

CEDARVILLE UNIVERSITY

CREATION AND DOXOLOGY:
A PORTRAIT OF BIBLICAL CREATION THEOLOGY

SUBMITTED TO T.C. HAM, Ph.D.
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
BEOT 3110 – PENTATEUCH

BY
JOSHUA P. STEELE
SEPTEMBER 17, 2012

INTRODUCTION

In many conservative evangelical circles, biblical creation theology has been hijacked and eclipsed by the vitriolic debate between Young Earth Creationism and Neo-Darwinism.¹ It is often difficult to see beyond this morass the beautiful tapestry of creation themes in biblical theology. Waltke summarizes the problem well: “Instead of metaphysical questions that shape culture, questions about dinosaurs, a young earth theory, and such dominate the evangelical landscape. This is unfortunate.”² Nevertheless, there is an embarrassment of riches when it comes to Scripture’s use of creation themes, whether the evangelical community gives them appropriate attention or not. Unfortunately, a comprehensive analysis of biblical creation theology, a field fertile enough to provide lifetimes of work and study, far exceeds the purview of this essay.³ However, a brief analysis of the motifs of creation as temple, chaos, and redemption will show that the overarching use of creation theology in Scripture is to bring about the praise of the Creator. Biblical creation theology, properly understood, leads to doxology.

CREATION AS GOD’S TEMPLE

A fitting place to begin this study is the creation account of Gen 1:1-2:3, which depicts the cosmos as Elohim’s holy temple.⁴ Although other ancient cosmogonies

¹ For a thoroughly cordial discussion of the debate, however, see the summary in Daniel J. Treier, “Creation.” In *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 144.

² Bruce Waltke and Charles Yu, “Chapter 7: The Gift of the Cosmos” In *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 174.

³ This is by no means an exhaustive list, but each of the following abandoned section headings (due to length limitations) represents its own “fertile field” within biblical creation theology: Creation and Ethics, Creation Undone: Judgment and Exile as Creation in Reverse, Creation and Wisdom, and Creation and Ecology.

⁴ The theme of the cosmos as God’s temple is taken up at several other points in the OT. For example, consider the depictions of the heavens as a sheik’s tent stretched out for God to dwell in (Job 9:8; Ps 104:1-3; Isa 40:22; cf. 42:5; 51:13). See Waltke and Yu 2007, 205. The clearest statements, however, are found in 1 Kgs 8:27, Isa 6:3, and most especially Isa 66:1-2a (discussed below). See Walton 2009, 83-4.

In this section I rely heavily on Walton’s “Proposition 8: The Cosmos is a Temple,” a key piece in his “cosmic temple inauguration” view of Genesis 1. See John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 74-86; 162-168.

prominently feature a particular location or building as the nexus for worship of the respective deities, Gen 1 contains no such element.⁵ Indeed, other creation accounts in the ANE associated the lack of a temple with the “precosmic condition.” That is, creation (the expression of divine authority) was not regarded as complete until the temple (the location for the implementation of divine authority) was constructed.⁶ The cosmogony of Gen 1 thus seems strange when compared to its ANE counterparts, but this anomaly reveals the main emphasis of the passage: the entire universe is the sacred dwelling place of Elohim.

The structure of the narrative lends itself to this “cosmic temple” interpretation. In the first three days of creation (1:1-13), Elohim calls three “spheres” into being, relating to the main “functions” of life: light/darkness (time), water/sky (weather), and land/sea (food).⁷ He then proceeds to create in days four through six (1:14-31), assigning the “functionaries” of creation their respective roles and spheres.⁸ The scene is then set for the climax of the narrative, which is not the creation of humans, but the installation of the Sabbath (2:1-3).

If the connection between this Sabbath rest and creation as temple is not apparent to the modern reader, it is due to a lack of knowledge of where divine rest takes place.⁹ Upon reading that Elohim “rested” (Gen 2:2), the ancient reader would have immediately recognized that this was taking place in a divine *temple*, the exclusively-appropriate place for any god to rest and proceed to rule his domain from the throne.¹⁰ However, the English “rest” does not fully reflect the meaning of the Hebrew “שַׁבָּת”, *shabbat*,” which refers to “the

⁵ Michael W. Pahl, *The Beginning and the End: Rereading Genesis's Stories and Revelation's Visions*. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 19.

⁶ Walton 2009, 78.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 54-62. (“Proposition 5: Days One to Three in Genesis 1 Establish Functions”).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 63-71. (“Proposition 6: Days Four to Six in Genesis 1 Install Functionaries”).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 72-7. The pertinent information in this paragraph (other than the biblical references below) comes from Walton’s succinct and cogent argument explaining the significance of Elohim’s Sabbath rest in the “cosmic temple inauguration” view (“Proposition 7: Divine Rest Is in a Temple”).

¹⁰ Cf. Pss 2:4; 11:4; 14:2 (as cited by Waltke and Yu 2007, 205).

completion of certain activity with which one had been occupied.”¹¹ After completing the creative transition from non-functional chaotic waters to a stable and functional temple, Elohim “rests,” and the cosmos may now operate normally, with him in control.¹² The clearest Scriptural compilation of all these ideas occurs in Isa 66:1-2a:

This is what the Lord says:
 “The heavens are my throne
 and the earth is my footstool.
 Where then is *the house* you will build for me?
 Where is *the place where I will rest*?
 My hand made them;
 that is how they came to be,” says the Lord.¹³

Doxologically, the creation of the universe as Elohim’s temple provides the impetus and parameters for appropriate worship of the Creator, whose “majestic splendor fills the entire earth” (Isa 6:3). As the only inhabitants of the cosmic temple created in the image (תְּלֵמָה, *tselem*) of Elohim, humans were created to function as “priest-kings”, extending his rule and dominion throughout the entire sacred realm of creation (Gen 1:26-28).¹⁴ Through the lens of creation as temple, therefore, worship is relational, designed to be mediated by Elohim’s beloved priest-kings as they live in perfect relationship with him, with each other, and with the rest of creation, a full vision of the divine rest appropriate to Elohim’s cosmic temple.¹⁵

However, there is a tension between creation as it is now experienced and as it has just been described.¹⁶ Genesis 3 gives the tragic explanation: Sin and Death, God’s cosmic

¹¹ See the New English Translation’s (NET Bible) appropriate rendering of Gen 1:2b: “and he *ceased* on the seventh day all the work that he had been doing.”

¹² The transition from a “ceasing rest” (שַׁבָּת, *shabbat*) into stability can be seen in the use of the Hebrew term נָחָה (*nuha*, entering stability, safety, or security) to describe God’s rest in Exodus 20:11. See Walton 2009, 73.

¹³ NET Bible, emphasis added. See Walton 2009, 83-4.

¹⁴ Pahl, *The Beginning and the End*, 19-20.

¹⁵ The link between divine rest and the cosmos as temple brings together several passages in the OT and NT. Consider how Heb 3:7-4:11 links the “rest” in Gen 2:2 with Ps 95. See Randall C. Gleason, “The Old Testament background of rest in Hebrews 3:7-4:11.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157, no. 627 (July 1, 2000): 281-303.

enemies, have infected and affected every layer of the cosmic temple,¹⁷ pulling the universe backwards, so to speak, toward the chaotic watery depths from which it was called into being. If the temple is no longer “safe,” is appropriate worship still possible?

CREATION, COMPLEXITY, AND CHAOS

Much of the chaos in the universe can be ascribed to the infiltration of Sin and Death as described in Genesis 3. However, an oft-overlooked facet of biblical creation theology is the appropriate place of complexity and chaos within God’s creation. Even when the effects of the Fall are ignored, God’s temple is by no means a tame environment, nor is humanity the sole venue through which Yahweh receives glory. This facet is a crucial one, for it reorients a proper view of worship in an untamed temple, necessitating humility in the worship of the Creator.

Yahweh’s “whirlwind speeches” in Job 38-41 are the longest sustained reflection on creation outside of Gen 1-3, and they depict a radically non-anthropocentric cosmos where the ferocity and freedom of non-human creatures is celebrated.¹⁸ Whereas other passages seem to portray humanity as the center of God’s attention,¹⁹ in Job 38-41 Yahweh only mentions humans in passing, choosing instead to focus on the wildest aspects of his creation, such as the Behemoth (40:15-24), the Leviathan (41:1-34), and the Sea (38:8-11).

The Sea, in fact, bears special mention, for it was a symbol of chaos in the ANE, and in several ANE cosmogonies it had to be slain by the gods in the process of creation.²⁰ Most notably, in the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, the creator-goddess *Tiamat* (Sumerian for “salt

¹⁶ This same tension is in view in Rom 1:16-32, where Paul contrasts the righteousness of God (which he will defend through the entire epistle) with the present state of the world.

¹⁷ I am indebted to Dr. Timothy Gombis (Ph.D., University of St. Andrews) for this phraseology regarding Sin and Death.

¹⁸ Kathry M. Schifferdecker, "Of Stars and Sea Monsters: Creation Theology in the Whirlwind Speeches," *Word & World* 31, no. 4 (09/01, 2011): 359, 361.

¹⁹ Cf. Gen 1-2; Pss 8; 104.

²⁰ Schifferdecker 2011, 361-2.

water, deep, chaos”) is violently defeated by the warrior-god Marduk, who constructs the universe from her bloody corpse.²¹ In the Genesis account, we see the cognate Hebrew term: תְּהוֹם (*tehom*), the “watery depths” of Gen 1:2. Although there are echoes of the Marduk-Tiamat battle elsewhere in Scripture,²² the struggle is not mentioned here.²³ Furthermore, in Job 38, the Sea is not a chaotic force of evil defeated by God, but a powerful force which is *born* as God acts as midwife.²⁴ Yahweh sets a boundary for the Sea, but he also gives its chaotic waters a place in the created order, revealing that his creation, though orderly, is not a perfectly safe or tame place for humans in its beauty and freedom.²⁵

The creation theology of the whirlwind speeches shows that “humanity has a place in God’s creation...not of dominion but of humility and of wonder.”²⁶ The inherent chaos and complexity of creation necessitate a humble reorientation in the priest-kings’ worship of their Creator. Nevertheless, although God’s temple is wild by design, Sin and Death continue to cut against the grain of Yahweh’s creative purposes, distorting even the intrinsic beauty of creation’s chaotic aspects. All is not as it should be in Elohim’s holy temple. Creation cries out for a Redeemer.

²¹ Catherine Keller, ““Be this Fish”: A Theology of Creation Out of Chaos.” *Word & World* 32, no. 1 (12/01, 2012): 17.

²² Cf. Ps 29; 74; 89; 114; Isa 51:9-10; Job 9:8; 26:12-13. Cited by Schifferdecker 2011, 362.

²³ David A. S. Fergusson, *The Cosmos and the Creator: An Introduction to the Theology of Creation*. (London: SPCK, 1998), 7. Keller regards this absence of violence and matricide as extremely significant, see Keller 2012. However, this is contra Hermann Gunkel’s 1895 essay on “The Influence of Babylonian Mythology Upon the Biblical Creation Story,” where he overlooks this difference as a “fading” of the Genesis 1 account, choosing instead to focus on the many similarities between the Babylonian and Hebrew cosmogonies. See Bernhard W. Anderson, ed. *Creation in the Old Testament*. Issues in Religion and Theology, edited by Douglas Knight and Robert Morgan. Vol. 6. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 25-52.

²⁴ Schifferdecker 2011, 362. Cf. Job 38:8-11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 363-4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 365.

CREATION AND REDEMPTION: CHRIST AND NEW CREATION

Throughout the New Testament, the main use of creation theology is to link creation with redemption, resulting in the praise of the Creator through the Creator-Redeemer, Jesus the Messiah. However, the linked concepts of creation and redemption have a rich OT history. For example, cited impetuses for keeping the Sabbath are Yahweh's creative work (Exod 20:11) and his redemptive work (Deut 5:15), revealing a close connection between the two actions.²⁷ The logic behind this correlation is one of continued creation: Yahweh is personally invested in the success of his creative purposes, the functionality of his temple.²⁸ Sin and Death will not have the final word. The Creator will redeem by creating anew through his Son.

The New Testament unites creation and redemption in the person of Jesus the Messiah. Evidence abounds, but consider three poignant examples. In John 1:1-18, Jesus is spoken of as the agent of creation (1:3) and the redemptive agent of grace and truth (1:17).²⁹ In Colossians 1:15-20, Jesus is the "image of God, the firstborn over all creation (1:15)," illustrating his role as the eternal nexus between Creator and creation.³⁰ Furthermore, Christ is spoken of, again, as both the agent of creation (1:16) and reconciliatory redemption (1:19-20).³¹ Finally, in Heb 1:1-4, the author of Hebrews takes special care to link the Son's

²⁷ Daniel J. Ebert, IV. "The chiasmic structure of the prologue to Hebrews." *Trinity Journal* 13, no. 2 (09/01, 1992): 171. Ebert also cites Gen 14:19-20; Pss 95:1-7a; 135; 136; Isa 45:17-25.

²⁸ Consider the Noachic Covenant of Gen 8:1-9:17. Even God's own judgment through the Flood, portrayed in terms of creation reversal, does not result in ultimate destruction of the created order. How much more, then, will the Creator work to redeem against the forces of his enemies, Sin and Death? See the section on "The continuation and renewal of creation" in L. H. Osborn, "Creation." In *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, edited by T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 432-3.

²⁹ Ebert 1992, 172. Cf. the parallel uses of ἐγένετο in vv. 3, 17.

³⁰ Osborn 2000, 433.

³¹ Ebert 1992, 171-2.

creative work with his redemptive work through a verbal parallel: through the Son, the universe and redemptive cleansing are both *made* (ποιέω).³²

Doxologically, the link between creation and redemption is hard to overemphasize, for it provides the explanation, impetus, and goal of worship. By creating anew through Jesus the Messiah, the perfect *Eikon*³³ or *Tselem* (image) of God who has defeated Sin and Death, Elohim has begun to renew his holy temple, even as it yearns for full release from its bondage to decay.³⁴ This act of re-creation begins in the crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah, reversing Death itself and displaying Jesus Christ as the pioneer of a new humanity, one untouched by God's cosmic enemies. It continues in the Church, as the priest-kings are re-created *in Christ and his resurrection* into a new race of people able to worship their Maker by participating in the renewal of his universe, by once again extending his rule throughout the sacred realm, and by living in right relationship to him, to creation, to each other, and to themselves as they await the return of their Creator, Redeemer, and King, Jesus the Messiah.³⁵

³² Ibid., 170-2. “Δι’ οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας...καθαρισμὸν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος.” This appears to be a purposeful parallel because the author could have easily used the cognate verb καθαρίζω instead of the classical use of the middle participle and adjective.

³³ With regards to “Eikon” language, I am indebted to Scot McKnight, who uses the terminology frequently in his writing. Consider his discussion of humans as Eikons and Christ as the perfect Eikon who redeems in Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*. Living Theology. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), especially pp. 15-24.

³⁴ Cf. Rom 8:18-23. See Richard Bauckham, “The Story of the Earth According to Paul: Romans 8:18-23.” *Review & Expositor* 108, no. 1 (12/01, 2011): 91-97 and also Michael W. Pahl, *From Resurrection to New Creation: A First Journey in Christian Theology*. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 88-92.

³⁵ Cf. passages such as Rom 5-8; 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 1:10. While the wording of the last two sentences in this paragraph is my own, some credit must be given to Pahl's remarkably clear summary and explanation of resurrection, redemption, and new creation in his final chapter on Creation. See Pahl *From Resurrection to New Creation*, 85-92.

CONCLUSION

In light of these things, to relegate the manifold and rich uses of creation theology throughout Scripture to an ongoing origins debate which is thoroughly *detached* from the biblical text would be a tragedy. At the risk of oversimplification, the myriad creation themes in the Scriptures all lead to one common goal: doxology, as a brief analysis of just three of those themes has shown. Creation as temple provides the parameters for worship of the Creator, setting the foundation for humanity's relational role as the priest-kings of Elohim. Creation as chaos reorients that worship toward humility and wonder in the midst of a purposefully untamed and sometimes dangerous temple, bringing the wildly complex beauty of Yahweh's creation to bear on the human experience. Finally, creation as redemption ties the entire story together, explaining the Creator's refusal to allow Sin and Death to drag his temple back to the watery depths of non-functionality. He has chosen to create anew, to redeem every aspect of his holy temple, from its priest-kings to its wild beauties, through Jesus the Messiah, the eternal intersection of Creator, creation, and redemption. This process of new creation began at the crucifixion and resurrection, continues through the Church, and anticipates the eschaton, when Sin and Death will not only be defeated, but utterly vanquished. The holy temple will again be filled with perfect worship, forever.

It is *because of* and *within* this story of creation and new creation that we worship our Maker.

Biblical creation theology inescapably leads to doxology.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Bernhard W., ed. *Creation in the Old Testament*. Issues in Religion and Theology, edited by Douglas Knight and Robert Morgan. Vol. 6. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984.
- Bauckham, Richard. "The Story of the Earth According to Paul: Romans 8:18-23." *Review & Expositor* 108, no. 1 (12/01, 2011): 91-97.
- Ebert, Daniel J, IV. "The chiastic structure of the prologue to Hebrews." *Trinity Journal* 13, no. 2 (09/01, 1992): 163-179. *ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost* (accessed September 16, 2012).
- Fergusson, David A. S. *The Cosmos and the Creator: An Introduction to the Theology of Creation*. London: SPCK, 1998.
- Gleason, Randall C. "The Old Testament background of rest in Hebrews 3:7-4:11." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157, no. 627 (07/01, 2000): 281-303. *ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost* (accessed September 16, 2012).
- Keller, Catherine. "'Be this Fish': A Theology of Creation Out of Chaos." *Word & World* 32, no. 1 (12/01, 2012): 15-20.
- McKim, D. K. "Creation, Doctrine of." In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell. 2nd ed., 304-306. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001.
- McKnight, Scot. *A Community Called Atonement*. Living Theology. Nashville: Abingdon, 2007.
- Osborn, L. H. "Creation." In *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, edited by T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, 429-435. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000.
- Pahl, Michael W. *The Beginning and the End: Rereading Genesis's Stories and Revelation's Visions*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011.
- . *From Resurrection to New Creation: A First Journey in Christian Theology*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010.
- Schifferdecker, Kathryn M. "Of Stars and Sea Monsters: Creation Theology in the Whirlwind Speeches." *Word & World* 31, no. 4 (09/01, 2011): 357-366.
- Treier, Daniel J. "Creation." In *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier and N. T. Wright, 144-146. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.
- Waltke, Bruce and Charles Yu. "Chapter 7: The Gift of the Cosmos." In *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach*, 173-208. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.

Walton, John H. *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009.

Westermann, Claus. *Creation* [Schöpfung]. Translated by John J. Scullion. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974.