

The Matrix of Groan

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In my Foreword to *All Creation Is Groaning*,¹ I have already indicated my great appreciation for the book and my admiration for the company of scholars that has produced it as a sign of serious collegiality. My appreciation expressed there is of two sorts. First, concerning the sociology of the book, the book attests to a lively collegium of scholar-teachers who are well grounded in their several disciplines but who mobilize the learning of their disciplines into a larger, forceful interdisciplinary statement. It is evident that confinement in academic disciplines is a serious limitation of much current research, precisely because the larger questions that require attention are most often screened out by the way in which much disciplinary research is formulated and funded. Against such a widespread habit, this book embodies a vigorous move into and through academic disciplines into a serious theological, intellectual venture.

Second, the book makes a major contribution to our thought and learning about “the future of the world.” This is indeed serious scholarship and reflection that refuse easy research questions. My impression is that the interdisciplinary conversation reflected here has functioned heuristically to return people to their disciplines with fresh questions, fresh energy, and with fresh learning in response to those larger questions. On both counts of collegiality and its intellectual contribution, this book is a model for the kind of research most urgent among us. Having already stated these matters in my Foreword, I am left free to pursue a slight theme of the book on my own. I wish to focus upon the *Groan* of the title, *All Creation Is Groaning*.

I.

In all its parts this book is an immense act of hope that anticipates a new regime of wholeness and well-being, marked by generosity and compassion. This hope is understood as theologically grounded and politically thinkable and dreamable. The new creation is a genuine possibility from God that the book affirms and to which the reader is summoned in glad, emancipated obedience. The book does not reflect much on the antecedents of newness, the extent to which the newness is a God-given *novum* and the extent to which the newness is extrapolated from what is old and now to be given new configuration. The perspective of the book is forward in expectation and not backward in analysis.

A variety of articulations of that coming, wondrous newness in the book will come as both gift and as task to the reader. I will mention only two of them. In chapter 4, “Christian Values, Technology, and the Environmental Crisis,” it is anticipated that a reordered communal existence will be marked by “simplicity, moderation, frugality, and gratitude” as a critical antidote to acquisitiveness and consumptiveness, a compelling alternative (64-65). In chapter 14, moreover, “Hope Amidst Crisis: a Prophetic Vision of Cosmic Redemption,” the reader is offered a compelling analysis of the great prophetic promises and hopes of Ancient Israel, poems that look to a new economy of well-being. Citations are appropriately made to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel,

and the Twelve Minor Prophets, indicating how the prophetic vision of new creation permeates the prophetic corpus of ancient Israel.

This buoyant vision that is a proper focus for our subject, however, has antecedents that cannot be easily passed over, antecedents signaled in the title, *All Creation is Groaning*.

The phrase, of course, derives from Romans 8:22 wherein Paul elaborates on the struggle for newness through the anguish and demand of labor pains, a new creation willed by God but not yet birthed, only in anticipation. My modest comment is that we must not pass over the labor pains, cries, and demands too readily. My colleague tells of a time of a characteristically demanding birth process in an earlier day in his family, when the father was, as usual, not present in the hospital at the birth. Soon after the birth, the father hurried to the hospital and reassured his weary wife and new mother, "Well, that wasn't so bad, was it?" Even though he is often accused of being a sexist, Paul was under no illusion about the problematic nature of birth pangs, how deep, how painful, how nearly unbearable they may be.

We do not know from whence Paul drew his insight, but perhaps like every male interpreter short on such an actual experience, he learned from a text. Long before Paul, the poet of the Isaiah tradition has God say:

For a long time I have held my peace,
I have kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in labor,
I will gasp and pant.
I will lay waste mountains and hills,
and dry up all their herbage. (Is. 42:14-15)

Under this imagery, newness is never cozy; it arrives through a struggle that turns out to be birth, though along the way the struggle might have been mistaken for death pangs. Newness is not easy for the God who will create a homecoming for exiles, according to this poet. Newness is not easy in creation that is too long in the grip of deathliness. The *process* of newness, perhaps not sufficiently considered in this book, is a process of pain that is very deep, so deep that it cannot be lived through quietly or serenely, perhaps not by either the creator or by the creation.

II.

The people of God in the Isaiah in this text (or in the Romans text) are, of course, not strangers to the groan of protest and anguish. God's creation and all of the creatures are not intended for abuse and suffering; for that reason there is something innate to human creatures in the image of God, something innate to God's people as God's partners, and something innate in creation itself as God's beloved world that will not keep silent in the process of dying and receiving new life. The texts of such anguished groaning that occurred to me include the following: What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! (Gen. 4:10). The old world of death is accomplished by Cain, but the dead Abel is not finished. The cry of Abel is a cry for vindication, a cry of pain about violence and, we dare say, a groaning toward the resurrection of life to be given again. The cry may be only in the ears of Cain and may be only on the lips of murdered Abel. For our purposes it is important,

however, that the cry is “from the ground” (*min-ha’adamah*), the very ground that constitutes the bottom layer of creation (see Gen. 2:5, 9; 3:17; 4:21-3; 5:29; 8:21). The ground is not only the scene for and witness to human violence, but the endless carrier of the residue of violence that brings anguish to the earth that remains blood-soaked.

-After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. (Ex. 2:23)

How incredible that the Exodus narrative does not begin—as Calvinists are wont to say—with divine initiative. It begins rather with Israel “groaning and crying out” in the burden of oppression that has become unbearable for the slaves. Now, beyond Gen. 4, this cry is historical and is not directly a cry of creation; except, as Terence Fretheim has shown, the moves of Pharaoh against Israel and the responses of YHWH to Pharaoh’s chaos-enactment deeply impinge upon the created order.² The plagues are actions of the creator in response to the groans of Israel for newness. We could readily imagine that the Nile, for example, could join the cry of the Hebrew slaves, for the Nile is soon to be taken up into Pharaoh’s anxious deathliness (see Ex. 7:14-25). The groan of Israel surely echoes around the Egyptian territory that is almost usurped from the legitimate hand of YHWH into alien, chaotic governance.³

-If my land has cried out against me,
and its furrows have wept together;
if I have eaten its yield without payment,
and caused the death of its owners;
let thorns grow instead of wheat, and fowl weeds instead of barley.
(Job 31:38-40)

It is astonishing that Job’s long recital of innocence—taken often to be the acme of Israelite ethics—culminates with an ecological affirmation. Indeed, the recital seems to culminate in verses 35-37 in Job’s defiant challenge to his accuser. The statement of innocence seems concluded in those verses, except that Job reaches rhetorically for one more extreme assertion of innocence. He claims that he has been environmentally responsive, a claim that makes even all his preceding neighbor claims penultimate. Job knows well that land—since it is blood-soaked by Abel—can groan, anguish, and cry out. The good news is that Job’s ecological commitments have caused the land, in this case, to be satisfied. The earth has not accused Job in angry thorns of protest or in enraged weeds of vengeance. The text tells negatively about the groan that has not been required or uttered. In our context of ecology, however, one may more fully appreciate Job’s innocence, for his care for the earth has made the groan of earth unnecessary.⁴

-Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” (Luke 19:39-40)

The text does not, to be sure, concern a cry of anguish, as the NRSV nicely renders the

Greek noun, *krazousin*, as “shout out.” The potential of stones “shouting out” is in case the crowds of disciples in verse 38 do not exuberantly shout out a welcome to the king who comes in the name of the Lord. The shouting disciples welcome the newness embodied by Jesus, newness that the Pharisees want to stop and do not welcome. But non-human creation is perfectly capable of sounding the exuberance in case human exuberance fails (see also Psalm 96:1-13 on the creation welcoming the new, coming king). The context indicates shout and not groan. But notice that the same verb can readily mean a cry of anguish; and in any case, the welcome shout is an eager longing for newness because the old has failed.

These four texts are representative of the world of *cry/shout/groan*, the world of *anguish and expectation* in which the groan of Romans 8 is situated. The new creation does not come easily, but only in a painful struggle that is both anguish and hope.

III.

I have taken this long with these texts that belong to the same semantic field as the groan of Romans 8, because I want to consider the groan of pain and the shout of hope that belong to the coming of new creation. The future, so claims biblical faith, is not an easy, convenient gift; it is not an automatic “next” that comes in “progress.” It is not a neat technological accomplishment akin to the solving of a puzzle. It is rather a mystery-shrouded gift of God which all the creatures are invited to receive in deep cost. Thus the theological-liturgical-pastoral question of the groan of newness looms large and permits no easy solution.

From God’s side, I suppose, new creation will come as God chooses. But the coming of new creation is with an ethical passion that requires us to consider the groan of newness from a human side. The truth of newness from the human side is that God’s gift comes at huge cost, the cost of acknowledging that old creation has failed and is dysfunctional, the awareness that new creation requires disciplined, intentional reception. As a result, the move from old to new entails bewildering loss of control that comes in relinquishment. The move from an old creation marked by rapacious acquisitiveness to the new world of justice, mercy, compassion, peace, and security is one that in socio-economic, political terms necessitates renunciation, repentance, yielding, and ceding of what has been. The move calls to mind the old question of baptism that in a therapeutic culture sounds so harsh, “Do you now renounce Satan and all his works?”, a renunciation of economic, political dimension that will be experienced as deep loss and that will evoke deep groans of a quite concrete, practical kind. Indeed, the depth of relinquishment is not unlike the Pauline structure of baptism in Romans 6, so that we might hear the groan of Romans 8 already anticipated in the baptism of Romans 6:

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him,

so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. (Romans 6:1-8)

The groan is that mark of shock, bewilderment, and recognition that stands between the old world of death and the new world of life. That moment between, Paul understands well, cannot be eluded, but is the narrow entry point into new creation. The groan is the gate to the future of God's new creation.

1. I can imagine a *groan without a future*, a relinquishment in which there are no new gifts and no new creation, because the new creation is only promised but not guaranteed. In a modern/post modern world so deeply secular, one can at least entertain the thought that the religious claim of newness is romanticism and that there is, in fact, no Giver behind the expected gift of newness. Such a thought is, of course, well outside the scope of this book and outside the scope of faith that propels the book, but that edge of potential *despair* is there and it is real. In the midst of our great advocacies of newness and our modest relinquishments of what is old, there is the deep threat of despair that there will be no new creation. That despair, moreover, I judge, is not simply out there but inside the household of faith. Our talk of new creation might on occasion be a bit too facile in our buoyancy.

2. But my real intention is to invert that proposition, not groan without future, but *future without groan*, or as Christian liturgy might suggest, Sunday without Friday. In a therapeutic culture in which reality is too soon reduced to entertainment, there is a ready attempt to eliminate the groan, to imagine that one can get from old to new, from death to life, in easy fashion without the pangs of death or of birth. That is, the ideology of the global economy and its match in buoyant religious affirmation are, in deep ways, an act of denial, a practice of getting from there to here without any acknowledgment of the trouble or trauma or the cost of newness. It is known among us, well known by the writers of this book, that the new creation, from the human side, is a new network of care that requires the end of domination and exploitation, the end of controlling truth and monopolies of certitude, the end of an oil-based comfort that makes every day one of ease, comfort, luxury, extravagance, and self-indulgence. That new network of care depends upon a willingness to think of creation not only as wondrous gift but also as uncompromising limit.

The groan might be the loud, unrequited blood of Abel, the unbearable slavery of Egypt, an uncared for field envisioned by Job, or an exuberant welcome from a rock (stone) concert. But the groan of new creation might also be on the lips of privileged Westerners over the loss of SUVs, or academics on the loss of new technologies, or taxpayers over the loss of easy accumulation. We should not remove the cosmic groan from the real life of creatureliness, for we have known autonomy and deeply resent the accounting to which the creator summons in the emergence of newness. Thus I suggest that a sequel to this splendid book might be an extended reflection on the liturgical, artistic, political, economic, scientific dimension of the groan that awaits us. For the cycles of denial can only be broken among us by the truth of groan.

3. The fact is that uncritical, systemic affluence that issues in consumerism is an incredible narcotic that keeps us in the grip of old creation and its deathliness. Under such a narcotic, we remain unschooled in hearing groans from non-human creatures, unaccustomed to deep human heaving. Under such a narcotic, critical discussion is too

much trivialized by therapists, managers, and entertainers; sex, power, money, and security become the defining marks of systemic denial. The cry characteristically breaks the vicious cycles of denial. But the cry will be put off for as long as we can. In this moment of crisis and denial, education for relinquishment and renunciation is essential if we are to hear the groan, and if we are to resist saying in our unnoticing, “Well, that wasn’t so bad.” It is, as Paul might have said in the depth of groan, now very bad—very glorious in prospect—but now very bad.

4. The twin habits of *denial* that refuses to groan in acknowledgment of a failed creation and *despair* that groans but entertains no prospect of newness after the groan are practices that preclude newness; for without groan there is no birth of newness; without hope there is no move out of groan. Of course new creation will be God’s utter gift among us; but it is gift given only where old creation is groaned and relinquished in expectation. Creation’s groan cannot of itself bring newness, but that groan is surely a human *sine qua non* for its coming. And if a prerequisite is creation’s groan in birth pangs, then the human creature, the creature who has most misunderstood our assigned role in creation, must do most of the groan. The human creature is deepest into the dysfunction of old creation and so must groan. The human creature is peculiarly gifted by God, and so the human creature must be the hoper for the reception of a new creation.

If we look for models of the groan that will break the despair and the cry that will override the denial, we may look in two places in Scripture that provide clues about where to look in life. First, the proper practice of hope for newness in the Old Testament, including “new heavens, new earth, new Jerusalem” in Isaiah 65:17-25, is *the exile*. Chapter 14 of our book lines out the prophetic passages of hope, but does not make much of exile—the brokenness of things past—as the context for such hope. Moreover, all of that hope in ancient Israel is after the Book of Lamentations, that is, past the large, public, loud groan.

In parallel fashion, in the New Testament it is the voice of Friday from *the cross* that does the groan that opens the way to Easter newness. The cry of Psalm 22:1, on the lips of Jesus, from the cross in abandonment, is the narrative-liturgical acknowledgement that even Messiah, the bodied hope for newness, must receive newness in the exile. Only when we, hopers for new creation, disown our present dysfunction in its deathliness and dare to voice a groan that matches God’s birthing of newness, only then will God give.

I accent groan because the force of evolutionary development, just now in the form of globalization, readily believes in new creation at the “End of History.” But that new creation, on the wings of technological progress, is a lie. The newness of God is not given in self-congratulatory buoyancy, but in the candor and hope of those who receive what they cannot conjure for themselves. This biblical insistence is not a picture of pessimism; it is rather a counter argument against rational optimism that will not wait long enough in the absence. It is in the absence that the newness comes. And so the task of faithful, candid, expectant imagination is to give absence full play, to give groan full sound. Those who do so may be among the first fruits of the spirit who groans inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. If it were easier than that or less costly than that, we would not be into birth pangs but into serene maturity with no pangs and without anguish. But we are only at the pangs. Nobody will say about such candor and hope, “Well, that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Notes

¹Carol J. Dempsey and Russell A. Butkus, eds. *All Creation is Groaning: An Interdisciplinary Vision For Life in a Sacred Universe* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999).

²Terence E. Fretheim, "The Plagues as Ecological Signs of Historical Disaster," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (1991): 385-96. See also Walter Brueggemann, "Theme Revisited: Bread Again!" (forthcoming).

³See Walter Brueggemann, "Pharoah as Vassal: A Study of a Political Metaphor," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 57 (1995): 27-51.

⁴The work of Wendell Berry, well cited in this book, is especially pertinent on this point. See for example, Wendell Berry, *The Gift of the Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981).