

## CONTEMPORARY JUDAISM AND CREATION THEOLOGY

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Creation has been the neglected question in modern Jewish theology. Partly because the issue did not fit well with the particularist agenda (“How are we different from our Christian neighbors?”), but also because we feared taking a clear position either supporting or opposing evolutionary theory, Jewish thinkers have remained mostly silent on the subject of life’s origins. In contrast to prior ages, when theologies of Creation served as the great font of life’s meaning, moderns seek to separate the search for meaning from the question of origins. Since we can no longer say that the world was created “for the sake of the righteous,” or “for Israel,” or “for Torah,” we find meaning in a Jewish life that has all too little to say about the big questions of how and why we all got here.

I believe that the urgent ecological agenda of the current century will change that situation quite radically. One of the most important roles of religion in the coming generations will be to affect our behavior with regard to the natural world and its resources. Humanity’s very survival demands a re-education regarding consumption, population control, and a host of other issues all having to do with our place in the fast-changing balances of the biosphere within which we exist. This conversation will perforce return us to the question of our place in the natural order and the process that led us to our now inescapable responsibility of stewardship over the existence of much more than our own species.

The current debates in some Christian circles about Creationism and Intelligent Design leaves most Jews cold. We are not fundamentalists or apologists for untenable theories of origin. Jews have embraced science since the beginning of the modern age; we accept Darwin and the developments of evolutionary biology since his time. It is to physicists rather than Kabbalists (though they sometimes sound similar!) we turn to try to understand being’s origins in the first emanations out of the black hole of primal nothingness.

But what does all this have to do with *God*? Assuming that the word “God” points, however inadequately, to ultimate reality and not merely to a human idea or a social construct, God surely must have some place in our thinking about how life came to be. Do we believe with the I. D. people that life is too complex to have developed on its own, that there must be a great brain with a plan behind it all? Or are we with the current pope and the more sophisticated (or “casuistic?”) Catholic thinkers who accept evolution as described by science but insist that it must be willed by God to work that way?

I want to suggest a different sort of function for religious language. Once we enter the world of “God,” it seems to me, we are no longer engaging in scientific or even philosophical discourse. There is nothing here that can be demonstrated by logical proofs or scientific experimentation. We must accept that situation fully and honestly. To speak of God is to address ourselves to a different level of discourse, to appeal to a quality of

mind that has much more in common with the mythopoetic imagination than it does with rational truth-claims.

To be fully human, however, is to live on more than a single frequency of mind. Poetry, music, and contemplation are all geared to address us on a rung of mental reality quite different than that of scientific discourse. This is the inner place to which religion speaks. It reveals a more profound truth about reality than does science, but it cannot express that truth in a cold, discursive prose that is alien to its mythic way of thought.

Our age is urgently in need of a new religious language, one that can take the account of origins that has shaped our age and view it through a deeper lens, one that will see it as sacred drama, not merely as a series of meaningless accidents. This poetic reframing of the tale will have to capture the human imagination, inspiring us to live as we must, to love the world around us, and to find our place within it.

The daunting task I set out for the new religious poets may be made easier by pointing out that it has all been done before. The author of the grand opening chapter of Genesis tells a tale of harmony, of Creation by a single God who expresses approval and delight for all that He has made. Behind this tale, well known to both the author and his readers, was the familiar Creation myth of the ancient Near East, one in which sky gods fought a great battle against the older gods of the sea, slaying them and setting out the earth on their carcasses. It is a tale of violence, aggression, and bloodshed, all quite hidden in the Genesis rewrite. We live in an era when a new Creation account has taken hold, this one too filled with competition for survival among rival forces, fights to the finish, and constant extermination of weaker species. A bold reframing of this tale is needed, one that will nourish a creative civilization much as Genesis did for so many centuries.

It is natural that we Jews, bearers of the old tale for so long, should want to take a hand, along with others, in composing this next one. If we have anything to say about it, this new myth will also speak of human dignity, of divine love for each creature, and of the value of rest and reflection about the very much unfinished task of Creation, the ongoing sacred drama that is the tale of all our lives.