



## The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder

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### Chapter summaries by Bill Brown

#### 1. From Wonder to Wisdom

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This chapter explores how science and faith can be related positively, despite the deep polarization that exists on the cultural level, thanks to the constant skirmishing between creationism and “soulless scientism.” On the academic level, discussions about theology and science tend to overlook Scripture as a fundamental source of insight. Biblical faith and science share a common sense of wonder, even mystery, that fosters active inquiry about the world. If theology is “faith seeking understanding” and science is “understanding seeking further understanding,” then theology has much to gain from science. But by inviting science into the world of the Bible, traditional notions of authority must be redefined, and the Bible’s diversity must be taken into account. The author identifies seven diverse creation traditions and outlines a method of inquiry that proceeds from exploring the biblical text within its own context to appropriating the text in the context of modern science.

*Keywords:* [faith](#), [evolution](#), [theology](#), [biblical theology](#), [biblical authority](#), [science](#), [scientism](#), [creationism](#), [wonder](#), [mystery](#),

#### 2. Revolution and Evolution

##### Ancient Near Eastern Backgrounds to Creation

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As background to studying the biblical texts within their ancient contexts, this chapter surveys several extra-biblical texts of the ancient Near East. Traditions from Mesopotamian, Egypt, and Canaan are briefly discussed. The divine characters of Marduk, Tiamat, Enlil, and Ea are described in the

Mesopotamian epics *Enūma elish* and *Atrahasis*. Drawing from Ugaritic archival material, the Baal epic, though not a creation account proper, is also recounted. Both the Mesopotamian and Canaanite narratives feature the motif of divine combat with watery chaos (*Chaoskampf*). In contrast, the Egyptian accounts offer a more “evolutionary” perspective, particularly the cosmogony of Heliopolis, which features the deity Atum differentiating himself to form the physical world. In addition, the so-called Memphite theology features the deity Ptah bringing forth creation by word, similar to the God of Genesis 1.

### **3. The Cosmic Temple** **Cosmogony According to Genesis 1:1–2:3**

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This chapter examines Genesis 1:1-2:4a, known as the Priestly account of creation. This “report” describes creation as a divinely guided process that begins with benign chaos and concludes with a fully differentiated cosmos. God enlists the elements of creation (water and earth) to bring forth a life-sustaining order. The structure of the Priestly account renders a picture of sacred space that mirrors the architecture of the temple. Connections are explored between the Genesis narrative and the modern cosmological perspective, which posits a “Big Bang” and accounts for the evolution of cosmic structure. The “image of God” language in Genesis, moreover, finds resonance with the unique neurological and cultural facilities of *Homo sapiens*. Disparities between the scientific account and the seven-day account of creation underscore the theological significance of Sabbath. In light of these findings, the problematic language of “dominion” in Genesis is understood in new ways.

### **4. The Ground of Being** **The Drama of Dirt in Genesis 2:4b–3:24**

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The topic is the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:4b-3:24, the Yahwist account of creation. In contrast to the God of Genesis 1, the God of the Garden is a down-to-earth deity who improvises and sometimes fails in the act of creating. This “low” view of God is matched by humankind’s portrayal as a “groundling,” a product of God’s work with dirt, in contrast to the “image of God” portrayal in Genesis 1. Written in view of ancient Israel’s mixed experience with monarchy, the Garden narrative focuses on the human family and its rise to power. As such, it invites dialogue with the anthropological account of human evolution, the human tree of life. Both accounts affirm the common ground of biological life and the challenging transitions that have shaped humanity’s development and ascendancy in creation. Evolutionary science reinterprets the account of the “Fall” of humanity in powerfully ecological ways.

### **5. Behemoth and the Beagle** **Creation According to Job 38–41**

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God’s answer to Job is the focus of this chapter. God presents a panoramic sweep of creation that comprises the cosmic, the meteorological, and the biological. Its primary focus, however, is on the diversity and vitality of animal life in the wilderness. What was considered marginal from Job’s

perspective now takes center stage in God's answer, which reflects God's biophilia. While de-centered, Job is shown to be integrally related to the wild. He was made by God "with" Behemoth, suggesting Job is linked with all creatures, including monstrous Leviathan. Biology, too, discerns a link that connects all life on Earth, a genetic link (DNA). God's answer, moreover, takes Job on a grand tour of taxonomy, not unlike Charles Darwin's around-the-world voyage on the H.M.S. Beagle early in his career. Read in the light of evolution, Job presents a powerful testimony to biodiversity and affirms the intrinsic value of all life.

## 6. The Passion of the Creator

### The Manifold Nature of Nature in Psalm 104

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Like Job, Psalm 104 celebrates God's diverse creation. Both Job and the psalm, in fact, share several animals in common, from the lion to Leviathan. The psalmist, however, highlights the botanical as well as the biological. In his eyes, the cedars of Lebanon are among creation's most majestic features. Whereas Job highlights the animals' range and independence, the psalm emphasizes their respective habitats. Creation is a habitat for biodiversity, not just for humanity. Humanity is merely one species among many species, each seeking its livelihood within its prescribed environment or niche. As in Job, God is the provider and sustainer of life. Science, with its ongoing discovery of species, expands and deepens the psalmist's awe, as well as underlines the fundamental importance of habitat.

## 7. Wisdom's World

### Cosmos as Playhouse in Proverbs 8:22–31

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Creation according to Wisdom is this chapter's focus. Proverbs 8:22-31 marks the climax of Wisdom's discourse, whose aim is to establish her preeminent authority and status. In this text, Wisdom is figured as a growing, playing child. Whereas the rest of creation is constructed by God, Wisdom herself is given birth. On the one hand, creation is made secure by God for the sake of Wisdom's flourishing. On the other hand, creation is the object and arena of Wisdom's play. Science, indeed, reveals a playfulness about physical reality, whether it is the interaction of gravity and dark matter on the cosmic scale, or the quirkiness of subatomic particles on the quantum level. Wisdom's growth in creation, moreover, mirrors human growth in wisdom. The science of human development underscores the role of play, including the playful interactions between mother and infant, in the development of learning.

## 8. The Dying Cosmos

### Qoheleth's Misanthropic Principle

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Though not a creation account per se, Ecclesiastes 1:2-11 features a portrait of creation that is entirely unique in the biblical corpus. Qoheleth, the ostensible author of most of Ecclesiastes, describes creation in terms of wearying, ever-repeating cycles, from wind and water to life and death. Qoheleth's world is devoid of anything "new," a creation without pause and effect with human life beset by uninterrupted toil.

The final chapter of Ecclesiastes, moreover, alludes to the eventual dissipation of creation. All is “vanity” (*hebel*); creation is a static, closed whole. Science, too, points to the ultimate dissolution of the universe, death by entropy. At the same time, science reveals that the cycles of nature Qoheleth so disparaged are in fact life-sustaining. Science both underscores and reorients Qoheleth’s “empirical” view of the world. Though creation seems pointless, it nevertheless provides sustaining moments of joy for human well-being.

## **9.The Fabric of the Cosmos**

### **The Emergence of New Creation in “Second Isaiah”**

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In stark contrast to Ecclesiastes, Isaiah 40-55 provides a dynamic and open-ended picture of creation. This chapter examines certain passages from Second Isaiah that were evidently composed at the end of Israel’s exile in Babylon. The heavens are likened to unfurled fabric, and the ground is the locus of God’s new creation. To herald the exiles’ release, the prophet draws heavily from the example of botanical life. Creation is emergent: like plants bursting from the soil’s crust, salvation “springs forth” from the ground. Creation’s emergent newness is matched by the prophet’s emergent view of God. Drawing from the biological analogy of “symbiosis,” this chapter argues that Isaiah’s rigorously monotheistic view of God is the result of a merging of divine qualities from which God’s identity emerges as the transcendent and consummate creator.

## **10. The God Allusion**

### **Creation as Consciousness-Raiser**

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This concluding chapter builds on the discussion of the previous material by briefly reviewing the distinctive features of each creation tradition and their connections with science, as well as explicating the hermeneutical dynamics involved in bringing scientific understanding and the biblical views of creation into constructive dialogue. A major section is devoted to discerning the intertextual connections that bind the various creation traditions together literarily and canonically. Central also is a discussion of the interrelated profiles of human identity featured in the traditions, followed by reflections on human responsibility in the face of mounting environmental degradation, including global warming. It is argued that the biblical view of creation is a more effective consciousness-raiser than Richard Dawkins’s commendation of evolutionary theory. Nevertheless, a scientifically and biblically informed faith is most effectual in fulfilling humanity’s commission to “serve and preserve” creation (Genesis 2:15).