

WHAT IS CREATION? REREADING GENESIS 1 AND 2

BY MICHAEL WELKER

God saw; God evaluated; God named; God separated; God brings to the human being; God allows to be named; God reacts to the needy situation of loneliness and helplessness of the human being who is not yet differentiated into man and woman. According to the classical creation texts, all of these activities and reactivities are part of the complex event 'creation.' All these reactive activities, which relate to that which is already "produced," are requisite in order to bring the process of the creation of heaven and earth to a close. God sees, names, separates, and reacts in a differentiated way to the situation and behavior of the human being. What a world lies between this important characteristic of divine creating in the classical creation texts and the concept of unconditional production and causation!

What is to be gained from rereading Genesis 1 and 2? Phyllis Bird has rightly termed the two creation accounts of Genesis "overexploited texts."¹ "Overexploited texts" read anew either leads one to expect old hat repetition, or it arouses the fear of entering a thicket of specialized problems. Such problems are difficult to untangle; they often can barely be connected to each other; and they usually promise to be instructive only to small groups of highly specialized researchers.

So, I hope to avoid both alternatives: either repeating what is old hat or entering the briarpatch of technical problems. I hope to do this by reconsidering the texts in light of a question whose time has come: Are the texts of Genesis 1 and 2 at all compatible with current conceptions of "creation," and to what extent? Do Genesis 1 and 2 in fact agree with the guiding images and concepts of "creation" that we presuppose and use in Western religious and secular-cultural contexts? Do Genesis 1 and 2 support the concepts of "creation" that our theological discourse also assumes and employs?

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¹Phyllis Bird, "Genesis 1-3 as the Source for a Contemporary Theology of Sexuality," *Ex Auditu*, 3 (1987), pp. 31ff.

I have been greatly surprised to discover a great divergence between, on the one hand, the creation *texts* Genesis 1 and 2, which are normative for the Jewish-Christian traditions, and, on the other hand, the *concepts* of creation that are dominant in Western cultures. To be sure, Genesis 1 and 2 are not the only texts of the biblical traditions that speak about “creation,” but for Judaism they count—I quote Shemaryahu Talmon—as “the normative Hebrew creation tradition.”² Genesis 1 and 2 are also regarded in Christian churches and in the areas of their cultural influence as the orienting foundation for knowledge and talk about “creation.” Even to the present day, exegetical and systematic efforts to mine the content of “creation” take recourse to these texts. In other respects, these efforts may be as far removed from one another as the founding of the doctrine of creation in Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*,³ and the important new understanding of the anthropology of the theology of creation for which we are indebted to feminist biblical interpretation of recent years.⁴

Short and snappy, my thesis is this: A rereading of Genesis 1 and 2 shows the predominant conceptions of “creation” to be *misleading abstractions*. Over against those texts, they are misleading, distorting definitions of “creation.” I will divide my discussion of this thesis into four parts. First, I will briefly present the conventional, abstract conceptions of creation. Second, I will propose a rereading of Genesis 1 and 2 that will shake up those guiding conceptions. Third, I will draw conclusions from that shake-up and seek a more satisfactory answer to the question “What is creation?” In the fourth and last section, I will consider some methodological consequences with regard to the relation between systematic theology and exegetical research.

Indeed, not only the conception “creation,” but also other guiding conceptions and basic patterns in religion and theology, present themselves to us today as misleading abstractions. On the one hand, they lie far below the level of the biblical traditions. They lack their rich differentiation and their authenticity of experience. On the other hand, they also lie below the level that we can assume for contemporary common sense. It is important to recognize and to dissolve these misleading abstractions and false optimizations. It is important for the powers of persuasion and influence of our religious positions, our theologies, and also our academic work. The dissolution of one-sided and distortingly abstracted conceptions is important not only for the capacity to converse in general cultural contexts. It is also requisite in order to increase our perceptive capacity and our innovative and persuasive powers in contexts of interreligious research and discourse. The understanding attained in earlier parts of the paper is thus

²Shemaryahu Talmon, “The Biblical Understanding of Creation in the Bible and in Jewish Tradition,” *Ex Auditu*, 3 (1987), pp. 98ff.

³Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/1, esp. pp. 103ff.

⁴Here I am thinking primarily of Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), and of the discussion touched off by this book.

pregnant with consequences for both content and method. So, after reflecting upon those consequences, I will conclude by attempting to measure the limits of what we have undertaken.

I

Secular common sense, as well as religious consciousness in the Jewish-Christian heritage, name "creation" the totality, the world or nature, insofar as it is regarded as unconditionally produced and dependent. The pattern of being produced and dependent remains a constant independently of whether creation (*creatura*) is ascribed to a god, gods, or other more original, supramondane, supernatural, and wholly superior powers. Creation is the totality essentially conceived as nature. Or creation is nature produced by something superior and, on the basis of having been produced, is dependent.

Moreover, the act or the activity of producing "the whole," the world or nature, is characterized as "creation" (*creatio*). The summarizing conceptions of, and ideas about, this act of production, and about that which is thus produced, are very vague, mostly even obscure. These ideas are unfolded in myths, sagas, and several cosmogonical theories that are difficult to decode. In our culture, these ideas have for a long time now been reduced to a very abstract and paltry conception of an ultimate process of causing and being caused, beyond which it is impossible either to go or to ask questions. Little enough can be said about this ultimate process of causing and being caused. Merely two questions over and over again set in tired motion the obscure idea of an ultimate process of causing and being caused. These are questions that are familiar to the point of surfeit. First, are we to understand "creation" as creation out of nothing, or as "creation" out of absolute or relative chaos? Second, are we to conceive "creation" as a one-time act or as a continuous event?

The first question deals with the alternative: *creatio ex nihilo* or creation out of chaos. Is the activity "creation" a qualitative leap, however we are to conceive it, from nothing to something? Is it a qualitative leap from a situation that offers no basis from which things can take shape, and about which nothing can be said, to a determinacy that is the beginning of any acquisition of understanding?⁵ Or is the activity "creation" a process of producing out of chaos? Is it a transformative process of producing higher aggregate conditions out of an absence of structure or relative lack of structure?

The second question deals with the alternative: Is the process of production and causation only the initial event for the course of the

⁵See also the efforts of G. Scholem and J. Moltmann to take up Isaak Lurias' doctrine of *zimzum* so as to give theological determinacy to "nothing." J. Moltmann, *Gott in der Schöpfung: Ökologische Schöpfungslehre* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1985), 98ff. With regard to this noteworthy new direction, compare also E. Jüngel, "Gottes ursprüngliches Anfangen als schöpferische Selbstbegrenzung: Ein Beitrag zum Gespräch mit Hans Jonas über den Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz," in *Gottes Zukunft—Zukunft der Welt*, H. Deuser, et al. (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1986), pp. 265ff.

world? Or does it operate as a condition in all that occurs? In the past, thought has always futilely worn itself out by working on the abstract alternative underlying both those questions. This alternative resulted from a concept of "creation" that is too simple, too undifferentiated. This fundamental "post-mechanistic" concept, which connects images of production and of the exercise of power, enjoys universal currency even to the present day. It understands "creation" as a process of production beyond which it is impossible to go and as absolute dependence.

"... [T]he doctrine of Creation has to do primarily with the ultimate dependence of all things on one transcendent reality." That formulation from Van Harvey's *Handbook of Theological Terms* is as succinct as it is representative.⁶ Over and over it is assumed, wholly without hesitation, that this is the central insight of the creation texts of Genesis. The recently published systematic theology of Kenneth Cauthen only repeats an *opinio communis* when it sums up Genesis 1 with the words: "Its theological meaning is that the world depends absolutely on God for its origination and continuation."⁷

The doctrine of creation has fortified and passed on a simple pattern of power. This pattern of power presents "creation" as a process of being produced by a transcendent reality. It presents "creation" as being in absolute dependence upon this transcendent reality. An ultimate process of being produced by a transcendent reality and absolute dependence, this pattern has been consciously regarded as that which alone is important and decisive in the doctrine of creation. Ferdinand Christian Baur, one of the most famous German theologians of the nineteenth century and a leading theoretician of historical-critical theology, enunciated this straightforwardly and without a trace of hesitation in his widely circulated *Manual of the History of Christian Dogma*. According to Baur, the doctrine of creation must "hold fast to the essential moment of the dependence of the world upon God." The "more determinate form of the same (namely, of this moment of dependence) no longer concerns Christian interest."⁸

"Creation" as an ultimate process of being produced by a transcendent reality and as absolute dependence upon that reality—this simple pattern of power has been accepted many times with a certain theological embarrassment and helplessness about where to turn. This shows itself, for example, in Leo Scheffczyk's *Introduction to the Doctrine of Creation* when he concludes that "the general conscious-

⁶Van Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms*, (New York and London: Macmillan, 1964), p 62.

⁷Kenneth Cauthen, *Systematic Theology: A Modern Protestant Approach* (Lewiston and Queenston: Mellen Press, 1986), p. 131. Cf. Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 3. The account "tells us something about the nature of the one God who is the Creator and supreme sovereign of the world and whose will is absolute. It asserts that God is outside the realm of nature, which is wholly subservient to Him."

⁸F. C. Baur, *Lehrbuch der christlichen Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 3, pp. 370ff.

ness both of an ultimate ground of things and of the dependence of human beings upon this ground . . . does not attain to that which is specifically Christian about the truth of creation.”⁹ Yet in this way as well, that which is “specifically Christian” is grasped as a more precise determination, a heightening, a transcending of the basic pattern, which has not been rendered fundamentally problematical.

“Creation” as an ultimate process of being produced by a transcendent reality and as absolute dependence from this reality—this pattern of power also maintains itself in theologies that seek, with the help of other theological concepts, to develop and to render more precise the understanding of “creation.” Perhaps the best-known example of such an effort in this century is Barth’s attempt to bracket creation theology within covenant theology. To be sure, Barth’s project differentiates and breaks in manifold ways the basic pattern of the powerful process of God’s producing the creaturely being and of the absolute dependence of the creature upon God. But Barth’s project does not place that pattern in question as a basic theological pattern. Instead it remains an obscure *cantus firmus*, whether its derivation in the theology of creation is always clearly proved or not. “Creation” as an ultimate process of being unconditionally produced by a transcendent reality and as absolute dependence upon this reality—with regard to these guiding conceptions we shall now reread Genesis 1 and 2.

II

Neither Genesis 1 nor Genesis 2 describes God as a highest being who in pure self-sufficiency does nothing other than produce and cause creaturely being. Neither text describes creation as the totality, the world or nature with the simple addition of an external ground, to which creation is related in mere dependence. In my estimation, the first surprising observation in the texts of Genesis 1 and 2 consists in the realization that God’s creative action corresponds in only a few ways to the pattern of causation and production. By contrast, the texts are full of instances that emphasize and develop God’s *reactive* experiencing and acting as God reacts to the presence of that which is created. The texts describe in a differentiated way God’s reacting perception and evaluation. They describe God intervening in that which is already created, intervening for the purpose of further specification.

Seven times the later creation account emphasizes God’s evaluative perception, “And God saw that that which had been created was good” (Gen. 1:4a, 10b, 12b, 18b, 21b, 25b, 31a). Three times, Genesis 1 emphasizes God’s activity of naming (Gen. 1:5a, 8a, 10a). Twice, God intervenes in that which is already created in order to separate it (Gen. 1:4b, 7b). The earlier creation account also inscribes God’s creative activity with marks of reacting—of self-binding to external events,

⁹Leo Scheffczyk, *Einführung in die Schöpfungslehre* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1982), p. 5.

actions, and presuppositions, even of learning. The creation account explicitly emphasizes that cultivated vegetation, an important goal of the creation event, is made dependent upon the cooperation of rain from heaven and of human activity. The creation account thus emphasizes that divine and human initiative coincide (Gen. 2:5). The creation account explicitly reserves for the human being—not yet differentiated into man and woman¹⁰—the naming of “all cattle, the birds of heaven, and all animals of the field” (Gen. 2:19–20). The creation account explicitly emphasizes the validity of this fundamental, culture-creating human activity: “And as the human being named each being, so was it to be called” (Gen. 2:19b).

Finally, God unquestionably acts in a reacting manner in response to the recognized need, the loneliness and helplessness, of the human being. The creation, sorting, and naming of the animals, does not do away with that need. The differentiation of the human being into man and woman follows in an action that is described in detail, and in which it is as if God must outdo God’s own self.

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The creating God is not only the acting God, but also the reacting God, the God who responds to that which has been created. The creating God is open to being confronted by the freedom, the originality, even the need for improvement of that which has been created. Only a distorting abstraction can block out the fundamental characteristic, emphasized throughout, of God’s action as action that reacts, that lets itself be determined. Reaction in perception, evaluation, naming, and separating intervention; reaction in giving space for the human being’s own activity; reaction in removing a recognized situation of need that cannot be spontaneously averted without further ado—all that is creation, according to Genesis 1 and 2!

Yet, not only the reactivity of the creating God, but also the creature’s own activity is blocked out by the concept of production and causation (or if it is not blocked, it is at least only understood by being distorted to the point of unrecognizability). Genesis 1 and 2 describe the entire creation as in many respects having its own activity, as being

¹⁰Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 73ff.

itself productive, as being itself causative. The creature's own activity, which includes processes of production, is not a mere consequence and result of creation. Rather this activity is embedded in the process of creation and participates in that process. The Priestly creation account describes the whole creation, not only and not firstly the human being, as itself active, separating, ruling, and imparting rhythm, as itself producing and giving life.

To be sure, in both creation accounts particular significance accrues to human action, especially to the human action of cultivating nature. To be sure, the process of creation also includes cognitive, normative, culture-creating human behavior and is directed towards that behavior. The fact that the earlier creation account so strongly emphasizes the naming of the animals—a naming that grounds culture—would require more prolonged discussion. The same is true of the fact that the later creation account has the entire process of creation moving towards the day of rest, the cradle of all cognitive and normative culture.

But the participatory activity of that which is creaturely does not find expression only with regard to human being. It certainly does not find expression only with the call to take dominion over the earth, which, since 1967 and Lynn White, has become notorious and much discussed.¹¹ The themes of “the call to dominion” and of “creation and Sabbath” are in themselves highly complex and require their own separate discussions. The aspect of the creature's own activity and productivity can be made clear without regard to those themes.

Anxiety about the creature's own power being too great is apparently foreign to the classical creation texts of the biblical traditions. Anxiety about the creature's own power being too great tends to entrench itself behind the model of causation and dependence. Instead of that anxiety, we encounter in the classical creation texts a rich description of that which is creaturely engaged in the activity of separating, ruling, producing, developing, and reproducing itself. Not only God separates, but also that which is creaturely—the firmament of the heavens, the gathering water and the stars—assumes functions of separation (Gen. 1:6, 9, 18). Not only God rules, but also that which is creaturely—the stars—rules by the establishment of rhythm, differentiation, and the gift of measure and order (Gen. 1:14ff.). Not only God brings forth, but also creature brings forth creature—animals of all species and plants (Gen. 1:12, but also 1:11, 20, 24). The creature develops and reproduces itself, as is recorded explicitly and in detail with regard to plants, animals, and human beings (Gen. 1:12, 22, 28).

¹¹Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” *Science*, 155 (1967). Also “Die historischen Ursachen unserer ökologischen Krise,” in: M. Lohmann (ed.), *Gefährdete Zukunft—Prognosen angloamerikanischer Wissenschaftler* (München, 1970). On this point Odil Hannes Steck is particularly instructive, along with summarizing the more recent discussion. O. H. Steck, “Dominium Terrae. Zum Verhältnis von Mensch und Schöpfung in Genesis 1,” F. Stolz (ed.), *Religiöse Wahrnehmung der Welt* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1988), pp. 89–105, esp. p. 89.

The creature's own differentiated activity is placed on the same level with God's creative action, without ceasing to be the creature's own activity. Thus the vault of heaven is to separate the waters and to create and maintain space for the further formation and development of that which is creaturely. At the same time, the text says, entirely in the sense of the dependence and causation model of creation, "God made the vault and separated . . ." (Gen. 1:7). The lights in the vault of heaven are "to rule over day and night and to separate the light from the darkness." At the same time we read, corresponding to the dependence and causation model, "God made . . . lights . . . ; God set the lights in the vault of heaven" (Gen. 1:16–18).

On the one hand, the creation accounts emphasize, in the sense of the production and dependence model, that God created the animals of the sea and air and made all species of land animals (cf. Gen. 1:21 and 25). On the other hand, and for precisely this process, the texts lay claim to the productive powers of the earth (1:24).

Now in all these cases, one can attempt to rescue the conventional model of causation and production with the help of the famous "yes-but swing."¹² It is no secret that this swing can be swung in two directions: One can grant that *yes*, on all levels the texts emphasize the creature's own activity of producing, indeed even of separating and ruling, *but* not only does God's word initiate the creature's own activity, God's making, doing, and creating surround and transcend the creature's own activity. God's activity keeps the creature's own activity dependent and under control. At the same time, over against this conventional model of divine power the "yes-but swing" can be swung in the other direction. First one emphasizes that *yes*, God's initiative is beyond question throughout and, with different degrees of clarity, God's creative activity, which can be understood in the sense of production and causation, is beyond question throughout. *But* we are to conceive this activity, together with the creature's own differentiated activity, an activity that is asserted for precisely the same processes of creation!

My own proposal opts for neither of the two directions in which the "yes-but swing" moves. My own proposal aims rather at totally freeing ourselves from this false alternative into which the model of production and dependence has pressed us. My proposal aims at recognizing that the classical creation accounts are much less anxiously concerned about simple hierarchical models than are the religious and theological conceptions still dominant among us. My proposal aims finally at seeing that, on the level of the model of production and dependence, we do not arrive at a clear differentiation of God's activity and the creature's activity in the process of creation.

¹²Recent exegetical discussion has rendered problematic the attempt to understand Gen. 1 as the fusion of two creation accounts. See O. H. Steck, *Der Schöpfungsbericht der Priesterschrift: Studien zur literarkritischen und überlieferungsgeschichtlichen Problematik von Genesis 1, 1–2, 4a*, 2 vols., (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), esp. pp. 11ff.

If one does not approach the classical creation accounts of Genesis with the distorting glasses of the production and dependence model, one will have to conclude the following: On the one hand, those accounts describe God's creative action so that it is comprehensible not only as actively producing and causing. They present it as equally reactive in perception, evaluation, and naming; in coming back and changing that which is already created; and, indeed, in learning by experience.

On the other hand, in a highly differentiated way, they connect God's creative activity of production with the creature's own varied activity. That which is creaturely for its own part separates, rules, brings forth, and reproduces itself. The creature's own activity is not only the result and consequence of God's action; it goes along with God's action, and at times it is practically interchangeable with God's action. The creature's own activity is constitutively bound up in the process of creation.

Where the conventional guiding conceptions focus upon division and hierarchical arrangement, the classical creation accounts emphasize the connectedness and cooperation of creator and that which is creaturely. In no way do the creation accounts of Genesis offer only the gloomy picture of sheer dependence. God's creative action does not confront that which is created with completely finished facts. The creature's own activity as a constitutive element in the process of creation is seen in harmony with God's action.

Yet is it still possible on this basis to determine in principle what "creation" is? Is it still possible to differentiate sufficiently God's activity and the particular activities of that which is creaturely? I think that we can answer both questions positively, even when we have given up the overly simplistic model of production and dependence. I begin with the following abstract, minimal determination: Creation is the construction and maintenance of associations of different, interdependent realms of life. By "association," I mean an interdependent relational network, and not a mere collection. God creates by bringing different realms of life into fruitful associations of interdependent relations that promote life. That which is creaturely is drawn into and bound up into the process of creation by developing and relativizing itself, and thereby fruitfully bringing itself into these associations of interdependent realms. These points are now to be briefly developed in the third part of my argument.

III

Both creation accounts describe with different weighting and subtlety the construction of associations of interdependent relations between different realms of life. A homogeneous, monostructured sphere is not yet creation. We should not put forward as "knowledge of creation" the interest in unearthing a simple basic structure, a basic quality in all reality. The different realms of life have to do with the

relations of human beings and vegetation, with the relations of human beings and animals, but also with the community of different groups and species of animals, and so forth.

Yet the Jewish-Christian traditions grasp and describe creation in a still more elementary way as an association of different, interdependent realms of life. What is in question is the statement, strange at first to our sensibilities, that God created the world as “earth and heaven.” That is, God created more than the reality to which human beings have relatively immediate access, the reality that they can perceive, of which they can gain an overview, and that they can physically manipulate. God did not create only the earth.

For the common sense still dominant today it sounds strange and even absurd to make the statement that creation consists not only of the *earth*, but also of *heaven*, that God also created heaven. “Imagine, there’s no heaven, it’s easy if you try, no hell below us, and above us only sky,” says John Lennon’s beautiful verse. Certainly it is easy to imagine that there is heaven only as “sky.” We connect talk about the strange creature “heaven” with outdated conceptions of reality. We think of Copernicus and Galileo and the defeats that theology and the church have suffered in the struggle with the ideas of natural science. The “Astrodome” model of the world, in which heaven overarches the earth like half of a sphere, still counts today as one of the most striking proofs for the naïveté of ancient cultures and for the great advances that we have made in the meantime.

Yet here as well influential and misleading abstractions have led us astray. To be sure, it is false to generalize the “Astrodome” model as a cosmological model. At issue with this model is rather the generalization of the form in which common sense perceives the world when it observes the world in an immediate, unsophisticated manner. Of course, for common sense, with its immediate perception, the sun still moves around the earth today, and heaven can indeed appear as a half-sphere. It is important to see that this impression of the world, this impression that common sense makes for itself, is relativized not only in modernity, and not only by research in the natural sciences. Without being able to go into detail, I will only point out that already in antiquity the most diverse cultures—and without a doubt the biblical traditions—used the expression “heaven” to summarize different conceptual realms and different relational systems.¹³ Thus in many biblical texts, heaven and sky are almost identical, but in others the conception of earth includes the atmosphere, and “heaven” is only the realm of stellar constellations. Still other texts name the entire observable cosmos “the visible” and differentiate it from the “invisible heavens.” The invisible heavens are disclosed in images, ideas, and even theories that today, in a primarily secular perspective, we might

¹³M. Welker, *Universalität Gottes und Relativität der Welt: Theologische Kosmologie im Dialog mit dem amerikanischen Prozeßdenken nach Whitehead* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981).

regard as images, ideas, and theories about *power structures*, to the extent that we are able to decode them at all.

I do not wish to speculate now about how perfectly or imperfectly the biblical traditions thought through these different relational systems in their connection with each other. I do not wish to speculate about how the unifying talk of “heaven” and the pluralizing talk of “the heavens” are related to each other in specific cases. I would like, though, at least in passing, to point out that Genesis 1 presents a sensorium for a more exacting conception of heaven. Genesis 1 does this by making the following distinction: On the one hand, Genesis 1 distinguishes the creation of light, which provides the more fundamental differentiation of light and darkness (Gen. 1:3ff.). On the other hand, Genesis 1 distinguishes the creation of the vault of heaven and the stars, which separate day and night, and thereby in a particular way separate light and darkness yet again (Gen. 1:14ff., esp. 1:18). From a purely systematic evaluation of this distinction, one could conclude that here an “absolute” conception is being combined with a relative view, which is bound to a particular perceptive standpoint and to life on the earth. The absolute conception is expressed by the image of light and darkness prior to any further fashioning of the world (Gen. 1:3ff.). The relative conception is expressed by the Astrodome model with its alteration of day and night (Gen. 1:14ff.) At least, systematically and in principle, here lies the basis for connecting monistic and pluralistic conceptions of heaven (and thus of the world).

At this point, I would not like to pursue further the highly interesting question of the linkage of unifying and of pluralizing, relativistic conceptions of “heaven.” This is the question of the relation of metaphysical and cosmological heaven, on the one hand, and the heavens of our perception, on the other. Nor do I wish to pursue further the relation of absolute and relative totality. What is important to me is to give fundamental emphasis to the following point: From the word “go,” “creation” has in view the association of heaven and earth as interdependent realms of life, which are themselves internally differentiated. “Heaven” is seen not only as the place from which natural forces—light, warmth, water, wind, and storm—determine life on this earth. Heaven is also seen as a place from which proceed strong forces that shape and determine culture.¹⁴ In Genesis 1, we find this clearly expressed in the statement that the lights are “to be signs and to serve the determination of festivals, of days and of years” (Gen. 1:14). Other traditions and texts elaborate much more the images of the powers that proceed from heaven, whether these powers be natural, cultural or culture-determining. At the same time,

¹⁴Patrick D. Miller has illuminated in various perspectives the plurality of the “divine world” and its dynamics. I refer the reader, for example, to “Genesis 1–11: Studies in Structure and Theme,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Supplement Series 8, (1978), esp. pp. 9ff; Also “Cosmology and World Order in the Old Testament: The Divine Council as Cosmic-Political Symbol,” in *Horizons in Biblical Theology. An International Dialogue*, Vol. 9 (1987), pp. 53ff.

so far we have in part been able only with difficulty to decipher and to comprehend many of those images.

“Creation” is the construction of associations of interdependent relations between realms of life that are relatively accessible to us and those that are relatively inaccessible to us. The expression “heaven” synthesizes the natural and cultural realms that are less accessible to us. The realms that are more accessible to us, integrated by means of the expression “earth,” are likewise grasped not only as natural, but also as cultural associations of interdependent relations. In both creation accounts we find texts that point to the interdependence of that which we call “nature” and “culture.” For example, there is in both creation accounts the charge to human beings to cultivate the earth. There is the centering of creation upon the day of rest, which is blessed and in its own way fruitful. There is the giving of names to the animals, but also the “geographical” and “geological” elements in the description of the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:10ff.). A merely naturalistic understanding of creation does not attain the level of the classical creation texts. “Creation” is thus the construction and maintenance of associations of interdependent relations between those natural and cultural realms of life that are more accessible to us, and those which are less accessible.

From here, let us cast a glance back to the old model of production, causation, and dependence. In doing so, we see that the old model lacked the power to draw adequate distinctions and to make adequate contrasts. On the one hand, there are relations of dependence among creatures. On the other hand, there is the relation of creator to creature. The old model did not allow us to distinguish sufficiently between these two types of relations. Moreover, there is, on the one hand, the creator’s relation of transcendence to the creature. On the other hand, there are instances of relative transcendence among creatures, grounded in the relation between heaven and earth. The old model did not allow us to contrast sufficiently these two types of transcendence.

That means, though, that the conventional conception of creation was not subtle enough, that it was not differentiated enough, and that it was too poor in its powers of disclosure and clarification. First, within this conception dwells a compulsion to homogenize “the creature” over against the divine, a compulsion to turn “the creature” into a simplistic abstraction. On the one side is the divine who brings forth; on the other is the dependent creature. By comparison, the creation accounts are much more subtle. They require us to recognize relations of interdependence between a plurality of different realms of life. Second, the old conception misleads us into confusing and equating relations of dependence among creatures and the relation between creator and creature. The old conception is, thus, to a high degree susceptible to ideology and idolatry. One need think only of the widespread confusion of God and heaven, and of the equally wide-

spread undifferentiated talk of “transcendence.” By contrast, the creation accounts reconstruct irreversible relations of dependence in the realm of the creaturely, and, at the same time, counteract the divinization of the powers of heaven or of the monsters from the deep.

The stars and the “great sea monsters,” the *tanninim*, are not gods on high or anti-gods from the deep; they are mere creatures.¹⁵ Genesis 1:21 explicitly emphasizes that God created the “great sea animals,” the *tanninim*, while otherwise the account does not mention any particular species. Genesis 1:16ff. emphasizes that God made and secured in the heavens the stars, which rule and which separate light from darkness. These emphases are reminders of the possibility of such divinizations and idolizations. By contrast, the creation account un.masks eerie phenomena and relations of dependence as associations within the realm of the creaturely. The younger account sublates, in the fully Hegelian sense, divinizations or idolizations of the luminary powers from on high or of the powers of chaos from the deep. It “reconstructs” these divinizations and idolizations as constitutive parts of associations of interdependent relations among creatures.

The creation accounts of Genesis make us sensitive to relations of interdependence among creatures. They also make us sensitive to relations of power and “transcendence” among creatures. At the same time, they lead us to direct more interesting and instructive questions to God and God’s creative action than those which were fixated on the indeterminate power of production, causation, and dependence. These more interesting questions concern themselves with the divine intentions and goals in the construction and maintenance of associations of interdependent relations among creatures.

What traits of justice and stability, what forms of power, what dynamics do we recognize in the associations of interdependent relations among creatures? Which of them can be religiously and theologically qualified, and which can not? Which of them work against God’s recognizable intentions, and in what way?¹⁶ It is not difficult to see that such questions do much more to activate and to challenge the world of religious symbols than do the questions that were possible and customary in the framework of the production and dependence model.

On at least four points it seems to me foreseeable that the proposed new understanding of the conception “creation” will lead us forward in contemporary investigations: (1) It allows us to strengthen and to render more precise the numerous recent efforts to recognize analogies between religious and ecological forms of thought and experi-

¹⁵See the article cited in note 2, as well as Carola Kloos, *YHWH's Combat with the Sea* (Amsterdam: G. A. Van Oorschot, 1986).

¹⁶That this does not import an investigative approach foreign to the biblical traditions is documented by the recent international discussion of the connection between creation theology and monarchical theology. See the interesting article of B. Janowski, “Das Königtum Gottes in den Psalmen. Bemerkungen zu einem neuen Gesamtentwurf,” *ZThK* 86 (1989), pp. 389ff.

ence;¹⁷ (2) it opens our eyes to see that knowledge of creation must focus essentially upon the interdependence of natural and cultural processes; (3) it makes us attentive to a fundamental difference between knowledge of creation and those forms of scientific knowledge of nature that aim at discovering an ultimate, simple, fundamental quality; (4) plus, it renders us sensitive to the exciting connection in the classical creation texts between absolute and relative totalizations, between monistic and pluralistic thought. Yet these are only initial examples of the places in which a change in fundamental religious and theological patterns of thought can also stimulate and require the renovation and reconstruction of normative and cognitive structures, that have become part of the flesh and bone of secular thought. With that I come to the final part of my reflections.

IV

“You cannot think without abstractions; accordingly, it is of the utmost importance to be vigilant in critically revising your modes of abstraction.”¹⁸ Alfred North Whitehead, in his main philosophical works, repeatedly pointed out that our thought and our culture are guided by a bundle of conscious and unconscious abstractions, which determine the possibilities and limits of our experience and action. He defined the chief task of philosophy to be the discovery and critique of these abstractions.¹⁹ But he also sees: “Sometimes it happens that the service rendered by philosophy is entirely obscured by the astonishing success of a scheme of abstractions in expressing the dominant interests of an epoch.”²⁰ Whitehead warns: “A civilization which cannot burst through its current abstractions is doomed to sterility after a very limited period of progress.”²¹

To my mind it is time to uncover, to criticize, and to revise the abstractions that also determine our thought and behavior in the areas of religious life, religious studies, theologies, and scientific occupation with religious themes. I am also of the opinion that we can not allow this task to remain left up to philosophy alone, indeed not even to a freely operating systematic theology. The task of laying bare, criticizing, and revising our guiding abstractions seems to me rather to be an interdisciplinary task.

It is an interdisciplinary task because the abstractions with which we have to do are located and operate in several contexts, namely in texts, in dogmatics, in the communication of religious communities, in common sense’s external perspective on religion, and so on. The

¹⁷See Bernhard W. Anderson, “Creation and Ecology,” in B. W. Anderson (ed.), *Creation in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 152ff.

¹⁸Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Glasgow: Collins, 1975), p. 76.

¹⁹Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, p. 109.

²⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 76–85, and *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology* (Corrected Edition, edited by D. R. Griffin and D. W. Sherburne) (New York: The Free Press, 1979) pp. 10, 14ff.

²¹Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, p. 76.

guiding abstractions are powerful precisely because they function in different contexts, which mutually support and strengthen each other—or which mutually hinder and debilitate each other. They are powerful in their vitality and powerful still in their ossification. Their uncovering and their revision are, if successful, of extreme consequence. Therefore, it is neither possible nor permissible to allow the important process of the “critique of abstractions” to remain left up to a single discipline and perspective.

Researchers who have learned to work with patterns of thought and with systematic structures must cooperate with other scholars who are schooled to elucidate texts or to reconstruct historical and contemporary contexts. They must cooperate with other scholars who understand the operative powers of symbols in practical and political realms. Under present conditions, in order to attack the great and momentous task of criticizing our guiding abstractions, we need interdisciplinary cooperation between persons who are schooled in exegesis, systematics, and social sciences.

To be sure, one can shrink back in fear from this task. Guiding conceptions have been handed down to us and have been finely tuned by long use. Calling those conceptions into question can easily knock loose an avalanche of resultant problems. If we call attention to how much our guiding abstractions, our classical and normative texts, and the conscious attitudes of our common sense have diverged from each other, we can quickly fall into the whirlpool of relativism. In our time and in our cultures, it is in no way a foregone conclusion that we orient our guiding conceptions, even our guiding religious conceptions, on biblical texts. For example, suppose we point out the abyss that separates our conceptions of creation and our most important creation texts. The question immediately poses itself in our culture whether, for example, we ought not rather take recourse to philosophical classics or cosmological theories or complex contemporary problems, in order to reformulate guiding abstractions or to acquire new abstractions. Uncertainties arise. To which theories ought we to take recourse? From which epochs? From which disciplines? On what grounds? Questions present themselves. Who selects and formulates the problems? How are we to guarantee the adequacy of their reality and complexity? I understand very much the fear that greets this explosion of resultant problems. Yet today I would like to submit an emphatic plea not to fear that explosion more than life with ossified, false abstractions—not to fear that explosion more than the sterility brought by a disengaged intellectual, religious, and confessional routine.

On the positive side, I hope, with the help of one example, to have drawn attention to the great potential for a change in our guiding conceptions that lies in the texts whose investigation and elucidation is particularly entrusted to biblical scholarship. To my mind, it is astounding what potential for the critique and transformation of guiding abstractions shows itself even in a very limited look at a very

small passage of text. For my view was indeed very limited. My cultural heritage and surroundings of course impose limits upon my capacity for theological perception and imagination. Apart from those limits, my view was limited by an exclusively “literary approach,” which my exegetical colleagues will surely correct and expand. It was further limited, and strongly so, because to a large extent I bracketed out the complex anthropology of the doctrine of creation, as well as the thematic cluster centered upon the Sabbath, with all the consequences of that thematic cluster. If, in spite of the limitation of my view and in spite of thematic reduction, we can already identify such clear and powerful alternatives to well-honed, misleading abstractions with regard to “creation,” the project of an interdisciplinary revision of our dominant abstractions seems to me to be enticing and encouraging.

Considered through the murky glass of hardened abstractions, the biblical traditions certainly can seem like a heap of rubble, or like museum pieces, which have come to us from some distant recess of the world. Yet, these same traditions also hold the potential for the critique and transformation of abstractions that continue to guide us even today. In the light of transformed abstractions, the apparent rubble heaps and museum pieces present themselves very differently. They present themselves as developed forms and witnesses of a life that is permeated by knowledge and insight. They radiate and provide orientation even into our future, full of innovative power and full of wisdom.