

Views from the Pews. Lent 5.

Creation theology in the First Testament

The authors of the Biblical creation stories, the ancient Hebrews, worked in a world dominated by the mythologies of Egypt, Canaan, Assyria, Babylon and Persia. Starting from the fourth or third millennia BCE, the Hebrew authors developed their own quite different fundamental convictions. Against the surrounding pagan mythology, they insisted that the creation expresses the unique sovereignty of Yahweh, the God of Israel, and the complete subservience of all nature to God's law, established at the beginning of time.

The Hebrew understanding of God's creation is not limited to the Book of Genesis. Psalms 19, 24, and 104, and Job 38-41 contain important general statements about the Biblical attitude to nature. They show some of the much older and deeper strata of Biblical faith, conveying how God's concern for the wider creation sets limits to human affairs. The Pentateuch includes some startlingly modern-sounding specific commands. For example: Deut 20:19 prohibits deforestation as a military tactic, asking "are the trees in the field men that they should be besieged by you?". According to Ex 23:12, the purpose of the Sabbath is partly also to allow rest days for working animals. Psalm 144 denies human hubris with "man is like a breath, his days are like a passing shadow". For the Hebrews, all discussions of creation concerned how things are now, not about where they came from. Biblical faith was and is simply confident that all human life and reason is somehow an image of that same lawfulness that has always governed the rest of the world. It insisted that trees, rivers and rocks did not have their own resident spirits, but that they were all simply created matter, open to human use and investigation.

Christian creation theology inherited this attitude, and is therefore seen to have been responsible for a systematic, historic campaign to demythologise nature. Christianity has been severely criticised for

this doctrine, on the grounds that it removed the protection that superstition had once afforded the natural world, and opened the way to the unrestrained exploitation that has produced the modern ecological crisis. Yet that very same demythologising doctrine also laid the foundations of modern science. Our modern view of the rational, ordered universe is entirely compatible with the theistic, Christian affirmation that we can make sense of the world because God's faithfulness stands behind it.

Both interpretations are true. We need God's wisdom to navigate between them.

Kim King