

BOOK NOTES

**Matthias Dorn and
Rolf Pöhler, eds.**

Die Schöpfung— glauben, denken, leben

(Lüneburg: Advent-

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€25.00



Matthias Dorn and Rolf Pöhler present a collection of essays dealing with today's relevance of the belief in creation. The purpose of the book is to present the beauty of the biblical theology of creation and to unfold its intellectual and spiritual values (p. 16). The individual essays do not primarily have a scientific focus, although scientific literature is recommended. Rather, they center upon the relationship between faith and science from a more general point of view and examine spiritual implications of the doctrine of creation. Before commenting on the book, a brief summary of each chapter is given below.

Matthias Dorn and Rolf Pöhler, "Introduction— Writing Appropriately About Creation"

The editors begin their book by reviewing the discussion about faith and science related to matters within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which is all the more necessary, since some Adventist institutions have taught and still teach theistic evolution. The authors strongly criticize the General Conference for having revised the Sixth Fundamental Belief by using far too precise language and for not allowing any other teaching at Adventist educational institutions. Thorough information and adequate discussion with students would have accomplished more (p. 13). The defined aim of this volume is to promote the belief in creation in a theological and spiritual way.

Matthias Dorn, "Believing in View of Creation"

What does it mean to have faith in a biblical sense? Matthias Dorn elaborates on this question and deals with common misunderstandings. Though in its fallen, not original, state, the biblical writers regarded nature as a reason to glorify God. In the scriptural passages describing nature, one can perceive a language of admiration. Dorn points out the theological difficulties that go along with the concept of theistic evolution: Creation would never be completed, but always in progress; it would be imperfect right from the beginning. God Himself, not man, would be accountable for evil, and the atonement of Christ would remedy the shortcomings of His own creative act. In the end, Dorn concludes, it seems odd to regard creation as an allegory and believe in a literal resurrection.

Lothar Wilhelm, "Believing, Living, and Proclaiming Creation"

In his essay Wilhelm addresses four major points: how the doctrine of creation shapes our concept of

man, the significance of the Sabbath, the ecological responsibility of mankind, and the difference between faith and ideology.

Ekkehardt Mueller, "Creation in the New Testament"

This chapter evaluates the references to creation within the New Testament and their consequential implications for our understanding of creation.¹

Bernhard Oestreich, "Knowledge of God Through Creation?"

Oestreich examines the literary-historical context of Romans 1:18–21 by comparing these verses with Stoic philosophy and ideas of Hellenistic Judaism.

Thomas Domanyi, "The Quest for Truth Between the Poles of Faith and Scholarship"

Domanyi advocates the idea that there is no conflict between faith and science, since they differ fundamentally in their objectives and topics of research.

Jim Gibson, "Intelligent Design—Is It a Useful Concept?"

Gibson discusses the scope of different design arguments, introduces the contemporary intelligent design movement, and refutes common objections.²

Stefan Wilhelm, "Evidence for Creation?"

Based on his own experience, Wilhelm points out both the inappropriateness of polemics as well as the indispensability of deep thinking in areas where faith and science seem to be in conflict.

Matthias Dorn, "Alternatives to the Theory of Evolution"

Dorn argues that alternative theories must also adhere to common scientific methodologies. Informed interventionism³ is a good method of conducting serious research to enlighten biblically motivated questions. Still, many questions are beyond the reach of scientific investigation (e.g., ecology before the fall). In such cases precise field work, as conducted, for example, by the *Studiengemeinschaft Wort + Wissen*, is to be preferred to mere speculation and exaggerated claims. Momentary contradictions should be acknowledged openly, and scientific problems ought to be answered with better science.

Matthias Dorn, "Theses on the Relation of Science and Faith"

This chapter intends to summarize the subject matter of the volume in seven short theses: 1) Gene-

sis 1–11 claims to describe reality. But since these texts contain no scientific explanatory language, they are unusable for theory formation. 2) Naturalistic sciences can only develop naturalistic theories. 3) Concerning the development of animate and inanimate nature, the explanatory power of alternative theories lags behind naturalistic ones. Micro- and macroevolution are well-founded, but mega-evolution is not. 4) There is a lack of alternative research, 5) which is partly due to the currently propagated system in natural sciences. 6) Neither evolutionary nor alternative theories are to be dogmatized. 7) We seek scientific theories that are complementary to the biblical account.

In my view, the first three theses are more than just summaries, since they by far exceed the statements of the preceding chapters. The first thesis pronounces the primeval history as unusable for theory formation. This is much too general, since according to Jesus' reading, Genesis 1–11 provides at least some definite and crucial points, although not containing "scientific explanatory language" (p. 207). Regarding the second thesis, it has to be said that a naturalistic methodology should not be limited to naturalism, but rather should also play an integral part in alternative theories (cf. chap. 6 and p. 201). Most astonishing, however, is the third thesis, which not only considers micro-evolution but also macro-evolution as well-founded (p. 208). How Dorn comes to this conclusion is anything but obvious, since all the literature he recommends at the end of the book (pp. 227–229) presents strong arguments against macro-evolution and thereby contradicts this thesis.

Rolf Pöhler, "Meditation—Creation and Faith"

Pöhler describes how a belief in creation answers the deepest questions of humanity, endowing it with purpose and meaning.

Comments

While reading the collective volume, three major points attract attention:

Understanding of Creation

Different passages give rise to the question of whether the authors regard Genesis 1–11 as being of historical significance, or whether they consider only its theology to be inspired (cf. pp. 13, 29, 46, 52, 55 n. 43, 131, 165, 207). In reference to the creation account, the editors warn against regarding "one particular reading as the only true one" (p. 14). It is difficult to not understand this as a call for theological arbitrariness, against which the authors themselves argue (p. 9).

Domanyi's approach that faith and science cannot contradict each other, since they differ in their objectives and topics of research, is a prominent idea also referred to as Nonoverlapping Magisteria (NOMA). Unfortunately, it does not satisfactorily reflect the complex relationship between biblical revelation and scientific methodology, entailing a certain way of reading Scripture that a priori limits divine revelation to the realm beyond scientific exploration. In contrast, Lothar Wil-

helm and Matthias Dorn expound the approach of Ellen G. White, where both Scripture and nature are regarded as divine revelation. They believe that their connection forms a cohesive whole and that apparent contradictions are due to either poor science or inaccurate interpretation of the Bible (pp. 79, 207).

However, Domanyi goes much further and argues that there are no infallible biblical doctrines and therefore we should beware of fixed dogmas (p. 139). The purported lack of absolute truth in the Christian faith should be looked upon as a good thing, for otherwise tolerance would be at risk (pp. 139–140). These propositions are quite radical and questionable. To pronounce in advance that God's revelation is so unclear that not one sound dogma can be derived from it is a very problematic foundation, to say the least. It is forbearance with human imperfection, not the imprecision of divine revelation, that calls for tolerance.

In the face of widely varying understandings of creation, it is not surprising that most authors criticize the revised fundamental belief of a recent creation in six literal days. They regard the specification of the sixth Fundamental Belief as unfortunate, since God's creative act is "not revealed" and "beyond the reach of theoretical or experimental knowledge" (p. 40).

Lothar Wilhelm argues that the biblical account of a six-day creation makes no statement concerning the time frame in which creation took place (p. 55 n. 43), nor does it explain "how everything came into being, which God created by His word" (p. 46). Rather, it sheds light on questions like origin, identity, and meaning. Likewise, nowhere does the Bible say anything about the time *when* creation occurred (p. 81 n. 142). Therefore, the revision of the sixth Fundamental Belief, speaking of a *recent* creation, is a problem for L. Wilhelm.

Stefan Wilhelm speaks against committing ourselves to literal creation days, as relativistic effects would rule out such precise statements concerning time (p. 168). While being true in a technical sense, this objection sounds a little far-fetched, since for inhabitants of our earth—to whom the Lord is speaking—such relativistic effects are in the realm of split seconds only.

Apart from these factual points of critique, it unfortunately must be noted that the introduction of the book contains polemics. The editors speak of "fundamentalist tendencies within the world church leadership," identify the reformulated fundamental belief as "tendentious infiltrate" (p. 15), and consider words like "Adventist inquisition" (p. 15) and "witch-hunt" (pp. 16, 42) as appropriate. A more objective language, free of derogative comments, would be desirable.

After a systematic analysis of New Testament passages, Ekkehardt Mueller comes to the conclusion that in our understanding of creation we should follow Jesus, for whom "a literal and definite reading of Genesis 1 and 2 . . . appears to be a suitable approach to scripture" (p. 101). At the end of his essay, however, the editors state in a short epilogue that this article merely

used a different methodology, without further theological reflections. It would be desirable, instead of such a sweeping remark, to have a concrete discussion of the opposing positions that are tacitly presented side by side in this book.

Handling Theological Differences

The editors open their introduction with a clear statement: “The message of God as Creator of the world is indispensable for biblically oriented faith. Its abandonment or adaptation to contemporary views would lead to an unrecognizable distortion of the Christian faith and to spiritual arbitrariness” (p. 9). It is therefore surprising that Dorn, referring to “the admittedly clear dogmatic difference between theistic evolution and traditional faith in creation,” comes to the conclusion that such doctrinal differences should also be endured within the Adventist Church (p. 43). If you go by the lowest common denominator defined by Dorn here, Baptists, Catholics, or Methodists as well could become members of the Adventist Church. If one does not want to slip into the arbitrariness mentioned in the introduction, there must exist clear basic convictions. The question about creation or (theistic) evolution is not a matter of trifles but, as Dorn aptly puts it, of “clear dogmatic differences.” In view of this delicate topic, polarizing vocabulary such as “know-it-all,” “defamation,” and “withdrawal of love” (p. 43) should have been avoided in order to not put obstacles in the way of an appreciative dialogue.

Conflicting Opinions

While the editors hold the view that creation can neither be scientifically tested nor proven (pp. 14–15, 40), Lothar Wilhelm suggests on the basis of Romans 1:19–20 that at least God’s “eternal power and His divinity” are evident (p. 63). Gibson agrees with this and points the reader, as an example, to the design argument in the case of the origin of life (chemical evolu-

tion), which he considers to be clear evidence of an intelligent Designer (p. 159). However, Oestreich in his analysis of the same biblical text claims that this natural knowledge of God has no apologetic-missionary value at all, but only serves to accuse all people (p. 124). Pöhler, on the other hand, ascribes even less evidential weight to nature when he claims that “there is no objective, compelling proof for what we believe—the existence of God, the truth of the Bible, the fulfillment of its prophecies, the creation of the world, etc.—apart from faith” (p. 220). In view of these profound disagreements over the general approach to the Word of God and to nature and over their information content, a discussion would be very helpful.

Conclusion

The book offers various theological reasons that underline the relevance of a belief in creation in this day and age, some of which are even penned in artistic German. However, the approaches and ideas presented by the various authors diverge widely. A transparent and open discussion of these theological differences would add much to the clarity of the book.⁴

Reviewed by
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¹ This chapter is a translation of the English article published in *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 15, no. 1 (2004): 47–62.

² This chapter is a reprint of the article published in *Ministry*, December 2005, 12–14; and February 2006, 13–17.

³ As outlined in Leonard Brand, “Naturalism and an Alternative,” chap. 5 in *Faith, Reason, and Earth History*, 3rd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2016).

⁴ A German translation of the book review is available on the BRI website at: <https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/de/materials/science-and-religion-creation/die-sch%C3%B6pfung-%E2%80%93-glauben-denken-leben>