

# Creation and redemption

By [George C. Heider](#)

December 28, 2009

This week's texts are striking for their marvelous intertwining of themes that creedal Christians, in particular, often tend to keep separate: creation and redemption. This appears especially when the Gospel reading speaks of the word of creation as the Word-become-flesh who reveals and reconciles us with the Father.

As always in biblical studies, it would be sheer arrogance to claim originality for any of the following points. But here's what came to mind as I read and re-read these texts.

## [Jeremiah 31:7-14](#)

- The reference to Israel/Ephraim recalls Hosea and especially the [moving statement](#) of God's internal conflict between justice and mercy. Indeed, Jeremiah seems deeply influenced by the one writing prophet whom we know to be from the North.
- Jeremiah's repeated references to "ransom" and "redeem" call to mind one of the hottest topics in theology: models for understanding the atonement. One of the questions that regularly arises is, if one favors a "ransom" model (à la [Irenaeus](#)), to whom is the ransom paid and from whom is humanity redeemed? This is a legitimate question, but not necessarily one that we can answer with scriptural authority. The point of ransom/redeem language, at least in Jeremiah, appears to be that alienation from God was part of God's judgment on Israel's rebellion and that reconciliation (whether expressed as ransom or as redemption) is at God's initiative and accomplished by God's acts. Israel, according to Jeremiah, has only to

accept that its circumstances vis-à-vis God have changed by God's own doing and to rejoice therein.

### [Ephesians 1:3-14](#)

- This opening passage has a hymnic quality and coheres especially around the phrase that occurs in some variation at least eight times in these 12 verses: "in Christ."
- The passage is [replete](#) with [adoption language](#). The upshot is that, while the passage certainly makes it clear that it is Christ who accomplished our redemption, the emphasis in many respects lies on the result rather than the process. (So much for models of the atonement.)
- The passage is also full of language that states implicitly or explicitly that our adoption is the free gift of God, beginning with the [claim](#) that God "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world," that is, manifestly before our own creation.
- [Language](#) like "marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit" as "the pledge of our inheritance" calls to mind (at least for those from more sacramentally minded traditions) both baptism and the anticipatory nature of the sacraments (e.g., the liturgy's Eucharistic reference as "a foretaste of the feast to come"). With [next Sunday's focus](#) on Jesus' baptism, there is an opportunity here for some continuity.
- Running throughout this text is an image of God as Planner Supreme. It is all-too-easy for us to wander off from this theme into fascinating theological and philosophical alleyways, including especially predestination (see also [Romans 8:29-30](#)). While I am well aware of my potential Lutheran bias here, I think it pastorally imperative to stress that language like this is intended

solely for the purpose of good news and the “blessed assurance” of God’s people.

[John 1:\(1-9\), 10-18](#)

- The first nine verses are listed as optional, but I would heartily urge their inclusion, as they provide essential context for verses 10-18 (especially if one intends to pick up on the creation/redemption combination).
- The passage offers a brilliant explanation of redemption in the light of creation. John takes the potentially distant fiat language of Genesis 1 and makes it personal in the extreme, by identifying that very language as the God who would become incarnate in Jesus Christ. (As many have observed, at least part of the linkage between the two is provided by the portrayal of Lady Wisdom in [Proverbs 8](#).)
- Similarly, redemption is described in terms of God’s very personal engagement with the world. Yet nothing comes easy, even for God: “his own people” do not know or accept him (a problem throughout the ages, not merely in late-first-century intra-Jewish polemics). But those who do receive and accept are adopted as God’s children—just as Ephesians said and even Jeremiah hints at as he hears God’s good news of reclamation proclaimed among nations and coastlands afar.

*Additional lectionary columns by Heider appear in the December 29 issue of the Century—click [here](#) to subscribe.*