Blenkinsopp, Joseph

Creation, Un-creation, Re-creation: A Discursive Commentary on Genesis 1–11


John E. Anderson
Augustana College
Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Joseph Blenkinsopp, emeritus professor of biblical studies at the University of Notre Dame, seeks to offer a new voice for how one reads the familiar stories in Gen 1–11. The main title of the book, Creation, Un-creation, Re-creation, tips its hat in the direction Blenkinsopp will ultimately argue, but potential readers of this book should not be so quick to assume Blenkinsopp is merely parroting this oft-recognized pattern. Indeed, Blenkinsopp presses beyond this understanding, and, while creation is central throughout the book, he also hits upon issues of theodicy, theology, authorship and source-critical discussions, the literary hallmarks and integrity of the text, and the diversity of possible interpretations, among a host of others. What emerges is a fresh rereading of Gen 1–11 that builds upon, enlightens, and enhances the familiar creation, uncreation, re-creation theme.

The central argument Blenkinsopp advances is twofold. First, he argues that “creation” is not a singular, one-time event in the biblical text that stands at the (literal) beginning and is generative for all that follows. Rather, creation is a process, an unfolding, a “coming-of-age” of sorts; for Blenkinsopp, Gen 1–11 in toto is about creation, which leads to his second and related argument: creation in Gen 1–11 is ultimately a theodicy. It wrestles with the question of how humanity was able to spiral so far downward and out of control...
in a world not only created good itself but created by a good God. These two strands undergird the entire commentary.

The book is divided into eight chapters and an epilogue. Given the breadth and depth of material addressed, this review can in no way hope to cover everything. I will thus aim to focus upon the way Blenkinsopp supports his double argument previously noted and emphasize along the way especially unique or novel perspectives that he offers.

In chapter 1, “Humanity: The First Phase,” Blenkinsopp tackles introductory issues and presents his argument. He notes that Gen 1–11 exists as its own self-sustaining literary unit, evidenced by the near-complete absence of cross-referencing with elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, its failure to mention Israel at all, as well as its intentional fivefold structure outlined by the phrase 'elleh tôlêdôt (2–4). On the matter of sources, Blenkinsopp does not entirely eschew such discussions in this volume, yet they are by no means at the fore. P (who he calls the “priest-scribe” throughout) establishes the basic thread that gives shape to the narrative, while J fills in some gaps; these source ascriptions, however, rightly do not dissuade Blenkinsopp from affirming the narrative integrity of the Gen 1–11 text.

In this introductory chapter he also addresses the question of theme for Gen 1–11 (concluding with creation as theodicy, mentioned above) and the topic of history or myth as the most apt descriptor (he settles, expectedly, on myth, describing it as follows: “we are thinking of myth not as the opposite of factuality or history but as a way of addressing and exploring matters of concern for the life of the individual in any society, at any period of history, and in the first place for our own lives at this point in history. Mythic narratives of the Genesis 1–11 kind were written, and possibly recited, not primarily to give information about the past but to add value and resonance to life in the present” [16]). Rounding out chapter 1 is a treatment of “creation beyond point zero,” that is, suggesting that creation is not focused on beginnings but is rather a process in which human creatures and even God adapt and change (16–19).

Chapter 2, “In the Beginning,” treats Gen 1:1–2:4a. Blenkinsopp understands the narrative to be concerned not with scientific questions so often erroneously asked of it but with matters of worship. On this model, for example, the cosmos functions as the cosmic

---

1. Readers familiar with Blenkinsopp’s *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1992) will be well-acquainted with his emphasis on the pentadic structure of not only the primeval history but also the ancestral history. Within the Gen 1–11 pentad, the story of Noah and the deluge occupies the esteemed and central third spot, therefore emphasizing all the more that Gen 1–11 is not merely about creation but also about uncreation and re-creation.
temple in which humanity is created for and sustained by worship.² Blenkinsopp dates Gen 1:1–2:4a to the Neo-Babylonian period or the early years of Achaemenid rule based upon affinities with Isa 40–48; these two texts together, he affirms, form the crux of a biblical theology of creation (22–25). Within this particular historical context, affinities with other creation accounts in the ancient Near East are to be expected; Blenkinsopp, however, emphasizes the points of contrast as being far more important and decisive for how one understands the narrative. Key for this is that humanity stands as the apex, both blessed by God and said to be “really good” (29).

On the question of “what was there before God spoke,” Blenkinsopp contends that Gen 1:1 is best translated “in the beginning of God’s creating the sky and the earth,” which supports neither the traditional view of creatio ex nihilo nor of an epic primordial victory over chaos but rather “the holding in check of life-threatening forces” (31). This point is essential for Blenkinsopp because it shows that chaos is not defeated once and for all but still lingers as an ever-present and potential threat to the good created order. But this notice raises another issue that Blenkinsopp says receives unfortunately little scrutiny in regard to Gen 1: Is the week-long creation all that can be said about creation? Or, asked another way, what can one deduce about the origins of primordial chaos, angels, and demons, whose existence is always taken for granted (39)? Blenkinsopp’s contention is that “their origins either remain to be discovered between the lines of Genesis 1 or there is a creation apart from and prior to the work of the six days” (45). After a thorough survey of the relevant creation texts from Job, Psalms, Proverbs, as well as early Jewish and Christian interpretive traditions, Blenkinsopp points to the ideas of the preexistence of wisdom, Torah, and Jesus as potential partners in this first creative enterprise.

In chapter 3, “The Story of the Man, the Woman and the Snake,” Gen 2–3 receives attention. Blenkinsopp ascribes much of the language used in these narratives to “late wisdom,” the exemplars of which are Proverbs and Job (57). The exchange between the woman and the serpent contain such wisdom elements. Yet this story also juxtaposes with Gen 1 in emphasizing that at the moment of its creation, humanity involuntarily enters into the drama of history, where malicious forces are already at work. The transgression in eating the fruit of the tree, therefore, does not lead to an ultimate rupture with the divine but rather suggests the tenacity of the divine character in holding steadfast to humanity, not abandoning them but rather “nudg[ing] them away from the fantasy of immortal ego consciousness in the direction of ‘the real world’ ” (80).

². On the idea of the cosmos as cosmic temple, see most recently John H. Walton, Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011).
Chapter 4, “Cain and Abel: A Murder Mystery,” introduces the first instances of the unfolding moral degradation of humanity. Blenkinsopp avers the possibility that Gen 4:1–16 may have existed as “a more explicit account of the origins of moral evil” in the world when compared with the Eden story (91), yet at the same time there are a number of striking affinities between the two stories: neither disobedience is punished by death, and YHWH takes special care to ensure the continued well-being of the transgressor (97). Blenkinsopp also provides an extensive survey of the various midrashic attempts to fill in the gaps of the Cain and Abel story, of which there are many, ranging from traditions about why YHWH refused Cain’s offering to the problematic creation of an ad hoc woman who was then ascribed blame for the murder (98–104). Cain, in the final analysis, is clearly the guilty party, and Blenkinsopp notes that, while he “could have become the model of the repentant sinner,” he instead becomes “the embodiment of malevolence,” showing that creation has begun to steer even further off course (104).

Chapter 5, “Enoch and His Times,” affords a remarkable amount of attention to the character Enoch. Regarding the issue of time, Adam’s genealogy in Gen 5 is said to have its terminus in 164 BCE, demonstrating again the priest-author’s emphasis on the cosmic temple—and the rebuilt Jerusalem temple—and the centrality of worship (109–10). Blenkinsopp next turns to the indistinct narrative of the sons of God and the daughters of men in Gen 6:1–4, arguing that it offers a negative comment on the expansive Adam genealogy that precedes it. The more sustained episode in the Book of the Watchers helps illuminate the much terser biblical episode: this sexual liaison becomes, following the logic of the narrative, the impetus for the deluge (124). The divine decision to send the flood amplifies all the more, Blenkinsopp says, that creation is about theodicy.

Chapter 6, “The Cataclysm,” is concerned with the third, central panel of the first pentad sequence in Genesis. After a survey of the ubiquitous flood traditions in the cultural milieu of the ancient Near East, Blenkinsopp hones in on what makes the biblical account distinctive. The narrative implies that God has, through this experiment called creation, come to learn something about humanity and its inclination toward evil; this intrinsic quality, however, does not preclude the possibility for righteousness, evidenced in Noah and his family (135–36). This point, however, raises an attendant difficulty that again highlights the theodicy theme: What is one to make of the righteous getting caught up in the same “annihilating judgment” of the “unrighteous world” (137)? Unfortunately, says Blenkinsopp, no answer is readily apparent.

The event itself is an act of uncreation, a return to chaos. Theologically, though, the narrative reveals a great deal more, for it sheds light on a God who is “in continuous and ongoing relation to humanity which exists in time and in history” and to a God who “will have such changes of heart” (144). For Blenkinsopp, moreover, the new created order is
certainly reminiscent of the original creation, yet not in every aspect. One significant change is that the relationship between humanity and animals is now typified by alienation; additionally, vegetarianism is no longer the norm (145). Despite this act of re-creation, the narrative leaves resonances that this is not how God had intended things to be. With this new reality, though, comes a new sense of covenant articulated by the priest-scribe. Covenants with Noah and Abraham are the only covenants known (Sinai is absent, says Blenkinsopp, in P’s overarching narrative), which evince “a shift away from bilaterality towards the idea of a free and unconditional commitment of God” (151). This covenant will reside in the divine memory; it is no longer governed by the need for a treaty of any kind.

Chapter 7, “The New Humanity,” centers on the Table of Nations in Gen 10 and the tower of Babel in Gen 11:1–9. It is interesting to note, however, that this “new” humanity actually has its origins with a family of survivors from the predeluge generation, which already hints at the fact that all will not be well going forward. Blenkinsopp reads the Table of Nations “as a symbolic approach to reconciling ethnic identity with a universalist perspective, implying a sense of shared moral obligation” (156). The tower of Babel scene, then, is literally after Gen 10 but, in the narrative world of the story, precedes it and explains the “breakdown of this ideal of commonality and reciprocity” (156). It is a flashback of sorts, and along with the Nimrod account (on which Blenkinsopp suggests it is making a narrative comment) tethers political and cultural advances to ego and violence (160). Very little has changed, it seems. The breakdown is all the more evident in the Babel scene, when God condescends to view the unimpressive tower yet does not communicate at all with humanity, whereas previously even human deviance had not precluded divine communication, seen with the first couple and with Cain (164).

In chapter 8, “From Shem to Abraham, From Myth to History,” Blenkinsopp notes that the divine focus begins to taper to a single familial line, that of Shem. This transitional genealogy marks the shift from myth and cosmic history to the beginnings of Israel’s history. Given the tôlêdôt structure enumerated earlier, Blenkinsopp does not regard Gen 12:1–3 as the great hinge von Rad held it to be; for Blenkinsopp, the tôlêdôt structure is decisive, and after this final unit there is “no narrative follow-up” (171), bringing Gen 1–11 to a definitive close.

The concluding epilogue, “Towards a Biblical Theology of Creation,” briefly investigates a number of topics. After a survey of the ways in which creation theology has been ill-treated or disregarded within Old Testament studies, Blenkinsopp advances Gen 1(–11) and Isa 40–55 as the heart of a biblical theology of creation. Both, he suggests, affirm YHWH’s steadfastness after a catastrophe: the prevailing image after the deluge in the primeval history and after the exile for Isaiah (180). After two cursory sections on old and
new creation in Paul and Christ as the wisdom of God, Blenkinsopp rounds out the commentary with a treatment of “the dark side of creation.” The central, theodical question remains at the fore, and according to Blenkinsopp, Gen 1–11 is an attempt, in the guise of myth, to examine that question: How is it that a world created good and by a good God experienced the emergence of evil to such epic proportions?

Blenkinsopp has poured a career’s worth of scholarship into nearly 200 pages, writing with erudition and insight into the key difficulties—textual, hermeneutical, and theological—that accompany Gen 1–11. I find his two-pronged argument—that creation is a process, not a simple beginning point, and that creation is ultimately about theodicy—to be convincing on a number of fronts; it achieves not only a fresh rereading of the primeval history but adds to its depth and complexity as the introduction to the entire Bible. Blenkinsopp has adeptly raised the profile of creation in the biblical text and joins a vibrant and robust conversation currently going on within scholarship that shows creation is not a marginal idea but one of fundamental and generative importance.3

This commentary also benefits from the impressive arsenal of textual support and diverse readings Blenkinsopp has amassed. His focus on literary precursors and interpretations within early Jewish and Christian texts—ranging from the midrashim to the church fathers—is especially commendable and demonstrates the rich range of potential meanings (plural) of these texts.

Blenkinsopp’s ardent resolve to underscore and work from the narrative logic of the text itself is another great strength. He rightly understands the priest-scribe redactor of Gen 1–11 to be a “competent author” who has constructed a narrative in a highly intentional way (56). While source discussions are not entirely absent in this volume, they are marginal comparatively, which presents a breath of fresh air and a welcome change from much traditional pentateuchal work, which at times can appear so infatuated with isolating the purportedly dissonant voices that readers are never able to see what the text itself as we have it is actually saying. Blenkinsopp offers up a word of caution that is worth heeding within Genesis and pentateuchal scholarship: “Genesis 1–11 is not just a combination of two sources pasted together like two computer files but the production of an author who worked up P and J, together with other source material, into a compelling narrative” (7).

The description “discursive commentary” in the subtitle is definitely an apt descriptor of what Blenkinsopp has achieved. This discursive model is, to my eye, both a strength and a potential liability. It is a strength inasmuch as the commentary is nearly exhaustive in scope, covering questions from what was the mark placed on Cain to ancient Near Eastern parallels to creation in Paul to whether the first couple had sex or not in the garden, among a litany of others. One excellent example of the strength of the discursive aspect occurs in chapter 2, while responding to the question of whether there is more to creation than simply the seven-day week; Blenkinsopp leads the reader through a discussion of Ps 104, Job 28, Prov 8:22–31, Sirach, Deut 24:23–29, Heb 1:2–3, John 1:1–3, and Wis 8:1, among others, as a way of approaching the question. But there is a downside: at several places it becomes quite easy to lose the narrative itself, and on some occasions Blenkinsopp himself never seems to return from following his discursive path.

In reading, I noted two inconsequential typos that could be corrected if another edition is planned. First, on page 74 the text reads “and to partake if it himself”; this should read “partake of it.” Second, on page 108 the text reads “if the calculations are correct, It should therefore end in the year” but should read “correct, it should therefore end in the year.”