Leaven

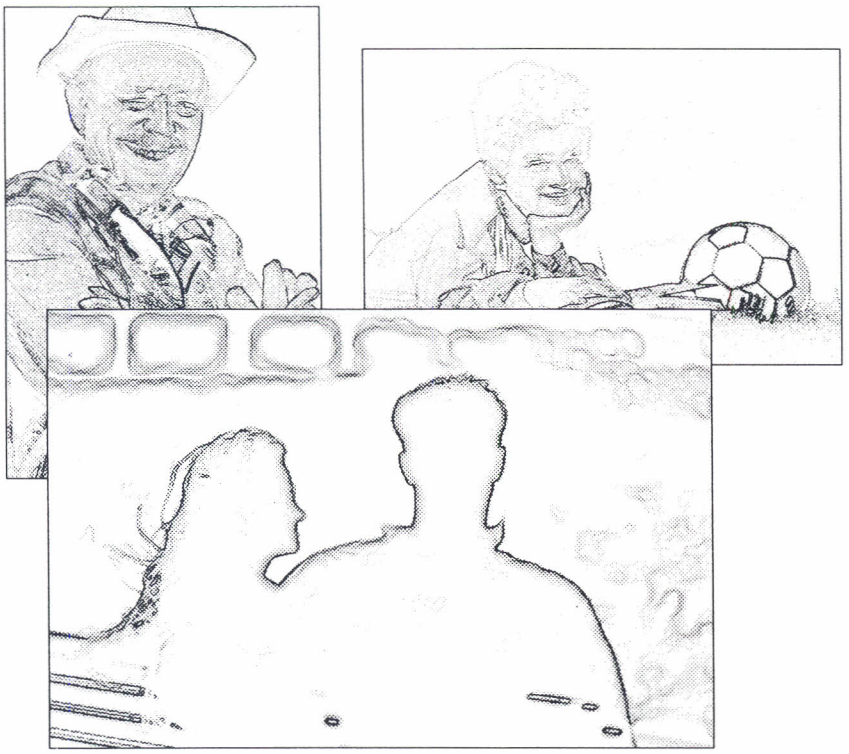
Volume 9
Issue 1 *Family*

Article 3

1-1-2001

# Creation Theology

Charme Robarts



# CREATION THEOLOGY

By Charme Robarts

Six months ago, fifteen-year-old Sam came to live in our family. Driven out by his own irresponsible and dysfunctional family, he was, in his words, a misfit and a drifter. One night when the hurt and anguish of his situation swirled in his head like the relentless West Texas wind, he lay writhing face down on his bed, asking me why he had even been born. The chaos of his world seemed unmanageable.

Centuries before us, Israelites sat in exile trying to sing the songs of their God in a foreign land—a difficult thing for a people whose own land was part and parcel of their identity as the people of God. He had given them Canaan, as he had sworn on oath to their forefather Abraham, but now that land lay somewhere in the distance, its smoldering ruins a haunting memory, and they sat mourning on the banks of the Kebar River. Driven from home, misfits in a place not their own, they faced a world of bewildering chaos.

For Jewish exiles and for Sam, and for all the rest of us who know the experience of chaos, the creation story announces that there is more to be known and experienced than what swirls about us. Creation theology defines human life and experience as unalterably entangled with God; not even the tumultuous chaos can change that reality.

But is it good news or bad to be entangled with God? The writer of Genesis says that

1. God is the creator of all things and all people
2. The physical world is subject to God but has been given to people for their good—it is ours, but it is his
3. As unique bearers of the image of God, people have been embraced by him in a way that no other part of creation has
4. People violate God's intentions for life in his world, effecting alienation from him and from each other
5. Alienation, however, does not dissolve God's relationship with people
6. People can be reconciled to God—a truth that brings together creation theology and salvation theology

These are broad strokes of the theology of creation. For exiles living in Babylon or for people living in the chaos of the twenty-first century, these claims give explanation of what has gone wrong, reminder of what is still right, and hope that creation is not simply a story from the past. The news is good.

Creation theology gathers up passages throughout scripture, primary texts being Genesis 1–3; Job 38–41; Psalms 8, 33, 74, 104, 136, 148; and Prov 8:22–31. The prophets draw on creation themes for their sermons and pronouncements. The New Testament heralds the theme of God's concern for his creation in a bold new way in the person of Jesus Christ. All these texts in one way or another address God's creative power, his relationship to creation, and the interrelationships of the created.

This essay will follow the contours of the Genesis 1–3 account of creation. The first question to be asked is, What does the writer hope the audience will hear? Though perhaps separated by time and space, every audience shares the common experience of life in God's created world with its attendant joys and sorrows. The writer issues a call to *trust the Creator.*

## God's Uncontested Power

The starting point is the uncontested power of the Creator. Genesis 1, with all the historical and scientific questions that have surrounded it, issues a clear refrain: *God creates*. Certainly, the text is theocentric, but the action of the text receives as much emphasis as the subject. The significance of this lies in recognizing that the text is heard by someone who is the object of the Creator's action. We are not able to remove ourselves from this reading. The writer will not stop with simply satisfying a basic curiosity about the beginnings of earth and life. First, however, he firmly establishes that *God creates.*

One is struck by the ease with which God does it, by the certainty with which he speaks. For readers who know well their own impotence in more situations than they care to list, the God who creates, who makes magnificent things happen by the breath of his mouth, compels attention (cf. Job 38–41). The reader does not sit in a place where the created things of Genesis 1 are unrecognizable. Who hasn't longed for the dawning of light when night seems long or for the promise of night, moon, and stars when the day's work brings fatigue and anxiety? Light and darkness are our recurring comforts. The sea, too vast to measure, and the hunger-relieving ground, whose beautiful plants and trees give us unexpected pleasure when our frantic lives beg for solace—these are known to us, perhaps well known, but it is not within our power to produce them. We know this about ourselves. So we encounter a God whose power goes further than we can fathom. God simply speaks, and these things appear. Wild animals and birds of every kind, great beasts and tiny insects that intrigue and frighten us—all live by the word of his command. The writer of Genesis is unconcerned with the technique of creation; he is concerned, it seems, to impress the reader with something more important—the uncontested power of God.

Two realities of our existence call for recognition of the uncontested power of God: chaos and peace. The wealth and prosperity of tenth-century Israel—the fulfillment of God's promises—can threaten one's grip on reality about the source of power. One can easily imagine that power lies in human potential and the trappings of success and peace. Genesis reminds those who drink from the pleasant waters of peace that God is the source of power.

Exiles languishing in the chaos of Babylon, where gods compete with each other for sovereignty, quench their thirst on the words about God, their God, who knows no rival and who by his words orders the chaos. Genesis reminds them that God's power is sovereign.

I listen again to the text from my own world that moves between the ledges of chaos and peace. I imagine the thunderous separation of light and dark, earth and sky, sea and land, and I remember, God controls—I do not.

The idea of chaos emerges in Gen 1:2: *"And the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep"* (NASB). The expression *formless and void* has become synonymous with chaos. The Hebrew *tohu* 'formless' speaks in other passages of a physical wasteland or desert (Deut 32:10) or a place where caravans, which have turned from their course, perish (Job 6:18). *Bohu* 'void' appears in two

Genesis reminds those who drink from the pleasant waters of peace that God is the source of power.

other passages (Jer 4:23; Isa 34:11). Each time, it is paired with *tohu* and is in the context of God's judgment on the earth, the result of which will be destruction, depicted in terms of waste, void, and chaos (NRSV). Questions arise about the presence of this chaos in Genesis before God begins speaking things into existence. The concern is whether the existence of chaos challenges the idea of creation from nothing, a view that has been at the center of the debate between religion and science.

The relationship between science and the Bible has a storied history and one that should be recognized as more complicated than merely a chronicle of believers versus unbelievers. Even Galileo, who was condemned by the church for supporting Copernicus' teaching that the earth revolves around the sun, agreed with the church's assertion that "the intention of the Bible is to teach us how one goes to heaven, not how the heavens go." If Galileo was meaning to point up the theological and spiritual concerns of the Bible, he was right. The Bible, and particularly the creation story, has something to say to the questions of the scientific community, but what it says is stated in the language of faith. So the Genesis narrative emphasizes God's power over everything we know about—the created order—and the thing(s) we do not have knowledge of—the physical chaos of verse 2. God's power over both is emphatically stated. Whether verse 2 functions as a collapsed literary introduction to the creative process that follows, or whether God first had to deal with the chaos of the "formless and void" earth, the claim is that he controlled it. And with ease.

The psalmists and prophets rehearse the creative power of God to their audiences. The psalms listed above as creation texts (Pss 8, 33, 74, 104, 136, 148) are couched in liturgical materials that speak out of specific needs and concerns. Psalm 74, for example, is a prayer of lament spoken by worshipers who feel that God has abandoned them. Verse 4 indicates that the setting is near the destruction of Jerusalem. The psalmist describes the agony of the situation and then calls on God, who *by virtue of his creative power* (vv. 12–17) can certainly redeem his oppressed people.

In the book of Job, God is the one who restates the glory of creation. Specific details about the created order—bases and cornerstones of the earth, boundaries and internal springs in the sea, storehouses of snow, rain that falls even in places where no one lives, lions that hunt the prey that God provides, and so on, are wrapped in God's rhetorical question to Job, "Do you have understanding (control) of all this?"

Isaiah's use of the God-as-creator motif is varied. In Isa 54:5, a passage that calls weeping Israel to faith, God is called "your Maker" and "God of the whole earth." In the same chapter, which uses as a backdrop the promise to Noah that floods will never again cover the earth, God says that even if the mountains and hills (the created order) are removed, his steadfast love will not depart from his people. Two interesting things emerge here. First, God's promise about the earth's being safe from floodwaters assumes that Israel knows this promise and can attest to its validity—the earth has not been flooded since the days of Noah. Isaiah, like other Old Testament writers, regards the created world as firm and sure because of God's will. Second, though the certainty of creation is a common plank for biblical writers' arguments about God's trustworthiness, here in 54:10, in an ironic twist, Isaiah pushes beyond the certainty of the created world and proclaims that God's steadfast love is even more certain.

## It Is Good

Creation theology affirms the uncontested power of God by virtue of the created order. But the Genesis writer tells more. The words about the power of God are interlaced with news of his *delight over what he has made*. "It is good," he says. Again, the reader is drawn in. This is not something abstract that God is approving; it is the earth on which we walk and the stars upon which we, like our father Abraham, gaze.

God, so full of power, and in that way distant from his creation, is full of an emotion we recognize—delight, pleasure. He is most pleased with the creature stamped with his image, the one like David, and Jeremiah, and me. The writer of Genesis makes it clear that God's approval of his creation—and especially, the creation of human beings—is extremely significant. The repetitious phrases and the emphatic adjective that describe the creation of humanity as "very good" expose the text's meaning. God assigns value to his creatures by his pleasure with them. "Why was I born?" I hear my adolescent friend say. Because human life pleases God.

Genesis 1:27 makes a sweeping statement about God's special relationship with humans.

> So God created humankind in his image,
> in the image of God he created them;
> male and female he created them. (NRSV)

This text has been central to discussions about the equality of men and women. While that must be kept in mind by a society that has from the beginning tended toward a masculine hegemony, the broader emphasis on all humanity as image bearers of the sovereign Creator calls for a respect for one another that mitigates against the evils that plague our life together in God's created world. The chaos of my friend Sam's world is created by a failure to recognize the extreme respect due to people created in God's image. Women and men use each other for sexual gratification with no thought of the consequences. Children born into these situations are too often pawns in unending power plays, or they are cast off with no thought given to their physical and emotional needs. Family resources are not shared; they are consumed by the one with the most power. God's good pleasure in his creation is of no consequence. Every social ill reflects this basic disregard for the significance of humans as bearers of the image of God.

As image bearers, Adam and Eve are given creative tasks. Like the other creatures and like the earth, they are to be fruitful and multiply. They are also given dominion over the other living things. Since God has pronounced the physical creation good, and since it is given as a life-sustaining gift, it is nonsensical to interpret dominion as some harsh or cavalier treatment of these resources. It is correct to cast the modern concerns of ecology in spiritual terms, but abuse of the physical creation must be seen as a fundamental issue of failure to depend on God. When people exploit the earth or its creatures for selfish gain, or when careless waste goes unchecked, humans are ignoring their relationship to God as creatures who are dependent on his good gifts. Waste and exploitation characterize a mindset that has lost connection with the purpose God has in mind for his world. Conversely, we will not be able to save ourselves, or the earth, by purely ecological efforts. Acknowledgement of our dependence on God and on Christ, his new creation, will announce a new ethic of ecology that can lead to progress in the preservation and sharing of resources but, more importantly, will lift our eyes beyond the physical to the spiritual world.

God's announcement that the fruit of the earth is given to Adam and Eve stands in contrast to pagan religion that seeks to appease the gods in order to obtain these gifts.

God's announcement that the fruit of the earth is given to Adam and Eve stands in contrast to pagan religion that seeks to appease the gods in order to obtain these gifts. In Hosea's day the prophet decried Israel's appeal to pagan gods for their basic needs (Hos 2:5, 8). The Genesis story sets the stage for the understanding that God gives these gifts to his creation; there is no other source for acquiring them.

Genesis 2 opens new categories in the creation story. First to be chronicled is God's rest. This anthropomorphism continues the theme of God's de-

sire to connect with his people. In chapter 1 he has created them with a special characteristic described as "in his image." He has spoken to them, explaining that the earth has been given to them. They are called very good. Now he rests, just as people will need to do. But just as his rest is not because of his actual physical fatigue, so the rest that his people will need will be for more significant reasons than physical tiredness. Centuries later when God speaks to Moses, the leader of the newly created nation, he gives Moses the law of Sabbath rest. The explanation is couched in allusion to the Genesis story of creation, but the case laws that follow reveal the spiritual purpose of Sabbath. Israel and its land are to observe Sabbath rest as an acknowledgement of dependence on God's provision. Frantic, ceaseless working betrays an unfortunate sense of self-reliance for the sustenance of life.

Literarily, the passage about God's rest in Genesis 2 seems to provide a moment of stillness, perhaps to allow a gathering of oneself for what is to follow. The reader will soon want to return to God's rest.

### Life and Death

The narrative moves quickly back through some of the tracks of the last chapter, restating God's place as creator of the earth, adding a few details and leaving out others. It quickly goes to the retelling of the creation of Adam, this time noting that God actually breathed life into him. Adam's home is in Eden (literally, 'delight'), where two trees are identified—the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The names of four rivers are given as waters that flow out of Eden. The picture is one of a heightened sense of delight, a garden by the edge of life-giving waters.

The tree of life is not mentioned again until chapter 3, but the narrative turns quickly to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, with God commanding that man not eat from it. The warning is that eating from it will result in death.

The narrative shifts again, to the creation of the woman from the rib of the man. She is made as his helper, since God deemed it "not good" that the man should be alone. Among the animals there is not a suitable helper for man. Adam recognizes the woman as like him, made from the same bone and flesh. He is credited as calling her a name (Hebrew *'ishshah*) that is similar to his own designation (*'ish*). Again, the implication is that God has in mind good things for the ones made in his image. He has provided suitable companionship, and Adam's words indicate

> We know well the desire to hide; we know that eyes open to evil are really eyes wide shut.

his recognition of that. Verse 24 anachronistically recognizes other relationships (mother and father), but it places special emphasis on the nature of the relationship between husbands and wives. The idea of one flesh signifies an intimacy that God does not intend to be dissolved. Thus far the theology of creation has stated emphatically that the sovereign creator God has placed his special delight on the humans he has made. Everything is in order for their good. The proliferation of the words *life* and *living*, including the tree of life in these chapters, indicates God's pleasure with human life. Only one warning has been sounded: do not choose the way of death. Why would anyone want to?

The story takes a dramatic turn in chapter 3, with the specific identification of one of God's creatures. The snake is described as more crafty than any other wild animal. His question to the woman about God's word as to what may be eaten and her restatement of God's command lead to the serpent's audacious interpretation of God's will. Questions about how it is that a snake could talk and whether this is Satan cannot consume the reader for long, because we remember what God said about death and the eating of the fruit. We have no stock with this character, the serpent. God has created, blessed, and given. Everything that we know is from him. Why listen to the snake? The story draws us in not only because we know what the rest of Genesis 3 will bring but be-

cause it is our story too. We too have decided that God's provision is not enough; we too have listened to other voices. We have indulged in our fleshly nature and have been hooked just like Eve, just like Adam. We know well the desire to hide; we know that eyes open to evil are really eyes wide shut.

It is here that the hope we have that creation theology is not confined to what happened in the six days of Genesis 1 reaches a gut-wrenching state. We, like Adam and Eve, live on the other side of those days when everything was good and we were not afraid. The narrative takes no pauses now, from the sin to the attempt to hide to the fear to the voice of the LORD God. Theories of documentary sources recognize the pen of a different writer with the designation LORD God that begins in chapter 2, but the dramatic flow is rich in irony. The serpent and the man and woman have presumed to have lordship over their own lives, but now the LORD God speaks. He hears the feeble attempts to lay blame somewhere else. The chaos has begun to take its toll. No recognition of the intimacy of 2:23 is found as the man tries to disassociate himself from guilt by blaming the woman. Again, the story is our own. It is not a story about whether the woman is more susceptible to the serpent, or whether the man is more likely to blame his partner; it is a story about trying to save oneself at the expense of another. It is about being dissatisfied with what God has given and trusting our own reasoning against God's command. Like Adam and Eve, we do not usually sin because we do not understand, or even, as they tried to offer, because someone else compels us. We sin because we do not regard God as Lord. Our own reasoning about the desirability of forbidden fruit displaces the plain word of God.

I often urge students to try to get past the flannelgraph pictures of Bible stories that we have from our childhood. Those characters with pretty, colorful clothing and serene faces taught us important things, but as adults we must see them as more dimensional, with real human sins, fears, doubts, and joys. Here in this primary story, however, we must return to that simple lesson we learned in Sunday school from the story of Adam and Eve: *We should listen to God.*

Now, as adults, we see that story as our own. We are so quick to consider other voices, so easily distracted; we are "prone toward other gods."[1] We refuse to be content with the way we have been given; we are always seeking another. These excursions down new paths never work out for us. *We should listen to God.*

> "He shall rule over you" should be regarded as a part of the consequence and hardship brought on by sin, not as God's new rule for life after Eden.

What will God do? The creation of his delight has rebelled against him. The rebellion has brought disharmony to the couple. God turns first to the snake. Is this a surprise, or is it predictable? If the humans are God's favored creatures, won't he, out of his disappointment, turn to discipline them first? He shows remarkable restraint and compassion. The snake is cursed, but not the people. Verse 15 describes life as it really is: the snake is probably the most feared and hated of all God's creatures. The possibility of an allusion here to Christ as the seed of woman is debated on linguistic grounds. The noun *seed* is collective, so it is unlikely to refer to a single descendant of Eve. Whether or not there is an allusion to Christ, the narrative that follows is full of God's will to redeem and re-create the situation.

Adam and Eve are both addressed; both receive God's discipline. Childbirth pains will increase for her, but she will still have sexual desire for her husband. The meaning of this last phrase is not completely clear. Gowan regards this as a statement about the ambiguities of life after sin, or "life in the real world," as he terms it. Childbirth pains may increase, but not to the point that women will avoid relationships with men. Relationships will continue, even

though now those relationships are skewed by the selfishness and disharmony that lead to males' ruling over females.[2]

Husbands' ruling over wives is a diversion from the relationship that is presented in 2:24–25. "He shall rule over you" should be regarded as a part of the consequence and hardship brought on by sin, not as God's new rule for life after Eden.

Adam (and Eve, no less) is said to be the cause of the cursing of the ground. God announces that now the earth, his good gift, given for humankind's blessing, will reflect the same distortion of God's plan as do the people. The earth will still yield crops, but only after considerable toil and sweat. In the modern world, difficulty in childbirth and hardship in producing crops are not everyone's experience. However, they stand as symbols of the most common elements of social structures: family life and the basic concerns for the sustenance of the body. They demonstrate that life away from the will of God brings suffering in many forms. The reality of death is common to all people in every socioeconomic class.

The text takes a brief excursus in 3:20–21, with the naming of Eve. Her name is close to the Hebrew word for "life." God then provides clothing for the man and his wife. These verses appear as bright spots in the dark story that has just been told.

The text cannot spell out for us the sadness of what has occurred. It is experienced in myriad ways by every person when he or she decides to go outside God's boundaries. Shame (3:7), fear (3:10), and sorrow (3:16–19) are delineated by the text. These are the broad realities of life after our choices to be or to do something other than that for which we were created. The writer of Genesis calls us to trust God in chapter 1; now, in chapters 2–3, he calls us to see ourselves and understand why we are where we are. But the story does not end with God's words to the snake, the woman, and the man. The compassion of God as a parent dressing a child and the seemingly out-of-place mention of Eve's name bring the story to a new beginning point. God is now ready to start life again this side of Eden. There will be no return to the garden (3:22–24), because endless life in this world would be disastrous for people who are so easily enticed to disregard God's commands. Eden is closed off by cherubim and a flaming sword. The cherubim are often pictured in the Old Testament as part of the heavenly realm, a place separate from the home of humankind. Though Adam and Eve must leave the garden and suffer the consequences of their decision, there is not an indication that they are going without God. He has clothed them for life outside Eden, and chapter 4 resumes the narrative of the descendants of Adam and Eve, with God present for the birth of Cain.

The story of Adam and Eve's rebellion seems to be an extended version of the stories of those who follow and who also have the choice to hear God or not. Chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis give a protracted view of Adam and Eve's choice. They can choose the abundance of life God has offered them, or they can choose to go beyond that boundary. Against the backdrop of the creation fiat of chapter 1, the few words of 3:6 that describe the fruit that is out-of-bounds paint a preposterous scene. The text finds us in familiar territory—caught in the deception of what lies beyond. The story is repeated throughout the entire Old Testament as characters make their choices either inside or outside God's boundaries. Blessing follows obedience, and suffering follows disobedience. But God is never far away, even from his stubborn people. There is always the promise of re-creation and redemption. The New Testament heralds the advent of God's new Adam, who chooses to hear God's voice and to bear the punishment of those who do not. Creation theology soars to new heights in the incarnation. Trusting in God now means trusting in his Son's obedience, which has now opened the way to the tree of life.

**Charme Robarts** is assistant editor of ACU Press, Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas.

## Notes

1 Form of Government, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

2 Donald E. Gowan, *From Eden to Babel: A Commentary on Genesis 1–11* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 59.