dominion surfaces in the parallel creation account in Genesis 2—3. The editor who put together the two creation stories in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2—3 did so for a reason, which may well be that, although written centuries apart, these two narratives manifest the same basic theology of creation, even as the account in Genesis 2 extends the story to include the specifically moral dimensions of such a theology. In Genesis 2, rather than using the image of the six days to communicate the idea that God has prepared an environment propitious for human flourishing, the author uses the image of a garden, in which God causes to grow “various trees . . . that were delightful to look at and good for food” (Genesis 2:9). In creating the world, God has prepared for humans a verdant place in which to flourish—if, that is, they care for that garden appropriately. Notice God’s instruction in Genesis 2:15: “The LORD God then took the man and put him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it.” Interestingly, the first word in this series, *cultivate*, comes from a root (*abad*) that means, “to serve.” The second, *keep*, which is also translated as “to take care of,” comes from a root (*shamar*) that means “to keep, watch, preserve” and even “to exercise great care over.” It would not be much of a stretch, then, to say that another possible translation of this verse would be to say that God had commanded humans to serve and preserve the world entrusted to their care.

There is in Genesis 2—3, as in the other creation texts, a moral dimension as well. The worm in the apple that results in the loss of this garden has to do with humans’ disobedience of God’s law. In the context of the time in which it was written (probably as early as the tenth century BCE), it may well be that the garden to which the author is referring is the Promised Land, and the temptation that the serpent represents is the temptation to idolatry. Recall that

at the end of Genesis 1 (verse 26), God says, “Let us make man in our image.” The implication is that humans are supposed to cut and form themselves in God’s image. The human tendency, however, is to cut and form God to their image: to turn God into the lord one would wish God to be—powerful, controlling, and fearsome—rather than recognizing God as the kind of Lord he has revealed himself to be: loving, righteous, and self-sacrificing. Thus, the temptation to idolatry involves not merely the making of statues and giving them human characteristics, but also that one makes gods over in one’s own image.

In the ancient world, when one was a farmer, one’s “god” was usually the god of the harvest. When one was a soldier, one’s god was usually the god of war, and so on for blacksmiths, merchants, hunters, fathers, mothers, and young women who desired beauty: each of them had their specific god. However, biblical revelation shows the “worshipper” in these instances has merely created a god in his or her own image, a god to satisfy his or her own desires and designs. Thus, the real danger is not simply the making of statues. The real danger is that humans will forsake the covenant and the gift God has given to them in the Law in order to pursue the worship of gods who promise control over history and nature but ask no moral conversion of heart and life.

Instead of attempting to control nature by bribing the gods to force nature into conformity with human desires, the creation stories in the Old Testament bid them to cultivate the garden God has given them. To *cultivate the garden*, in this view, is synonymous with to *keep the law*. That is to say, to cultivate the garden, humans must first cultivate the virtues united under the overarching virtue of love. There will be no order in the garden if there is no order in the human soul. Ultimately, to care for the garden, one’s heart must be made over into the image and likeness of the God who loves and cares for all.

CONCLUSION

The Jewish people came to believe that the source of their existence as a people was the source of the existence of all the world; that the same God who had rescued them from slavery, entered into a covenant with them, and given them his law—who had in this way

revealed himself to be a God who is “with them and for them”⁸—was also the God who had made all the world. He had done so, moreover, with the same will for the salvation and flourishing of all. The Jewish people began to see, in other words, that their primal narrative was not merely their narrative as a people; rather it was the key to the primal narrative of the whole cosmos. If that is true, then all humans are a covenant people now, living in a covenantal world, with covenant responsibilities: to exist, as God does, “with the world and for the world,” and to rejoice in God’s creation by living righteously with all of God’s creatures.

Scripture reveals a God who creates out of wisdom and love. God’s creation involves a commitment of wisdom and righteousness and calls forth a similar commitment. Humans are called into a covenant with God, which is also a covenant with neighbor and nature.

Scripture presents a distinctly moral dimension to creation. Humans are made in the image of God and called to show that likeness to others: through allowing creation to show forth the glory of God; through causing nature to “rejoice”; by singing “joyfully to the LORD”; by being “righteous”; by realizing, as Psalm 33:5 says, that “the LORD loves justice and right.” The antithesis of this attitude of thankfulness and rejoicing is to attempt to become the “lord” of creation and thereby the cause of its enslavement. Acting without righteousness, as Saint Paul suggests in Romans 8:20 (and chapter 5 will explore further), humans make creation “subject to futility.”

That humanity has fallen short is hard to deny when one surveys the damage done. However, Genesis would argue, the problem did not begin in 1967 or at the outset of the Industrial Revolution, when the spirit of the instrumentalization of nature began in earnest. The problem began at the beginning, when men and women first chose to see themselves as gods, rather than acknowledging their Creator as the one, true, living God. It began when men and women chose their own will-to-power over the moral law of all creation. Indeed, if the book of Genesis is to be believed, then the problem can only be solved by getting at the heart of men and women and calling them to fidelity to God, to one another, and to the world they are meant to steward.

8. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 414.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are the two major modern indictments of the creation story in Genesis 1? Why, according to the author, is the interpretation of Genesis 1 that supports these two indictments especially ironic?
2. What, according to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, is the “primal narrative” of the Old Testament? Of what relevance is the story of the Exodus to one’s understanding of the story of creation recounted in Genesis 1?
3. When do many scholars think the creation story in Genesis 1 was written? What new understanding about the nature of God did the Jewish people discover during this time, according to Pope Benedict XVI?
4. How, according to the author, should we understand the order of the six “days” of creation in Genesis 1?
5. What, according to the author, are the two different ways of understanding what it means for humans to “have dominion” over the plants and animals?

IN-DEPTH QUESTIONS

1. What difference does it make to one’s understanding of the creation story in Genesis 1 to read it in the light of the Exodus event?
2. Consider for a moment the following possible alternative understandings of creation:
 - (a) Creation is the by-product of a cosmic battle between the gods.
 - (b) Creation happens by “fate”; the gods are more powerful than humans but are as much subject to fate as humans are.
 - (c) Creation is the result of God’s desire to have creatures to bow down in homage.
 - (d) Creation happens by chance. Existence is essentially meaningless.

3. What would be the implications for human life and for human attitudes toward the environment given each scenario? Now compare these with the understanding of creation that suggests creation is the product of a just and loving God who creates to invite humans into a fellowship of love.
4. What difference would it make to one's understanding of what it means to "have dominion" over the plants and animals if one thought about it from the point of view of farmers or shepherds (as many of the original audience were) rather than from the current industrial-technological point of view?
5. What, according to the author, is the real problem with idolatry? Why is idolatry a problem with respect to one's treatment of the environment? Would it make any difference if, instead of cutting and forming God to human image, the believer felt the need to be made over into God's image?
6. What difference would it make to the way you live your life and treat those around you if you thought of Earth's stewardship as a gift? Would it make any difference to you if you thought of such stewardship as an expression of God's wisdom—as a key, in other words, to humans flourishing in this world?

CHAPTER 5

A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH:

Creation in the New Testament

Thomas Bushblack

KEY TERMS

divine providence

Dei verbum

hermeneutics

fusion of horizons

eschatology

Hellenistic

Logos

incarnation

kenosis

exegesis

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. (Revelation 21:1)

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

In comparison with the Hebrew Scriptures, surprisingly little work has been completed by scholars focusing on the New Testament as a source for environmental theology and ethics. Perhaps this is because the Hebrew Scriptures provide more immediate stimulation for the imagination in relation to the ecological concerns that define current times. Yet, one should not be deterred from looking to the New Testament as a source for better understanding a Christian scriptural view of the role of creation (both human and nonhuman) within God's plan of salvation history. When read in conjunction and in continuity with the