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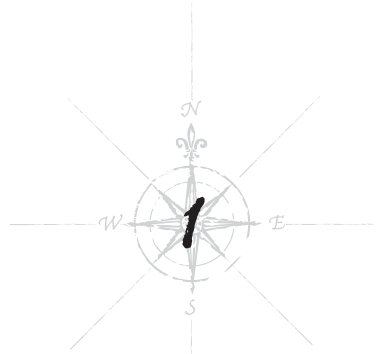


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# Creation

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# Creation Marred

IT WAS THE DAWN OF A NEW ERA. In 1961, Yuri Gagarin became the first man to orbit the earth in outer space. The globe was abuzz with space talk: interstellar travel, lodging, tourist flights, even space warfare. But what impacted Yuri the most? He was taken aback by the sheer beauty of the world. In a signed Russian document after his historic flight, he pleaded, “Orbiting earth in the spaceship, I saw how beautiful our planet is. People, let us preserve and increase this beauty, not destroy it!”<sup>1</sup>

What it must be like to see the planet from space! We have seen hundreds of pictures of the earth from space. But we have never seen it directly. The first civilian to do so was Russian Konstantin Petrovich Feoktistov, the first non-Communist cosmonaut to orbit the earth. Noting that an artist or poet would be better suited to offer a description, he nevertheless tried to describe the ineffable:

From the height of four hundred kilometers our earth is really very beautiful. The air crown around the earth is wonderful. There is an amazing gamut of colors in the outer space landscape. Against the background of the dark, completely dark sky, the . . . constellations shine brightly, like diamonds. And the sun? If all the people on the earth could see it rise and set the way we did, how they would love the heavenly body! The sun

1. L. A. Lebedev, Boris Lyk'yanov, and A. Romanov, *Sons of the Blue Planet*, trans. Prema Pande, 3rd ed. (New Delhi: Amerind Publishing, 1981), 13.

would appear from behind the horizon very suddenly, at first as a bright reddish line. . . . It would grow in front of our eyes instantaneously. At first we saw a greatly stretched oval figure and then the sun became a huge, round disk and it would dazzle the eyes in such a way that it was impossible to look at it.<sup>2</sup>

Now imagine God’s perspective. The universe is his good creation. He has created it in every color, shape, and size. The world, his creation, must appear very beautiful to him, its Maker. But the universe has been blighted by sin, the beautiful canvas smeared with all manner of evil. And this is why renewal is central to the biblical story. Renewed creation is anticipated from Genesis 3 onward. Something went very wrong, and it needs to be rectified for creation to be restored and humankind to live as God intends. The Bible tells the grand story of this new creation in four movements:

- Creation: Heaven and Earth Made
- Fall: Heaven and Earth Marred
- Redemption: Heaven and Earth Waiting
- Restoration: Heaven and Earth Repaired

We will examine the first three movements in this chapter and the restoration of heaven and earth in the next one.

### **Creation: Heaven and Earth Made**

Debates today on Genesis 1–3 center on the historicity of Adam and Eve and the interpretation of the seven creation days.<sup>3</sup> But three thousand years ago, the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai had different concerns. Egypt was a culture

2. L. A. Lebedev, Boris Lyk’yanov, and A. Romanov, *Sons of the Blue Planet*, trans. Prema Pande (New Delhi: Amerind Publishing, 1973), 85–86.

3. On the historicity of Adam and Eve, see C. John Collins, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist? Who They Were and Why You Should Care* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011). For a synopsis of the creation-days debate, see Sandra L. Richter, *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 92–103.

with a radically different worldview from Israel, including its many deities. And Israel had been enslaved there four hundred years (Gen. 15:13).

So when Yahweh brings Moses to the king of Egypt and delivers his people, the question arises: Who is this God whom Israel worships who just plundered the most powerful empire at the time? The first chapters of Genesis serve, in large part, to answer that question. And their answer is that the God of Israel, its Redeemer, is also the Creator of the world—everything and everyone in it.<sup>4</sup>

### *The World Is Created*

Jay Leno has a well-known bit on his show called “Jaywalking,” when he asks the public a series of simple questions that anyone should be able to answer. One segment asked people to complete famous phrases:

- “Ask not what your country can do for you but . . .” (John F. Kennedy)
- “One small step for man . . .” (Neil Armstrong)
- “In the beginning . . .” (the Bible)

Interestingly, most people could not finish the quotations, except for Genesis 1:1. That’s how well known the Bible’s claim that God created heaven and earth is today. But in Moses’ day, such a claim was not so easily understood by the average Israelite. Remember that when Genesis was written, Israel was a wandering people. They were not yet a nation like Egypt and lacked their own land. In Genesis 1–11 God sets the record straight, beginning with creation.

*The Redeemer Is the Creator.* The Egyptians, like the ancient Greeks and many other cultures, believed in a pantheon of deities, each with its own realm. Anubis watched over the dead as they

4. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), xlv.

were embalmed and delivered them up safely to Osiris, judge of the underworld. Osiris was married to Isis, goddess of motherhood and fertility. Ra (or Amun-Ra) was the sun god and co-creator of the universe along with Atum, Ptah, and others. Nut, depicted as a cow, was the goddess of the sky and the heavens and kept the stars in their course.

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Against the backdrop of the Redeemer’s delivering the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, these words are pregnant with meaning. When Moses writes that God created “the heavens and the earth,” he means that God—this one God, Yahweh—created everything. It was not a collective of individual deities but a single God, one who also defeated the gods of Egypt through ten public displays (the plagues) of his awesome power over creation and all that is in it. The God of Israel is the God of the universe.

*The Creation Reflects the Creator.* Every creation bears the imprint of its creator. Picasso’s works bear his surname, usually in the lower left-hand corner. Leonardo da Vinci not only signed his works, like the famous Vitruvian Man, but wrote most of his work with inverted writing; you can read it only if you look at its reflection in a mirror. E. E. Cummings wrote much of his poetry in all lowercase with little if any punctuation.

All creations in some way reflect their maker, including the work of the Great Artist, as both Testaments affirm:

The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. (Ps. 19:1)

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. (Rom. 1:20)

By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. (Heb. 11:3)



These passages reveal that the Creator displays his unique signature on his creation. The invisible God created from nothing all things seen and unseen. And the fact that he is Creator, as Paul says, is obvious in his creation—not just in people, who are made in his image, but in everything.<sup>5</sup> And everything, though it does not speak with words, shouts “Glory to God!” because it was made to glorify him.

### *The Worshipers in the Garden*

Humankind is not the result of random biological processes. Rather, “the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Gen. 2:7).

*Unique Bodies.* When we read the creation account, we cannot help but notice the last statement of each day: “And it was so.” But for the days on which God creates some sort of organism, another phrase directly precedes: “bearing fruit . . . each according to its kind” (Gen. 1:11–12, 21, 25). Humankind was created male and female and likewise told to “be fruitful and multiply” (v. 28)—the same command given to the creatures of the sea (v. 22), along with a similar pronouncement of blessing.

Reproduction, however, is a curious thing. No two plants or no two fish are the same. They are similar in general appearance, structure, and composite molecules, but are individually unique. Similarly, human beings do not reproduce clones but unique individuals. With each new day, each reproductive cycle, the diversity and majesty of creation increases.

There is the most profuse diversity and yet, in that diversity, there is also a superlative kind of unity. The foundation of both diversity and unity is in God. . . . Here is a unity that does not destroy but rather maintains diversity, and a diversity

5. This concept is not some form of pantheism, in which “everything is god.” True, God is ever-present (Ps. 139:7–12). But trees are not God. It is a grave mistake to confuse “the glory of the immortal God” with “images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (Rom. 1:23). That kind of confusion leads to idolatry (v. 25).

that does not come at the expense of unity, but rather unfolds it in its riches.<sup>6</sup>

The doctrine of creation teaches us that we each individually matter to God, that he loves us uniquely and specially in the way a father loves his sons and daughters.

*The Image of God.* We note that humanity alone is created in God's image. Of what does this image consist? It is not simply "the breath of life" (Gen. 2:7), since animals also have that (7:15, 22). The image includes humankind's task to rule over the earth and to care for it on behalf of the Creator.

The image of God is not solely spiritual in nature, since man and woman are not just spiritual beings. We are a unity of body and soul, whole persons. You are you because of your body, not just your mental and emotional faculties. In Eden, body and spirit operate as one to the glory of God.

Both male and female are created in God's image. Neither is better than the other. Genesis 1 radically unites all human creatures in equal dignity and honor: "It is . . . significant that whereas in the rest of the Ancient Near East the image of God was limited to the king, in Israel it was regarded as characteristic of mankind generally, without distinction between king and commoner, man and woman, or Israelite and non-Israelite."<sup>7</sup>

*True Beauty.* Certainly creation was a sight to behold. Eden is referred to as a *paradise*, a word for "park" or "garden," precisely because of its beautiful landscape. Moses describes it as being bounded on one side by the river Pishon, "the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there" (Gen. 2:11–12). This is a beauty that permeates God's good creation.

This beauty extends to the bodies of Adam and Eve, who were created naked. "The body has been consistently depreciated in Christian theology, under the influence of Platonic, Aristote-

6. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 2:435–36.

7. David J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 94.

lian, and Stoic conceptions of man as primarily *nous*, ‘mind’ or ‘reason.’ . . . In biblical thought a far higher value is set upon the body.”<sup>8</sup> The human body, male and female, is a thing of exquisite beauty, a good creation by God, and it should be treated as such.

*The Creation of the Family.* God declares something “good” many times in Genesis 1, and he tells us what is “not good” in Genesis 2: “It is not good that the man should be alone” (v. 18). Next follows the so-called parade of animals before Adam, when he names each one. When no suitable helper is found among the animals, God forms one out of Adam’s rib. We can almost imagine Adam’s thought process:

“No, this one isn’t like me . . . I will call it ‘Bull.’”

“This one isn’t like me, either . . . I will call it ‘Horse.’”

“This one certainly isn’t like me . . . I will call it ‘Dog.’”

“This at last is bone of my bones . . . ; she shall be called ‘Woman.’” (Gen. 2:23)

The parade functions to help Adam understand who exactly his helper is supposed to be—Eve. And so our first parents become “one flesh” (v. 24), uniting to accomplish the work set before them in the garden.

### *The Work to Be Done*

Adam and Eve are to “work it [or serve it] and keep it” (Gen. 2:15)—language of the worship of God to the Israelite ear. They were to worship God by the caretaking of creation and creatively expressing whatever their hearts desired, resulting in the ongoing praise of his glory. There were no express limitations for their task, save one: do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (v. 17). Imagine the creative possibilities! Sandra Richter summarizes: “In essence, Adam and Eve are free to do anything except decide for themselves what is good and evil.”<sup>9</sup>

8. Ibid., 86.

9. Richter, *The Epic of Eden*, 104.

This was the good creation of God, the crown of his glory made manifest as the *world* filled with his *worshippers* doing his *work*. Richter articulates it well:

This was Adam and Eve's perfect world. Not just fruit and fig leaves, but an entire race of people stretching their cognitive and creative powers to the limit to build a society of balance and justice and joy. Here the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve would learn life at the feet of the Father, build their city in the shadow of the almighty, create and design and expand within the protective confines of his kingdom. The blessing of this gift? A civilization without greed, malice or envy; progress without pollution, expansion without extinction. Can you imagine it?<sup>10</sup>

### **Fall: Heaven and Earth Marred**

Unfortunately, the perfection enjoyed by Adam and Eve did not last. When the devil tempted them, they did indeed decide to choose for themselves what was right and wrong, and in so doing irreparably damaged the peace and beauty of God's good creation. The blessings of creation are now tainted by the curses of the fall.

#### *The World Is Cursed*

It is said often, but believed too little: sin affects everything. It never "affects only me." And the classic example of this truth is the first pronouncement of curse for Adam's sin: "cursed is the ground because of you" (Gen. 3:17). The ground as created was to bring forth plentiful vegetation for the food of humans and animals alike. Now, because of Adam's sin, the ground is subjected to an alien unfruitfulness. The animals have done nothing wrong, yet their food source is damaged because of Adam. And the earth's vegetation is also damaged. As Paul explains, "the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly" (Rom. 8:20). All

10. Ibid.

that was good and beautiful—the harmony of human beings, beasts, and ground—is disrupted by the pollution of Adam’s sin.

### *The Worshipers Are Cursed*

The most glaring reversal of blessing befalls Eve. The blessing of male and female to “multiply” (Gen. 1:28) now turns to curse: “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children” (3:16). The pain is not just limited to the actual moment of birth. Nor is it limited to the gestational period, though that is also painful. The pain of childbearing extends to miscarriage, to birth defects, to diseases, even to the untimely death of children. None of these was part of Eden before the fall; they follow the sin of our first parents.

The second reversal strikes the marriage relationship itself. Eve’s desire is changed from one of helping her husband to helping herself (Gen. 3:16),<sup>11</sup> just as she “helped herself” to the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. She saw that the tree was good for food, that it was beautiful, and that it was desirable to make her wise, so she ate. She did not help Adam to keep God’s command; she helped him to violate it along with her. For both husband and wife, the curse introduces opposition and self-centeredness into the marriage covenant where there once was mutuality and self-sacrifice. Both Adam and Eve are responsible for the results of sin on the marriage relationship, which God had intended to reflect his very image.

### *The Work Is Cursed*

Completing the reversal, the curse now spreads to the work. Humankind’s charge to work and keep the garden is no longer easy because of sin. Now, instead of cooperating with Adam in perfect harmony, the ground only grudgingly produces “thorns

11. This is a modification of the interpretation that the woman’s desire is to “domineer” over the man. See Susan T. Foh, “What Is the Woman’s Desire?” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37, 3 (1975): 376–83; Robert I. Vasholz, “‘He (?) Will Rule Over You’: A Thought on Genesis 3:16,” *Presbyterion* 20 (1994): 51–52.

and thistles” (Gen. 3:18), with the result that Adam (and Eve) would live only “by the sweat of” their faces (v. 19). The work that was previously enjoyable is now laborious. It is slow because the fruitfulness of the ground and of our labor has been hindered by sin. Now we must exert more effort while we accomplish less.

In short, the creational blessing “be fruitful and multiply” has degenerated into blighted productivity and painful accomplishment. Samuel Medley captures our lament:

Weary of earth, myself, and sin,  
Dear Jesus, set me free.<sup>12</sup>

### **Redemption: Heaven and Earth Waiting**

Since that dreadful day, every human being has longed for a return to perfection. But how can something that is polluted become pure again? No matter how many times you distill water, pass it through carbon filters, diamond filters, and chemical filters, it still contains trace amounts of pollutants. It is never truly pure again. Purity must be introduced from an outside source. And that source is the incarnation. “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Heb. 2:14–15). The solution to the pollution of human sin is the human embodiment of the only remaining perfection, God himself.

### ***The World Groans***

Tsunamis in Japan, Thailand, and Indonesia. Earthquakes in Haiti and Chile. Fierce tornadoes in Alabama and Missouri. We call them *natural disasters*. But in point of fact, there is nothing natural about their destructive effects on humankind. Those

12. Samuel Medley, “Weary of Earth, Myself, and Sin,” in William Gadsby, *A Selection of Hymns for Public Worship: In Four Parts*, 10th ed. (London: Paternoster, 1844), no. 386.

effects are unnatural, a result of the brokenness of this world.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Paul writes:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it. . . . For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. (Rom. 8:19–20, 22)

With the first advent of Jesus Christ, the decisive blow against the devil has been struck. But the weeds have not yet been pulled from among the wheat (Matt. 13:24–30), and the world has not yet been purified of the corruption of the works of the devil. So it waits. It eagerly longs for justice. It awaits the final day when it, along with humankind, will be made right forever.

The Gospels give us a glimpse of this restoration in one of Jesus' miracles. In Mark 4, Jesus is asleep on a boat crossing the Sea of Galilee and a great storm arises, striking fear into his disciples, seasoned seafarers. Jesus commands the storm, "Peace! Be still!" (v. 39). And the storm obeys: "And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm." Certainly the main point of the narrative is the disciples' weak faith in their moment of struggle.

But there is also here a description of what creation looks like under the perfect, righteous rule of the Creator. When Jesus speaks, "Peace!" he is in effect saying, "Silence!" There is no indication in the passage that the storm subsides by natural causes—quite the opposite, in fact. The experienced fishermen marvel and are filled with "great fear" (Mark 4:41), seeing that the winds and sea instantly obey Jesus' command. The picture is that of a command issued by one in authority. The sea is in a state of chaos, disturbing the peace of the boat and its passengers. The Creator-King commands; peace is restored. Similarly, creation

13. In the Bible, *disasters* may at times be the result of individual or collective sin, but we know that only because God's Word reveals it to us (e.g., Ex. 2–12; Num. 16:30). Thus, there is no way to know whether any event today is directly related to any particular sin(s) or is part of the general brokenness of creation. In fact, Jesus instructs us not to assume that a tragedy is necessarily the direct result of sin (Luke 13:1–5; John 9:1–7).

eagerly awaits the last day when the Creator will once again issue his command, this time to all of heaven and earth, rebuke all that rages, and cause all chaos to cease.

### *The Worshipers Struggle*

The description of the current state of affairs in creation continues in Romans 8:23, shifting to human brokenness: “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”

We all know that our bodies are weak and frail. And all of life centers on the harsh reality of our mortality. We scramble for everything we can get: the best opportunities for our kids for elementary school so that they can get into a good high school, attend a better college, land that perfect job, marry an equally well-off spouse, and save enough to retire comfortably and put their children and their children’s children on the same path before they die. Did we leave anything out? It is like a rat race, all driven by the ticking clock, because we know that we will not be on this earth forever.

And so we struggle. We struggle to be faithful in every area to which God has called us. More deeply, we struggle, as Paul says, not “against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). These things are a result of the brokenness of the world introduced by sin and under the influence of Satan. We struggle against our own sinful tendencies (e.g., Rom. 6:12–19; Col. 3:5–17). We struggle against a world that is hostile to the things of God (e.g., Ps. 34:21; John 16:33). And we struggle against the schemes that Satan himself has set up in opposition to the risen Savior (e.g., 2 Cor. 10:3–6; Rev. 12–14).

Yet even in our struggles, we see much of what is to come. The power of sin has been broken. And we have put on the new self, which even now “is being renewed in knowledge after the



image of its creator” (Col. 3:10). This is just one way that the Bible describes the ongoing process of becoming more like Jesus Christ. To grow in holiness is to be increasingly transformed into the kind of people we were created to be until at last, either by death or by Christ’s appearing, we burst into the full brilliance of our heavenly perfection. And so, Paul says, we “toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within” us (Col. 1:29).

### *The Work Progresses*

Is the work of Christ progressing? In terms of the overall mission of God, we must answer yes, since more people worship Christ than ever before.

*The Works of Common Grace.* Christians use the term *common grace* to refer to the grace that God as Creator gives to all people, regardless of their acknowledgment of him. For example, Jesus teaches us that the Father “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45). People have not ceased to be human because of the fall; they still bear the image of God (James 3:9). And by the manifold grace of God that extends to everyone, people everywhere are engaged in making culture: building buildings, establishing customs, preserving justice, and providing for those in need. It is important to remember that God’s call to “fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion” (Gen. 1:28) and to “work it and keep it” (2:15) is not something exclusively done by Christians. True, we should be doing it. And it is a great tragedy that non-Christians, even atheists, by means of God’s common grace sometimes fulfill the task of creation-caretaking and culture-making better than God’s children do. But as we will see, this work of common grace is an integral part of the renewed creation, even as it is now.

*The Works of Special Grace.* In even greater degree, God’s work of special grace is abounding in Christ and in his church. Special grace is the work of God that draws people to himself by faith in Jesus Christ (e.g., John 6:44, 65). And most typically associated with the work of God’s special grace is the conversion

of the lost. The gospel is going forth into more new places and back into places such as the Middle East, where Christianity was once the stalwart religion. Most estimates today place the number of Christians worldwide, including nominal ones, at around 2 billion. And that is just a snapshot at this point in time; historically, who knows how many have become heirs of eternal life?

Also included in the work of God's special grace is the performance of miracles. When Jesus begins his public ministry, he starts by reading in the synagogue from the Isaiah scroll: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18–19, quoting Isa. 61:1–2). This new turn in redemptive history (Luke 11:20) is marked by the advent of Jesus Christ, who has brought the kingdom of heaven with him. Luke links Jesus' performing miracles with the Holy Spirit's special work.

Consider the healing of the man with leprosy whom Jesus encounters: "And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, 'Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.' And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, 'I will; be clean.' And immediately the leprosy left him" (Luke 5:12–13).

This is no sleight of hand. Luke goes out of his way to describe the man as being full of leprosy. Nor was it a "natural" cure; no cure was that immediate. What occurs is the reconstitution of this man to full health, and this is a picture of the renewal that is to come in the new creation. Graham Twelftree explains:

The biblical theology of [miracles] is dominated by Jesus. . . . His ministry is best understood in the light of [Old Testament] conceptions of God's continuous creativity, in which some events reveal his nature and saving power more clearly than others. . . . [They] carry the signature of the one who

performed them; God himself is revealed and is eschatologically at work in Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, the incarnation of Jesus also brought the power of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' miracles provide pictures of the renewal that is to come to creation and humanity. In them God gives a foretaste of the future now. And what a future it will be for the citizens of heaven!

In the meantime, believers who make up the church, the creation itself, and even the Holy Spirit groan for final redemption:

The whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves . . . groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. . . . The Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. (Rom. 8:22–23, 26)

We rejoice that God's work in Christ is progressing through the life and mission of the church. This is the special locus of God's presence in the world and is for the sake of the world. The church joins in the groaning of the creation and the Spirit most especially when it recognizes its role in God's mission and in this way actively waits for the coming kingdom. This longed-for final redemption is the focus of the next chapter.

14. G. H. Twelftree, "Signs and Wonders," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity & Diversity of Scripture*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 886.