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Journal for the Study of
the New Testament
2025, Vol. 47(3) 355–375
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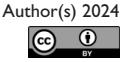
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Christ and Creation in the Synoptic Gospels

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Abstract
Observing that most scholarly attention to the theme of Christ and creation has taken place in Pauline and Johannine studies, this essay addresses a relatively neglected factor in Synoptic studies. On the assumption that, scripturally speaking, 'creation' is a relational category in terms of which time, space, persons, and values are interpreted in relation to God in God's sovereignty, the essay draws attention to the multiple ways creation, interpreted christologically and eschatologically, shapes the Evangelists' portraits of Jesus both literarily and theologically. The main conclusion is that creation, including stories of the beginnings of the world and of the people of Israel, offers the Evangelists significant ways to speak about the meaning of history and human existence as given by God in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of God's Son. This revelation is understood as ultimate victory in the battle against the forces of chaos and death and as the inauguration of a redeemed sociality.

Keywords
Christ, cosmology, creation, eschatology, exorcisms, healings, miracles, parables, Synoptic Gospels, temple, Torah

Introduction

In his brilliant essay, 'Christ, Creation and the Church', published in honour of C. H. Dodd, Nils Dahl (1956) makes a compelling case for points of correlation (both negative and positive) in New Testament eschatology between creation and salvation, first things and last things, Adam and Christ, Israel and the Church. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the focus of his attention is the eschatology of the Pauline corpus in the context of comparable eschatological reflection in

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Second Temple and rabbinic Judaism. Only in the final paragraphs does he turn to the Gospels. With respect to the Synoptics, he makes the following percipient comment:

> Here, too, we must take care not to elaborate with a false antithesis between eschatology and the work and will of God the Creator. The miracles of Jesus should, for instance, hardly be understood as *either* eschatological signs *or* deeds of mercy; they are one of these things in being the other. In a similar way, the moral teaching of Jesus insists upon the original will of the Creator, and just in this way it is the revelation of the will of God for the last days, in which the Kingdom of God is proclaimed on earth. The freedom of Jesus with regard to Sabbath laws is derived from his messianic authority, and at the same time brings the purpose of the Creator to realization: 'The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath' (Mark ii, 23–8).

Since the publication of Dahl's essay, considerable attention has been given to the theme of Christ and creation in the Fourth Gospel (e.g. Painter 2002; du Rand 2005; Klink 2008; Brown 2010); but, so far as I am aware, comparatively little in relation to the Synoptics (cf. Adams 2007: 133–81; Bird 2008; Pennington 2008; Walton; 2008; Bauckham 2012). This essay is offered, therefore, as a modest attempt to address a neglected factor in the study of the theologies of the Synoptic Evangelists in the hope of provoking further research.

Thinking about Creation

The subject of 'creation' is multi-faceted and all-embracing. Its dimensions are religious, cultural-symbolic, historical, doctrinal, liturgical, rhetorical, epistemological, political, moral, and material—all of which helps to explain why accounts of, and appeals to, how the present and future relate to what is said to have been 'in the beginning' have such weight (cf. Cahill 2005). Indeed, given its *normative potency* for societies and groups in specific historical contexts, it is not surprising that 'creation' is a matter of ongoing interpretation, nor that its invocation and performance in law and life become a focus of identity and controversy in times both ancient and modern.[1]

Scripturally speaking, 'creation' is how life in time and space is differentiated, classified, ordered, narrativized, and performed in relation to God as creator and sustainer of all that is.[2] Like 'covenant', but of more overtly universal significance, it is a *relational* category expressing the dependence of all that is on God

1. Regarding 'creation' as a focus of controversy, one thinks of Gnosticism in the second century and of Darwinian evolution in the nineteenth and twentieth. On the former, see Logan 1996; on the latter, see Cunningham 2010.
2. Valuable on getting beyond abstract and 'merely naturalistic' accounts of creation is Welker 1991. On differentiation and classification, see Eilberg-Schwartz 1990: 217–34.

in God's sovereignty. In respect of the Gospels, written as they are in the light of the death and resurrection of the Messiah understood as the revelation in history of a new order of things, creation is re-framed christologically and eschatologically in terms of the one who is (to co-opt the language of the Apocalypse) 'the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end' (Rev. 22.13; cf. 1.17).

The scope of this re-framing is wide, and its creativity in gospel proclamation and Gospel texts is profound. Aspects of that creativity include attention to the following: i. creation texts such as Gen. 1–3, including implications for the existential realities of evil and death (cf. van Kooten 2005); ii. wisdom texts and the idea that the Wisdom of God is implicated in and mediated through creation; iii. temple, cult, calendar, and festivals in their significance in maintaining creation (including people) in alignment with the will of the Creator; iv. the Torah, including sabbath law, as a key to creation's mysteries; and not least v. Jesus' proclamation and embodiment of the kingdom of God in the context of ancient constitutional ideals of kingship, cosmic harmony, and communal wellbeing.

Creation as Gospel-Shaping: Beginnings and Endings

Indicative of the ways in which creation is enlisted in relation to Jesus and the end of all things is how creation shapes the Gospel texts literarily as well as theologically. Creation and narrative are intertwined. History in its literary expression is presented as creation fleshed out.

Beginnings

Thus, a remarkable feature of the Gospel narratives (shared with a number of other New Testament texts, e.g. Col. 1.15–20; Eph. 1.3–14; Heb. 1) is that they begin their accounts of Jesus from the beginning—that is, from creation. In relation to the traditions of Israel and Judaism, this is by no means unprecedented. It is what the redactors of the Pentateuch do in placing the books of Genesis and Exodus at the beginning of their history of Israel. It is reflected in the strategy of the priestly author of the *Book of Jubilees* in offering, as secret revelation transmitted by angels to Moses on Mount Sinai, *halakah* in the form of an elaboration of Gen.1—Exod 12 (cf. *Jubilees* 1.27, 29; 2.1). It is also what Josephus does in beginning his history of the Jewish people from the story of creation (cf. *Jewish Antiquities* I.27). For Josephus, as for his forebears and contemporaries in Judaism, creation is profoundly *historical and constitutional* (cf. Miller 2000: 422–44).

Overall, the observation of Shemaryahu Talmon (1987: 98–119, at 118) on what he calls 'the blending of creation with history', and on the way Jewish

liturgy and life historicize creation by making creation present in the everyday, is highly pertinent:

> The Hebrew Bible tends to view creation in historical terms and to conceive of history in imagery drawn from the creation accounts. In his daily prayers, morning and evening, a Jew praises God, "who alone effects mighty deeds, makes new phenomena … master of wondrous acts who in his benevolence forever renews creation day after day." This understanding of creation as forever being present in the life of the individual and the community culminates in a prayer which is recurrently offered on the New Year festival after the sounding of the shofar, the ram's horn: "This day the world was called into being. This day all creatures of the universe stand in judgment before thee as children or as servants. If as children, have pity on us as a father pities his children; and if as servants, we call upon thee to be gracious unto us and merciful in judgment of us, O revered and holy God."[3]

When we turn to the Gospels, this historicization of creation is apparent. It is as if the story of Jesus and his significance cannot be communicated adequately apart from the larger story of how God in God's sovereignty relates in judgement and mercy to the world of time and space.

This is widely recognized of the Fourth Gospel, with its '*In the beginning* was the Word' (Jn 1.1) re-narrating Gen. 1 to present the one who becomes incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth as no less than the key to creation and universal salvation, the 'true light which enlightens everyone' (Jn 1.9a; cf. Gen. 1.3).[4] Creation reinterpreted and particularized is the overture to the christological symphony which follows. The Synoptic Gospels do it differently: but for them also the creation of the world by God as narrated in Genesis, and the creation of Israel under Moses as narrated in Exodus are crucial *sites of orientation and ongoing significance* for their respective stories of Jesus.

So: regarding Mark, the very first word of his gospel, Ἀρχὴ, echoes the ἐν ἀρχή of Gen. 1.1 (LXX), while at other points, Genesis and creation are engaged explicitly.[5] Even more important is the Book of Exodus (as interpreted by Isaiah), quoted at the beginning of Mark's Prologue (Mk 1.2–3; cf. Isa. 43.16ff.), signalling that Jesus is inaugurating a new exodus, an event itself redolent of creation.[6]

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3. Pertinent along the same lines is Ollenburger 1987: 54–71, esp. 59–63.
4. Note also the remarkable tenfold appeal in the Johannine Epistles (at 1.1; 2.7, 13, 14, 24 [2x]; 3.8, 11; 2 Jn 5–6) to what was 'from the beginning' (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς); and see further, Trebilco 2021.
5. Compare the explicit allusions to Genesis, where ἀρχή is used, in Mk 10.6 (on which more below) and 13.19.
6. As Watts (2000: 478) puts it: 'The Exodus cannot be understood apart from Genesis. It fulfils the patriarchal promises of progeny and land … and begins a new creation, albeit in microcosm, whereby God establishes a new humanity, provides them with a new Edenic land, and dwells among them'.

Matthew, strikingly, begins his gospel, Βίβλος γενέσεως (Mt. 1.1), an opening with several connections between the story of the birth of Jesus and the primeval history: Matthew uses the same formula for genealogies found at the beginning of Genesis (Gen. 2.4; 5.1, LXX), as if Jesus is being enrolled in a much bigger narrative of creation and fulfilment; also, as a likely allusion to the title, 'Book of Genesis', it implies that the story of Jesus about to be told is the story of creation seen in a new light.[7]

Like Matthew, Luke also 'locates' Jesus genealogically early on (Lk. 3.23–38). Significantly, whereas Matthew traces Jesus' genealogy in descending order from Abraham, Luke traces it in ascending order to '*son of Adam*, son of God' (3.38). The effect—in line with Luke's message of universal salvation—is to ascribe to Jesus the universal significance of the first Adam from the story of the creation.[8]

Endings

If creation (and exodus) motifs shape Gospel beginnings, they also shape Gospel endings—in the twofold sense of what Jesus prophesies about the end-time and of how the story of Jesus itself ends. Indeed, the two senses are intertwined, as if to suggest that the end-time of creation and the climax of human history begins with the ending of the story of Jesus.

Limiting ourselves to Mark's Gospel, and turning first to Jesus' prophecies, what stands out is the extent to which the end-time is characterized as the *unmaking of creation*. Thus, Mk 13 has Jesus prophesy suffering of a kind 'such as has not been *from the beginning of the creation that God created* until now' (13.19). Pivotal is the destruction of the temple (Mk 13.2)—pivotal because the temple is understood as a microcosm of the cosmos and the place where daily divine service, properly performed, keeps the cosmos in life-sustaining order and motion.[9] Then come the dire corollaries: the disintegration of international order (13.7–8a), geological upheaval (13.8b), social enmities of the most unnatural kind (13.9, 12–13), and the collapse of precisely what God put in place according to Gen. 1: 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken' (13.24–25)[10]—in sum, evoking Gen. 1.1 in such a way as to dramatize the sense

7. See further Davies and Allison (1988): 149–60, noting at 151: 'By opening his gospel with another book's title, Matthew almost certainly intended to set up his story of Jesus as a counterpart to the story of Genesis.'
8. Paul, of course, takes the Adam/Christ analogy much further: for example, at Rom. 5.12–21. See further, Dunn 1988: 90–101.
9. Cf. Levenson 1984: 275–298; also Hayward 1996: esp. 6–10 and the texts from Philo and Josephus offered at 108–53.
10. See further, Adams 2007: 133–66.

of catastrophe, '*heaven and earth will pass away*' (13.31a), but not before the rescue of the elect 'from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven' (13.27). So along with warnings of uncreation, there is the intimation of new creation, not least in the birthing imagery of the phrase, 'the beginning of the birthpangs [ἀρχὴ ὠδίνων]' (13.8b).

All this is reinforced in the ending of the story of Jesus in Mark 14–16. It is as if the unmaking (and remaking) of creation is offered as the hermeneutical lens through which to see what happens to Jesus *and* what happens to Jesus as the catalyst for the same unmaking and remaking. This time, the temple in process of destruction is the body of Jesus (14.58; 15.29). The king-messiah, God's vice-regent in creation, is being undone in torture and death (15.16–32). As if in cosmic sympathy, the solar system is dissolving, for there is darkness *at noon* 'over the whole land [or better, earth]' (15.33; cf. 13.24). And the temple curtain, richly embroidered with cosmic symbols,[11] is despoiled, being 'torn in two from top to bottom' (15.38). Nevertheless, that the story of Jesus ends with the angelic announcement of Jesus' having been raised (i.e., by God), speaks of the eschatological overcoming of the forces of uncreation—above all, the overcoming of death and the powers of evil. As such, the final intimation is one of new creation and new life in the kingdom of God.

With regard to Gospel beginnings and endings overall, then, motifs drawn from Genesis and Exodus provide the Synoptic Evangelists with essential ingredients for showing that the ways of God with creation and cosmos have reached their fulfilment in Jesus—that Jesus is the key: to the purposes of God in space and time, to the mystery of salvation, and to how to live in the face of evil, suffering and death.

Creation and the Understanding of God in the Synoptics

As well as influencing the shaping of the Gospel narratives, creation motifs underlie their essential subject-matter. Most important in this connection are the characterizations of God and God's relation to the world. Here, the fundamental assumption is the recurring scriptural testimony, from Gen. 1.1 on, to God as creator of all things, the sovereign Lord 'who made heaven and earth, the sea and all

11. Cf. Josephus, *Jewish War*, V, 212–214 (LCL translation):

> Before these [doors] hung a veil … of Babylonian tapestry, with embroidery of blue and fine linen, of scarlet also and purple, wrought with marvellous skill. Nor was their mixture of materials without its mystic meaning: it typified the universe. For the scarlet seemed emblematical of fire, the fine linen of the earth, the blue of the air, and the purple of the sea. … On this tapestry was portrayed a panorama of the heavens, the signs of the Zodiac excepted [for Jews do not worship animals].

that is in them' (Ex. 20.11; Ps. 146.6; cf. Pss. 33.6–9; 104) and who reigns from his throne in heaven (cf. Pss. 11.4; 103.19). But also at play is the complex shaping of creation traditions by various 'voices of authority' in Israel and Judaism—especially those associated with temple and cult, wisdom and prophecy (Brooke 1987: 235–41)—all reinterpreted in the light of Jesus and the Spirit within the historical matrix of the fraught social realities of the parting of the ways between church and synagogue. In brief, eschatologically oriented re-imaginings of scriptural creation motifs allow for a re-narration of God's relation both to the world and to God's chosen people with a view to the generation of new understandings of existence and the legitimation of new forms of community.

Matthew's Gospel is a case in point. Shaped by traditions of wisdom and apocalyptic (cf. Bendoraitis 2017), Matthew's story of God's presence in Jesus and the scriptural story of creation (including that of Israel) are intertwined and mutually interpreting. Thus, the fulfilment of the divine plan of salvation is told in a way that *both links and distinguishes* heaven and earth (5.34–35), creation and new creation (19.28), and Israel and the eschatological family of 'all nations' (28.19). Characteristic of this binary worldview, God is transcendent, an ontological and moral-relational quality signified cosmographically: God is the '*heavenly* Father' (6.26), his dwelling is in 'the heavens' (6.9) and his realm is 'the kingdom of the heavens' (4.17).[12] As such, God is distinct from, and sovereign over, creation (11.25). But as the 'heavenly *Father*', God cares for his people on earth, doing so in two ways. First, God's care is providential and universal, as in Jesus' famous double invitation to his followers and the accompanying crowds to 'Look at the birds of the air! … Consider the lilies of the field!' (6.26, 28), as the way of wisdom for restraining anxiety over mundane matters. Second, God's care is revelatory and salvific, as in Jesus' thanksgiving prayer in the face of rejection in the cities: 'I thank you, *Father, Lord of heaven and earth*, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants …' (11.25).

A corollary of God's transcendence is that God's care for the world is mediated, a mediation carried out by agents both celestial and terrestrial. In Gospels cosmology, heavenly and earthly space is populated by beings visible and invisible. Angels, for example, are particularly prominent in Matthew—as heavenly messengers revealing the divine will (1.20), shaping the course of human action (2.13, 19), representing the 'little ones' to God in heaven (Mt. 18.10), and acting on behalf of the heavenly Son of Man at the end-time judgement (13.41–42, 49–50; 24.31; 25.31) (Bendoraitis 2015). Among other celestial beings, a star, understood as a heavenly agent, is present to guide the magi (2.2, 7, 9–10)

12. Matthew's cosmographic interest is evident in his practice of changing 'the kingdom of God' in his Markan source, to 'the kingdom of *the heavens*' (cf. Mt. 4.17//Mk 1.15). The plural form occurs 32 times in Matthew. See further, Pennington 2008: 29–30.

(Allison 2005), while the sun (noting, '*his* sun') rises and the rain falls at the Father's behest (5.45).

Supreme among God's agents, however, is Jesus God's Son, understood as 'God with us' (1.23; 28.20) come in judgement and mercy. In ways evocative of the birth of Israel with Moses and the exodus, Jesus calls eschatological Israel into being through a ministry of preaching, teaching and healing (cf. 4.23; 11.2–6). Then, following his epochal death and resurrection—accompanied by cosmological sympathy in the form of earthquakes (27.51; 28.2)!—Jesus himself, as the one to whom 'all authority *in heaven and on earth* has been given' (28.18), sends out agents of the kingdom. An ending becomes a new beginning. What began with the creation of the heavens and the earth in Gen. 1.1, and what began again with the Βίβλος γενέσεως of Jesus the Messiah of Mt. 1.1, is beginning again with the mission to 'all nations' (28.19) towards a temporal ending of 'the age' determined by God as sovereign (28.20).

Creation and the Portrayal of Jesus in the Synoptics

More needs to be said about creation in relation to Jesus. Fundamental to the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus and his mission is his proclamation in speech and action of the breaking in of the kingdom of God/heaven (cf. Mk 1.15a, par. Mt. 4.17). An important question, therefore, concerns the relation between God's sovereignty over time and space from the beginning and God's sovereignty in the present and future in and through Jesus.

Creation, the Kingdom of God, and Jesus as Messiah and Son of God

In John's Gospel, mentioned previously, the relation is given provocative expression in the presentation of Jesus as God's Word (λόγος)—the Word through whom creation came into being (cf. Gen. 1.3; also Ps. 33.6)—*becoming flesh*, and collaborating with God in doing God's ongoing, life-bestowing 'work' (cf. Jn 4.34; 5.17, 20, 36; 9.3–4; 10.37–38) (Borgen 1987). In the story of a Jesus whose 'sign'-miracles resonate with scriptural narratives of creation and exodus, and in the work of the Spirit in bringing people to *new birth* (cf. 3.3–8), creation becomes new creation and an eschatological community comes into being.

In the Synoptics, the relation of God in creation to God in Jesus is conveyed somewhat differently, focusing on the tensive symbol, 'kingdom of God'. Put briefly, the kingdom as embodied in Jesus is *creation reaching fulfilment*, God's sovereignty over all things in time and space being brought to fruition with the advent of the Messiah, God's Son.

A brilliant expression of this is Mark's Prologue (1.1–15) with its stories of Jesus' baptism and testing culminating in his kingdom proclamation. At the baptism, as Jesus comes up out of the water, he sees the heavens 'torn apart' (1.10).

The verb σχίζω is used only here and at the crucifixion where the curtain of the temple is 'torn in two [ἐσχίσθη εἰς δύο]' (15.38). The link is intentional (Bird 2008: 49–55). What is signified at the beginning and ending of the Gospel is 'an irreversible cosmic change' (Marcus 2000: 165). The rending of the heavens allowing the descent of the Spirit represents the eschatological response to the plea of the Isaianic prophet, 'O that you would *tear open* the heavens and come down!' (Isa. 64.1a), a plea which has in view the creation of 'new heavens and a new earth' (Isa. 65.17a). And the rending 'from top to bottom' of the temple curtain, adorned as it was with symbols of heavenly bodies in the colours of the cosmos (mentioned previously), represents the end of the old order of things, with Jesus in death proclaimed 'Son of God' (15.39), and with the new life of the resurrection in the offing (16.1–8). Furthermore, the portrayal of the Spirit 'descending like a dove [ὡς περιστερὰν]' on Jesus (1.10)—evoking Gen. 1.2, where the Spirit moves over the surface of the waters like a bird—reinforces this sense of cosmic change and new creation with the revelation of the Son of God (Markus 2000: 159–60).

But there is more. The same Spirit which has descended upon and empowered Jesus, 'immediately' drives him into the wilderness to be tested by Satan, as if to begin the cosmic battle with the powers of darkness without delay (1.12). That Jesus as God's Son is victorious is not made explicit, but it is implied in the remarkable *dénoument* unique to Mark: 'and [Jesus] was *with the wild beasts*, and the angels waited on him' (1.13b). As Richard Bauckham (2012: 111–32) has shown, the vision portrayed here with maximum economy is of the restoration of Paradise. Jesus in companionable relationship with the wild animals and being waited on by the angels evokes the peace in creation which Adam forfeited by succumbing to temptation by the serpent (Bauckham 2012: 115–16; Marcus 2000: 168–71). Perhaps even more evidently, it represents the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy of the eschatological peace between human and non-human creatures in a renewed creation which would accompany the coming of the Davidic Messiah:

> The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. … They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Isa 11.6–9)

This is a vision of Eden, God's 'holy mountain' (cf. Ezek. 28.13–14), restored in Israel in the messianic age (cf. also *Sibylline Oracles* 3.788–795). So now, as the divine Son, the eschatological Adam and the Davidic Messiah, having bested Satan in initial combat and made peace with the wild beasts, Jesus is ready to appear in public to announce with full authority the in-breaking of the kingdom of God (1.15). The cosmic battle now becomes street-level; and the rest of Mark's narrative is the revelation of the divine sovereignty in Jesus' teaching, healings, exorcisms, wondrous works (on which, more below), and above all

(and most paradoxically), in his life-giving, death-defeating death and resurrection (France 1990).

Creation in the Teaching of Jesus

God's kingship over creation is an *ordering activity* with a view to generating, sustaining, judging and renewing life in holiness and wholeness. This ordering activity is manifest in Israel in law, prophecy, wisdom, and the symbols and rituals of the cult. Just so, as God's Son and kingdom agent, it is not surprising that Jesus is portrayed as, *inter alia*, an authoritative interpreter of Torah and a teacher of eschatological wisdom—and that such portrayals have creation as a significant point of reference.

Jesus' Interpretation of the Torah

A case in point is the dispute over the divorce law in Mark 10.2–12 and parallels (Doering 2009). The thrust of Jesus' reply to the Pharisees' appeal to the Deuteronomic law permitting divorce (cf. Deut. 24.1), is to allow the Book of Genesis—and specifically, the story of creation (noting the quotations from Gen. 1.27c and 2.24)—to trump the Book of Deuteronomy:

> But *from the beginning of creation* [ἀπὸ δὲ ἀρχῆς κτίσεως] 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. (Mk 10.6–9).

The underlying rationale is eschatological, reflected in the concentration of references to 'the kingdom of God' (at 9.47; 10.14, 15, 23, 24, 25) in this crucial central section of the Gospel (8.27—10.45). The reality of God's coming in power to overthrow evil and to renew his people is envisaged as (in some sense) a restoration of Eden, a return to how God intended things to be 'from the beginning'. It is the principle of *Endzeit gleich Urzeit*, with the practice in the eschatological community of lifelong marital oneness as testimony to God's sovereign will—to 'what *God* has joined together' (10.9a).[13]

Of course, other Synoptic texts show that this is not the whole story.[14] On the one hand, there are traditions of a casuistic kind regulating (and therefore implicitly accepting) divorce (cf. Mk 10.10–12; Mt. 5.32; 19.9; Lk. 16.18). On the other hand, there are traditions favouring singleness and celibacy. Thus, the Jesus of Matthew speaks of 'eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of

13. Note, by way of corroboration, that in Mk 10.28–30, those of their kin group whom followers of Jesus may be forced to leave do *not* include wives (in contrast with Lk. 18.29b!).
14. See further, Loader 2005: 61–120. Significantly for the theme of creation, his discussion is entitled, 'Order and Chaos: Marriage and Divorce'.

the kingdom of heaven' (Mt. 19.12c);[15] and in Luke, eschatology and the ascetic life are close corollaries (cf. Lk. 20.34–36; also 2.36–38; 9.57–62; 14.20; 17.26–27; 18.29–30). But here, too, interpretations of paradisal existence, in the form of speculation concerning the sexual life of Adam and Eve, may have played a part (cf. 2 *Baruch* 56.6) (Anderson 1989). As Dale Allison (1998: 208) puts it:

> Because many hoped for an eschatological return to things as they were in the beginning, it is possible that Jesus understood chastity as a replay of paradise and thus an anticipation of eschatological existence, in other words, as a proleptic recovery of 'the glory of Adam'.

A second instance concerns disputes over *sabbath law* and observance (Doering 2010). At several points, the Synoptic Gospels tell of complaints against Jesus for alleged infringements of the sabbath (e.g., Mk 3.1–6 and parallels; Lk. 13.10–17).[16] The complaint against Jesus' disciples for plucking grain on the sabbath is one such (Mk 2.23–28; Mt. 12.1–8; Lk. 6.1–5). In the background is the prohibition in the Decalogue of work on the sabbath, along with subsequent developments in Jewish sabbath *halakah*. Significantly, the two versions of the commandment offer differing, if complementary, rationales. The Deuteronomic version sets the command to rest and the prohibition of work in the context of what it means to be God's covenant people liberated from slavery (Deut. 5.12–15). The version in Exodus sets the command in the context of God's universal concern for the well-being of humankind as a whole, the warrant for which is the Genesis creation narrative: 'For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it' (Exod. 20.8–11, at v.11; cf. Gen. 2.1–3). Against this background, two elements of Jesus' defence of his disciples stand out. The first is the eschatological messianism implicit in Jesus' appeal to the precedent set by David ('Have you never read what David did …?'). The second is the climactic saying unique to the Markan Jesus ('The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath', at 2.27), a defence redolent of the universalistic rationale evident in Exod. 20.11 and rooted in the story of creation. In this connection, Lutz Doering draws attention to the use of a form of the verb γίνομαι in Mk 2.27 (as in, 'The sabbath *was made* [ἐγένετο] for humankind') as implying a reference to 'the institution of primordial Sabbath' in Gen. 2.1–3. He goes on: 'One possible interpretation of this relation [to the Genesis narrative] is to view it in the context of a restoration of paradisal conditions

15. For background to this extraordinary saying, see van der Horst 2002.
16. For development of sabbath controversy tradition in the Fourth Gospel, significant not least for their parallels with Jewish interpretations of Gen. 2.2–3 and debate over whether or not God is always active (even on the sabbath), see Borgen 1996.

proclaimed by Jesus as part of his eschatological mission of the kingdom of God.' (Doering 2010: 217).[17]

Jesus as a Teacher of Eschatological Wisdom

Comparable with Jesus' appeals to creation in regard to Torah interpretation are the creation motifs in his wisdom teaching.[18] A good example comes in the Sermon on the Mount, at Mt. 6.25–26 (par. Lk. 12.22–24):

> Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you nor of more value than they?

Jesus here addresses the danger of personal and social anxiety, likely corollaries of adherence to the radical values and practices of *askēsis* consonant with participation in the kingdom of heaven (cf. 6.19–24).[19] As Allison (1999: 147) points out, the text resonates with scriptural wisdom traditions such as Job 38.41, according to which God 'provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food' (cf. Ps. 147.9; *Psalms of Solomon* 5.9–10). In 6.25–26, an argument for God's providential care for faithful disciples is advanced by appeal to an analogy with divine providence in the non-human creation, with the direction of the analogy running from the lesser to the greater. That disciples (and by implication human beings generally) are, on this argument, accorded more worth than birds is taken as a given, and doubtless reflects the exalted status accorded humankind in the Genesis creation narrative (cf. Gen. 1.26–28). At the same time, the positive worth of all God's creatures is taken as a given also. Overall, Allison's wider reflection on the kind of theology represented here is pertinent: 'Because 6.26 draws an inference about God from the birds, it also offers a sort of simple natural theology: Jesus gathers something about God's dealings with humanity by looking at how God works in the natural world (cf. Job 12:7–8; Prov. 6:6–11).' (Allison 1999: 147).

17. Joel Marcus's comment (Marcus 2000: 246) on 2.27 is *à propos*: 'In our passage, then, the Markan Jesus appeals to God's original will in creation, and its eschatological renewal in his own ministry, in order to defend his disciples' infraction of Sabbath regulations.'
18. As the Gospels show, such wisdom often takes the rhetorical and literary form of analogies, aphorisms, parables, allegories, and stories, all with deep roots in the wisdom and prophetic literature of the scriptures. See further, Witherington 1994: 147–208.
19. A similar wisdom injunction, again taking birds as the basis for the analogy, comes in the mission instructions in Mt. 10.28–31 (par. Lk. 12.4–7), where Jesus exhorts his disciples to face persecution without fear: 'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. … So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.'

Jesus as a Teacher in Parables

Communicating the μυστήριον of the in-breaking kingdom of God (cf. Mk 4.11) 'by looking at how God works in the natural world' is especially characteristic of Gospel parables, a genre of ancient wisdom particularly prominent in Israelite and Jewish prophetic and apocalyptic circles whose prophets, seers, and mystics sought to discern the hand of God in world history, especially in times of crisis (Drury 1985: 7–38). As far as the Gospels are concerned, it is as if the revelation of God's power—in the history of Israel and, above all, in the story of Jesus and his followers—is so disconcerting, so against all the odds, so 'hidden in plain sight', that the disclosure of its truth requires the aid of figurative speech like parables, including parables drawn from the created order.[20]

In this connection, images of an organic, agricultural kind are powerful, not only because they speak from and into a predominantly agrarian environment, but also because they are particularly apt for conveying ideas rich in moral-symbolic potential—ideas of new beginnings, of growth and decay, of vulnerability and flourishing, and of the seasons and the passing of time. They also draw upon a tradition. Hosea, for example, addresses Israel as follows: 'Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground; for it is time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you' (Hos. 10.12). An oracle in Jeremiah runs similarly: 'For thus says the Lord to the people of Judah and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem: "Break up your fallow ground, and do now sow among thorns. …"' (Jer. 4.3; cf. also Isa. 55.10).[21]

So, in Mark's collection of kingdom parables in chapter 4, the ultimate victory of God through Jesus as the climax of history is revealed (and concealed) in images of seed, soil, yield and harvest, tree branches and nesting birds (cf. 4.3–8, 14–20, 26–29, 30–32). What the first, longest, and apparently normative[22] Parable of the Sower (so-called) suggests, for example, is that God's rule on earth will triumph magnificently—hence the climactic, abundant yield of fruit, 'thirty, sixty and a hundredfold' (4.20)—but that it will do so '*despite all evidence to the contrary*' (Marcus 2000: 295, italics in the original), as the failures and opposition depicted in the first three-quarters of the parable imply. The qualification ('*despite all evidence to the contrary*') is crucial. It corresponds with the wider narrative concerning the ever-increasing hostility to Jesus culminating

20. On the related issue of how the truth about history is discerned, see Marcus 1984.

21. See further, Drury 1985: 26–28, 52–53. Drury draws particular attention to 2 Esdras 4.26–32 (cf. also 8.41; 9.31) for its use of images of seed, sowing, and harvest in a context of revelation for the purpose of shedding light on a catastrophe: 'why Israel has been given over to the Gentiles in disgrace; why the people whom you loved has been given over to godless tribes, and the law of our ancestors has been brought to destruction and the written covenants no longer exist' (2 Esdras 4.23).

22. Cf. Mk 4.13: 'And [Jesus] said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?"'

in the crucifixion; and it comports well with what is implied about the lived experience of followers of Jesus—their suffering and ultimate vindication—in the time following (cf. 8.34–38; 9.49–50; 10.35–40; 13.9–13).

With the climactic and portentous arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem, a cursed fig tree signifies eschatological judgement upon the temple and the nation (Mk 11.12–14, 20–23//Mt. 21.18–22) against the scriptural backdrop of Jer. 8.13: 'When I wanted to gather them, says the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.'(See further, Telford 1980). Again, in a parable Jesus tells in the temple, a vineyard and its murderous workers (Mk 12.1–12 and parallels) serves as an allegory of the history of Israel and its leaders in their spurning of God's messengers, and does so against the scriptural backdrop of the 'song of the vineyard' in Isa. 5.1–7, with its shocking climax (v. 7): 'For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness but heard a cry!'

Taking the parables overall, it is clear that images from creation are intertwined with Gospel history. In fact, they serve as a prime rhetorical vehicle for its *interpretation*, by virtue both of their location within the Gospel narrative and their resonance with the larger biblical narrative of creation, election, judgement, and salvation.

Jesus as Lord of/in Creation

Creation is critical, not only for the Gospel portrayals of what Jesus says, but also for what Jesus does, whereby he shows that he is truly Messiah and vice-regent in God's kingdom. Thus, a striking element of the Synoptic narratives are accounts of what are commonly called the 'nature miracles'.[23] Of course, the designation is potentially misleading. To speak of 'nature' miracles isolates them artificially from the wider Gospel narrative of Jesus as saviour who brings rescue, healing, and peace in every sphere. Even to speak of 'miracles' is problematic if such nomenclature carries anachronistic assumptions in the face of the theologically weighty words used by the evangelists themselves—words like 'deeds of power' (δυνάμεις), 'signs' (σημεῖα), 'wonders' (τέρατα), or 'strange things' (παράδοξα)—which express the evangelists' sense of the active and sustaining presence of God in the world through Jesus, evoking fear and awe.[24] Therefore, rather than refer to Jesus's 'nature miracles', we do more justice to our Gospel sources to talk of Jesus' lordship in creation.

23. Examples include the multiplication of the loaves, the walking on the water, the stilling of the storm, the large catch of fish and, in the Fourth Gospel, the water become wine.
24. On the problem of nomenclature, see further, Twelftree 2017: 3–5.

To take one example: Mark's version of the story of the stilling of the storm (Mk 4.35–41 and parallels) shows Jesus as God-like lord of the sea (Marcus 2000: 332–340). Tell-tale along these lines are the following. First, the story follows hard on Jesus' teaching in parables about the hidden, but gradually advancing, presence of the kingdom (or power) of God (4.1–34). This sets the cosmic scene for Jesus' exercise of power in the storm-stilling as God's divine agent. Second, the setting is a boat in peril on the 'sea' (θάλασσα) (4.39; cf. 4.1).[25] This setting is evocative, for the sea is a particularly significant scriptural setting for God's self-revelation as sovereign power and source of life both in creation (cf. Ps. 93.1–4) and in salvation (cf. Exod. 15); and Mark has no fewer than three sea stories revelatory of the power and authority of Jesus (4.35–41; 6.45–52; 8.13–21).[26] In fact, Mark's storm-stilling resonates with the narrative of revelation in Ps. 107.23–32 concerning people who 'went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the mighty waters': '*they saw the deeds of the Lord*, his wondrous works in the deep … he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.' Third, in language reminiscent of God's sovereignty over the sea (cf. Job 26.11–12; Pss. 18.15; 104.6–7; 106.9), Jesus 'rebukes' [ἐπετίμησεν] the wind and silences the sea (4.39), as earlier, he has rebuked and silenced an unclean spirit (1.25). Like God in creation and salvation, Jesus conquers the life-threatening, even demonic, forces of chaos. Fourth, the disciples' response, with their 'great fear' in counterpoint with the 'great calm' of the seas (4.39b, 41a; cf. 5.15, 33; 10.32; 16.8), is typical of responses to revelations of God's power in creation and rescue (cf. Pss. 47.2–4; 89.7–8; 96.1–4; 99.1–3) (Lasater 2015). Finally, the climax of the story poses, in the form of a question, the answer to which the episode itself points. To the question, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him? (4.41b)—resonating as it does with the Psalmist's question, in Ps. 89.8–11—the necessary answer is that Jesus, the Messiah and revealer of the kingdom of God, is lord in God's creation and, as such, the one who delivers from evil and death.

Jesus as Agent of Creation's Healing

Of a piece with Jesus as lord of/in creation exemplified at the mythological level by the storm-stilling (Mk 4.35–41) and the walking on the water (Mk 6.47–52) are the Gospels' portrayals of Jesus as healer and exorcist. In different but overlapping ways, all three Synoptics witness to Jesus' healings and exorcisms as

25. Contrast the topographically more precise (but less mythologically weighted) 'lake' [λίμνη] in Luke's version, at 8.22–23.

26. See further, Malbon 1984. On the story of Jesus' walking on the sea and its profound resonance with the picture in Job 9.4–11 (LXX) of God the Creator walking on the sea and 'passing by', see Hays 2014: 24–26.

integral to his identity and mission, and even, ironically, contributing to his fate (cf. Mk 3.6 and parallels). In the background are scriptural accounts of prophets of God (such as Moses, Elijah, Elisha, and Isaiah) as agents of healing, as well as texts which speak of healing in utopian terms as the corollary of return from exile and a time of new beginnings (cf. Isa. 35, esp. vv. 5–6).

In Mark, *exorcisms* have cosmological significance as the overpowering of Satan and his minions by the Son of God (cf. 1.23–27, 32–34; 3.22–27; 5.1–20; 7.24–30; 9.14–29). Especially noteworthy is the elaborate story of the Gerasene demoniac (5.1–20) (Rochester 2011: 115–68) with its movement at the symbolic level from *uncreation*, in images of death, defilement, derangement, chaotic multiplicity and social alienation, to *creation restored*, with the unclean spirits dispatched to the sea, and the demoniac at peace, 'sitting there, clothed and in his right mind' (5.15) and subsequently reintegrated into society (5.19). Significantly, the destruction of the unclean spirits in the sea has likely scriptural echoes, not only in traditions relating to the Genesis story of the Flood (Gen. 6—8; cf. 1 Enoch 67; *Jubilees* 10.1–14), but also in the destruction of the Egyptian army in the sea as narrated in the Book of Exodus (Exod. 14.1—15.22). It is as if Jesus, Moses-like, is a warrior for God whose battle with the forces of chaos and evil, brings liberation and the possibility of a new beginning (cf. Mk 5.19–20).

A new beginning is conveyed also in Gospel stories of *healing*, suggestive again of creation restored and God's rule made manifest (Carroll 1985). Distinctive in Luke, for example, are the ways in which Jesus' healing and teaching ministry—understood as the fulfilment of Isaianic prophecy (Lk. 4.16–30; also, 7.21–22; cf. Isa. 61.1–2; 58.6)—challenges the priestly holiness system of classification and distinction based on Gen. 1 (cf. Lev. 17–26) as given ritual-symbolic expression in cult and Temple (Neyrey 1990). In a profound ideological reversal, holiness predicated on separation from things and persons 'unclean' is displaced in Luke in favour of holiness predicated on divine mercy (ἔλεος) upon all (cf. 1.50, 54, 58, 72, 78; 7.13; 10.33; 15.20), given expression in practices of indiscriminate benefaction especially towards the 'unclean' and marginalized.[27] Jesus raises the dead (7.11–17; 8.40–42a, 49–56); heals a leper (5.12–16); brings relief to a chronic menstruant (8.42b–48); makes a paralysed man walk again (5.17–26); gives release to the demonized (4.31–37; 8.26–39; 13.10–17); and offers welcome to sinners (7.36–50; 15.1–32; 19.1–10). Remarkably, such a welcome occurs even in Jesus' final moments. At the climax of Luke's passion narrative, and in response to a criminal's entreaty, Jesus promises a place with himself (no less) *in Paradise*, 'today' (23.42–43).[28] And, as if in

27. The theological grounding for this boundary-transcending benefaction is beautifully epitomised later on in Peter's testimony in Acts 10.34: '"I truly understand that God shows no partiality [οὐκ ἔστιν προσωπολήμπτης ὁ θεός]"'.

28. On παράδεισος as the 'garden of Eden' (Gen. 2.8–16; 3.1–24), or 'God's garden' (Ezek. 31.8), or the 'garden of the Lord' (Isa. 51.3), and on this episode as a whole, see Fitzmyer 1989: 203–33, with the cited references at 209.

divine confirmation of the new, 'kingdom of God' order of things (cf. 11.20), Jesus is exalted to heaven at the Gospel's end (24.51; Acts 1.9–11). Importantly, in Jesus' exaltation via resurrection and ascension, one last boundary is transcended. Steve Walton (2008: 60) puts it well:

> By contrast with angels, who come from heaven and return there, Jesus is a human being who enters heaven. Jesus both shares the rule of God over the universe and continues to intervene in the story of his followers, both in his own person and by the Spirit. In piercing the barrier between earth and heaven, Jesus restructures how reality is understood, both now and in the days to come.

As Luke's second volume makes plain, this restructuring of reality, carried forward in the teaching, healings and exorcisms performed by Jesus' Spirit-inspired apostles, enables in turn the coming into being of a new, boundary-transcending, eschatological community (cf. Acts 2.43–47; 4.32–37; 10.44–48; 13.44–49; 15.8–9) in lively communication with a heaven now '"open for business" on a permanent basis' (Walton 2008: 68). That heaven is 'open' is a *felt reality* manifest in joy, gladness, and praise (cf. Lk. 24.50; Acts 2.25–28, 46–47; 8.8, 39; 13.48, 52; 16.34) (Barton 2013: 179–83).

Conclusion: 'Our Father'

To speak about creation in the Synoptic Gospels is to speak about God and God's relation to time, space, people, and values as reflected in the various ways in which the Evangelists tell the story of Jesus. It is to speak about how scriptural stories of beginnings—the beginnings of the world and the beginnings of the people Israel—give the Evangelists significant ways to think about their past, present, and future (including the future of all things) in the light of Jesus and the Spirit. It is to speak about the meaning of existence as *given by God* in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of God's Son understood as ultimate victory in the battle against the forces of chaos and death, and as the revelation of redeemed sociality. Creation in the Synoptic Gospels is an invitation to learn and practise what it means to call God 'Our Father' and to pray that the Father's will be done 'on earth as in heaven' (Mt. 6.9–10; cf. Lk. 11.2).

Author's Note

This essay is an expanded version of `Creation in the Synoptic Gospels', in Jason Goroncy, ed., *T&T Clark Handbook of the Doctrine of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 79–91, and is used with the kind permission of the editor.

Acknowledgement

For their advice, I am grateful to John Barclay, Richard Bauckham, Dorothee Bertschmann, George Brooke, Lutz Doering, James Harrison, George van Kooten, and Benjamin Wold. Versions of this essay were presented at New Testament research seminars at both Durham and Manchester Universities, and I am grateful for the feedback I received on both occasions. Unless indicated otherwise, all biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

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