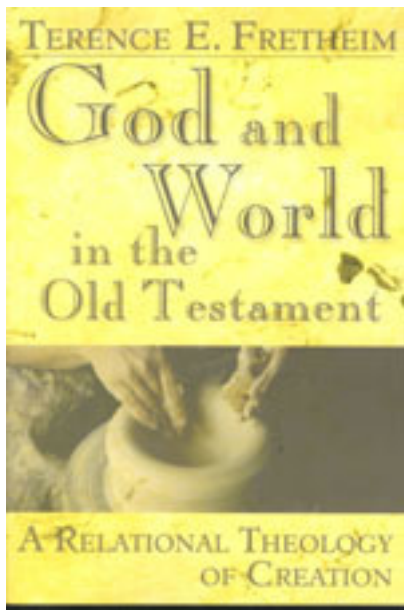


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**Fretheim, Terence E.**

***God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation***

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Terence E. Fretheim, the Elva B. Lovell Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, has contributed widely to Old Testament scholarship, his other works including a commentary on Exodus for the Interpretation series. Now Fretheim has written an outstanding book on creation, which he confesses has been a career-long concern (vii). A major contribution of his thought is his emphasis on the ongoing and intimate relationship God has with creation. Fretheim's *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* not only presents a well-reasoned approach to creation but also argues that creation presents the foundation for every aspect of theology. This book will be helpful to those teaching Old Testament introduction courses, pastors seeking to present theological sermons, and the academy for providing scholarly, balanced, believable approach to an overlooked theme throughout the canon.

Fretheim contends that the importance of creation has been overlooked and underestimated by both the church and the academy. He calls it the "marginalization of creation" (ix). Fretheim credits this marginalization to a pervading anthropocentrism in the cultural-social-political world. Creation's importance has been diminished by (1) a focus that sees salvation history as more important than creation; (2) a tendency to see all reality from the perspective of human existence; (3) a political theology centered on the

liberation of the human that overlooks the nonhuman; (4) a view that God will destroy everything so one need not bother; and (5) a patriarchal view of God that emphasizes his mighty acts and neglects his so-called more feminine themes of blessing and creation (ix–x).

Fretheim notes that any contemporary interest in creation comes not from traditional realms such as the church or theological disciplines but from an ecological consciousness (xi). His hope in writing this book was to foster more reflection on creation in the academy and in religious communities (xvii). Fretheim certainly provides a fine foundational work for worship of God as creator and for human beings to come before God with humility as stewards—beloved stewards—of God’s creation.

Central to his thinking is that creation exists apart from the history of human beings (xiii). Fretheim maintains that “God is the God of the entire cosmos; God has to do with every creature, and every creature has to do with God, whether they recognize it or not. God’s work in the world must be viewed in and through a *universal form of reference*. That the Bible begins with Genesis, not Exodus, with creation, not redemption, is of immeasurable importance” (xiv, emphasis original). Fretheim’s texts include Gen 1–2; selected verses in Gen 3, 4, 6, 9–11 and 12–50; Jer 12; Exodus; and Prov 8. Fretheim’s topics include “Creation at Risk”; “Creation and the Foundation Narratives of Israel”; “Creation and Law”; “Creation, Judgment, and Salvation in the Prophets”; “Wisdom and Creation”; “Nature’s Praise of God.” Chapter notes constitute the concluding eighty-one pages. Fretheim’s work is so rich that scholars delighting in Job, Jeremiah, Exodus, Proverbs, and prophecy will feast sumptuously.

Fretheim begins by pointing out eleven Hebrew words used frequently in the Hebrew Bible to refer to creation with God as the subject (1). The list, which he says could be extended, “indicates that Israel’s thought was wide ranging and complex” concerning creation (1). Fretheim notes that creation as a theme pervades the biblical narrative but that what the word *creation* itself entails is not immediately evident (3). Fretheim asserts that creation in the Old Testament as a *theological* category is not to be equated with *nature* or *world* (4); the distinction in thought is seminal to much of today’s thinking. Creation is ongoing, and God has a continuing relationship to the world as its creator. Creation also is a divine eschatological event that brings a new heavens and a new earth (5–9). Key to Fretheim’s view of creation is that there is a relational creator who has made a relational world (13). God freely enters into relationships with creatures. Indeed, a relationship precedes a covenant with both a person and a nation (15). The creator, relational God has created a world in which all creatures are interrelated.

Adding an insight probably useful in the ongoing intelligent design/evolution debate, Fretheim says that the word “beginning” in Gen 1:1 probably refers to the beginning of ordered creation, not to the beginning of all things (35). Fretheim also cites eleven ways that God creates in Gen 1–2 that overlap throughout the Hebrew Bible. God’s wonderful and varied ways that Fretheim cites include creating by the word; the word followed by creative actions; spirit and breath; wisdom; using what has already been created as raw material to bring other creatures into being; creating some creatures out of nothing; naming creatures and allowing human beings to name creatures, thereby bringing further order to creation; evaluating what has been created, which then entails further creative work on the part of God and a creature; and creating through combat and chaotic forces and by finding victory over them (34–35).

Fretheim reminds his readers that creation was not finished until the seventh day, a day of rest (61). The framework of creation continues with a work-rest rhythm (61). Although creation was finished with the Sabbath’s rest, that does not mean that creation has ended. It has simply been rounded off, Fretheim maintains, to be taken up by God, humans, and other creatures (64).

According to Fretheim, the way God set up creation as relational involved risks; what creatures do with their God-given freedom determines the course creation takes (69). Via the stories of Abraham and his extended family, the theme of creation expands in setting, characterization, and theological focus (89, 91). The biblical text bears witness to the fact that God’s blessing cannot be a one-time gift but that the chosen and redeemed people need it continually for their continuing journey of health, life, and well-being (108).

Fretheim also sees relational creation in the stories of the plagues. He notes that “elements of the nonhuman order are deeply and positively affected by God’s saving deed and the relationship with the human community becomes more what God intended it to be. Salvation is experienced by both human and nonhuman” (127). Fretheim sees God’s providence in the wilderness as often leading Moses and others to sources of help that are already available in the world of creation (128); he develops this theme by noting the modern use of natural elements in developing medicines.

Fretheim regards the law as given to every human being (not only to the chosen people) so that they may attend to it for the sake of the creation and all its creatures (133). The law is dynamic; the biblical texts bear witness to a dynamic process of its revision in light of new times and new places. Fretheim also links creation and judgment, a common theme in the prophets. He says the most common agent of divine judgment is the created moral order (163). Broadly speaking, this means that a deed (whether good or bad) will have consequences. The message of the prophets is this, Fretheim argues: God’s creation

is at stake in Israel's behaviors (165). For example, Jer 12 links the land to creation. While God responds to Jeremiah's mourning, God also mourns with genuine grief the distress that is coming upon the land and people (179).

Wisdom literature provides a sound relational backdrop for creation because dealing wisely in life involves an extended encounter with the natural and social orders (which are both created by God) (203). Creation in the Old Testament refers both to the physical world and to the community of human beings who interrelate in their daily lives (203). Fretheim adds that the content and skills of a moral life, as seen in Proverbs, are closely associated with Woman Wisdom's place in the creation of the world (207). God is imaged in Proverbs as a builder (Prov 8:25–29; p. 213). The call of Woman Wisdom to seek wisdom is to seek and discern what Wisdom knows—both in knowledge about the world and in the underlying will of God for the world and for each creature in it (213). Thus the seeking of wisdom will put the seeker in tune to creation as God intended it (213). God works in and through wisdom in bringing creation into being. Wisdom is thus appropriately described as a created co-creator; this understanding fits well with the relational model Fretheim presents (215).

Fretheim argues convincingly for a relational model of creation. The texts covered in his book support the thesis that both God and creatures have an important role in the creation enterprise (269–70). He argues strongly for the interaction of the human and nonhuman aspects of creation with God within the community of creation (269).

Fretheim also acknowledges that biblical texts speak of the total dependence of creation on God, but he encourages a deeper textual reading that sees that “God has freely chosen to establish an *interdependent* relationship with the creation, with respect to both origins and continuation and with overlapping spheres of responsibility. Indeed, God has freely chosen to be dependent upon both human and non-human in the furtherance of God's purposes in the world” (270, emphasis original).

Fretheim ends with the importance of praise (284). He notes that humankind's sinfulness may contribute to smog and that the heavens will declare the glory of God with less clarity on a smoggy day than on other days (284). Continuing this line of thought, he says that environmental activity is directly related to the praise possibilities of nature. Humankind can enhance or inhibit the vocation of nature to praise its God (284), which is a sobering thought indeed.