A deficient and defective doctrine of creation

The Doctrine of Creation: A constructive Kuyperian approach

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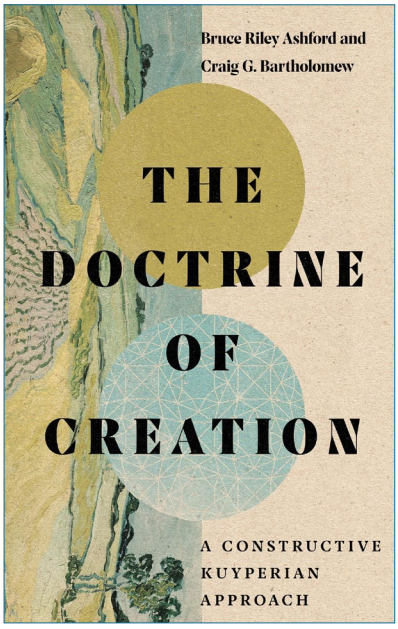

Methodological complications

The Doctrine of Creation is an attempt by Ashford and Bartholomew to provide a 'robust' theological treatment of the Doctrine of Creation from the Kuyperian tradition in dialogue with Karl Barth (1886–1968; figure 1) (pp. x–xi). To anyone familiar with Barth's writings on creation, it is hard to conceive how any 'robust' doctrine of creation is obtainable on these grounds when so severely hamstrung at the outset. This is because Barth views Genesis as 'non-historical history', a 'pure saga' probably derived from older Babylonian myths.[1] He is also convinced that the first two chapters of Scripture are irreconcilably contradictory, having arisen from "different sources, originating at different times, against different backgrounds, and from a different intellectual approach."[2] Barth, like many other German scholars from his time, had been captured by the zeitgeist of evolutionary dogma.[3] Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), on the other hand, is not crippled to the same extent by Barth's naturalistic myopia. Kuyper is wary of the "hypnosis of the dogma of evolution".[4] But he is still not ready to dismiss Darwin completely.[5] Kuyper endorses a theistic version of evolution or 'evolutionistic creation'.[6]

Put simply, both Barth and Kuyper are critically compromised when they engage with Genesis theologically. The pervasive secular scepticism of creation noticeably shapes their understanding of Scripture. For this reason, while Ashford and Bartholomew maintain that Scripture is their final authority, their theological conclusions betray an alternative allegiance (p. x). Their "great respect" for Barth, while tempered by their disagreements,[7] critically undermines this entire project. And although they claim to make a concerted effort to avoid engaging explicitly with contemporary science on matters of creation, the spectre of naturalistic science overshadows their project.

The goodness of a cursed world

That Ashford and Bartholomew want to provide a novel approach to the Doctrine of Creation is evident from the first paragraph of this book. They begin their discussion of creation with Peter's betrayal of Jesus in Mark 14:66–72 (p. 1). Their goal, following Erich Auerbach (1892–1957), is to "defamiliarize us with the doctrine of creation" (p. 3). It is hoped that this "fresh perspective" will lead to a renewed reverence for creation and help us escape from any "sub-Christian sacred-secular dualism" (p. 4).

Their first chapter goes on to explore creation from the standpoint of the early Christian creeds; namely, the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. From the opening clause in both creeds, they discuss the relationship between God and creation, arguing for *creatio ex nihilo*[8] and the contingency of creation upon its creator (pp. 1–11). Ashford and Bartholomew then argue that the Doctrine of Creation has doxological and eschatological ramifications (p. 14). They assert, following Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716), that this world is the best of all possible worlds (p. 38). What they mean by this is that the proclamation in Genesis 1:31, that God said it was very good, is still true of creation today. Put simply, they believe that the Fall has not altered or compromised the ontological goodness of creation (p. 51).

We are told that any denial of the goodness of creation marks the re-emergence of Neoplatonism (pp. 37, 39). They complain that the church has often failed to "articulate and embrace a full-orbed doctrine of creation" (p. 41). By 'full-orbed' they mean a doctrine of creation that affirms the triune creator, the goodness of creation, the *imago Dei*, and the future restoration and glorification of creation "in the eschaton" (p. 42). But their biggest concern is how theologians have failed to preserve an understanding of the "ontological goodness of creation" (p. 71). And their concern here is not merely for

the state of creation *before sin came into the world*, but after it.

Thus, to argue for the goodness of creation, post-Fall, Ashford and Bartholomew try to make their case from Hebrews 11:1–3 (pp. 14–15). According to their reading of the text, "The effect of what has gone wrong in God's 'very good' (Gen 1:31) creation is that … we do not now naturally see that the world was created by the word of God" (p. 14). In other words, the Fall means that we now need faith to believe in the goodness of God's creation. But, as most commentaries on Hebrews will corroborate, the faith spoken of in Hebrews 11:1–3 is restricted to the fact that God created the universe by his Word. The goodness of creation is not in view here. And, even if it was, the act of creation spoken of in these verses is pre-Fall. To state the obvious, God did not create the world after the Fall, but before it.

But Ashford and Bartholomew persist with their conviction about the goodness of creation post-Fall. Appealing to Kuyper's distinction between *structure* and *direction*, they argue that structurally, creation is good; but directionally, it is 'twisted' (pp. 21, 102, 231, 254, 259). These categories are useless, however, unless explained with concrete examples. Is cancer not a structural change? How does animal cruelty or death feature within this framework? Ashford and Bartholomew do not explore this any further. Neither is the Curse of Genesis 3 discussed in any detail. But most importantly, the concept of 'goodness' is insufficiently clarified. We are told that God's creation is ontologically good but not perfect (pp. 100–101). What does this mean? What are the principal theological distinctions between a good creation and a perfect creation? This becomes even more problematic when discussing the new creation. Apparently, the future restoration of creation will be an "elevation and enhancement of creation in its original form" (p. 102). But what about pain, sickness, suffering, and death? If the Fall has not affected the intrinsic goodness of creation, how are we to respond to Darwin, who once asked:

> "...what advantage can there be in the sufferings of millions of the lower animals throughout almost endless time? This very old argument from the existence of suffering against the existence of an intelligent first cause seems to me a strong one".[9]

The so-called 'goodness' of creation becomes a hollow concept detached from reality. As we will see later, Ashford and Bartholomew believe that pain, suffering, sickness, and death were typical of that world which God once called 'very good'. This is why Christians who embrace theistic evolution or interpret the fossil record on naturalistic terms severely compromise any effort to provide a robust theodicy to address the obvious problem of evil.

To try and bolster their argument from history, Ashford and Bartholomew summon Irenaeus, Tertullian, Athanasius, Basil, Augustine, Maximus, and Aquinas as witnesses to the fact that God's creation, *contra* Gnosticism, should be viewed as good (pp. 48–63). Even the Reformation is restricted to this narrow viewpoint as a movement that "sought to recover the goodness of creation" (p. 63). Thus, Calvin, Luther, and the Puritans all endeavoured to "recover the goodness of material creation" (p. 64). The Anabaptists, however, are labelled regressive and neo-gnostic for failing to "distinguish between the structures of creation and the moral direction of creation" (pp. 66–67). In the same way, "American fundamentalists" are blamed for undermining the goodness of creation by misinterpreting 2 Peter 3:12–13 (pp. 98–99).

But what Ashford and Bartholomew fail to provide from their brief survey of early church history is a single instance of someone arguing for the ontological goodness of creation *post-Fall*. Did the early church fathers really believe that the Fall had no effect on the goodness of creation? This is not evident from the citations provided.

Image: Unknown author, Wikimedia / Public Domain (colorised)

Figure 1. Karl Barth (1886–1968) was one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century.

Hermeneutical baggage from the Ancient Near East

I first encountered Bartholomew's views on creation in an undergrad course at Bible college where we were assigned readings from his book, *The Drama of Scripture* (2004). Even back then, Bartholomew was arguing that Genesis 1–2 is an ancient polemic in competition with other ANE (Ancient Near East) creation stories and should not be consulted for information about "how God made the world".[10] Two decades later, and hardly anything has changed.

Thus, while Ashford and Bartholomew stress the critical importance of creation to the entire drama of Scripture, it is disconcerting to see how they recast the creation story as a polemic against ANE views

of the world with deference to the documentary hypothesis (pp. 23, 24, 26, 28–29, 40, 176, 181, 186).[11] But if creation is to function as a necessary "presupposition of the entire drama of Scripture", any tampering with Genesis can only compromise the integrity of the whole theological structure which is built upon these foundations (p. 25).

In the fourth chapter, Ashford and Bartholomew explore the power of the creator, looking at four different Psalms. Once again, their interpretation of Scripture is hindered by unnecessary external factors. We are told that Psalm 29 and 82 must be interpreted in light of the Canaanite gods Baal and El along with their corresponding mythologies (pp. 113–114). Attention to the practices and beliefs of the ANE forms an integral part of the hermeneutical toolbox required to correctly decipher the Old Testament (pp. 115, 126, 134–135). The discussion eventually turns to the subject of theodicy, where Ashford and Bartholomew insist that "The Bible is profoundly in touch with the brokenness of the world and the reality of evil", rightly pointing out the critical importance of the Cross of Jesus Christ (p. 131). But even here, the discussion suffers from a lack of engagement with Genesis 3.

Chapter 5 begins with a renewed emphasis on the foundational importance of the Doctrine of Creation to the rest of redemptive history (p. 142). Ashford and Bartholomew rightly observe that Genesis 1:1–2:3 establishes the "forming and ordering" of creation (p. 143). But, because the creation account is a "sui generis event", they also insist that the genre of Genesis is essentially inscrutable. Thus, although the authors acknowledge the narratival structure of the text—even to the point of calling Genesis 1 historical—it still cannot be understood apart from the context of other ANE stories (pp. 145, 150, 158, 162, 286, 294). This is reminiscent of Barth's unhistorical history. The historical details in Genesis are not taken seriously.

We are then told that Genesis places the creation of light before the sun and moon in order to challenge the beliefs of ancient Egyptians (p. 160). There may be some truth in this, but if God did not literally create the light before the sun and moon, how does this polemic carry any weight? Without a literal ordering of days within a fixed timeframe, the argument that Genesis presents to a pagan ANE world falls flat. Similarly, Ashford and Bartholomew accept the portrayal of animals and humans as herbivores in Genesis 1:29–30, calling the text 'evocative', when it is evident that they also believe, on naturalistic grounds, that this state of affairs never actually happened (pp. 163–164). This leads to a discussion on cruelty of animals, but without any acknowledgment of how evolution makes this a feature instead of a bug (pp. 164, 345). Once again, the goodness and completeness of creation is accepted from Genesis 2:1–4, but without any appreciation for what this would necessarily preclude (p. 170).

Using the wrong framework

We are led to believe that the timeframe of creation is a matter for modern science, not Scripture. This leads to a brief discussion of 'modern evangelical issues' concerning how to read Genesis, specifically the days of creation (p. 96). There are six views presented: (1) six-day creation, (2) the gap theory, (3) revelatory-day theory, (4) day-age theory, (5) analogical-day theory, and (6) the framework hypothesis. Ashford and Bartholomew express their preference for the framework hypothesis (p. 98). Thus, they insist that Genesis can only inform us that God created time without providing any further details as to how or when he did so (pp. 154–155). Not surprisingly, Ashford and Bartholomew are sympathetic to Augustine's emphasis on the simultaneity of creation where "the days are not time periods but categories for teaching purposes" (pp. 144–145).

Ashford and Bartholomew admit that without revelation we would not know that God had created the world *ex nihilo* and made man in his image (p. 225). But what they fail to appreciate is that the efficacy of this revelation is severely compromised when its literal historicity is denied. A non-historical Genesis is incapable of revealing the true history of how God created everything. Ashford and Bartholomew cannot pick and choose what to retain as factual and what to reject from Genesis. The creation account stands or falls *in toto*.

This type of problem persists with their exposition of Genesis 3. Here, we are encouraged to regard the text as historical and paradigmatic (p. 226). Ashford and Bartholomew reject the allegorizing that typifies how many scholars interpret the two trees of Eden (p. 227). But, at the same time, they never go so far as to assert that these trees literally existed. Following Wenham, the account is deemed 'protohistorical' (p. 231). Likewise, the serpent merely "symbolizes sin, death, and the power of evil", and the Fall is all about how human beings chose 'moral autonomy' or forbidden wisdom (p. 255). Whether or not this involved a literal Adam and Eve is carefully avoided.

Eschatologically implausible

Ashford and Bartholomew return to the subject of cruelty to animals, lamenting the "abysmal record of the exploitation" in history, but with no recognition of how theistic evolution makes this category of evil a complete misnomer (p. 178). Their emphasis on environmentalism brings mystic sentimentalism to bear upon an

over-realized eschatology. We are told to "make place for birds in our lives" so that "they will call us back into place" (p. 196). There is an expectation for humans to live peaceably with wild animals.

In general, Ashford and Bartholomew see great continuity between the old creation and the new. In fact, it is their conviction that this world will not be destroyed but restored (pp. 306–311). Put simply, "The new heaven and earth is *this* universe" (p. 315). Following the text preserved in Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, they argue that the fire spoken of in 2 Peter 3:10 is a purifying fire, not a destroying one (pp. 317–322). They emphasize this because they want to retain an eschatological purpose for the care of creation. A creation destined for obliteration means that all environmental efforts will ultimately amount to nothing.

What Ashford and Bartholomew want to establish is a 'cultural continuity' between this present life and the next (p. 328). In other words, the physical or material effects of man's efforts in this world will carry over to the next. The example they offer is of ships built in this world that are restored in the next. They anticipate "such developments" to "find their way into the new heaven and new earth" (p. 329). Whether or not the reader finds this compelling, we are encouraged to think of the new creation as a "future cosmic resurrection" akin to the resurrection of the body (p. 321, 325). But this analogy fails to consider the fact that the human body is literally destroyed by death before being raised to life. Annihilation of the flesh does not negate continuity between the old creation and the new creation. These are eschatological realities which Ashford and Bartholomew need to examine more closely. And, once again, while they have no problem appealing to texts like Isaiah 65 to describe what the new creation might be like, they give little thought to why there would be a cessation of carnivory in this world (pp. 314–315). If suffering and death can exist in a "very good" world, why not in the new creation also? Their doctrine of creation is deficient. Consequently, they allow for the possibility of death even in the new creation. They state, "It remains an open question as to whether humans will be vegetarians in the new heavens and the new earth" (p. 342). This is hard to stomach given their insistence that our "practices of eating and drinking" be informed by a "robust doctrine of creation" (p. 346).

Philosophically flawed

In the first chapter of this book, Ashford and Bartholomew point out how Maimonides failed to correctly understand God and creation because his interpretation was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy instead of Scripture (pp. 36–37). This line of thinking is developed further in the next chapter as they look in more detail at the influence of Plato, Plotinus, and Philo on the early church fathers (pp. 44–47). Origen is singled out as a theologian who regretfully "reinterprets Scripture to fit the philosophical system he prefers" (p. 55). For similar reasons, they also acknowledge that "Augustine's writings are not an entirely trustworthy guide to the biblical teaching on creation" (p. 60). They state that his Neoplatonic convictions "kept Augustine from ever reading the Genesis account on its own terms" (p. 61). This is true. But what Ashford and Bartholomew fail to see is how *their* endeavour to derive a doctrine of creation suffers from its own philosophical baggage.

For example, Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788) is praised for not capitulating to the Radical Enlightenment, being lauded as "the most profound Christian thinker of the eighteenth century" (pp. 72–76). Apart from his influence upon Barth, he is also famous for introducing Hume's writings to Kant (pp. 76–77). We are told that Hamann considered Scripture "the key to our understanding of the world" (p. 78). What Ashford and Bartholomew do not mention is the fact that Hamann treats Genesis more like a dramatic poem or 'rhapsody' than as narrative history.[12] He had a significant influence on Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) (figure 2), who was one of the first to call the creation story a 'child-like fable'.[13]

Image: Franz Gerhard von Kügelgen, Wikimedia / Public Domain

Figure 2. Portrait of Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) by Gerhard von Kügelgen (1772–1820)

In fact, this book is filled with the opinions of men who do not take Scripture as the infallible Word of God. The reader is repeatedly encumbered by lengthy discussions in dialogue with liberally minded scholars like Gerhard von Rad (1901–1971), Ernst Käsemann (1906–1998), Emil Brunner (1889–1966), Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), Michel Henry (1922–2002), Claus Westermann (1909–2000), Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), Jürgen Moltmann (1926–) *et al.*.

Accompanying them are prominent secular philosophers like Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005), Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), Philip Rieff (1922–2006), and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004). It is hard to conceive how Ashford and Bartholomew had any hopes to derive a robust doctrine of creation from such a milieu.

When Ashford and Bartholomew discuss the French phenomenologists, we are told that they "provide the reader with a feast" when it comes to delineating the Doctrine of Creation (p. 93). All the examples provided, however, are painfully esoteric and philosophically burdensome to parse. Thus, Jean-Louis Chrétien (1952–2019) is praised for developing a "remarkable philosophy of language" in which he uses Noah's Ark as a metaphor for the language man must "inhabit" (p. 91). Michel Henry (1922–2002) is celebrated for his 'trinitarian anthropology', which describes the "reciprocal phenomenological interiority" of the "common Spirit" of the Self and the Word (p. 93). Emmanuel Falque extends Chrétien's metaphor of the "ark of speech" to the "ark of flesh" by which it is apparently "evocative to think of creation as 'the first ark'" (p. 93). None of the so-called greater thinkers in this chapter treat Genesis as history.

So while Ashford and Bartholomew correctly maintain that the fear of the Lord is foundational to any attempt to understand creation, it is disappointing to notice how much space is allocated in this book to the opinions of men who do not fear the Lord (p. 337). Indeed, only a few paragraphs after mentioning the fear of the Lord, they praise Oliver O'Donovan's theological epistemology as "most profound" (p. 338). We are informed that O'Donovan's epistemological stance "operates between Barth and Brunner" (p. 338). But neither Barth nor Brunner serve as admirable examples of what it means to begin with the fear of the Lord in philosophy. One can only think that O'Donovan's position must likewise be compromised. And, indeed, if we explore O'Donovan's writings further, especially his views on homosexuality, this is sadly the case.[14]

Following Kuyper, the authors assert that all cultural spheres, including science and education, operate under the sovereignty of Christ (p. 267). But what does this look like? How should we do science and education to the glory of God? What are we to make of the naturalistic framework which continues to exclude God's Word from science and education? What does it mean to actually fear the Lord in practice (p. 269)? Barth is praised for not capitulating to Nazism, but to what extent do Christians in the public square capitulate to the secular agenda today (p. 270)? Ashford and Bartholomew rightly acknowledge that the "roots of modern science" can be traced back to the "Christian culture of medieval Europe", but they should also remember why this was the case (p. 272). At the heart of this scientific renaissance was a reinvigorated interest in the literal interpretation of the creation story.[15]

Ashford and Bartholomew argue that our doctrine of creation should inform our view of time and history (p. 347). They even concede that "Genesis 1 establishes the day and the week as constituent elements of time". But they never go so far as to actually treat the first week of the world as seven days or, from the fact, make any inferences concerning the actual chronology of history. And while they point out that scientific theories cannot be "proven true or even probably true", they refuse to let Scripture challenge the edicts of modern science, fallible as they are (pp. 351–353). Instead, we are to take the "strong scientific support" for an old earth as hermeneutically formative for how we read Scripture (p. 355). This is despite their admission that "Modern science is not religiously neutral" (p. 358).

Ashford and Bartholomew, following Plantinga, express some scepticism of evolution (pp. 355–357). But they deliberately leave room for theistic evolution, which they claim is "compatible with theism and theistic religion" (p. 357). This stance is not merely erroneous; it also critically compromises the robustness of their doctrine of creation. This becomes apparent a few pages later, where they go on to identify transgenderism as "deeply incoherent" (p. 360). They even make their case, to some extent, from Genesis 1:27 (p. 361). Evidently, some details in Genesis 1 retain their literal value—but their lack of attention to the rest of Genesis 1 undermines their overall case. In particular, they fail to recognize how transgenderism finds its logical roots in evolutionism. If, by ignoring how God created his creatures in Genesis 1, we accept the possibility of ape-like creatures becoming humans, how will we rule out the much easier transformation of male to female *within the same species*? If we can swallow the camel, why not the gnat?

Final thoughts

Ashford and Bartholomew set out to provide a robust doctrine of creation. But the end result is less than satisfying. It is philosophically flawed, theologically compromised and exegetically weak. This book reads more like a historical survey of secular and liberal views—often barely tangential to the intended subject—than a coherent case for the Doctrine of Creation. Thankfully, there are many other excellent works on the Doctrine of Creation that do not suffer from these failings.[16]

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5. Kuyper praises Darwin for "paying his respects to the mystery of religion". Bratt, ref. 4, pp. 405–420, 1999.
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8. At this point, Ashford and Bartholomew claim that Justin Martyr denies *creatio ex nihilo*, but they have misread him. Justin explicitly states that the universe had a beginning. His comments in the first Apology (10.2) that God created "all things out of unformed matter" relate to Genesis 1:2ff, not Genesis 1:1. Martyr, J., Writings of Saint Justin Martyr; in: Falls, T.B. (Ed.), *The Fathers of the Church*, Christian Heritage, New York, p. 156, 1948.
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