

michael welker
creation and reality

Fortress Press

Minneapolis

To my Princeton friends and colleagues

CREATION AND REALITY

Translated by John F. Hoffmeyer

Copyright © 1999 Augsburg Fortress Publishers. All rights reserved. Except for quotations in critical articles or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher. Write to: Permissions, Augsburg Fortress Publishers, Box 1209, Minneapolis, MN 55440.

Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used with permission.

Cover design: Joseph Bonyata
Book design: Peregrine Graphics Services

0-8006-2628-1

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Services—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z329.48-1984.

Manufactured in the U.S.A. 1-2628
03 02 01 00 99 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

contents

- ix Acknowledgments
- 1 **Introduction**
*The Collapse of Bourgeois Theism and the Crisis
of Religious Existence*
Theology of Creation: Questions in Biblical Perspective
The New Biblical Theology
- 6 **1. What Is Creation? Rereading Genesis 1 and 2**
Conventional Guiding Conceptions of Creation
Rereading Genesis 1 and 2
What Is Creation?
Critique of Abstraction as a Theological Task
- 21 **2. Creation and the Problem of Natural Revelation**
*The Defect of Revelation: Why Does Common Sense
Prefer Natural Revelation?*
Calvin's Appreciation and Critique of Natural Revelation
Creation and Revelation
- 33 **3. Creation as the Heavens and the Earth**
"God Is in Heaven, and You Are on Earth"
The Heavens—Unity and Plurality of "Transcendence"
The Earth—Active and Empowering Environment
- 45 **4. Angels and God's Presence in Creation**
Messenger Angelology and God's Withdrawal
Court Angelology and the Glory of God

- 60 **5. Creation, the Image of God, and the Mandate of Dominion**
Recent Theological Attempts to Weaken and to Relativize the Mandate of Dominion
The Image of God, the Mandate of Dominion, and Sexual Differentiation of Humans
The Mandate of Dominion: Obligation to Hierarchically Ordered Partnership with Animals and to Dominion through Caretaking
- 74 **6. Creation and Sin**
"The Fall" or the Autonomy of Created Humankind
Mere Autonomy: The Wretchedness of Sinners
- 83 Notes
- 101 Index

acknowledgments

The chapters of this volume, all examining central themes of the doctrine of creation, were first formulated as lectures in the United States. Five entered the forum of public discussion as the Warfield Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary. I am very grateful for the continued good exchange, both professional and personal, with colleagues there—including the Bible and Theology Project and the Consultation on Science and Theology.

The chapter on Genesis 1 and 2 was first conceived for the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion in autumn 1990 in New Orleans (as part of a series on "Reinterpreting Classic Texts"). I have reworked the earlier lecture on the basis of lectures delivered as part of the same event by Phyllis Trible of Union Theological Seminary and Paul D. Hanson of Harvard Divinity School. I put forward an expanded version for discussion by colleagues of the Evangelical and Catholic Faculties of the University of Münster at their 1991 Epiphany Conference. I am grateful to them as well for fruitful provocation to further reflection.

A doctoral seminar held jointly with Jürgen Moltmann several years ago in Tübingen, and especially a paper delivered by Hartmut Gese at that seminar, made a valuable contribution to the chapter on "God's angels" in the present volume. They helped move me to understand statements of faith that resist being fit into our contemporary forms of experience but that, on the basis of their logic, enable a circumspect questioning of our constructions of "reality."

Finally, I am grateful for discussions within the framework of courses taught by my colleagues and friends Christof Gestrich and Bernd Janowski, in which chapters for this volume were subjected to critical examination.

I thank my wife Ulrike Welker for many conversations concerning the material and for her great help in preparing the manuscripts. Dr. John Hoffmeyer translated these essays with great linguistic and theological sensitivity. He bore with my numerous improvements, revisions, additions, and reworkings with friendliness and patience. I am very grateful to him for many years of collaboration and would like to say publicly in this place what I have repeatedly communicated to him: I often find his translations better than the original.

introduction

The Collapse of Bourgeois Theism and the Crisis of Religious Existence

The major churches in Europe, and partly in North America as well, are currently experiencing the collapse of classical bourgeois theism. More and more people are turning away from belief in a personal figure who exists over and above this world, who has brought forth both himself and all reality, and who controls and defines “everything” without distinction. They no longer affirm the omnipotence and ubiquity of God. This collapse, which naturally gives rise to powerful countermovements—for example, fundamentalist ones—is hitting churches and cultures hard. Many institutions and many people are experiencing a crisis of landslide proportions.

Laments over this development mostly overlook the fact that almost all significant theologies of the twentieth century have actually worked toward this collapse. This has been a deliberate goal in the thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Jürgen Moltmann, in many theologies of liberation, and in almost all feminist theologies. At least initial steps in this direction have occurred in the work of Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Eberhard Jüngel, and David Tracy, in process theologies, and in other thinkers and developments.

It was above all christological and trinitarian insights and questions that were determinative of the efforts to put an end to classical theism. A realistic knowledge of the unity, vitality, personality, effectiveness, and glory of the triune God was and is being sought. But insights also from the theology of law and from pneumatology, as well as metaphysical, moral, and political reasons, forced theism into question. A whole array of critical encounters and movements are thus collaborating in the collapse of this religious form of power. Yet instead of contentment and rejoicing at the success, perplexity and discouragement seem to be proliferating. Indispensable religious and normative foundations seem to be crumbling or to have crumbled already. It is no idol that has been toppled. Instead it seems to many people that God's own self has fallen.

Theology of Creation: Questions in Biblical Perspective

In this situation it is necessary not to give up the christological, pneumatological, and other debates with classical theism but to supplement them in the area of the theology of creation. The alliance between theism and belief in the Creator must also be examined. This book offers initial steps toward correcting both the classical theistic caricature of God the Creator and a corresponding religious understanding of "reality." Taking their orientation from the biblical traditions, these chapters look for perspectives and ways to achieve a pre- or post-theistic understanding of God's creative power and of the creation intended by God.

This sort of attempt to develop a biblical-theological orientation is admittedly disputed in contemporary systematic theology. Raising such ideas has met with considerable agreement but also given rise to energetic criticism both from the North American Thomistic Catholic quarter and from the German Neoprotestant quarter. David Burrell, for example, has objected to rethinking the God-creation relationship, preferring instead to emphasize "the 'distinction' of God from the world . . . which creation is meant to secure. . . ." ¹ That is *the* task of the theology of creation, while specific knowledge of creator and creature remains completely vague: "So the quintessential task becomes one of formulating that 'distinction' so as to assure the required transcendence, *while allowing us to have some notion of what it is we are referring to* in addressing 'the Holy One,' 'our Father,' or 'Allah Akbar.'" ² As important as this concern may be for basic theistic moves in a Thomistically defined philosophy of religion, it ought not to be advanced as a formulation of *the* fundamental task of the theology of creation.

One sees an analogous move in the thought of Eilert Herms. ³ Herms uses his so-called relation of existential grounding to argue against my analyses and to claim that the task of the theology of creation is to secure "the distinction" between God and creature. But his view of what he calls the "relation of creation" as a twofold "relation of existential grounding" ⁴ is reductionistic in such a way that, like the conceptions that I examine in the following pages, it obscures a decisive point of the classical creation accounts: In concerning fundamental relations among creatures, both the interdependencies and the difference between creator and created can and must be recognized. To put things in a clear, straightforward and formal way: "The relation" between creator and creatures cannot be illuminated in abstraction from the fundamental "relations" between complex structural associations of creaturely existence. Inasmuch as Herms obscures this with his twofold "relation of creation," he performs precisely what I call false abstraction.

As much as I understand these defensive reactions, the objections have not persuaded me concerning the issues in question. They have not dissuaded me from my conviction that the dominant fundamental concepts and theoretical models of Christian theology again need to be subjected to a critique on a biblical-theological basis. This "Reforming" orientation is still relevant and promising today. The fruitful renewal of broad areas of Roman Catholic theology on an exegetical basis after the Second Vatican Council confirms me in my view, as do many good experiences in interdisciplinary conversation, both within and beyond the confines of theology.

At any rate, those within the sphere of Christian theology who think they can do without the biblical sources in handling questions about the theology of creation can learn from Friedrich Schleiermacher, for example, that the "dissolution of the relationships among that which is finite" for the sake of the "relationship of the finite to the infinite" leads to mysticism "in the bad sense." ⁵ Analogously, the "dissolution of the relationships among that which is finite" for the sake of the "relationship of the infinite to the finite" leads to a theism "in the bad sense," a theism that hardly provides perspectives on real tasks of the theology of creation.

As a by-product, the investigations presented here show that orienting theology on biblical traditions ought not to be abandoned in favor of an orientation on this or that "natural" theology of various times and cultures. To be sure, the biblical traditions themselves include diverse "natural" theologies. But in doing so they always expose themselves to the associated conflicts that arise in the search for truth between various rationalities and various understandings of reality.

The New Biblical Theology

The investigations presented here count themselves among the new approaches of a "Biblical Theology" that have been developing in interdisciplinary and interconfessional collaboration since the 1980s, particularly in Germany and North America. ⁶ These approaches depart from all earlier attempts to take a single form—for example, personalism, existentialism, social criticism—or a single theme—for example, reconciliation, covenant, reign of God, God's glory—and to highlight it as *the* form or *the* content of the biblical traditions, or to read it into those traditions. Instead these approaches are consciously pluralistic. They take seriously the diverse biblical traditions with their different situations in life, with the continuities and discontinuities in their experiences and expectations of God, since those experiences and expectations are sometimes compatible with each other and sometimes not directly so.

The new approaches to a biblical theology are interested in these differences not only because they feel themselves intellectually obligated to excavate what are, from a historical-critical perspective, diverse “past presents.” These new approaches have a burning theological interest in these differences because they are seeking to work out a tension-laden typology of inquiry and speech about God—a typology that gives rise to permanent self-criticism and to creative reconstruction. Precisely those tensions between relative commonalities and relative differences in the expectations and experiences of God in the different biblical traditions are essential to theological self-criticism. They are essential for theology’s neverending task of distinguishing materially appropriate speech about God from religious projections and wishful fantasies.

Inasmuch as the new approaches to biblical theology, in their search for relative commonalities and continuities, do not seek to dissolve the differences in the biblical traditions, they gain bases for realistically reconstructing complex theological and key religious concepts and sets of concepts. They put themselves in a position where they are able to restore importance and orienting power to complex theological concepts that have had their cutting edge dulled by “natural” and so-called philosophical theologies in favor of reductionistic clarity.

The new approaches to biblical theology also proceed from the assumption that many of the biblical traditions’ concepts and sets of concepts (for example, creation, world, sin, atonement, sacrifice, righteousness, reign of God, God’s Spirit), which once possessed great orienting power, have now been so dulled by multiple accommodations to prevailing habits of thought and specific conceptions of rationality and moral systems that they function only as ciphers. This dulling of fundamental theological concepts is fatal not only to religious existence and the churches. It also robs cultures and societies of fundamental sources of orientation and important possibilities for self-criticism. “Religion” then becomes empty, boring, vapid, and banal, and so the augurs of the spirit of the age (even when they themselves operate with highly reductionistic forms of thought) lament theology’s “lack of cultural competence.”

This situation is not altered when theology attempts to abandon its central traditions, historicizing them away. Nor is it altered when theology attempts to refurbish the ciphers and the empty and hollow sounding “great words” by developing their rhetorical impact, heightening their entertainment value, or employing them to strengthen moral attitudes. Instead theology must direct all its powers toward uncovering the achievements of the central contents of faith in providing substantive orientation in diverse historical contexts. The chapters that follow attempt to do so through central examples drawn from the theology of creation. I would like to show that

many of the biblical traditions’ fundamental concepts dealing with the theology of creation provide stimuli and insights that are far from being exhausted—even in today’s situation, where it is impossible to get a clear cultural overview and where ecological perplexity is the order of the day. In addition, these biblical concepts impel us to new and clearer knowledge of God and self in a time and world after the collapse of classical theism—which is to say, in our time and our world.