

# The wisdom of creation

## A Jewish perspective

*Carol K. Ingall*

### *Wisdom as Torah*

ACCORDING TO JEWISH LEGEND, even before the creation of the heaven and the earth, Torah was created. Written with black fire on white fire, lying in the lap of God, Torah served as God's blueprint for the task of bringing order out of chaos. This view is the analogue of the Christian view encapsulated by my friend and colleague, Mary Boys. What Christian theologians said about Jesus, the rabbis said about Torah. Torah was God's partner in creation. The rabbis came to this understanding through an ingenious bit of exegesis. Noting that the first word of the creation account is *B'reishit*, they recalled that *reishit* is used in Proverbs as a synonym for Torah. (See Proverbs 8:22, in which Wisdom reminds human beings that 'The Lord acquired me at the beginning (*reishit*) of His way, before His works of old'.) Thus, a midrashic interpretation of Genesis 1:1 is: 'With (or for) Torah, God created the heavens and the earth'. Implicit in this hermeneutical interpretation of the creation saga is the theological message to God's creatures: You too need to use Torah as your guide in this world I have created.

What lessons did the rabbis tease out of the retelling of the creation narrative? How can they inform those of us deeply concerned about the wanton destruction of our resources, students of Torah who are fearful of a return to *tohu va'vohu*, an earth that is 'wild and waste'?<sup>1</sup> What are the essentials of an ecological theology shaped by Torah and its interpreters?

### *Creation begins with justice and mercy*

The differing names for God the Creator (*Elohim* in Genesis 1 and *Adonai Elohim* in Genesis 2)<sup>2</sup> presented the midrashists with a theological opportunity. Noting that *Elohim* is usually associated with the quality of God's justice while *Adonai* (YHWH) is associated with God's mercy, they mused about the nomenclature of *Adonai Elohim*:

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He [God] made several worlds before ours, but He destroyed them all, because He was pleased with none until He created ours. But even this last world would have had no permanence, if God had executed His original plan of ruling it according to the principle of strict justice. It was only when He saw that justice by itself would undermine the world that He associated justice with mercy, and made them to rule jointly.<sup>3</sup>

An ecological reading of this text teaches us that slavish dedication to universal ecological principles may ultimately do more harm to the ecosystem than good. Many Americans, particularly those who live in the Pacific Northwest, can recall the recent Northern spotted owl vs jobs controversy. Would a rare species of avian life be nurtured at the cost of thousands losing their livelihood? The midrash cited above reminds us that the strict justice of preserving an endangered species must always be viewed within the context of a web of interconnectedness: justice for the owl, mercy for those families who might be deprived of a livelihood. The literary genius of the creation narrative becomes clear when we note that the story ends as it begins, with that exquisite tempering of justice and mercy. Adam and Eve assuredly merit the consequences of strict justice for disobeying God's command and eating of the tree of knowledge. They deserve the severity of their sentence: banishment from Eden. And yet, before they are to leave, God shows them an extraordinary act of *hesed* (mercy): sewing them garments and clothing them (Gen 3:21). The lesson for humankind is clear: the world which is entrusted to them must be maintained with a wisdom based on justice and mercy.

### ***Speciesism and stewardship***

Genesis 1:26 resonates with ecological and theological implications. What does it mean for human beings to 'have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the heavens, animals, all the earth, and all crawling things that crawl about upon the earth'? Rashi notes that the verb that is used (*v'yirdu*) can mean descend as well as rule. He comments: 'If he is worthy, [Man] dominates over the beasts and cattle; if he is not worthy, he will sink lower than them, and the beasts will rule over him.' What determines worthiness? Imitating God's relationship to the universe, an ethical attentiveness. The Hasidic teacher, Simhah Bunam of Pzhysha, taught:

This is how we must interpret the first words in the Scriptures: 'In the beginning (*B'reishit*) of God's creation of the heaven and the earth . . .'

For even now, the world is still in a state of creation. When a craftsman makes a tool and it is finished, it does not require him any longer. Not so with the world! Day after day, instant after instant, the world requires the renewal of the powers of the primordial word through which it was created, and if the power of these powers were withdrawn from it for a single moment, it would lapse into *tohu bohu*.<sup>4</sup>

My reading of Reb Simhah's teaching is that human beings must follow God's example and renew the work of creation on a daily basis. The world is not to be exploited, but to be maintained. You may recall it was Simhah Bunam who taught the far more famous dictum:

Everyone must have two pockets, so that he can reach into the one or the other, according to his needs. In his right pocket are to be the words: 'For my sake was the world created', and in his left: 'I am earth and ashes'.<sup>5</sup>

The story of the two pockets is the Zaddik of Pzyhsha's musing on the ambivalent status of human beings and their part in God's creation – ascending (*rdh*) or descending (*yrd*). This literary gem is rooted in the creation narrative, with its two accounts of creation: one in which God creates human beings last (Gen 1:26–27) and one in which God creates human beings first (Gen 2:7). Commenting on Psalm 139:5, 'Both last and first You made me', the rabbis taught: 'When a man is worthy, he is told: "You preceded the ministering angels". But if he is not, he is told: "The fly preceded you; the gnat preceded you; this earthworm preceded you in the work of creation"'.<sup>6</sup>

Adam's first task was not to rule, but to tend the Garden of Eden: 'YHWH, God, took the human and set him in the garden of Eden to work it and to watch it (*u-l'shamrah*)' (Gen 2:15). The Spanish commentator Ibn Ezra comments that Adam was entrusted with the responsibility of watering the garden and guarding it from wild beasts. Despite the temptation to read Genesis 1:26 as an invitation to exploit the earth, reading this verse through the prism of rabbinic interpretation suggests a very different message. Our task is to tend the earth. If we ignore those wild beasts who would despoil the planet, we will sink (*v'yirdu*) to their level.

### ***Living with limitations***

The view of Torah is that from the very beginning, human beings were meant to live with restrictions.

YHWH, God, commanded concerning the human, saying: ‘From every (other) tree of the garden you may eat, yes, eat, but from the Tree of the Knowing of Good and Evil – you are not to eat from it, for on the day that you eat from it, you must die, yes, die’. (Gen 2:16–17)

Wisdom lies in accepting restraint. A famous rabbinic homily on the giving of the Torah (Exod 32:16) plays with the interrelationship of liberty and law. ‘The words were incised, *harut*, on the tablets. One should read *herut*, meaning freedom. The tablets’ words spelled freedom for Israel if it would obey them.’<sup>7</sup> The notion of nineteenth-century Americans travelling across the Great Plains, shooting buffalo from the windows of their passenger trains, is a horrific reminder of the blurring of liberty and licence. Like *kashrut*, a classically Jewish attitude towards ecology is an ethical one, rooted in self-control.

### *The Sabbath as an ecological construct*

The bridge between the two creation stories is Genesis 2:1–3, the account of the first Sabbath. Resting from one’s labour is as integral to world-building as the act of labouring itself. In commenting on these verses, Rashi depicts a Creator who seems to step back to admire his creation. Rashi imagines God pondering, ‘What did the world lack? Rest!’ The great eleventh-century exegete continues: ‘Sabbath came – Rest came; and the work was thus finished and completed’. God rests; and so God’s creatures must follow suit: human beings and their animals. Even the land must rest. Before the Israelites enter Canaan, God warns them:

When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land is to cease, a Sabbath-ceasing to YHWH. For six years you are to sow your field, for six years you are to prune your vineyard, then you are to gather in the produce, but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of Sabbath-ceasing for the land, a Sabbath to YHWH . . . (Lev 25:2–4)

As Fox points out, land, the most precious commodity in the ancient Near East, is not the property of human beings. It belongs to God, and thus is holy.<sup>8</sup> Human beings receive the gift of the Sabbath, sacred time set aside for re-creation (note: re-creation, not recreation). The land shares in this bounty as well; it too is afforded time for re-creation. The practical wisdom of letting the land lie fallow is demanded by that source of all Wisdom, Torah. The rabbis tell a poignant story in which Torah worries about her future:

The Torah said: ‘Master of the universe, when Israel enter the Land, what will happen to me? Every man in Israel will proceed to sow and plant his field – and I, what will happen to me?’ God replied: ‘I have a mate which I will provide for you – the Sabbath, when Israel abstain from work, enter the synagogues and houses of study, and occupy themselves with Torah’.<sup>9</sup>

This rabbinic interpretation links the Sabbath eternally with Wisdom. Every seven years, the land will have its Sabbath. Every week, Jews can experience their Sabbath, not only by resting, but by studying Torah. In creating a Jewish approach to ecology, it was to Torah that the rabbis turned. The rabbinic value-concept which has shaped contemporary Jewish theology and pedagogy on ecology is *bal tashhit* (be not destructive). Its locus in Torah is Deuteronomy 20:19-20, the passages in which the Israelites are forbidden to cut down the fruit trees surrounding the towns of their enemies.

When you besiege a town for many days, waging-war against it, to seize it: you are not to bring-ruin on its trees, by swinging-away (with) an ax against them, for from them you eat, them you are not to cut-down – for are the trees of the field human beings, (able) to come against you in a siege? Only those trees of which you know that they are not trees for eating, them you may bring-to-ruin and cut-down, that you may build siege-works against the town that is making war against you, until its downfall.

Note that the prohibition is not framed in ethical terms, but tactical ones. You may need that fruit to sustain you, while you are trying to conquer your enemy. However, you can raze any other kind of tree for use in defending yourself. The verse is not a prohibition against wanton destruction. In its context, it offers a soldier’s pragmatic wisdom: in one’s rage, do not bite the hand that feeds. Note that in Deuteronomy 20:20, the Torah shows no such concern for trees other than fruit trees. The rabbis reinterpreted Deuteronomy 20:19, adding an ethical gloss. They created the legal dictum of *bal tashhit*, the prohibition of squandering a resource that might prove useful to others. Although *bal tashhit* has engendered a vast array of Jewish curricula on ecology and is widely taught as a value-concept in Jewish schools, it hardly wields the power of Genesis in shaping a moral imagination. A reading of the creation narrative offers a deeper, more ethically nuanced perspective of Jewish attitudes towards ecology, one which appeals on many levels, to the heart as well as to the head.

### ***A lesson for inter-religious dialogue***

One of the most significant and wisest lessons from the creation narrative is a reminder of our common humanity and subtle differences. It is this ambiguous lesson that serves as the springboard for discussion with others of different faith communities. This ambiguity is both a joy and a challenge. It is primarily our similarities that propel the story of the creation of Adam. The rabbis of the Mishnah call our attention to the ethical message of a single set of progenitors for humankind: 'Man was created single for the sake of peace among men, so that no one might say to his fellow: "My father was greater than yours"'.<sup>10</sup> The Aggadah, the corpus of Jewish folklore, envisions one set of progenitors for us all, fashioned to represent the multiple dimensions of Otherness. According to legend, God wanted to remind human beings of their kinship with those who are different from them ethnically and racially. To do so, God took two kinds of dust to fashion Adam: dust from the four corners of the earth and dust of various colours. This is a wonderful starting place for lessons of tolerance, for moral messages underscoring our universality. Yet there is more to the story, a message usually omitted in the telling. God also mixed that variegated dust with some from the sacred centre, Jerusalem, from the very spot where the Holy of Holies would stand.<sup>11</sup> The lesson to me is that we are created with both universalist and particularist qualities; ambiguity is hardwired into our very being, as it was in Adam's. Like my good friend, Mary Boys, I too am wary of religious education which has been based on the disparagement of the other. Teaching texts on Jewish chosenness is troubling for me, for chosenness can result in arrogance. And yet, I cannot excise those texts. I have to reinterpret them, in the light of the Wisdom of creation. The midrash on the creation of Adam suggests a direction. To dialogue with the religious other does not require a surrender of the self, but rather a heightened awareness of one's differences while celebrating what we share: dust of many colours, dust from the four corners of the earth, and dust from that special place which speaks to the uniqueness of our religious expression.

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*Jewish perspective on moral education* (New York: Melton Research Center, in press).

## NOTES

1 Everett Fox, *The five books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1995). All citations from Genesis follow Fox's translation.

2 Elohim and YHWH are the two names for God which appear in the creation story. Traditional Jews avoid pronouncing the tetragrammaton, 'the ineffable name', and refer to YHWH as Adonai, or, in yet another circumlocution, as HaShem (the name).

3 Louis Ginzberg, *The legends of the Jews*, vol 1 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1942), p 4.

4 Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: later masters* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p 259.

5 *Ibid.*, pp 249–250.

6 Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky (eds), *The book of legends (Sefer ha-Aggadah)*, trans William G. Braude (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), p 15.

7 *The Torah: a modern commentary*, Commentaries by Gunther Plaut (New York: UAHC, 1981), p 652.

8 Fox, p 626.

9 *Ibid.*, p 488.

10 Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5.

11 Rashi on Genesis 2:7; see also Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol 1, p 55.

# The wisdom of creation

## A Christian perspective

Mary C. Boys

**I** BELIEVE IN ONE GOD, THE FATHER, THE ALMIGHTY, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen.' Christians in the East and West have been reciting this first article of the Ecumenical Creed (popularly known as the Nicene Creed) since the Council of Constantinople promulgated it in 381. Belief in God as creator of all things living and non-living lies at the heart of Christian faith – deeply lodged, but little noticed. Our times necessitate renewed attention to its meaning, a task that reveals the profundity of Israel's testimony to the God who creates and calls for Jews and Christians today to probe the ethical implications of that testimony.

When the fourth-century Church professed belief in one God as the maker of heaven and earth, its concern was fundamentally pastoral: to articulate a vision of God's goodness in creating as a counterpoint to the dualism of Gnostic views. Gnostic perspectives on creation generally rested on the distinction between the material universe fashioned by the demiurge – an inferior deity – and the spiritual universe created by the Supreme Being. The material universe originated through mischance or accident at some pre-cosmic point. Matter was evil, beyond redemption; spirit, in contrast, was good. Only a spiritual élite among humankind could experience reunion with the Supreme Deity by means of secret knowledge (*gnosis*). Christ had come as an agent of this Supreme God, revealing the true knowledge that offered the few escape from the realm of matter and of the flesh.<sup>1</sup> In opposing Gnostic views of creation, the early Church affirmed what it had learned from the Jewish tradition: all that the one God created is good. Though under the later influence of Neoplatonism, the Church tended to think of matter as inferior, it nonetheless countered the Gnostic denigration of the material universe.

Gnosticism is now largely a distant memory, but an even more dangerous enemy of the goodness of creation confronts the Church on the brink of the new millennium: the environmental crisis. Contemporary ecological practice would be much enhanced by



sustained attention to Israel's legacy of creation faith and to the unfolding of wisdom imagery in the Christian tradition.

### *Israel's creation faith*

When we think of God creating, we naturally think of Genesis. The magnificent cadences of the Priestly writer's account (1:1—2:4a, c. 500 BCE) attesting to the orderliness of creation must have sustained Israel during the insecurity and chaos of exile. Created in God's image, humankind is given dominion over the earth's creatures (1:28), and instructed to till and keep Eden's garden (2:15) – a responsibility that weighs heavily on us today.<sup>2</sup> The skilful narrative of the Yahwist (2:4b—3:21, c. 961–922 BCE) gives an image of God as a potter, crafting the human 'of dust from the soil', making *adam* a living being by blowing the breath of life into its nostrils.

The two accounts of creation in Genesis, however, hardly exhaust testimony to God's creative activity. References abound through the First Testament, most notably in Second Isaiah, the Psalms and Proverbs. Israel draws upon the mythological language of the ancient Near East while limning a distinctive portrait of the one true God whose 'work in creation is never an act of raw, sovereign power, but is an act saturated with covenantal, ethical intentionality'.<sup>3</sup>

In particular, the eloquent poetry of Isaiah during the sixth-century struggle vis-à-vis Babylonian military power profoundly articulates Israel's creation faith. Babylon's gods – the ultimate guarantors of the military – lack the authority and power of YHWH (see Isai 40:12–13; 41:1–5, 21–29; 43:8–13; see also Jer 10:1–6). It is YHWH, maker of the earth and its creatures, who has anointed the Persian king Cyrus to free the exiles (Isai 45:12). It is YHWH, 'the Creator of the ends of the earth who does not faint or grow weary', who will renew fragile and powerless Israel (Isai 40:28–31). YHWH, the Holy One, is the true creator who does not abandon creation. So Israel should not fear:

Thus says the LORD who made you,  
 who formed you in the womb and will help you:  
 Do not fear, O Jacob my servant,  
 Jeshurun whom I have chosen.  
 For I will pour water on the thirsty land,  
 and streams on the dry ground;  
 I will pour my spirit upon your descendants,  
 and my blessing on your offspring.

(Isai 44:2–3)

Happy indeed are ‘those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, who keeps faith for ever’ (Ps 146:5–6). Israel’s God, however, does not merely create. God governs creation. The Holy One, in whom mercy and justice are correlates, as my colleague and friend Carol Ingall shows in her companion essay,<sup>4</sup>

... executes justice for the oppressed;  
 who gives food to the hungry.  
 The LORD sets the prisoners free;  
 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.  
 The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;  
 the LORD loves the righteous.  
 The LORD watches over the strangers;  
 he upholds the orphan and the widow,  
 but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.  
 (Ps 146:7–9)

### *Creation and Wisdom*

In a word, ‘those who mock the poor insult their Maker’ (Prov 17:5). Such proverbial admonitions take on new force when situated within the literature personifying Wisdom, whom God fashioned at the beginning – ‘ages ago’ – and who was God’s daily delight throughout the rest of creation. Wisdom rejoices in God’s inhabited world, and takes delight in the human race (Prov 8:22–31). She builds a house and invites her hearers to a great banquet:

‘Come, eat of my bread  
 and drink of the wine I have mixed.  
 Lay aside immaturity; and live,  
 and walk in the way of insight.’  
 (Prov 9:5–6; see also Sir 24:19–21)

Wisdom makes her dwelling in Israel, setting up her tent in Jerusalem (Sir 24:8–11). Her memory is sweeter than honey; those who eat and drink of her will hunger and thirst for more. Ben Sirach<sup>5</sup> identifies Wisdom with *Torah*:

All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God,  
 the law that Moses commanded us  
 as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob.

It overflows, like the Pishon, with wisdom,  
 and like the Tigris at the time of the first fruits.  
 It runs over, like the Euphrates, with understanding,  
 and like the Jordan at harvest time.  
 It pours forth instruction like the Nile,  
 like the Gihon at the time of vintage.

(Sirach 24:23–27)

Thus, Sirach instructs Israel to ‘put your neck under her yoke, and let your souls receive instruction’ (Sir 51:26). Wisdom’s close identification with creation – ‘wisdom theology is creation theology’<sup>6</sup> – reflects the conviction that there is divine intelligence at work in the universe. The patterns of everyday life provide a lens on God’s creative and governing powers.

### *Wisdom in the early Church*

The personification of Wisdom as the divine companion of God offered fluid imagery on which the early Church drew in reflecting on Jesus. What Judaism had said about Wisdom, early Christian writers voiced about Jesus.<sup>7</sup> Wisdom language is especially evident in a hymn in Colossians, which alludes to Proverbs 8:22, Sirach 24:9, Proverbs 3:19 and Wisdom 8:4, 6:

He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (1: 15–17)<sup>8</sup>

Just as Wisdom had made her home among human beings, so too had Jesus ‘pitched his tent among us’ (see John 1:14). Wisdom language offered a resource for saying that ‘in Jesus is embodied and therefore revealed the very wisdom of the very God. One encounters God in Jesus by encountering the consummation of God’s wise economy for the world which has been revealed in him.’<sup>9</sup>

The early Church also found the imagery of wisdom evocative of the Spirit. Texts in the Wisdom of Solomon provided an especially fertile source.<sup>10</sup> ‘Wisdom is a kindly spirit . . . the spirit of the Lord has filled the world’ (Wis 1:6–7).

There is in her [Wisdom] a spirit that is intelligent, holy,  
 unique, manifold, subtle,  
 mobile, clear, unpolluted,  
 distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen,  
 irresistible, beneficent, humane,  
 steadfast, sure, free from anxiety,  
 all-powerful, overseeing all,  
 and penetrating through all spirits  
 that are intelligent, pure, and altogether subtle.

(Wis 7:22–23)

Wisdom's spirit is 'more mobile than any motion', 'a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God and an image of his goodness' (Wis 7:24, 26). Wisdom and the spirit are intertwined: 'Who has learned your counsel, unless you have given wisdom and sent your holy spirit from on high?' (Wis 9:17). In the Christian tradition, the Spirit is the teacher and vivifier, as the Ecumenical Creed affirms: 'We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life'.

Clearly, the poetry of the wisdom tradition, integrally connected to creation, has shaped the Christian imagination in professing its belief in the one God in trinitarian terms. Elizabeth Johnson speaks of 'Holy Wisdom's livingness in three distinct movements, shapes, manners of subsistence, hypostases, modes of being, persons'. God is Spirit-Wisdom, the mobile, pure, people-loving Spirit pervading every wretched corner of the cosmos, wailing at the waste, and releasing power that enables fresh starts. God is God again as Jesus Christ, Wisdom's child and prophet, Wisdom pitching her tent in the flesh of humanity to teach the paths of justice. God is God again as unimaginable abyss of livingness, Holy Wisdom unknown and unknowable. She is the matrix of all that exists, mother and fashioner of all things, who herself dwells in light inaccessible.<sup>11</sup>

### *Ecological theology*

For Christians, such language about God opens new possibilities for ecological theology. Patriarchal theological systems largely obscured Wisdom language, with its extensive female symbolism. Its recent reclamation by feminist theologians invites renewed attentiveness to our place in the cosmos. In an intensification of the early Church's opposition to the Gnostic denigration of matter, ecofeminists emphasize the significance of embodiment as the basis of our commonality with all things. Everything – living and non-living – is the product of

the same primal explosion and evolutionary history. 'We are distant cousins to the stars and near relations to the oceans, plants, and all other living creatures on our planet.'<sup>12</sup> In the lovely line of physicist-priest John Polkinghorne, 'We are all made of the ashes of dead stars'.<sup>13</sup>

Ecological theology also involves enlarging our understanding of salvation by linking it more closely with creation. As Carol Ingall points out, the rabbis read the command in Genesis 1:26 to have dominion over all things as an imperative to follow God's example and renew the work of creation each day. In Christian tradition, the doctrine of creation is rooted in a sense of radical contingency: all things depend on God, the transcendent source and ground of being. God's creative power is the force underlying the wholeness and healing that is salvation. Moreover, ecologists help us to see more clearly that the world is a finite contingent system that we must nurture, lest we destroy. God's creative power is essential:

Given the direction the human race seems to be headed ecologically, there is a strong sense today that the human cooperation needed to save the planet, and at the same time provide a just distribution of resources, will not be achieved without divine help. Thus theologians are calling for a theology of salvation that doubles back on physical creation to make it the object of salvation.<sup>14</sup>

The language of wisdom contributes to an understanding of salvation that transcends Christian categories. The particularity of God's saving action in Jesus Christ is a true story with universal relevance for all humankind, but it is not the only story of God's saving power. Other traditions have reflections of the same holy Wisdom that Christians find in Jesus. Divine wisdom will have something to say from within other religious traditions that is not already said in Christianity.<sup>15</sup> Roger Haight argues:

I believe that people who fail to acknowledge the salvific truth of other religions may implicitly be operating with a conception of God who is distant from creation. Jesus testifies to the immanence of God. When the world's religions allow transcendence to press in upon them and, in turn, open human beings up to self-transcendence, they reflect and mediate the immanent God as Spirit whom Christians know through Jesus. But this God is also transcendent. Knowing this God transpires in an encounter with mystery. Neither Jesus nor Christianity mediates any complete possession of God. Without a sense of God's transcendent mystery, without the healthy agnostic sense of what we do not

know of God, one will not expect to learn more of God from what has been communicated to us human beings through other revelations and religions.<sup>16</sup>

While each religious tradition approaches Divine Wisdom from a distinctive vantage point, scientists now provide what Sallie McFague terms the ‘common creation story’. She draws upon Polkinghorne’s summary:

In the beginning was the big bang. As matter expanded from that initial singularity it cooled. After about three minutes the world was no longer hot enough to sustain universal nuclear interactions. At that moment its gross nuclear structure got fixed at its present proportion of three quarters hydrogen and one quarter helium. Expansion and further cooling continued. Eventually gravity condensed matter into the first generation of galaxies and stars. In the interiors of these first stars nuclear cookery started up again and produced heavy elements like carbon and iron, essential for life, which were scarcely present in the early stages of the universe’s history. Some of these first generation stars and planets condensed in their turn; on at least one of them there were now conditions of chemical composition and temperature and radiation permitting, through the interplay of chance and necessity, the coming into being of replicating molecules and life. Thus evolution began on the planet Earth. Eventually it led to you and me.<sup>17</sup>

This account of creation, which varies in particulars and includes many unknowns, might serve as a vital stimulus for changing how we understand ourselves. Everything has a common origin and is related. We are interrelated with and dependent upon everything else in the universe. Woven into our lives, Johnson says, is the ‘very fire from the stars and the genes from the sea creatures, and everyone, utterly everyone, is kin in the radiant tapestry of being’.<sup>18</sup>

Christians in the past two millennia have not typically embodied a sense of kinship in this tapestry of being. Too often we have proclaimed our faith in ways that disparaged other people’s – particularly Jews’ – and paid too little attention to the earth. Today, inspired by the common creation story, and the wisdom tradition we received from Judaism, it is time to rekindle our faith in the one God, Creator of heaven and earth, so that we might approach all creation with awe and accountability.

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## NOTES

1 See Frances Young, *The making of the creeds* (London: SCM, 1991), pp 1-32. Also, Berard L. Marthaler, *The creed* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1987), pp 27-60.

2 See Claus Westermann, *Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), who argues that we are to understand 'till and keep' as 'preserve' and 'enhance'.

3 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: testimony, dispute, advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), p 158.

4 See also Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol 2 (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971), p 63.

5 Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus) is not included in the Jewish and Protestant canons.

6 Walter Zimmerli, 'The place and the limit of wisdom in the framework of Old Testament theology' in J. L. Crenshaw (ed), *Studies in ancient Israelite wisdom* (New York: KTAV, 1976), p 316.

7 See Elizabeth A. Johnson, 'Jesus, the wisdom of God: a biblical basis for non-androcentric Christology', *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 61 (1985), p 261.

8 For more extensive references and explanation of texts underlying a wisdom Christology, see Denis Edwards, *Jesus the wisdom of God: an ecological theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), pp 33-68.

9 Roger Haight, *Jesus symbol of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), p 172.

10 Neither is the Wisdom of Solomon found in the Jewish and Protestant canons.

11 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She who is: the mystery of God in feminist theological discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), pp 215, 213-214.

12 Sallie McFague, *The body of God: an ecological theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), pp 48, 104.

13 John Polkinghorne, *One world: the interaction of science and theology* (London: SPCK, 1986), p 56.

14 Haight, *Jesus symbol of God*, p 353. See also John T. Pawlikowski, 'Co-Creators with a compelling God', *Ecumenism* 134 (June 1999), pp 8-11, who reminds us that the 'paradigm of an all-powerful God who will intervene to halt human and creational destruction is dead . . . [Thus] we must reintroduce into human consciousness . . . a deep sense of . . . a "compelling God" ' (p 11).

15 See Edwards, *Jesus the wisdom of God*, p 66.

16 Haight, *Jesus symbol of God*, p 417.

17 Polkinghorne, *One world: the interaction of science and theology*, p 56.

18 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, earth, and Creator Spirit* (New York: Paulist, 1993), p 39.

# The wisdom of creation

## A joint postscript

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OUR RESEARCH INTO THE THEOLOGICAL RESOURCES each of our traditions brings to the ecological crisis and our conversations over early drafts of our essays have deepened our appreciation for the resources Jews and Christians might bring to deliberations about the environment. What stands out with particular force is the ethical dimension. Whether in the narratives of the Genesis creation stories or the poetry of Isaiah, Israel views creation as ordered by its covenant with God. God is the creator of all things, but the human beings fashioned in the image of the divine share responsibility for the well-being of creation. God entrusts humankind with care for the planet and its creatures, a care that is to extend to the stranger, the widow and the orphan.

The motif of wisdom apparent in both of our essays offers a significant orientation for contemporary Jews and Christians. The deep connection between creation and wisdom indicates the importance of cultivating an attitude of awe before all that is, and serves as a significant counterpoint to contemporary infatuation with technology. The early Church's evocation of wisdom imagery in portraying Jesus and the Spirit suggests the supple nature of this imagery, and its appropriateness, when drawn upon in prayer and hymnody, in forming Christians committed to the environment.

In the United States, much of the current discussion about creation centres on the continuing debate between creationists and evolutionists. For example, during the time we drafted our essays, the State of Kansas Board of Education voted to delete virtually any mention of evolution from its recommended science curriculum and standardized texts (although local school boards may establish their own guidelines). The irony is that the creationist preoccupation with censoring evolutionary theory so dominates the agenda that the public has little awareness of the profound theology underlying Jewish and Christian understandings of the covenantal character of creation and of the powerful potential of the common creation story.



It is a further irony that fundamentalists have staked the claim to being 'creationists'. The term more appropriately belongs to those who recognize the profoundly religious import of our kinship with all creation. If 'we are all made of the ashes of dead stars', as John Polkinghorne has so eloquently phrased it, then Jews and Christians are related not only to one another as brothers and sisters, but also to all of creation.