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Jeffrey R. Reed
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

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All Creation Groans: A Comparison of Feminist and German Existential Theology of Romans 8:18-25

Jeffrey R. Reed

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to the futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

(Romans 8:18-25; NRSV)

Conventional exegetical and theological approaches to the understanding of the Pauline Epistles have been dominated by androcentric views of Paul, largely due to the fact that males have disproportionately done theology. Arguably, one of the most influential writings on New Testament theology in the last 150 years is Rudolf Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament*. First published in 1951, Bultmann's anthropological view of New Testament writings and particularly those of the apostle Paul typify an androcentric view of Pauline theology. For nearly two thousand years, this has been the approach to virtually all exegetical reviews of Scripture. As more women have entered into theological endeavors, they have brought with them alternative ideas on how to view Scripture. There are any number of examples in Scripture where a female perspective is more than warranted, however, none more so than Romans 8:18-25, a pericope in which Paul describes "all of creation groaning with labor pains." Perhaps there is no better lens to view a pericope regarding childbirth, even if it is understood to be metaphoric, than through the eyes of a woman. In this paper I examine Bultmann's interpretation of creation with a comparison to his more traditional views to those of several feminist interpretations regarding Paul's theology of creation.

Bultmann's view of the Pauline Epistles, particularly Romans, is complex. Bultmann emphasizes the Gnostic influence on Paul and more specifically on Paul's view of creation.¹ He also makes reference to Paul's pantheism (Rom 11:36)² and his use of what would currently be termed natural theology (Rom 1:19).³ Most intriguing is Bultmann's view on how Gnostic and Old Testament traditions combined to form Paul's view of creation. Bultmann explains that according to Paul, creation is from the Creator (the use of Creator indicating the Old Testament influence) and humankind is excepted from creation but certainly belongs to it.⁴ Since humankind is no longer part of creation yet is endowed by God with "special dignity and responsibility" (1 Cor 11:37) toward it, humanity stands between God and creation and must choose between the two. The earth and its creatures are subordinate to humankind and are not influenced by the cosmic powers Paul refers to in Romans 8:38-39:

neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

As Bultmann notes, this gives creation an ambiguous character, on one hand the earth has been placed at humanity's disposal for his use and benefit by God (1 Cor 10:26), while on the other hand creation is the field of activity for evil and demonic powers. It is from here that Bultmann sees Paul's Old Testament tradition flow together with his appropriation of Gnostic mythology. It is through this Gnostic mythology that creation becomes a destructive power and humanity chooses it over God. Paul's view that all humankind is in sin (Rom 1:18-3:20) can therefore be traced to humankind basing life upon creation rather than the creator. As such, creation owes to humanity just as it owes to God. This view

¹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 227-32.

² *Ibid.*, 229.

³ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 230.

of Bultmann is also evident in his writing regarding “Gnostic Motifs,” where he again claims Paul to have appropriated the Gnostic myth of creation’s fall as well as that of Adam.⁵ Therefore, according to Bultmann, humanity’s plight in the world is “as a life which by its origin is destined for destruction, a life that is prone to be ruled by demonic powers.”⁶ It is particularly interesting that Bultmann continually sets humankind in opposition to creation. When Paul does hint at humankind and creation being related or at least dependent on each other (1 Cor 15:28) he commonly dismisses the pericope as either Gnostic or pantheistic. Perhaps even more telling is that Bultmann makes no mention of “all of creation groaning” (Rom 8:22). Here Paul has indicated that humankind and creation are one in their groaning in desperation for a new order, and again Bultmann makes no mention of the passage in his treatise. One can only speculate about why he does not mention this female imagery; imagery that seemingly ties humanity and creation together in such a way that creation is as dependent on Christ’s death and resurrection as is humankind. In §31 Bultmann makes no mention of creation being reconciled with humankind.⁷

The lack of attention paid to creation in Bultmann raises the question of whether Paul was at all concerned about creation and if so, in what sense. According to W. D. Davies, Paul’s concern for land and creation was based on his view that the new movement the world was experiencing—that is, Christianity—was the next step from exile to land.⁸ As a result, Davies contends the land was largely dismissed by early Christians. Combined with an immediate sense of revelation due to their apocalyptic views, early Christians found no reason to maintain balance with creation.⁹ Conversely, Walter Brueggemann contends that while creation wasn’t perhaps a central focus of Pauline theology, it was much more common and integral to Christianity than Davies is willing to acknowledge.¹⁰ Brueggemann finds land,

and creation, integral to the Pauline mission.¹¹ In particular, Brueggemann notes the importance of the apocalyptic view that land was essential to complete the cycle from exile to “rightness” with Torah and God’s will. Central to Brueggemann’s argument is Romans 8:17, which refers to “heirs” and the promise to the descendants of Abraham that they inherit the world (cosmos) not through the law but by faith. As those who gather around Christ are heirs, all will find freedom from exile and a new creation.¹² While Brueggemann fails to mention “groaning” specifically, it is very likely that those who follow Christ will be those groaning with creation for the fulfillment of prophecy. Neither Bultmann, Davies, nor Brueggemann reflect on the portion of the pericope that mentions “groaning with labor pains.” Perhaps they were deferring that exegesis to feminist theologians, several of whom we now turn our attention to.

The mere idea that Paul could be seen as an ally to feminist theology is nearly laughable. Paul lived in a decidedly androcentric culture and his writings arise from a fundamentally androcentric viewpoint.¹³ Examining the Pauline corpus from a feminist perspective is, of course, somewhat dangerous in that it is quite easy to fall into a revisionist trap. If we are to look at how the Pauline corpus will influence our current theology and spiritual lives, however, it is imperative to examine this literature from all perspectives, particularly from those who are affected by these writings.

A feminist view of Paul and creation begins with an “immersion into the apocalyptic tradition that Paul uses and a disassociation from the androcentric blueprint most often used in the interpretation of Paul.”¹⁴ Accordingly, Luzia Sutter Rehman defines her views on Paul and creation based on her interpretation of apocalyptic literature. Rehman sees such literature as that of resistance, written by people who with all their might and hope are waiting for transformation of existing conditions. She goes on to note, however, that waiting isn’t neces-

⁵ Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 174.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 235–38.

⁸ W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974), 396–404.

⁹ Revealing a Gnostic influence that both Davies and Bultmann consider important in the development of Pauline theology of creation.

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002), 166.

¹¹ For the purposes of this paper, I consider land as an integral part of creation as alluded to by Brueggemann. It can also be considered a political property.

¹² Brueggemann, *The Land*, 167.

¹³ Sheila E. McGinn, “Feminists and Paul in Romans 8:18-23: Toward a Theology of Creation,” in *Gender, Tradition and Romans: Shared Ground, Uncertain Borders*, eds. Cristina Grenholm and Daniel Patte (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 21.

¹⁴ Luzia Sutter Rehman, “To Turn the Groaning into Labor: Romans 8:22-23,” in *A Feminist Companion to Paul*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (New York: T & T Clark), 74.

sarily a passive exercise; in fact, they are reaching out for redemption. She also questions the “Christian patience” for salvation, asking rhetorically if patient waiting actually brings relief in times of distress. On the contrary, Paul says to cry out loud, protest, demand abundant life and justice. Rehman demonstrates how this apocalyptic imagery shows that hope and resistance are interwoven into the metaphor of laboring creation: “Birthing, labor, is not an impotent whispering of poor female bodies, nor is it passive suffering. . . . It is above all active!” She goes on to note that when viewed metaphorically and from a feminist understanding, the laboring and groaning is working toward a whole new life, beyond the androcentric view of birth that associates it with pain and suffering and the “production of sons.”¹⁵

Contrary to Bultmann’s view of creation as being created for humanity’s disposal and use, Rehman contends that Paul does not put Christians in opposition to creation. Paul does not isolate community and creation from Christ’s death and resurrection; this event has overtaken all of creation. Humankind and creation groan together with hope for beginning and new life. Groaning binds them together.

Somewhat similar to Bultmann, Rehman does note that Paul is using mythic images from Old Testament images to develop his metaphor. Paul expands this myth in his discourse; obviously creation has no mouth from which to groan, nor a head or eyes to look out into the future. The myth, while incorporating Old Testament influences, certainly must be considered a metaphoric image of a woman in childbirth.

Rehman’s view on sin is considerably different from Bultmann’s.¹⁶ Whereas Bultmann places the cause of humankind’s sin as a choice between creation and God, Rehman claims Paul’s interpretation of sin results largely from the economic and military oppression that resulted from Roman domination in the Mediterranean region. This oppression led to sin. Consequently, with sin present, Jews could no longer uphold God’s will (Torah), resulting in a life far apart from God. Rehman also adds that all creation suffers as a result, and rather than being the source of evil as Bultmann’s theology would assert, creation is subjugated to the same cosmological powers that are hostile to God; just as is humankind.

Rehman concludes by rhetorically (or perhaps

not) questioning what this female imagery in Romans 8:22-23 would have meant to the female companions that Paul had acknowledged as coworkers. Could it be that Paul saw them as vital to our understanding that they are giving birth to a new creation in a matter that required pain and suffering but above all, active participation?

Similarly to Rehman, Sheila McGinn begins her analysis of Romans 8:18-23 from an apocalyptic understanding of Paul, also claiming this leads one to discern gender relations in a new creation or eschatological perspective.¹⁷ McGinn takes great issue with the tradition surrounding the Pauline corpus and chastises female exegetes for being slow to analyze Paul’s letters for the various theological themes and questions their male counterparts have been doing since antiquity. Still, while not approving of the tradition, McGinn notes that neither the androcentrism present in Paul’s writings nor the misogyny that has resulted are enough to reject them entirely.

According to McGinn, Paul’s theology of creation begins with the assumption that it is a result of a divine act and therefore creation is a divine object. Unlike the previously mentioned authors, McGinn notes that Paul is greatly interested in the nature of creation. Because he views it as a divine act, he is particularly interested in the role creation will play in God’s plan for salvation. In her view, however, Paul’s view of creation has been misappropriated by a “malestream theology” that at its very best has viewed creation as subordinate to humankind. From this platform nature has been denigrated and viewed in dualistic fashion in opposition to a spiritual reality, that is, nature is evil, corrupt, and a source of temptation for the “spiritual man.” Although not mentioned specifically, Bultmann’s legacy and view on creation certainly does come very close to McGinn’s description. She goes on to argue that because women are so closely tied to nature (e.g., Rehman’s claim that creation giving birth to a new creation is a metaphor for a woman in labor) through their roles in gestation, childbirth, and lactation, women have similarly been denigrated; the earth and women have both been relegated to subordinate roles. For example, she notes that imagery often associates women and nature and that they are both capricious and irrational. This is contrary to man and spirit, which are seen as trustworthy and rational. Interestingly, Wendell Berry has made a similar observation on the re-

¹⁵ Rehman, “To Turn the Groaning into Labor,” 75.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁷ McGinn, “Feminists and Paul in Romans 8:18-23,” 22.

relationship between how women and land have been treated. He writes:

I do not know how exact a case might be made, but it seems to me that there is an historical parallel . . . between the treatment of the land the treatment of women . . . interested in both mainly for what they could produce, crops and dollars, labor and sons.¹⁸

Berry's words give life to McGinn's argument and even more reason to seriously consider the feminist viewpoint.

From her exegetical work and apocalyptic understanding of Paul's theology, McGinn constructs a feminist theology of Romans 8:18-23. Accordingly, the universe is a creation of God and as a creature it has a purpose. Creation is not static, but rather a dynamic entity that is continually seeking fulfillment. As a dynamic entity with purpose, creation is meant to work with humanity and God. Through the web of life, McGinn notes that creation, humanity, and Creator are intimately bound with each other. From that bond, creation is eager for human salvation and human and creation fulfillment are dependent on each other. She goes on to say that the fulfillment of creation will reveal a nature that is connected to what currently exists but is qualitatively different. McGinn contends that she and Paul begin at the same place, with a loving deity who generated the universe. Yet she also notes that Paul's encomium on creation goes even further than her feminist model. In the spirit of Rehman, McGinn notes that Romans 8:18-23 depicts creation as an active, live force that is seeking to achieve a goal it shares with humanity. Paul's theology of creation is therefore intertwined with his view of the eschaton; creation, like humankind, is actively pursuing the goal of eternal salvation. McGinn notes that the eschatological view is troublesome for feminists in that it more often than not requires "redemptive violence" and the acceptance of the annihilation of the earth, disdain for the human body, and human salvation through cosmic holocaust.

These observations are particularly striking, as they are supportive of Bultmann's claim of Gnostic influences in Paul's theology of creation. Paul, however, never mentions a cosmic holocaust or anything being destroyed in his eschatological vision. Rather, he envisions a liberation of creation so that it may achieve its full potential. When human salvation is

complete, creation likewise will find its fulfillment in God's glory. When humanity's deficiency is overcome and humans are adopted as heirs to God's freedom and glory, creation will also find its fulfillment. In light of this, McGinn closes by suggesting feminist theologians would be well served to reconsider the role of eschatology in their theology. Feminist theologians embrace humanity's relationship with creation. Ironically, that same embrace is what has kept them subordinate since antiquity.¹⁹ It is appropriate for feminist theologians to examine, perhaps even embrace Paul's theology of creation. They stand in stark contrast to Bultmann and those he influenced who have made faith existential to the point that nature and community are left out of the equation.²⁰

Christianity, similarly theology, can be seen as a closed system with well-defined boundaries, established ways of examining Scripture and strict dogma. Conversely, it can be fluid, boundless, and understood, as creation can be, as a dynamic reality. As Bultmann's work was likely seen as pushing boundaries when it was first published, feminist theologians are doing likewise; pushing boundaries and creating new vantage points from which we can examine the theological landscape of Scripture and how it, and consequently we, affect creation.

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¹⁸ Wendell Berry, *Recollected Essays, 1965-1980* (San Francisco, CA: North Point, 1981), 215.

¹⁹ McGinn, "Feminists and Paul in Romans 8:18-23," 34.

²⁰ Bernhard W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 115.