

The STORY of GOD

Wesleyan Theology and Biblical Narrative

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The God Who Creates

"Then God said, 'Let there be . . .'" (Gen. 1:3 ff.)

It is a fundamental assumption of the biblical story that God is the Creator of all things, the "Maker of heaven and earth" (Apostles' Creed). It is also commonly observed that, according to Scripture, God is Creator by virtue of His spoken word. The word of "let there be" in the beginning of God's Story receives amplification later in the prologue of John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1). Throughout the Bible, the creative and redemptive power of God's word is celebrated. When God speaks, things happen! And the New Testament Book of Hebrews insists that this creative power of the divine word continues to sustain creation, to call it into being, for God, in Christ, "upholds all things by the word of His power" (1:3). Hence, the Story of God has its foundation and continuation in the God who speaks, the God whose Word provides the possibility of the words that compose this ongoing Story in which we participate.

How appropriate it is for a narrative approach to theology that God is a God who speaks, and whose speaking initiates the very universe. For narrative is the meaningful arranging of words to tell a story, to pull the story's listeners in, to involve those listeners in the very telling and hearing of the story. And in Genesis, it is the speaking of God, the meaningful arranging of divine words, that begins the story our universe is.

It is critical, though, that we hear the nature of the creative word that God speaks. Repeatedly in the opening chapter of Genesis we find this phrase, "Let there be . . ." The word of God has the nature of *letting be*, of allowing things—zebras and zygotes, lizards and lions, rocks and rivers, microbes and mountains, plankton and people, *ad finitum*—to become. There is something about this word of "letting be" that bespeaks God's generosity in the giving of being out of the riches of His own being, a divine fascination with and love for beings of all



Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City
Kansas City, Missouri

sorts, a wondrous stepping back by God in allowing creation truly to be.

Mainstream Jewish and Christian traditions have also insisted that this universe, called into being by God's word, truly does come into being purely by virtue of His word. That is to say, there is no other power, no other source, no other material out of which we and our world come, than that which God creates. Such a claim means that He did not have to begin with some preexistent "slush" or matter (or even energy) and somehow shape it into being; to think otherwise, after all, would be to give to this presumably preexistent, eternal stuff equal standing with God. The traditional language for this belief is *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing), and it underscores the biblical affirmation that God is God alone and that He is sovereign. Some modern theologians have suggested, however, that *creatio ex nihilo* has a rather barren ring to it, as though God simply conjured up beings from nothing out of sheer caprice. Perhaps the suggestion of one contemporary theologian, Paul van Buren, that it is more appropriate to speak of *creatio ex amore*—creation out of love—comes closer to the nature of the biblical narrative. It certainly resonates with the Wesleyan tradition's focus on God as holy Love. For in the phrase *creatio ex amore* it becomes evident that the God who speaks the word of "letting be" does so out of a love for the other, and a nurturing desire for the other to be.

In any event, the conviction that God creates the universe by the power of His loving word is an important affirmation of *monotheism* (belief in one God). According to the Story line, God has no competitor, no higher-up to answer to, and no preexisting material out of which He must create, all of which notions are examples of *dualism*. Any dualism, by definition, compromises the doctrine of God's *sovereignty*, of God's real *Godness*, throughout the universe.

This is, incidentally, one of the critical points at which mainstream Latter-day Saints (Mormon) theology seems to fall short, for it claims that there is an infinite begetting of "Gods" (including the God who created this world and fathered us all) and that the material universe, like the progression and proliferation of deities, is eternal. There is in such a theology no place or person at which the buck stops, and so the word God has a function different from its traditional implications of religious ultimacy. Unlike the monotheistic traditions of the world (most notably Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), for Mormon theology the word God does not name the universe's ultimate Source and Creator; it simply names a man who, like many others within the universe, has achieved the status of godhood. It just so happens that we are most closely related to this particular God.

Traditional monotheism, on the other hand, affirms that the word

God refers to the Creator of the universe and of all other possible universes or dimensions—God is Creator! Certainly it is permissible to speculate on the relative possibility of other created universes that preceded our own, or that will follow our own, or that are even operating in another set of dimensions alongside our own—for the main point that Christian faith affirms is that, wherever creation occurs, it is the doing of one Creator.

Christian tradition has developed in such a way as to safeguard the sovereignty of God over and throughout creation. It has done this primarily by speaking of God's *omnipotence*, *omniscience*, and *omnipresence*.

The barest definition of omnipotence is that all potency or power is inherently God's. There is no other power against whom God must compete, no other source of being or energy. God is, in the little phrase of the Jewish theologian Emil Fackenheim, *Sole Power*. Taken to a simplistic extreme, the doctrine of omnipotence could suggest that anything and everything that happens does so because God, who after all is omnipotent, causes, wills, or directly makes it happen. To be sure, there have been Christians, most notably those of a strict Calvinist tradition, who have indeed held such a doctrine of divine omnipotence.

Similarly, omniscience means that God, the sovereign Mind, knows all things. There is no event, no detail so tiny or insignificant as to elude His omniscience. More often than not, this belief in omniscience is assumed to include the future in all of its details (*foreknowledge*), so that God the omniscient One can never be surprised. All is known, and in fact is foreknown. Philosophers and theologians down through the centuries have wrestled with the question of whether such divine foreknowledge cancels any possibility of human freedom, and they have arrived at various answers. Calvinist theologians, for example, generally have not been particularly concerned to protect the idea of human freedom, since divine sovereignty is their highest concern anyway; the Dutch theologian James Arminius, on the other hand, affirmed divine foreknowledge but believed that this did not mitigate a person's freedom of response to grace. We will have occasion later to pursue the fine details of omniscience as it relates to divine foreknowledge.

Finally, omnipresence means that God is present to every point in the entire universe at every moment. There is no place where God is not. Down to the most infinitesimal subatomic particle, the doctrine of omnipresence affirms that God is truly and fully present—and that, thinking in the other direction, God is more than and larger than the immensity of the universe in its entirety, embracing and sustaining it.

Certainly theologians through the centuries have found biblical

proof texts for each of these affirmations, but there is a relatively recent suspicion floating around among some thinkers that the *omni* doctrines owe their existence more to abstract analysis and deductive logic about what God "must be in order to be God," and less to attentiveness to the way in which God is encountered and described in the biblical story. The *omni*-God is metaphysically unimpeachable, but is such a God a philosophical construction, the idealistic invention of human minds, rather than the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?

Undoubtedly one of the primary reasons for this suspicion about the *omni* doctrines, at least as they are often conceived, is a concern for *theodicy* (Gr. *theo* = God, *dike* = justification), or for justifying God's ways in the world. Theodicy has to do most specifically with the theological task of defending belief in God in the face of extreme human suffering. While belief in the one sovereign, personal Creator satisfies the religious longing for one ultimate Cause of being, it also paves the path to this most troubling problem for people of faith: How can a good and loving God (*creatio ex amore*) allow a world with so much senseless suffering? After the Holocaust, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, after Cambodia and Uganda and all the other horribly graphic scenes of dehumanizing torture, suffering, and violent bloodshed we have witnessed in our century alone, is it possible yet to believe in a good, powerful, and caring God? Many people, persuaded by the existentialist protest of authors such as Albert Camus in his classic *The Plague*, have answered this question with what might be called an "atheism of protest." There is probably no reason modern people offer more for their unbelief than this *problem of evil*.

The problem might be set up this way:

- An *omnipresent* God would certainly be aware of the presence of evil.
- An *omniscient* God would certainly know how to overcome that evil.
- An *omnipotent* God would certainly be able to enforce victory over evil; and
- A God of love presumably would desire to be rid of evil.

● Yet evil does not disappear!

By evil we might here include wars, murder, oppression, torture, abuse of all kinds (particularly when afflicted upon powerless children), hunger and starvation, homelessness, fatal accidents and illnesses, birth defects; and, of course, the list could go on. Elie Wiesel, in his gripping little book *Night*, tells of seeing cartloads of Jewish children being dumped into huge, fiery pits, literally a hell on earth. It has been suggested that any theology we do must be done at the edge of

that pit, in the presence of those burning children. Such a demand should deeply chasten any theodicy we offer with a profound sense of inadequacy, humility, and pain. No attempt to justify God's ways in the world should lessen the seriousness of such sufferings or compromise our commitment to put an end to such evils. Nonetheless, an honest and self-searching faith in God demands that we do our best also to do *our theology in the ugly face of human suffering in all its depth and breadth*.

We may find a beginning in the distinction that Christian tradition has made between *moral evil* and *natural evil*. Moral evil includes all suffering that is a result of human decision, or more exactly, of the misuse of human freedom. The *freewill defense* of God is most effective in dealing with moral evil, since essentially it argues that evil is in the world because of human sin, not because of divine will or doing. In this case, God cannot be directly faulted for occasions in which one person suffers or dies at the hands of another, for God does not will that human beings so treat one another. Of course, God still is finally responsible for having created moral agents who can and often do resist His will, but at least then He is only indirectly responsible for evil. God, in creating free agents, has also created the *potential* for evil in creation.

This simple freewill defense, it seems to me, begins to open the door to a more adequate way of understanding divine omnipotence. In creating such a world as ours, and especially in "letting there be" human beings with the power of contrary choosing, God has in a sense divested himself of omnipotence in the act of sharing power with us. God manifests His creative power by "letting there be" that which is truly *other* to Him, that which can shake its fist and say "No!" to Him. There is a mystery in divine power, the mystery of sharing, of giving, of allowing others to live and to act. Perhaps it is possible that divine power is best understood as *empowerment* of the other, so that in the very breath we say "omnipotence" we also envision a kind of all-power that is, by *very nature*, shared. This is the intertwined mystery of divine power and human freedom.

But there is another dimension to the problem of evil, usually called natural evil. In this case, we deal not with obvious results of misdirected human freedom but with occasions such as hurricanes, volcanoes, deadly diseases, and drought. The fact is, of course, that human freedom wisely invested can and does reduce much of the suffering inflicted by natural evil: victims of drought, famine, or other disasters of nature can be sent food and water to relieve their need; cures can be discovered or developed for diseases. For that matter, such phenomena as hurricanes, volcanoes, and earthquakes are usual-

ly considered evil only when human lives or societies are destroyed thereby. (This may suggest a criticism of traditional theodicy as being too shortsighted, being concerned usually only for human, as opposed to animal, pain.) In many cases, then, one could extend the freewill defense by pointing out that people might have chosen to live elsewhere than where disaster struck. This does not mean, for example, that it was "their own fault" when people lost material goods or loved ones because they were living too close to Mount St. Helens when it blew in 1980. It simply means that, through what is normally a long series of complex decisions, we sometimes end up in the wrong place at the wrong time. This response to natural evil, then, involves a variation on the freewill defense.

Perhaps we can concede that many of our world's natural phenomena that wreak destruction are not evil *per se* but neutral. (Better yet, perhaps they are actually often good; earthquakes and volcanoes, for example, help the planet release pressures that, were they not "blown off," would eventually destroy us all.) But that does not help us deal with the problem of evil on the level where it really hits us: on the personal, existential level, where so often we feel at the mercy of destructive forces beyond our control.

It is at this level of theodicy that the Book of Job operates. It may seem at first glance that Job gives us the easiest of answers, since it tells of a kind of "gentleman's bet" between Satan and God, with poor Job as the prize (1:6-12; 2:1-7). It would be inviting to blame this satanic figure for all the bad things that happen, and save the good things for God! But, in fact, after the preface passage Satan never again appears in Job's story. And the preface makes it clear that Satan is answerable to God anyway, and able to go only as far as God will allow. This reminds us of an important implication of the doctrine of God's sovereignty as Creator and Sustainer of all: Satan, too, is created and sustained by God. Like every other component of creation, Satan's existence is immediately dependent upon the upholding power of God's word. Thus, to blame our experiences of evil and destruction upon Satan only pushes the problem back one step, for God remains the sovereign Source of all things—including the devil.

Further, when Job's pleas for an audience with God finally are answered, God shows no hesitation whatsoever about taking responsibility for the world in all of its joys and pains. His thunderous address to Job out of the whirlwind (chaps. 38—41) reaches its zenith in chapter 41, where He boasts of His handiwork evidenced in "Leviathan" or, of all things, the crocodile. Generally, we may experience more repulsion than admiration when it comes to crocodiles. But apparently God does not share our sentiments:

"Lay your hand on him; remember the battle; you will not do it against! . . .
No one is so fierce that he dares to arouse him; who then is he that can stand before Me? . . .
Who can open the doors of his face? Around his teeth there is ter-

ror. . . .

His breath kindles coals, and a flame goes forth from his mouth. . . .

When he raises himself up, the mighty fear; because of the crashing they are bewildered. . . .

Nothing on earth is like him, one made without fear."

(*w.* 8, 10, 14, 21, 25, 33)

To hear God's lengthy musings on the merits of the crocodile is to begin to develop an appreciation for God as Creator and Lord of "tooth and claw." The teleological argument for God's existence in chapter 3 can certainly be conducive to romanticizing about the beauty and harmony of the world of nature. But there is an underside to nature, too—where the big fish eats the little fish, and where blood is spilled in the savage struggle. The Book of Job challenges us to appreciate this underside of nature, also, as God's handiwork. The harmony remains, yes; but it is often a ferocious, tooth-and-claw harmony that may suggest an almost brute power at work in creation.

Surely it is no accident that God speaks out of the whirlwind, suggesting unleashed, uncontrollable energy; and it may be instructive to remember that it is "a great wind . . . from across the wilderness" that brings death to members of Job's family (1:19). And out of that whirlwind comes a word of the divine delight in the incalculable diversity of creation. God speaks of the immensity of the oceans, light and darkness, snow and hail, floods and thunderbolts; God calls to Job's mind dew and ice, constellations and clouds, and even clods of dirt. Also God speaks of lions and ravens and mountain goats, of deer and donkeys. The ox is God's, as well as the ostrich, and the horse and hawk and hippo. This majestic address from the whirlwind might inspire in us, as it did in Job, an awe in the presence of God's creative imagination, for the created order is so multifarious and brimming with life and vitality that God alone can contain, sustain, and integrate its immense variety and precarious harmony. It seems, in fact, at times to totter on the brink of chaos.

This brings us back to that crocodile. Why, after all, would a long reflection on the crocodile be the punch line of God's oration, the evidence that finally drives Job to a profound sense of finitude and humility? Biblical scholars are quick to point out that the crocodile, or Leviathan, was a creature of importance in Canaanite mythology. For the Canaanites, whose religious imagery is often reflected (and harshly

judged) in the Hebrew Bible, the Leviathan-crocodile represented Lotan, a seven-headed monster of the swirling seas, a personification of the chaotic elements that are conquered in the act of creation. Psalm 74 reflects this mythic imagery of God's conquering and controlling of chaos:

Yet God is my king from of old, who works deeds of deliverance in the midst of the earth.
 Thou didst divide the sea by Thy strength; Thou didst break the heads of the sea monsters in the waters.
 Thou didst crush the heads of Leviathan; Thou didst give him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.
 Thou didst break open springs and torrents; Thou didst dry up ever-flowing streams.
 Thine is the day, Thine is the night; Thou hast prepared the light and the sun.
 Thou hast established all the boundaries of the earth; Thou hast made summer and winter.

(vv. 12-17)

It is a tantalizing possibility, then, that the crocodile that God so prizes in Job 41 is not simply the beast in the swamp, though it is certainly that; on a deeper, symbolic (and narrative) level, the crocodile evokes the image of the chaotic Leviathan, the swirling powers of the deep waters that threaten the order and well-being necessary to human existence. God has the monster under control—and is in fact its Creator!

Such reflections push us back to Genesis 1, where God's act of creation involves the divine Spirit-wind-breath (*ruach*) blowing over the chaotic, dark waters, and finally separating with the heavens "the waters which were below the expanse from the waters which were above the expanse," and then gathering "the waters below the heavens . . . into one place" so that dry land might appear (vv. 7, 9). This compelling picture of creation, in brief, involves God's act of "holding back chaos" or nothingness, symbolized by the formless, swirling void of deep, dark waters, so that order and structure ("dry land") may emerge. Creation is no less God's when it is characterized by swirling, threatening chaos, but creation as an ordered arena for living creatures, and especially human beings—giving them "a place to stand"—is that which God's life-giving Spirit, breathing and blowing upon the waters, brings into being.

Sometimes it is suggested that the creation account of Genesis is told in the light of the Jewish Exodus out of Egypt. If we keep in mind that the Exodus was, in fact, the central revelatory event in Jewish experience and memory, such a suggestion has merit. The psalm just

quoted above, in fact, seems to bring images of creation and Exodus into convergence, like a double-exposure photo; creation is extolled as one of God's "deeds of deliverance" in which He did "divide the sea" (74:12, 13). The logic of such an approach to creation would be, "The God who delivered us out of Egypt's bondage is also Creator of heaven and earth." In both events there is the powerful Spirit-breath of God "dividing" the waters, blowing back chaos, so that a new creation might occur. In Exodus, it is the creation of a people before God, a people of identity and dignity; in Genesis, it is the creation of a world. In both cases, God's word is the word of "Let there be"—let there be a real creation, a real people, a true "other" that is other than God, that is not "under God's thumb" or at the end of puppet strings.

On the human level, that experience of otherness is found in human freedom, in our capacity to refuse God's love and will for us, which results in moral evil; on the level of the rest of the created order, perhaps that experience of otherness is found precisely in this notion of chaos (which, while profoundly biblical, also fascinates modern physicists), which lends a certain indeterminacy, even stubbornness, to God's own creation! Might our experiences of what we call "natural evil" be interpreted as the occasional intrusions of "chaos" into the predictable, structured order of our lives? Remember, after all, that it is his suffering that inspires Job's questions of God, and that it is God's whirlwind address on the Leviathan, the monster of the chaotic deep, that finally silences those questions. This "monster" (on both the literal and symbolic levels) is indeed God's creation, but that does not stop it from threatening or injuring us from time to time.

Of course, if the Jewish understanding of creation is framed by their collective memory of the Exodus, we might expect to see Christians, too, interpreting the creation of the world through their "deliverance narrative," the gospel of Jesus Christ. And that, in fact, is the case: John's Gospel, for example, tells us that the creative word (*logos*) that God spoke in creation is the same Word that became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth (1:1, 14). Similarly, Paul insists that "for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him" (1 Cor. 8:6). The point is that the early Christian community, living in the light of Christ's powerful redemption, now saw even God's deed of creation in that light. "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. . . . And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (Col. 1:15, 17).

This has rich and profound implications for our understanding of God, of creation, and of the problem of evil. For understanding God, it means that our Christian confession is that the very heart of God in

the moment of creation is a Christlike heart. The bold statement of 1 John, "God is love" (4:8, 16), while not the result of theological speculation but of Christ's self-giving on the Cross, is nonetheless telling us that *God is eternally and unchangingly love*. In some way, if Christ is at the center of the Christian doctrine of creation, it will mean that God's act of creation reflects the very self-giving, self-surrendering love embodied in the Crucifixion. It is the word of "Let there be," the word of a Love who shares being with the *other* that creation is—it is this Word of Love who became flesh and dwell among us, who gave himself up for us. There is a cross in creation!

If indeed Christ on the Cross is the decisive revelation of God the Creator—the great historic parable of God's own suffering and vulnerability in relationship to the otherness of creation—then *the Creator truly is love*, and divine power is not a ruling fist but an open, bleeding hand. This only confirms our earlier hints about the need for a more adequate understanding of divine omnipotence. The very fact that Christ, the Word become flesh, was nailed to a cross by other men reveals a vulnerability on God's part, a willingness to suffer our abuses of freedom. God the omnipotent One does not hoard power but shares power. In the very act of creation, the God who is self-giving Love has shared His power, shared the quality of *being* that He alone possesses by nature. Anglican theologian John Macquarrie has written, "His creation was also a self-emptying. . . . His love and generosity led him to share existence with his creatures. [This is not simply] a limitation of power but also God's making himself vulnerable, for there cannot be this love and sharing and conferring of freedom without the possibility of suffering on the part of him who loves and shares and confers." The God we call omnipotent does not exercise all power, if indeed power has been shared with us. But this is far more than a matter of quantity, of divvying up power; rather, it may be more accurate to say that the very nature of divine power is *empowerment of the other*.

The doctrine of divine omniscience, too, undergoes a significant shift when interpreted through the lens of Christ's cross as the decisive revelation of God as love. It points us now toward the deeply significant rendering of knowledge in the Hebrew tradition (*yada*, e.g., "Adam knew Eve"). Here to know another is active involvement, participation, transforming engagement with the other—intercourse with the other in the most profound sense. This moves omniscience away from a kind of disinterested, passive, computer-like knowledge of every detail of the universe, and instead toward the omniscience of love that probes deeply into our lives. God actively loves us, and thus

God knows us. This seems far more in harmony with the Psalmist's declaration,

O Lord, Thou hast searched me and known me.
Thou dost know when I sit down and when I rise up; Thou dost understand my thought from afar.
Thou dost scrutinize my path and my lying down, and art intimately acquainted with all my ways.
Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Lord, Thou dost know it all.

(139:1-4)

Similarly, interpreting omnipresence in the light of the love revealed in the Cross unveils new shades of meaning. Yes, God is present everywhere, because His love impels Him to be *with* and *for* all creation. "God is love" means that He was in Auschwitz's fiery pits of burning children, in the eye-melting heat of the Hiroshima blast—and most particularly hanging on the cross of Jesus. But there is also a sense in which, because He is love, God in silence and pain awaits our response, our recognition of His presence. God does not *force* himself to be everywhere, in the sense of forcing our recognition and adoration. A story comes to mind of a Jewish rabbi who asked his students, "Where is God?" One bright and eager learner responded, "Everywhere, of course!" To which the rabbi answered, "God is wherever we let Him in." The omnipresence of God is an omnipresence of love, which quietly, even humbly, awaits our answering love.

This rather extended meditation on the character of the Creator as revealed in the Cross is important because it offers a different approach to theodicy, or the problem of evil. If, as the Wesleyan tradition has tended to say, divine sovereignty is in fact primarily a *sovereignty of love*, then the first thing to say about human suffering is that God, who is love, shares in it. When the Christian tradition pays heed to the cross of Jesus, it lays to rest any notion of an impassive, omnipotent deity on a distant heavenly throne, untouched and unaffected by the pains of creation. The God revealed in Jesus' suffering with and for us is a God who is vulnerable, who shares in the pain. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead reflected his deep immersion in the Christian vision when he called God "the fellow-sufferer who understands."

Important as that is in a Christian theodicy, it is not enough; it is good if God suffers with us and understands our sorrows, but finally we seek a deliverance from evil. And this is what the resurrection of Jesus from death promises us: If the Cross bespeaks God's willingness to suffer at the hands of creation, to feel with us the pangs of chaos as it threatens and sometimes harms us, then the Resurrection reminds us that God is the victorious Power. He has created with a purpose, a

retos, which the Hebrew prophets most often called *shalom*. This is an all-embracing sense of well-being that will permeate all creation, a vision of peace that sustains God's own struggle against the destructive effects of our freedom. Whether or not God will at some point in the future overrule our freedom in the interests of universal *shalom* is virtually impossible to say, but the indications of Scripture are that He would prefer our cooperation, our working together with Him, to accomplish a fulfilled creation. And as we offer ourselves as partners of God in His world, we are sustained by the conviction that "God is love"—that the love embodied in Christ is the Creative Power of the universe. This is the confidence in divine sovereignty the apostle Paul celebrated in the following passage: not the idea that God determines every event in our lives like some master solitary chess player, but that God's love for us is the one indestructible power in the universe.

For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. . . . But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:22-23, 37-39).