



Katharine J. Dell

The Lord by Wisdom Founded the Earth: Creation and Covenant in Old Testament Theology

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Daniel R. Driver
Atlantic School of Theology

With a title drawn from Prov 3:19, Katharine Dell signals an ambitious purpose for a relatively short book, which is to let biblical wisdom provide a lens through which to see two other major biblical themes: creation and covenant. The foregrounding of wisdom is presented as a “thought experiment” (6–9, 95, 205), but it is one with significant consequences for once-dominant scholarly constructions that prioritized covenant over creation, in part by pushing wisdom redactions and “wisdom literature” to the margins of Israel’s scripture. Ultimately, Dell argues for a kind of canonical reintegration. Wisdom establishes a conceptual bridge that unites creation and covenant, showing them to be fundamentally related, not dialectically opposed—yet without masking the differences that one finds in a diverse collection of ancient Israelite literature and without asserting a new “center” for Old Testament theology. Dell puts some distance between her method and both biblical-theological and history of religions approaches, and she is eclectic in her citations (Leo Perdue on one page, Rainer Albertz on the next), yet she pursues an “integrating theological approach” (25). Dell’s conclusions have implications for studies in various modes, including avowedly historical studies of wisdom, creation, and covenant material.

Chapter 1, “Creation and Wisdom in Scholarly Assessment,” situates the work relative to recent generations of Old Testament theology and other biblical scholarship. Dell aligns herself with the gradual, and recently well-supported, overturning of the strong consensus secured by Gerhard von Rad in the mid-twentieth century, according to which creation and wisdom themes were

found to be outside Israel's core tradition. Salvation history and covenant were prioritized instead. Pointedly anticipating her argument that wisdom and creation traditions were more central and formative, Dell asks: "Was the emphasis both on God and on God as creator a later reworking of essentially rather secular material, or was it the presupposition of all the maxim-making that went on in this particular branch of Israelite thought?" (28). She also questions whether it is helpful to draw a developmental line between the creation of humans (purportedly an earlier idea) and the creation of the world (a later one) and so to find meaning in a distinction between anthropology and cosmology, as some scholars do. The literature review sets the stage for Dell's argument, which unfolds in two phases.

Phase one deduces and then applies six facets of a wisdom-creation lens by working with texts selected to prioritize wisdom's leading role in creation. Chapter 2, "Creation in Wisdom Texts: Proverbs and Ecclesiastes," features a study of Prov 3:19–20 bolstered by a survey of other texts from Proverbs (esp. ch. 8) and Ecclesiastes. A rich portrait emerges of wisdom personified, with Woman Wisdom operating "as the feminine principle through which God created the world" (43). "She is an elemental creation by God through which the real work of creation also by God can begin" (47). She spans the first making and ongoing maintenance of the world, too, and, since she is available to be found by those who pursue her, she bridges the divine and human realms. At the end, Dell abstracts six categories or "stages" for a wisdom-creation framework: foundation, division, provision, life, relationship, and morality (60–63). All six are found in Proverbs, and all but the first pertain to Ecclesiastes. Chapter 3, "Creation in Wisdom Texts: Job," pursues the personification of wisdom in Job, though Woman Wisdom admittedly does not appear. Rather, the hymn in Job 28 stresses the hiddenness and inaccessibility of Wisdom, who is sought by humans like miners digging for gold, and indeed also by God. Then, an extended reading of Job 38–41 turns attention to God's own role in creation. It is a vast ordering work accomplished quite apart from Job, who is (perhaps) implied not to have seen what only Wisdom could have seen ("Where were you?") and who is told to consider wild beasts who have a strange wisdom all their own. The six categories are found to suit the book of Job well, albeit with different emphases (creation's morality, for example, is less transparent). Chapter 4, "A Wisdom Lens on Two Creation Accounts: Genesis 1–3 and Psalm 104," finally addresses the Bible's most famous creation narrative. Discussion of Gen 1 is postponed to this point, and further relativized in apposition with Ps 104, because it has, in Dell's view, been assigned too much weight. Here, though, the six categories are given their fullest discussion. Under those headings, Gen 1–3 and Ps 104 are explored with the themes and texts developed in the preceding chapters.

Phase two of the argument adds covenant to the mix. "The relational aspect of God and the world" has already begun to surface as a theme with special emphasis (116). Chapter 5, "The Dialogue between Creation and Covenant: Genesis 9," finds ample reason to link creation and covenant, not least as broken and restored relationship. In the flood the wise initial order of creation is undone, but after the flood the world is remade and secured by God in covenantal

terms. Creation and covenant are distinct ideas: textually, conceptually, and even developmentally (137, but cf. 166). Gradually, though, the ideas merge. “The Noachic covenant is the pivot around which this creation/covenant link revolves and it is a magnet for other passages to be gathered under the creation/covenant synthesis” (139). Chapter 6, “Creation and Covenant in Cosmic Dialogue,” extends the discussion to covenant and creation in various prophetic texts (Hos 2; Isa 24; 33; 54; Jer 14; 33; Ezek 34; 37). Dell finds just four wisdom-creation categories in the Prophets (division, provision, relationship, and morality), but abundant intertextual connections suffice to affirm Robert Murray’s 1992 proposal of a “cosmic covenant.” Finally, chapter 7, “Wisdom and Covenant in Relationship,” builds “conceptual and theological links” (166) by evolving an expanded understanding of covenant in Proverbs, Job, and the Psalter. Dell suggests, “We need perhaps to define covenant then in terms of formalizing a relationship of any type, in the main involving the deity” (182). In practice it may not be quite so generic. Admonitions in Proverbs recall commandments in Deuteronomy, for instance (188). Ecclesiastes and Job seem vaguely related to legal material (190). However, the definition of covenant is very broad. “Relationship leads to expectations on both sides, which in turn defines covenant” (196). Such relationships have specific moral content, clearly, yet the “broader view of covenant is only possible when entering the definition through the universal lenses of creation and wisdom” (196). Put differently, Wisdom, who stands in relationship to creator and cosmos, opens a view onto the common heart of creation and covenant, which is “God in relationship” (198).

There is much to commend in a bold study that is deeply grounded in the author’s specialization. Textual details abound, and the commentary is often illuminating. Moreover, skillful works of broad synthesis are rare in biblical studies. They should be welcomed. This title may not become as influential as von Rad’s *Wisdom in Israel* (1970; ET 1972) or Ernest Nicholson’s *God and His People* (1986); however, the works of von Rad and Nicholson need now to be reconsidered in light of Dell.

Dell’s work also poses some problems. Four will be queried here. First, what consequences does a wisdom-creation framework have for Israel and the torah that constitutes its covenant? Citing Prov 8:22, a famous midrash puts torah at the head of creation and suggests that God made the world by means of the torah. One could perhaps say that this is a less apt postbiblical summary than the wisdom of Sirach (cited favorably on 1, 195). However, in the discipline of Old Testament theology, Christians have a sad history of building freeway bypasses around the law, often at the expense of Judaism. Given Dell’s engagement with that discipline and her recourse to more “universal” concepts of wisdom and creation as the bedrock of God’s covenant relationships, her final summary seems to neglect the nation of Israel. “Wisdom ... draws a profound comparison with God as both creator and maintainer of a covenant with individuals and with the land and the world” (205). Perhaps Israel’s covenant is on the horizon, but it is not clear where it fits in such a formulation.

Second, how should one understand the relationship of creation to “chaos”? The latter word is deployed throughout but never clearly defined. Dell seems aware that chaos has been problematized in recent discussion (although Rebecca Watson’s *Chaos Uncreated* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005] is missed), but the concept tends to function in ways closer to John Day’s understanding than Dell’s citation of him might suggest (35 n. 66). In Job 38, for example, “creation involves ordering chaos” (72). Or in Gen 6–8, “God’s wrath manifests itself through natural elements of chaos” (121). Or, speaking abstractly of Hosea: “The covenantal idea of order and right relationships is combined with the creation idea of God imposing order so as to avoid chaos” (146). What is the basis for this “creation idea”? How is it “natural”? What bearing does it have on God’s work, power, and character? Elsewhere Dell notes that, in Gen 1, “conflict theory ... has been overplayed” (103 n. 23). If so, how might one need to reconsider the use of chaos as a controlling idea for creation?

Third, a canonical approach is used selectively—to treat Solomon as a figure, for example (199 n. 120)—while the sequence of creation’s presentation in scripture is systematically disregarded for heuristic reasons. These interpretive moves are perfectly legitimate and intelligible. Indeed, they are instructive. However, the thought experiment has consequences for a canonical understanding of creation and wisdom. What are they, exactly? What kinds of differences might obtain if Gen 1–3 were accorded its signal place rather than subordinated to a wisdom-creation lens? Should not Wisdom, as personified in Proverbs and Job, be read in light of Gen 1–3 as well as the reverse? Further steps of canonical revisioning and reintegration appear necessary if one is to enter a theology of creation and covenant through the front door.

Fourth, in the final pages, King Solomon is touched on as the “embodiment of wisdom’s covenant” (199). Dell’s previous work lies in the background, but the suggestion needs more development in this novel context. After all, canonical Solomon flourishes under God’s oath to David, and his failures are tempered by the same covenant. In terms of biblical history, interpretation, and theology, what is gained, and what might be obscured, if Solomon is advanced as a “covenantal figurehead” akin to “Moses, Abraham, David, and Noah” (201)?