In this Festschrift, colleagues and former students of Ben C. Ollenburger honor him with essays focused on a subject that has figured prominently in his work: creation in the theology of the scriptures. In the preface, the editors fittingly remark on Ollenburger’s concern for approaching this subject precisely as “God’s creation” (ix). Indeed, most of the contributions to the volume delineate a theology of creation that reaches beyond the matters of nature or world origins. Many of the essays also indicate points of application for contemporary Christian practice and theology. The volume is divided into two sections: one of six essays that engage with the Old Testament, and one of seven essays that engage with the New Testament.

In the first essay (3–16), Theodore Hiebert analyzes the creation account of the Priestly writer, arguing that it demonstrates more comprehensiveness than it has been given it credit for in modern debates surrounding ecology. For Hiebert, the Gen 1 account models a view of creation that integrates the scientific, poetic, and theological and may therefore serve as an invitation for contemporary readers to “live on earth in a holistic way” (15). Making note of key issues in translation he encountered when working on the Common English Bible (e.g., כים כים as an adverbial construction emphasizing that God was moved by the beauty of creation), Hiebert grounds his exposition in the details of the text. Though cautioning readers that the ideology of the Priestly writer may be inadequate today, he nevertheless commends its “integrative method”
(13) and aptly distills significant implications, such as that humanity’s first vocation is not to love God or neighbor but “to be responsible for the world of nature” (15).

Andrea D. Saner writes on the relation between creation and covenant in Exod 19:4–6 and in the work of Karl Barth (17–34). Saner’s analysis of Exod 19:4–6 attends closely to the language and structure of the text; focusing on the use of “Israel” in the phrase “for all the earth is mine” (Exod 19:5), she adopts a causal interpretation in which the phrase functions to provide the motivation or rationale for the covenant. To clarify the logic (i.e., how God’s possession of earth serves as the basis for covenant with Israel), Saner turns to Barth’s theology and exegesis of Gen 1–2. Ultimately, she argues that the same purpose lies behind both God’s creation of the world and God’s calling of Israel to covenant: “life with God” (33). I would welcome further explanation as to why Barth’s points suit the particularities of Exod 19. Some of Saner’s interpretive decisions may also require further justification (e.g., why should the MT’s versification of Exod 19 be followed?).

The theology of creation in First Isaiah is addressed by Walter Brueggemann, who shows that YHWH’s sovereignty as creator is a “critical principle” (35–52). Brueggemann, engaging with the work of Ollenburger and others on the Zion tradition, surveys a wide breadth of texts that testify to YHWH’s “direct governing inclination” over a creation that has been structured to rely on the creator (44). Whether speaking of the nations, superpowers such as Assyria, or even chosen Israel, Isaiah holds that creation’s self-sufficient flaunting of justice, righteousness, and peace contradicts the “nonnegotiable expectations of the creator” (41). But just as YHWH freely exercises judgment in defense of the well-being of creation, YHWH may “reverse field and restore” both Israel and all creation to a state of well-being (48). Though I am sure there are further implications to be discerned from Isaiah’s depiction of nonhuman creation, Brueggemann’s caution against presuming to contain the creator God within “convenient ideologies” is an opportune point of application (52).

Patricia K. Tull examines the theology of creation in Second Isaiah with explicit concern for how it might inform contemporary views on the place of humans in God’s creation (53–66). Demonstrating that Second Isaiah provides an alternative to the (overutilized and distorted) image of humans as beings of another order in Gen 1, Tull emphasizes the continuity between humans and nonhuman creation as she analyzes both broader themes and minute textual details in the section. Humans—frequently likened to components of the natural world in Second Isaiah—disrupt the God-ordained orderliness of the created world with their rebellious trust in human-made objects and are therefore beckoned to rejoin the rest of creation in humbly submitting to God. For Tull, the text’s depiction of God’s ongoing creative activity (via participles and infinitive constructs), along with its inclusion of human culture in the domain of creation, invites “remembrance of our limited capability” as beings subject to God and creation (65).
Reading Ezekiel in light of covenant theology (esp. Lev 26) and the hermeneutics of trauma, Safwat Marzouk considers the book’s emphasis on divine sovereignty and creation’s accountability in its attempt to process the devastation of exile (67–83). He argues that both land and people are depicted as agents deserving of God’s judgment; furthermore, divine acts of restoration in the book are presented not as contingent upon humans but on “God’s commitment to God’s self” (76). Safwat, in claiming that humans and land are “interdependent subjects in God’s created order” (82), is right that the text sometimes refers to land as distinct from human inhabitants even as it envisions their shared fate in renewal and in judgment (e.g., with forms of לֹאַל applied to both parties). However, some of his points in reaction against the Earth Bible raise questions. For instance, is “land” (לָגְן) not a (human) political region when its infidelity is addressed in Ezek 14:3? Further, can nonhuman creation be said to be in “rebellion” (74) when it is as an instrument of the deity that it acts to harm (and, later, to benefit) the human inhabitants responsible for violating the covenant (see, e.g., Ezek 36:13–19)?

In the final essay of the section on the Old Testament, Heather L. Bunce traces the cycle of creation, uncreation, and re-creation through key texts in the Book of the Twelve (84–98). Bunce holds that the prophets depict God’s intervention as a sovereign response to the chaos introduced by human sinfulness, one enacted for the ultimate purpose of reestablishing the order of creation. She suggests that the heart of the matter is human behavior that does not meet the standard of justice, righteousness, and compassion—even and especially such behavior among the people of God. This message Bunce also applies (with New Testament support) to the contemporary church. A few components of her argument did strike me as underdeveloped or unsupported. An issue with the translation of Nah 1:7 is settled by appeal to “a careful study of the grammar,” the content of which she does not share (87). Following a section on Ugaritic parallels, I wondered whether the motifs used by the prophets were merely a case of “shared cultural imagery” (89) or intentional reappropriations of Baal imagery. Further examination of the rhetorical function of the prophets’ use of threats and offers of “hope with uncertainty” would also have been helpful (97).

Opening the section on the New Testament, Darrin W. Snyder Belousek offers a figural reading of Mark in which the “narrative identity of Jesus” is projected onto “the canonical identity of YHWH” (101–17). Belousek’s treatment of the two sea stories in Mark (4:25–41; 6:45–52) involves identifying Old Testament texts to serve as a figural background for the stories. These texts, it is argued, depict God as engaging in activity exclusive to God (i.e., creating and ruling); therefore, when Jesus is depicted as engaging in the same activity in Mark (e.g., by rebuking waters or walking on the sea), the interpreter may infer that “Jesus belongs intrinsically to the unique identity of God” (104). Though heavily reliant upon the likes of Bauckham and Hays, Belousek’s approach is more dogmatic (one he deems “pre-critical,”103). Certain conclusions may be unsatisfying to some due to the apparent influence of doctrinal presuppositions—for instance, that Jonah was an “inapt” figure for Jesus (108 n. 21), or that it should be impossible for a text to depict God as acting against creation (e.g., in Ps 18).
Creation motifs in the Gospel of John are discussed by Willard Swartley (118–35), whose interpretive comments are accompanied by several outlines depicting the structure of particular texts (and no fewer than four chiasms). Swartley’s handling of John 1 highlights connections with Gen 1, with Jesus as both cocreator and the one who manifests divine glory in (created) human flesh. Other connections are identified in the seven-day time structure of John 1–4, the references to water, light, and food throughout the book, and the earth-oriented metaphors in the “I am” statements. God’s breathing life in Gen 2 finds a parallel in Jesus’s breathing of the Holy Spirit in John 20:22, which Swartley sees as a culminating depiction of Jesus as one who promises and gives life. More sustained theological reflection amidst the cataloging of connections and imagery would have been welcome. What are the implications of, say, Jesus’s self-designation as “vine” or “lamb”?

Ryan D. Harker, delineating a two-stage eschatological framework in 2 Baruch, argues for a similar schema in Romans (136–54). In this framework, God initially works through a set-apart people who receive the benefits of renewed creation (within the land of Israel in 2 Baruch but extended to the “children of God” spread throughout the earth in Romans); subsequently, all creation will receive the renewal that the set-apart people embody and to which they testify as “the locus of … a transformative merging between this creation and the redeemed creation” (154). Since much of the essay, like Romans, is concerned with expounding in meticulous detail what God has accomplished in defeating the powers of sin and death to which human beings were subject and in making of the church a “new kind” of actor (151), there is not much said about what is meant by the rest of (nonhuman) creation being trapped in its current, groaning state. Surely there are consequences for the church’s relationship with the rest of creation?

In an essay on Ephesians, Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld analyzes the letter with an eye to Ollenburger’s construal of creation as God’s establishment and ongoing defense of peaceful order (155–70). This lens Yoder Neufeld applies as he works through the text according to its structure, drawing attention to the hymn to peace (Eph 2:14–16) as the climactic center of chapters 1–3. Peace between heaven and earth, and between Jews and the nations, is accomplished through the creation of a new human crafted from that which was first torn down: rebellious humans who hostile to one another and to God. Yoder Neufeld’s treatment of chapters 4–6 focuses on the exhortation for the new human to participate in the ongoing process of creation. Though this entails joining God to take on the powers of chaos, it also, surprisingly, takes place within the old structures and ordinary activities we might associate with creation gone awry (as in the Haustafel). By implication, the peace-making efforts of readers among “former and ever new strangers and enemies” may be understood as intrinsic to God’s ongoing enterprise of creation (170).

The conclusions of Yoder Neufeld dovetail nicely with those of Gordon Zerbe, who writes on recreation in Philippians and the broader Pauline corpus (171–85). Zerbe, careful to show how Paul was in conversation with the Old Testament, later Jewish traditions, and the Greco-Roman world, points to his depiction of the “(re)creative power of God in the Messiah” via images of “world
subjection” (182). Specially, God exercises kingship over the world through the original act of creation, the sustaining of the world, and the eschatological transformation to come. So, too, is God’s creative power in the world expressed in terms of “world reconciliation”—first between humans and God but also among humans and between humans and the rest of creation (183). One of the most distinguished contributions here is Zerbe’s thorough review of terminology used in the complex conception of creation in Paul, as examination of that kind is wanting elsewhere in the volume.

Though David Rensberger circumspectly characterizes the contributions of the Johannine Letters to a theology of creation as “indirect,” he manages to construct from them rather significant implications (186–93). I should also note that he is one of the few contributors who acknowledges and attempts to reckon with the anthropocentric character of the text. For Rensberger, the value of the physical/material for salvation, as emphasized by the references in the letters to the real humanity of Jesus and to the sharing of goods, undermines views that would permit withdrawing from or ruining creation. Furthermore, from the notion of divine love made known and brought to its goal through believers’ self-giving relations (1 John 4:7–18), Rensberger posits that the same nonexploitative relations might be expected to bleed over into believers’ engagement with creation.

In the final essay, Loren L. Johns discusses the christological titles used in Rev 3:14 (the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of God’s creation) as allusions to the “creation-affirming” promises of Isa 65. The third of the titles receives the most attention, as Johns works through the possible construals of archē and reviews the development of Jewish traditions related to things regarded as preceding the beginning of creation; he seems to suggest the title be understood as an expression of the way Jesus was “fundamental to the purpose and plans of God” (203). Johns also offers a brief overview of arguments for Revelation’s “creation-affirming” character, though further qualification of that designation would have been helpful given ongoing discussions concerning the significance of the destructive imagery in the book (see, e.g., recent work by Micah D. Kiel).

Overall, the Festschrift is well-edited, with just a few minor typographical errors (many of which pertain to transliteration—such as hōhma being used when ḥokmā is meant, 119). There is a degree of variety among the essays, not only in formatting but also in terms of contributors’ approaches and conclusions. Some employ the sort of theological interpretation that draws on Christian creeds or doctrine (esp. Saner and Belousek), while others follow Ollenburger by attempting to let the scriptures set the agenda when it comes to defining or speaking of creation (see esp. Yoder Neufeld’s discussion, 156). Saner, acknowledging criticism surrounding Barth’s construal of creation as mere “instrument” for covenant (28), still depicts creation in such terms as “stage” or “theater” when drawing conclusions (33). Tull, on the other hand, determines that nature is not a mere stage but rather an actor in the story (60).
The collection does tend to approach creation as “the work of the Creator,” with emphasis on the dynamic activity of the God who “defends and redeems his creation” (ix–x). While such an approach is perhaps a fitting tribute to Ollenburger, I wondered at times about the place of nonhuman creation in the theology of the contributors and the biblical texts they treated. The assumption often appears to have been that discussing scriptural portrayals of the creator’s manifold engagement with human beings is tantamount to discussing God’s engagement with all creation. But even as it leaves room for further reflection in this respect, *The Earth Is the Lord’s* brings much to the contemporary Christian conversation surrounding the relationship between God, humanity, and creation.