Is Creation Theology Inherently Conservative? A Dialogue with Walter Brueggemann*

J. Richard Middleton
Institute for Christian Studies

S ince his 1972 study of the wisdom literature of the Hebrew scriptures, provocatively entitled *In Man We Trust*, Walter Brueggemann has challenged the settled verities of Christian communities of faith and the orthodoxies of biblical scholarship.[1] In over two dozen books and numerous popular and academic articles on the texts and themes of the Hebrew scriptures, Brueggemann has explored and articulated his growing thesis that the Bible is a powerful, critical, and energizing resource for human and social transformation in our times. Concentrating on the prophetic corpus since his programmatic 1978 book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, as well as giving significant attention to the historical books and the psalter, Brueggemann himself has become an important prophetic voice, calling the contemporary church to fidelity to Yahweh's uncompromising claims as these are articulated in the Mosaic, covenantal, and prophetic traditions of the Hebrew scriptures.[2]

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[1]Walter Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1972).

[2]Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); other representative texts on prophecy by Brueggemann include *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic*

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What is particularly attractive about Brueggemann's exegesis—besides his superbly sensitive literary handling of scripture—is his passion for uncovering the social context and function of biblical texts, their function either to express and thus to legitimate a given social order or to voice a critical alternative to the status quo.[3] This sociological analysis of texts, which Brueggemann has honed through interaction with the work of George Mendenhall and Norman Gottwald, has allowed him to bridge the hermeneutical gap between the ancient text and our modern, and increasingly postmodern, situation.[4] By suggesting continuities between the status quo of Israel's day and our contemporary North American culture, Brueggemann allows the biblical text to address us in both judgment and hope.[5]

In this article I am concerned with the specific application of Brueggemann's sociological analysis to texts of creation theology in the Hebrew

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Voices in Exile (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); *To Pluck Up, to Tear Down: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah 1–25* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans and Edinburgh: Handsel, 1988); and *To Build, to Plant: A Commentary on Jeremiah 26–52* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans and Edinburgh: Handsel, 1991); as well as his earlier work *Tradition for Crisis: A Study in Hosea* (Richmond: John Knox, 1968). On the historical books see his *David's Truth in Israel's Imagination and Memory* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); and *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990). On the psalter see *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984); and *Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). Brueggemann has attempted to address the entire range of the Hebrew scriptures in *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

[3]Brueggemann's literary sensitivities have no doubt been influenced by Samuel Terrien and James Muilenburg, two of his teachers at Union Theological Seminary in New York, who are both known for their nuanced literary approach to scripture. Examples of Terrien's work on the Bible include *Job: Poet of Existence* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1957) and *The Elusive Presence: The Heart of Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978). Besides Muilenburg's *The Way of Israel: Biblical Faith and Ethics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), see his Society of Biblical Literature presidential address, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 (1969) 1–18, which influenced a whole generation of scholars in literary analysis of the Bible.

[4]Although Brueggemann cites numerous texts by Mendenhall and Gottwald throughout his writings, he has drawn particularly upon two of these: George Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); and Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250–1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979). Brueggemann, however, has not drawn uncritically on Mendenhall and Gottwald and is aware of the differences between them; see his discussion in "Israel's Social Criticism and Yahweh's Sexuality," *JAARSup* 45 (1977) 739–72; and *"The Tribes of Yahweh:* An Essay Review," *JAAR* 48 (1980) 441–51.

[5]Brueggemann typically hints at such suggestions rather than explicitly articulating them. See, for example, Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination,* 41; idem, *The Message of the Psalms,* 151–52; idem, *Israel's Praise,* xi, 49. Brueggemann draws the parallels more explicitly (and is therefore "at some risk" because he may be wrong) in his *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living* ([Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991] 111–14).

scriptures. It is Brueggemann's judgment that such texts typically serve the socially conservative function of legitimating the status quo of Israel's royal establishment, specifically the Jerusalem monarchy. The social function of creation texts, however, is not simply conservative, Brueggemann argues; it is oppressive. If the regnant order is rooted in creation, then any challenge to that order is religiously disqualified. The pain of the marginalized is therefore silenced and social transformation is impossible.

▓ Brueggemann's Hermeneutical Categories

In order to understand the force of this judgment about creation theology, it will be necessary to elucidate the basic, underlying hermeneutical categories that Brueggemann employs in reading creation texts. These categories, which at least since *The Prophetic Imagination* are operative in all of Brueggemann's exegetical and theological work on the Bible, are explicitly articulated in two important articles. The first, published in 1979, is entitled "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel." The second, published in 1985 in two parts, is entitled "A Shape for Old Testament Theology."[6]

In these articles Brueggemann identifies in the Hebrew scriptures two opposing tendencies or theological trajectories which are rooted in two different Israelite traditions. The first, which he names "structure legitimation," is associated with the Abrahamic-Davidic traditions. These traditions are characterized by a concern for universality and order. Their overriding claim is that life is good and God is gracious, reliable, and faithful. In these traditions, God functions primarily in a stabilizing capacity, guaranteeing and legitimating the social order. In contrast, Brueggemann identifies a tendency or trajectory, which he calls the "embrace of pain," that is associated with the Mosaic-prophetic traditions. These traditions are characterized by a concern for justice, rooted not in any universal moral order, but in the scandalous particularity of Israel's Exodus experience. Their overriding claim is that life is not as it ought to be and thus they articulate, in the name of Yahweh, the covenant God, a critique of the present order and a call for moral and social transformation. In these traditions, God functions primarily as the free and transcendent ground of criticism of the status quo.

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[6]Walter Brueggemann, "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel," *JBL* 98 (1979) 161–85; idem, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation," *CBQ* 47 (1985) 28–46; and idem, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain," *CBQ* 47 (1985) 395–415. The last two articles are reprinted in idem, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (ed. Patrick D. Miller; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) chaps. 1 and 2.

In *The Prophetic Imagination*, Brueggemann further describes the first trajectory as a "royal" or "imperial consciousness," the paradigmatic manifestation of which is found in the hierarchical Egyptian social order that enslaved the ancient Hebrews. This oppressive social order, understood as the eternal expression of universal cosmic order, was legitimated by a pantheon of static gods of state and was mediated by the divine pharaoh, their son and image.[7]

For Brueggemann, this royal consciousness was next manifested in the Solomonic monarchy, with its immense building program utilizing forced labor, its standing army of horses and chariots, its secular wisdom literature, and the establishment of the temple as a royal chapel, the liturgy of which included royal psalms celebrating the king as God's divine son. Thus what Gerhard von Rad had characterized as a time of Israelite "enlightenment" Brueggemann, following Mendenhall, calls the "paganization" of Israel.[8] The oppressive royal consciousness of Egypt had been the context for the radical, liberating event of the Exodus, which arose out of and articulated an alternative vision that Brueggemann calls the "prophetic imagination." Similarly, the monarchy, especially in the South, with its temple-Zion complex, required the rise of the prophetic movement which proclaimed God's intrusion into Israelite history to judge and to liberate.[9]

Brueggemann's categories are further nuanced—and possibly even transformed—in his 1984 monograph on the psalter, entitled *The Message of the Psalms*.[10] There, in place of his bipolar, dyadic schema of royal and prophetic, he introduces a triadic schema of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation. He classifies and exegetes various psalms in terms of this new triadic schema.

In this triad, "orientation" corresponds to the royal consciousness, the trajectory of structure legitimation. Typical psalms of orientation are royal

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[7]Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, chap. 1, esp. 16–19.

[8]On the monarchy, see ibid., chap. 2, esp. 30–31. On "enlightenment," see Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1: *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 53. On "paganization," see George Mendenhall, "The Monarchy," *Int* 29 (1975) 160; and idem, "Samuel's Broken Rib," in James Flanagan and Anita W. Robinson, eds , *No Famine in the Land* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975) 67.

[9]On the Exodus, see Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, chap. 1 (pp. 11–27); on the prophetic movement, see chaps. 3 (pp. 44–61) and 4 (pp. 62–79) in the same book.

[10]See note 2. Numerous other articles develop Brueggemann's categories more fully; see Walter Brueggemann, "A Convergence in Recent Old Testament Theologies," *JSOT* 18 (1980) 2–18; and idem, "Old Testament Theology as a Particular Conversation: Adjudication of Israel's Sociotheological Alternatives," *TD* 32 (1985) 303–325; these articles are reprinted in Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*, chaps. 5 and 7. Both articles, however, reproduce versions of Brueggemann's dyadic schema, whereas Brueggemann adds a distinctive new slant to these categories in *The Message of the Psalms*.

psalms, Torah psalms, wisdom psalms, and creation psalms. These psalms make claims concerning the way the world is normatively ordered and generate an attitude of confident security for those who conform to this order.[11]

The terms "disorientation" and "new orientation" correspond to two successive moments of the prophetic imagination. The first, that of disorientation, is equivalent to the embrace of pain, the voicing of an awareness that the realities of lived experience do not correspond to the orienting claims of the imperial consciousness. Psalms of disorientation include laments and imprecatory psalms. They constitute a judgment or critique of the present system and generate an attitude of both honesty about pain and suspicion about naive claims of the tradition.[12]

The term "new orientation" corresponds to the second moment of the prophetic imagination, namely, the move from criticism to hope, a move energized by the alternative future that God offers. Psalms of new orientation include primarily the thanksgiving psalms, which tell stories of God's deliverance from disorienting situations. Such psalms generate thankful historical memory of pain and liberation. Brueggemann also, however, includes songs of trust or confidence, enthronement psalms, and the hallelujah psalms found at the end of the psalter as liberating psalms of new orientation.[13] Interestingly, four years after *The Message of the Psalms*, in his 1988 book entitled *Israel's Praise*, Brueggemann's hermeneutic of suspicion led him to reread the enthronement psalms and the hallelujah psalms (with the exception of Psalm 146) as oppressive psalms of orientation which ignore, if not suppress, the abrasive pain of the marginalized.[14] Later in this article, I shall address the significance of this shift.

In concluding this section, I must state that I find Brueggemann's hermeneutical categories and sociological approach both creative and fruitful. These categories and this approach are, of course, indebted in varying degrees to the work of numerous previous scholars, an indebtedness that Brueggemann fully acknowledges in his ample footnotes.[15] Without claiming, therefore, strict originality for his hermeneutical proposals, Brueggemann's insightful synthesis nevertheless has provided readers of

[11]Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, chap. 2 (pp. 25–49). Although Brueggemann does not exegete any royal psalms, his comments indicate he would treat them as psalms of orientation (p. 200 n. 44).

[12]Ibid., chap. 3 (pp. 51–121).

[13]Ibid., chap. 4 (pp. 123–67).

[14]Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise*, chap. 4 (pp. 89–121).

[15]Indeed, in his survey article, "A Convergence in Recent Old Testament Theologies," Brueggemann has acknowledged a whole range of similar hermeneutical proposals for scholarship in the Hebrew scriptures.

scripture with an illuminating set of categories that enlivens biblical texts and allows these texts to speak powerfully to our own context.[16]

▓ Brueggemann's Assessment of Creation

When Brueggemann applies his hermeneutical proposals to the theme of creation, a problem arises. Although he does make some positive statements regarding creation theology, his typical judgment is overwhelmingly negative. In *The Prophetic Imagination*, for example. Brueggemann asserts that "in fact, creation faith tended to give questions of order priority over questions of justice. It tended to value symmetry inordinately and wanted to silence the abrasive concerns of the have-nots."[17] This is a historical claim about ancient Israel. but Brueggemann also makes the systematic claim that creation faith "is more inclined toward social stability than toward social transformation and liberation."[18] Although he admits that this need not be so, he also believes that "it regularly is so. Creation theology readily becomes imperial propaganda and ideology."[19] Such theology is not simply "open to exploitation" by those whose interests are politically conservative, but it "easily, readily, and frequently" is thus exploited.[20]

Even this assessment, however, is surpassed by his statement in *Israel's Praise*. There Brueggemann admits, with superb understatement. "I incline to take a more critical view of creation theology in ancient Israel than do many of my colleagues." His position is summarized as follows:

> The social function of creation theology. . . is characteristically to establish, legitimate. and advocate order at the cost of transformation. . . . The problem is that regularly (I believe inevitably), creation theology is allied with the king, with the royal liturgy. and therefore with reasons of state. The outcome is to coalesce the royal ordering of economic distribution and political power with the goodness and reliability of God's intended order, thereby absolutizing the present order as the very structure God has decreed in and for creation.[21]

[16]Brueggemann's work has certainly revolutionized both my academic work and my preaching. Examples of the fruitfulness of Brueggemann's categories for contemporary cultural analysis may be found in J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh. "Theology at the Rim of a Broken Wheel: Bruce Cockburn and Christian Faith in a Postmodern World." *Grail* 9 (1993) 15–39: and J. Richard Middleton and Brian S. Walsh. *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downes Grove, IL: InterVarsity. 1995). See also the superb analysis by Brian J. Walsh in *Subversive Christianity: Imaging God in a Dangerous Time* (1992: reprinted Medina. WA: Alta Vista, 1994). which is indebted to Brueggemann's approach to scripture.

[17]Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*. 39.

[18]Brueggemann, "Trajectories." 171.

[19]Brueggemann. "A Shape for Old Testament Theology. I." 42.

[20]Ibid., 41–42.

[21]Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise*. 101.

Even in the midst of this programmatic statement, Brueggemann does devote two (somewhat grudging) sentences to possible positive functions of creation theology. These two sentences, however, constitute his sole concession and are followed by no less than twenty pages of sustained and insightful analysis devoted to elucidate the conservative, oppressive function of creation theology in ancient Israel, as it is manifested in the psalter.[22]

Now, it is undoubtedly true that creation theology may be—and has been—used oppressively to justify a particular social order or political program. In this Brueggemann is entirely correct. It seems that this was the primary function of such theology in the ancient Near East, certainly in Egyptian, Sumerian, Akkadian, and possibly Canaanite cultures.[23] There can also be little doubt that creation theology functioned oppressively in the history of the Jerusalem monarchy, in much the way Brueggemann portrays it. The most important evidence for this is found in those royal psalms that depict the Davidic king as God's chosen son, who is then addressed with divine epithets or imbued with divine characteristics such as

[22]Ibid., 101–121.

[23]That creation theology functioned in a conservative fashion, legitimating the royal status quo, is clearest in the case of Sumero-Akkadian cultures. At least five interlocking claims are significant here. The first is that the Sumerian king list claims that kingship is inaugurated by the gods and handed down from heaven at creation. The second is the reference, found in the *Tukulti-Ninurta Epic* and in various letters of Assyrian court astrologers, to kings as the image of deity, which implies the divine right to rule on behalf of the gods. Third, in writings such as the *Eridu Genesis* and the *Harab Myth*, cities, over which kings ruled and in which their reigns were consolidated, were believed to have been founded not by mere humans, but by the gods at creation. Fourth, the prologue to the laws of Hammurapi, who was a king of Babylon in the eighteenth century BCE, claims that these laws were given at creation, resulting in their unchangeable and inviolable character. Finally, at least by the sixth century, neo-Babylonian kings regularly assumed the part of Marduk, the head of the Babylonian pantheon, in the annual liturgical reenactment of the *Enuma Elish* at the Akitu festival, thus identifying Marduk's primordial conquest of chaos with the human king's political conquest of his enemies. On the above points, see Phyllis A. Bird, "'Male and Female He Created Them': Gen 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation," *HTR* 74 (1981) 129–59; Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "Eridu, Dunnu, and Babel: A Study in Comparative Mythology," *Hebrew Annual Review* 9 (1985) 227–351; and Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon, 1969) 182, 192–98.

A possible exception to the conservative function of creation theology in the ancient Near East is the appeal to certain elements of the kingship ideology by the usurper of the Babylonian throne, Nabonidus, in the middle of the sixth century. Nabonidus appeals in his own favor to "the will of the gods" against his predecessor Labaši-Marduk, even though he admits he has no dynastic claim to the throne. On Nabonidus's quest for the legitimacy of his nondynastic kingship as recorded in inscriptions 1, 13, and 15, see Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *The Reign of Nabonidus King of Babylon 556–539 B.C.* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1989) 22, 89–90, 110–114. For this reference and its interpretation I am indebted to an unpublished paper by Al Wolters of Redeemer College, "Labaši-Marduk and the Neobabylonian Succession" (May 1991) esp. 4–5, section 11.

the conquest of chaos. Such psalms were patently idolatrous in their origi-
nal setting, and it was not until they came to be read messianically and
eschatologically that they could function as a critique of the Jerusalem
monarchy.[24]

In our own time, appeals to a creation order have been at the root of
both South African apartheid and German National Socialism, to say noth-
ing of the recent hyper-Calvinist movement known as Theonomy or Chris-
tian Reconstruction which, in the name of creation order, wants to reinstate
in contemporary America the legislation and sanctions of the Hebrew scrip-
tures.[25]

What is not at all clear, however, is that creation theology inevitably
functions in a conservative or oppressive manner. I am in agreement with
Emil Brunner who, in conversation with Karl Barth about the appeal to
creation in German National Socialism, argued against Barth that creation
theology was open to a variety of political uses. Brunner distinguished
specifically between three such uses; creation, he said, can function nega-
tively—in a conservative and authoritarian manner, or positively in either
a conservative or a revolutionary manner.[26] Whereas the negative function
corresponds to Brueggemann's predominantly suspicious analysis, the posi-
tive conservative function of creation theology corresponds to Brueggemann's
somewhat grudging admission that there is value to an orienting vision of
life that, in the face of experiences of chaos, claims coherence, reliability,

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[24]The clearest cases are Ps 2:7–12; 45:2–7; 89:25–27. 35–37: and 110:1, 4. Psalm 89 may,
however, already testify to a process of transformation. since the psalmist not only looked
back to the Davidic ideal (vss. 1–37) from the point of view of God's evident rejection of the
king (vss. 38–51). but included an unusual conditional clause in the Davidic covenant (vss.
30–32), and mused on the mortality of all humanity, including the king (vss. 47–48). Despite
the existence of psalms such as these and the clear historical portrayal of the abuse of mon-
archy in the Hebrew scriptures, it is noteworthy that no element of the Sumero-Akkadian
kingship ideology is connected with creation theology in the Bible (see previous note). In-
deed, some of this ideology is explicitly excluded. The Bible. for example, asserts not only the
creation of all humans in God's image—commissioned to rule the earth (Genesis 1, Psalm 8)—
but also the historical origin of kingship in the tenth century with Saul, its demise in the sixth
century exile. the founding of the first city in ambiguous circumstances by Cain (Genesis 4).
and both the historical origin of the Torah at Sinai and the subjection of the king to this Torah
(Deuteronomy 17).

[25]Brueggemann himself cites (*Israel's Praise*. 180 n. 21) the subordination of blacks and
women as examples of oppression in the name of creation order. On the Reconstructionist
movement. see the helpful summary in Rodney Clapp, *The Reconstructionists* (2d ed.; Downers
Grove, IL: InterVarsity. 1990). The two central texts for this movement are Rousas John
Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law* (Nutley, NJ: Craig, 1973); and Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy
in Christian Ethics* (Nutley, NJ: Craig, 1977).

[26]Emil Brunner, "Nature and Grace," in idem and Karl Barth. *Natural Theology* (trans.
Peter Frankel; London: Bles, 1946) 51.

and graciousness for a world that is God's good creation.[27] To this I would add that creation theology provides a sense of connectedness and mutual dependence among all creatures (as depicted, for example, in Psalm 104). Such an orienting vision not only establishes and roots a person—this world becomes home—but it also provides a basis for care for the natural world and confident participation in ordinary social life and everyday tasks.[28] Brunner's positive revolutionary function of creation theology, in turn, corresponds to Brueggemann's admission, when discussing the Psalms, that creation may come to function as the eschatological hope of an alternative future in which God's creative intent shall be manifest. This hope then results in radical critique of the present social order *vis-à-vis* idolatrous formations that do not manifest God's creative intent.[29]

﹖ Creation as Liberating

I shall attempt to illustrate that these positive functions are not simply abstract possibilities by reference to two concrete scriptural examples in which creation theology has exercised a salutary revolutionary or liberating function.[30] The first example is constituted by the canonical book of Exo-

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[27]This is stated most explicitly in Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I," 41; and idem, *Israel s Praise*, 101. It is adumbrated in idem, *Prophetic Imagination*, 39; and idem, *The Message of the Psalms*, 35, 49, 201 n. 64.

[28]Regarding creation theology, see "The Affirmation of Ordinary Life," part 3 of Charles Taylor's philosophical-historical study. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) esp. 218–27.

[29]Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 28; idem, *Israel's Praise*, 101.

[30]Of the possible extrabiblical examples that could be given, I shall mention one important cluster. If the Nazi appeal to blood and soil cited creation theology in order to justify oppression, we also should remember the Dutch Christians who resisted Nazi occupation of Holland, harboured Jewish fugitives, and endured the suffering of concentration camps, sustained all the while by perhaps the most articulate theology of creation to be found anywhere in Christendom. This creation theology, which can be traced back to the neo-Calvinian tradition of Abraham Kuyper and Groen van Prinsterer, brought a tremendous challenge to the status quo of nineteenth-century Holland, resulting in a flurry of social activism that was understood as an alternative to both the French Revolution and British capitalism. The explicit, undergirding theological motif of this activism was that God's redemption is for the sake of creation, implying the mandate to transform human sociocultural life. See McKendree R. Langley, *The Practice of Political Spirituality: Episodes from the Public Career of Abraham Kuyper* (Jordan Station, ON: Paideia, 1984) 167–68; and A. J. van Dijk, *Groen van Prinsterer's Lectures on Unbelief and Revolution* (Jordan Station, ON: Wedge, 1989) 232. I am indebted to Al Wolters of Redeemer College for these references.

Examples of contemporary social criticism that are rooted broadly in the neo-Calvinian creation tradition include Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983); Bob Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society* (Toronto: Wedge and Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979); Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace: Love, Work and Parenting in a Changing World* (Downers

dus. Contrary to the false polarization of creation and salvation which has dominated biblical studies at least since Gerhard von Rad's early work, Terence Fretheim has recently claimed that "the book of Exodus is shaped in a decisive way by a creation theology."[31] Although Fretheim's explication of this claim is multifaceted, we may distill three central points relevant to our purposes.

First, Egyptian slavery was evil precisely because it contravened God's creative purposes. Pharaoh's oppression of the Israelites was subject to Mosaic criticism insofar as this oppression attempted to shortcircuit God's original intent to bring blessing and harmony to all creatures. including Israel.[32] Hence, Fretheim comments that "a proper creation theology should be in constant challenge of the status quo rather than in support of it."[33] Second—and this is the flip side of the challenge—the deliverance of Israel, including the giving of the Torah, was fundamentally restorative, reclaiming human life in its fullness.[34] Since creation, like the Torah, is dynamic and developmental, Fretheim denies that redemption constitutes a mythic return to a primal origin, but he nevertheless affirms that "the objective of God's work in redemption is to free people to be what they were created to be."[35]

The third relevant point is that God's purpose in the Exodus—to establish the Creator's name in all the earth—was not limited to Israel, but was cosmic in scope. Thus Israel's royal-priestly vocation (Exod 19:4–6) consisted in mediating the benefits of salvation to all the nations.[36] Creation, in other words, not only provided a basis to critique the Egyptian social order and norms for Israel's redeemed social life, but it also prevented a

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Grove. IL: InterVarsity. 1990): Walsh and Middleton. *The Transforming Vision*; and idem. *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be.*

[31]Terence E. Fretheim. *Exodus* (Louisville, KY: John Knox. 1991) 13.

[32]Terence E. Fretheim, "The Plagues as Ecological Signs of Historical Disaster." *JBL* 110 (1991) 392: idem. *Exodus*, 13.

[33]Terence E. Fretheim, "The Reclamation of Creation: Redemption and Law in Exodus." *Int* 45 (1991) 363.

[34]Fretheim. *Exodus*, 13–14, 170; idem. "Reclamation of Creation," 358–59, 363–64.

[35]Fretheim. "Reclamation of Creation," 359; italicized in the original.

[36]Fretheim. *Exodus*, 13–14: idem. "Plagues as Ecological Signs." 392. It is significant that von Rad misread precisely this point in his choice of the Hexateuch rather than the Pentateuch as the basic canonical unit of the Hebrew scriptures. Whereas Israel does not possess the land at the end of the Pentateuch. the Hexateuch ends with the conquest and settlement. For von Rad, Israel's definitive confessional story starts with creation (Genesis) and ends with the land (Joshua). This led him to characterize the function of creation in the Hexateuch as the theological justification or legitimation of Israel's election and possession of the land: "Presumptuous as it may sound. Creation is part of the aetiology of Israel!" (von Rad. *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, 138.) If we follow Fretheim. however. it would be more accurate to say that Israel is part of the salvation history of creation.

narrow, self-serving reading of Israel's election as a badge of national superiority by defining the purpose of election as service of others.[37]

A liberating creation theology can also be found in the first chapter of Genesis. As James Crenshaw stated, "The Bible opens with vigorous protest."[38] Not only does Genesis 1 dissent, as is widely recognized, from prevailing ancient Near Eastern cosmological and theological conceptions,[39] but, I have argued that the democratization of the image of God notion, in such a way that it is applied to all humanity in Gen 1:27, implies a radical critique of Babylonian sacral kingship and thus of the Babylonian social order which this sacral kingship legitimated.[40] Brueggemann himself, in both his 1982 commentary on Genesis and his 1972 article, "The Kerygma of the Priestly Writers," repeatedly has read Genesis 1 as a subversive, empowering text addressed to Israelite exiles in sixth-century Babylon. This text, according to Brueggemann, denies Babylonian claims to sovereignty, while empowering the marginalized exiles by rooting their future in the

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[37]Fretheim's reading of creation theology in Exodus has, of course, been disputed (and probably will continue to be disputed). It may therefore be helpful to introduce a distinction suggested by N. T. Wright in his "Romans and the Theology of Paul" (in Eugene H. Lovering, Jr., ed., *Society of Biblical Literature 1992 Seminar Papers* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992] 185, 211). Not only does Wright read Romans, as Fretheim reads Exodus, as appealing to a creation theology. but he helpfully distinguishes the explicit rhetorical argument of the book, its "poetic sequence," from the wider—although implicit—world view and system of belief upon which Paul draws, the "narrative sequence." The third point I have cited from Fretheim— that the purpose of the Exodus is cosmic in scope—can be found in the text itself ("Indeed the whole earth is mine"; Exod 19:5b). With regard to the first two points, however, creation theology constitutes part of the implicit narrative sequence of Exodus. This is suggested by Fretheim's emphasis on the placement of the Genesis creation account at the start of Israel's canonical story and the theological implications of this placement for reading Exodus (Fretheim, "Reclamation of Creation," 354–56).

[38]James Crenshaw, "The Human Dilemma and Literature of Dissent," in Douglas A. Knight, ed., *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 235.

[39]See Gerhard Hasel's analysis of this dissent in "The Significance of the Cosmology in Genesis 1 in Relation to Ancient Near Eastern Parallels," *AUSS* 10 (1972) 1–20; and idem. "The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology." *EvQ* 46 (1974) 81–102. Other works in which Genesis 1 is read as polemical include James A. Sanders, *The Old Testament in the Cross* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961) chap. 2; Alexander Heidel. *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation* (2d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) chap. 3; Arvid S. Kapelrud, "The Mythological Features in Genesis Chapter 1 and the Author's Intentions," *VT* 24 (1974) 176–86; and Conrad Heyers, *The Meaning of Creation: Genesis and Modern Science* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984) chaps. 2 and 3.

[40]See J. Richard Middleton, "The Liberating Image? Interpreting the *Imago Dei* in Context," *Christian Scholar's Review* 24 (1994) 6–23. Brueggemann himself has characterized (*Old Testament Theology*, chap. 7) the royal and prophetic traditions as "iconic" and "aniconic." I argue that the creation of humans in God's image in Genesis 1 is the positive counterpart to the prohibition against images in the decalogue. Both protest the iconic tradition that attempts to control and guarantee the divine presence as legitimation of the status quo.

power and purposes of the radically free and transcendent Creator.[41] He does not hesitate to state: "The text is revolutionary."[42]

Since creation theology in Israel was not always revolutionary, but, on the contrary, often functioned oppressively (a point I have already conceded), we may ask how this transformation was achieved.[43] This is, of course, a complicated historical question, and its answer inevitably will involve a large measure of conjecture. Nevertheless, there seem to be at least two important factors involved in this shift. The first is the Israelite exile. By the time Genesis 1 was written as a preface to the Pentateuch, Israel was a marginalized, powerless people, uprooted from their land, having experienced the dissolution of temple and monarchy. This new social location was undoubtedly a crucial factor in the development of a liberating function for creation theology (evident in Genesis 1).[44]

Second, it seems likely that the liberating experience of the Exodus had a transformational effect on Israel's creation theology throughout the period of the tribal confederacy and the monarchy. The final fruit of this transformation is found in Genesis 1. Since creation is a dominant theme in the religions of the ancient Near East, its role as a minor subtheme in all the earliest Israelite materials is certainly surprising. Why is it that creation has been consistently subordinated to the Exodus, so much so that in von Rad's list of four or five uses of creation theology in the Hebrew scriptures, only

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[41]Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 31–39; idem, "The Kerygma of the Priestly Writers," *ZAW* 84 (1972) 401, 408–413; see also idem, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 144–46. Note that Brueggemann claims (*Genesis*, 27–28; *The Land*, 146) not only a liberating and revolutionary function, but also a positive orienting and conservative function for Genesis 1 in his comments about the gift-like character of God's gracious ordering of reality.

[42]Brueggemann. *Genesis*. 33. It is paradoxical that after making this statement in a 1982 book, Brueggemann could claim in a 1985 article ("Old Testament Theology as a Particular Conversation," in idem, *Old Testament Theology*, 139) that the decisive canonical priority of the Torah or Pentateuch, with its commitment to liberation and transformation, is "somewhat mitigated by the presence of creation theology."

[43]I am not necessarily assuming that this was a one-time transformation. The texts are too complex for us to make definitive judgments here.

[44]This does not mean, however, that only the socially marginalized are able to call the status quo into question: witness the radical internal critique of the royal court mounted by Isaiah of Jerusalem. Brueggemann himself acknowledges (*The Creative Word*, 138 n. 32) that Isaiah is an exception to his royal-prophetic schema. Note Hans-Rudi Weber's reticence (*Power: Focus for a Biblical Theology* [Geneva: WCC, 1989] 23) to characterize the prophetic as a distinct biblical trajectory, since it was the vocation of prophets to take up critically and reinterpret a whole series of differing traditions, including the Exodus-Mosaic and royal-Davidic traditions. It should also be noted that I am not claiming that all Israelites in exile were socially marginalized. This is patently false. Nevertheless, Babylonian exile signaled the ending of a cultural-political era and symbolic world, an ending that shook Israel to the core and generated a reinterpretation of the tradition.

one involves the thematization of creation as an independent subject in its own right, and then only in a few late texts?[45]

I agree with Bernhard Anderson's suggestion that the theme of creation was intentionally suppressed in early Israel because it was inextricably bound up with a pagan mythological world view. Such a world view was antithetical to Israel's faith, which was historically based in the Exodus. It was not until a significant transformation of consciousness was effected by sustained and explicit focus on the mighty historical acts of Yahweh— evidenced, for example, in what von Rad called the *credos* (the retelling of Israel's salvation history found in texts like Deut 6:20–25, 26:1–11, and Josh 24:1–15)—that creation, now purged of mythological conceptions, could become an independent theme in later scripture such as Genesis 1.[46]

Von Rad himself made such a sharp distinction between mythic creation (derived from ancient Near Eastern models) and historical Exodus (which was unique to Israel) that he disqualified creation faith from being genuinely Yahwistic.[47] While this distinction between myth and history is often overblown and artificial, I believe Brueggemann's suspicion of creation themes is rooted in a genuine insight into what is theologically at stake here. Ancient Near Eastern creation faith is firmly embedded in a mimetic world view which seeks to set up, by liturgical and political intermediaries, a correspondence between a primal divine state of affairs and a matching human social order. The end result is the use of creation as an ideology to prohibit change and legitimate the social order as divinely willed. Biblical faith, however, is historical and covenantal in the sense that it gives humans room, in partnership with God, to explore with innovation and freedom genuinely new paths on their historical journey.[48] By affirming both

[45]Gerhard von Rad. "The Theological Problem of the Old Testament Doctrine of Creation," in Bernhard W. Anderson, ed.. *Creation in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 55–61; von Rad, *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*. 137–39.

[46]Bernhard W. Anderson, *Creation versus Chaos: The Reinterpretation of Mythical Symbolism in the Bible* (1967; reprinted Philadelphia: Fortress. 1987) 49–55.

[47]Von Rad. "Theological Problem of the Old Testament Doctrine of Creation." 61–62.

[48]The distinction between these two world views is helpfully explored by Merold Westphal in *God, Guilt and Death: An Existential Phenomenology of Religion* ([Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984] chaps. 10 and 11); he names them "mimetic" and "covenantal." Paul Ricoeur's important analysis of the Babylonian world view as embedded in the *Enuma Elish* highlights its fundamental divergence from Israel's historical faith (Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, part 2. chap. 1). Mircea Eliade described (*The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History* [Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1954] chap. 4) the "cyclical" world view of archaic peoples, including Sumero-Akkadian cultures, as being in "terror of history." The issue at stake is not the old one of whether the gods participate in history or nature (adequately addressed in Bertil Albrektson, *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and in Israel* [Lund: Gleerup. 1976]), but whether *humans* are granted the freedom of making history.

human and divine freedom and partnership, this covenantal world view not only valorizes the historical process, but is able to relativize—and even critique—any present state of affairs in light of God's norms for that process.

Whatever the actual function, oppressive or otherwise, of creation in the time of the Israelite monarchy, by the time of the canonical book of Genesis, we find God's cosmic, creational intent for peace signaled thematically at the outset. As the preface not only to Genesis, but to the entire story of scripture, creation provides the ground for criticism of every system of historical injustice and a hope for an alternative future wherein God's intent will be restored. Thus what von Rad had called the unhappy "circumstance" of the canonical placing of creation at the start of the Bible turns out to be a matter of fundamental theological importance.[49]

■ Brueggemann's Hermeneutical Shift

Happily, von Rad changed his mind about the significance of creation and came to a deep appreciation of creation theology, especially as found in the wisdom literature.[50] What is fascinating is that Brueggemann's 1972 book, *In Man We Trust*, is indebted to the later von Rad, as Brueggemann himself acknowledged.[51] Addressing both royal and wisdom themes, the book is permeated by a positive appreciation of the ordered regularity of creation and celebrates human maturity and responsibility in the world. If Brueggemann's later valorizing of the Mosiac and prophetic traditions may be viewed as a protest against the pretensions of Enlightenment autonomy and therefore as a celebration of God's intrusive presence to judge and to save, *In Man We Trust* is meant as a protest against the heteronomy of the ecclesiastical and theological status quo of the late 1960s. Brueggemann explicitly characterizes this status quo (which is his own heritage) as a neoorthodox Christianity informed by a theology of the "mighty acts of God and wedded to an evangelical Pietism." What *In Man We Trust* especially protests are the twin dogmas of human incapacity and an intrusive God, both mainstays of pietism, neoorthodoxy, and the biblical theology movement.[52]

Between 1972 and 1978 Brueggemann had reversed his position completely, returning paradoxically from the later to the earlier position held by von Rad.[53] In a chapter entitled "Uneasy Reflections from a Son of

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[49]Von Rad, "Theological Problem of the Old Testament Doctrine of Creation," 54.

[50]Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972).

[51]Breuggemann, *In Man We Trust*, 8. Although Brueggemann does not specify whether he was indebted to the early or later von Rad, the substance of the book makes this clear.

[52]See Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust*, 7–9, 23–27, 119.

[53]This is not, however, a simple return, but what might be termed a sociological reappropriation of von Rad. See Brueggemann's assessment ("*The Tribes of Yahweh*: An Essay Review," 445)

Neoorthodoxy," Brueggemann admitted that *In Man We Trust* may be "only a tract for the time, perhaps a very brief time."[54] Certainly, six years later in *The Prophetic Imagination* he seems to have repudiated his earlier position.[55] What could have precipitated such a change? Undoubtedly, the times changed and different issues needed to be addressed. With the onset of the seventies and the eighties, Brueggemann probably began to discern in the churches a move from a neoorthodox heteronomy that stressed religious distinctiveness to an uncritical embrace of the modern autonomous stance of surrounding culture. Most likely this discernment was radicalized with the rebirth of the triumphal *pax Americana* under Ronald Reagan. Nevertheless, beyond this changed historical situation I would suggest another factor. Although *In Man We Trust* celebrates human responsibility and the reliability of the world, Brueggemann's articulation of the theme of "creation" is actually quite paltry. Apart from a few unsystematic, almost incidental, references, the book focuses on secularity, not creation. Indeed, by highlighting modern themes of human independence and the reliability of cosmic order, while downplaying any need for salvation, the book comes close to equating creation with secularity.[56] I believe that the lack of a clearly defined or articulated creation theology resulted in Brueggemann's (likely warranted) suspicions that there might be no substantial difference between the position expounded in *In Man We Trust* and the radical autonomy of Enlightenment secularism.[57]

▓ Creation Faith versus the Chaos-Cosmos Scheme

By 1978 Brueggemann had opted for a hermeneutical stance that privileged salvation and deliverance themes and was suspicious of creation. Brueggemann's early protest against precisely these themes, however, indicates that if creation theology can be used oppressively, so can a theology of salvation. Many fundamentalist and evangelical churches of this century,

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that Gottwald's proposal in *The Tribes of Yahweh* allows for a new articulation of the mighty acts of God in history that is not subject to the criticisms of confusing history (the facticity of events) with faith (theological claims about the events).

[54]Breuggemann, *In Man We Trust*, 125.

[55]Yet in *The Land*, published one year before *The Prophetic Imagination*, Brueggemann was still critical of the biblical theology movement for unnecessarily polarizing history and nature and for assuming that religious meaning is found only in "intrusive, disruptive discontinuities" (Brueggemann, *The Land*, 3, 51). Exploring the rich ambiguity of a broad range of biblical traditions about land, he spoke of a necessary dialectic of gift and demand, a dialectic of the Davidic and Mosaic traditions (p. 52). By the time he wrote *The Prophetic Imagination*, he had chosen decisively for one side of the dialectic.

[56]On the manner in which modern secular ideals are historically dependent on a biblical view of creation, see Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, 117–29.

[57]See Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust*, 71–73, regarding what he calls "Our Western Danger."

for example, know next to nothing of creation theology; on the contrary, their theology of sin and salvation is characterized by otherworldly piety, an authoritarian ethical legalism, and a dualism regarding sacred and secular as well as soul and body. My own experience of such churches suggests that this theology typically generates a quietistic acceptance of the status quo; the possibility of social transformation is eliminated.

Social legitimation thus does not require a creation theology. It does, however, need to be rooted in some sense of primal normativity to which one can appeal. This normativity, however, can be embedded in paradigmatic historical examples as varied as the Mosaic law, the New Testament epistles, the Constitution of the United States of America, or statements such as "when I was your age." Furthermore, these normative appeals are usually linked to some experience of deliverance or salvation. Thus, appeals to the Mosaic law may be combined with Exodus memory, the citing of the New Testament with a dramatic conversion experience, constitutional precedent with the American Revolution, and "when I was your age" with survival in the Depression years.

In each of these cases, nothing about the particular, historical memory prevents it from being remembered and interpreted nationalistically or self-righteously in order to justify a partisan cause or institution. Even appeals to a creation order—as in apartheid—can be linked to a historical memory—as in the Afrikaner Great Trek or the Boer Wars—and used for oppression. I therefore find no persuasive evidence for Brueggemann's claim that Israelite slave memory of both the Exodus and parallel experiences of deliverance guarantees justice or openness to social transformation.[58] Indeed, it might be argued that any historical memory of deliverance that does not universalize to the common humanity of all people on the basis of a creation theology is in danger of interpreting such memory as a symbol of privilege, resulting in a triumphalistic world view which externalizes the other as enemy or inferior—the *goyim*, the infidels, the "damn communists."

Pedro Trigo, in his book *Creation and History*, refers to such a triumphalistic, polarized world view as the chaos-cosmos setting. Trigo, a Spanish Jesuit living in Venezuela, has written what is to my knowledge the first substantial study of creation by a liberation theologian. In a profound and stimulating section entitled "From Chaos and Cosmos to Faith in Creation," a section that deserves considerably more detailed treatment than I am able to render here, Trigo applies the chaos-cosmos polarization of

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[58]To be sure, Brueggemann does concede ("A Shape for Old Testament Theology. I," 46) that even the cross, the paradigmatic Christian symbol of the embrace of pain and the source of radical newness, is often "used to justify a theology of imperial exploitation." This admission, however, is atypical.

ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies to various contemporary geopolitical and ideological splits.[59] What all versions of this split have in common is a fundamentally ambiguous judgment about the nature of the world. Cosmos, the good, exists only in eternal struggle against chaos. Evil is thus equiprimordial with good, and life consists in ideological and political warfare against one's enemies, who are demonized and stripped of their humanity. This is Trigo's assessment of the oppressive function of the Western world view from the perspective of the marginalized—those identified with chaos—in Latin America.

The only adequate answer to this false ideological polarization, says Trigo, is biblical faith in God as Creator. Genuine creation faith breaks the spell of the chaos-cosmos scheme, not because the struggle against evil is illusory—it is not—but because the goodness of the Almighty God who is with us is still more primordial. Thus Trigo claims that Ronald Reagan, although justly denounced for the evil he has perpetrated in various Latin American countries, is nevertheless "a person for whom one ought to pray" although presumably one should not vote for him; Reagan is even "a candidate for salvation."[60]

Trigo can make this claim, remarkable for a liberation theologian, because he distinguishes radically between creation as the conquest of chaos, a salvific event that demonizes and absolutizes two sides of a historical struggle, on the one hand, and, on the other, biblical creation faith, which relativizes both sides of this struggle *vis-à-vis* the sovereign and transcendent Creator. What Trigo means by biblical creation faith is thus remarkably similar to the theological category of *creatio ex nihilo,* a category toward which he seems to be straining, although he never actually uses the term.[61] His interest is not, however, dogmatic, but practical and political. Like Brueggemann, he is interested in the possibility of justice rooted in God's radical freedom, even in a tyrannically closed situation of oppression. In such a situation, "faith in creation is. . . protest, and hope, and principle of a transforming activity."[62]

It is intriguing that Brueggemann himself is constrained, when writing of the Exodus, to use terms such as "unprecedented," "unextrapolated," and "inexplicable," even claiming that "Israel in the thirteenth century is indeed ex nihilo."[63] He goes on to describe the Exodus as "the primal scream that

[59]Pedro Trigo, *Creation and History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis. 1991) part 2, 69–108.

[60]Ibid., 86–87.

[61]It is significant that the explicit articulation of creation out of nothing in 2 Macc 7:28 is arguably polemical against the Platonic version of the chaos-cosmos scheme.

[62]Trigo, *Creation and History*, 87.

[63]Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 15–16.

permits the beginning of history."[64] In Genesis 1, however, it is creation that permits the beginning of history. Is Brueggemann, like Trigo, straining towards *creatio ex nihilo* in his attempt to root liberation in the unfettered, transcendent God of the scriptures?

If so, he clearly never arrives there. On the contrary, Brueggemann's dyadic hermeneutical scheme is in danger of moving instead in the direction of one version of the chaos-cosmos scheme against which Trigo cautions. In this left-wing version—a version that tempts liberation theologians and base communities—the terms of the schema are simply reversed, resulting in the valorizing of the chaotic marginalized and the demonization of those who stand for false order.[65] I am certainly not claiming that Brueggemann's dyadic schema of "prophetic imagination" and "royal consciousness" is simply a version of the chaos-cosmos setting as Trigo describes it. That would be an oversimplistic reduction. Nevertheless, upon considering the major trajectory of his work, culminating especially in *Israel's Praise*, I sense that Brueggemann's genuinely insightful and liberating hermeneutic of suspicion may be on the way to hardening into a dogmatic orientation that ignores, if not suppresses, alternative readings.[66]

■ The Promise of a Triadic Hermeneutic

If Brueggemann took seriously his own triadic hermeneutic of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation from *The Message of the Psalms*, a hermeneutic informed by his conversation with John Goldingay and by the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, to whom he continually appeals, he might be able to reevaluate the significance of creation theology in the Bible. In a preliminary exploration of his triadic hermeneutic in a 1980 article entitled "Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function," Brueggemann noted that liberating psalms of new orientation could come to be read as jaded psalms of old orientation when distanced from the salvific experience that produced them. Goldingay responded by pointing out that the opposite could also occur: jaded psalms of orientation could likewise be joyously transformed in the perception of the reader by a fresh, liberating experience of God. Drawing upon Claus Westermann's notion of

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[64]Ibid., 21.

[65]Trigo, *Creation and History*, 79–80, 86.

[66]Brueggemann himself has recently admitted that his royal-prophetic schema may need revision. Since studies by Gottwald and others in the 1980s revealed that the discontinuity between early Israelite retribalization and the subsequent monarchy is not quite as radical as Brueggemann had portrayed it, Brueggemann has acknowledged (*Interpretation and Obedience*, ix–x) that this "might in time to come lead to a less absolute contrast in the articulation of my argument."

a "circle of praise" in the Babylonian psalter,[67] Goldingay proposed that underlying the various biblical psalms was a hermeneutical cycle or spiral of the life of faith. This cycle moved in and out of old and new orientation either through a satiated forgetting of God or through disorientation and a subsequent renewed experience of God's salvation.[68]

Brueggemann acknowledged the value of Goldingay's suggestion both in a brief response article and in *The Message of the Psalms*.[69] Goldingay and Brueggemann agreed that neither the theme or topic of a particular psalm—such as creation—nor its form-critical classification, nor even its original social function determined whether that psalm would in fact function oppressively or in a liberating manner. Rather, the hermeneutical stance of the reader was decisive for the way in which the psalm functioned.[70]

This insight, however, did not have to wait for Goldingay's suggestion. It was available to Brueggemann by virtue of his pervasive appeal to the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. Although Brueggemann typically appeals to Ricoeur's analysis of the evocative power and world-making function of poetic language,[71] in *The Message of the Psalms* he draws particularly upon Ricoeur's hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval in order to correlate psalms of disorientation and new orientation with the extremities of human expe-

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[67]See Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen; Atlanta: John Knox. 1981) esp. 36–42.

[68]Walter Brueggemann. "Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function," *JSOT* 17 (1980) 3–32: John Goldingay. "The Dynamic Cycle of Praise and Prayer in the Psalms," *JSOT* 20 (1981) 85–90.

[69]Walter Brueggemann, "Response to John Goldingay's 'The Dynamic Cycle of Praise and Prayer,'" *JSOT* 22 (1982) 141–42; and idem. *The Message of the Psalms*. 125. 179 n. 13. 197 n. 8, 201 n. 62.

[70]Goldingay. "Dynamic Cycle of Praise." 89; Brueggemann. "Response to John Goldingay," 141; idem, *The Message of the Psalms*. 125. H. Richard Niebuhr makes a similar point about the impact of the sociological context of the reader on biblical interpretation in "The Story of Our Life" (in Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 1989] 25). The fact that texts are always affected by readers means that Brueggemann's rhetorical question regarding whether a radical alternative to the imperial consciousness exists—an alternative that would "avoid domestication"—must be answered in the negative (Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*. 14). No position is immune from ideological distortion or oppressive uses. Anything may become an idol. I have, however, addressed the question of a possible anti-ideological dynamic built into the biblical canon (J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh. "Facing the Postmodern Scalpel: Can the Christian Faith Withstand Deconstruction?" in Dennis Okholm and Timothy Phillips. eds., *Christian Apologetics in a Postmodern World* (Downes Grove, IL: InterVarsity. 1995). See also Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be*, esp. chaps. 5 and 8.

[71]See, for example. Brueggemann. *Hopeful Imagination*. 25, 138 n. 34; idem. *To Pluck Up, To Tear Down*, 14 n. 22: idem, *Hope within History* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987) 73. 124 n. 5. 126 n. 26.

rience.[72] Nevertheless, Brueggemann dedicates only a single footnote to what is perhaps the most famous element of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, namely, Ricoeur's account of the multiple ways in which texts can be read once they are severed by historical distance from their original contexts.[73] This is strange, for Ricoeur's account of such multiple readings points decisively to the ongoing reworking of tradition within both scripture and contemporary interpreting communities, and Brueggemann is intensely aware of both.[74] Admittedly, a reader-response hermeneutic may harbor the potential for rationalizing shoddy scholarship, idiosyncratic readings, and a relativistic ethic if applied incautiously to scripture. The potential for a relativistic ethic may in particular explain Brueggemann's avoidance of this aspect of Ricoeur's hermeneutics.[75] Nevertheless, its importance here is in corroborating Brueggemann's triadic hermeneutic of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation as a heuristic schema for correlating biblical texts with the ongoing experience of the interpreting community. What both Ricoeur's hermeneutics and the discussion with Goldingay clearly indicate is that whether or not creation originally functioned to legitimate the status quo in ancient Israel, it is not necessary that it fulfill this function.[76] On the contrary, with a new set of readers, creation may function in a revolutionary and liberating manner.

▓ Concluding Unscientific Postscript

Although the burden of this paper has been a theological assessment of Brueggemann's largely negative judgment on creation theology, it is per-

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[72]Although Brueggemann cites Ricoeur in *The Message of the Psalms* (p. 180 n. 17; see also pp. 192 n. 87 and 195 n. 124), his dependence on Ricoeur in "Psalms and the Life of Faith" is evident on nearly every page and is helpfully summarized (pp. 19–20 and 23 n. 19).

[73]Brueggemann, "Psalms and the Life of Faith," 25 n. 35, where he cites Paul Ricoeur, *Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974) 63–73. The footnote occurs in the context of discussing the multiple interpretations possible for terms such as "the pit" and "the enemy" in lament psalms (Brueggemann, "Psalms and the Life of Faith," 8).

[74]Awareness of the reworking of tradition within scripture pervades even Brueggemann's 1968 book *Tradition for Crisis: A Study in Hosea.*

[75]An example of overly subjectivistic interpretation may be found in Ricoeur's own reading of the *imago dei* in Gen 1:26–27 in terms of Greek Orthodox divinization and modern evolutionary categories. See Paul Ricoeur, "The Image of God and the Epic of Man," in idem, *History and Truth* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965) 110–28.

[76]Brueggemann himself did not come to this conclusion in *The Message of the Psalms.* Indeed, he stated (*The Message of the Psalms*, 26, 158) both that all psalms of orientation are at bottom expressions of creation faith and that, in general, the more a psalm focuses on creation, the more likely it is to be a song of old orientation. That there may well have been a shift in emphasis even between "Psalms and the Life of Faith" (published in 1980) and the

haps telling that I was troubled initially because his judgment simply did not fit my experience. As a young theological student in Kingston, Jamaica, in the mid-1970s, I was grappling with issues of liberation, postcolonialism and the contextualization of the gospel. Along with a number of my fellow Caribbean students, I found creation to be an explosive category, profoundly liberating from otherworldly pietism and empowering for redemptive activity in a world that belongs to God. This paper thus represents the raising of a voice in pain as a disorienting protest against Brueggemann's assertions about the social function of creation theology. Given his own hermeneutics, he must take this protest seriously.

In conclusion, then, I call upon Brueggemann to take seriously my claim that his position on creation theology, although well ordered, does not do justice to the realities of experience. This claim is admittedly a minor correction to a powerful and fresh biblical hermeneutic which I largely appreciate.[77] Nevertheless, perhaps the time is now ripe for Brueggemann to begin developing, in line with his insightful, although atypical, Genesis commentary, a biblically rooted, coherently articulated theology of creation that knows the darkness and yet hopes, beyond suspicion, in the Creator's gracious and just purposes for this world.[78]

1984 book, *The Message of the Psalms*, is indicated by the systematic replacement of the earlier term "reorientation" with the later "new orientation"; this may testify to Brueggemann's growing sense of the radical discontinuity between mere return to an old orientation and genuine newness.

[77]Let me emphasize that my criticisms occur in the context of deep appreciation for Brueggemann's work. I believe Emil Brunner's comments (*Natural Theology*, 59) about Karl Barth are, with appropriate changes, applicable here: "I do not wish to blame [Walter Brueggemann] for neglecting and discrediting creation theology. God uses the genius of one-sidedness. . . . It may be [Brueggemann's] special mission to serve at this point as a counter-weight to dangerous abberations. . . . But the Church must not be thrown from one extreme to the other. In the long run the Church can bear the rejection of creation theology as little as its misuse. It is the task of our theological generation to find the way back to a true [creation theology]." I have replaced Brunner's references to "natural theology" or "theologia naturalis" with "creation theology," which is what he actually meant, as is widely recognized.

[78]A significant move towards this articulation may be found in Brueggemann's more recent book, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); see chap. 2, esp. 29–39, for his positive construal of creation as gift.