

A NEW CREATION

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MATTHEW FOX, the leading North American proponent of creation-centred spirituality, maintains that 'Western spirituality has two basic traditions—that which starts with the experience of sin and develops a fall/redemption spiritual motif; and that which starts with the experience of life as a blessing and develops a creation-centered spirituality'.¹ For Fox and others concerned to recapture a spirituality centred in the blessings of creation, redemption-centred spirituality has held sway for far too long. As a result, Western Christianity has become preoccupied with personal human sinfulness instead of attending to the grace of God.² Rather than embracing God's gift to us and creatively fashioning a world that reflects that gift, we have busied ourselves with avoiding sin, desperately calling upon God to pluck us out of what we have come to see as a world of temptation and despair.

The field of biblical studies over the past decades substantiates the claim that redemption spirituality has superseded creation spirituality. For such classical biblical scholars as Gerhard von Rad, creation motifs in scripture play an important role, but always remain in a secondary position to salvation motifs. According to von Rad, it is 'belief in redemption which dominates the whole of the Old Testament'.³ The motif of creation merely supplements the primary theme.

Seen through the lens of redemption spirituality, scripture presents the human orientation towards God, the path of the spiritual life, as one in which God must constantly intervene in history. God breaks in to free an imprisoned people, redirect a wayward nation, rescue the poor and oppressed, save the sinner. Helen A. Kenik notes that in this salvation spirituality, '*God is the actor*'.⁴

But from the perspective of creation spirituality, says Kenik, '*Human beings are the actors*' in the bible.⁵ True, scripture portrays God as the creative source of life and sustenance, but in the biblical corpus God hands to human beings responsibility for maintaining the created order, preserving life, fashioning justice, fostering love and offering mercy. God nourishes, supports and empowers humans in these creative efforts.

Indeed, scripture offers many expressions of a spirituality which does not portray God as primarily a rescuer. From beginning to end—in the opening verses of Genesis 1, in the refrains of songs such as Psalm 104, in Paul's new-creation motif in Second Corinthians 5, in the new heaven/new earth theme of Revelation 21-22—creation-centred spirituality permeates the bible. As a survey of these and other creation-focused passages would demonstrate, creation spirituality takes many forms, shaped by the concerns, theologies and experiences of the assorted faith communities from which the various writings have sprung.

One of the most vivid expressions of creation-centred spirituality is found in Second Isaiah. Because it draws many of the creation themes from other biblical writings into one poetic argument, Isaiah 40-55 offers a revealing look at the biblical roots of creation spirituality. For example, Second Isaiah reflects the creation spirituality of Genesis as well as that of the Psalms. In addition, as we shall see, Second Isaiah points toward the creation-centred spirituality that arises in the New Testament.

Redemption and creation in Second Isaiah

The message that forms Second Isaiah was probably proclaimed between 540 and 530, B.C.E. The Judahites, remnants of the southern realm of Israel, had grown rather accustomed to their exile in Babylon. They had settled in, and after a time they had prospered. But now the political landscape was changing. The Persian empire, led by Cyrus, was rising to replace the Babylonians. Cyrus had introduced a new policy of encouraging the Israelites to return to their homeland. But the exiles resisted returning. They feared the uncertainty and disruption of uprooting and moving to a land they barely remembered.

Faced with the Israelites' complacency, the prophet of Second Isaiah undertakes a campaign to convince the people to return to the land of their ancestors, the land Yahweh had given them.

Without question, a strong redemption theme lies at the heart of Isaiah 40-55. The prophet cloaks his persuasive oratory in terms that conjure up God's saving action in the Exodus. Under Moses the Hebrews fled Egypt. Now they are to flee Babylon. Under Moses the Hebrews looked toward Canaan as their promised destination. Now they look toward Zion. During the time of Second Isaiah, as during the time of the Exodus, the people leave a land that is not theirs and journey to an unknown place at God's

command. In fact, Gerhard von Rad insisted that in Second Isaiah the doctrine of creation 'is but a magnificent foil for the message of salvation, which thus appears the more powerful and the more worthy of confidence'.⁶

Over the years, scholars have increasingly modified von Rad's analysis. For instance, Theodore M. Ludwig countered von Rad by stating that 'creation faith in Deutero-Isaiah is not merely subsumed under election or redemption faith'.⁷ And more recently, Richard J. Clifford's work on Second Isaiah has revealed a full-blown creation theology that overshadows salvation theology in the poetry of the prophet.⁸

Consistent with Clifford's analysis, creation-centred spirituality offers us a new perspective on Second Isaiah's salvation theme. In the Exodus narrative, God rescues the Hebrews from Pharaoh, manipulating creation toward that end with deadly plagues and a parting sea. But in Second Isaiah, God speaks to the Israelites through the prophet, who acts as a goad to convince them to leave Babylon. In trying to persuade the people, God does not promise to rescue them, but to lead them through the wilderness to Zion.⁹ Rather than saving the Israelites, God blesses them with a promise to remain with them, prods them into action with prophetic persuasion, and leads them to Zion with a promise of continued blessing for those who follow. In sustaining, persuading and leading, God is not primarily rescuing the exiles, but is re-creating a people and giving them the responsibility for taking charge of their own destiny, their own creation. God relates to the people as one who expects *them* to act on behalf of God—for God, for themselves and for all creation.

As we have seen, the broad outline of Second Isaiah's creation-centred spirituality becomes visible in its relationship to the redemption themes that fill the prophet's poetry. But if we examine only the broad outline of that spirituality we will miss much of its power and uniqueness. The particulars of Second Isaiah's creation orientation warrant our perusal, for they reveal a spirituality composed of four vital characteristics: creating, blessing, imaging God and re-creating.

Creating

The dominant characteristic of creation-centred spirituality, of course, is that of creating. Second Isaiah shares with Genesis 1,

with many psalms, and with much of the Wisdom literature a boundless awe at God's mysterious power in creating the universe:

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? (40,12). The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth (40,28).

While modern notions of creation focus on the impersonal forces of evolution and the precise theories of the laboratory, Second Isaiah sees creation in terms of personal wills and conflict.¹⁰ God has wrestled the chaotic elements into submission, taming the whirlwind, quelling the raging waters, and forming the earth 'to be inhabited' (45,18).

What is more, God continues this personal creation, sustaining the life established there:

The LORD . . . gives power to the faint, and to the one who has no might he increases strength (40,29).

God . . . gives breath to the people upon [the earth] and spirit to those who walk in it (42,5).

The world of nature is truly God's, created and sustained by divine activity. Here Second Isaiah echoes the creation theme of Psalm 104: God continually cares for the birds, the trees, the creatures of the sea, coaxes food from the earth for the animals and for humankind, orders the seasons, marks off the days and sets the course of time.

But Second Isaiah does not limit God's creating activity to the establishment and maintenance of the universe. God, says the prophet, also creates a people:

Israel, my servant, Jacob, who I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, 'you are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off' (41,8-9).

Stranded in exile, the Israelites have forgotten who they are. Second Isaiah reminds them that once upon a time their ancestors were solitary individuals, scattered across the earth without a home

and without a people. But God drew them together just as God gathered the waters and marked off the dry land. God has fashioned them as a living creation, never to be abandoned.

Blessing

God's selection of Israel as God's people forms the heart of the blessings Israel has received from God. From that primary blessing flow others. Foremost among these is God's promise to guide and protect Israel: '... my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you' (54,10).

That promise continues indefinitely; the blessing moves out of the past into the present and draws the people toward the future. God pledges that Zion will be restored, and that the people will dwell there under God's favour. God's smoothing, taming touch will turn the chaotic wilderness into a place of hallowed hospitality, as the people march to Zion to enjoy the blessings God's bountiful earth offers:

I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground (42,16).

Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and those who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price (55,1).

Here—as in Genesis 1,31—God fashions the earth as a place that is 'very good'. A blessed creation offers nourishing abundance if the people will heed God's call and risk a journey into the unknown.

Imaging God

While creating and blessing are readily visible in Second Isaiah, the notion of imaging God is a bit more elusive. But it is no less important for an understanding of creation-centred spirituality. Richard J. Clifford points out the unique power of the imaging motif, noting that in midst of 'the Exile, two Israelite thinkers made daring new interpretations of earthly imaging of divine perfection', the writer of Gen 1,1-2,3 and the writer of Second Isaiah.¹¹

According to both writers, God has created humans as God's representative on earth. In Genesis 1, humans represent God to

the rest of the created order, to the animals and plants that inhabit the earth. In Second Isaiah, the focus shifts a bit. Here, the world is already populated. Nevertheless, God is working to create an earthly representative. In Second Isaiah God's ambassadors represent God to other humans, as well as to the rest of the created order. The prophet portrays ungodly craftspeople and goldsmiths labouring over statues of false gods, likenesses which have no power, 'molten images [which] are empty wind' (40,18-20; 41,7; 42,8). As the image-makers struggle in feverish futility, God is fashioning a living icon, a people who will show forth God's glory to the nations. 'I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to graven images' (42,8).

The image-makers fashion idols that 'cannot be moved' (41,7), but God is creating an image that lives and breathes. For the people God creates will uproot themselves, faithfully going where God points them, trustfully doing as God commands. God says to them, 'You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off' (41,9). And as God's servant, this people will shake themselves free of the life-numbing, false security of Babylon and return to Zion. As God's servant, this people will experience God's Spirit upon them, increasing their strength, strengthening their courage (42,1; 40,29; 42,4). As the image of God given to the world, this servant people will witness to and live out God's blessings of mercy, compassion and justice. They will become co-creators in fashioning a world that reflects God's loving purpose:

I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness (42,6-7).

Re-creating

Yes, in becoming the image of God, the Israelites will accept the responsibilities God hands over to them; they will respond to the prophetic call to live as God's image; they will take on the mantle of co-creators in the creation process. Indeed, in the act of imaging God, re-creation begins. God alerts the people to the newness about to unfold: 'Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare' (42,9). Even as Mother God

gives birth to this renewed people, a newly ordered creation, future generations also receive the promise of re-creation:

For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in travail, I will gasp and pant (42,14).

I will pour my Spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring. They shall spring up like grass amid waters . . . This one will say, 'I am the LORD's', another will call himself by the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, 'The LORD's', and surname himself by the name of Israel (44,3-5).

From this time forward, God's living image will span the generations. Each time a people re-images God, a new birth will take place; God's mercy, compassion and justice will be re-enacted in so far as faithful peoples re-create themselves in God's image. As faithful creation transforms itself, a new creation comes to life.

A creation-centred spirituality

As we have seen, Second Isaiah expresses a spirituality which sets creation and re-creation at the very centre of the human orientation toward God. In creation God has blessed us with the goodness of the earth, which offers life-sustaining sustenance. In calling us forth from a life-numbing situation, God shapes us into a people, a community of faith. In forming us in the image of God, God has blessed us with the capacity to fashion life-giving lives. In handing over to us responsibility for forming mercy and justice on earth, God has blessed us with the capacity to become co-creators with God, continually re-creating ourselves and our world. Living a creation-centred spirituality means not waiting in need for God to rescue us, but responding to God and acting as God's ambassadors in creation.

Notice that the characteristics of this spirituality are not static. Creating, blessing, imaging and re-creating define a spirituality that draws on the bible's portrayal of a dynamic, active God involved with a dynamic, active people. A creation-centred spiritual life moves, expands, grows, heads outward. It emphasizes 'extroverted meditation', such as art, rather than an 'introverted meditation' that contemplates the individual's personal psychic situation.¹²

Notice, also, that this spirituality's defining characteristics circle into one another. The process of creating moves through blessing

and imaging, transforming itself in a process of re-creating. In creation-centred spirituality, the spiritual journey does not lead to subsequently higher levels of angelic perfection; spiritual growth does not involve an effort to transcend temporal joys and struggles. Instead, the spiritual journey moves us ever deeper into the midst of life in the created order. This constant engagement with the world serves as the vehicle by which our lives are transformed. As we live God's grace in creation, we are re-created.

A new creation

In lifting up God's re-creating grace, Second Isaiah ultimately pushes us to recognize the creation-centred spirituality in the New Testament. As portrayed in the gospels, Jesus Christ embodies most vividly the creation spirituality expressed by Second Isaiah: Jesus the Word eternally lives as the vital force through which God is *creating* the universe; Jesus of Nazareth *blesses* the poor and oppressed with the freedom to enjoy God's abundance; Jesus the Servant *images God* through a life of mercy, justice and love for the benefit of others; Jesus the Living Christ dwells with us as the Holy Spirit to *re-create* the world in God's image. As the embodiment of God's creating grace, Jesus offers us the definitive model for how we are to fashion our own creation-centred spiritual paths.

Of course, as with any spiritual path, creation-centred spirituality may be abused. In accepting our role as actors in co-creation, we may come to overestimate our own creative powers. In de-emphasizing God's redemptive activity for us, we may come to ignore our own sin. In emphasizing the blessedness of being created by God, we may come to forget the frailty of the human condition. For as we embrace a spirituality that calls us to take responsibility for making this world a new creation, we risk treating God as merely a superfluous and uninvolved deity; we risk substituting ourselves for God.

Fortunately, neither the words of Second Isaiah nor the life of Christ will easily let us fall prey to these risks. Again and again the prophet's poetry and the gospel narratives call us back from the edge of such abuses. Second Isaiah builds redemption themes on a foundation composed of a creation-centred orientation toward God. The gospels portray liberating grace crystallized in a life that offers the blessing of re-creation to those who need it most. To read scripture from the perspective of creation-centred spirituality is to recognize that our salvation comes not in being rescued, but

in responsibly living God's creating grace as a blessing for ourselves, for others and for the earth we inhabit. Living such a life, we become what God calls us to be—the blessed people of God, a new creation.

NOTES

¹ Fox, Matthew: 'Introduction: roots and routes in Western spiritual consciousness', in *Western spirituality: historical roots, ecumenical routes*, ed Fox, (Santa Fe, 1981), p 2.

² Fox, Matthew: *Original blessing* (Santa Fe, 1983), p 26.

³ von Rad, Gerhard: 'The theological problem of the Old Testament doctrine of creation', in *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed Anderson (Philadelphia, 1984), p 53.

⁴ Kenik, Helen: 'Toward a biblical basis for creation theology', in Fox (ed) *Ibid.*, p 32.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ von Rad, *Ibid.*, p 56.

⁷ Ludwig, Theodore: 'The traditions of the establishing of the earth in Deutero-Isaiah,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92, 1973, p 357.

⁸ Clifford, Richard: *Fair spoken and persuading: an interpretation of Second Isaiah* (New York, 1984).

⁹ *Ibid.* p 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p 60.

¹¹ *Ibid.* pp 51-52.

¹² Fox: *Original blessing*, p 317.