# Durham E-Theses

## *Genesis 1 and Creation Ex Nihilo: A Reconsideration*

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ABSTRACT

Genesis 1 and Creation Ex Nihilo: A Reconsideration

Nathan J. Chambers

This thesis addresses the question of the relationship between Genesis 1 and the doctrine of creation ex nihilo. Although creation ex nihilo was developed in the early church as a guide for reading Genesis 1, the consensus among modern historically-oriented biblical scholarship is that, as a post-biblical category, creation ex nihilo in fact obscures the original meaning of Genesis 1. By examining the various historical and theological contexts within which Genesis 1 has been read, I illustrate the differing purposes with which one can read the biblical text and the differing methods of study which relate to these purposes. Although one can read Genesis 1 as ancient history, it can also be read as part of the canonical Scripture of the church.

I first examine the ancient Near Eastern background of Genesis, which forms the historical context within which Genesis 1 has been read in the modern period. Then I turn to an exposition of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo in its classic iteration within the Christian tradition. This leads naturally to an examination of the historical circumstances in which the early church developed this doctrine. Having examined some of the key historical and theological contexts within which Genesis 1 has been read, and having addressed various hermeneutical issues involved in negotiating these various contexts, I focus on the text of Genesis 1:1-3. The syntax of these verses has been a major interpretive crux in the modern period and so I offer a close philological examination of the various possible interpretations. I conclude by examining the narrative function of Genesis 1:1 within the chapter as a whole and its larger literary-canonical context, arguing that the verse can responsibly and plausibly be read as describing the first act in the process of creation.

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We've also had several other 'families' that have been a source of encouragement during the writing process: our community group on south Whidbey and Trinitas Presbyterian Church. Again, just being asked how the writing is coming and occasionally putting up with long explanations of my research has been a great encouragement. Moreover, as a ministry intern at Trinitas, I was given the opportunity to preach through Genesis 1-11, which was a valuable impetus to formulating my thoughts on these chapters and relating these chapters to the broader work of God in Christ. I am also grateful to Brant Bosserman and Hans Boersma for reading and commenting on chapters 3 and 4 and Robert Hayward for commenting on portions of chapter 5. Although I have not been able to follow up on all their suggestions, the work is no doubt better because of their helpful advice on fields outside my own expertise.

Finally, my most profound gratitude is for my best friend and wife, Kelsey, whose love and support has been my constant source of strength. She has carved out space in our house and schedule for me to read and write, and has put up with stacks of books and papers for years. This project would never have come to fruition apart from Kelsey's encouragement and sacrifice and for this, as for so much else, I am eternally grateful.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: RECONSIDERING GENESIS 1 AND CREATION EX NIHILO

'Many writers have written a great number of things about the beginning of the book of Genesis, in which the creation of this world is described. They have left behind to future generations many monuments to their own genius…However, because they are so plentiful, these many volumes could be acquired only by the wealthy, and so profound that only the most learned could study them.'

—The Venerable Bede, 'Preface' to *Commentary on Genesis*

'In the old days, one initially wrote a work by which one sought to gain prominence, but now the task is so manifold that competence in everything is required.'

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Writing Sampler*, 76

1. THE QUESTION

The purpose of this study is to address the question of the relationship between Genesis 1 and the Christian doctrine of creation ex nihilo. Although the doctrine seems to have developed in the early church as a sort of guideline for rightly reading Gen 1 and describing the relationship of the world to God, it has fallen on hard times of late. From the perspective of biblical scholarship, creation ex nihilo is identified as 'post-biblical' and, as such, is frequently rejected as an imposition when used as an interpretive category for approaching Gen 1. Rather than illuminating the text, creation ex nihilo is thought to obscure it.[1] From the perspective of systematic theology, although creation ex nihilo is often still affirmed, the doctrine has been criticized for a number of reasons. Creation ex nihilo is seen as undergirding a 'logic of domination,' which has led to a disastrous Christian environmental ethic.[2] Similarly, although creation ex nihilo 'lacks biblical warrant,' it has had an uncontested 'doctrinal hegemony' over the language of the church, the codifying a 'pure dualism' of Logos and nothingness.[3]

John Goldingay suggests that

The discussion in the world of Greek thought regarding matters such as…creation out of nothing…is not in principle alien to the Scriptures as a whole, but it does take scriptural

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[1] See the representative quotes in ch. 2, §1.1; ch. 6, §1.

[2] Eg., Bauman, *Theology, Creation, and Environmental Ethics*, 3.

[3] Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 6, 4, 10. Cf. the further criticisms of theologians noted ch. 3, §1.1, 2.1.

thinking further than the Scriptures do themselves or takes them sideways or backwards from them…and risks losing the wisdom that appears there. If we are to learn from the Old Testament theologically…[it] will be wise to keep closer to the Old Testament's own categories of thought in order to give it more opportunity to speak its own insights rather than assimilating it to Christian categories.[4]

While Goldingay's point may be granted—various theological categories such as creation ex nihilo move beyond Scripture in a variety of ways and at times these moves are actually detrimental—it leaves open a subsequent and, it seems to me, central question: How best can these subsequent movements in 'scriptural thinking' be related to 'the Old Testament's own categories of thought'? Even if there is the risk of losing the wisdom of the OT by imposing subsequent Christian categories, is there not an equal risk of losing the wisdom and insight of previous generations, codified in 'post-biblical' doctrinal formulations such as creation ex nihilo?

Even this latter question, however, is in conflict with the Enlightenment sensibilities that have characterized modern biblical scholarship. Ellen van Wolde, in her inaugural lecture at Radboud University, addressed the question of the interpretation of Gen 1:1-3, advancing her widely publicized argument that *br'* in Gen 1:1 means 'to separate' rather than 'to create.'[5] What is of note here is neither her rejection of creation ex nihilo in the interpretation of Gen 1, a commonplace in biblical scholarship, nor her interpretation of *br'*, which has found little acceptance. Rather, van Wolde concludes her lecture with a 'credo':

Ik geloof in onbevangen lezen en leven,
in het steeds weer opnieuw beginnen,
in je zelf leeg maken van eerdere opvattingen,
om telkens opnieuw alles als nieuw gewaar te worden.

I believe in unrestrained reading and living,
in starting ever anew,
in clearing yourself of previous opinions,
in order to be aware of everything as new again.[6]

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[4] *Old Testament Theology*, 1:18.

[5] Eg., *Daily Telegraph*, October 8, 2009, reported on the lecture under the ridiculous headline 'God is not the Creator, claims academic.'

[6] van Wolde, *Terug naar het begin*, 21 (my translation). The credo includes several more stanzas along similar lines.

Van Wolde is poetic and, like Goldingay above, gives voice to the anxiety shared by many biblical scholars, myself included, that the voice of the Old Testament not be lost or muted by tradition.

From a variety of angles, however, the Enlightenment claim that the rejection of tradition is the beginning of wisdom, or at least critical knowledge, is being rethought. Thus Gadamer argues that 'If we want to do justice to man's finite, historical mode of being, it is necessary to fundamentally rehabilitate the concept of prejudice and acknowledge the fact that there are legitimate prejudices.'[7] The basic question then, is 'what distinguishes legitimate prejudices,' which are the precondition of understanding, 'from the countless others which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome?'[8] In my opinion, the critique advanced by Gadamer is strong enough that it is no longer tenable simply to reject creation ex nihilo as 'post-biblical' or 'traditional' on the grounds of Enlightenment assumptions regarding the relationship between critical reason and tradition. Neither, however, does this critique of the Enlightenment assumptions mean that creation ex nihilo must necessarily be accepted as 'traditional wisdom.' 'Legitimate prejudices' that yield understanding must still be critically distinguished from illegitimate prejudices. Consequently, there is a genuine question regarding the suitability of creation ex nihilo as a category or framework for the interpretation of Gen 1 and it is this question that I set out to reconsider.[9]

## 2. A BRIEF OVERVIEW

My reconsideration of Gen 1 and creation ex nihilo takes the following shape. In chapters 2 and 3, I set out to clarify the context for the question. Chapter 2 addresses the ANE materials that together form the historical background of Gen 1, against which biblical

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[7] *Truth and Method*, 278. 'Prejudice' in this case is linked to 'authority' and 'tradition'

[8] Ibid. Cf. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, 36-44.

[9] The question has recently been addressed. In his theological commentary, *Genesis*, Reno sees a basic division between 'traditional readers' who see that '*creatio ex nihilo* guides us toward a reading of the ambiguous words and phrases in Genesis that downplays the obvious, literal sense' (44) and 'modern biblical scholarship' which can only describe 'ancient Israelite religion' through 'sophisticated reconstructions of historical context' but are unable to integrate Gen 1 with the rest of the Bible, contemporary Christian practices, or 'a cogent view of God' (44-45). For Reno, the choice is obvious. Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, 90-91, follows a similar line, arguing that new translations that interpret Gen 1:1 as a relative clause are rooted in the human desire for 'a foothold outside of God.' Again, a 'creedal approach' dictates how the ambiguities of Gen 1:1-3 ought to be resolved. While both Reno and Jenson raise the question of Gen 1 and creation ex nihilo and offer helpful considerations, more can be said.

scholars often read the text. At the same time, I address the question of appropriate interpretive categories as well as some of the hermeneutical issues raised by reading Gen 1 in connection with ANE texts.

Creation ex nihilo is often treated, both by those who affirm it and deny it, as if the meaning of the doctrine is obvious and so gloss over the basic question of what the doctrine is actually intended to convey. In chapter 3 I offer an exposition of the classic Christian form of the doctrine, laying out several claims that the doctrine entails about God, the world, and humanity. Chapter 4 follows up on this by offering an account of the rise of creation ex nihilo in the early church. Although I accept that creation ex nihilo is 'post-biblical,' in that it was first explicitly formulated in the second century, I argue that the doctrine results from reading Gen 1 within the larger literary-canonical context of the two-testament Christian Bible.

Having offered these preliminary accounts of the ANE context of Gen 1, the meaning of creation ex nihilo, and how the doctrine arose, chapter 5 offers a philological discussion of the various possible interpretations of Gen 1:1-3. I suggest there that, although overall the arguments favor reading Gen 1:1 as an independent clause, the issue cannot be definitively resolved on philological grounds but rather a broader appeal must be made to the narrative dynamics of Gen 1 as a whole as well as the chapter's larger literary-canonical context. In chapter 6, I take up this question, examining the implications of the various interpretations of Gen 1:1 for the reading of the chapter as a whole. In this context, I offer a new argument for the old view that Gen 1:1 describes the first act in the process of creation. In chapter 7, I conclude by briefly suggesting some of the possible ways forward.

By examining the various historical and theological contexts within which Gen 1 has been read, I hope to illustrate the differing purposes with which one can read the biblical text and the differing methods of study which relate to these purposes. That is to say, how one reads the text depends on why one reads it. Although one can read Gen 1 as ancient history —as a source for understanding the religious thought of ancient Israel—it can also be read as part of the canonical Scripture of the church. This latter approach naturally includes philological and historical issues, yet other issues also which relativize some of the historical questions and also reshape the overall nature of the discussion.

3. A NOTE ON SOURCES

As this work reconsiders the relationship between a biblical text and a theological claim, it necessarily involves working across now-traditional divisions between disciplines. I believe that this sort of work is important but have also discovered that interdisciplinary work entails a number of difficulties, not least of which is the question of sources. In the following work, in addition to detailed arguments concerning Hebrew philology, I engage with the NT and numerous ANE, patristic, medieval, and reformation sources. I have tried to make judicious use of modern translations and the work of scholars in fields that are not my own but have undoubtedly overlooked certain points and sources and likely my presentation occasionally is open to challenge by experts in the respective areas. This, it seems to me, is inevitable when trying to make the sorts of broad connections between various fields that I attempt to do here. As a result, I make no claim to offer an exhaustive survey nor a complete review of the literature of any of the fields that I engage. In order to keep the work manageable, throughout I give reference to the author's last name and an abbreviated title of their work; full bibliographic details are offered in the bibliography. Early on, I adopted the practice of transliterating all foreign languages to avoid things getting garbled as they were emailed back and forth with my supervisor. Occasionally, I have replaced Hebrew characters in quotes with transliteration.

CHAPTER 2

INTERPRETIVE CATEGORIES AND THE ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT

'The story so far: In the beginning the Universe was created.  This has made a lot of
people very angry and been widely regarded as a bad move.'

—Douglas Adams, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, 1

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 *Comparative Studies and Creation Ex Nihilo*

In 1873, George Smith, Senior Assistant in the Assyriology Department at the British

Museum, announced a remarkable discovery that has been influential in the scholarly

interpretation of Gen 1 in the period since.  Smith himself was a remarkable figure: he was

born to a working class family from Chelsea in 1840 and left his education at 14 to become

an apprentice engraver.[1]  While working in London, Smith would race to the British Museum

during his lunch break, where he was fascinated by the Near Eastern collection, particularly

the cuneiform tablets which no doubt bore a resemblance to the detailed engravings he spent

his days working on.  Eventually Samuel Birch, the Egyptologist who headed the Near

Eastern department, realized not only that Smith had taught himself to read the cuneiform

tablets but that he could read them better than anyone employed at the museum.  Birch

introduced Smith to Henry Rawlinson, the leading British scholar of cuneiform, who had

initially deciphered cuneiform some years earlier.  Rawlinson petitioned the museum to hire

Smith for his skill in piecing fragments together.

While working to organize the British Museum's cuneiform, Smith made a number of

important discoveries.  In 1866, Smith deciphered a tablet describing a tribute payment by

Jehu of Israel to Shalmaneser III.  The following year, he discovered the description of a total

solar eclipse of June 15, 763.  It was in 1873, however, that Smith made his one of his most

influential discoveries: a partial version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.  Describing the discovery,

Smith notes that he had divided the museum's tablets into six divisions, one of which he

called 'Mythological Tablets.'  No doubt this sixfold division, and the category of

'mythological' texts, has been significant for our subsequent understanding of Mesopotamian

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[1] This bibliographic account is based on David Damrosch, 'Epic Hero,' 94-102.

literature.  At any rate, while organizing the tablets, Smith's eye was caught by a line referring to 'the ship that rested on the mountains of Nizir, followed by the account of the sending forth of the dove, and its finding no resting-place and returning.'[2]  This tablet was highly fragmented and so Smith

> commenced a search for any missing portions of the tablets.  This search was a long and heavy work, for there were thousands of fragments to go over, and, while on the one side I had gained as yet only two fragments of the Izlubar legends to judge from, on the other hand, the unsorted fragments were so small and contained so little of the subject, that it was extremely difficult to ascertain their meaning.

Ultimately, Smith recovered 80 fragments through this painstaking process and, two years later, following a similar process, Smith also discovered and published a reconstruction of *Enuma elish*, which has ever since set the agenda for the interpretation of Gen 1.[3]  Unfortunately, Smith died of dysentery the same year, while on an archaeological expedition to further excavate Assurbanipal's library.

In the wake of Smith's discoveries, new issues emerged in the interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis as scholars attempted to relate the biblical and ANE accounts of creation and early history.  The most influential early attempt was by Hermann Gunkel in his 1895 work *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* although the American scholar G. A. Barton published a similar comparative study two years earlier.[4]  It is now standard practice in biblical scholarship to read Gen 1 (and 2-11) with recourse to a variety of ANE texts, although *Enuma elish* remains one of the most frequently referenced texts.[5]

The issue at hand—Gen 1 and creation ex nihilo—is affected by this interpretive trajectory in a number of ways.  First, various features of Gen 1 have been read as parallel to ANE creation accounts.  Second, the early lines of *Enuma elish* in particular led to a reconsideration of the syntax of Gen 1:1-3.[6]  Third, the emergence of ANE comparative materials was seen to problematize creation ex nihilo as an interpretive category, although

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[2] Smith, *The Chaldean Account of Genesis*, 5.

[3] George Smith, 'The Chaldean Account of the Deluge,' *Transactions of the Society of Biblical Archaeology* 2 (1873-1874): 213-234; ibid., 'On Some Fragments of the Chaldean Account of the Creation,' *Transactions of the Society of Biblical Archaeology* 4 (1875-1876): 363-364.

[4] 'Tiamat,' *JAOS* 15 (1893): 1-27.  On Gunkel's work, cf. ch. 6, §3.

[5] For further history of comparative studies, cf. Christopher Hays, *Hidden Riches*, 15-25; Richard S. Hess, 'One Hundred Fifty Years of Comparative Studies on Genesis 1-11,' 3-26; and Mark Chavalas, 'Assyriology and Biblical Studies: A Century and a Half of Tension,' 21-67.

[6] Cf. ch. 5, §2.1.2, 2.2.3

precisely how and why this is the case is often unspecified.  To illustrate this trend, I offer several examples.

Bernard Batto lists as the first 'common assumption about creation' shared by all ANE peoples, including ancient Israel, that 'they had no concept of *creatio ex nihilo*; this idea seems to have made its appearance no earlier than the second century B.C.E. with the arrival of Hellenistic ideas in the region, after the heyday of ancient Near Eastern culture and near the end of the Hebrew Bible period.'[7]  Here creation ex nihilo is unsuitable simply because of its late formulation; it is a post-biblical concept.[8]  Othmar Keel and Silvia Schroer share this basic perspective, although their formulation is a bit more nuanced: 'The highly philosophical construct of a *creatio ex nihilo*, which appeared in the historical record for the first time only in the second century A.D., arising in the early church, cannot be found in the Hebrew Bible.'  Rather, creation ex nihilo 'developed from the ontological perspective that had its origins in the time of Aristotle and leads, in regard to understanding Genesis 1 and other passages, to error.'  They do allow, however, that 'the idea of preexisting primeval material' is also a possibly erroneous assumption for the interpretation of Gen 1.[9]

Joseph Blenkinsopp notes that 'by construing the opening sentence as a main clause rather than a subordinate temporal clause, this version [the LXX] provided warrant for a theology of creation from nothing.'[10]  While this doctrine 'can be argued on philosophical and theological grounds,' 'was accepted in Judaism before Christianity,' and is 'hinted at indirectly' in the NT, the LXX reading of Gen 1:1-3 'is not the preferred option in strictly exegetical terms.'[11]  Rather, we must 'take account of the literary context, and from this perspective it is clear' that Gen 1:1 should be read as a subordinate clause.  After all, Gen 1 'belongs to the genre of cosmogony…and ancient cosmogonic myths in that culture area begin by describing the way it was at the time of the first creation, only then to proceed to the creation itself.'[12]  Blenkinsopp here cites *Enuma elish* as a prominent example, since it was

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[7] *In the Beginning*, 10.

[8] On the history of the concept of creation ex nihilo, cf. ch. 4.  I pick up the issue of 'post-biblical' categories in the conclusion of this chapter.

[9] *Creation*, 139.  Cf. van Wolde, *Terug naar het begin*, 20: Dus deze tekst vertelt niet over een *creatio prima*, een eerste schepping, niet over een *creatio ex nihilo*, over een schepping uit niets, en zelfs niet over een schepping uit chaos.

[10] *Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation*, 30.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., 31.

'the canonical Babylonian creation myth.'[13]  Blenkinsopp's conclusion: 'It is in any case a mistake to coerce an ancient text to conform to what is essentially a philosophical and theological theory.  As we read on, we see that the author is thinking of creation as the production out of chaos of an ordered, liveable environment…Creation follows chaos.'[14]  Blenkinsopp's point is clear, even if it raises several questions: creation ex nihilo may be defensible as a doctrine of the church, but to use it as an interpretive category for reading Gen 1 requires twisting the text out of shape.  And yet we might reasonably ask: Is reading a text in terms of a subsequently developed doctrine *always* 'coercion'?  Why is it particularly as 'an ancient text' that Gen 1 that should not be coerced?  Does Blenkinsopp beg the question by presuming that philosophical and theological concerns are foreign to Gen 1?

Finally, Jon Levenson states the matter in no uncertain terms: 'it is now generally recognized that *creatio ex nihilo*…is not an adequate characterization of creation in the Hebrew Bible' but, nevertheless, 'the legacy of this dogmatic or propositional understanding lives on and continues to distort the perceptions of scholars and laypersons alike.'[15]  For Levenson, creation ex nihilo not only arises subsequent to and is foreign to the concerns of Gen 1, but its dominance historically as an interpretive category has made it difficult to read Gen 1 on its own terms.

The objections of these scholars are representative and raise three discrete issues.  First, these scholars treat creation ex nihilo as if its meaning is self-evident.  Yet it is by no means obvious what precisely is being affirmed or denied in the doctrine or how it might function as an interpretive category.  This question is taken up below in the chapter 'Creation from Nothing.'  Second, although these scholars agree that creation ex nihilo is 'post-biblical,' and thus foreign to the concerns of the OT, there is disagreement when and in what context the doctrine actually emerged.  Understanding the context for the development of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo may lead to a more nuanced account of what it means that it is a 'post-biblical' development.  In the chapter 'Biblical Pressures and Ex Nihilo Hermeneutics,' I examine the development of creation ex nihilo and its background in Jewish, Christian, and hellenistic thought.  Third, all of these scholars in one manner or another appeal to the ANE

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, xiii.  I deal with Levenson's argument extensively in ch. 6, §1-2.

literary context as either illustrating the unsuitability of creation ex nihilo or as providing alternative, more historically responsible interpretive categories.

In the current chapter, I set out the ANE context for the interpretation of Gen 1. I first address some of the basic methodological issues faced by comparative studies (§1.2-4) before offering a succinct overview the West Semitic, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian views of creation (§2-4). With reference to each culture, I offer brief comments on some of the most plausible textual parallels to Gen 1. While this overview is necessary for situating my larger argument, I proceed with caution: 60 years ago, J.J. Finkelstein commented that 'we shall always have with us the third- and fourth-hand popularizers who will pound and mash significant additions to the fund of knowledge into an amorphous and misleading pabulum for the consumption of the semi-literate.'[16] Although I am not a specialist in ANE literature, I have tried to offer a fair overview of the material based on the primary sources in translation and drawing on the work of various specialists. While more could be said at every point, I hope to at least have avoided pounding and mashing the material beyond recognition. After this overview, I address five specific questions related to the larger issue of the relationship between Gen 1 and creation ex nihilo (§5). Finally, in the conclusion to this chapter, I address some of the hermeneutical issues raised by reading Gen 1 against the background of ANE literature.

1.2 *Methodological Issues in Comparative Studies*

It is interesting to note that although biblical scholars regularly read Gen 1 within the context of ANE literature, only rarely do they explicitly state *why* they are doing so. For the historian, comparative reading is perhaps of obvious interest as it turns up potential genetic relationships between various texts and clarifies the history and development of various ideas. Thus, Gunkel in his early study proposed both a possible route by which *Enuma elish* may have influenced Gen 1 (via Canaanite mythology in 2nd millennium) and a model for the development of the idea of creation.[17] Within the Biblical Theology movement of the middle of the last century, comparative readings were pursued because of an underlying

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[16] 'Bible and Babel,' 439, quoted in Chavalas, 'Assyriology,' 45.

[17] Cf. ch. 6, §3.

assumption that the theologically significant portions of the biblical faith are its 'unique' (or at least purportedly unique) features.[18]

K. Lawson Younger undoubtedly represents the concerns of many contemporary biblical scholars engaged in comparative studies in expressing his fear that a turn to text- and reader-oriented interpretive strategies 'puts the reader rather one-sidedly in control of the literature, conforming it to the categories and interests of current criticism without regard to the categories and interests of ancient literature.'[19]  Instead of reading the Bible according to an ideological or theological agenda, we ought to let the text 'address us on its own terms.'[20]  Authors of both biblical and ANE texts employ rhetoric that

> was designed to create a certain impression on the hearer or reader, and that impression is lessened or confused by a reader's ignorance of the ancient rhetorical devices and the presuppositions that these texts employ.  Some apprehension of the ancient culture and social environment that their rhetoric presupposed and addressed—in which the composer made his or her choices—is essential for fulfilling the role of 'implied reader.'[21]

Thus comparative studies serve the goal of developing what John Barton calls 'literary competency,' the ability to recognize the conventions and genre of a text—its language-game —and, as a result, to be able to pose appropriate interpretive questions to the text.[22]  Othmar Keel puts the point succinctly: 'only when this rich environment has been systematically included in the study of the OT do OT conventionalities and originalities clearly emerge.'[23]  These points ought to be taken into account even within a broadly 'theological' approach to interpretation.  While the Hebrew Bible, as the OT, functions as Christian scripture, it was Israel's scripture first and as such it is a product of the ANE.  Thus, one of the basic questions for any theological interpretation of the OT is how to negotiate reading the text both as scripture and as an ancient text.

Accepting that comparative studies have a legitimate role within biblical studies, especially as a way of developing our 'literary competency' by expanding the range of texts from which we derive the implicit 'rules' of various genres and identify appropriate readerly

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[18] J.J.M. Roberts, 'Myth versus History,' 59-71, quote on 59.

[19] K. Lawson Younger, 'The "Contextual Method,"' in *COS* 3:xxxv, quoting Simon Parker, *Stories in Scripture and Inscription*, 4.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., xxxvi.

[22] *Reading the Old Testament*, 8-19.  'Language-game' is, of course, a term borrowed from Wittgenstein.

[23] *The Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 7.

expectations, answers *why* Gen 1 is read in connection with other ANE materials.  But it must still be determined *what* materials in particular make for appropriate comparisons.  Biblical scholars have often focused on comparisons between the biblical text and a specific ANE text and this approach does lend itself to clarity and makes for an elegant argument as two texts are set side by side and compared.  Problems arise, however, when an ANE text is treated as the 'historical' context of a biblical passage.  While in a sense any ANE text forms part of the 'historical' context of the Bible, in most cases it is very difficult to establish that a biblical author was aware of the ANE text being used for comparison or consciously borrowed from it.  Furthermore, even this framing of the problem presupposes that we are adopting an 'author-hermeneutic' rather than a 'text-hermeneutic.'[24]  While an author-hermeneutic is appropriate for some texts and in some contexts, it raises the danger of losing focus on what the author is actually saying in the text and instead trying to reconstruct the authors' sources and their dispositions to those sources.[25]

This does not mean that the comparisons of individual texts must be abandoned but it does have implications for how the comparison is framed.  Frequently, the comparison is actually being made on heuristic, rather than historical, grounds: the comparison illuminates specific features of texts, the texts demonstrate shared conventions, and so forth.  Moreover, a comparison might still be made on historical grounds but the relative likelihood and manner of historical connection between the texts should be made clear.  Finally, some of these issues can be resolved by reading biblical texts, such as Gen 1, against the background of the ANE culture, broadly conceived, rather than in connection with a specific text (although specific texts are of course key to the reconstruction of ANE culture).  The drawback of this approach is that it loses the simplicity of comparing two texts and the one doing the comparison must have a broader understanding of ANE culture.

1.3 *Comparative Reading of Genesis 1*

The general standards for historical comparison are uncontroversial: material that is geographically and chronologically 'nearer' to the focus text are more suitable for comparison as they are more likely to have exerted historical influence on the composition of

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[24] The labels and the distinction are from Luis Alonso Schökel with José María Bravo, *A Manual of Hermeneutics*; cf. Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, 17-44.

[25] Cf. Louth, *Discerning*, 40-41.

the focus text; texts that deal with the same theme and are of the same genre are more appropriate for comparison.[26] Even these criteria, however, are partially relativized when texts are being compared on heuristic grounds. For example, Carolina López-Ruiz's fascinating article 'How to Start a Cosmogony' compares the opening lines of *Enuma elish*, Gen 1, and Hesiod's *Theogony* in order to argue that there are only a limited number of ways that an author can start an account of the beginning of the world and that the way they do so sets the agenda for their work. Even if the general criteria for identifying parallel ANE material is agreed upon, there is always a subjective element as some parallels will seem more plausible to some scholars than to others.

Applying these criteria to possible comparative material for Gen 1, it seems to me, creates more difficulties than is often acknowledged. A number of Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and West Semitic texts show significant thematic overlap with Gen 1 and are frequently used in comparative readings. Many of the Mesopotamian and Ugaritic texts, however, are generally identified as 'epic poetry' (although I believe that it may be difficult to draw a sharp distinction between cuneiform 'prose' and 'poetry'). Much of the Egyptian material comes from various inscriptions on sarcophagi and the walls of buildings, including the Pyramids. Thus, there are numerous texts that deal with the same theme as Gen 1, but few share precisely the same genre.

Furthermore, in order to establish geographical and chronological 'nearness,' the place and date of the composition of Gen 1 must first be determined. Although Gen 1 is generally identified as the 'Priestly' account of creation and the 'Priestly Source' is generally dated to the exilic period, it would be unwise to tie the search for comparative material too closely to this historical hypothesis. While the 'Priestly' identification of Gen 1 is plausible, other plausible suggestions have been made.[27] And while the 6th century date for the 'Priestly Source' may still be the dominant view, good arguments have been made for both

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[26] Cf. Christopher Hays's list of criteria for identifying intertextual 'echoes' in biblical literature, 'Echoes of the Ancient Near East?,' 36-42.

[27] Peter Southwell, for example, points out that Gen 1 displays an interest in natural history, an apparent knowledge of foreign cosmogonies, and employs 'the didactic onomastic style' characteristic of Proverbs and thus may have been composed by a wisdom writer (*Prophecy*, 55-56). Bill Arnold argues that Gen 1 in fact comes from the Holiness redactor who used by 'P and non-P materials, whose purpose was to bring together all of Israel's traditions on the primeval and ancestral ages in a unified whole' ('Genesis 1 as Holiness Preamble,' 331-343).

earlier and later datings.[28]  Moreover, even if Gen 1 is 'Priestly' and that source (or redactional layer) is largely a product of the 6th century, this does not preclude the real possibility that Gen 1 circulated (relatively) independently prior to this, at which time it may have been influenced by ANE materials.  In short, 'we lack sufficient evidence to be dogmatic about the date for Gen 1:1-2:3.'[29]

At any rate, we need not identify a specific event or historical context in which the parallels between the Israelite and other ANE accounts of creation developed.  Rather, Gen 1 can heuristically be read against the broad backdrop of ANE cosmological thought.  This move is further warranted as it is apparent that international interactions of various sorts took place throughout Israel's history that provided ample opportunity for the communication of various national myths and stories.  Israel's own account of its history describes various periods of significant influence from both Egypt and Mesopotamia.  Additionally, the discovery of non-native fish bones at various archaeological sites in the Palestinian region indicates that throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages, dried fish from the Nile and Red Sea were traded throughout the Near East, including in Judah and Israel.[30]  While Egyptian and Mesopotamian climates could support the production of beer and grain alcohol, they were not well suited for the development of viticulture and thus wine developed into a profitable export for Israel.[31]  In addition to peaceful trade, frequent military excursions from both Egypt and Mesopotamia were made to and through the Palestinian region.  In the Amarna period, Palestine was under Egyptian control, as documented in the Amarna letters which were, nevertheless, written in a cuneiform script, indicating the various overlapping influences on the Palestinian region in the mid-second millennium.[32]  Moreover, a fragment of the *Gilgamesh* epic has been discovered at Megiddo in northern Palestine while the library at Emar in eastern Syria (c. 1200 B.C.) contained a number of canonical Mesopotamian texts.[33]  Finally, it is reasonable to suppose that 'at least some scribes employed in Canaanite

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[28] Cf. the helpful recent discussion in Catherine McDowell, *The Image of God*, 178-202.  McDowell concludes that a pre-exilic date for Gen 1 deserves serious reconsideration.

[29] Ibid., 186.

[30] Cf. W. Van Neer et al., 'Fish Remains,' 101-147.

[31] Cf. Nathan MacDonald, *What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat?*, 22-23.

[32] Cf. Eva von Dassow, 'Canaanite in Cuneiform,' 641-674, who argues that the hybrid of Canaanite and Akkadian displayed in the Amarna letters results from using Akkadian cuneiform to write down messages in Canaanite.

[33] Richard J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 13.

and Israelite temples and palaces were trained in the traditional manner—by copying standard texts.'[34]  Thus, Gen 1 can reasonably be read against a broad ANE background given the various forms of commercial, diplomatic, and military interactions between the Palestinian region and the larger empires of Egypt and Mesopotamia.

1.4 *'Myth'*

Throughout, I avoid the term 'myth.'  Although it is commonly employed in discussions of the texts under consideration, the term has been defined in countless ways and so can confuse the discussion.[35]  For example, on the one hand, it could be argued that since myths are tales about the interactions of the gods, none of the ANE 'myths' are comparable to Gen 1, which only depicts one deity.  On the other hand, it might be argued that since Gen 1 shares numerous characteristics with ANE 'myths,' it too must 'only' be a myth and therefore have no significance for modern religious thought.  While both arguments draw on valid observations (Gen 1 is unlike the ANE texts in its lack of a community of gods, but is like the ANE texts in various other ways), it seems to me that the category of 'myth' simply confuses things.

Although the term 'myth' is unhelpfully laden with various connotations, I nevertheless want to briefly comment on the function of 'myths' within society.  Paul Ricoeur's definition of  'myth' is a helpful starting point as it avoids some of the pejorative connotations that sometimes accompanies the term:

> [a] myth is a narrative of origins, taking place in a primordial time, a time other than that of everyday reality…Myths can reply to any of the following types of question.  How did a particular society come to exist?  What is the sense of this institution?  Why does this event or that rite exist?  Why are certain things forbidden?  What legitimizes a particular authority?  Why is the human condition so miserable; why do we suffer and die?  Myth replies to these questions by recounting how these things began…Its tie and the subsequent conflict with history result from this function.[36]

Thus a central issues raised by 'myth' is how it is related to 'normal' time, the time of everyday reality.  This relationship can be established in various ways: by ritual, through

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[34] Ibid., 14.

[35] Moreover, the distinction between 'myth' and 'history' is indebted to a classic Greek distinction that may only partially apply to the ANE context.  Cf. Paul Ricoeur, 'Myth: Myth and History,' 9:6371-6380.

[36] Ibid., 9:6371-6372.

forms of 'participation, imitation, decadence, or abandonment.'[37]  Thus, within the ANE, 'myth' is often found in connection with rituals.  In Babylon, the national myth *Enuma elish* featured prominently in the national Akitu festival while minor cosmological myths can be found at the beginning of various ritual incantations, such as the Akkadian Incantation Against Tooth Ache.[38]  In addition to offering a narrative of the origin of things, 'myths' could also be used as theology, national propaganda, as etiologies for specific features of the world, within cultic worship, and perhaps also as a form of entertainment.[39]

Finally, that the Hebrew Bible uses language that might be identified as 'mythological' (depending on one's definition of that term) raises a number of prominent theological issues for the communities that read the Hebrew Bible as scripture.  It raises basic questions about the 'the semantic status of religious discourse,' the 'theoretical place of theology as a science,' the general validity of metaphysical or ontological truth claims, and the 'relationship between theology and aesthetics.'[40]  Thus, reading Gen 1 in comparison with ANE 'mythological' texts confronts us with a number of central theological issues that arise from the biblical narrative and metaphorical identifications of God and the theological attempt to move beyond narration by making ontological claims about God.  With these brief comments on the functions of mythic language, I turn now to an overview of ANE materials that might form a background to Gen 1.

## 2. CANAANITE MATERIAL

### 2.1 *Summary*

Unfortunately there is a paucity of evidence regarding the cosmological views of Israel's immediate neighbors.  This fact in itself encourages caution in formulating claims about Gen 1 based on comparative readings as it must be admitted that much remains

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[37] Ibid., 9:6372.

[38] Cf. Benjamin Sommer, 'The Babylonian Akitu Festival,' 81-95; Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 56.

[39] Kenton Sparks, *Ancient Texts*, 335-337.

[40] Ulrich Körtner, 'Myth and Mythology IV: Fundamental Theology,' 8:688.

unknown regarding the cosmogonic accounts that may have been prominent in Israel's sphere and thus influenced the author of Gen 1.[41]

First, it ought to be noted that the closest historical context for Gen 1 is other Hebrew creation texts, several of which are preserved within the Hebrew Bible and thus also form part of the literary-canonical context of Gen 1. These creation texts preserved within the canon suggest that several features of Gen 1 were shared by the 'normative' form of Yahwism that preserved and edited the text: in all the texts, one God is depicted as the creator, generally without opposition (the interpretation of several psalms is debated).[42] Many of these creation texts focus on God's provision for His creatures. Without pushing the point too far, it must be stressed that these various creation texts are part of the broader historical background for Gen 1 since some commentators write as if *Enuma elish* is a 'closer' parallel to Gen 1 than Ps 8, 104, or 148. This simply is not historically plausible; more likely, the groups that produced these various psalms (as well as Gen 2, Job, Isa 40-48, etc) are representative of a strand of cosmological thought that influenced (and was influenced by) Gen 1.

Second, several inscriptions have been discovered within the Palestinian region that are of some relevance. The Jerusalem Ostracon may include a reference to the 'Creator of the Earth' (cf. Gen 14:19), although the text is damaged.[43] Other inscriptions, such as those from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom, contain the phrase 'YHWH and his Asherah.' Although the meaning of this phrase is debated, it seems that the physical evidence supports the picture given in the Hebrew Bible: within Israel and Judah, there were various groups that did not share the 'normative' form of Yahwism and attempted to syncretize the worship of YHWH with Canaanite religion. Unfortunately, we have no indications how those who practiced the 'YHWH and his Asherah' religion conceptualized the act of creation, although it should be noted that within the Ugaritic pantheon, Asherah was the wife of El, the creator god.

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[41] Given the common assumption that Gen 1 is P, it may have been compose in Babylon in response to the dominant religious ideology encountered there. This process nevertheless may have drawn on pre-exilic traditions and eventually was brought back to the Palestinian region and was contextualized there. Identifying the precise regional context for the composition of Gen 1 involves a series of complex issues.

[42] Cf. ch. 6, §1.4

[43] Cf. P. Kyle McCarter's translation and comments in *COS*, 2:174.

Similar epithets to the Jerusalem Ostracon have been found in Ugaritic, Phoenecian, Punic, and Aramaic inscriptions: *'l bny bnwt* ('El, the maker of creation'); *'šrh qnyt 'lm* ('Asherah, creator of the gods'); *'l qn 'rṣ (*'El, the creator of earth').[44]  From Ugarit, the *Ritual Theogony of the Gracious Gods* (KTU 1.23) gives a sexually explicit account of El's fathering of various deities, but the text is difficult to reconstruct and it does not move from theogony to cosmogony (although given the identification of various gods with various natural phenomena, it can be difficult to draw a firm distinction).  On the other hand, the *Baal Cycle* (KTU 1.3, 1.4), is probably best interpreted as a *chaoskampf* account of the maintenance of natural cycles rather than an account of the creation of the world.[45]

The bilingual inscription on the image of Hadad-Yith'I, discovered in northern Syria, reads

> The image of Hadad-yith'i which he has set up before Hadad of Sikan, regulator of the waters of heaven and earth, who rains down abundance, who gives pasture and watering-places to all lands, who gives rest and vessels of food to all the gods, his brothers, regulator of all rivers, who enriches all lands, the merciful god to whom it is good to pray, who dwells in Sikan.[46]

Again, the focus is not on the Hadad as the creator of heaven and earth, but as the regulator of various natural systems which ensure provision for the gods.  Likewise, no Hurrian or Hittite cosmogonic text survives although a number of texts recount the disappearance of a god, resulting in natural disasters as the systems under their charge become disordered.  Only after the lost god is retrieved is natural balance once again restored.[47]

## 2.2 *Key Text?*

Apart from the canonical Hebrew texts, there is no known major creation text preserved from any of the cultures along the eastern Mediterranean coast and this is a major hindrance to reconstructing the likely historical influences on the composition of Gen 1.[48]  In his comparison of Gen 1 and *Enuma elish*, Hermann Gunkel postulated that the influence of

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[44] Batto, *In the Beginning*, 39-40.

[45] Cf. Ibid., 40-41; Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 122-126; Jakob Grønbæk, 'Baal's Battle with Yam—A Canaanite Creation Fight,' 27-44.

[46] Trans. Alan Millard, *COS*, 2:153.

[47] Eg., the *Disappearance of the Sun God* (*CTH* 323), the *Illuyanka Myth* (*CTH* 321), the *Telipinu Myths* (*CTH* 324), all of which are translated in Harry A. Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*.

[48] The late work of Philo of Byblos (c. 64-141 A.D.) could be considered an exception.

*Enuma elish* on Gen 1 was likely mediated by a Canaanite creation account.[49]  Thus, upon the discovery of the *Baal Cycle* among the Ugaritic archives, it was natural to associate the narrative of the battle between Ba'al Haddad (the storm god) with Yam ('Sea') and Mot ('Death') with *Enuma elish*, which depicts the battle of Marduk (the storm god) with Tiamat (etymologically related to the term for 'deep sea'), resulting in creation.  One then might reasonably assume that the *Baal Cycle* is also a cosmogony or even a Ugaritic version of *Enuma elish*.[50]

There are several problems with this interpretation.  As far as can be determined, it was El, not Baal, who was the creator god within the Ugaritic pantheon.  While it is true that in *Enuma elish*, Marduk displaces the role of the older creator god, there is no parallel in the extant portions of the *Baal Cycle*.  The *Baal Cycle* does describe the construction of a temple for Baal and temples did have cosmic significance within the ANE.  Nevertheless, the *Baal Cycle* does not offer any account of the creation of the world.  Finally, *Enuma elish* is now generally dated too late to have influenced the Ugaritic version of the *Baal Cycle* as Ugarit was abandoned c. 1192 B.C.[51]  Thus, if there is any historical connection between the *Baal Cycle* and *Enuma elish*, it would either be in the form of a common predecessor or the influence of the Ugaritic narrative on the composition of *Enuma elish*.[52]  Thus, while the *Baal Cycle* might be helpfully compared to some of the psalms or passages that describe YHWH as a storm god, there is no obvious point of comparison between the *Baal Cycle* and Gen 1.[53]

## 3. EGYPTIAN MATERIAL

### 3.1 *Summary*

The Egyptian material is difficult to summarize for several reasons.  First, as in many ANE cultures, there was not one standard account to which other accounts had to conform.[54]  Rather, we have an abundance of extant but brief references to creation from across several

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[49] *Creation and Chaos*, 129-132.

[50] For a sophisticated defense of the cosmogonic interpretation of the *Baal Cycle*, see John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, 1-18.

[51] Cf. David Kaniewski et al, 'The Sea Peoples,' n.p.

[52] A possibility proposed, in general terms, in Thorkild Jacobsen, 'The Battle between Marduk and Tiamat,' 104-108.

[53] Cf. David Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction*, 41-57.

[54] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 99.

millennia in addition to various pictorial representations of Egyptian cosmology.[55] Throughout Egyptian history, the various 'gods and systems indigenous to different regions were combined in an ongoing syncretism for nearly three millennia. The resulting religion is a complicated array of gods and divine functions.'[56] In fact, 'the ancient Egyptians themselves had considerable difficulty understanding their texts, as is demonstrated by, for example, the widely differing interpretation preserved in the glosses appended regularly to chapter 17 of the Book of the Dead.'[57]

Some commonalities, however, have been discerned in Egyptian cosmological texts. First, the period before creation could be characterized both by negation and affirmation.[58] The period before creation could be described through negation by various phrases such as 'before the sky existed, before the earth existed,' 'before men existed, before the gods were born, before death existed' (*Pyramid Text* 1466), 'before that which was made firm existed, before turmoil, before that fear which arose on account of the eye of Horus existed' (*Pyramid Text* 1040).[59] Particularly telling is the negative phrase 'not yet two things' (*Coffin Text* 2.396b, 3.383a). At first glance, the phrase appears redundant—if there is nothing, then of course there are not two things—but it 'is an explicit expression of the Egyptian view that before creation there was a unity, which could not be divided into two things.'[60] This is comparable to the Egyptian epithet for the creator god: the 'one who made himself into millions.'[61] Thus, in the Egyptian conceptuality 'nonexistence is one and undifferentiated. The creator god mediated between it and the existent and separated them…This is the intellectual foundation of Egyptian polytheism: insofar as it exists, the divine must be differentiated.'[62]

In positive terms, the period before creation was pictured as limitless water (personified as Nun) and total darkness.[63] These states are not eradicated at creation but

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[55] John Currid, 'Egyptian Background of the Genesis Cosmogony,' 20.

[56] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 100.

[57] Leonard Lesko, 'Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology,' 88.

[58] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 101.

[59] Quoted in Ibid., 101.

[60] Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, 176.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 102; Hornung, *Conceptions*, 176-177.

continued to characterize Egyptian life: darkness was experienced nightly when the sun-god entered into the abysmal darkness only to reemerge victorious (or be reborn) each morning. The limitless water was likewise experienced annually in the Nile flood that was the foundation of Egyptian agriculture.[64] These perennial encounters with the nonexistent could be either hostile or regenerative (as were both the annual flood and the sun's nightly journey through the primeval ocean).[65]

Within the cosmologies of different regions, different gods played the role of the creator (Ptah, Re, Amun, Atum, Khnum) although only one god is depicted as the creator in any given cosmology. The creator god 'is always self-generated within Nun' (the primeval flood).[66] Just as when the annual Nile flood receded small hillocks were the first dry land to appear, so the creator god's initial acts of creation took place on a primeval hillock that emerged within Nun and was subsequently associated with the location of a temple or burial site.

The initial acts of creation are generally described as a theogony, as the emergence of the various gods of different spheres of reality from the one creator god. Three primary modes of creation are depicted in Egyptian creation accounts.[67] The first (and, so far as I can tell, the most frequent) metaphor for creation is 'procreation' via masturbation or sneezing/coughing—puns on the names Shu and Tefnut—or a combination of the two.[68] The second image for creation is building or fashioning. So Khnum was depicted as a potter who fashions human babies in the womb while Ptah could be depicted as a metalworker.[69] Finally, in the Memphite theology, Ptah is depicted as creating by divine command.[70] A further significant act of creation was the separation or differentiation of various realms,

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[64] Hornung, *Conceptions*, 179-180.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 105.

[67] So Siegfried Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 171-172.

[68] The metaphor of masturbation is a way of explaining the physical origin of the world from a single material source (James Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 14). It can be seen in, eg., *Pyramid Text* Spell 527 (*COS*, 1:7) and is conflated with the metaphor of sneezing or coughing (other forms of derivation from a single source) in *Coffin Text* Spell 80 and Spell 245. In Papyrus Bremner-Rhind (trans. James Allen, *COS*, 1:14), the two metaphors are combined into a coherent narrative: 'I copulated with my hand, I let fall into my own mouth, I sneezed Shu and spat Tefnut.' Thus the etymological (by way of the puns 'sneeze' and 'spat,' which are close in Egyptian to 'Shu' and 'Tefnut') and physical explanations of the origins of Shu and Tefnut are syncretized.

[69] Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 161.

[70] Ibid., 172.

especially the separation of Nut, the sky-goddess, from Geb, the earth-god, and the placing of Shu, the air-god, between the two to maintain their separation.[71]

In order to illustrate these various elements of Egyptian thought, I turn to several specific examples. The first example is from *Pyramid Texts* Spell 600:

> Atum Kheprer, you have come to be high on the hill, you have arisen on the Benben stone in the mansion of the Benben in Heliopolis, you spat out Shu, you expectorated Tefnut, and you put your two arms around them as the arms of a *ka* symbol, so that your *ka* (personality) might be in them. O Atum, place your arms around the king, around this edifice, around this pyramid as the arms of a *ka*, so that the King's *ka* may be in it, firm forever and ever…O great Ennead which is in Heliopolis—Atum, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Osiris, Isis, Seth, Nephthys—children of Atum, extend his heart (goodwill) to his child (the king) in your name of Nine Bows.[72]

The term 'Kheprer,' applied here to Atum, can both refer to a 'scarab' and to 'becoming.'[73] Atum takes his place on the primordial hillock, here identified with the sacred 'Benben' stone in the temple at Heliopolis. From that high point, the first act of creation is generating Shu, the male air-god, and Tefnut, the female moisture-goddess. These two are imprinted with the *ka* of Atum (another pun: the symbol for *ka* is two arms raised upwards). While this text does not make clear where the remainder of the Ennead (or group of nine gods) comes from, in other texts, Shu and Tefnut give birth to Geb, the male earth-god, and Nut, the female sky-god.[74] Thus, for example, *Coffin Text* Spell 78 refers to Tefnut as the 'daughter of Atum, who bore the Ennead. I [Shu] am the one who bore repeated millions for Atum: Eternal Sameness is (my sister) Tefnut.'[75] In other texts, such as *Coffin Text* Spell 76, 80, Shu gives birth to the Ogdoad (eight Infinite One) rather than an Ennead. The Ogdoad is four sets of couples that are equivalent to four qualities of the primordial waters: watery, infinite, darkness, and lostness. These four qualities are contrasted with the created world: dry, limited, light, and ordered.[76]

The second example is the so-called *Book of Nut*, an image and text that has been found

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[71] Ibid., 173.

[72] Trans. James Allen, *COS*, 1:7-8.

[73] Currid, 'An Examination,' 24.

[74] Cf. Lesko, 'Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies,' 92.

[75] Trans. James Allen, *COS*, 1:11.

[76] Cf. James Allen, *COS*, 1:10n10.

in both the tombs of Seti I and Ramesses IV. The dominant feature is the image of Nut, depicted as a woman bent over the earth. In the center of the image, Shu is depicted as supporting Nut. Unlike other versions of the *Book of Nut*, this version does not depict Geb, the earth-god, below Nut.[77] To the right of Nut, the text reads 'the uniform darkness, ocean of the gods…this is from her northwestern side up to her northeastern side, open to the Duat that is on her northern side, with her rear in the east and her head in the west.'[78] Similarly, the

Fig. 1: The Book of Nut[79]
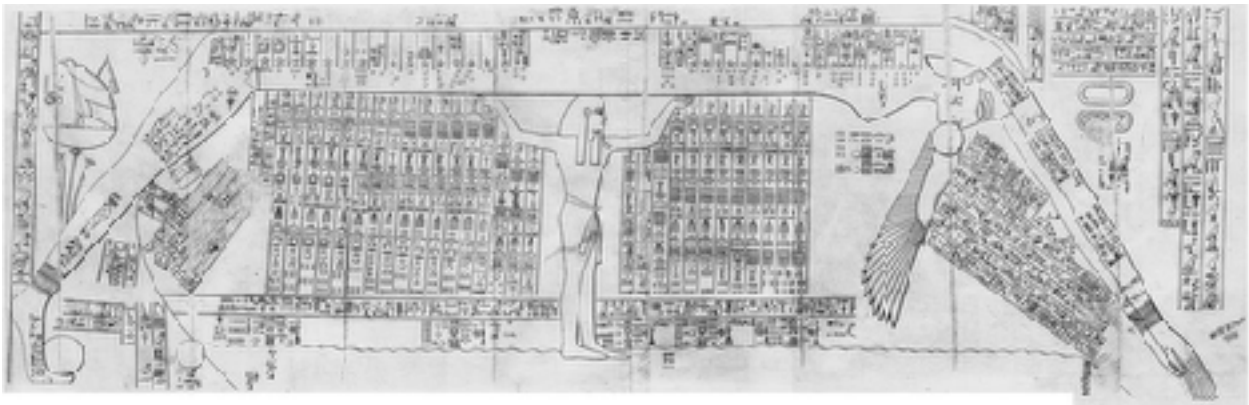


text above Nut indicates that 'the upper side of this sky exists in uniform darkness, the southern, northern, western, and eastern limits of which are unknown, these having been fixed in the Waters, in inertness. There is no light of the Ram there: he does not appear there…as for every place void of sky and void of land, that is the entire Duat [= land of the dead].' The primordial darkness and sea have not been eliminated or entirely transformed in the act of creation. Rather, the created realm exists *within* limitless darkness and waters.

At Nut's mouth, the sun is depicted as a winged-disk. The connected text describes the journey of the sun-god:

> The manifestation of this god enters at her first hour of evening [ie, is swallowed by Nut], becoming effective again in the embrace of his father Osiris, and becoming purified therein. The manifestation of this god rests from life in the Duat at her second hour of pregnancy. Then manifestation of this god is governing the westerners, and giving directions in the Duat. Then the manifestation of this god comes forth on earth again,

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[77] Cp. eg., E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, 2:96, reproduced on the cover of John Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*.

[78] Trans. James Allen, *COS*, 1:5-6

[79] Line drawing from Henri Frankfort, Adriaan DeBuck, and Battiscombe Gunn, *The Cenotaph of Seti I at Abydos*.

having come into the world, young, in his physical strength growing great again, like the first occasion of his original state. Then he is evolved into the great god, the winged disk. When this god sails to the limits of the basin of the sky, she causes him to enter again into night, into the middle of the night, and as he sails inside the dusk these stars are behind him. When the manifestation of this god enters her mouth, inside the Duat, it stays open after he sails inside her, so that these sailing stars may enter after him and come forth after him.[80]

The sun is also depicted just below the horizon, without wings, in front of Nut's foot. Here the text reads: 'the redness after birth, as he becomes pure in the embrace of his father Osiris. Then his father lives, as he becomes effective through him, as he opens in his splitting and swims in his redness.' Thus the redness of sunrise is associated with the redness of birthing. The sun is depicted a third time, directly on top of Nut's foot. Here the text reads: 'the manifestation of this god comes forth from her rear, then he is on course toward the world, apparent and born. Then he produces himself above. Then he parts the thighs of his mother Nut.' Finally, the sun is depicted a fourth time, this time as a winged-scarab on Nut's thigh. Again the text describes the sun's birth from Nut and regeneration through the embrace of Osiris.

Through text and image, then, the Egyptian view of the world can be seen: 'each day nature starts quite afresh, as at the first time.'[81] The unordered realm the precedes creation is not abolished by creation but surrounds the created world and this 'constitutes a constant threat, reflected above all in the much-cited myth about the periodic battle between the sun-god and the serpent Apophis, which is "repelled" but is not killed.'[82] This martial maintenance of the created realm is reflected in the historical sphere where the king, also a manifestation of the divine, 'drives out confusion…in that he has appeared as Atum himself.'[83] After another battle, Tutankhamon is praised for driving 'confusion out of the Two Lands' so that 'order is firmly in its place…and the land is as it was at the first time.'[84]

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[80] I have adjusted Allen's translation, based on his marginal notes, by replacing 'incarnation' with 'manifestation' throughout since the former term carries connotations specific to Christian theology.

[81] Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 168.

[82] Ibid.

[83] *Urkunden des ägyptischen Altertums* VII, 27 describing Amenemhet II, quoted in Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 168.

[84] *Urkunden des ägyptischen Altertums* IV, 2026 (the so-called "Restoration Stele" of Tutankhamon), quoted in Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 168.

The historical action of the king reflects the actions of the gods and the natural cycles that they embody.

In conclusion, I make two general observations on the Egyptian cosmological material.  First, basic to Egyptian thought is 'a concept of the one and the many: all the many beings that constitute the divine and the human realms, including the physical world surrounding us, are diverse manifestations of one primordial substance.'[85]  In metaphysical terms, it might be suggested that the Egyptian conception of creation corresponds to an emanation of diversity from the primordial one.  The second observation is that unlike *Enuma elish*, where the primordial ocean personified by Tiamat is transformed into the world, in Egypt the primordial ocean, personified as Nun, did not provide the materials for creation nor was it eliminated in the act of creation.[86]

That the Egyptians conceived of creation as a finite realm of light and ordered space within the infinite dark, formless waters perhaps provides an analogy to the beginning of Gen 1.[87]  Although the possibility of Egyptian influence on Gen 1 is often overlooked, Richard Clifford suggests that it ought to be considered, especially as it may have been mediated through Phoenician cosmogonies.[88]  But the Egyptian literature shows a marked contrast to Gen 1 in its depiction of everything, even the creator god, as beginning within an inert monad.  Moreover, while the creation process in Egyptian literature is depicted sometimes 'as a self-development from within Nun, [and] at other times the creator is independent of his creation; these depictions may represent two sides of the same coin' and thus stands in distinction to Gen 1 where the creator 'is unequivocally distinct from the *materia*' of creation.[89]

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[85] Batto, *In the Beginning*, 12.  Thus, the subtitle of Erik Hornung's work is *The One and the Many*.

[86] Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 171-173.

[87] Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 56.

[88] *Creation Accounts*, 114; Currid, 'An Examination,' demonstrates that many of the features of Gen 1 are paralleled in various Egyptian texts although no single Egyptian text brings those various features into a coherent account; cf. James Hoffmeier, 'Some Thoughts on Genesis 1 & 2 and Egyptian Cosmology,' 39-49, who likewise concludes that Egyptian literature should be considered along with other ANE documents in the study of Gen 1-2.

[89] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 114.

## 3.2 *Key Text: The Memphite Theology*

A key text that has been compared to Gen 1 is the so-called Memphite Theology.[90] This text, lines 48-64 on the Shabaka Stone, describes the cosmogony of the Temple of Ptah at Memphis (unfortunately, the monument on which the text was inscribed was subsequently used as a millstone, leading to a fragmentary text). In keeping with the pattern noted above, this regional cosmogony places Ptah, rather than Atum, in the role of the creator. Rather than directly rejecting Atum, however, the Memphite Theology displaces him by identifying Ptah with Nun, the primordial waters out of which Atum came, thus making Ptah the creator of Atum.[91] The text thus begins: 'The gods who came into being in Ptah: Ptah-on-the-great-throne——, Ptah-nun, the father who [made] Atum. Ptah-Naunet, the mother who bore Atum. Ptah-the-Great is heart and tongue of the Nine.'[92] The text continues 'there was evolution into Atum's image through both the heart and the tongue. And great and important is Ptah, who gave life to all the [gods] and their *ka*'s as well through this heart and this tongue, as which Horus and Thoth have both evolved by means of Ptah.'[93]

Not only is Ptah depicted as the one who guided the evolution of Atum (and the other gods), but his mode of creation is explicitly contrasted with Atum's mode of creation: 'Whereas the Ennead of Atum came into being by his semen and his fingers, the Ennead (of Ptah), however, is the teeth and lips in his mouth, which pronounced the name of everything, from which Shu and Tefnut came forth, and which was the fashioner of the Ennead.'[94] Thus the Memphite Theology simultaneously subsumes the Atum cosmogony to the Ptah cosmogony by equating Ptah with Nun, out of which Atum came, and implicitly criticizes the Atum cosmogony by contrasting creation by invention and command with creation by procreation.[95]

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[90] Cf. Keel and Schroer, *Creation*, 136 fig. 138 for a line drawing and 206-207 for the text of the *Memphite Theology*.

[91] Currid, 'An Examination,' 27. Keel and Schroer consider the possibility that this text is an exposition of the Heliopolitan (Atum) cosmology that nonetheless seeks to promote Ptah (*Creation*, 137n75).

[92] Trans. in Keel and Schroer, *Creation*, 206.

[93] Trans. James Allen, *COS*, 1:22.

[94] Trans. John Wilson, *ANET*, 4-5.

[95] Cf. John Wilson, 'The Nature of the Universe,' 66. That the text contrasts these two modes is clear although seeing in the contrast an implicit criticism of Atum's mode of creation may have more to do with modern sensibilities than the actual intentions of the text. Wilson, for example, refers to Atum's act of creation as 'self-pollution' (63).

The Memphite Theology has garnered much attention for its emphasis on deliberation ('all the divine order really came into being through what the heart thought') and on divine command ('thus the *ka*-spirits were made and the *hemsut*-spirits were appointed, they who make all provisions and all nourishment, by this speech').[96]  John Currid argues that both Gen 1 and the Memphite Theology 'articulated a creation that was divinely-fashioned *ex nihilo*, that is, out of nothing…At the heart of the issue has been the common assumption that Ptah used the pre-existent primordial waters (Nun) as the material of creation.'[97]  The Memphite Theology, however, never gives any explicit indication that Nun was the material of creation; rather Ptah is identified with Nun.  Moreover, given the common motifs in Egyptian literature, there is no reason to assume that Nun has been transformed or eliminated in the process of creation.  Further, as Currid notes, the logic of creation by command does not necessitate that any material is presupposed.  Thus, he concludes, 'the common belief in one creator-god who fashioned the universe *ex nihilo* by means of verbal fiat reflected a common thought…He simply owed nothing to the agency of another.'[98]  Leonard Lesko goes further, arguing that 'In this text the Memphite god Ptah is the one who conceives in his heart and creates with his tongue, an interesting example of creation ex nihilo and a possible antecedent both of ancient Israel's concept that God created by speaking and of Christianity's doctrine of the Logos.'[99]

These claims reveal the remarkably different standards used by scholars in different fields to identify when the doctrine of creation ex nihilo is being affirmed.  As seen below in ch. 4, scholars of early Jewish and Christian literature are reluctant to identify a text as maintaining creation ex nihilo apart from the explicit denial of primordial matter.  On this standard, the Memphite Theology is clearly disqualified since it presupposes Nun even while identifying Ptah with it.  While I challenge that standard in my subsequent chapter, it is hasty to identify fiat creation directly with creation ex nihilo.  Furthermore, to anticipate a later discussion, it should be noted that Irenaeus, for example, developed an account of creation ex nihilo not based solely on divine fiat but rather on the biblical juxtaposition of the images of

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[96] Trans. Wilson, *ANET*, 5.

[97] 'An Examination,' 28.

[98] Ibid., 29.

[99]  'Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies,' 96.

God as a king giving orders and as a workman shaping creation.[100]  As Robert Gordon has noted, the significance of Gen 1 (or any biblical text) is not in the presence of 'individual, pure traits' but rather in the specific 'configuration of traits' given in the text.[101]  Thus, there has been 'a tendency to emphasise the fiat aspect of creation…as if this expressed a distinctive Israelite standpoint.'[102]  However, not only is fiat apparently found in the Memphite Theology but Gen 1 'is actually stronger on the idea of the "workman God," not least when it comes to the creation of the first humans.'[103]

## 4. MESOPOTAMIAN MATERIAL

### 4.1 *Summary*

The Mesopotamian material can be divided between the earlier Sumerian tradition (ca. 2500-1600) and the later Akkadian tradition (ca. 1800-500).  Many motifs and texts from the earlier Sumerian period are taken up and reworked by the Akkadian poets.  Following Clifford, the Sumerian material can be further divided between the Nippur and Eridu narrative traditions with their associated motifs.  Within the Nippur tradition, creation 'though complex is a single act: the union of heaven and earth with life and organization flowing from it.'[104]  This marriage of heaven (An) and earth (Ki) is associated with the cosmic storm that brings fertilizing rains which, in turn, produce various forms of life— vegetable, animal, human, and social.[105]  A prerequisite to the marriage of heaven and earth is the separation of heaven from earth, typically by their son Enlil of Nippur, as in the *Praise of the Pickax*.[106]

In the Eridu tradition, the basic scenario is that Ea/Enki inundates or inseminates underground waters via rivers and canals, bringing forth life.[107]  The so-called *Eridu Genesis*, from c. 1600, is of interest because it is apparently similar in structure to Gen 1-11.[108]

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[100] Cf. Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 52-73.

[101] '"Comparativism" and the God of Israel,' 45 quoting from Peter Machinist, 'The Question of Distinctiveness in Ancient Israel,' 200.

[102] Ibid., 60-61.

[103] Ibid., 61.

[104] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 24.

[105] Ibid., 25.

[106] Cf. Sparks, *Ancient Texts*, 307.

[107] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 16.

[108] Thorkild Jacobsen, 'The Eridu Genesis,' 513.

Unfortunately the first 36 lines of text are lost. It is likely that they described the creation of humanity since line 37 depicts Nintur (Ninhursaḡa) calling humans from a nomadic existence to establish cities and temples, thus becoming civilized. Eridu is named as the first city and given to Enki. At this point follows a possible list of antediluvian rulers.[109] Following another break, the text picks up with Nintur once again grieving for humanity, this time because the great gods have decided to flood the human realm. Enki, however, intercedes by warning Ziusudra who constructs a boat and is saved only to be rewarded with eternal life in Dilmun (this portion of the story has been taken up in tablet 11 of *Gilgamesh*).

An additional five extant texts from the Eridu tradition depict Enki as the creator god. In *Enki and the World Order*, Enki establishes world order by assigning stations to the gods and setting up various boundaries. *Enki and Ninhursag* (also known as the *Dilmun Myth*), is actually two loosely linked stories. In the first, Enki impregnates Ninsikila and, at her request, sets up the city of Dilmun with fresh water and a harbor for trade. In the second story, Enki incestuously fathers a series of goddesses until his great-granddaughter Uttu refuses his advances unless he offers her apples, cucumbers, and grapes. Enki then provides water for human agriculture so that they can produce fruit to offer Uttu.[110] Throughout these stories, Enki's sexual activity is portrayed as agriculturally productive. *Enki and Ninmaḫ* also loosely joins two episodes. In the first, Enki, along with the mother goddess Nammu, fashions humanity in order to maintain the irrigation canals and to water the fields, thus relieving the minor gods of this task.[111] In the second episode, Enki and Ninmaḫ (the midwife goddess) enter into a drunken contest wherein Ninmah produces a series of misfit creatures, each of which Enki finds a position for. Then Enki produces Umul but concludes that his creation cannot gestate without Ninmaḫ. Thus the text concludes that both Enki and Ninmaḫ are required for human life. Both *Enki and Ninhursag* and, more so, *Enki and Ninmaḫ* introduce a central theme in Mesopotamian theology: humans are made to do the work of the gods so that the gods can enjoy the leisure befitting their status. Moreover, the king is created by the gods in order to ensure that the humans do the gods' work.[112]

Finally, KAR 4 is not representative of either the Nippur or Eridu traditions. It begins

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[109] Sparks, *Ancient Texts*, 310-311.

[110] Ibid., 308.

[111] Batto, *In the Beginning*, 26-27.

[112] Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 147-160 traces this theme in Mesopotamian thought.

> When the heaven had been separated from Earth—hitherto they were joined firmly together—after the earth-mothers had appeared; When the earth had been founded and set in place; after the gods had established the plan of the universe, And, to prepare the irrigation system, had determined the course of the Tigris and Euphrates, Then An, Enlil, Ninmah and Enki, the chief gods, with the other great gods, the Anunna, Took their place on the high dais, And held an assembly.[113]

At this point, two (presumably rebellious) deities are killed and their blood is used to create human beings to do the work of the gods and build temples for them. The first humans are a couple, Ullegarra and Annegarra, who are planted in Nippur and commanded to 'multiply' and see to the well being of the land, cattle, sheep, animals, fish, and birds.[114]

Three main divisions may be made of the Akkadian cosmogonic material: there are a variety of minor cosmogonies, often in the introduction to other texts; there are the major anthological texts, *Atrahasis* and *Enuma elish*; and there is the *Dunnu Theogony*.[115] The minor cosmogonies can be found at the beginning of rituals, incantations, prayers, and literary texts.[116] Often, as in *Creation of the Pickaxe* or *Song of the Hoe*, mention is simply made of the primeval separation of heaven and earth. In the *Foundation of Eridu*, nine lines describe a time when various creations did not yet exist: 'a holy house, a house of the gods had not been build in its holy place, a reed had not come forth' and so on.[117] The primordial state is not described as abstract nothingness but rather as a time when basic institutions did not yet exist. Finally, in line 10, creation begins: 'all the lands were sea…then Eridu was made, Esagil was built.'[118] Only then does Marduk created dry land by placing soil on a raft in the sea. Subsequently, inhabitants and topographic features are created and then Enki and Marduk together establish boundaries between dry land and sea. The text concludes by stating that now reeds, bricks, brick molds, cities, and temples exist, whereas they had not at the beginning of the narrative.[119] Note the logic here: at first Marduk's temple was created, then the earth, humanity, and then temples for the other gods.[120] While the opening is

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[113] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 49-50.

[114] Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 158-160.

[115] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 54.

[116] Andrea Seri, 'The Role of Creation in Enūma eliš,' 6.

[117] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 62-63; cf. W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 366-365.

[118] Ibid., 63.

[119] Wayne Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, 129-131.

[120] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 64.

formally similar to *Enuma elish* in employing nine lines describing things that did not yet exist, there is also a contrast: only *tâmtu*, the sea, was prior to creation, not the undifferentiated *apsû* and *tâmtu* while the material of creation is not the body of Tiamat but a reed raft covered in dirt.[121]

Of the major anthological cosmogonies, *Atrahasis* is the older, originating in the Old Babylonian period along with the *Gilgamesh* epic. *Atrahasis* begins 'when the gods instead of man did the work, bore the loads, [then] the gods' load was too great, the work too hard, the trouble too much, the great Anunnaki made the Igigi carry the workload sevenfold.'[122] Rivers, irrigation canals, and silt to stop them both up are already a given reality at the beginning of *Atrahasis*. The Igigi eventually rebel and, in response to their incessant noise, Ellil (=Enlil), together with Belet-ili the womb-goddess, make humans using the blood of a god mixed with clay. Although the humans are given the task of clearing out the irrigation canals and providing food for the gods, they too eventually become too noisy and so the gods set out to destroy humanity through plague, famine, and ultimately a flood. In each instance, Enki delivers humans from the wrath of the gods. In the case of the flood, Enki surreptitiously instructs Atrahasis to build a boat to survive the flood. Having survived the flood, Atrahasis offers sacrifices which appease the gods, who had become famished after wiping out the humans who supplied their food. Although Ellil is initially enraged to find a surviving human, he ultimately relents but imposes barrenness, still-births, and the office of temple virgin as means of controlling the human population.

Three observations about *Atrahasis* are relevant to the larger issues under consideration. First, the cosmogony simply presupposes that there is a 'world' in which first the gods, and then humans, work in order to produce food. The focus of the narrative is on the creation of humanity, not of the cosmos.[123] Second, the trend in Mesopotamian theology noted earlier is seen strongly here: humans are created to do the work of the gods, allowing the gods to avoid a civil war. Third, the humans are created using the blood of a murdered god and this, perhaps, is the reason that they are noisy and rebellious, just as the Igigi were before them.[124]

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[121] Ibid., 64-65.

[122] Trans. Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 9.

[123] Cf. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 169.

[124] So Batto, *In the Beginning*, 29.

*Enuma elish* will be dealt with in the following subsection and so this survey of the Mesopotamian material can be completed by noting the bizarre *Dunnu Theogony*.[125]  In this text, power is transferred by a series of parricides and incestuous relationships:

> At the very beginning [Plough married Earth] and they [decided to establish] a family and dominion…The Furrows, of their own accord, begot the Cattle God…Then Earth raised her face to the Cattle God his son and said to him, 'Come and let me love you!'  The Cattle God married Earth his mother, and killed Plough his father, and laid him to rest in Dunnu…[Then] He married Sea, his older sister.  The Flocks God, son of the Cattle God, came and killed the Cattle God, and in Dunnu laid him to rest in the tomb of his father.[126]

The account continues through River, the Herdsman God, Pasture-and-Poplar, Haharnum, Belet-ṣeri, until ultimately Hayyashum 'took over his father's dominion, but did *not* kill him, and seized him alive.'[127]  This account finds its closest parallel not in any Mesopotamian text but rather in Hesiod's *Theogony* and Philo of Byblos's *History of Kronos*.[128]  One possible interpretation is that the *Dunnu Theogony* intends to contrast the chaos of natural succession with the ordered and civilized succession of Enlil's family line (after 50 missing lines, reference is made to Enlil at the end of the work), thus implicitly supporting orderly monarchical successions in the human realm.

4.2 *Key Text:* Enuma Elish

While comparative readings of Gen 1 may have overly focused on *Enuma elish* in the last century, it was undoubtedly an influential work in ancient Mesopotamia.  Tablets and fragments of the text have been discovered written in both Babylonian and Assyrian script. Some of the various tablets come from Ashurbanipal's libraries in Nineveh while others apparently belonged to private owners.[129]  The story was revised in the Assyrian period to make Aššur, rather than Marduk, the key figure in the epic.  Ritual texts of Esagil, the temple in Babylon, indicate that *Enuma elish* was to be recited by the priest before the statue of Marduk on the 4th day of at least two months (the instructions for other month have not

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[125] Cf. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 387-395.

[126] Trans. Dalley, *Myths*, 279-280.

[127] Ibid.

[128] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 96.

[129] Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 3-4.

survived).[130]  Finally, a variety of works quote full lines from *Enuma elish* or allude to

phrases and motifs.[131]  Thus, there is a broad range of evidence indicating that *Enuma elish*,

the longest known cosmogony from Mesopotamia, was an influential text from about 1200

B.C. onward.  Particular details of *Enuma elish*, in comparison with Gen 1, are addressed

below.[132]  In the present context, I offer a brief overview of *Enuma elish* in its own right, in

order to situate those subsequent comments.

Although *Enuma elish* features cosmogonic passages, it is really the epic of Marduk,

providing a narrative context for the eclipse of Enlil (and the rest of the old pantheon) by the

patron deity of Babylon.[133]  Unlike the various minor Akkadian cosmogonies, *Enuma elish*

does not begin with creation, but rather the first four (of seven) tablets describe the

generations and battles of the gods that preceded creation.  While the first two verses ('when

skies above were not yet named, nor earth below pronounced by name')[134] raise forward-

looking expectations, the next two lines mover further back and thus 'ameliorates the

fundamental problem of first beginnings (where do you start? what beginning is really *the*

beginning?) by moving back past an opening tableau that already seems distant enough.'[135]

Thus, 'this clever beginning destabilizes the intuitive flow of the beginning and obscures the

fundamental problem of how to talk about the absence of time and existence before creation,

so that the poet can get on with it.'[136]

In this primordial period, Apsu and Tiamat (often identified with fresh and salt water)

are mixed together, resulting in several generations of gods: Lahmu and Lahamu; Anshar and

Kishar; Anu, the first-born of Anshar and Kishar; and Nudimmud, Anu's son.[137]  The

remainder of the first tablet describes how the younger generation of gods, apparently still in

some sense 'within' Tiamat and Apsu, 'would meet together and disturb Tiamat, and their

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[130] The text for these rituals is from the Seleucid era but likely reflects earlier practice.  Cf. Ibid., 6-7.
Conversely, Benjamin Sommer, following the work of J.Z. Smith, argues that the Babylonian Akitu festival,
with its recital of *Enuma elish*, was in fact a response to the situation of foreign dominance in the Seleucid
period; cf. Sommer, 'Babylonian Akitu Festival,' 81-82.

[131] Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 7-9.

[132] In ch. 5, §2.1.2, 2.2.3 and  6, §2.1.3, 2.2.3, 3.1-2.

[133] Ibid., 248; Seri, 'Role,' 7.

[134] Trans. Dalley, *Myths*, 233.

[135] López-Ruiz, 'How to Start,' 34.

[136] Ibid.

[137] Based on his structural analysis, Gabriel Gösta divides *Enuma elish* into twelve episodes (cf. *enūma
eliš*.  While Gösta's structural analysis seems plausible, in the following summary I have simply attempted to
convey the general plot rather than the specific textual development of the narrative.

clamour reverberated. They stirred up Tiamat's belly, they were annoying her by playing inside Anduruna.'[138] Tiamat, ever the indulgent mother, refuses to punish her disruptive children until Apsu eventually decides to destroy the younger gods so that they (along with Mummu, his advisor) can get some sleep. Tiamat is initially furious with Apsu for proposing to kill her children but eventually assents to his plan. Ea (=Nudimmud/Sumerian Enki) finds out about Apsu's plan. By first putting him under a sleeping spell, Ea is able to kill Apsu, bind Mummu, and construct a dwelling place for himself on top of Apsu, who is now depersonalized in death. Inside Apsu, which is now Ea's palace, Ea and Damkina have a son, Marduk.

The events to this point are all repeated and elaborated, this time with Marduk as the main character. Marduk is more excellent than any of the other gods but uses his strength to conjure up storms to irritate Tiamat and the other gods. Eventually, the other gods convince Tiamat that she must avenge the murder of Apsu by killing the younger gods. The text elaborately describes the two opposing armies and their weapons, which involve a series of new creations. Anu fashions the four winds and gives them to Marduk and later he is also given a scepter, throne, staff and fashions for himself a bow, thunderbolts, a net, and a terrible wind. In response to the four winds, Tiamat gives birth to eleven monsters—mythical serpents, dragons, and various hybrid creatures—and appoints Qingu as her champion. Marduk is appointed the champion of the (younger) gods and is instructed to destroy and recreate, by command, a test constellation supplied by the other gods. After successfully destroying and recreating the constellation, Marduk is formally declared the king of the gods.

When the battle ultimately ensues, Marduk captures Tiamat with his net, overwhelms her with his wind, and shoots an arrow from his bow which pierces her heart. Only after her eleven creatures are defeated, Qingu is captured, and the tablet of destinies is taken does Marduk crush Tiamat's skull with the scepter that he was given by the gods. The symbolism is clear: Marduk defeats Tiamat with his own weapons and only uses the scepter of kingship which he was given by the other gods to strike a symbolic blow after the victory was ensured.

Then Marduk cuts open Tiamat's arteries and inspects her corpse. At this point, the traditional separation of heaven and earth (typically done by Enlil), is depicted as Marduk

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[138] Trans. Dalley, *Myths*, 233.

'spliced her in half like a fish for drying: half of her he put up to roof the sky.'[139]  Marduk

integrates Apsu, the dwelling place of Ea, into his three-tiered cosmos, making Heaven for

Anu, Earth for Enlil, and placing Apsu under the earth for Ea.  Each realm also has a

corresponding sanctuary for the respective gods to dwell in.  A series of constellations are set

up in order to structure the calendar and Marduk fashion's Tiamat's lower half into the

various topographic features of the earth.  Finally, Marduk reveals his own desire for a temple

'situated above Apsû and below Heaven.  The temple shall be a replicate of the Ešara, that is

to say, a replica of Enlil's cosmic abode…which Marduk had already built as the level of the

universe' between Apsû and Heaven.[140]  Ešara is part of Enlil's temple in Nippur.  Thus

Marduk's temple, located in Babylon, is a mirror of Nippur's older temple but will also

displace Nippur, in terms of cosmic geography, as the center of the universe.[141]  Finally,

Marduk creates humanity using the blood of Qingu to work so that the gods can rest.

At the surface level, *Enuma elish* offers a narrative context for the rise of Marduk in

the Babylonian pantheon by describing how the other gods appointed Marduk as their

champion and he subsequently quelled the forces of chaos and brought about the ordered

universe.  Moreover, there is indubitable political import to this story: just as Marduk

restrains the forces of cosmic chaos, so Babylon, Marduk's city, and her king must hold the

forces of political chaos in check.[142]  It seems to me, however, that this reading of *Enuma*

*elish* can be challenged at a number of points.  Bernard Batto's comments are representative

of the common interpretation:

> the common theme in all versions of the Combat Myth is a battle between the creator
> deity and his archenemy, a chaos monster, who attempts to subvert the creator's good
> designs for bringing about an ordered universe, of which humankind is a part.  Although
> not explicit in all versions, basically this is the story in which the creator must first slay
> the chaos monster—most often depicted as a water dragon…—and then from the carcass
> of the slain chaos monster (=primeval substance) the creator constructs the ordered
> cosmos.[143]

It should be noted, however, that neither Apsu nor Tiamat are at any point identified in

*Enuma elish* as 'chaotic.'  In fact, in the narrative it is the younger gods who are incessantly

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[139] Ibid., 255.

[140] Seri, 'Role,' 16.

[141] Ibid., 17.

[142] Eg., Batto, *In the Beginning*, 36.

[143] Ibid., 32.

noisy and disruptive and who preemptively murder Apsu. Marduk himself is responsible for

Tiamat's eventual decision to make war against the younger gods and in the course of their

battle, 'Marduk appears as brute force, as little ethical as the wrath of Tiamat.'[144] Thus, while

it is accurate to say that the creator deity battles and slays another deity, there are no clear

grounds within the narrative for identifying Apsu or Tiamat as 'a chaos monster, who

attempts to subvert the creator's good designs for bringing about an ordered universe.'[145]

In fact, *Enuma elish* is built on a series of unstable binary oppositions that, it seems to

me, lend themselves to a 'deconstructive' mode of reading. While Marduk is depicted as a

creator deity, Apsu and Tiamat are the progenitors of the gods and so could also be identified

as creators. Thus, *Enuma elish* contrasts two modes of creation.[146] On the one hand, Apsu

and Tiamat create through biological reproduction, a common mode in both Egyptian and

Mesopotamian literature, as has been seen. On the other hand, Ea and Marduk practice an

artificial or technical mode of creation which first requires destruction.[147] So Apsu's corpse

is refashioned by Ea, Tiamat's corpse is refashioned by Marduk, and Qingu's blood is

necessary in order for Ea to make humanity according to Marduk's instructions. Each major

act by Ea and Marduk is simultaneously destructive and creative (as is also the case in

Marduk's destruction and recreation of the test constellation). Not only is there a binary

opposition between these two modes of creation (procreation and fashioning), but Ea's killing

of Apsu actually interrupts the biological mode of creation and, from this point forward,

Tiamat only produces monsters. Is this because her mate has been killed and so new beings

can no longer be properly conceived? Thus, running through *Enuma elish* is a recurrent

tension between biological creation and artificial creation, which requires prior destruction.[148]

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[144] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 182.

[145] Cf. Karen Sonik's sympathetic reading of the character of Tiamat ('Chaos and Cosmos in the Babylonian "Epic of Creation,"' 1-25): 'As a feminine entity, Ti'āmat is expected to fulfill her responsibility as both wife (to Apsû) and mother (to the gods): these are the ties that bind her to the developing civilized world and that she is ultimately unable to maintain' (25n77). In this light, Tiamat is a tragic figure, not a monster, torn between loyalty to her husband and her children. Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 83 observes that although Tiamat is often identified as a 'monster,' this is can only be supported from *Enuma elish based* on the fact that she gives birth to dragons (but she also gives birth to gods) and that she 'opens her mouth to devour' Marduk when they meet in battle. Neither of these points, however, indicate that Tiamat is any more monstrous than the other gods.

[146] Cf. Seri, 'Role,' 18-24.

[147] Ricoeur: 'Marduk personifies the identity of creation and destruction' (*Symbolism of Evil*, 182).

[148] On the significance of the axiomatic role of violence in *Enuma elish* for Babylonian ideology, cf. Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 175-198; Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 250-260. The outcome of this sort of myth is that historical 'enemies' are not simply humans who happen to be opposed to us but are identified with the Enemy—they are an instantiation of chaos and the forces of evil.

Marduk is the ostensible hero of the story, but his artificial mode of creation also implies destruction.

Furthermore, at one level, *Enuma elish* depicts Marduk as mirroring Ea in his various actions but, at each point, as also superior to Ea—defeating a stronger enemy and producing a more comprehensive creation.  Thus Marduk displaces his father Ea as the superior god.  At the same time, as noted above, in setting up his own realm and temple, Marduk implicitly displaces Enlil as the god of earth.  At every point, however, the other gods are depicted as approving of Marduk's accession because it is the only means of defeating Tiamat (although the trouble with Tiamat is, at least in part, Marduk's fault in the first place).  Thus *Enuma elish* plays a clever sleight of hand by focusing our attention on the peaceful transition from father (Ea) to his superior son (Marduk) while, in the background, Enlil, the patron god of Nippur was also being displaced.

Finally, although Apsu and Tiamat were apparently only minor deities, seldom referred to before *Enuma elish*, Marduk and Ea displace this primordial couple by killing them and using them as the material for creation.  Here is an interesting contrast with the Egyptian material where the creator gods are pictured as emerging within Nun, the primordial waters, and setting up a space within Nun.  In *Enuma elish* the gods also emerge within the primordial waters but kill the primordial waters, which are then depersonalized as the material of creation.  All this displacement is only made more magnified in the Assyrian version where Aššur is simply written into the place of Marduk.

These observations are not meant to imply that *Enuma elish* should not be compared to Gen 1.  Rather, I simply want to draw attention to the fact that *Enuma elish* is a complex text in its own right, with a number of narrative dynamics, and so should not be oversimplified when comparisons are made to Gen 1.  Moreover, along with *Atrahasis* and perhaps the *Eridu Genesis*, *Enuma elish* is better compared to a similar length text, such as Gen 1-11, rather than merely Gen 1.  When *Enuma elish* and Gen 1 are compared, typically the comparisons jump from the description of the pre-creation state in the first ten lines of the first tablet to the creation of the world at the end of the fourth tablet, with only a brief mention of the battle with Tiamat, eliding nearly four full tablets of material.[149]  If *Enuma elish* and *Atrahasis* are compared to Gen 1-11, interesting observations emerge about the

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[149] For examples, cf. ch. 5, §2.1.2,

ordering of various common motifs and 'blocks' of material—we begin to note the 'configuration of traits,' to use Gordon's phrase. Richard Averbeck, for example, argues suggestively that Gen 3 can be read as a sort of Israelite version of the cosmic battle and this raises important implications if the cosmic battle in Gen 1-11 comes *after* the creation of the cosmos, rather than before as in *Enuma elish*.[150]

5. QUESTIONS

This brief overview of ANE creation material is intended to provide a broad horizon, indicating the concerns and ways of depicting creation common in the ancient world. It is within this context that biblical scholars, at least those with broadly historical concerns, read Gen 1. This background, in turn, can be compared to the background for the emergence of creation ex nihilo in the early church.[151] I now turn to address several specific questions related to the interpretation of Gen 1 in relationship to the ANE context.

5.1 *Is Genesis 1 a 'recension' of* Enuma elish *or any other ancient Near Eastern text?*

Gunkel argued against Julius Wellhausen's claim that Gen 1 is 'free construction' of an exilic author, maintaining instead that 'the Priestly writer…has reshaped traditional material according to the sensibility of his era.'[152] Similarly, E.A. Speiser maintains that 'the present version of P should go back directly to old Mesopotamian material,' especially *Enuma elish*, 'Mesopotamia's canonical version of cosmic origins.'[153] Gordon Wenham

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[150] 'Ancient Near Eastern Mythography as it Relates to Historiography in the Hebrew Bible: Genesis 3 and the Cosmic Battle,' 351-354. Cf. Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 191: 'If evil is coextensive with the origin of things, as primeval chaos and theogonic strife, then the elimination of evil and of the wicked must belong to the creative act as such…there is no problem of salvation distinct from the problem of creation; there is no history of salvation distinct from the drama of creation.'

[151] This context is recounted in ch. 4, §2. While the two contexts are undoubtedly divergent, the contrast should not be exaggerated: Eusebius, for example, refers to Berossus and attempts to reconstruct the Egyptian and Phoenecian cosmologies. Similarly, Lucian, *De Dea Syria*, refers to Ctesias, Herodotus, Berossus, and Manetho, while Ps-Eupolemus, a 2nd c. Jewish author, apparently sought to correlate biblical history with Berossus's account by arguing that Babylon was the first city built after the flood although it was originally named Belus. Claudian in *De Raptu Proserpinae*, a work that is now obscure but was well known in the medieval Christian period, depicts *Natura* as 'the demiurge who reduced primeval chaos to cosmos' (C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* [Cambridge: CUP, 1964], 36). Thus works such as Berossus and Hesiod that were used by George Smith and Hermann Gunkel in their reconstructions of Mesopotamian mythology were also known in the early church period. Moreover, classical scholars recognize a 'orientalising period' where Egyptian and Mesopotamian material influenced Greek history, literature, and arts, cf. Stephanie Dalley and A.T. Reeves, 'Mesopotamian Contact and Influence in the Greek World I: To the Persian Conquest,' 85-106; H. Matthäus, 'Zur Rezeption orientalischer Kunst-, Kultur- und Lebensformen in Griechenland,' 156-186; C. Penglase, *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia*; and M.L. West, *The East Face of Helicon*.

[152] *Creation and Chaos*, 6.

[153] *Genesis*, 9.

reports that in the period between these two scholars, the 'consensus view' was that 'Gen 1 either used the Babylonian creation story, *Enuma elish*, or at least is generally dependent on Mesopotamian traditions.'[154]

The preceding survey of ANE material suggests that the author of Gen 1 was conversant with his larger cultural context and that the account uses conventions and motifs common throughout the ANE. But an important distinction must be maintained between 'being conversant with cultural categories' and 'literary dependence.' While some may object to the literary dependence of Gen 1 on *Enuma elish* or other ANE texts on substantial (theological) grounds, there is a more basic problem with the older consensus view, namely, that it is difficult to establish literary dependence, especially given ANE literary conventions. Thus, I have stacked the deck by asking if Gen 1 is a 'recension' of an ANE text: few would definitively answer 'yes.' Nevertheless, by asking this question, it helps us get at the difficulty in establishing a hypothesis of literary dependence.

Demonstrating conclusively that an author had access to a specific text, thus establishing definitively the literary dependence of an author on a source, is quite difficult if not impossible. Accepting a lower standard of proof, a hypothesis of literary dependence can be shown to simply be plausible, rather than definitive, if it is reasonable or possible to suppose that the author had access to the earlier text and if the two texts share a theme, various words and phrases (infrequent vocabulary and sequences of words are especially significant), and an overall structure.[155] On the older 'consensus,' it was argued that a number of parallels demonstrate the plausibility of the dependence of Gen 1 on *Enuma elish*: both are creation texts that prominently feature 'separation' as a creative act; both begin with a watery primordial state; and the creation of light, firmament, dry land, luminaries, humanity all occur in a broadly similar order.[156] In particular, *tĕhōm* ('the deep') in Gen 1:2 was thought to be an Akkadian loanword, a demythologized version of the Babylonian proper name *Ti'āmat*.

Many of these similarities, however, appear superficial upon closer inspection. Although *Enuma elish* is in some sense a 'creation' text, as was noted above, the majority of

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[154] *Genesis 1-15*, 8.

[155] On criteria for identifying literary dependence, see eg., Mark Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem*, 16-19.

[156] Cf. Speiser's chart comparing the two texts in *Genesis*, 10.

the work focuses on Marduk's ascension in the pantheon while creation proper is only described in 4.135-5.76. Likewise, finding structural similarities requires a selective reading of *Enuma elish*, ignoring various divine births, lengthy meetings of the divine council, and battles that punctuate the narrative. Furthermore, many of the shared phrases and motifs are not exclusive to *Enuma elish*: as seen above, watery origins, the separation of heaven and earth, and the emergence of dry land are common features of many Egyptian as well as Mesopotamian cosmological texts (some of these features may actually be *more* characteristic of the Egyptian tradition than the Mesopotamian). Finally, objections to the claim that *tĕhōm* is a loanword from the Akkadian Tiamat have been raised at various times (although the claim is still made). David Tsumura has carefully responded to the claim by showing that if *tĕhōm* were a loanword, the expected form would be *tĕ'ōmát* or, with the loss of the final -*t*, *tĕ'omā(h)* but Akkadian terms never lose the entire feminine morpheme -*at* when borrowed into Hebrew.[157] While it is true that the two words are 'etymologically related,' this is because they are cognates, both built on the common Semitic root *thm*, not because *tĕhōm* is an Akkadian loanword.[158]

The relationship between *tĕhōm* and *Ti'āmat* thus provides an illustration of the relationship between Gen 1 and *Enuma elish* more generally. Both texts work with common Semitic motifs and may even present parallel developments of a common earlier text (although no likely candidate has yet been discovered), but it is implausible to maintain that Gen 1 is dependent on, or a recension of, *Enuma elish*.

5.2 *What preceded creation in ancient Near Eastern creation accounts?*

What is significant for comparison with Gen 1 is not what in particular precedes creation in various ANE accounts but rather that the ANE texts often presuppose that *something* preceded creation. In some accounts, such as *Atrahasis,* the gods already exist and something about their interactions prior to creation must be understood in order to make sense of the world of human experience: for example, that humans were created to avert a divine civil war, that a god was murdered and his blood used to make humans, or that the world itself is made from a divine corpse. In these accounts, the relationships between the

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[157] *Creation and Destruction*, 36-38.

[158] Ibid., 38.

gods and their relative dispositions toward humanity can only be understood through recourse to events that take place before creation.

Other accounts begin at a point when even the gods do not yet exist. Here the narratives begin with the emergence of a god or gods within the primordial waters, personified as Nun in the Egyptian material and Apsu and Tiamat in *Enuma elish*.[159] In these accounts, theogony and cosmogony together form a coherent whole. The created world itself is located within this larger (or infinite) realm of Nun or is created out of the bodies of Apsu and Tiamat.

Preexistent matter, which is prominent in hellenistic accounts of creation, seems not to have been raised as an issue, one way or the other, in ANE speculative thought.[160] In the Egyptian creation accounts generally no material is specified in the creation of the world. This likely stems from the fact that creation is depicted in the form of a theogony as the gods who personify various realms and aspects of the world are born and arranged in successive generations. Moreover, I have suggested that the various physical metaphors for the derivation of the multiplicity of gods from the one creator-god suggests that the Egyptian model of creation was similar to the later model of emanation, which was formulated in a mature form by Plotinus.[161]

The Mesopotamian creation accounts vary. Texts like *Atrahasis* simply assume the earth while in *Enuma elish* Apsu and Tiamat prominently serve as the material of creation. In *The First Brick*, Ea first creates Apsû as his abode and then 'nipped off clay from the Apsû,' which is then apparently the material out of which various other creations are made.[162] In other Mesopotamian texts, heaven and earth are preexistent but are intermingled and must be

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[159] Apsu and Tiamat are not marked with the dingir sign, which signifies when terms are being used to name deities, thus are not technically 'gods' in *Enuma elish*.

[160] So Michaela Bauks, *Die Welt am Anfang*, 14-33. She argues that there are three possible 'hermeneutischen Grundmodelle für das Verständnis der drei Anfangsverse der Bibel' (14). For the first model, preexistent matter is a given, while the second model is built on the systematic theology category of creation ex nihilo. Bauks advocates a third model, 'das nicht-ontologische Verständnis von Gen 1,2' (30), which attempts to read Gen 1 on its own terms rather than with reference to questions raised by Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics: 'Zuletzt bleibt zu untersuchen, inwieweit nicht beide Konzeptionen an der Aussageabsicht des alttestamentlichen Textes vorbeizielen. Wenn dem so ist--das zu untersuchen, ist Gegenstand dieser Arbeit--, bleibt aufzuspüren, in welchen Traditionen sich ein alternatives Verständnis andeutet und wie dieses die Intention von Gen 1,2 im Einzelfall wiedergibt' (14).

[161] Plotinus was in fact born and educated in roman-era Egypt and was conversant with the cult of Isis, as recounted in Porphyry, *The Life of Plotinus*, 10.

[162] Trans. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 381.

separated from each other.[163]  In at least some Mesopotamian texts, then, creation is the shaping of preexistent material.

The extent to which Gen 1 differs from these texts in part depends on the interpretation of the first several verses.[164]  Genesis 1 has no theogony, however, and does not give any indication that events prior to creation shape the human experience of the world in a significant manner.  Moreover, because of its focus on a sole creator-god, Gen 1 does not presuppose any divine realm or stage prior to creation.  We might reasonably conclude that the God is, in some sense, His own space; He requires no larger context to act within.

5.3 *How was creation understood in the ancient Near East?*

Claus Westermann has proposed a widely accepted fourfold division of the modes of creation in the ANE:

> there are four main types of creation to be distinguished in the world outside Israel: (1) creation by birth or by a succession of births; (2) creation through struggle; (3) creation as fashioning, making or forming; (4) creation through utterance.  This division makes no claim to be comprehensive; it merely outlines the main types.[165]

These types can be combined in a number of ways but are generally representative of the material surveyed above.  In the Egyptian material, creation is depicted as theogony (eg., the birth of Nut and Geb corresponds to the creation of sky and earth) and so masturbation, self-insemination, and birth are all creative acts.[166]  In the Sumerian texts, the gods' sexual activities leads to creation, as in *Prologue to the Disputation between Wood and Reed*, where An, the sky god, inseminates the earth, leading to the creation of plants.[167]

The second type, most prominently seen in *Enuma elish*, depicts the act of creation as battle.  While creation as battle *per se* does not seem to have been a widespread motif in the ANE, the maintenance of natural cycles was often depicted as a battle between various gods

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[163] While the material of creation is not often specified, I cannot accept John Walton's conclusion that this is because the ANE conceived of existence in terms of a 'functional,' rather than 'material,' ontology and thus creation accounts are about the assigning of functions rather than material origins (cf. *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*, passim).  While Walton rightly draws attention to the importance of the functions of various aspects of creation within ANE literature, he overstates his case.  Material often *is* specified—notably clay and blood in the creation of humans.  Moreover, how does a 'functional ontology' make sense of passages such as 'Marduk constructed a raft on the surface of the waters, He made earth and heaped it up on the raft' (*The Founding of Eridu*, trans. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 373)?

[164] Addressed in ch. 5 and 6 below.

[165] *Genesis 1-11*, 26.

[166] Keel and Schroer, *Creation*, 84.

[167] Ibid., 84.

and is found in Egyptian, Ugaritic, Phoenician, Sumerian, and Mesopotamian materials.[168] The third type models creation on the work of a craftsman and is associated especially with the creation of humans and the construction of temples, which is often the culmination of creation in ANE accounts. Finally, the fourth type, creation through utterance, although relatively rare in the ANE is not unique to the Hebrew Bible. As seen above, the *Memphite Theology* contrasts Ptah's creation by utterance with Atum's creation by birth and in *Enuma elish*, Marduk demonstrates his suitability as divine king by commanding a constellation to be destroyed and created again. Care must be exercised in the interpretation of these accounts, however, as creation by utterance may be analogous to magical incantation rather than fiat or creation ex nihilo.[169]

Genesis 1 does not depict creation either by birth or by battle, although other biblical texts may depict the maintenance of natural cycles as *chaoskampf*.[170] On the other hand, Gen 1 depicts creation as both by command and by fashioning or forming and I will argue subsequently creation ex nihilo provides a framework for interpreting the particular interlacing of these modes of creation in Gen 1.

In addition to the various modes of creation employed in ANE texts, the ANE concept of creation is further clarified by the frequent contrast between the period before and after creation. In *The Founding of Eridu*, for example, the period before creation is when 'A pure temple, a temple of the gods, had not been made in a pure place.'[171] This line is repeated, with slight difference, eight lines later, forming an inclusio for the description of the pre-creation state. Creation concludes when Marduk has made a temple and city. Thus, the period before creation can be described by the absence of essential institutions (the temple, city, and civilization) while creation is completed when these essential institutions have been established.

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[168] Cf. Ibid., 97-106 especially for iconographic representations of this theme.

[169] Cf. Ibid., 106.

[170] cf. ch. 6, §2.1.2. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:61-71, suggestively examines how the images of birth and battle are used in other portions of the HB to depict creation. I would further add that it is significant that these images are used within the canonical context of Gen 1, thus partially relativizing some of the implications of these images; cf. ch. 3, §1.2.

[171] Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 371.

5.4 *Is the act of creation limited or conditioned by the 'material'?*

This question is difficult, given that 'material' was not a main focus in ANE creation texts and that creation could be depicted in a variety of modes. What I propose, then, is tentative. In the Egyptian cosmologies, although Nun/the primordial ocean is not properly the 'material' of creation, it does remain an outside force which at times impinges on the created realm. Thus, in the Egyptian cosmology, the created realm is in some sense tenuous and cyclically invaded from outside creation.

The Mesopotamian material is variegated and so more difficult. Jon Levenson argues that in both Gen 1 and *Enuma elish*, the primordial chaos (=Tiamat) 'does not *disappear*, but rather is *transformed* during the act of creation.'[172] Although chaos is restrained, in both cosmologies there is always the threat that it will return.[173] Similarly, there does seem to be an indication in *Atrahasis* and related texts, that the creation of humans using the blood of a murdered rebel god in some sense shapes the human condition: humans share something with the divine but, like the Igigi, they too are noisy and prone to rebellion against the high gods. I conclude then that in both Egyptian and Mesopotamian sources, the act of creation is in some sense limited or constrained by conditions in the period before creation.

5.5 *How was the world pictured in the ancient Near East?*

Keel and Schroer note (and reject) a common misunderstanding:

People in the ancient Near East did not conceive of the earth as a disk floating on water with the firmament inverted over it like a bell jar, with the stars hanging from it. They knew from observation and experience with handicrafts that the lifting capacity of water is limited and that gigantic vaults generated gigantic problems in terms of their ability to carry dead weight. The textbook images that keep being reprinted of the "ancient Near Eastern world picture" are based on typical modern misunderstandings that fail to take into account the religious components of ancient Near Eastern conceptions and representations.[174]

Just as ANE images are conceptual rather than photographic, so their world-picture was conceptual and could picture things in multiple, non-exclusive ways. Thus, in Egypt, for example, the sky can be depicted at Nut, a naked woman crouched over the earth. But even in the same image, Nut can also be understood as the heavenly ocean, with the sun depicted

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[172] *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, 122.

[173] For my response to Levenson, cf. ch. 6, §1-2 .

[174] Keel and Schroer, *Creation*, 78.

crossing her back in a bark.[175]  Likewise, as in Fig. 1 above, the sun can be depicted in the same scene as a disk, a winged-disk, and as a winged-scarab.  These various cosmological descriptions function symbolically: the sun can be pictured like a bark crossing the sky or like a winged-scarab because it shares features with both of these images.  These ways of describing features of the world, however, do not necessarily entail claims about the material composition of the sky or the sun.  The basic question, then, is 'did the people of ancient Israel [and the ANE] think differently than we do, or have they only given a different expression to their thought than we do today?'[176]

It seems to me that the problematic modern understanding of the ancient world-picture, criticized by Keel and Schroer in the quote above, arises when moderns attempt to reconstruct the world-picture of Israel and the ANE without understanding the purpose for which various images were chosen to describe different elements of the world.  Put simply, the cosmological language of the Bible and the ANE is misunderstood when its symbolic function is ignored and it is used to reconstruct the world as 'a closed and profane system' since the symbolic language was used in order to depict the world as fundamentally open to the divine realm.[177]  The various conceptions of the divine realm, then, will effect the selection of various symbolic images for features of the world.

Thus Gen 1 does not use personal images to depict features of creation,[178] although it does use language that strikes moderns as 'mythic' or childish.  So, for example, the sky is described as *rāqîa'*, which is related to the verb *rq'* ('to spread out,' 'trample,' or 'hammer out').[179]  Consequently, *rāqîa'* is translated as 'firmament' or 'canopy.'  On the one hand, this image for the sky is divergent from both the Egyptian depiction of the sky as a woman or cow and the depiction of the sky as half of Tiamat in *Enuma elish*.  On the other hand, referring to the sky as a 'firmament' makes little sense to moderns and so has either led to confusion or the denigration of Gen 1 as childish.  However, when the verb *rq'* is used with

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[175] Izaak de Hulster, 'Picturing Ancient Israel's Cosmic Geography,' 51-52.

[176] Bernd Janowski, 'Das biblische Weltbild,' 6 (author's translation).

[177] Bernd Janowski, *Arguing with God*, 26; cf. Keel and Schroer, *Creation*, 78: All ANE 'world images imply the involvement of divine powers that, especially at the beginning, make possible the cohesion and functioning of the parts of the cosmos—that is, they [the world images] grapple with the transcendental.'

[178] The one exception would be the sun and moon 'ruling' over the day and night, but even there the avoidance of proper names by labelling the sun and moon as the 'greater' and 'smaller' lights avoids giving the impression that they are personal beings.

[179] *HALOT*, 1292.

*'rṣ* ('earth') as the object in describing creation (Isa 42:5, 44:24, Ps 136:6), this does not seem to lead to the same interpretive difficulties, perhaps because moderns think of the earth as something solid.  Taking into account the symbolic function of ANE world pictures, it seems apparent that in either instance the point being made is that both the sky and the earth are not self-existent but have been fashioned (or 'hammered out') by God.  The firmament furthermore restrains the waters above (which may refer to clouds, rather than a cosmic ocean).  The language of Gen 7:11, 8:2 (*'ărubbōt haššāmayim*) reflects a similar conception although it should be noted that it does not use the term *rāqîa'* and so caution must be exercised in combining the two conceptions into one basic world-picture.

Furthermore, communicative acts always presuppose some level of shared conceptual framework between the speaker and hearer.  Conventional phenomenological language forms a part of this conceptual framework.[180]  Thus, in Seattle, we go 'up' to Vancouver and 'down' to Portland, even all three cities are at roughly the same elevation.  Although this is merely a conventional way of referring to 'north' and 'south,' it is nevertheless jarring to a native Seattleite when someone says they are going 'down' to Canada.  This example is particularly pertinent since Israel oriented itself towards the east and thus *ymyn* can mean 'right' and 'southward' while *śm'l* can mean 'left' or 'northward.'  Egypt oriented itself according to the Nile and so the word 'to go south' is the same as 'to go against the current' and 'to go north' is 'to go downstream.'[181]

In order to read biblical and ANE cosmological literature sensitively, then, we must both attend to the symbolic purpose of the language selected and the conventional phenomenological language being used.  I do not believe, then, that the biblical use of expressions such as 'water under the earth' (Exod 20:4) or 'firmament' necessarily entails the claims that the earth floats on a cosmic sea or that the sky is composed of metal.  Rather, these are conventional and symbolic ways of speaking that convey something about the natural phenomena described, but do not necessarily make literal claims.[182]

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[180] Cf. C. John Collins, *Genesis 1-4*, 260-265.

[181] Wilson, 'The Nature of the Universe,' 45-46.  Humorously, the Egyptian name for the Euphrates, which flows roughly north to south, is literally 'that circling water which goes downstream in going upstream.'

[182] Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 209-216, where he argues that an author's point can be affirmed while not affirming the literal, cosmological truth of the way that the author makes that point.

6. CONCLUSION: ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN AND POST-BIBLICAL CATEGORIES

In conclusion, while it is perfectly legitimate for scholars to propose a variety of historical hypotheses regarding the relationship of Gen 1 to various ANE texts, the statement of these hypotheses must clearly indicate the relative plausibility of the various reconstructions. Not infrequently, biblical scholars appeal to ANE literature as if the interpretation of these texts is settled or somehow more straightforward than the biblical texts they seek to illuminate. Comparative readings are an important component of biblical scholarship but they must be pursued in a sober manner, not claiming more than the evidence supports and recognizing the thematic complexity of ANE texts.

Moreover, I began this chapter by noting the objections of biblical scholars to creation ex nihilo as a post-biblical interpretive category to which the text must not be forced to conform. While this concern is valid, it must be argued that recourse to ANE materials is *also* an appeal 'to a frame of reference extrinsic to the Genesis account.'[183] While comparative readings are legitimate and helpful for comparing various conceptions of creation, 'it is not the same thing as taking the Genesis narrative in its canonical integrity as a suitably theological account of the canonical significance' of creation.[184] Rather, as Richard Briggs notes in relation to the specific issues of the 'image of God' in Gen 1:26,

> the hermeneutical frameworks brought to bear actually *generate* (that is, construct) readings rather than simply uncovering them in the text…the decision to read the 'image of God' language in Gen 1 against an ancient Near Easter background *generates* one way of framing the import of this 'image of God' language, and as a result it shapes how one might go on to develop the theological implications of what 'image of God' language is about.[185]

Briggs thus poses a fundamental challenge to comparative readings: they have a legitimate role in biblical scholarship but they do not occupy a privileged position over against literary-canonical readings nor are ANE categories *necessarily* superior in all instances and for all purposes to 'post-biblical' theological categories. Rather,

> the framing of historical and canonical questions that readers bring to bear will always interrelate in hermeneutically productive and varied ways….Questions about the historical contexts in which the text of Gen 1-11 developed have their hermeneutical

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[183] Richard Briggs, 'Humans in the Image of God,' 115.

[184] Ibid., 116.

[185] Ibid., 116-117. Briggs frames the point with specific reference to the 'image of God.'

place, but in this instance at least they need not be prior to questions of canonical function pertaining to the whole canon relevant to the reader (Christian or Jewish).[186]

Thus, while the various ANE models for creation should be taken into account in the interpretation of Gen 1, this does not mean that the ANE accounts provide better interpretive categories. To put the point rather vulgarly, it is unclear how divine masturbation or parricide are heuristically superior to creation ex nihilo as categories for interpreting Gen 1.

As a matter of fact, the interpretation of the Bible is always making heuristic use of a variety of post-biblical categories. The real issue, then, is not

> whether the category is biblical or post-biblical [but] whether it (negatively) does not force the biblical content into inappropriate moulds but (positively) enables penetrative grasp of the nature and content of the biblical text; and this, in turn, is a matter not only of the category in itself but of the way in which it is used in practice.[187]

Thus, while I agree with K. Lawson Younger's concern, quoted in §1.2 above, that lack of attention to the historical horizons of Gen 1 puts the reader 'one-sidedly in control of the literature, conforming it to the categories and interests of current criticism without regard to the categories and interests of ancient literature,' the question cannot be left here.[188] The problem is applying the categories of current criticism *without regard* to the categories of ancient literature but this problem is not simply resolved by reversing the direction of one-sided control. Rather, it must be recognized that 'questions of how to understand the Bible in its own right, of how to understand the Bible in terms of contemporary categories, and of how to relate these perspectives are *the* questions of biblical interpretation.'[189]

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[186] Ibid., 118.

[187] R.W.L. Moberly, 'How Appropriate is "Monotheism" as a Category for Biblical Interpretation?,' 218.

[188] See n.19 above.

[189] R.W.L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 76.

CHAPTER 3

CREATION FROM NOTHING

'Our difficulty with the idea [creation ex nihilo] is (depressingly) the difficulty of
imagining a need-free love, and it is a difficulty felt as much by ancients as moderns'

—Rowan Williams, 'Good for Nothing?,' 19

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 *A Sketch*

This chapter neither intends to be a historical account of the doctrine of creation ex

nihilo nor a fully systematic account of the doctrine of creation as a whole. Rather, it is

intended as a sketch of the classic Christian doctrine of creation ex nihilo. Some explanation

of what this means will help to situate the present work within the larger argument. Rowan

Williams has noted among theologians a reluctance to spend much time 'trying to understand

what exactly the doctrine of creation out of nothing actually means in the hands of those who

have most carefully dealt with it, and what its implications might be for understanding or

imagining ourselves as creatures.'[1] This tendency is even more marked among biblical

scholars. Among theologians, there is a rush to point out that creation ex nihilo has been used

in traditional Christianity, at times, in a manner that opens 'disastrous possibilities of a

certain kind of God-world differentiation, especially when coupled with a parallel spirit-

nature disjunction.'[2] This rejection of creation ex nihilo, however, especially when coupled

with a lack of sympathetic engagement with the most careful proponents of the doctrine, has

not protected Christian theology but rather led to a 'fundamental muddle here about the kind

of difference we can and should speak of in relation to God and God's world.'[3]

Thus, while the following is not intended as a historical account of the origins or

development of creation ex nihilo, it does attempt to sketch the classic Christian doctrine and

so I have attempted to engage representative theologians from the Christian tradition—

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[1] *On Christian Theology*, 67. This trend is by no means universal. As evidenced by the notes below,
there has been a resurgent interest in creation ex nihilo among theologians in the period since Williams essay.
At the same time, Williams examples of rejection based on superficial engagement could also be multiplied
from the recent period and there is little indication that biblical scholarship is interested in recovering creation
ex nihilo as a potential framework for interpretation.

[2] Ibid., 67.

[3] Ibid., 66.

Augustine and Aquinas figure prominently in the following account—as well as contemporary theologians who are informed by the tradition. Similarly, many things that ought to be accounted for in a 'theology of creation' are absent in the following account. The larger doctrine is viewed narrowly through the lens of creation ex nihilo. Nevertheless, the sketch offered here does seek to tease out the various implications and interconnections of creation ex nihilo.

The following sketch is also qualified in two further ways. First, the following account is of the *Christian* doctrine of creation ex nihilo. An important question that must be faced, especially given the widespread dismissal of creation ex nihilo by biblical scholarship, is if the doctrine is 'properly Christian.' As David Kelsey explains, asking if a doctrine is 'properly Christian' means asking 'is it the sort of proposal that a Christian community ought in all self-consistency to adopt to guide its life and thought?'[4] Thus, in order to argue for the 'properly Christian' status of the doctrine, I have focused on how creation ex nihilo coheres with the larger body of Christian doctrine, and especially the peculiarly Christian description of God as triune. This, however, is not intended to ignore the fact that there are also Jewish and Islamic forms of the doctrine or to suggest that those forms may not also potentially frame an interpretive approach to Genesis 1.

Second, from Origen to Luther and Calvin, doctrines of creation were articulated through more or less formal commentary on Gen 1-2.[5] My purpose here, however, is to set forth, as clearly as possible, the various claims and implications of the classic doctrine of creation ex nihilo rather than to observe the variety of associated interpretive moves that were used in various periods to relate this doctrine to Gen 1. The following sketch is thus somewhat artificial in many cases, as it abstracts the *doctrine* of creation ex nihilo from its original exegetical context.

Having made these qualifications—that this sketch presents neither a history nor a systematic account of creation ex nihilo and that it focuses on the Christian form but apart from the various exegetical contexts where it is often expressed—three further introductory issues are addressed before turning to the sketch of the doctrine. First, I ask briefly how

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[4] 'The Doctrine of Creation from Nothing,' 185.

[5] Paul M. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 107-110 documents the variety of means of commenting on Gen 1-2 in the early church, from sermons (such as those of Origen, Basil, and Ambrose) to technical commentaries (Origen, again, as well as Augustine's several commentaries on Gen 1) to hymnic arrangements (Ephrem the Syrian).

doctrines function.  Second, a terminological clarification is made about the phrase 'creation ex nihilo.' Third, I lay out the threefold organization that is used to sketch the doctrine of creation from nothing.

1.2 *What Does a Doctrine Do?*

At the outset, it is important to recognize that doctrines perform a number of functions.  Nicholas Lash argues that Christian doctrine provides 'identity sustaining rules of discourse and behavior governing the Christian use of the word "God".'[6]  *Credo*, in a Christian context, functions like a performative, like the English phrase 'I promise,' and, therefore, the confession *credo in Deum* is not mere intellectual assent to the existence of God but is confessing God as the 'goal towards which all our life and thought is set…to confess God is to set all our life, our mind, our heart, in God's direction.'[7]  Thus, although an investigation might focus narrowly on the propositional content and truthfulness of a doctrine, it is important to recognize that in Christian life and discourse doctrines are for more than mere predication: for example, right confession that God is 'the maker of heaven and earth' entails certain attitudes and commitments to behavior, absent which the confession may be invalidated.  This 'self-involving' aspect of doctrines is further addressed in §4 below.

A further function of doctrines can be noted in considering another example: the Chalcedonian Definition.  Here, the strongly self-involving *credo* language is absent and thus specific attitudes and behaviors are perhaps less strongly entailed in its affirmation.[8]  The Definition, however, does not simply codify a series of beliefs which Christians affirm but also functions analogous to a grammatical rule, suggesting standards for discriminating 'between well-formed and ill-formed Christian statements, and to generate statements of the former sort in the appropriate circumstances.'[9]  A hymn might be recognized as ill-formed if it speaks of Jesus in a manner that confuses his divine and human natures.  Thus a doctrine might not only express a belief that Christians hold but also function as a principle of 'theological grammar,' governing the formation and evaluation of first-order Christian

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[6] *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 8.

[7] Ibid., 18, 20-21.

[8] One obvious implication of affirming that 'our Lord Jesus Christ is to us…truly God…co-essential with the Father according to the Godhead' is that he may be addressed in prayer and worship along with the Father.

[9] Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology*, 14.

discourse.[10]  Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that some doctrines will function more as rules of theological grammar than as expressions of propositional beliefs.

In the Christian tradition, there is a strong emphasis on the ineffability of creation ex nihilo.  For example, 'reading the mature patristic treatments of the theme, one is struck by the sheer bafflement which is expressed, the sense that reason runs up against a limit it cannot pass.  Creation out of nothing is inconceivable, and that inconceivability is *material* rather than *contextual*.'[11]  After all, creation is not an object within but the precondition of human experience: 'absolutely everyone and everything we have ever known, imagined, thought about or undergone is thus "made".'[12]  Given the emphasis on on the ineffability of creation ex nihilo in the Christian account, there is good reason to expect that the doctrine primarily functions as a principle of theological grammar—as a way of discerning between ways of conceiving of God in relation to creation—rather than as expressing a positive understanding of how God creates.  In this respect, creation ex nihilo is closely related to transcendence. The Christian affirmation of God's transcendence is not a material property of divinity but rather a formal principle, a traditional way of saying that God cannot be spoken of univocally, that God is beyond human conceptual systems.[13]  Likewise, creation ex nihilo primarily functions as a negative principle of theological grammar, as a reminder that creation, as absolute beginning, cannot be identified with an particular object of experience in contrast to other objects of experience.[14]  We simply cannot 'inquire by what hands, by what machines, by what levers, by what contrivances [God] made this work of such magnitude.'[15]

The identification of the function of creation ex nihilo as a principle of theological grammar has three subsequent implications.  First, the assertion that creation ex nihilo functions as a principle of theological grammar does not mean that Christian theology has

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[10] Ibid., 15.

[11] John Webster, 'Creation out of Nothing,' 130.

[12] Lash, *Believing Three Ways*, 23.

[13] Ian McFarland, *From Nothing*, 30.

[14] John Webster, 'Love,' 158.

[15] Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, II.9 quoted in Webster, 'Love,' 158.  While a central burden of the following account is to demonstrate how creation ex nihilo functions as a principle of theological grammar, it is helpful to note the 'set of properly basic norms for Christian discourse on Creator and creation' in the pre-Nicene period that Blowers suggests: 1) God creates ex nihilo; 2) God is the sole Creator and possesses creation (sometimes expressed as 'enclosing' the world); 3) God creates through Word and Wisdom, not through intermediary angels; 4) God creates with a special view to human communion with God; 5) God creates out of a sheer overflow of love, not out of an necessity; 6) the Christian doctrine of creation is not reducible to protology, but includes an *oikonomia* and a teleology; and 7) Jesus Christ is the key to this biblical teleology (cf. *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 99-100).

nothing further to say: recognizing the ineffability of creation, theologians proceeds to say quite a bit about it!  It does mean, however, that discussions of creation ex nihilo unavoidably engage in what John Webster has called 'speculative divinity.'[16]  He observes that 'much modern biblical, historical, and systematic theology has been decidedly reluctant to address the speculative question of God's life in himself' given that 'the center of gravity of the biblical texts lies in the economy of salvation.'[17]  In describing the external work of God, however, the doctrine of creation necessarily 'refers back to prior teaching about the movement of God's inner life.'[18]  Thus, whatever 'Christian theology says about creation is a function of what it says about God.'[19]

A second implication of the function of creation ex nihilo as a principle of theological grammar is that it has exerted much pressure on the formulation of other Christian doctrines.[20]  For example, as discussed further below, reasoning according to creation ex nihilo, not only is a graded series of mediators between God and the world, such as suggested by Plotinus, unnecessary, it is impossible: there is only Creator and creation.  But what then of Irenaeus's two hands of God, the Word and Spirit?  As Irenaeus saw, if there is only God and all else is created by Him, then God's Word and Spirit must be essential to God's identity.  Similarly, creation ex nihilo as theological grammar governs Athanasius's arguments in the christological debate with the Arians.  Returning to the Chalcedonian Definition, that the two natures, divine and human remain distinct, unconfused but concurrent in the one person can be seen as an expression of Christian belief about Jesus Christ articulated according to the grammar of creation ex nihilo.  Because of its function as a principle of theological grammar and due to the pressure it has exerted  on the development of Christian doctrine, creation ex nihilo is a 'distributed doctrine' that is ubiquitous but inconspicuous in all other articles of the external works of God.[21]  As such, creation ex nihilo 'provides orientation and a measure of governance' to other doctrines in which it is often implicit.[22]  It should be cautioned,

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[16] 'Creation,' 135.

[17] Ibid., 135.  Webster notes as an example of this trend Dietrich Bonhoeffer's argument that 'we can know nothing at all of *this* God except as the creator of our world…There is no possible question that could go back behind this God who created in the beginning' (137).

[18] John Webster, 'Trinity,' 5.

[19] Ibid., 6.

[20] Cf. Frances Young, *God's Presence*, 57.

[21] John Webster, 'Non Ex Aequo,' 98.

[22] Ibid., 98

however, that while other doctrines such as providence and reconciliation presuppose creation ex nihilo, they are not merely inferences from the doctrine of creation.

Third, creation ex nihilo's grammatical function is to stress that there is no possibility of providing an illustration of what it means to say that God creates.[23]  Nevertheless, a peculiar feature of the Christian tradition has been its proclivity for borrowing and misusing terms from other semantic domains according to the principles of its own theological grammar.  Although it is incorrect to say either that the world *emanates* from God or that God *makes* the world like a craftsman, in articulating an understanding of creation, the Christian tradition has made use of both models.[24]  It is precisely because these otherwise inappropriate models or metaphors for creation ('making' and 'emanation') are used according to the grammar of creation ex nihilo that their use for conceptualizing creation can be justified.

Gregory of Nyssa illustrates this dynamic.  It is clear that he affirms creation from nothing: 'God, when creating all things that have their origin by creation, neither stood in need of any matter on which to operate, nor of instruments to aid Him in His construction.'[25]  But within this context, Gregory prefers to describe creation using emanation language as amenable to his central motif—life (and afterlife) as unending movement toward and increasing participation in God.  For example, note Gregory's use of the classic fountain and stream image of emanation:

> the fountain, the origin, the supply of every good is regarded as being in the world that is uncreate, and the whole of creation inclines to that, and touches and shares the highest existence only by virtue of its part in the First Good.[26]

Throughout, Gregory is able to (mis)use the model of emanation in order to develop a properly Christian account of the relationship of God and creation precisely because he develops his account according to the underlying principles of creation ex nihilo.

Similarly, Irenaeus develops two images for relating the world to its first cause.  On the one hand, God is like an architect or builder who brings order out of disorder.  On the other hand, He is like a monarch, who brings things about through powerful speech.  While the first image emphasizes the order and beauty of the world, by itself it implies belief in the existence of unformed matter and thus contradicts Irenaeus's basic belief in one first

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[23] McFarland, *From Nothing*, 87.

[24] Cf. Kathryn Tanner, 'Creation *Ex Nihilo* as Mixed Metaphor.'

[25] *Against Eunomius*, II.7; NPNF[2] 5:111.

[26] *Against Eunomius*, I.22; NPNF[2] 5:60.

principle.  Irenaeus, consequently, supplements and corrects this image by appealing to the royal image of God as a king who brings things into reality by speaking.[27]

Numerous examples could be provided from throughout the history of doctrine that further illustrate what is seen in Gregory and Irenaeus: creation ex nihilo functions as a principle of theological grammar, regulating the use of various images and models in Christian discourse.  Given the variety of things that doctrines do, it should be unsurprising to discover below that creation ex nihilo has been used for a variety of purposes through the history of theology, to guide numerous articulations of the relationship between God and the world, and that its affirmation entails a series of concomitant attitudes, dispositions, and behaviors.

1.3 *A Terminological Clarification:* Creation Ex Nihilo

Although it was developed to clarify what Christians mean by 'creation,' theologians have long recognized that the phrase creation ex nihilo is ambiguous.  As Anselm noted, the phrase has (at least) three possible meanings.[28]  It could mean that 'nothing was created at all' but this is unintelligible as a description of creation since it would then entail a contradiction. The phrase might be used in a way that treats 'nothing' as the name of a sort of something from which the world is created.  But again, to conceive of an existing nothing is self-contradictory and so must also be rejected.  Thus, concludes Anselm, the phrase creation ex nihilo means 'that while something has indeed been made, there is not some thing from which it was made.  This is like using the expression "sad about nothing" of someone who is sad without a reason.'[29]  Thomas Aquinas further clarifies: 'When anything is said to be made from nothing, this preposition from (*ex*) does not designate the material cause, but only the order.'[30]

The historic use of creation ex nihilo as a way of excluding a material cause of creation stands in contrast to various attempts to construe 'nothing' as a sort of something. G.F.W. Hegel, for example, defined 'nothingness' as 'nonbeing that is simultaneously a kind

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[27] Cf. Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 51-52.  Both images, arguably, stem from Gen 1.

[28] *Monologium*, *Major Works*, 20-22.

[29] Ibid., 22.

[30] *Summa Theologica*, 1.45.1.  Henceforth abbreviated as Aquinas, *STh*.

of being, and a being that is simultaneously nonbeing.'[31]  Alternatively, in an attempt to realign the discussion of creation with categories native to the Hebrew Bible, Jon Levenson suggests that

> It seems more likely that they [the ancient sources] identified "nothing" with things like disorder, injustice, subjugation, disease, and death.  To them, in other words, "nothing" was something—something negative.  It was not the privation of being…but a real, active force, except that its charge was entirely negative.  When order emerges where disorder had reigned unchallenged…this is indeed the creation of something out of nothing.[32]

While this sort of construal of ex nihilo may be desirable for the purposes of biblical theology, it must be recognized as a departure from the traditional understanding of the phrase, as Levenson himself recognizes.

## 1.4 *A Threefold Organization*

Creation ex nihilo, then, means that a fundamental distinction runs through the entire Christian worldview, a distinction between the Creator on one side and creation on the other. This distinction had been developed in different ways by various theologians—Aquinas, for example, draws the contrast between self-subsisting Being and beings by participation[33]—but the distinction itself is a constant feature in the classic Christian tradition.  Herman Bavinck goes so far as to claim Christianity is distinguished from other religions 'by the fact that it construes the relation between God and the world, including man, as that between the Creator and his creature.'[34]  This radical conception of the difference between Creator and creature necessitates a constant effort to discipline the imagination to avoid all conceptions which attempt to subsume uncreated Being and created being to any overarching ontological order.

Contemplating the doctrine of creation ex nihilo consequently entails understanding both the distinction and the relationship between Creator and creation or, to put the issue another way, it entails both the contemplation of God in Himself (*operationes Dei internae*)

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[31] *Wissenschaft der Logik I*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 4, 87-118 quoted in Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:419.  Henceforth abbreviated as Bavinck, *RD*.

[32] *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, xxi[2].

[33] *STh*, 1.44.1.

[34] *RD*, 2:407.  Bavinck does not directly address the question of creation in Judaism and Islam, both of which affirm versions of creation ex nihilo.

and God in relation to what is not God (*operationes Dei externae*).[35] The attempt to envisage and express in a systematic fashion creation in relation both to the agent of creation and the larger economy of acts is not merely an intellectual exercise. Rather, the 'deep purpose of this systematic impulse is spiritual, so that theological reason may come to be captivated by the harmony, beauty, and order of the acts of God.'[36]

This systematic impulse may result in a number of equally legitimate arrangements of the material. For heuristic purposes, the following exposition follows a threefold organization of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo.[37] The doctrine is considered from three angles: first, that God creates from nothing, second, that the world is created from nothing, and third, what it then might mean to live as creatures created from nothing. Dividing the material into these three sections does not imply that the doctrine itself is made up of three discrete parts but rather that the doctrine as a whole can be helpfully viewed from these three different perspectives.[38]

## 2. GOD CREATES FROM NOTHING

The doctrine of creation from nothing 'is a function of the Christian confession of the identity of the creator.'[39] Thus the proper articulation of the doctrine of creation must begin by attending to the identity of the Creator. This movement begins in the biblical 'confession and acclamation of God's matchless self-sufficiency' (eg., Deut 10:17, Isa 44:6-8, Dan 2:47, Rev 17:14).[40] Tertullian sees these sorts of passages as presupposing creation ex nihilo and therefore as evidence of the doctrine:

> The fact of God being the One and only God asserts this rule [creation ex nihilo, cf. 16.3], for He is the One-only God for the reason that He is the sole God, and the sole God for the only reason that nothing existed with Him. Thus He must also be the First, since all things are posterior to Him; all things are posterior to Him for the reason that all things

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[35] Cf. Webster, 'Creation,' 127-128. Cp. N. Joseph Torchia: in Augustine 'we find two correlative teachings which represent salient features of the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*: first, that the Trinity creates everything which exists by virtue of the supreme omnipotence of the Divine Persons; secondly, that creatures are completely contingent upon God for their very existence. From this standpoint, God creates in a wholly unqualified sense—that is, from nothing whatsoever through a free act of the divine will' (Creatio ex nihilo, 116).

[36] Ibid., 127.

[37] This arrangement is indebted to David Kelsey's comparable arrangement of the doctrine in 'The Doctrine of Creation.'

[38] On the importance of perspectives in theology, cf. Frame, *Knowledge of God*.

[39] Webster, 'Creation,' 137.

[40] Webster, 'Non Ex Aequo,' 100.

are by Him; all things are by Him for the reason that they are from nothing, so that this passage of Scripture, too, is verified: 'Who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been His counsellor? Or with who took He counsel? Or who hath shown Him the way of wisdom and knowledge? Who hath first given to Him and recompense shall be made?[41]

Similarly, Irenaeus sets out 'the first and most important doctrine' of God 'God the Creator, who made the heaven and the earth, and all things that are therein' which entails the demonstration

that there is nothing either above Him or after Him; nor that, influenced by any one, but of His own free will, He created all things, since He is the only God, the only Lord, the only Creator, the only Father, alone containing all things, and Himself commanding all things into existence.[42]

In and of itself, however, the claim that God is entirely unconstrained in His act of creation may in fact be a terrifying, rather than comforting, claim: to confess that God is almighty, apart from any determinative context, may suggest an arbitrary tyrant who rules by sheer power. Thus the claim that God creates ex nihilo must be developed in the context of Christian claims about the goodness, simple being, and triune identity of God.[43]

## 2.1 *Trinity and Creation*

It is not merely a hypothetical concern that creation ex nihilo might be considered a doctrine of terror that ought to be rejected. Process theologians have objected that the claim that God creates ex nihilo 'has connotations of arbitrariness…[and does] not properly capture the ways in which creator and creation are bound together.'[44] The resulting object of God's arbitrary creation, then, is not valued. Moreover, process theologians argue, the claim that God created without constraint only sharpens the problems that arise from experiences of suffering and evil in the world.[45] From a not unrelated perspective, various feminist theologians, such as Sallie McFague, have argued that the distinction between creator and creation entailed in creation ex nihilo only serves to canonize a hierarchical view of reality, grounding a series of problematic dualisms such as man-woman, spirit-body, humanity-

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[41] *Against Hermogenes*, trans. J.H. Waszink, 17.1. The cited passage is apparently an amalgamation of Rom 11:34-35 and Isa 40:13-14.

[42] *Against Heresies* II.1; ANF 1.

[43] Webster, 'Non Ex Aequo,' 96.

[44] David Fergusson, 'Loved by the Other, 272.

[45] Ibid., 272. On the objections of process theology to creation ex nihilo, cf. McFarland, *From Nothing*, 15-18.

nature.[46]  The objections emerge partially from a misunderstanding of what creation ex nihilo was understood to mean in the classic tradition and partially from differing conceptions of how God and God's relation to the world ought to be conceived.  It must be admitted, however, that passages such as those quoted above from Tertullian and Irenaeus, taken by themselves, lend credence to various theological critiques of creation ex nihilo.

The burden of this section, then, is to demonstrate how the Christian identification of the Creator as the triune God forms the context for affirming creation ex nihilo, creation that is unconditioned, unconstrained, and unnecessary but is nevertheless an act of the love and goodness of God.  In fact, Nicholas Lash points out that creation ex nihilo is 'systematically ambivalent' when considered in abstraction from the trinitarian frame of the creeds.[47]  Here Augustine points the way forward: 'God did not create under stress of any compulsion, or because he lacked something for his own needs; his only motive was goodness; he created because his creation was good.'[48]  God 'had no need for the things he created but rather created them out of his sheer goodness.'[49]  The unconstrained act of creation is not arbitrary since it is further qualified in two ways: it is motivated, insofar as we can specify any motivation for God's act of creation, by God's own goodness and it produces a further good, the created world.  The classic creedal formulations give further shape to God's own goodness by identifying God as 'Father' *before* 'almighty' and 'maker of heaven and earth.'  That God 'had no need for the things he created' is not a way of saying that He has no regard for creation but rather indicates that God is fully realized in His triune being and therefore is not completed, fulfilled, or further realized in the act of creation.  Thus rightly understanding creation necessitates further reflection on God's triune identity.

This creedal identification of God as Father 'is not in the first instance an answer to the question "What is God like?" but rather to the question "Who is God?"' and thus Father 'is a relative term' that identifies God fundamentally in relation to His 'only begotten Son.'[50] And yet, that God the maker of heaven and earth is identified as Father by His love of the Son in the Spirit does not imply that three Gods were at work in the act of creation.  Rather,

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[46] Rowan Williams, 'Good for Nothing?,' 9.

[47] Lash, *Believing Three Ways*, 47.

[48] *The City of God*, 11.24

[49] Ibid., 12.18.

[50] Ian McFarland, 'God, the Father Almighty,' 265.

the creeds begins in the absolute insistence that creation is the act of *one* God.[51]  Thus, when 'applied to God, "one" and "three" are mutually interpretative and reinforcing;' God's unity is always a *tri*unity.[52]  Neither God's unity nor simplicity can be conceived of in abstraction from the three persons: 'when we hear "one" we ought to understand "unity of substance"; when we hear "three in one essence," the persons in this trinity are meant.'[53]  This qualifies the Christian claim that God is 'simple'—the tradition affirms only 'the simplicity of the triune God as one essence in a threefold modal or personal differentiation.'[54]

Some further elaboration of trinitarian theology is necessary at this point in order to set out the resources that the Christian tradition brings to bear in attempting to clarify creation ex nihilo.  Within the unity of God, the three persons cannot be 'separated from the other by any difference of essence.'[55]  Rather, a distinction can be drawn between the three persons only on the basis of 'their mutual relationships and not the very substance by which they are one.'[56]  These distinguishing relations between the persons are 'active generation, passive generation, active spiration, passive spiration' and indicates that 'each person possess characteristics proper to that specific mode of essence: paternity, filiation and emanation (or procession).'[57]  On this basis, we can assert that God is 'inherently expansive, living as God by giving rise to and subsisting in relation with another…the Father is God precisely in giving himself away by begetting the Son and breathing forth the Spirit.'[58]

John Webster asserts a basic rule that conditions Christian talk about God and creation: 'the Holy Trinity is perfect blessedness in himself in the absence of creatures.'[59]  God's generative capacity is constitutive of His personal nature, it is not a power in reserve that is only realized in the act of creation.  This generativity, moreover, is intrinsically personal.  Furthermore, the generative relationship between Father and Son is eternal and necessary.  This rule has two corollaries for further understanding the Christian claim that

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[51] Cf. Donald Wood, 'Maker of Heaven and Earth,' 384.

[52] Webster, 'Trinity,' 8.

[53] John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.5

[54] Webster, 'Trinity,' 8.

[55] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.19

[56] Ibid., 1.13.19.

[57] Webster, 'Trinity,' 9.

[58] McFarland, 'God, the Father,' 266.

[59] Webster, 'Trinity,' 10.

God's act of creation is unconditioned and unconstrained. First, there is a fullness of life in relationship enjoyed by God the Father, Son, and Spirit such that creation can in no way supplement or complete God. God, therefore, cannot be motivated to create by any deficiency or need.[60] All of God's attributes, including relational attributes such as love, are already fully actualized within the dynamics of the triune life. God does not need creation as an object in order to express or actualize His love. This does not entail that God does not love creation but rather that His love is antecedent to any act of creation. Second, God's self-sufficiency means that the act of creation and the resulting relationship between Creator and creatures is entirely gratuitous.[61] Creation, therefore, should not in any proper sense be thought of as a natural or physical act, such as an emanation from God.[62] Creation is an act of will, an intentional act. In the Christian tradition, then, a trinitarian framework is necessary for affirming that God's unconstrained act of creation is neither tyranny nor terror but love creating a further object of love. It is an act that is not arbitrary but unnecessary, 'its *point* is not to serve a divine need.'[63]

At the same time, that God is triune, that He inherently lives in relation, that His life is found in the productive and generative giving of one person to another, is the grounds for God's creation of all that is not God. Bavinck states the point particularly well:

> Christian theology…knows both emanation and creation, a twofold communication of God—one within and the other outside the divine being; one to the Son who was in the beginning with God and was himself God, and another to creatures who originated in time; one from the being and another by the will of God. The former is called generation; the latter, creation. By generation, from all eternity, the full image of God is communicated to the Son; by creation only a weak and pale image of God is communicated to the creature. Still, the two are connected. *Without generation, creation would not be possible*. If, in an absolute sense, God could not communicate himself to the Son, he would be even less able, in a relative sense, to communicate himself to his creature. If God were not triune, creation would not be possible.[64]

Bavinck draws out the remarkable logic of the Christian tradition: the Christian God is not Plotinus's undifferentiated One but the differentiation by virtue of which God is able to create is also *not* a movement toward creation, a lower rung on a ladder of being. Rather, this

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[60] Ibid., 13.

[61] Ibid., 13.

[62] Recall, as noted in §1.2, that emanation language can be used as an image for creation within a creation ex nihilo framework, as is frequent in Aquinas.

[63] Williams, 'Good for Nothing?,' 19.

[64] *RD*, 2:420, emphasis added.

differentiation is internal to God and so the sharp Creator-creature distinction is maintained even while it grounds God's capacity to bring creatures into being.

Identifying the Creator as the triune God in this manner has raised further issues for the Christian tradition: should creation be attributed particularly to one or another person? Is it the *Father* Almighty who alone is maker of heaven and earth? Aquinas, in particular, has carefully contemplated these questions. He first answers that although the distinction within God is the grounds of the possibility of creation, 'all things created are the common work of the whole Godhead.'[65] This is because the act of creation 'pertains to God according to His being, that is, His essence, which is common to the three Persons. Hence to create is not proper to any one Person, but is common to the whole Trinity.'[66] Thus, the capacity to create, to be 'the cause of being,' is proper to God alone because He alone is uncaused. Moreover, this capacity to create is not a power, held in reserve as it were, rather God's creative power *is* what He is; He creates 'through his very self.'[67] Thus, as Augustine asserts, 'creation has its being from the fullness of your [God's] goodness. In consequence a good which confers no benefit on you…can nevertheless have its existence caused by you and so will not lack being.'[68] The Christian doctrine of creation, then, begins with reflection on how creation results from the fullness of God's being and goodness, rather than from a lack in God which must be supplemented or fulfilled. Although it can be demonstrated *that* it is fitting for God to create, we are unable to give reasons *why* God has actually chosen to create in terms that are conventionally used to specify the motivations for creaturely action.[69]

Aquinas continues, however, by arguing that while the act of creation is a common work of the whole Godhead, and so cannot simply be assigned to one or another person as some sort of independent agent, the Christian tradition, as exemplified in the Nicene Creed, has 'appropriated' aspects of creation to the Father, Son, and Spirit. For Aquinas, and the classic tradition which he represents, the procession of persons within the Godhead indicates something of the mode of action in acts external to the Godhead, as in the act of creation. In this, Aquinas further develops Irenaeus's metaphor of God working through His two hands,

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[65] Aquinas, *STh*, 1.45.6.

[66] Aquinas, *STh*, 1.45.6.

[67] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II.8.6, quoted in Webster, 'Love,' 161.

[68] *Confessions*, 13.2.

[69] Cf. Webster, 'Trinity,' 14.

the Word and the Spirit.  First, 'to be the Creator is attributed to the Father as to Him Who does not have the power of creation from another.'[70]  As it is the Father from whom the Son and Spirit receive their being in generation and spiration, so the Father has the power of creation of Himself and gives that power *through* the Son and Spirit.  In this manner, Aquinas offers an important corrective to Irenaeus's metaphor: it is the *Father* who creates through Son and Spirit.

Second, 'of the Son it is said (John 1.3), *through him all things were made*, since He has the same power, but from another; for this preposition 'through' usually denotes a mediate cause, or a principle from a principle.'[71]  Again, Aquinas is picking up classic themes of the Christian tradition.  The Nicene Creed, for example, that it is 'the only-begotten Son, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God' that is the one 'by whom all things were made.'  Rather than treat the Son merely as an intermediary who insulates the Father from the world of creation, the Christian tradition, following Col 1:15-16, emphasizes that the Son as Word is the exemplary and efficient cause of creation.[72]  It is through the Son that God speaks His Word, or Wisdom, giving form to creation and causing it by example.  Moreover, the Word is not only the archetype of creation but the agent 'through' whom God creates.[73]

Third, 'to the Holy Spirit, Who has the same power from both, is attributed that by His rule He governs and quickens what is created by the Father through the Son.'[74]  Once more Aquinas echoes the Nicene Creed, which declares that the Spirit as the one who 'proceeds from the Father' is 'the Lord and Giver of life.'  This is not simply a donation of life, however, but is a drawing of creation to its proper end.

Finally, a trinitarian identification of God and the affirmation of creation ex nihilo are not simply logically consistent, although the Christian tradition has affirmed that they are at least this.  Rather, the two claims imply one another and 'therefore meet requirements for a stronger kind of intelligibility, systematic coherence.'[75]  On the one hand, creation ex nihilo

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[70] Ibid., 1.45.6.

[71] Ibid., 1.45.6.

[72] Webster, 'Trinity,' 18.

[73] Ibid., 18.

[74] *STh*, 1.45.6.

[75] Tanner, *God and Creation*, 82.  Tanner is referring to claims regarding God's transcendence and involvement in the world.

played a pivotal role in the development of the early Christian understanding of the triune identity of God. If God creates from nothing, the *logos* through which God creates and the Spirit by which He give life must be understood as essential to God's own identity rather than as some secondary principle existing alongside Him.[76] Thus, for example, Athanasius argues that 'no creature…can be the efficient cause of creation.' Therefore, if the Son creates with the Father (cf. John 1:3, Col 1:16, Heb 1:2), then the Son must be the 'proper offspring of his [the Father's] own being.'[77] Thus, the distinction between Creator and creature that is fundamentally entailed in creation ex nihilo shapes the Christian confession of the identity of God.

Conversely, as I have attempted to demonstrate above, *if* God is triune—if He is fundamentally generative and relational—then there is no logical need for any external context for actualization or fulfillment. God *is* His own context.[78] God does not become Himself through the process of creation; He is already the fulness of goodness and being. Thus, the triune identification of God implies creation ex nihilo: God lacks nothing and needs nothing, neither for the actualization of His own being nor in order to create.[79] Positing matter or any second principle alongside God, then, is sheer dualism: something to which God has no intrinsic relationship simply exists alongside Him, regardless of His will.

By using the language of creation ex nihilo in its proper context, trinitarian theology, much of the objections noted at the beginning of this section are alleviated. Creation is unconditioned and unnecessary, but this does not mean that it is arbitrary nor does it imply a lack of regard by the Creator for His creation. Rather, the act of creation is ex nihilo: it has no other grounds than God's antecedent love, goodness, and fullness of being. While creation ex nihilo certainly does assert a basic distinction between the Creator and creation, this should not be understood to entail an oppressive hierarchy nor does it ground various tyrannical hierarchies *within* the created world. Rather, it indicates that God is fundamentally different from created reality in His self-sufficiency but this self-sufficiency must be understood in terms of the triune life of deference of one person to another. We turn more

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[76] Cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.20.

[77] Athanasius, *To Serapion*, 3.5 quoted in Bavinck, *RD*, 2:421.

[78] On the systematic importance of this claim, cf. B. A. Bosserman, *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox*, 175-196.

[79] Cf. Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 55-56.

directly to the problems raised by the distinction between Creator and creature in the next section.

## 2.2 *Transcendence and Presence*

The preceding entails that creation is non-necessary, at least from God's point of view. He is perfect in Himself, 'has no need of creation, acquiring no augmentation from its existence, and being deprived of no good by its absence.'[80] God is, therefore, in some sense *beyond* creation: it does not form a basic context for His identity and it has come into being only by His will. Further clarifying what it means for God to be 'beyond' creation, however, involves a careful exercise of the Christian imagination. Too often, this claim has been pictured as God standing outside creation and imposing His will on a recalcitrant world. Although variations of this image might be fitting at subsequent points in the history of God's dealings with people (cf. Exod 32:9-10), creation ex nihilo rejects precisely this sort of imagery as unsuitable for understanding the basic relationship between the Creator and creation.

The Christian tradition has classically formulated God's 'beyond-ness' in terms of His transcendence. Ian McFarland exposits this language in reflection on Anselm's identification of God as 'that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought.'[81] Had Anselm simply claimed that God is 'the greatest conceivable thing,' this would put God on the same metaphysical continuum with all other things.[82] Anselm's formulation, however, is 'significant precisely because it destabilizes whatever conceptual system we may have by positing a distinction between the "that" it names and *anything* that we can conceive.'[83] Transcendence, then, is a way of saying that God cannot be classified within our conceptual or metaphysical systems; it is a way of pointing out the obstacles to rightly talking about God.[84]

When applied to the distinction between the Creator and creature, transcendence rejects two possible conceptualizations. First, God's transcendence does not exclude His presence in the world. Second, the power of a transcendent God is not in competition with

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[80] Webster, 'Love,' 160.

[81] *Proslogion*, chap. 1-5, in *Major Works*, 84-89.

[82] McFarland, *From Nothing*, 30.

[83] Ibid., 30.

[84] Ibid., 34.

creaturely powers. Both of these rejected possibilities were commonplace in the Hellenistic environment in which early Christianity formulated its understanding of divine transcendence and creation ex nihilo. Either, divinity (broadly conceived) was conceptualized as present to the world, but in a manner that posited competition between divine and non-divine agency (think of the various divine figures in Homer, for example). Or, as in Plotinus, divinity was conceptualized as transcendent in a simple oppositional contrast with the non-divine world in a manner that makes any direct productive involvement of divinity in the world problematic.[85] The early Christian 'affirmation of God's radical transcendence unsettles this world picture.'[86] By affirming transcendence and creation ex nihilo, Christian theology denies that God and matter are two principles within some larger framework that together result in creation. This entails viewing 'God's relationship to creation as utterly gratuitous… it is part of a vision of the God-world relationship that sees no "opposition" between them.'[87] This further implies that the various distinction and contrasts *within* the created realm result from God's free choice to create in this or that way. These contrasts within creation are not necessitated by forms or categories that somehow stand above God and the world. Therefore, the difference between God and creation must be formulated in 'non-contrastive' terms: God cannot simply be identified with one side of an exclusive contrast and the world with the other.[88] This greatly complicated Christian theological grammar as terms like 'mutable,'

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[85] Tanner, *God and World*, 39-45.

[86] Brian Robinette, 'The Difference Nothing Makes,' 535.

[87] Ibid., 535.

[88] Tanner, *God and World*, 79-80.

when applied to creation, are not in exclusive contrast to the Creator but actually suggest a created mode of resembling the Creator.[89]

Positing a 'non-contrastive difference' between Creator and creation further entails that 'God can no more be in competition with a creature than Shakespeare can be in competition with Viola.'[90] The Christian tradition grasps 'the idea of transcendence sufficiently to understand that it necessarily implies immanence. If God creates ex nihilo, then nothing is opposed to him, nothing can limit him nor be compared with him: [God] is "wholly other," and therefore penetrates the world absolutely.'[91] God is not opposed to the world because He is not another cause in the realm of creaturely causes, in competition with other creatures. Creation ex nihilo illegitimates the use of 'God' as a 'principle of explanation' in this manner, as simply another link in a chain of causes and effects.[92] God is not a being among beings, but gives being and order to all creatures. This donation of being and order is not a foreign imposition on creation but constitutes the very reality of the creation order. Rowan Williams clearly demonstrates how this conception of the relationship between God and world follows from creation ex nihilo in Augustine's *Confessions*:

> God's action cannot *compete* with created agency, God does not have to overcome a rival presence, the creative power of God is not power exercised unilaterally over some other force, *but is itself the ground of all power and all agency within creation*. God does not…make the world by imposing the divine will on some recalcitrant stuff…Rather, God causes an entire process in which intelligible structure comes to view. In response to the

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[89] In his article, 'Creator and Creature,' Robert Jenson argues that a variety of attempts to clarify the Creator/creature distinction based on exclusive contrasts prove unstable. For example, he suggests that although the contrast between eternality and temporality might seem to clarify the distinction, no 'sheer contradiction of eternity to time' is permissible since positing an act of divine will in creation 'demands a before and after of some sort, that is, something analogous to time rather than simply opposite to time' (217, 218). Jenson similarly demonstrates the problems with using the pairs infinite/finite, spatially transcendent/limited, and use of the modifier 'omni-' as exclusive contrasts to name the difference between the Creator and creature. Jenson suggests three viable options for moving forward. First, scripture marks the difference between the Creator and creatures *narratively* rather than conceptually and it may be the case that the distinction is ultimately only narratable. Second, Jenson suggests that Aquinas's exposition of the Creator-creature distinction in terms of the identity of essence and existence in the Creator and their distinction in all creatures 'comes very close to working' (219). Third, Jenson proposes a new approach: that the Creator/creature distinction is something 'which God *enforces* by taking action…to say that God is Creator and we are creatures is to say that God takes a certain preventive action' to stop creators from melting back into Himself (219). This preventative action, argues Jenson, is taken in Christ: 'God acts to block the possibility of emanation/return by being in his second identity an actor who acts always as Creator and creature, and by just so seeing to it that there is *only* that one' (221). While Jenson convincingly demonstrates the problems in attempting to clarify the Creator/creature distinction through recourse to exclusive contrasts, I must admit that, even after several readings, I find his positive proposal perplexing.

[90] C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 42.

[91] Henri de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, quoted in Robinette, 'The Difference,' 533.

[92] Lash, *Believing Three Ways*, 39.

act of God, created life shapes itself as a balanced whole, seeking equilibrium; but all this, and the possibilities thus realised, is simply the result of divine freedom.[93]

An analogous point is made in Aquinas's denial that creation 'is made by movement, or change.'[94] Change or process presupposes an object. But this is precisely what creation ex nihilo denies: God does not exercise power *on* anything in creating. Therefore, in creation 'God does not impose a definition but creates an identity' since before creation there simply 'is not to impose *on*.'[95] Creation thus cannot be pictured as 'any kind of imposition or manipulation: it is not God imposing on us divinely willed roles rather than the ones we "naturally" might have.'[96] Rather, the classic tradition maintains that creation means 'that to be here at all, to be a part of this natural order and to be the sort of thing capable of being named—or having a role—is "of God"; it *is* because God wants it so.'[97]

This way of conceiving God's relationship to the world is grounded in the triune identity of God: God is love, eternally, by virtue of the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit. Therefore, 'God's love, far from being caused by goodness in the object, causes all the goodness which the object has, loving it first into existence and then into real, though derivative, lovability.'[98] God, then, 'can give good, but cannot need or get it. In that sense all His love is, as it were, bottomlessly selfless by very definition; it has everything to give and nothing to receive.'[99]

All of this means that God's transcendence, His existence beyond or before creation, should not be understood as an *opposition* between the Creator and creation. Rather, creation is ex nihilo, that is, it has its being because the God who exists apart from creation brings the created order into being. Although this means that God ultimately exceeds the act of creation, it does not mean that He is absent from the created order. Rather, an implication of creation ex nihilo is that *nothing* stands between God and creation—all that exists, exists because God is present to it. God's transcendence implies His immanence. In Irenaeus's terminology, God encloses creation, but is not enclosed by it.[100]

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[93] Williams, 'Good for Nothing?,' 19.

[94] *STh*, 1.45.3.

[95] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 68.

[96] Ibid., 69.

[97] Ibid., 69.

[98] Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 43.

[99] Ibid., 43.

[100] Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 55.

Finally, the way of conceiving God's transcendence and presence entailed in creation ex nihilo has important implications for other doctrines. The incarnation, for example, does not describe a way of God being inserted into a world that He is otherwise outside of since creation ex nihilo 'implies that God is *already* maximally "inside" the world…since God's sustaining presence is the one necessary and sufficient condition of every creature's existence at every moment of its existence.'[101] Similar considerations might clarify the reformed understanding of Christ's 'real presence' in the eucharist: God is present in a sustaining manner to all bread and wine (and all wheat, grapes, and yeast for that matter) but identifies a specific loaf and cup with Christ's body and blood as a means of mediating His grace to a specific congregation.

## 2.3 *The Act of Creation*

Finally, the affirmation of creation ex nihilo has classically conditioned the ways that the act of creation itself is described. The following discussion examines several modifiers that are classic elements of Christian discourse about God's act of creation. Some earlier observations crop up again but now focused on the act of creation itself.

*The act of creation is personal.* In the first instance, creation ex nihilo provides grounds on which creation should be characterized as a personal act. If the subject of the act of creation is fundamentally identified by the internal relationships of Father, Son, and Spirit, then the act of creation itself is a personal act, an act of will, rather than an operation of abstract force.[102] Moreover, in general, in the Christian tradition it is fundamentally personal language that properly describes the Creator-creature relationship, not, in the first instance, the language of physics or metaphysics.

*The act of creation is free.* As the act of a personal agent, the act of creation is free in a twofold sense. First, a prominent theme in the Christian tradition is that God's work in creation is an act of God's freedom. Tertullian used the term *monarchia* which ambiguously carries the notions of both 'sovereignty' and 'sole first principle.'[103] As Aquinas argues, God's creativity is not constrained by material, exemplary, or final causes outside of

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[101] McFarland, *From Nothing*, 102.

[102] Cf. Webster, 'Creation,' 138.

[103] Young, *God's Presence*, 54.

Himself.[104]  Bavinck argues that 'the doctrine of creation out of nothing teaches the absolute sovereignty of God and man's absolute dependence; if only a single particle were not created out of nothing, God would not be God.'[105]  While the act of creation is free, uncompelled by either internal or external necessity, this does not entail that this act is arbitrary but rather corresponds to the character of God's triune life.[106]  Thus, the act of creation 'results from something like a decision, in that as creator God is wholly self-determining; but again, this self-determination is not arbitrary self-causation but simply God being the one he is.'[107]

The act of creation is, therefore, also free in a second sense: it is a gratuitous act.  Out of His own sheer goodness, God created for the good of the world rather than to in any manner complete His own goodness.[108]  In turn, as Luther saw so clearly, this twofold sense of God's freedom in creation, encapsulated in creation ex nihilo, forms 'the pattern of divine work more generally.'[109]  God always relates to His creatures sovereignly and gratuitously and thus Luther, in his commentary on Genesis, does not only discuss creation ex nihilo with reference to the first chapter but throughout the whole work right up to the story of Joseph where conservation and new creation are also characterized as creation ex nihilo.[110]

*The act of creation involves no change.*  Since creation is free and ex nihilo, 'it is not a change.'[111]  If creation is from nothing, there is nothing acted upon in the act of creation and therefore no change or motion can be said to have taken place.  Rather, what was nonexistent is brought into being.  Thus, creation ex nihilo is a way of naming 'a divine action that differs from every creaturely mode of production: to create belongs to God *alone*.'[112]  As such, the power of creating is numbered, in the technical language of Christian theology, among God's incommunicable attributes—neither by nature or grace may any other creature enact a creation ex nihilo.[113]  That creation ex nihilo involves no change is an important qualifier to Luther's broad use of creation ex nihilo: creation must be distinguished

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[104] *STh*, 1.44.2-4; cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, 2.7; NPNF2, 111.

[105] *RD*, 2:419.

[106] McFarland, *From Nothing*, 42.

[107] Webster, 'Creation,' 139.

[108] Augustine, *The City of God*, 11.23, 12.18.

[109] Johannes Schwanke, 'Martin Luther's Theology of Creation,' 411.

[110] Cf. Johannes Schwanke, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*.

[111] Aquinas, *STh*, 1.45.1.

[112] Wood, 'Maker,' 390.

[113] Cf. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:421.

from, e.g., conversion which can be described as a change or a movement from darkness into light.[114]  Thus, while creation ex nihilo articulates a foundational claim about God's freedom in relating to His creatures, at the same time the order of creation and redemption ought not be conflated.[115]  Although these two concerns can likely be reconciled, there does seem to be a real tension in the Christian tradition at this point between those who stress that ex nihilo points to a common characteristic of all of God's works *ad extra* and those who are want to maintain a distinction between creation and God's subsequent works in redemptive-history.[116]

*The act of creation is instantaneous*.  A further implication of creation ex nihilo is that it not only does not describe a change but also that it, therefore, 'enacts the divine counsel instantaneously and without effort.'[117]  The language of instantaneity for describing creation is especially prominent in the early church.  Basil, for example, claims that 'at the will of God the world arose in less than an instant.'[118]  Similarly, Ambrose states that 'He who in a momentary exercise of his will completed such a majestic work employed no art or skill so that those things which were not were so quickly brought into existence.'[119]  Webster concludes that 'creation is thus more like an inner act of willing than an external act of craftsmanship.'[120]  The apparent function of this sort of language is to further deny that any change or motion is involved in creation or that creation involved an 'protracted toil' or opposition to God.[121]

At the same time, however, this way of describing creation ex nihilo appears problematic—although God arguably may not wrestle with any opposing forces, the narratives of Gen 1-2 certainly do in fact depict God as acting like a craftsman, working on things as part of a process of creation that extends through time.  To overcome these sorts of problems Charles Hodge, for example, standing in the tradition of Aquinas, distinguishes between 'immediate and mediate creation' while other theologians refer to 'creation' proper

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[114] Wood, 'Maker,' 389.  Against Wood, however, it must be noted that rather than referring to a change of heart, the prophets frequently refer to the 'removal' of an old heart and the 'giving' of a new heart (Jer 24:7; Ezek 11:9, 36:26; cf. Ps 51:10).

[115] Ibid., 389-391; cf. Susannah Ticciati, 'How New is New Creation?,' 89-116.

[116] Cf. Webster, 'Non Ex Aequo,' 98-99.

[117] Webster, 'Creation,' 140.

[118] *Hexameron*, 1.6, quoted in ibid., 140.

[119] *Hexameron*, 1.13, quoted in ibid., 140.

[120] 'Love,' 162.

[121] Cf. Webster, 'Creation,' 140-141.

and the subsequent work of 'ornamentation.'[122]  We will return to this issue in the final section of this chapter where the possible failures of creation ex nihilo are considered.

*The act of creation is ex nihilo*.  These various implications, then, are brought together in theological discourse by saying the God creates ex nihilo: the act of creation is 'ascribed to *nothing but God*,' God is the sole precondition for the act of creation, and, therefore, there is nothing which limits God's act of creation.[123]  Not only is God unopposed in the act of creation but, as Theophilus, Irenaeus, and Tertullian argued, even the notion pre-existing matter must be rejected as in competition with God's omnipotence.[124]  As argued above, the phrase creation ex nihilo is best used—is used in a way that avoids connotations of divine indifference or tyranny—when it is used in the context of trinitarian theology.  Moreover, the qualification that God is transcendent is a reminder that the Creator cannot simply be incorporated into the system of creation.  This does not mean that He is distant from creation but is freely present to all of creation.

## 3. THE WORLD IS CREATED FROM NOTHING

That creation ex nihilo is ineffable not only implies that no illustration can be offered for what it means for God to create from nothing but also has implications for how the world might be known to be created.  Charles Hodge asserts that 'without the light of a divine revelation, this question [is the world created?] is unanswerable.  The data for the solution of the problem do not lie within the sphere either of experience or of reason.'[125]  Theologians from Aquinas to Barth come to similar conclusions, albeit formulated in different manners.[126]  Thus, the Christian claim is not that it is a self-evident fact that the world is created ex nihilo, but rather is a confession of faith that the world is such as much as it is a confession of faith that God created the world from nothing.  This is not to deny that Christianity has reasons for this belief but does entail a distinction between theological claims about the world and natural scientific claims about the world.[127]  In fact, although creation ex nihilo does have implications for a Christian cosmology in general terms, by denying that God worked with

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[122] *Systematic Theology*, 1:556-558.

[123] McFarland, *From Nothing*, 87.

[124] Cf. Blowers, *Drama*, 169-171.

[125] *Systematic Theology*, 1:551.

[126] cf. Aquinas, *STh*, 1.46.2; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3.1, 3-41.

[127] Cf. David Fergusson, *Creation*, passim.

pre-existent matter, early Christian theology was able to express its doctrine of creation without committing to specific cosmological theories or their entailed beliefs about the nature of matter.  Thus, at the risk of oversimplifying things, Augustine develops a doctrine of creation using the resources of Neoplatonism while Aquinas borrows much from the contemporary resurgence in Aristotelianism.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter (§1.4), creation ex nihilo fundamentally posits a distinction between the Creator and creation.  The previous section (§2) focused on the *Creator* side of this distinction; now the *creation* side of the distinction is examined.  What can be said about all that is not God is fundamentally *that* it is a creature, a 'thing made.'[128]  What this means is further expounded by examining three interrelated claims: that the world as creation is contingent, that the world as creation is dependent, and that the world as creation is good.  The next section (§4) examines the sorts of dispositions and disciplines necessary to see the world as created from nothing.

3.1 *Contingence*

If creation ex nihilo, as a rule of theological grammar, implies that the act of creation should be described as a free and personal choice of God to create—a choice unconditioned by either external constraints or internal need—then a corollary is that creation, as an object, is rightly described as contingent.  The world is but need not have been and need not have been in the manner in which it is.  That the world is contingent stands in contrast to necessity on two levels.  First, as just stated, God's act of creation was, strictly speaking, unnecessary and, therefore, so is the product of that act.  Second, however, as contingent, the world stands in contrast to God Himself who, the Christian tradition maintains, exists necessarily.  In light of this contrast, the distinction between the Creator and creation has been traditionally further elaborated as a contrast between the 'necessary existence' of God and the 'contingent existence' of created reality.[129]  Kelsey cautions, however, that although this contrast may hold, the attempts by neo-Thomism to give 'precise ontological content' to these categories

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[128] Webster, 'Non Ex Aequo,' 101; cf. McFarland, *From Nothing*, 52-61.

[129] Kelsey, 'The Doctrine of Creation,' 179; cf. Aquinas, *STh*, 1.3.4-7

has been unsuccessful, especially since Christian theology has benefitted 'from a certain creative ambiguity' in the terms.[130]

This contrast does not imply that creation must be construed as antithetical to God but simply that creation is not God. Aquinas argues that God's existence and His essence are identical: God is coexistent with His nature, He does not have accidental qualities.[131] This is not the case for the creature: 'the existence of any one of us…depends on a vast sequence of preceding and concurrent circumstances, variations in any one of which would lead to a very different outcome.'[132] While the contingency of creation as a whole may not be empirically demonstrable, Basil argued that creation from nothing means that 'the created universe is intrinsically incomplete; in no way physically or logically necessary, self-sufficient or self-explanatory, it is ultimately to be understood from its contingence upon God beyond itself.'[133] Thus, argues T. F. Torrance, the doctrine of creation ex nihilo implies 'a far reaching epistemological revolution.'[134] He writes that

> the baffling thing about the created universe is that since it came into being it contains no reason in itself why it should be what it is…It is ultimately to be understood from beyond itself in its relation to the Creator…the universe is intrinsically open and elusive in its existence and structure, and constantly surprising in its manifestation of new features and patters.[135]

The resulting new, Christian understanding of the nature and order of the universe stands in contrast to the doctrines of Hellenism. Frances Young contends that creation ex nihilo, with its affirmation of the contingency of created reality

> broke the hold of "necessity" and "chance," substituting the notion of a created order with its own rationality, so ultimately permitting the rise of modern science; furthermore, it de-sacralized nature, allowing its utilization, even exploitation, for human benefit.[136]

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[130] Kelsey, 'The Doctrine of Creation,' 195n.2; cf. the similar cautions in Jenson, 'Creator and Creature,' 219.

[131] *STh*, 1.3.3-4.

[132] McFarland, *From Nothing*, 61.

[133] T.F. Torrance, 'Creation, Contingent World-Order, and Time,' 208, summarizing Basil's *Hexameron*.

[134] Ibid., 206.

[135] Ibid., 209

[136] *God's Presence*, 57.

*3.2 Dependence*

In related terms, the contingent existence of creatures, as opposed to the necessary existence of the Creator, implies the dependence of creation on the Creator. The existence of all creatures is conditioned by a variety of contingent circumstances, both past and present. No creature, as Athanasius argued, is independent of creation. Rather creation is characterized by webs of interdependency, whereby each creature is mutually dependent on a variety of others. And this 'mutual dependency of parts points to the contingency and dependency of the whole.'[137] The contingency and interdependence of all created things points to the dependence of creation on the Creator: there is no absolute and self-sustained point in creation. Moreover, in several ways, various theologians have drawn the further implication that if creation is from nothing, then it is marked by ontological instability: 'Creatures have their being in such a way that both in coming-to-be and in continuance they are marked by entire ontological deficiency apart from the person and act of the creator in his infinite charity.'[138]

That reality is created ex nihilo and therefore contingent and totally dependent 'is not, in itself, good news.'[139] Too often, dependence is experienced as antithetical to freedom or as, for example, characteristic of unhealthy relationships. Moreover, as humans, we entertain an 'illusion of omnipotence,' of being 'an individual self-regulating system,' which resists assertions of dependence.[140] Thus there are 'both good and bad reasons for fearing dependence, and it is not always easy to distinguish between them.'[141] Nevertheless, creation ex nihilo 'considered in abstraction from the sending of the Son and breathing of the Spirit is systematically ambivalent.'[142] Once again, creation ex nihilo must be deployed within a trinitarian context if it is to be heard as 'good news.'

As argued above, one implication of creation ex nihilo is that creation is entirely gratuitous. In this light, the affirmation of contingency and dependency is not a denial that creatures have being. They *do* have being, but it is dependent, or donated, being, being from the Creator. For Aquinas, this is a pivotal truth:

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[137] Peter Leithart, *Athanasius*, 98.

[138] Webster, 'Non Ex Aequo,' 102; cf. Fergusson, *Creation*, 22-23, Leithart, *Athanasius*, 95-96.

[139] Lash, *Believing Three Ways*, 41.

[140] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 69-70.

[141] Ibid., 69.

[142] Lash, *Believing Three Ways*, 47.

> Now it has been shown above [1.3.4] when treating of the divine simplicity that God is Being itself self-subsisting; and also it was shown [1.7.1-2] that subsisting being must be one…Therefore all beings apart from God are not their own being, but are beings by participation. Therefore it must be that all things which are diversified by the diverse participation of being, so as to be more or less perfect, as caused by one First Being, Who is most perfect.[143]

All created things have their being in relation to God and His gift of being. Although the notion of participation, as a corollary of dependence, has been eclipsed in the modern period, it can be understood theologically 'in terms of the operation of creative benevolence, and so in terms of the *differentiated* sharing of…[the] creature in the good of being, each in their proper order and mode.'[144] Creatures are thus constituted by standing in a relation to the Creator, sharing in the good of being by a work of divine love, but always in a finite manner.[145] Thus, the goodness of creation must be directly considered, as the complement to the contingence and dependence of creation.

## 3.3. *Goodness*

That creation ex nihilo involves a positive evaluation of created things is no longer self-evident.[146] The Christian belief in the goodness of creation has never claimed to be an empirical observation but rather a corollary of belief in the goodness of the Creator. Thus Augustine argues that God's 'only motive was goodness; he created because his creation was good.'[147] Yet in the contemporary situation, the sorts of formulations entailed in creation ex nihilo, such as contingence and dependence, make the creature appear permanently impoverished and the Creator, in His perfection, indifferent to creation. There are large intellectual shifts that have lead to the contemporary anxiety about creation ex nihilo and a full response would involve both an uncovering of the reasons for these shifts and a recovery of the sorts of spiritual disciplines that accompanied the traditional affirmation of creation ex nihilo.[148] Here I seek to demonstrate how creation ex nihilo implies the goodness of creation in several aspects.

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[143] *STh*, 1.44.1.

[144] Webster, 'Love,' 164.

[145] Ibid., 164.

[146] Ibid., 165.

[147] *The City of God*, 11.24.

[148] Cf. Webster, 'Love,' 166-170; Williams, 'Good for Nothing?' for two indicative approaches to these issues.

*Goodness and the Goal of Creation.* That creation *is* good, and the sense in which it is good, is tied up with the Christian claim that creation has a goal. This claim in itself, however, was just as contested in the early Christian period as it is today.[149] Robert Louis Wilken goes so far as to say that 'there is no more challenging doctrine…than this, that creation is purposeful.'[150] After all, to claim that creation has a goal means that it is going somewhere, but that does not mean that the goal of creation is currently apparent or realized.

Nevertheless, the beliefs that the world is created ex nihilo and that it has an end are intertwined. Basil argues that 'that which was begun in time is condemned to come to an end in time' and so in the term 'beginning' in Gen 1:1 an intimation of the end can be seen.[151] For Basil, the beginning and temporality of the created world, in contrast to the eternal Creator, implies its end. Conversely, Tertullian argues that 'the fact that everything sprang from nothing will ultimately be made plausible by the dispensation of God which is to return all things to nothing.'[152] Basil draws an analogy between the beginning and end of creation and a circle drawn by a draftsman: the starting and ending points of the circle may not be obviously visible, but surely the draftsman began and ended somewhere. Likewise, though the beginning and end of creation may not be obvious, they are entailed in the finitude and temporality of creation, in contrast to the eternal Creator.[153]

What is the goal of creation? The Christian tradition has answered with one voice: the glory of God is the ultimate goal of creation. This is implicit in early writers like Athenagoras, who argues that God created 'for his own sake and for the purpose of showing that his goodness and wisdom had been advanced in all his works.'[154] Similarly, Tertullian maintained that God created 'for the embellishment of his majesty.'[155] Bonaventure, more precisely, argues that the 'principal end of founded things is God's glory or goodness; not, indeed, to be acquired or enlarged, but manifested and communicated.'[156] In the Reformed

[149] On the Hellenistic context, which had both a sort of doctrine of creation, as in some interpretation Plato's *Timaeus*, and various teleologies, as in Aristotle's cosmology, but tended not to link the two, cf. Blowers, *Drama*, 18-38.

[150] *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 142.

[151] *Hexameron*, 1.3 (NPNF2 8:53).

[152] *Against Hermogenes*, 34.1.

[153] *Hexameron*, 1.3.

[154] *Resurrection of the Dead*, 12 quoted in Bavinck, *RD* 2:433.

[155] *Apology*, 17 quoted in Bavinck, *RD* 2:433.

[156] *Commentaria in Lubrum Secundum Sententiarum* 1.2.2, trans. in Wood, 'Maker,' 388-389.

tradition, this principle becomes fundamental. The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins by asking 'What is the chief end of man?' and answering 'Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.'

Aquinas argues that this is necessarily the case: were God to have any goal outside of His own glory, then in creation He would have been acting to supplement or fulfill Himself, but this is impossible. Rather, creation is gratuitous and unconditioned; God creates because He is good but not in order to supplement His goodness.[157] While the glory of God as the goal of creation is entailed in the understanding of the Creator laid out above, it nevertheless seems to make God 'self-centered, self-seeking, devaluing his creatures, specifically human beings, into means.'[158] Ironically, this appears self-seeking precisely because of 'the difficulty of imagining a need-free love.'[159] Augustine addresses precisely this issue. All love either enjoys a thing in itself or uses it to reach some greater end. If God loves the created order, does He do so to use it or enjoy it? 'If he enjoys us [creatures], he stands in need of our goodness.'[160] If the point of creation is something outside of God, then God creates in order to satisfy Himself; creation is the *required* for the happiness of God. Creation, then, would be entirely self-serving on God's part. Thus God 'uses' creation in loving it, 'but he does not use us in the way that we use things; for we relate the things which we use to the aim of enjoying God's goodness, whereas God relates his use of us to his own goodness.'[161] Therefore, 'the use attributed to God…is related not to his own advantage, but solely to his goodness.'[162] Because God is the ultimate good and goal of creation paradoxically

> we must say that God "uses" us for the sake of our greatest good, which is, of course, loving God: God loves us so that we may come to *our* highest good, not so that *God's* good may be served. Our good is God, and, consequently, the love of one another for and in God. God's love is instrumental for our good, and so is wholly selfless, since my enjoyment of God is the greatest possible bliss for me, but adds nothing to the endless bliss of God.[163]

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[157] *STh*, 1.44.4.

[158] Bavinck, *RD* 2:434.

[159] Williams, 'Good for Nothing?,' 19.

[160] *On Christian Teaching*, 1.31-32.

[161] Ibid., 1.32.

[162] Ibid., 1.32.

[163] Williams, 'Good for Nothing?,' 20.

Thus, the Augustinian account of creation presupposes 'the pure desire for the joy of another.'[164]

*Goodness and the Mutability of Creation.* When the mutability of the created realm is understood within the context of God's goodness as the ultimate goal of creation, mutability is seen as a good. Augustine maintains that

> there is no immutable good except for the one true and blessed God. The things that he made are most certainly good, because they were made by him, but they are mutable, because they were made not out of him but out of nothing.[165]

In creation, God has willed that there be a reality other than Himself and therefore, as different than God, this reality *necessarily* only partially reflects God's glory and fullness of goodness. But while creatures can never fully image God, they are mutable and therefore can increasingly participate in God's goodness. Mutability, therefore, is the precondition of history and the drama of history is a way for a finite world to move toward ever great approximations of God's glory.[166] Frances Young summarizes Gregory of Nyssa's parallel argument in *On the Making of Humankind*: 'God is immutable, but created nature cannot exist without change—for its very passage from non-existence to existence is a kind of motion and change. But this mutability is not negative.'[167] Rather, Gregory formulated a spirituality in terms of an ongoing *epektasis* or reaching towards God that extends into eternity. Thus, in an arguably unprecedented manner, the Christian tradition has understood the mutability in a positive fashion.[168] Thus, in an Augustinian mode, we might say that creatures are the mutable images of an immutable God.

*Goodness and the Materiality of Creation.* It is in light of this positive valuation of mutability that early Christian comments about matter must be understood. Mutability, the ability of creation to mature, to become more God-like, 'entails also the dialectic of the possible and the actual, it entails a world of purposive fluidity.'[169] But change presupposes 'a

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[164] Ibid., 20.

[165] *The City of God*, 12.1

[166] Cf. Williams, 'Good for Nothing?,' 17.

[167] *God's Presence*, 99.

[168] Athanasius likewise argued that the mutability of creation, its ability to move, is the precondition of moving *toward* God (Leithart, *Athanasius*, 92-95. Cf. McFarland, *From Nothing*, 64: 'though a creature can never (again by definition) be uncreated, it can take on the glory of divinity as an effect of God's communing with it over time.'

[169] Williams, 'Good for Nothing?,' 17.

*medium* of change or a vehicle of change…an interaction between stability and variety.'[170] Augustine, representing much of the early Christian tradition, calls this medium of change 'matter'—'The matter of heaven and earth is one thing, the beauty of heaven and earth is another. You made the matter from absolutely nothing, but the beauty of the world from formless matter.'[171] Matter, for Augustine, is ' nothing something' and 'a being which is non-being.'[172] In the post-Enlightenment period, it is easy to misread Augustine at this point as denigrating material existence by depicting creation as a struggle wherein form is imposed on the concrete world.[173] In Augustine's context, however, 'matter' is simply potentiality, the plasticity that any act of making presupposes.[174] Thus, when Augustine describes matter as 'a kind of formlessness without definition' or as 'this next-to-nothing [made] out of nothing,' he does not intend to denigrate material or physical existence.[175] Rather, he is simply attempting to name that which underlies change, the *something* that is changed. Therefore, 'the action of form on matter is not the imposition of one thing on another, let alone one system on another: it is simply the process of actualisation itself.'[176] Matter is not a good in itself but it is the presupposition of mutability and is therefore good as the means to the ultimate end of creation.

*Goodness and the Diversity of Creation.* If creation is ex nihilo and, therefore, the material from which all things are created is also created by God, then 'the distinction of things is not on account of matter, but rather, on the contrary, created matter is formless in order that it may be accommodated to different forms.'[177] Similarly, creation ex nihilo, as seen above, excludes any secondary or mediatory agents in the act of creation. Aquinas argues that, therefore,

> we must say that the distinction and multitude of things comes from the intention of the first agent, who is God. For He brought things into being in order that His goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many

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[170] Ibid., 16.

[171] *Confessions*, 13.33.

[172] Ibid., 12.6.

[173] Colin Gunton, for example, misreads Augustine at this point (*The Triune Creator* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 78).

[174] Williams, 'Good for Nothing?,' 17; Norbert Luyten, 'Matter as Potency,' 103.

[175] *Confessions*, 12.3, 12.8.

[176] Williams, 'Good for Nothing?,' 17.

[177] Aquinas, *STh*, 1.47.1

and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another.  For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided; and hence the whole universe together participates [in] the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever.[178]

Thus, argues Aquinas, the various inequalities between creatures must be understood as part of a diversification that, when taken as a whole, expresses the goodness of the Creator more adequately than even the most excellent creature might individually.[179]

That creation is good in its diversity raises two further issues.  First, the Christian doctrine of creation ex nihilo entails not only that the world is genuinely other than God but also that the experienced plurality of the world is neither an illusion nor a misapprehension of an underlying (spiritual) oneness.[180]  Rather, the concrete particulars of created reality are good in their very particularity.  Creatures in their rich and colorful diversity each reflect something of the goodness of God their Creator.  Second, however, the flourishing of one creature is almost inevitably at the expense of another.  Life on Earth 'is so arranged that all the forms of it can live only by preying upon one another.  In the lower forms this process entails only death, but in the higher…[it is] attended with pain.'[181]  Thus, the Christian assertion of the goodness of the diversity of creation is a statement of faith, a faith grounded in delight in the particulars of creation but faith nonetheless, that the diversity of creation *in its totality* expresses the goodness of the Creator more fully than otherwise possible.  Once again, this is not an empirical observation but an expression of hope that in the end, creation will be seen as a manifestation of divine goodness.[182]

*Goodness and the Unity of Creation*.  This eschatological perspective on the goodness of created diversity points to consequent affirmation of the unity of creation:

the divine intellect planned and established in things the multiplicity and diversity in order for created things to represent the divine goodness in different ways…this was so

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[178] *STh*, 1.47.1.  Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, 1.102: 'It was impossible that one thing perfectly represent the divine goodness…Therefore, it was necessary that many things represent him, so that one thing supplied what another thing lacks…Nor does even the whole universe of creatures perfectly equivalently represent the divine goodness.  Rather, the universe of creatures represents the divine goodness by the perfection possible in creatures.'

[179] *STh*, 1.47.2.

[180] Kelsey, 'Doctrine of Creation,' 179.

[181] Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 2.

[182] Cf. McFarland, *From Nothing*, 71-72.

that a beauty shone in things from the very gradation of their diversity, and the beauty commended the divine wisdom.[183]

While the diversity of creation is not an illusion to be overcome, and the Christian hope for creation is not a return to undifferentiated divine oneness, according to creation ex nihilo, creation is a personal, willed, act of God and therefore is a unified and ordered whole.[184] Creation is unified by the plan of God.

This unity is seen in a number of facets. As argued above, creatures are diverse and interdependent and this points to the dependence of creation as a whole on the Creator. All creatures are unified in their dependence on the Creator and their interdependence with each other.[185] Not only is creation unified in its common origin, but it is also unified by an order of things: 'this world is called one by the unity of order, whereby some things are ordered to others.'[186] Thus the diversity of creation itself implies a unity as each creature, in its diverse particularity, occupies a specific place in creation.[187] Similarly, although the world is mutable and diverse, it does exhibit regularities that suggest an ordered whole. Finally, creation exhibits a unity insofar as all creation 'has relation of order to each other and to God Himself.'[188] The unified order of creation is ordered not only in terms of the relationship between the various elements but is ordered as a whole toward a single goal.

Augustine argues that created goodness, as opposed to God's own goodness, is necessarily the product of a process. Thus, creation 'is so ordered that at any point in time the balance of things or agencies is being adjusted toward equilibrium…things are made to change and grow, to realise their optimal form over time.'[189] This process is not the imposition of a divine plan against the grain of creation, as it were. Rather, 'in response to the act of God, created life shapes itself as a balanced whole, seeking equilibrium; but all this, and the possibilities realised, is simply the result of divine freedom.'[190]

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[183] Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, 1.102.

[184] Cf. James Houston, *I Believe in the Creator*, 103-107.

[185] Cf. Leithart, *Athanasius*, 93: 'created things are all essentially the same in that they came-to-be, but Athanasius also recognizes the vast diversity of the creation.'

[186] Aquinas, *STh*, 1.47.3.

[187] Cf. McFarland's reflections on Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.25.2 (in *From Nothing*, 73-74).

[188] Aquinas, *STh*, 1.47.3

[189] Williams, 'Good for Nothing?,' 14.

[190] Ibid., 19.

Bavinck sees in this dual affirmation of the goodness of creation in its diversity and unity an image of the triune Creator: 'Just as God is one in essence and distinct in persons, so also the work of creation is one and undivided, while in its unity it is still rich in diversity.'[191] One God creates all things and for that reason creation as a whole is a unity. But within that one God, there are three persons, each acting in creation to bring about a process of harmonious diversification.

3.4 *Conclusion*

Throughout this section, examining the peculiarly Christian way of describing the world as created from nothing, it is apparent that the claims made are not, in any straightforward sense, empirical claims. Undoubtedly, Christian discourse about the world as created operated in contact with the world as experienced. But the actual construal of the world, in its finitude, contingence, and mutability, *as good* is a corollary of the Christian confession of faith in the good Creator. It will not do to simply start by arguing from these claims about the world, as if they were universally recognized, as proof of the triune Creator. Rather, the claim that creation has an end, that it is good, are difficult claims to accept and thus

> What we call Christianity is supposed to be a kind of school the purpose of whose pedagogy is to foster the conditions in which dependence might be relearned as friendship; conditions in which the comprehensive taming of chaos by loving order, of conflict by tranquility, of discord by harmony, might be instantiated and proclaimed. To use the Creed, to make its articles one's own, is, therefore, to be pledged in labour toward the kind of 'heaven and earth' in which our human work might be the finite form of God.[192]

The next section (§4) addresses what it means to live as creatures created from nothing, what disciplines and dispositions are required to see the world as an expression of the goodness of the Creator.

4. LIVING AS CREATURES CREATED FROM NOTHING

The previous two sections have examined how the triune identity of the Creator shapes the doctrine of creation ex nihilo and how creation ex nihilo, in turn, provides

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[191] *RD*, 2:422.

[192] Lash, *Believing Three Ways*, 54.

guidance for rightly forming Christian discourse about creation, both as act and as product. For example, following creation ex nihilo, it is right to describe creation as a free and personal act of God and the product, as a result, should be thought of as contingent rather than necessary or the product of change. This section approaches the doctrine from a third angle, asking how affirming creation ex nihilo might shape the patterns of Christian life. Three issues relating to living as creatures created from nothing are addressed below. First, it is noted how creation ex nihilo shapes Christian discourse about the relationship between divine and creaturely agency. Second, the self-involving force of affirming creation ex nihilo is addressed. Third, it is briefly noted how creation ex nihilo contributes to a Christian understanding of the problem of sin and evil.

## 4.1 *Dual Agency*

What has been said above about God as Creator and the world as creation appears to run up against an intractable problem, especially when set in the larger context of Christian doctrine. After all, that humanity is made in the image of a God who freely creates, is called to participate in various creative activity, and is held accountable for their actions would all seem to imply that a human being 'must in many respects be a free, self-determining being' who can manipulate nature through decisions that in some respect stand outside natural processes.[193] Especially in recent times, various theological movements have attempted to resolve the apparent conflict either by redefining human freedom as compatible with physical determinism or redefining God's freedom in a manner that does not impinge on human decisions. But although it might appear that 'one must choose between the biblical portrait of man as free…or the biblical portrait of God as utterly sovereign,' in fact 'both doctrines have been proven to be essential components of the Christian worldview.'[194]

Thus Christian discourse must proceed in a manner that upholds both divine and creaturely agency. In order to rightly speak of God's agency in relation to creatures,

> a direct rather than inverse proportion [must be maintained] between what the creature has, on the one hand, and the extent and influence of God's agency, on the other. One must say created being becomes what it is and this all the more fully, not by way of separation or neutrality from God, but within the intimacy of a relationship to divinity as its total ground. The more one talks of the realization and perfection of created beings,

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[193] Bosserman, *Trinity*, 222.

[194] Ibid., 222.

the more must one be willing to talk of God's immediate creative working. One must not assume that talk of God's working takes away from what the creature has; talk of the creature's stature does not take away from God's but magnifies it.[195]

Problems emerge for Christian discourse that attempts to treat divine sovereignty as implying human freedom when it is presumed 'that the sort of efficient causation between man and natural objects, or between natural objects themselves, is the only acceptable model for how God directs his human creation.'[196] As seen above, in the discussion of divine transcendence (§2.2), it is precisely this sort of model that is rejected by creation ex nihilo. God is not subject to external constraints or limits in creation—He creates ex nihilo—and is thus transcendent. But by virtue of this very transcendent difference from creatures, God 'cannot be defined in terms of the categorical differences of kind (viz., *this* rather than *that*) by which creatures are distinguished from one another.'[197]

Thus, although creatures are limited, their existence is *to be* one kind of thing rather than any other, 'the God who creates from nothing is not so limited, and this lack of limitation takes form precisely as the power to secure the life of the other.'[198] While creation ex nihilo provides guidelines for how the relationship between the agency of the Creator and creatures should, and should not, be developed, it is not clear that it directly entails a specific formulation of that relationship. Aquinas develops the relationship in terms of the ends of creaturely actions:

> not only is divine goodness the end of establishing things, but it is also necessarily the end of every action and movement of any creature…any created thing by its form shares in a likeness of the divine goodness, as I have shown. Therefore, every action and movement of any creature is ordered to the divine goodness as its end.[199]

Alternatively, Augustine argues that there is 'one kind of form that is applied *externally* to any sort of bodily matter' and 'another kind of form which has efficient causes that work *internally* and stem from the secret and hidden choice of a living and intelligent nature.'[200] This is God's 'hidden power, which penetrates all things by that presence of its which cannot be defiled, that gives existence to anything that exists in any way at all and insofar as it exists

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[195] Tanner, *God and Creation*, 85.

[196] Bosserman, *Trinity*, 223.

[197] McFarland, *From Nothing*, 105.

[198] Ibid., 106.

[199] *Compendium of Theology*, 1.103.

[200] *The City of God*, 12.26.

at all; for, unless he made it, not only would it not exist in this way or that, but it could not exist at all.'[201]  Augustine develops the relationship between divine and created agency somewhat differently in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis* by appealing to the concept of *rationes seminales*, a sort of latent power of development in created things.  By appealing to the *rationes seminales*, Augustine is able to affirm predestination as other than determinism: 'God's will is not a cause among others, but the power that activates a particular set of causes at the appropriate time.'[202]

Accordingly, Christian discourse, operating according to the rule of creation ex nihilo, might elaborate the relationship between the agency of the Creator and His creatures in a variety of ways.[203]  Creation ex nihilo simply dictates that this relationship must not treat the Creator and creature as if they coexist within a metaphysical continuum, locked into a sort of zero-sum game, wherein creative agency is only exercised at the expense of created agency.[204]  Rather, creation ex nihilo means that 'the work of creation is precisely that by which God gives might to that which is not God—echoing the intratrinitarian process by which the Father gives infinite might to the Son and the Spirit.'[205]  Because God has nothing to gain in creating, the creature gains everything.

## 4.2 *The Self-Involving Force of Creation Ex Nihilo*

While earlier iterations of creation ex nihilo acknowledge the personal element (especially Augustine in his *Confessions* casts the doctrine in dialogical terms), particularly in the Reformation period creation is cast in a strongly existential perspective.  So Luther, in his *Large Catechism*, asks

> What is meant by these words, 'I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker,' etc.? Answer: I hold and believe that I am a creature of God; that is, that he has given and constantly sustains my body, soul, and life, my members great and small, all the faculties of my mind, my reason and understanding, and so forth; my food and drink, clothing, means of support, wife and child, servants, house and how, etc.  Besides, he makes all creation help provide the comforts and necessities of life…Thus we learn from this article that none of us has his life of himself, or anything else that has been mentioned here or

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[201] Ibid., 12.26

[202] Rowan Williams, 'Creation,' 252.

[203] Cf. Tanner, *God and Creation*, 81-119.

[204] Robinette, 'The Difference,' 538.

[205] McFarland, 'God, the Father,' 270.

can be mentioned, nor can he by himself preserve any of them, however small and unimportant. All this is comprehended in the word 'Creator.'[206]

Especially in a confessional context, *credo* ('I believe') is not simply a religious way of introducing a series of agreed upon propositions. Rather, it is, to use the language of speech act theory, a 'performative.' It involves a *commitment* even as it specifies various convictions. These are convictions 'are not haphazard but grown into; slowly, obscurely and often painfully acquired.'[207] To confess 'I believe' then is to commit oneself to the ongoing, often painful process of growing into these deep convictions.

Luther points toward two principles for using creation ex nihilo in a strongly self-involving manner. First, creation is to be understood not merely as a claim about the cosmos as a whole but as an individual event.[208] Creation ex nihilo, for Luther, is not abstract claim about initial conditions but a profoundly personal claim: *I* owe *my* existence and individuality to God, the personal Creator.[209] Second, as seen in his *Large Catechism*, creation is for Luther a contemporary event.[210] Echoing Psalm 104, Luther treats creation ex nihilo as a description of the shape of God's ongoing providence and preservation of created reality. Creation exists through God's providing presence.[211]

Especially following Luther's principles of the individuality and contemporaneity of creation, how does creation ex nihilo function not only as a rule of Christian discourse but to shape the Christian life? What specific attitudes, dispositions, and behaviors might be entailed in affirming creation ex nihilo? Answers to these questions at times can only be offered in an indirect manner: attitudes cannot always be directly deduced from truth-claims. Rather, the issue is often addressed in terms of the *appropriateness* of specific attitudes and behaviors given the truth-claim that is being affirmed. Thus coherence is being sought between the truth-claims and the self-involving force of creation ex nihilo but these interconnections are not simple deductions. Moreover, the issues are further complicated as

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[206] *The Large Catechism of Martin Luther*, 56.

[207] Lash, *Believing Three Ways*, 18.

[208] Schwanke, 'Luther's Theology of Creation,' 400-401.

[209] Ibid., 400.

[210] Ibid., 404-408.

[211] Schwanke also argues that for Luther, 'the moment of creation' is 'a moment of dialogical encounter with a sovereign' (Ibid., 410-413). In this respect, Luther provides an existential account of the relationship between divine and human agency which could be set alongside the accounts of Augustine and Aquinas noted above (§4.1) as an example of Christian discourse that is properly formed according to the rule of creation ex nihilo.

certain postures may be required, in turn, to correctly understand the claims being made by creation ex nihilo.[212] As Webster argues, 'consideration of the topic of creation out of nothing carries with it the requirement that we be in the process of becoming certain kinds of persons.'[213] Thus the relationship between truth-claims and self-involving force is not only indirect but dialectical. Despite these difficulties, several classic corollary attitudes and behaviors of creation ex nihilo are examined below.

*Dependence and Trust*. The first and perhaps most difficult to accepting creation ex nihilo is its assertion that all that is not God exists in dependence on God. In the human realm, dependence can name an unhealthy sort of relationship and human flourishing entails a 'giving back,' a measure of independent contribution. Moreover, in contemporary society (perhaps especially contemporary American society), independence—autonomy, freedom, self-determination—has become an idol that is directly challenged by the claims of creation ex nihilo.[214] Nevertheless, while a measure of independence is a mark of human maturity, we are, as creatures, inescapably and undeniably caught up in webs of interdependence with other creatures. On this point, modern science and Christian theology are in total agreement: even our bodies are shared with a vast numbers of bacteria and other microbes which are necessary for our bodily processes. Although we imagine ourselves as self-regulating, independent agents, by virtue of our very birth, we, along with all creatures, receive—life, being, nurture—prior to any giving that we might do.[215]

Thus creation ex nihilo only fosters maturation when used in the context of the identity of the Creator as narrated by Scripture and the creeds. We can accept our absolute dependence to the extent that we are willing to trust *this* God:

> We are…provided, in the Creed, with a pattern or framework for its [creation ex nihilo's] interpretation; a pattern according to which we learn not only that God creates parentally but also that to be a creature is to be indwelt, inhabited, by the gift of God's own self. It follows, according to the Christian construal of createdness, that it is in an absolute depedence upon the unknown mystery of God that we find not only our existence and identity, but our cherishing and forgiveness, our flourishing and peace.[216]

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[212] Webster, 'Non Ex Aequo,' 107.

[213] Webster, 'Love,' 159. The process is supposed to be facilitated by Christianity as whole—all of its doctrines, its ritual practices, and various commended actions. Thus, as was already seen above, creation ex nihilo properly functions in the total context of Christian thought and life.

[214] Cf. Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 69-72.

[215] Ibid., 71.

[216] Lash, *Believing Three Ways*, 54.

Only when we trust the self-giving, triune God identified by the narrative of Scripture, dependence can, in Lash's memorable phrase, be 'relearned as friendship.'[217]

*Gratitude*.  As argued above (§2.1), God does not create because He needs anything from creation; there is, therefore, no ulterior motive behind His creative providence.  Trusting *this* Creator, we can look on creation, in all of its splendid variety and intricate interdependence, as a gift.[218]  When all that we have is received in trust, rather than distrust, and our absolute dependence is recognized as constitutive of the creaturely condition the resultant disposition is gratitude.  It is with this disposition that receiving everything from God—something that could be construed as a mark of an unhealthy relationship—can be taken as a mark of the Creator's gracious generosity.  Moreover, looking on creation as a gift entails that certain further attitudes and dispositions that are suitable for receiving a gift are also suitable for receiving creation and createdness.  Just as it would not be fitting to casually toss aside a gift, so a flippant carelessness regarding creation is not fitting when creation is looked on as a gift.

*Prayer*.  It is by no means assumed that this is an easy task.  Rather, the companion of gratitude is silence: a contemplative struggle to become the kind of person who can be open to divine activity, who can receive creation as divine gift.[219]  In this contemplative struggle, we are 'freed from the illusion that we may possess anything that the Creator does not freely and deliberately give us.  In short, we are liberated to *gratitude* and to *supplication*.'[220]  Thus creation ex nihilo is naturally associated with prayer in three forms: contemplation, thanksgiving, and supplication.  In contemplation, we struggle to discern God 'deeply hidden yet most intimately present,'[221] to find rest in the one who is 'more inward than my most inward part and higher than the highest element within me.'[222]  Thanksgiving is the expression of gratitude, 'that quality of a creature's action most consonant with its created nature.'[223]  And this acknowledgement that all we *have* is gifted to us from the Creator

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[217] Ibid., 54.

[218] For a further reflection on what it means to 'look on' *x* as *y*, cf. Donald Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement*, 124-141.

[219] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 75.

[220] Wood, 'Maker,' 393.

[221] Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.4.

[222] Ibid., 3.6.

[223] Wood, 'Maker,' 392.

naturally leads to supplication, the recognition that all that we *need* too can only come from the Creator.  At this point, although the doctrines of creation ex nihilo and providence are presupposed by the practice of prayer, they may seem to simultaneously make prayer superfluous unless the guidelines developed above (§4.1) are kept in mind.  God as Creator exercises His power by giving power to His creatures and prayer is an essential part of this dialogical process.

*Life Oriented Toward God*.  The implication, then, 'is that only those who depend upon God every day of their lives, "in whom they live, and move, and have their being," so that they recognise every breath they breathe as God-given and God-sustained, can worthily call God their Creator.'[224]  Augustine famously begins his *Confessions* with a similar sentiment: 'You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you' (1.1).  For Augustine, this basic orientation of life toward God is tied up with creation ex nihilo.  All creatures are made from nothing, are constituted by a basic movement from non-being to being, and are thus unstable and restless.  Thus, 'a creature, inherently changeable because it has changed from nothingness into something, must keep changing in the right direction.'[225]  Created from nothing, creatures can only find their happiness in their Creator, not in themselves.[226]

Living life oriented toward God entails contemplating creation in order to know God in His goodness *through* creation.[227]  Creation ex nihilo affirms that nothing stands between God and creation and therefore all of creation mediates the knowledge of God.  Calvin, for example, describes creation as a mirror, like the Bible and the *sensus divinitatis* within each person, in which God is reflected and made visible.[228]  God has 'revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe.  As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him.'[229]  Shifting optical metaphors, Calvin argues that although sin has clouded the human ability to perceive God in creation, the Bible

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[224] Houston, *I Believe in the Creator*, 48.

[225] Young, *God's Presence*, 132.

[226] *City of God*, 12.1.

[227] Cf. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 313ff on the contemplation of nature in the patristic period.

[228] Cf. Cornelius van der Kooi, 'Calvin's Theology of Creation and Providence,' 49.

[229] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.1.

functions like spectacles, 'gathering up otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.'[230]

This orientation toward God and contemplation of Him in creation, together with the doctrine that humanity is made in the image of God, points toward the general shape of human vocation. Creation in its very diversity reveals God more fully than any single creature might. Moreover, God's power in creation is not exercised in competition with creatures but in the donation of power, to bring the flourishing of life. So humanity, in general terms, images God when it seeks the flourishing of other creatures, and in their particular diversity and human power is exercised in a 'godly' manner when it is self-giving, for the good of the other.

### 4.3 *The Problem of Sin and Evil*

While properly addressing the question of evil, even the question of evil in relationship to creation, would entail a much longer digression than is appropriate here, it must nevertheless be recognized that creation ex nihilo provides some very general principles for how Christian discourse about sin and evil might be properly formed. Creation ex nihilo essentially is a rejection of the perennial dualistic explanation of evil: either that God made the best possible world given the material He has to work with or that God is eternally opposed by some malignant force or personality. This dualistic explanation of evil is simple and tidy and in rejecting it via creation ex nihilo, for Christianity, there must always be something inexplicable, at least in straightforward terms, about evil.

What explanations of evil do fit with creation ex nihilo? Augustine argues that evil does not exist at all for God, or for His creation, 'because there is nothing outside it which could break in and destroy the order' God has given creation.[231] Creation is good but liable to corruption and 'all things that are corrupted suffer privation of some good.'[232] Evil, then, is not a substance but rather corruption. Moreover, 'in parts of the universe, there are certain elements which are thought evil because of a conflict of interest.'[233] Nevertheless, these

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[230] Ibid., 1.6.2.

[231] *Confessions*, 7.13.

[232] Ibid., 7.12. Cf. Leithart, *Athanasius*, 96: evil is a contingent, historical aspect of creation that 'feed[s] on the inherent mutability of creation.'

[233] Ibid., 7.13.

elements do contribute to the creation such that its goodness is greater than even a superior creature by itself.[234] Aquinas develops a similar understanding: 'evil implies the absence of good but not every absence of good is evil.'[235] If, as the affirmation of creation ex nihilo entails, all that exists is from God, then evil can only be explained as a perversion or corruption of creation, not as any sort of entity with an independent existence. In the context of the larger discussion, it should be noted that the Christian tradition has maintained that one of the chief sources of this perversion is 'our deeply rooted aversion to our own creatureliness.'[236]

Some theologians have sought further explanation for evil in creation ex nihilo. Athanasius, for example, maintained that 'creation out of nothing accounted for the human predicament.'[237] Because the world is created from nothing, it inherently drifts back toward non-being. It is constantly, therefore, sustained by God. The problem is only exacerbated by human rebellion against God.[238] While this framework does allow Athanasius to emphasize the sustaining role that God plays in creation and to describe the incarnation as an act of recreation, it risks returning to the earlier view that evil simply results from the nature of creation.

In short, creation ex nihilo means that evil and sin must be conceived in ethical rather than metaphysical terms. As Basil puts it, our basic problem is not any deficiency of matter but a sickness of the 'soul opposed to virtue.'[239] The solution, therefore, cannot be conceived of in terms of the transcendence of material creation but through diligent 'exercise' of the soul in the 'training ground where [we] learn to know God.'[240] There is, as Williams states, 'no short route to heaven: we must *grow* into new life…there is no way to God but through time.'[241]

It would be a mistake to think that the various topics discussed in this section are solely derived from the doctrine of creation ex nihilo. Rather, as Webster points out, creation

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[234] Ibid., 7.13.

[235] *STh*, 1.48.3.

[236] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 77.

[237] Frances Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, 30.

[238] Leithart, *Athanasius*, 95.

[239] *Hexameron*, 2.4; NPNF[2] 8:61.

[240] Ibid., 1.6; NPNF[2] 8:55.

[241] 'Good for Nothing?,' 18.

is a 'distributed doctrine'; it always lies in the background of other doctrines, providing a framework or foundation for them.[242] Doctrines of prayer, the Christian life, the mysterious problem of evil, and so on are all developed with reference to the breadth of the Christian canon and the revelation of God in Christ Jesus. Creation ex nihilo provides certain general guidelines for conceptualizing these various aspects of the Christian life but must function within the context of Christian doctrine as a whole.

5. CONCLUSION: ON THE POSSIBLE FAILURE OF CREATION EX NIHILO

This chapter has attempted to provide a sketch of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo by paying attention to what the doctrine actually means for those who have most carefully attended to it from within the Christian tradition. I have sought to show both what claims the doctrine makes and how it functions as a rule governing Christian discourse. As a heuristic organization of the material, the doctrine has been addressed from three perspectives. First, from the perspective of God, who creates from nothing, creation ex nihilo properly functions in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity. Within this context, creation ex nihilo underlies a conception of God's transcendence that is fully compatible with His presence in and to the world. Also, it was argued that creation ex nihilo governs the way that the act of creation should be described—as a personal and free act that involves no change. Second, creation ex nihilo not only entails that the world is contingent and dependent but grounds a positive evaluation of the world. Creation ex nihilo means that the world is good in its contingence, dependence, mutability, materiality, diversity, and unity in light of God's purposes for it. Third, creation ex nihilo is foundational for affirming a direct proportion between the extent and influence of the Creator's agency and the agency of creatures. Moreover, affirming creation ex nihilo involves committing oneself to a variety of attitudes and behaviors in the world, which were briefly reflected on.

A final issue, raised by Kelsey, is the possible failure of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo.[243] Several possible ways that the doctrine may fail ought to be considered. First, it could be that the doctrine fails to be properly 'Christian'—it may be discovered not to cohere with other doctrines or to be only tangentially related to the main body of Christian doctrine.

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[242] 'Non Ex Aequo,' 97.
[243] 'Doctrine of Creation,' 187.

Admittedly, creation ex nihilo has been presented at times in a manner that risks failing in this way—a sort of free-standing, cosmological claim that is simply an implication of theism generally. While the doctrine is shared by several religions, I have attempted to demonstrate above how in the Christian tradition it has been developed as integrally related to the Christian creedal identification of God as Father, Son, and Spirit and is closely tied up with a variety of other Christian doctrines.

Second, a not unrelated possibility is that creation ex nihilo might be rejected since it no longer self-evidently entails a positive evaluation of the created world and, in fact, has been perceived as codifying a variety of oppressive hierarchies within the created world. Kelsey believes that, in fact, although it is difficult to document, appeal to the Christian experience of the world as grace has historically been a powerful warrant for creation ex nihilo.[244] Thus the inability to relate the doctrine to the experience opens up a serious possibility for the failure of the doctrine. Again, the response above has been to clarify what is, and is not, entailed in the classic doctrine while noting that its acceptance as 'good news' is dependent on the cultivation of a spiritual disposition of humility and trust.

Third, when particular construals of the cosmological and historical truth-claims of creation ex nihilo are particularly emphasized, the doctrine becomes open to the possibility of empirical falsification. Thus, if creation ex nihilo is depicted as essentially a theological form of the Big Bang theory, then it would fail in the case of the disproval of the Big Bang or proof of the Steady State theory. It was noted above that although the classic tradition has maintained that the doctrine of creation ex nihilo involves the historical truth-claim that the created world has a definite beginning in time, this truth-claim might be modified without serious changes to other claims about God as Creator and His relationship to the created realm. Moreover, as noted in both Basil and Aquinas, even this historical truth-claim has often been expressed in a manner that recognizes that it may not be empirically verifiable.

Finally, historically the doctrine of creation ex nihilo has been primarily warranted by biblical appeal rather than through Christian experiences, scientific theories, or even its coherence with the larger body of doctrine. As noted above, for the first 1,500 years of Christian theology, the doctrine of creation was developed mainly through commentary on the early chapters of Genesis. This warrant has become increasingly problematic, however,

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[244] Ibid., 190-191.

in light of the shifting consensus of modern biblical scholarship. For much of the modern period, the sort of creedal biblical interpretation that has been used to warrant creation ex nihilo has been out of vogue.[245] Moreover, the insights of historical scholarship into the text of Genesis 1 and its ANE context seem to indicate that creation ex nihilo is a foreign category whose imposition obfuscates the meaning and value of the biblical text.

A poignant example is provided by the claim that creation is instantaneous. As noted above, this seems to be another way of saying that creation involves no change since there is nothing to be changed before creation. While the claim that creation is instantaneous and does not involve a change follows from the logic of creation ex nihilo, it is difficult to see how it coheres with the account of creation in Genesis 1. In fact, although Webster and Williams are two of the most important proponents of creation ex nihilo, neither engages very closely with the particulars of Genesis 1-2. Similarly, Bavinck maintains that Gen 1:3ff is properly considered a description of God's preservation and providence, not of creation. Charles Hodge, however, helpfully points out that

> while it has ever been the doctrine of the Church that God created the universe out of nothing by the word of his power, which creation was instantaneous and immediate, i.e., without the intervention of any secondary causes; yet it has generally been admitted that this is to be understood only of the original call of matter into existence. Theologians have, therefore, distinguished between a first and second, or immediate and mediate creation. The one was instantaneous, the other gradual; the one precludes the idea of of a preexisting substance, and of cooperation, the other admits and implies both.[246]

In pointing out this distinction between immediate and mediate creation, Hodge reaches back to a debate between Irenaeus and Theophilus. Irenaeus, like Williams and Webster, refused to 'divide *creatio ex nihilo* from the formation of creatures.'[247] Theophilus for his part 'distinguished creation of matter from production of creatures; he thereby confronted the widely held philosophical thesis of the eternity of matter.'[248]

By acknowledging the distinction between immediate and mediate creation, the doctrine of creation ex nihilo might be brought back into contact with Genesis 1. In order to maintain this distinction in a coherent manner, however, several things must be demonstrated. First, the distinction seems to presuppose that Gen 1:1 is an independent clause that describes

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[245] Ibid., 186.

[246] *Systematic Theology*, 1:556.

[247] Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 71.

[248] Ibid., 71.

the first, immediate act of creation.  Second, in order for the distinction to provide more than simply an ad hoc way of relating the doctrine to the biblical text, it must be shown how the first, immediate act of creation, and its entailed relationship between God and all that is not God, is presupposed by the narration of the second, mediate act of creation.

BIBLICAL PRESSURE AND EX NIHILO HERMENEUTICS

'On the Theory of the Big Bang
as the Origin of the Universe'

I.
What banged?

II.
Before banging
how did it get there?

III.
When it got there
where was it?

—Wendell Berry, *Leavings*, 5

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE SUDDEN EMERGENCE OF CREATION EX NIHILO

Around the year 175 AD, a man named Hermogenes argued that 'God made all things from coeval underlying matter, for he considered it impossible for God to make generated realities from what does not exist.'[1]  In the hellenistic milieu of the 2nd century, this claim in itself was not particularly surprising.  It fit well with the various interpretations of the *Timaeus* proposed at the time and previous Christian authors, such as Justin Martyr, had written about the relationship of God to matter in rather ambiguous terms that could be compatible with Hermogenes's claim.  Moreover, Hermogenes clearly differed from the various gnostic groups that had attempted to syncretize allegorical readings of *Timaeus* and Gen 1 in the preceding half century.  Unlike those groups, Hermogenes agreed with the mainstream of Christianity, 'confess[ing] that Christ is the Son of the God who created all things, that he was born from a virgin and from Spirit according to the message of the Gospels.  After his suffering, he was bodily raised and appeared to his own disciples.  When he ascended to heaven, he left his body in the sun and advanced to the Father.'[2]

Why did Hermogenes argue that God created using coeval underlying matter?  It is apparent that Hermogenes was highly influenced by Platonism and he argued logically that there are only three options regarding creation: 'that the Lord made all things either out of

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[1] Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, 10.28, trans. Litwa, 737.  Our knowledge of Hermogenes is reconstructed from his opponents, primarily Hippolytus and Tertullian.

[2] Ibid., 8.17.3; 611.  Admittedly the last part about Christ's body is somewhat unorthodox.

Himself, or out of nothing, or out of something.'[3]  Since God is indivisible and immutable, creation cannot be made out of Him as it leads to various logical contradictions.  Similarly, that God created out of nothing is also rejected: evil must have an origin apart from God, since it is God's opposite.  Therefore the world, which contains evil, 'must be understood to have been made from the faultiness of something, which without a doubt means that it originated from matter.'[4]  Thus, concluded Hermogenes, 'God is always lord and maker, while matter is always slave and made—though not all of it.'[5]

Hermogenes's argument was not only philosophical, it was also exegetical: he found support in various phrases of Gen 1.  The 'earth' of Gen 1:2 refers to coeval matter and, in the LXX, it 'was without form and void.'  Hermogenes argues that the imperfect tense of the verb signifies eternal duration while being 'without form and void' describes an unordered, chaotic state.[6]  Genesis 1:2b then is read as describing the basic elements of creation in an unordered state.[7]  Hermogenes's case then appears quite strong: it is logical, built on an interpretation of Gen 1, and cohered easily with the dominant cosmology of the day.  Moreover—and this seems to have been one of Hermogene's central concerns—it provided the basis for a theodicy.  If God created from nothing, then 'evil things too might be imputed to His will.'  It is far preferable to 'derive evil from matter, not the Creator.'[8]

Despite the apparent strengths of Hermogenes's case, within 25 years, both Theophilus of Antioch and Tertullian had written works against his doctrine of creation, explicitly affirming creation ex nihilo.[9]  In the same time period, Irenaeus of Lyons and Tatian of Syria also affirm creation ex nihilo although without direct reference to Hermogenes.  Although marking a departure from the dominant hellenistic cosmologies, once formulated and defended in the last quarter of the 2nd century, creation ex nihilo received virtually unanimous support in the early church.  A basic question in the history of doctrine

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[3] Tertullian, *Against Hermogenes*, 2.1, trans. Waszink, 27.

[4] Ibid., 2.4.

[5] Hippolytus, *Refutation*, 8.17.1; 609.

[6] Tertullian, *Against Hermogenes*, 23.1.

[7] Ibid., 30.

[8] Ibid. 10.1.

[9] Theophilus's work has been lost but is noted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.24.1.  Since (1) Theophilus affirms creation ex nihilo in his work *To Autolycus*; (2) it appears that Tertullian drew on Theophilus's earlier work against Hermogenes (cf. Waszink's 'Introduction' to Tertullian, *Against Hermogenes*, 9-11); and (3) Hippolytus indicates that Hermogenes was orthodox in other respects, it is reasonable to assume that Theophilus's lost work *Against the Heresy of Hermogenes* focused on defending creation ex nihilo.

then is: How did the doctrine of creation ex nihilo suddenly achieve universal normative status?[10]

## 2. GERHARD MAY'S ACCOUNT OF CREATION EX NIHILO IN EARLY CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

Precisely this issue was addressed by Gerhard May in his monograph *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought*.[11]  Although this work is 40 years old, it is still considered the standard account of the emergence of creation ex nihilo in the 2nd century.[12]  I use May's account as a basic framework for recounting the emergence of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo in order to ensure that my argument is well situated vis-a-vis the standard account of the issue.

May sets out to discern at what point and under what conditions the doctrine of creation ex nihilo begins to be used 'in its full and proper sense, as an ontological statement' (xi).  The concept of creation ex nihilo 'corresponds factually with the Old Testament proclamation about creation, but as a theory it is not yet present in the Old Testament' (xi).  Although Greek phrases parallel to the formula creation ex nihilo can be found in 2 Macc 7:28, Rom 4:17, Heb 11:3 and similar passages it is not yet being used in a technical sense.  Rather, creation ex nihilo, and similar Greek phrases, begins to be used 'in its full and proper sense, as an ontological statement, only when it was intended, in opposition to the idea of world-formation from unoriginate matter, to give expression to the omnipotence, freedom, and uniqueness of God' (xi).  This first happens in the 2nd century when 'hellenistic-Christian mission preaching' (1) confronts gnosticism, on the one hand, and hellenistic philosophy, on the other.  Thus, argues May, creation ex nihilo must be seen as 'dialectically' related to hellenistic philosophy: it 'breaks through the principles of philosophical metaphysics, but it can only be articulated within the latter's frame of reference and by using its terms' (xii).

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[10] An interesting comparison might be made at this point with textual criticism: imagine what strong support a variant would have if it was found represented in fragments from 175-200 AD in regions as far apart as Antioch, Syria, north Africa, and France, where Theophilus, Tatian, Tertullian, and Irenaeus respectively lived.

[11] Subsequent references to May's work are provided parenthetically.  Despite using May's framework, I have at several points demurred from his interpretation of the data and provided supplementation.

[12] E.g., Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 66n25: 'The work of G. May…remains of fundamental value'; Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology*, 79n8: "For an overall consideration of the background, history, and theology of the question of *creatio ex nihilo* see May 1994'; Nikolai Kiel, *Pseudo-Athenagoras,* De Resurrectione, 144n196: 'Zur Entwicklung der Glaubensvorstellung von der *creatio ex nihilo* siehe: G. May, *Schöpfung aus dem Nichts* (1978)'; and similar notes in Young, *God's Presence*, 53n31; McFarland, *From Nothing*, 5n12.

That creation ex nihilo emerges in the context of a sustained debate with gnosticism and hellenistic philosophy is neither surprising nor reason to regard the doctrine with suspicion. After all, as George Lindbeck notes,

> controversy is the normal means whereby implicit doctrines become explicit, and operational ones official. For the most part, only when disputes arise about what it is permissible to teach or practice does a community make up its collective mind and formally make a doctrinal decision…insofar as official doctrines are the products of conflict, there are two important consequences: first, they must be understood in terms of what they oppose…and, second, the official doctrines of a community may poorly reflect its most important and abiding orientations or beliefs.[13]

In turning to the evidence that May draws together, Lindbeck's reminders are important: creation ex nihilo is formulated once explicitly challenged but may have operated at unreflective level previously while the formulation of the doctrine must be understood in the context of what it is responding to.[14]

May concludes that it is impossible to state definitely and precisely *when* creation ex nihilo began to be used in technical sense (157) and he recognizes that his thesis, that creation ex nihlo arose in the context of 2nd century debates, is not new. His contribution, in his estimation, lies in presenting 'the history of its origin…in all its stages' and especially 'in its relationship with gnostic theology' (xiii).

2.1 *Background in Jewish, Christian, and Hellenistic Thought Prior to the Second Century*
2.1.1 Early Jewish Sources

May begins by noting that for Judaism (as well as early Christianity), it was an axiomatic presupposition that 'God created the world and everything in it'—the comprehensiveness of God's creation was never questioned (1).[15] Hellenistic Judaism, according to May, never engaged in a fundamental debate with Platonic and Stoic philosophy and therefore did not develop a technical doctrine of creation ex nihilo. Thus the statements occasionally found in Jewish literature that describe God as creating non-being or from non-being must be interpreted as 'an unreflective everyday way of saying' that God brought about something that was not previously the case (21).

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[13] *The Nature of Doctrine*, 75.

[14] I raise my own concerns about May's argument in §2.3 below. The caution noted here parallels Osborn's criticism of May's work: 'The concept of creation from nothing can be found without the formula and the formula can be found without the concept. Accounts of creation can only be understood in the context of their total argument' (*Irenaeus*, 66).

[15] Cf. N.T. Wright's description of Jewish 'creational monotheism' in *The New Testament and the People of God*, 248-250.

One passage that has generated much controversy in this regard is 2 Macc 7:28.[16] The chapter recounts the story of a mother and her seven sons who are arrested and martyred for refusing to 'partake of unlawful swine's flesh' (7:1 RSV). As each son in turn is martyred, they confess their faith in God while their mother

> encouraged each of them in the language of their fathers. Filled with a noble spirit, she fired her woman's reasoning with a man's courage, and said to them, 'I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of man and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws (7:21-23).

Finally, when the last of her sons faces either martyrdom or great wealth if he will submit to Antiochus, the mother says to her son 'I beseech you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed (*hoti ouk ex ontōn epoiēsen auta ho theos*). Thus also mankind comes into being' (7:28).

Although this passage has been pointed to as one of the earliest explicit references to creation ex nihilo, May thinks not. He argues that 'a position on the problem of matter is clearly not to be expected in this context' (7). It should be recognized, however, that May does not adequately distinguish between the context of the mother, as a character in the text, and the context of the author of 2 Macc 7. At any rate, May argues that since there is no known older theory of creation that is being alluded to nor does the passage appear to argue 'in a principled anti-Greek sense about creation "out of nothing"…arguing back from the formal turn of phrase to an underlying theological tradition is ruled out' (7).

The various writings of Philo have generated similar controversy with respect to creation ex nihilo.[17] In general, it appears that Philo did not feel any basic tension between biblical conceptions of creation and the hellenistic 'world-formation' model that presupposed existing matter (9). In his various works, Philo blends various Platonic and Stoic themes with Gen 1, at times approaching something like creation ex nihilo without actually arriving at that

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[16] Cf. Jonathan Goldstein, 'The Origins of the Doctrine of Creation Ex Nihilo,' 127-135; ibid., 'Creation Ex Nihilo,' 187-194; J.C. O'Neill, 'How Early is the Doctrine of *Creatio Ex Nihilo*?' 449-465. Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation out of Nothing*, 29-145 address many of the same Jewish and early Christian sources as May but tend to find evidence for creation ex nihilo where he does not. They additionally fill in May's account with reference to various Qumran documents. Of relevance are 1QS III, 15-16 and 1 QS XI, 11 although it is not clear that they change the basic picture offered by May.

[17] In addition to the articles referenced in the previous note, cf. Albert M. Wolters, 'Creatio Ex Nihilo in Philo,' 107-124.

conclusion.[18]  Thus May finds in Philo only ambiguous and 'remarkably vague' comments with reference to creation ex nihilo.  On the one hand, Philo does refer to the creation of or out of 'non-being' (16).[19]  In other passages, however, Philo apparently presupposes given matter for God to work on:

> But Moses…was well aware that it is indispensable that in all existing things there must be an active cause, and a passive subject; and that the active cause is the intellect of the universe, thoroughly unadulterated and thoroughly unmixed…while the passive subject is something inanimate and incapable of motion by any intrinsic power of its own, but having been set in motion, and fashioned, and endowed with life by the intellect, became transformed into that most perfect work, this world.[20]

Moreover, Philo stresses that God created without touching matter Himself:

> for it was not lawful for the all-wise and all-blessed God to touch materials which were all misshapen and confused, but he created them by the agency of his incorporeal powers…the ideas, which he so exerted that every genus receives its proper form.[21]

Finally, in several passages, Philo 'can even expressly describe matter as bad and as one of the causes of evil' (11).[22]  May thus contends that it is unlikely that Philo thought of God as bringing into being preexistent matter, which is evaluated negatively and which God Himself did not directly touch.  In my evaluation, May is correct that although Philo refers to God bringing things out of non-being, this does not lead him to reject the view that preexistent matter was utilized in creation.

May also considers an early Jewish approximation of creation ex nihilo found in Genesis Rabba 1:9:

> A certain philosopher asked R. Gamaliel: Your God was indeed a great artist, but surely He found good materials which assisted Him? What are they? he said. He replied, *Tohu, bohu,* darkness, water, wind (*ruaḥ*), and the deep. May that man perish, exclaimed Gamaliel: The term 'creation' is used by Scripture in connection with all of them. *Tohu and bohu*: I make peace and create evil (Isa 45:7). Darkness: I form the light, and create darkness (Isa 45:7). Water: Praise Him, you heavens of heavens, and you waters that are

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[18] Fergusson, *Creation*, 17; Wolters, 'Creatio,' 120.

[19] Eg., *On the Life of Moses*, II.266-267: 'For God began to create the world on the first day of a week of six days: and he began to rain down the food which has just been mentioned [the manna of Exod 16] on the same first day; and the two images are alike; for as he produced that most perfect work, the world, bring it out of non-existence (*ek tou mē ontos*), so in the same manner did he produce plenty in the wilderness, changing the elements with reference to the pressing necessity' (ET: *The Works of Philo*, trans. Yonge, 515). Cf. *On the Life of Moses*, II.100; *The Special Laws*, IV.187; *On the Migration of Abraham*, 183

[20] *On the Creation*, 8-9 (*Works of Philo*, 3).  Cf. *On the Eternity of the World*, 5: 'nothing is generated out of nothing…It is impossible than [sic] anything should be generated of that which has no existence anywhere' (*Works of Philo*, 707).

[21] *The Special Laws*, I.329 (*Works of Philo*, 565).

[22] May cites *The Special Laws*, IV.187; *On Providence*, II.82; *On Flight and Finding*, 198.

above the heavens (Psa 148:4); why? For He commanded, and they were created (Psa 148:5). Wind: For lo, He that forms the mountains, and creates the wind (Amos 4:13). The depths: When there were no depths, I was brought forth (Prov 8:24).[23]

Gamaliel II likely has in mind passages such as Isa 45:7, Amos 4:13, Ps 148:4-5, and Prov 8:24, 28 where the elements of Gen 1:2 are explicitly said to be created.[24] May passes over the significance of this passage entirely too quickly, noting merely that by denying that Gen 1:2 describes unformed matter, Gamaliel II 'implicitly asserts *creatio ex nihilo*. But such sayings remain isolated, they arise occasionally from the needs of ongoing discussions, and a firm unambiguously formulated doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not worked out in ancient Jewry' (23).[25] Gamaliel II's argument suggests the hermeneutical significance of the larger canonical context for reading Gen 1, an issue that is addressed below in §3. At this point, May's argument is unconvincing, although it is difficult to know what significance ought to be attributed to Gamaliel II's denial of preexistent matter.

Moreover, in roughly the same time period, Wisdom of Solomon 11:17 takes for granted that creation is out of formless matter (*ex amorphou hulēs*).[26] Thus, while Gamaliel II denies the use of preexisting matter, the author of Wisdom of Solomon is able to describe creation in language strongly reminiscent of hellenistic views.[27]

2.1.2 Early Christian Sources

May notes that the NT, along with other 1st century Christian writings, stands in continuity with the OT confession that God is 'the free and almighty creator' and expresses this confession through various statements, such as Rom 4:17, Heb 11:3, that are 'quite legitimately interchangeable with the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*' (26).[28] It must also be recognized, however, that early Christianity did not focus on *how* God created, but rather on the identity of the creator in relation to Christ and on Christ's agency in creation. Thus,

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[23] Quoted in Bockmuehl, '*Creatio ex nihilo* in Palestinian Judaism and Early Christianity,' 267. On Genesis Rabba in general, although with no reference to the question at hand, cf. Philip Alexander, 'Pre-Emptive Exegesis: Genesis Rabba's Reading of the Story of Creation,' 230-245.

[24] Cf. the similar exegetical move in Jub 2:2-3.

[25] May notes similarly that the Jewish prayers preserved in *The Apostolic Constitutions*, 7.34.6, 8.12.17 assert that the soul was made 'out of nothing' (*tēn psychēn ek tou mē ontos*) but since this formula is not applied to the world as a whole, it should not be taken as evidence for an earlier Jewish doctrine of creation ex nihilo (21-22).

[26] Bockmuehl, '*Creatio ex nihilo*,' 255.

[27] It should be noted, however, that in context this assertion supports the view that therefore God 'did not lack the means to send upon them a multitude of bears, or bold lions, or newly created unknown beasts full of rage' (Wisdom 11:17b-18). The logic of the passage then perhaps suggests that the formless matter should be interpreted as *also* created by God in a two-stage model of creation.

[28] For a more thorough overview, see now Sean McDonough, *Christ as Creator*.

creation ex nihilo was not 'explicitly developed as a cosmological theory' (26) and the various NT statements should not be understood as giving 'expression to creation out of nothing, in the strict sense, as a contradiction in principle of the doctrine of world-formation' (27).

In line with this interpretation of the NT data, neither should other passages from early Christian writings, such as Hermas 1.6, 26.1, 2 Clem 1.8 be understood to express creation ex nihilo in a technical sense.[29] Thus, even into the middle of the 2nd century, the origin of the world is not yet felt as a theological problem. Although the relevant works are lost, Anastasius Sinaites asserts that early Christians Papias, Pantaenus, Clement, and Ammonius read the account of Gen 1 as pointing to Christ and the Church, but there is no way to determine how they handled the first several verses or the question of matter (35-36). Thus in this early period of Christian reflection, the doctrine of creation ex nihilo had not yet achieved normative status and so a wide-range of cosmological speculation was possible, often expressed within a doxological context (37).

2.1.3 Hellenistic Philosophy

At this point, I depart somewhat from the framework supplied by May in order to elaborate the philosophical context which the early Christians encountered in the development of creation ex nihilo. It seem judicious to do so because of the popular impression that early Christianity, in formulating creation ex nihilo, has simply imposed hellenistic philosophical categories onto the Hebrew worldview attested to in Gen 1. The situation is more complex than this simplistic account allows for: as May himself notes, the relationship of Christian thought to Hellenism is dialectical and so the Christian formulation is better understood with a clear picture of the general background assumptions about matter and creation in Hellenism.

The eternity of matter was 'an axiomatic assumption' for hellenistic philosophy.[30] Parmenides, in the 5th century BC, in his poem *On Nature*, argued for the thesis that is best

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[29] Hermas 1.6: 'God, who dwells in the heavens, and made out of nothing the things that exist (*ktisas ek tou mē ontos ta onta*), and multiplied and increased them on account of His holy Church, is angry with you for having sinned against me' (ET: *ANF* 2:9). Hermas 26.1 (Mandate 1, 1): 'First of all, believe that there is one God who created and finished all things, and made all things out of nothing (*poiēsas ek tou mē ontos eis to einai ta panta*). He alone is able to contain the whole, but Himself cannot be contained' (ET: *ANF* 2:20; this passage is quoted by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies*, 4.20.2 as a summary of Scripture). 2 Clem 1.8: 'For he called us when we were nothing, and willed our existence from nothing' (trans. Richardson, in *Early Christian Fathers*, 193).

[30] Fergusson, *Creation*, 16.

known in its Latin form given by Lucretius: *nihil fit ex nihilo*.[31]  Parmenides argued that if things arose from nothing, there must have been a reason for them to emerge at one point rather than another but it is contradictory to claim that that 'nothing' can contain causes.[32]  If out of nothing, nothing comes and there is now something (the world of our experience), then there must always have been something in one form or another.

Plato, in his *Timaeus*, which was the most influential of his works in the ancient world,[33] argued that the demiurge used matter to construct both the cosmos and bodies with reason as a guide.  The demiurge 'wanted everything to be good, marred by as little imperfection as possible.  He found everything visible in a state of turmoil, moving in a discordant and chaotic manner, so he led it from chaos to order, which he regarded as in all ways better.'[34]  Aristotle reports that Anaxagoras 'assumed the truth of the view held by all natural scientists that nothing comes into being from non-being.'[35]  For his own part, Aristotle argued that 'there is always *something* underlying substances, something for them to come from.'[36]  While some views of 'matter' conceive of it as a palpable thing, it should be noted that in more sophisticated hellenistic philosophy, such as Aristotle's, matter was associated with potency or possibility as much as physicality.[37]  The Greek term *hylē* initially refers to wood or material out of which something is made: it is something that has the potential to be made into something else.[38]

For Stoicism, the fundamental material of the universe—its *archē* or first principle— was fire, 'which they thought of as the most discrete kind of matter, and as a sort of spiritual divine substance…permeating all things, and giving them order.'[39]  Periodically, all things would return to a cosmic fire and then be distilled out again in epochal cycles.  Epicureans, on the other hand, argued that everything was composed of an endless stream of atoms.  Thus the particular existence of any given thing was a matter of pure chance.[40]

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[31] *On the Nature of Things*, 1.160.  Variations of the phrase have been used throughout western literature, including in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, 1.1 and 1.4, and the film *The Sound of Music*.

[32] *On Nature*, 8.5-14.

[33] Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 141.

[34] *Timaeus*, 30a, trans. Waterfield, 18.

[35] *Physics*, 187a 33-34, *Physics*, trans. Bostock, 17.

[36] Ibid., 190b 4-6, (*Physics*, 26).

[37] Cf. Norbert Luyten, 'Matter as Potency,' 102-113; Rowan Williams, 'Good for Nothing?,' 17: 'For Augustine…"matter" is pure potentiality.'

[38] LSJ, 1847-1848.

[39] Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, 26-27.

[40] Ibid., 26-27.

As already noted, Lucretius argued against the idea of something being made out of nothing: 'Nothing can ever be created by divine power out of nothing…if things were made out of nothing, any species could spring from any source and nothing would require seed… since each is formed out of specific seeds, it is born and emerges into the sunlit world only from a place where there exists the right material, the right kind of atoms.'[41]  Thus, if gods could create from nothing, they could create arbitrarily and there would be no regularity to nature.  For Lucretius, the possibility of natural philosophy is tied up with the assertion that 'out of nothing, nothing comes.'

Within the 2nd century context, Middle Platonism was a major force in hellenistic philosophy.  Middle Platonism as a whole was characterized by ongoing debate regarding the interpretation of *Timaeus* 28b and 30a.[42]  The basic conflict was between those who held a monistic interpretation, that 'matter was coeternally dependent on God' and the dualist interpretation that saw 'unformed matter as independent of God until, at a point in time, God brought it into order.'[43]  This debate was echoed in the debate between monist and dualist Pythagoreans.  In general 'God' began to replace Plato's doctrine of the ideas as a central metaphysical theme and, consequently, the ultimate 'One' of the *Parmenides* and the 'Good' of the *Republic* were conflated with the divine mind and the demiurge of the *Timaeus* resulting in a sort of creator God.[44]  The three basic principles of reality then were conceived of as God, Ideas, and Matter.

Plutarch, for example, argues for an interpretation of the *Timaeus* in which 'the substance or matter out of which [the cosmos] has come into being did not come to be but was always available to the demiurge to whom it submitted itself for disposing and ordering, for the source of what comes into being is not what does not exist, but…what is not in good and sufficient condition.'[45]  In fact, 'what preceded the generation of the universe was disorder, disorder not incorporeal or immobile or inanimate but of corporeality amorphous

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[41] *On the Nature of Things*, 1.160, trans. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 90-91.

[42] Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Plato and Presocratic Cosmology,' 78-79: 'it appears to have been a controversial question among the Platonists whether the *fabricatio mundi* that the *Timaeus* recounts actually meant that the world came into being or whether…it is to be interpreted as a mathematical construct.'

[43] Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 70.  The monist school of thought culminates in Plotinus while Plutarch, Atticus and Maximus Tyrius are representative of the dualist school.

[44] Young, *Making*, 27.

[45] *Moralia: On the Generation of Souls in Timaeus*, 1014b trans. in Wilken, *The Christians*, 90.  Note that preexistent matter is *not* in conflict with things 'coming into being.'

and incoherent and of motivity demented and irrational, and this was the discord of soul that has not reason.'[46]

Galen wrote his work *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body* not later than 176 AD, precisely when Hermogenes ignited the debate in Christian theology regarding creation.[47] In his writings, Galen is impressed by Christian virtue but offended by the 'arbitrary' creator God of Christianity. He asks with reference to Gen 1, 'Is not this Moses's way of treating nature and is it not superior to that of Epicurus? The best way, of course, is to follow neither of these but to maintain, like Moses, the principle of the demiurge as the origin of every created thing, but also adding to it the material principle' that is, preexistent matter from which the world was made.[48] Thus Galen prefers the Mosaic account of creation to the rejected Epicurean principle of chance but still finds the biblical account deficient for two reasons. First, on Galen's view, the God of Genesis simply brings things into being, without any rational account of how things ought best to be arranged. Second, Galen objects to the lack of a material cause in the Genesis account.[49] Note, then, that Galen's objection to Gen 1 is that it only accounts for one of the three Middle Platonist principles: it has God, but says nothing of Ideas or Matter.

Galen subsequently argues that God could not make a man out of a stone. 'It is precisely this point,' he maintains, 'in which our own opinion and that of Plato and of the other Greeks who follow the right method in the natural science differ from the position taken up by Moses…[who says] that God simply willed the arrangement of matter and it was presently arranged in due order; for he believes everything to be possible with God.'[50] In contrast, Galen maintains that 'certain things are impossible by nature and that God does not even attempt such things at all but that he chooses the best out of the possibilities of becoming.'[51] While Galen's claim sounds close to the mature claims of Christian theology that God cannot do logically impossible things, such as make a square circle or cease to be God, the context for Galen's argument is the placement of the eyelashes 'in a cartilaginous body' rather than 'in a soft and fleshly substance.'[52] Galen, then, stands in clear contrast to the subsequent Christian claim that the world is radically contingent. On his position, the

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[46] *Moralia: On the Generation of Souls in Timaeus*, 1014b, trans. Cherniss, 181-183.

[47] May, *Creatio*, 155.

[48] *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, 11.4, in Wilken, *The Christians*, 84.

[49] Wilken, *The Christians*, 85.

[50] *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, 11.14, in Wilken, *The Christians*, 86-87.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

natural world is unintelligible unless it is recognized that the creator, like all things, is governed by the laws of reason that determine the best way for things to be. In short, for Galen, 'God is part of nature.'[53] On the other hand, 'the Christian God appeared capricious, arbitrary, even whimsical, subject to no laws other than his own will, and beyond the bounds of nature, a rule unto himself.'[54] It is another peculiarity of the story of the emergence of creation ex nihilo that a non-Christian philosopher, in the context of a medical treatise, recognized the irreconcilability of Christian thought with the dominant Platonic cosmology, perhaps before any Christian theologian recognized this.

Ps-Aristotle's *On the Cosmos* was likely written about the same time that Galen was writing, perhaps slightly before. He too argued that God was essentially a part of nature: 'God is to us a law, evenly balanced, receptive neither to correction nor change…under his motionless and harmonious rule the whole ordering of heaven and earth is administered, extending over all created things through seeds of life in each both to plants and to animals.'[55] The argument proceeds: God 'is one' though 'he has many names, according to the many effects he himself produces…To sum up all, he is a God of Heaven and God of Earth, and takes his name from every kind of nature and estate; for he himself is the cause of all…I think too that Necessity (*anankē*) is nothing but another name for him, as being a cause that cannot be defeated (*anikētos*); and Destiny (*eimarmenē*), because he binds things together (*eirein*) and moves without hindrance; Fate (*Peprōmenē*), because all things are finite (*peperatōsthai*) and nothing in the world is infinite.'[56] The unity of God is defended, as in early Christian thought, but although Zeus is considered one of the proper names of God, this conception of God is fundamentally the impersonal ordering principle present in all nature.

This summary of hellenistic philosophy concludes with Celsus, another critic of early Christianity, also writing around the 170 AD.[57] It is possible that Celsus wrote in response to Justin Martyr's *Apology*, in which case Celsus's criticisms form an important backdrop to our reading of Justin. Unlike Galen, who admired Christian virtue, Celsus adopts an acerbic tone, mounting several arguments against Christianity, two of which are relevant to the

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[53] Wilken, *The Christians*, 87.

[54] Ibid., 93.

[55] *On the Cosmos*, 401 a, in Wilken, *The Christians*, 92.

[56] *On the Cosmos*, 401 a-b, trans. Furley, in *Aristotle*, 405-409.

[57] We know Celsus's work against Christianity, *True Doctrine*, primarily through Origen's response, *Against Celsus*, written a generation later.

current discussion.[58]  First, he argues that the incarnation is a contradiction to God's immutability and so 'is most shameful and no lengthy argument is required to refute it.'[59] One wonders if the desire to distance God from matter also informs Celsus's argument at this point.

Second, Celsus rejects the Christian doctrine of resurrection.  After all, since all flesh 'is full of things which it is not even nice to mention, God would neither desire nor be able to make it everlasting contrary to reason.'[60]  Furthermore, argues Celsus, 'what sort of body, after being entirely corrupted, could return to its original nature and that same condition which it had before it was dissolved?'[61]  Celsus clearly thinks that this argument is definitive: Christians can only 'escape to a most outrageous refuge by saying that "anything is possible to God."'[62]  This, Celsus maintains, is absurd: 'neither can God do what is shameful nor does He desire what is contrary to nature…He himself is the reason of everything that exists; therefore he is not able to do anything contrary to reason or to his own character.'[63]  Again, this last line comes quite close to latter Christian reflection, and yet for Celsus it is clearly objectionable that Christians conceive of God as outside of the laws of nature and as free to act according to his will.

This short survey of the role of matter in hellenistic philosophy is important because one of the basic objections that has been made to the doctrine of creation ex nihilo is that it represents the intrusion of Hellenism into Christian thought.[64]  The issues are rather more complicated than this sort of criticism indicates.  The early Christian formulation of creation ex nihilo did, of course, use Greek and Latin language as well as various conceptual categories drawn from hellenistic philosophy.  But using these tools, through its doctrine of creation ex nihilo, Christian theology developed a conception of God and His relationship to

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[58] Cf. Wilken, *The Christians*, 101-105.

[59] *Against Celsus*, 4.2, in Wilken, *The Christians*, 102.

[60] *Against Celsus*, 5.14, in Wilken, *The Christians*, 104.

[61] *Against Celsus*, 5.14 in Wilken, *The Christians*, 90.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid.

[64] E.g., John Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 59: 'Metaphysical theology has turned this Hebrew narrative into the tale of a pure, simple, clean act of power carried out on high by a timeless and supersensible being, a very Hellenic story that also goes along with a top-down social structure of imperial power flowing down from on high.  There is order and majesty here, but the story is, upon closer reading…not a single clean power acting *ex nihilo*, but in a concert of forces, one active and formative and the other more open-ended, free-floating, fluid and unformed.  A poetics of creation from primal, untamed, unwieldly, watery elements, as wily as the wind and as slippery as water, elements that tend to resist fixed order.'  No doubt the discerning reader will note that it is in actuality Caputo's formulation, with its active and passive principles, which sounds like 'a very Hellenic story.'  A more thorough account of the issue of matter in hellenistic thought can be found in the essays contained in McMullin (ed.), *The Concept of Matter in Greek and Medieval Philosophy*.

the world that was fundamentally different from that held in the greco-roman world.[65]  Thus, Thomas Aquinas's short recounting of the issue in *STh* 1.44.2 is not far from the mark.  After reviewing the opinions of various philosophers, he concludes that while hellenistic philosophy asked Why is this this way rather than that way? Christian theology addressed a more basic question with its doctrine of creation ex nihilo: Why does this exist?

### 2.2 *Second Century Attempts to Formulate a Doctrine of Creation*

Having departed from May in order to provide a more in depth account of the background for the development of creation ex nihilo in the 2nd century, his argument can be picked up.  May's account of the question of the origin of the world in Christian gnosticism is useful for the history of ideas generally.  However, since May himself concludes that 'the attempts of the great gnostics to explain the origin and nature of matter hardly influenced in a direct way the inception and general prevalence of the church doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*' (117), his account of the various gnostic approaches can be covered briefly before turning to the development of creation ex nihilo in orthodox circles.[66]

### 2.2.1 Gnostic Approaches to the Doctrine of Creation

May identifies three major theologians as representative of gnosticism: Marcion, Valintinus, and Basilides.  Perhaps in the nature of the case, no complete explanation can be offered for the emergence of Christian gnosticism.  May suggests that disillusionment, perhaps at the destruction of Jerusalem, may have been a factor or, possibly, that gnostic circles were motivated to a sort of extreme Christian apologetic that rejects not only the Jewish law but the Jewish creator God as well (49-52).  At any rate, the shared negative evaluation of the world raised the question of how to think about matter in a pressing way.

May summarizes the basic gnostic myth: the world is viewed negatively and so its origin cannot be attributed to the true God.  Thus, in one form or another, creation is the work

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[65] Cf. Young, *God's Presence*, 55.

[66] May devotes nearly a full half of his study to the doctrine of creation in gnostic theology.  I should note at this point that I have used the term 'gnostic' at various points throughout this argument.  I am aware that there are at least two difficulties in using this term in such a manner.  First, the 'gnostics,' who vehemently rejected each others' systems, are not a homogenous group.  Thus the term gives the impression of unity among a disparate group of 'outsider' theologians.  Second, the term, in its classic use, has implied a clear-cut distinction between those 'inside' the church (the orthodox) and those 'outside' (the gnostics/heretics).  Against this distinction, it may be argued that, in the pre-nicene period, it is anachronistic and that, at any rate, it represents a theological, rather than historical, judgment.  Despite these concerns, I continue to use the term for several reasons.  First, May and others in the field continue to use the term.  Second, although there is admitted diversity among the various 'gnostic' groups, which I follow May in recounting, there is *some* 'family resemblance' among the groups addressed below: they generally have some role for a demiurge in creation, treat *gnosis* as the route to salvation, and hold to various forms of docetic Christology.

of lower ranked heavenly beings. Some gnostics postulated an unformed material principle of creation; all agreed that material creation was an interruption of the high God's original plan (40-41). Thus, as in Hermogenes, questions regarding the origin of evil form an important starting point for these gnostic theories of creation. In general, the distinction between the 'true' God and the creator god was rarely emphasized in the earliest forms of gnosticism, treated instead as part of the esoteric knowledge (*gnosis*) reserved for the initiated. Marcion was the marked exception, mounting a 'frontal attack against the God of the Old Testament' (41).

One of the primary criticisms of gnosticism made by early Christians is that they gave too much credence to philosophy, yet in general, 'the gnostics were not seeking an academic controversy with philosophy,' instead appealing to many of the same 'philosophical stock of ideas' as hellenistic philosophy (47). A basic and decisive difference, however, can be noted between Middle Platonism and gnosticism. Middle Platonism placed a strong emphasis on reason and rational thought, as was seen above in Galen. Gnosticism, on the other hand, stressed that *gnosis*, or true knowledge, came through revelation alone. It is interesting to note how this basic contrast plays out in the divergent attitudes of hellenistic philosophy and gnosticism toward Gen 1. In general, non-Christian hellenistic authors seem to have been struck by the 'philosophical' character of the creation account (48).[67] On the other hand, gnostics adopted 'fantastic' mythological interpretations, especially of Gen 1:2 which was a key passage for esoteric speculation (48-49, cf. 105-107). In general, concludes May, the gnostic interpretation of Gen 1 departs especially sharply from that found in Theophilus of Antioch, preferring the allegorical and esoteric and producing an interpretation that was, in short, unusable by Christians (49).

For Marcion, salvation is the central theme of theology and this is worked out in a basic opposition between the God who is revealed in Christ and the creator God who is revealed in the OT law.[68] This creator God, according to Marcion's student Apelles, is the dark, 'fiery' God of Israel whom Moses encountered in Exod 3 (54-55). Following from this basic opposition, world-denial achieves axiomatic significance for Marcion: it 'determines and guides his whole theological thinking' (55). In Marcion's account of creation, the

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[67] May notes (48n37), in addition to Galen, the neo-pythagorean author Ocellus Lucanas, who appears to refer to Gen 1:28 in *On the Nature of the Universe*, 46; the anonymous work *On the Sublime*, 9.9 that quotes Gen 1:3 as an example of the sublime; and Numenius of Apamea, fragment 30, quoted in Porphyry, *Cave of the Nymphs*, 10 who comments on Gen 1:2.

[68] For a fuller account, cf. May, *Markion*, and Judith Lieu's very thorough work, *Marcion*, esp. 257-261, 324-356. Lieu likewise notes that for Marcion, 'Christ's independence of the Creator and the created order is fundamental' (262).

demiurge created out of unformed, evil matter. In this, Marcion can be contrasted with Plato. In the *Timaeus*, 30b the demiurge did the best he could with the materials he had. Marcion is engaged in the 2nd century debates about the interpretation of *Timaeus*, advocating a distinction between the demiurge and the highest God. Further, the mere fact that the demiurge did anything with matter is an indictment of the creator.[69] The true God left matter well enough alone and works through Word alone. May notes that although Marcion raises a number of issues, such as the evaluation of matter, that overlap with the concerns of creation ex nihilo, the initial response to Marcion focused on Scripture, not metaphysics, defending the OT and its Christological interpretation.

Basilides is a more significant figure for the question at hand as he, in May's estimation, is the first figure to hold to creation ex nihilo in its technical sense. Basilides's system is difficult to understand, especially as our knowledge of it is mediated through his opponents, Irenaeus and Hippolytus. According to May's reconstruction, Basilides begins with pure, ineffable nothing which might be equated with the highest God, although this is unclear (67). Next, Basilides posits a highest God whom he characterizes as 'non-being' in a sort of radical negative theology (67). This non-being God creates a cosmic-seed which contains in itself all things potentially. Within this cosmic-seed are contained three 'sonships' which are consubstantial with the non-being God. The third sonship is the chosen gnostics who are liberated from the world by the gospel (*gnosis*). This enlightenment is mediated to the third sonship by Jesus. The process as a whole causes the great Archon, who was involved in shaping the world from the cosmic-seed, to realize that he is *not* in fact the true God.

Basilides then marks a divergence from other gnostic groups (and even, subsequently, from his own followers). For Basilides, all reality comes into being, potentially, through a single God rather than through any sort of cosmic rebellion or disobedience. Moreover, Basilides maintains that 'creation results from pure, unconditioned nothing' while emanation and shaping of pre-existing materials are rejected as too anthropomorphic (70). May maintains, then, that Basilides seems to have developed a form of creation ex nihilo in direct contrast to Greek philosophy by coupling the biblical creation accounts with 'specific gnostic ideas of the incommensurability of divine activity' (77). Moreover, compared to Marcion and Valentinus, Basilides had a relatively positive evaluation of the created world (80).

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[69] Cf. Lieu, *Marcion*, 336-337: 'Marcion apparently took the separation between supreme and Creator deities much further than any of his contemporaries might have envisaged, until it becomes an unfathomable gulf, a gulf that can only be conceptualised in spatial language.'

At the same time, however, Basilides' ultimate 'creator' God has no part in the unfolding of the cosmos from the cosmic-seed and His acting in history is inconceivable (81). Rather, in Basilides' scheme, his form of creation ex nihilo serves to maintain a distance between God and the world. This stands in sharp distinction to the function of creation ex nihilo in Irenaeus's writings, for example, where it functions to ensure that God can be *present to* creation. Moreover, for Basilides, the 'gospel' is not about God's acting in history but is esoteric knowledge about the origins and arrangement of the world that allows the third sonship to transcend the created realm. Finally, Eric Osborn has argued at length against May's interpretation of Basilides, noting that Basilides's basic claim that a non-being God creates a non-being cosmic-seed from non-being is open to a variety of interpretations.[70] While May finds significance in Basilides's formulation as the first use of creation ex nihilo in a technical, ontological sense, even Basilides's disciples did not keep to his doctrine of creation but reverted to the more general gnostic myth of creation from a lower God. It is unlikely, then, that Basilides's formulation of creation ex nihilo (if this characterization is even appropriate) exerted any positive influence on the early Christian development of the doctrine.

Valentinus had strongly ascetic tendencies which lead to a devaluation of the created world (88-89). This led to a basic question: how could lesser gods/being originate from the highest God and yet no longer be in a position from which they can know that highest God? In response to this question, a complex set of myths was developed (May recounts the details on 85-117). In the most general terms, the material world results from the fall of the Aeons and was not part of the high God's eternal plan. By implication, therefore, matter is *not* eternal but comes into being with the fall of the Aeons.[71] While this does make matter contingent and therefore bears formal similarity to creation ex nihilo, it is not creation ex nihilo as such. Rather, matter is not created by an act of the divine will but is a byproduct of the fall of Sophia.

The picture that emerges from May's account is that various gnostic groups were confronting issues raised by Hellenism with recourse to the biblical traditions and so, at

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[70] Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 68-69. Also critical of May's interpretation of Basilides as holding to a form of creation ex nihilo are Bockmuehl, '*Creatio ex nihilo*,' 257, and Winrich A. Löhr, *Basilides und seine Schule*, 314: 'Ob die 'creatio ex nihilo,' d.h. die Schöpfung aus dem nichtsseienden Gott, als authentisch anzusprechen ist, bleibt ebenfalls sehr zweifelhalts. Eine derartig ins Extreme gesteigerte negativ Theologie scheint den Fragmenten durchaus fremd zu sein.'

[71] In passing, note that in his account of various gnostics, May is willing to draw this sort of implication from their claims while seems to resist drawing similar implications from the claims of early Jewish and Christian writings.

times, arrive at similar formulations to the Christian doctrine of creation ex nihilo. The gnostic approach to Gen 1, however, eschewed the literal sense in favor of allegorical readings that fit in with their speculations about various lower gods that were involved in creation.[72] Moreover, when gnostics did adopt a form of creation ex nihilo, it served drastically different functions within their larger systems than it did within Christian theology.

2.2.2 The Emergence of the Church Doctrine of Creation Ex Nihilo

Having surveyed the various elements that form the background to the emergence of creation ex nihilo, we can now turn directly to the chain of 2nd century Christian authors who develop this formula. Since a previous chapter has already been devoted to the various implications of creation ex nihilo, I again follow May in focusing narrowly on the emergence of creation ex nihilo rather than attempting to document the various nuances of each figure. At the same time, it would be a mistake to think that all of the implications of creation ex nihilo noted in the previous chapter are already present in fully developed form in these 2nd century figures.

Aristides the Athenian, as far as can be determined, was the first Christian to write an *Apology*, in the first quarter of the 2nd century. In the Greek text of the *Apology*, preserved within the 7th century work *The Life of Barlaam and Joasaph*, likely by John of Damascus, Aristides asserts that God created even the elements out of nothing, through his command (119).[73] At this point, however, the Syriac version simply claims that the elements 'are not gods, but a transitory and mutable creation which is in accordance with the image of man' (119). May argues, given the mode in which the Greek text is preserved and its theological sophistication that the Syriac rendering more likely approximates the original.[74] Furthermore, since, in May's view, Aristides does not seem to be fully aware of the problems in philosophy, he therefore cannot have held creation ex nihilo in a mature form.

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[72] Admittedly, various early Christian writers *also* adopted allegorical approaches to Gen 1 but generally not as a way of overturning the literal sense.

[73] *Life of Barlaam and Joasaph*, 4.1: *ek tou mē ontos parakthenta prostagmati tou ontōs theou.*

[74] As an example of May's somewhat uneven handling of the evidence, note his claim that 'if, nonetheless, the Greek text is held to be original, then in spite of its apparently unambiguous assertions, one ought not to read more from it than from corresponding statements of Hermas or of hellenistic-Jewish literature: Aristides means that the elements are created by God; but it does not appear from his book that he consciously distanced himself from the philosophical model of world-formation' (119-120). This is a bit much! The full texts and translations of Greek and Syriac are available in Harris, *The Apology of Aristides* and, in my opinion, suggest Aristides is moving closer to creation ex nihilo than May recognizes.

Justin Martyr was also an early apologist, in the mid 2nd century, whose work Celsus may have been responding to, as noted above. May advises that Justin 'is a theologian who must not be undervalued' (120). 'Creator' is Justin's favorite title for God and in his *Apology*, he compares Gen 1 with *Timaeus* (122). In this comparison, Justin appears to have a nuanced stance toward Platonism: he is clearly influenced by it but is also critical of Plato, whom he claims learned from Moses (122). Justin is willing to say that 'God in his goodness created everything from formless matter' in terms of which he reads Gen 1:2.[75] May argues that if Justin did hold this formless matter to be previously created, it would be surprising, then, that Justin does not criticize Plato for holding to the eternality of matter, given Justin's general readiness to criticize Plato where he is perceived to depart from Moses (123)

In the *Dialogue with Trypho*, 5.4-6, Justin again pursues a literal interpretation of the *Timaeus*, this time arguing that God alone is not originate and not transitory (124). All other things, therefore, are originate and transitory. Justin, however, only draws the contrast in this respect between God and souls, but not between God and matter. May therefore concludes that Justin does not here teach creation ex nihilo. Osborn, conversely, understands the argument to work in precisely the opposite direction: 'there can only be one unoriginated or unbegotten (*agenneton*) being, from which it follows that the soul is originate and transitory. *A fortiori* the same argument would have to apply to matter.'[76]

Finally, the work *On the Resurrection* has been questionably attributed to Justin.[77] Despite ascetic tendencies, the work is decidedly positive about bodily existence (134). The work is significant because it brings together several lines of argument: it argues from the resurrection of Jesus for the resurrection generally, as well as making a parallel argument that God's creation of the body proves that He has the power to resurrect at well.[78] The work does consider resurrection to be compatible with the eternity of elements *for the sake of argument*, but it is by no means clear that the author himself shares this opinion.[79]

Even if Justin did assume that in creation God made use of preexisting matter, this plays no significant role in his thought. At no point does Justin connect matter with the origin of evil nor does it form a constraint on what it is possible for God to do (125). Thus

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[75] *Apology* 1.10.2: *panta tēn arkēn agathon onta dēmiourgēsai auton ex amorphou hylēs di anthrōpous dedidagmetha;*' trans. in May, *Creatio*, 122.

[76] *Irenaeus*, 66.

[77] At any rate, Irenaeus references this work, so it clearly emerges from the mid-2nd century.

[78] *Fragments on the Resurrection*, 5; *ANF*, 1:295-296.

[79] In fact, the way the argument is set up suggests to me that the author in fact does *not* share this view, cf. *Fragments on the Resurrection*, 6; *ANF*, 1:296.

Justin makes a break with philosophical tradition by making creation a specific act with a beginning, rather than an eternal process and the dynamics of system 'practically compelled acceptance' of creation ex nihilo, but he does fully break with philosophical tradition by means of that formula (132).[80]

Athenagoras, a third apologist, likely wrote his *Apology for the Christians* at the same time that Hermogenes was writing his work (c. 175). In his discussion, which is heavily influenced by Middle Platonism, Athenagoras affirms that God created through His Logos and Spirit, although he does not maintain a clear role for the Spirit. In this respect, he falls short of his near contemporary Theophilus. May's handling of Athenagoras is among one of the more puzzling aspects of his work. He gives a mere three pages to Athenagoras (compared to the 40 pages each to Basilides and Valentinus) and asserts that 'Athenagoras understands the world unambiguously as the mere shaping of the unoriginate matter… material is assumed to be given, and nowhere are questions raised about its origin' (138-139). However, in Athenagoras's *Plea for the Christians*, 4.1, we read that

> to us, who distinguish God from matter, and teach that matter is one thing and God another, and that they are separated by a wide interval (for that the Deity is uncreated and eternal, to be beheld by the understanding and reason alone, while matter is created and perishable), it it not absurd to apply the name of atheism?[81]

Similarly, Athenagoras admittedly uses the metaphor of a potter and clay, as May asserts: 'as is the potter and the clay (matter being the clay, and the artist the potter), so is God, the framer of the world, and matter, which is subservient to Him for the purposes of His art.'[82] Yet just before this metaphor is employed, Athenagoras says that Christians do not worship idols because, although

> the multitude…cannot distinguish between matter and God, or see how great is the interval which lies between them, pray to idols made of matter…[we] do distinguish and separate the uncreated and the created, that which is and that which is not, that which is apprehended by the understanding and that which is perceived by the senses, and…give the fitting name to each of them.[83]

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[80] Cf. Young, *Making*, 28.

[81] *ANF*, 2:131. In Greek, the parenthetical phrase reads: *to men gar theion agenēton einai kai aidion, nō monō logō theōroumenon, tēn de hylēn genētēn kai phthartēn* (from Athenagoras, *Legatio Pro Christianis*, 28; cf. the helpful summary of the work on 3-20). May acknowledges this passage but claims that Athenagoras 'clearly means in a broader sense the corporeal and the visible, not the formless original substratum,' noting that in 16.4 and 22.3 *hylē* is used in conjunction with the elements rather than primary matter (139n114). This of course assumes that Athenagoras sharply distinguished between the elements and primary matter.

[82] *Plea for the Christians*, 15; *ANF*, 2:135. Oddly enough, May sees in the 'potter and clay' and allusion to the Platonist philosopher Albinus but does not note that this is a prominent biblical metaphor.

[83] Ibid.

Thus if we do ultimately conclude with May that Athenagoras has not yet fully embraced a mature form of creation ex nihilo, by no means can we say that this is 'unambiguously the case.'

At this point, the story is brought back to its starting point with Hermogenes's argument for God creating out of matter and the subsequent responses of the Church. Hermogenes argued logically that God must have created out of Himself, out of nothing, or out of preexistent matter. He argued against positing that God created out of Himself as a contradiction of the Christian conception of God and against creation out of nothing as failing to account for contemporary cosmological theories and making God the author of evil. Creation out of matter, then, is the only plausible option: it cohered with hellenistic cosmology and provided the basis for a straightforward theodicy. God was vindicated since 'traces of the original disorder of matter remaining in every created thing [is] the specific ground of the evil present in the world' (142).

The first definitive affirmation of the Christian doctrine of creation ex nihilo is found in Tatian the Syrian's *Address to the Greeks*. Tatian, a pupil of Justin, does not directly respond to Hermogenes and may have even written his work before Hermogenes (possible dates range from 160-175; cf. 148n2). In his work, Tatian argues that

> the Lord of the universe, who is Himself the necessary ground (*hypostasis*) of all being, inasmuch as no creature was yet in existence, was alone; but inasmuch as He was all power, Himself the necessary ground of things visible and invisible, with Him were all things; with Him, by Logos-power (*dia logikēs dynameōs*), the Logos Himself also, who was in Him, subsists.[84]

From this, Tatian draws the necessary conclusion: 'matter is not, like God, without beginning, nor, as having no beginning, is of equal power with God; it is begotten…brought into existence by the Framer of all things alone.'[85] Thus, although the Logos shapes matter in the process of creation, matter itself must have had a beginning or it would be a second principle alongside God (cp. Galen's criticism in §2.1.3). This argument may have been directed against the Marcionites, who asserted that matter was an *archai* or possibly against the Valentinian view that matter derives from the fall of Sophia. At any rate, for Tatian, the implication is clear. He moves directly from creation ex nihilo to arguing for the

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[84] *Address to the Greeks*, 5.1; *ANF* 2:67.

[85] *Address to the Greeks*, 5.3; *ANF* 2:67. May provides the Greek text of this key passage: *oute gar anarchos hē hylē kathaper kai o theos, oute dia to anarchon isadunamos tō theō, genētē de kai ouch hypo allou gegonuia, monou de hypo tou pantōn dēmiourgou probeblēmenē* (149n7).

'resurrection of bodies…on this account.'[86]  There can be no denigration of matter: its goodness is supported on either side by the doctrines of creation ex nihilo and of bodily resurrection.[87]

Theophilus of Antioch, writing only slightly later than Tatian (probably before 180 AD), simultaneously affirms creation ex nihilo in a much more thorough manner than Tatian and provides the first known extended commentary on Gen 1 (156).  As noted above, Eusebius reports that Theophilus wrote a work against Hermogenes which has been lost but it is uncertain if it was written before or after his work *To Autolycus*.[88]  What is apparent is that the controversy with Hermogenes forced Theophilus to think through the implications of the Platonist cosmology, with its preexistent matter, much more thoroughly than any Christian author had previously.  Unambiguously, Theophilus asserts that 'God has created everything out of nothing into being.'[89]  Later, he argues at length for this view against Plato:

> that Plato and those of his school acknowledge indeed that God is uncreated, and the Father and Maker of all things; but then they maintain that matter as well as God is uncreated, and aver that it is coeval with God.  But if God is no longer, according to the Platonists, the Creator of all things, nor, so far as their opinions hold, is the monarchy of God established.  And further, as God, because He is uncreated, is also unalterable; so if matter, too, were uncreated, it also would be unalterable, and equal to God; for that which is created is mutable and alterable, but that which is uncreated is immutable and unalterable.  And what great thing is it if God made the world out of subject-matter?  For even a human artist, when he gets material from some one, makes of it what he pleases.  But the power of God is manifested in this, that out of things that are not He makes whatever He pleases; just as the bestowal of life and motion is the prerogative of no other than God alone.[90]

This thorough critic of the Platonic world-formation model addresses several issues with asserting that matter was preexistent and ready at hand when God created (160-162).  If matter is preexistent, then God is not truly the creator of *everything*.  Although this argument seems rather obvious, standing at the other end of 2,000 years of Christian tradition, Theophilus seems to have been one of the first to reach this conclusion.  Thus, the

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[86] *Address to the Greeks*, 6.1; *ANF* 2:67.

[87] Cf. Young, *God's Presence*, 97.

[88] Cf. n. 9 above; May hesitantly concludes that the work *Against Hermogenes* preceded the work *To Autolycus* (157n51).

[89] *To Autolycus*, 1.4 trans. May (156): *ta panta ho theos epoiēsen ex ouk ontōn eis to einai*; cf. 1.8, 2.4.10.

[90] *To Autolycus*, 2.4; *ANF* 2:95.

preexistence of matter is in direct competition with the *monarchia* of God.[91]  Moreover, since being not originate and not mutable are correlated attributes of God, if matter were not originate, it too would be immutable, and therefore not open to shaping by God's power.[92] Finally, and this may have been the key issue for the early church, if creation merely means shaping preexistent matter, this conception of creation does not preserve the greatness of God.  God is just a human craftsman, scaled up.  Thus, concludes Theophilus, the divine will is the *sole* ground of creation.

May concludes that in his work, Theophilus has adopted a piece of 'traditional theological language,' *ex ouk ontōn*, which is now used in 'a new, a pregnant sense' in order to deny that God used coeval matter in his creating (163).  Thus a phrase that is used in what might be called a 'doxological' manner in 2 Macc 7:28, Rom 4:17, and similar passages, now has had its various logical implications drawn out and begins to be used in a technical sense. Moreover, Theophilus not only coins a technical, theological phrase, but he applies it in an extended interpretation of Gen 1 (May notes this fact but perhaps neglects its significance). At the heart of Theophilus's interpretation is a two-stage model of creation: first, God in the beginning (*archē*, which is read Christologically as the *logos*), God 'made all things out of nothing; for nothing was coeval with God.'[93]  Subsequently, from the material that is created out of nothing, which is described in its unordered state in Gen 1:2, God shapes the ordered, inhabitable world.

With Irenaeus, creation ex nihilo is not only affirmed and connected with an interpretation of Gen 1 but it is integrated as a foundational component into a comprehensive biblical theology that is opposed to gnosticism.[94]  Irenaeus maintains that God creates through a free decision of His will, acting not through a chain of intermediary figures as in gnosticism, but with His own two 'hands,' the Word and Wisdom (166).  This means that both the material of creation and the patterns according to which matter is shaped, originate from God, not outside God (cp. Middle Platonism's three principles: God, Ideas, Matter).  All alternative theories denigrate the creator God and make the incarnation impossible.  Creation ex nihilo must be affirmed as the foundation of the whole divine *oikonomia*.  Thus, Irenaeus's

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[91] Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History*, 4.18.4) reports that Theophilus had also composed a lost treatise *On the Monarchy of God*.

[92] Tatian makes a similar argument in his *Address to the Greeks*, 5.3.

[93] *To Autolycus*, 10.1; *ANF* 2:98.

[94] Osborn's comprehensive study of Irenaeus's thought argues that for Irenaeus, four concepts are basic: (1) God as universal intellect; (2) the *oikonomia*, God's orderly, inclusive plan for creation; (3) the recapitulation of all things in the person and work of Jesus Christ; and (4) 'the end of all things is the participation of God in man and of man in God' (*Irenaeus*, 22-23).

twofold stress on God's self-communicating goodness, which is revealed as the motivation for creation through the recapitulation, and on God's cosmic power to create ex nihilo, are economical considerations.  This, in turn means that for Irenaeus 'demonstrating and establishing protology' involves not only Gen 1 but the 'larger economy whose character is consistently revealed in the scriptural text explored through the testimony of the incarnation.'[95]

Irenaeus differs from Theophilus in that he does not speak of God creating formless matter from nothing, but rather asserts that God used His will and power *as* matter.[96]  Here it is important to remember that in some forms of hellenistic thought, matter was closely associated with potential, and it is probably along these lines that Irenaeus should be understood.  When Irenaeus says that God's will and power 'in combination, form the substance of the created world…he speaks not of a definition of ontological essence, but of formative generation by the one thus capable of redemption.'[97]  Creation thus is radically contingent and its sustaining is a free gift of God.  Osborn argues that Irenaeus arrives at this formulation by juxtaposing two images for God as creator—the supreme king and wise architect—and by combining these images, he also combines the creation of matter and the shaping of the world as two aspects of the single act of creation.[98]  The great strength of this formulation is that it stresses the immediacy of God to His creation.  The drawback is that Irenaeus never applies this model to a sustained interpretation of Gen 1.  He references Gen 1:1, 3 several times while Gen 1:26-27 are among his favorite verses.  Genesis 1:2, however, is only addressed in the context of reporting on gnostic speculation while Gen 1:4-24 are not referenced in his work *Against Heresies*.[99]  Instead, Irenaeus's conception of creation is based on a broad appeal to the psalms, prophets and NT.

Finally, although May stops at Irenaeus, concluding that the doctrine has essentially reached its mature form, it should be noted that Tertullian also wrote a treatise *Against Hermogenes*, apparently while Hermogenes was still alive (157n51).  In this work, Tertullian recounts Hermogenes's basic arguments, before refuting Hermogenes on logical and exegetical grounds.  Tertullian's logical arguments focus on Hermogenes's conception of matter and motion, which Tertullian attacks tenaciously with *reductio ad absurdum*

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[95] Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation*, 49.

[96] *Against Heresies*, 2.10.2; cf. Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 69.

[97] Steenberg, *Irenaeus*, 45.

[98] Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 69.

[99] *Against Heresies*, 1.18.  This is based on the *ANF* 1 index.

arguments, revealing Tertullian's truly dizzying intellect.[100]  Moreover, Tertullian objects to the association of matter and evil before turning to address Hermogenes's interpretation of Gen 1:1, 2.[101]  May's conclusion is somewhat abrupt although he is arguably correct in seeing creation ex nihilo as having reached its seminal form with Theophilus, Irenaeus, and perhaps Tertullian.  Yet, as has been noted in passing in the previous chapter, numerous additional implications of creation ex nihilo were drawn out over the next several centuries as the doctrine was integrated into a more coherent and mature system of Christian doctrine.

## 2.3 *Evaluation of May's Argument*

Thus May's work is a careful piece of extremely detailed scholarship, documenting the various stages of the development of the doctrine up to the time of Irenaeus.  May's study has made a valuable contribution to our understanding of the emergence of creation ex nihilo, showing the context for the doctrine's emergence in detail.  The work has, and will likely continue to have, significance as providing a basic outline of the various issues and figures involved in the early debates regarding creation ex nihilo[102] and thus I have used May as a framework for the preceding discussion.  However, in the interest of refining May's framework, I address two basic conceptual issues raised by May's work.[103]

First, the data presents a basic problem: since hellenistic writers regularly refer to God as the 'creator' but still presuppose that this means shaping preexistent matter, criteria are

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[100] *Against Hermogenes*, 4-18.

[101] *Against Hermogenes*, 19-34.

[102] Cp. n. 12 above.

[103] Perhaps in part due to its detail, May's work has been read somewhat uncharitably, especially by scholars who want to argue for an earlier or 'biblical' origin for creation ex nihilo (eg., Paul Copan, 'Is *Creatio Ex Nihilo* a Post-Biblical Invention?  An Examination of Gerhard May's Proposal'; Copan and Craig, *Creation out of Nothing*, passim; and, although more charitably, Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 65-69).  Copan, in his article, states that he is engaging May's book because 'it is both incorrect and potentially misleading' (79).  He wants to argue that creation ex nihilo is not merely an innovation' (79) but 'rooted in biblical passages' (93).  Similarly, in Copan and Craig's work, they state that the 'key question' is if creation ex nihilo was 'an innovation/invention' or was it 'merely drawing out and making explicit' what is implicit a biblical theme (94).

I want to challenge this reading of May's work in two respects.  First, as I have already noted above, May affirms on the first page of his work that 'to be sure, it [sc. the doctrine of creation ex nihilo] *corresponds factually* with the Old Testament proclamation about creation, but as a theory it is not yet present' (xi, emphasis added).  Similarly, in the preface to the English translation, May says that 'the driving motive which underlies the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is an attempt to do justice to the absolute sovereignty and unlimited freedom of the biblical God acting in history' and that 'Christian theology has developed its doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* from its own presupposition' (viii).  So, although May does not see creation ex nihilo in early sources such as 2 Macc 7 or Philo where Copan and Craig do, it seems apparent that May would readily agree that the doctrine is 'rooted in biblical passages.'  May's work, rather, attempts to determine under what conditions creation ex nihilo begins to be used in a technical sense, as a rejection of preexistent matter.  Moreover, since Plato, for example, can call God 'the father and maker of the universe' (*Timaeus*, 28c) and yet assert that God makes use of preexisting matter in creation, May's caution in seeing affirmations of universal creation as evidence of a theory of creation ex nihilo is warranted (continued on next page).

needed to determine when 'creator,' 'create,' and similar terms are being used in a technical sense to mean absolute creation or creation ex nihilo. May adopted a twofold criterion. First, he considers the use of variations of the phrase creation ex nihilo and Greek parallels to be an important indicator that the concept of creation ex nihilo is being employed.[104] Second, May argues that we can only be sure that creation ex nihilo is being used in a technical sense when it is used in conjunction with a rejection of preexistent matter. Thus, 2 Macc 7 and similar uses of the phrase *ouk ex onton* cannot be considered creation ex nihilo in the technical sense because they are not used as 'an intentional antithesis to the idea of world-formation' (8). Similarly, evidence to the contrary, Aristides cannot have meant creation ex nihilo because 'it does not appear…that he consciously distanced himself from the philosophical model of world-formation [or] that he had formulated the conceptual difference between world-formation and creation' (120).

Admittedly, given the ambiguity in the language of creation, which is readily used by the various hellenistic philosophers addressed above (§2.1.3), criteria are needed for determining when creation ex nihilo is and is not entailed in more general references to creation. At the same time, however, since May's criterion is essentially that creation ex nihilo is only meant in a technical sense when used in antithesis to the hellenistic model of world-formation, then by definition creation ex nihilo will only ever be found in sources that are aware of hellenistic theology. May's work then, while helpful in its detailed examinations of various figures, is circular in its overall shape and does not offer a convincing case against finding creation ex nihilo in Paul, Gamaliel II, or Shepherd of Hermas (although, of course, the question is further debated in the literature with reference to each).

A similar concern might be raised in regard to May's narrow focus on the cosmological aspects of creation ex nihilo. He recognizes early on that the doctrine was developed as a way to 'give expression to the omnipotence, freedom and uniqueness of God' (vii) 'who creates freely and unconditionally' (2). Yet May's criteria focus narrowly on creation ex nihilo's claims about the nature of the world, and especially the role of matter in

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Second, although it is beyond the scope of this argument, it seems to me that serious questions are raised about the model for the development and growth of Christian doctrine that Copan and Craig apparently presuppose when they play 'innovation' off against 'drawing out' a biblical theme. Could not the development of creation ex nihilo be an *innovative* drawing out of biblical themes? Could not much of the important contributions of the early church be characterized as the *invention* of new terminology in order to 'make explicit' various claims that are 'rooted in the biblical passages'? Since *creatio ex nihilo*, like *trinitas*, *homoousios*, and other technical theological terms, are all in the plain sense 'post-biblical inventions,' a model for the development of doctrine is needed that has a positive role for the church's creative development of new ways of stating both implicit and explicit biblical themes.

[104] Osborn cautions, however, that 'the concept of creation from nothing can be found without the formula…Accounts of creation can only be understood in the context of their total argument' (*Irenaeus*, 66).

the creation of the world.  As I have argued in the previous chapter ('Creation from Nothing'), however, the Christian tradition has used creation ex nihilo as a way of codifying a series of claims about God, the world, our place in the world, and the relationships between God, world, and ourselves.  Arguably, with this sort of broader focus in mind, many of the sorts of concerns that are *ultimately* appropriated to the doctrine of creation ex nihilo would be detected in a variety of early Jewish and Christian sources.

Second, May takes for granted the consensus of modern historical-critical scholarship that Gen 1 did not originally, within its historical context, intend to teach creation ex nihilo or even address the question of preexistent matter.  The question then becomes, what is the origin of the doctrine?  How did the church come up with it?[105]  In searching for the true 'origin' of creation ex nihilo, 2 Macc 7:28 has become the focus of a heated-debate.  2 Maccabees 7 was a passage that was 'well known to early Christians' and 'especially struck a chord,' even more so than the story of the Maccabees and, for example, was the subject to three sermons by John Chrysostom.[106]  Moverover, the specific debated phrase from 2 Macc 7:28 is referenced by Origin as biblical support for creation ex nihilo.[107]  Overall, however, I suspect that 2 Macc 7:28 may actually be a red herring: as far as I can tell, it is never used in the 2nd century debate as a proof text for creation ex nihilo.  Rather, early Christian readers by and large appealed to Gen 1 as the biblical warrant for the doctrine of creation ex nihilo.  In short, just because historically-sober contemporary exegesis concludes that creation ex nihilo is not found in the OT, this does *not* mean that the early church did not get the doctrine from the OT.  Thomas Aquinas, for example, simply states: 'on the text of Gen. 1, *In the*

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[105] Although May does not explicitly state the question in this manner, but compare the discussion in McFarland, *From Nothing*, 1-10, which is dependent on May and develops the logic rather clearly: 'Theophilus followed the grammar of the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures' but 'many contemporary exegetes agree with the medieval Jewish commentator Rashi that the first verse of Genesis is better rendered as a dependent clause of a sentence' (3).  It is thus 'hard to avoid the impression that it [the matter of Gen 1:2] is in some sense resistant to God's will' (3).  Although various biblical passages 'seem to provide support for a biblical doctrine of creation out of nothing, closer examination suggests that such appearances are misleading' (4).  Like May, McFarland concludes that 'absent the kind of explicit contrast that Theophilus draws with the Platonist scheme of creation from preexisting matter…such language cannot be taken as evidence of belief in creation from nothing, because external evidence suggests that it is a Greek idiom used for the coming into being of anything new' (5, referencing Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 2.2-3 and Plato, *Symposium* 205b).  Thus, after this section on the 'Exegetical Difficulties' for creation ex nihilo, McFarland turns to uncover the 'Origins of the Doctrine.'  Although McFarland sets out the issue in this way in his introduction, he subsequently argues that creation ex nihilo can be grounded on broadly biblical grounds, especially John 1, even if it is not supported by the specific syntax of Gen 1:1-3.

[106] Lois Farag, 'The Septuagint in the Life of the Early Church,' 394.

[107] *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 1.17.103; *On First Principles*, 2.1.5.

*beginning God created*, etc., the *Glossa Ordinaria*, has to create is "to make something from nothing."'[108]

May has thus answered his basic question by identifying the 'origin' of creation ex nihilo in a series of convergent factors within the 2nd century milieu that led to the development of the Christian doctrine. It seems to me, then, that the fundamental questions that remains to be addressed regard how and why the early Church read Gen 1 as teaching the doctrine of creation ex nihilo. May is no doubt correct that the confrontation with gnosticism and hellenistic philosophy led the early church to formulate its doctrine of creation ex nihilo, but this was done within the context of biblical interpretation.[109] Thus, it is to these questions that I now turn.

## 3. BIBLICAL PRESSURE

I wish to argue that is not the case that the early church simply misread Gen 1 as teaching creation ex nihilo when it in fact does not, and so inaugurated millennia of theological reflection with an exegetical mistake. Rather, at least in part, the church read Gen 1 as teaching creation ex nihilo because of its commitment to read Gen 1 *as Scripture*, with reference to the one God revealed in Christ, and in doing so made a context other than the historical context of origin ultimately determinative for interpretation.[110] In the early church Gen 1 was recontextualized such that, in certain respects, the significance of the context formed by the text's origin was relativized. In part, this larger literary-canonical context was inherited by the church from Judaism: Gen 1 was received by the church as the preface to Genesis and, indeed, the whole Pentateuch and, furthermore, is connected through various allusions and thematic overlaps with a variety of passages beyond its immediate literary context in Gen 2-11. Within the 2nd century debates, moreover, Gen 1 was further

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[108] *STh* 1.45.1. The *Glossa Ordinaria*, a collection of patristic glosses on the biblical text reproduced in the margins of some editions of the Vulgate, were ubiquitous in the Middle Ages from 1140 onward (cf. Smith, *The* Glossa Orinaria).

[109] Fantino, 'L'origine de la doctrine de la création ex nihilo. A propos de l'ouvrage de G. May,' 601: 'La confrontation avec la philosophie est don un élément déterminant, mais il n'est pas le seul…De plus, cette confruntation s'effectue tojours dans le cadre de l'interprétation des Écritures.' Cf. Yeago, 'The New Testament and the Nicene,' 153: 'No theory of the development of doctrine which attempts to save the classical doctrines without accounting for the unanimous conviction of the Christian tradition that they are *the teaching of Scripture* can overcome the marginalization of the doctrines.'

[110] No doubt early Christian theologians' development of creation ex nihilo was also greatly shaped by the fact that they primarily encountered Gen 1 in the LXX and other Greek translations and that the possible categories for interpreting this passage seemed to have been laid out exhaustively with Hermogenes's three possibilities. On the interpretation of the Bible as a unified whole in the early church, cf. O'Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified*, 24-44; Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 142-178; and MacDonald, 'Israel and the Old Testament Story in Irenaues's Presentation of the Rule of Faith,' 281-298.

recontextualized as the OT as a whole was read with reference to Christ and was beginning to be set alongside the writings that together would come to be known as the NT.[111]

The emergence of creation ex nihilo must then be seen within a nexus of 2nd century debates: apart from perhaps the works of Theophilus and Tertullian against Hermogenes, none of the texts in the pre-Nicene period focus exclusively on the doctrine of creation. Rather, the doctrine of creation and the goodness of matter are tied up with debates about the unity of God as revealed in OT and NT, the nature of Christ, and the hope for the resurrection of the body and the renewal of all things. Within these debates, creation ex nihilo did become an important principle for shaping Christian discourse on these various other topics but its emergence cannot be understood apart from this larger context. The basic questions are (to paraphrase C. Kavin Rowe) 'Who is the God of the whole Bible? and How do we read Gen 1 in light of this God?'[112]

In relation to the interpretation of Gen 1, the canonical context has both negative and positive influence. Negatively, alternatives to creation ex nihilo were ultimately seen as having a series of far-reaching effects (as noted above, some of these implications do not seem to have been worked out before Hermogenes). While it may not be logically necessary to correlate preexistent matter with the origin of evil, this was seen as a natural move in the hellenistic period. If God and matter are taken to be active and passive principles of creation, it makes far more sense to attribute evil and suffering to matter, the passive principle, than to an active and good God. Thus, as we have already seen, hellenistic philosophy, gnostic theology, and even Hermogenes, who otherwise held orthodox views, all sought to associate matter and evil to varying degrees and in varying manners. The early church, however, did not simply object to this association because they wanted to affirm the goodness of physical existence—although they did affirm this—but also because this association led to a variety of missteps in Christology. For Basilides, all suffering, which accompanies material existence,

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[111] The issue of creation ex nihilo and Gen 1 in modern biblical scholarship is thus a particular example of the more general issue defined by Jon Levenson: 'the essential challenge of historical criticism to book-religions lies in its development of a context of interpretation, the *historical* context, which is different from the *literary* (or *canonical*) contexts that underlie Judaism and Christianity, in their different ways. In one fashion or another, these religions presuppose the coherence and self-referentiality of their foundational book' (*The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism*, 28. May actually moves in this direction in an early, suggestive passage that is unfortunately not subsequently developed in his work: 'Christian thought is from the beginning in a different position from Jewish. No longer the Old Testament as such, but Jesus Christ, is understood as the creative revelation of God. The Old Testament writings are applied to Christ, expounded in relationship to him, and thereby Christian theology cannot remain "biblicist" to the same extent as the Jewish. From the interpretation of the Christ-confession stems the dogma of the early Church. Thus the Easter faith forms the starting point for the formation of Christian dogma' (*Creatio*, 25).

[112] cf. Rowe, 'Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics,' 295. Rowe's article has greatly influenced my argument in this chapter, hence the allusion in the title of this chapter.

is for atonement; even martyrdom was a punishment for sin.[113]  Thus, by definition, Christ who has a truly human nature and suffered must also have been a sinner.  On the other hand, having associated matter with evil and the fall of the Archon, the Valentinians denied that Christ had a 'hylic' (or material) body.  Rather, they argued, Christ only had an invisible psychic body that was made miraculously visible.[114]

Thus, Irenaeus, for example, affirms creation ex nihilo as a gloss on Gen 1:1 (*Against Heresies*, 4.20.2) *so that* he can say that God's 'Word, our Lord Jesus Christ…in the last times was made a man among men, that He might join the end to the beginning, that is, man to God' (*Against Heresies*, 4.20.4).[115]  Similarly, the possibility and indeed desirability of the resurrection of the dead is also grounded on creation ex nihilo, the affirmation that material existence is part of God's good plan and not an aberration.  So the canonical context for interpretation provided a negative guideline for reading Gen 1: no reading could be maintained that made Scripture as whole incoherent or led to wrong claims about Christ or the nature of salvation.

Positively, as Brevard Childs argues, 'there is a content-derived pressure from the biblical text evoking interpretations which transcend a simple temporal relationship respecting the two Testaments.'[116]  That is to say, when the biblical text, in its totality, is taken as the context for interpretation, it exerts a pressure on the interpretation of given passages, such as Gen 1, that yields results that only partially overlap with interpretations that treat the historical, originating context for the text as ultimately determinative.  Childs stresses that 'the biblical text itself exerts theological pressure on the reader, demanding that the reality which undergirds the two witnesses not be held apart and left fragmented, but rather critically reunited.'[117]  Although not construed explicitly in hermeneutical terms, Irenaeus makes much the same point:

> the entire Scriptures, the prophets, and the Gospels, can be clearly unambiguously, and harmoniously understood by all…proclaim that one only God to the exclusion of all others, formed all things by His word, whether visible or invisible, heavenly or earthly, in the water or under the earth.[118]

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[113] May, *Creatio*, 81-82.

[114] Ibid., 110.

[115] Trans. *ANF* 1:488.

[116] 'Toward Recovering Theological Exegesis,' 21.

[117] Ibid., 24.

[118] *Against Heresies*, 2.27.2; *ANF* 1:398

Irenaeus consequently develops his account of creation ex nihilo by developing the biblical images of God as 'king' and as 'architect' (or builder) and conjoining them in an account of creation.[119]  Like an an architect, 'from himself God found the model and form (*exemplum et figurationem*) of created things.'[120]  Yet God is not merely a shaper; like a king, his commands are entirely efficacious and bring about the state of affairs that are decreed.  Although these models *are* present in Gen 1, they bring together themes from across the canon—God as a potter, God as covenant-lord, and so on.  Similarly, Theophilus asserts that 'first, they [the Prophets] taught us *with one consent* that God made all things out of nothing; for nothing was coeval with God.'[121]

Although I cannot here engage in extensive commentary, I turn now from the general claim that the canonical framework exerted pressure that lead to reading Gen 1 as teaching creation ex nihilo to an exegetical examination of several passages which exhibit the sort of pressure exerted that I am here suggesting is exerted on the reading of Gen 1.[122]

3.1 *Exegesis*

3.1.1 Luke 18:27

It is surprising to discover that while an obvious passage like 2 Macc 7:28 does not seem to have been referenced in the 2nd century debate over creation, Luke 18:27— 'What is impossible with men is possible with God'—*is* cited (cf. Matt 19:26, Mark 10:27).  Yet this text is virtually unreferenced in modern discussions of creation.  Theophilus criticizes Hesiod's 'mean and very weak' picture of a God who, like a man, can only build the world out of given things by asserting that 'the power of God is shown in this, that, first of all, He creates out of nothing, according to His will, the things that are made. "For the things which are impossible with men are possible with God."'[123]  Likewise, Irenaeus attributes

> the substance of created things to the power and will of Him who is God of all…and there may be well said regarding such a belief, that "the things which are impossible with men are possible with God."  While men…cannot make anything out of nothing, but only out

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[119] Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 69.

[120] *Against Heresies*, 2.16.3, trans. Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 60.

[121] *To Autolycus*, 2.10; *ANF* 2:97.

[122] I am not here making the historical claim that the following passages are *the* key texts for early Christian reflection on creation ex nihilo.  Rather, by drawing together a number of themes, these passages are selected as clearly exhibiting the canonical pressure or 'grain' of the text of the Bible as a whole which *did* influence the early Christian reading of Gen 1.  While it would be interesting and helpful to catalog the passages referenced in early Christian discussions of creation and determine which passages were in fact key, it is beyond the scope of the current project to pursue.

[123] *To Autoloycus*, 2.13; *ANF* 2:99.

of matter already existing, yet God is in this point preeminently superior to men, that He Himself called into being the substance of His creation, when previously it had no existence.[124]

It is possible that Luke 18:27 was already being referenced in connection with creation before the writings of Theophilus and Irenaeus, since Galen, in criticizing the arbitrariness of the Christian God seems to allude to this passage: 'for he [the Christian] believes everything to be possible with God.'[125]

What makes it initially surprising that this passage was referenced in connection with creation ex nihilo is that the context for the verse is the conversation between Jesus and the rich ruler. who asks, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' (Luke 18:18). Jesus immediately sets out to refocus the discussion by asking in return, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone' (18:19). The issue of 'eternal life' cannot simply be addressed with reference to what is to be done and human means, but must be addressed with reference to the nature of God. At the end of the conversation, Jesus concludes that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Although some make recourse to hypothetical gates in Jerusalem and other theories to interpret this saying in a less austere manner, the sense is obvious and straightforward.

Certainly the audience understands: if the rich cannot enter the kingdom of heaven, they asks, 'then who can be saved' (18:26)? To this, Jesus responds, 'What is impossible with men is possible with God' (*ta adunata para anthrōpois dunata para tō theō estin*; 18:27). Thus, in Luke, the context has to do with what is necessary for eternal life/entering the kingdom of God/being saved (the three phrases are coordinated in the logic of the passage). In the first instance, it is a claim that it is possible for God alone, who alone is good, to save men who, themselves, are impotent to inherit eternal life. That God can act, bringing about things that are impossible by nature, in a way categorically different humans act went directly against the hellenistic way of thinking and, as Galen put it, made God arbitrary, uninhibited by natural laws. It is precisely this account of the omnipotence of God, however, that exerted pressure on the early Christian reading of Gen 1. As Tertullian put the point, alluding to an analogous passage, how could matter be resistant to God, 'the Power which can convert the nature of stones into children of Abraham?'[126]

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[124] *Against Heresies*, 2.10.4; *ANF* 1:370.

[125] *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, 11.14, trans. Wilken, *The Christians*, 87.

[126] *Against Hermogenes*, 37.4, trans. Waszink, 76.

Thus the Christian confession about the nature and means of salvation shapes the Christian confession of creation ex nihilo.[127] Two hundred years later, Basil of Caesarea makes this clear. There are three kinds of creation: 'the first is the evolution from non-being into being (*paragōgē apo tou mē ontos eis to einai*). The second is the change from the world to the better [i.e., salvation]. The third is the resurrection of the dead.'[128] Asserting that Christian belief about salvation shapes its belief about creation does not mean, however, 'that creation is itself salvific…but that creation from nothing is a necessary implication of Christian confidence in God's ability to save.'[129]

3.1.2 Romans 4:17

On the basis of Luke 18:27 alone, Galen's critique that this view of God's power makes Him arbitrary may gain some traction. As Christian have long recognized, however, they 'cannot properly speak of divine power in abstraction from a set of stories that account for God as creator, as redeemer, and as the One who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.'[130] In Rom 4, Paul's sustained reflection on Abraham, God is identified circuitously with a series of relative clauses. The syntax of each clause is indicates that the believer trusts God precisely in respect of these characteristics. *He* is the one 'who justifies the ungodly' (4:5), 'who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist' (*tou zōopoiountos tous nekrous kai kalountos ta mē onta hōs onta*; 4:17), and 'who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord' (4:25).

As might be expected, opinions differ if Paul here intended creation ex nihilo when he refers to 'calling into existence the things that do not exist.'[131] John Murray, for example, reasonably argues that 'the things which are not' refers 'to the things determined by God to come to pass but which have not yet been fulfilled. These things do not yet exist, but since they are determined by God they are "called" by him as having existence.' Thus, 'the word

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[127] Thus the early Christian tradition would strongly reject Maria's terrible bit of theologizing in *The Sound of Music* when she sings that 'Nothing comes from nothing. Nothing ever could. So somewhere in my youth or childhood. I must have done something good' (I am indebted to Walter Moberly for drawing my attention to this). The very point of the Christian doctrine of creation ex nihilo is that despite that fact that we may have never done anything good, God can *nevertheless* makes something of us.

[128] Letter 8.11; *NPNF*[2] 8:121.

[129] McFarland, *From Nothing*, 10-11. This, in turn, suggests a heuristically helpful way of reading Gerhard von Rad's essay 'The Theological Problem of the Old Testament Doctrine of Creation,' 53-64), where he argues that Israel's redemption faith preceded its creation faith.

[130] Brian Robinette, 'The Difference that Nothing Makes,' 539.

[131] Jonathan Worthington, '*Creatio Ex Nihilo* and Romans 4.17 in Context,' 50-53; Copan and Craig, *Creation out of Nothing*, 75-78 offer surveys of the relevant literature.

"call" is used of God' effectual word and determination.'[132]  Whether this phrase does refer to creation ex nihilo in the first instance, may be beside the point.  Rather, throughout Romans, God is portrayed as the one who gives life to the dead; resurrection is a significant theme in the book.[133]  In fact, Rom 4:17 marks the intersection of several major themes of the book. That the power of God for resurrection is an object of *faith* in this passage is significant: it is only as we learn radical faith in the God 'whose word…can recall into being all that has lapsed into non-being' that we can begin to see and live life as 'wholly given to one by God' and so be 'freed from self-possession and for self-giving.'[134]

Romans 4:17, then, echoes back to the larger context of Luke 18:27, where freedom to give away everything comes only through trust in the God who alone is good and can do what is impossible for humans.  It also picks up a an important aspect of Jesus' teaching on the resurrection that is recorded, in at least four forms, six times in the Gospels: 'Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life *for my sake and the Gospel's* will save it' (Mark 8:35; cf. Matt 10:39; 16:25; Luke 9:24; 17:33; John 12:25).  The trust in God that is central to Jesus' teaching about discipleship is radicalized in these passages: only by trusting ourselves and our futures to the divine power of the God who is faithful to His people do we become free to risk ourselves and give all that we have 'in love for others and the service of his kingdom.'[135]  Thus in Rom 4:17, Paul is echoing a theme found throughout the NT.  The trust in God's power for resurrection is a radical form of trust in God the creator, who gives the fulness of life to His creation, even beyond the point of death.

This dynamic of resurrection-faith bears some reflection in terms of the previous discussion: it is the assertion that in a situation where there is no human or natural possibility of life, where there is no potential, God nevertheless gives life.  Given this opposition, the God who brings life to the dead, the second clause should be interpreted as an analogous antithesis.  This does not *necessarily* mean the same as creation ex nihilo but even if, as Murray argues, it applies to God's providence generally, it must refer to God's bringing into being things that do not yet have being.  This radical trust in God as the one who gives life and calls into being is not, for Paul, simply hopeful thinking but is rather grounded in the concrete: we can believe in this God because it is He 'who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification' (4:25).  This

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[132] *Romans*, 1:147.

[133] Hays, 'The God of Mercy,' 135.

[134] Bauckham, 'God Who Raises the Dead,' 143-144.

[135] Ibid., 145.

radical creation and resurrection faith finds its grounds and coherence in the story of 'Jesus our Lord, delivered up…and raised up.'

In the first instance, however, it should be noted that God's power to bring life to the dead and give being to non-being is not applied in a sustained way to creation but rather to Abraham and Sarah's infertility. Paul writes that Abraham's faith in God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist did not waver 'when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead…or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb' (4:19). There is a clear parallelism here: God gives life and Abraham is as good as dead; God calls into existence things that have no existence and Sarah's womb is barren or, more literally, dead (*tēn nekrōsin tēs mētras*).[136] There are, of course, echoes of Sarah throughout the OT: barren women, who appeal to God and bear sons (Gen 25:21; 30:22-24; Judg 13; 1 Sam 1-2). God's 'opening' and 'closing' the womb is a clear demonstration of His power which may have had added significance in the ancient world. It seems to have been common to equate the male contribution to conception with the active, formal principle and the female contribution with the passive, material principle.[137] Against this background, God's giving a child to Sarah, who was barren, could be *conceptio ex nihilo*.

At any rate, the connections between resurrection and creation were frequently noted in the 2nd century and the argument could work both ways.[138] Tatian's argument for creation ex nihilo is preceded by the affirmation that 'God alone is to be feared' and followed immediately by an argument for the Christian belief in the resurrection, on the grounds that matter is created.[139] Similarly, Irenaeus argues that if God cannot raise the dead, then he cannot be the one who calls things out of nothing.[140] It is thus apparent that, for early Christian theologians, creation and resurrection are parallel acts of God and that, therefore, 'death' and 'non-being' were analogous states over which God had power beyond the laws of nature.

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[136] On the experience of death in the midst of life, cf. Bernd Janowski, *Arguing with God*, 46-53.

[137] Aristotle, for example, is quite clear on this; cf. *On the Generation of Animals*, 729a. A similar conception may be behind ANE expressions such as 'virgin soil' (*qrq' bḥwlh*) or the Amarna Letter from Rib-Hadda complaining about the lack of cultivators that 'my field is like a woman without a husband' (EA 75). Cf. Needham and Hughes, *A History of Embryology*, 18-81.

[138] Cf. Justin's fragments *On the Resurrection* and Pseudo-Athenagoras, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, which is likely early 3rd century; cf. Kiel, *Pseudo-Athenagoras*, 390. Note also Brevard Childs's observation that 'from a noetic perspective the Christian faith in God the creator arose from its experience of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead' (*Biblical Theology*, 397).

[139] *Address to the Greeks*, 4-6. Pseudo-Athenagoras also argues for the resurrection *from* creation ex nihilo.

[140] *Against Heresies*, 5.3.2; cf. Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 224-228.

## 3.2 *Implications*

Further examples could be given. The exilic prophets exhibit a similar tendency as their faith in God as creator grounds a faith that He will deliver in a situation where communal identity and power have been utterly lost.[141] Early Christians argued that creation ex nihilo was of central significance for the efficacy of the sacraments and thus, from another angle, this entire argument could be reworked in terms of sacramental theology.[142] The strong biblical emphasis on historical development in the process of redemption stands in contrast to the timelessness of hellenistic cosmologies.[143] I believe that these two extended examples, Luke 18:27 and Rom 4:17, are sufficient to demonstrate the sort of 'pressure' exerted by the canonical context in which the early church read Gen 1 to formulate something like creation ex nihilo.

Early Christians did not approach Gen 1 as a neutral text but as a key passage within their Scriptures and that context 'exerts a pressure ("coercion") upon its interpreters and asserts itself within theological reflection and discourse such there there is (or can be) a profound continuity, grounded in the subject matter itself, between the biblical text and traditional Christian exegesis and theological formulation.'[144] If the basic questions put to Gen 1 are 'Who is the God of the whole Bible? and How do we read Gen 1 in light of this God?' it is apparent how the canonical context exerts a pressure on the interpreter to makes the sort of ontological judgment about the nature of God's relation to the created world that the early church made with its doctrine of creation ex nihilo. If all things are possible for God, even things that are impossible for creatures, then why would God require matter to create, like a creature? If God has power to give life to the dead, to situations where there is no natural potential, then could He not give life to His creation *ex nihilo*, where there is no natural (material) potential?

The point has never been, for the Christian tradition, simply to secure a piece of esoteric metaphysical-cosmological theory. Rather, affirming creation ex nihilo is about framing a way of speaking about God's work in within the world. Thus, I conclude this

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[141] Cf. Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 67-68. It is precisely in this context that some of the key intertextual allusions to Gen 1 that were picked up by Gamaliel II in his rejection of preexistent matter occur.

[142] Cf. Young, *Making*, 20-21.

[143] Cf. Bockmuehl, '*Creatio ex nihilo*,' 254.

[144] Rowe, 'Biblical Pressure,' 308.

section with two quotes, one from Martin Luther, the other from John Calvin, demonstrating how Christian discourse properly operates according to the principle of creation ex nihilo.

Luther, commenting on Ps 38:15-22 writes

It is God's nature to make something out of nothing; hence out of one who is not yet nothing God cannot make anything. Human beings, however, make something else out of what already exists; but this has no value whatever. Therefore God accepts only the forsaken, cures only the sick, gives sight only to the blind, restores life only to the dead, sanctifies only the sinners, gives wisdom only to the unwise. In short, he has mercy only on those who are wretched, and gives grace only to those who are not in grace.[145]

Similarly, in reflection on Rom 4:18-22, Calvin writes

We do not sufficiently exalt the power of God, if we do not consider it greater than our weakness. Faith, therefore, ought not to look to our weakness, misery, and defects, but should fix its whole attention on the power of God alone. If it depended on our righteousness or dignity, it would never reach the consideration of God's power…Faith does not suppose that God can do all things while in the meantime remaining unmoved, but rather locates His power in His continual activity, and applies it in particular to what is effected by His Word.[146]

Creation ex nihilo is, in the first instance, a way of saying that although *we* are nothing, in our natural capacities, God might yet make something of us.

3.3 *Restating the Question*

In conclusion we must return to the larger question at hand that is, what is the role of creation ex nihilo in contemporary interpretation of Gen 1? The current argument has sought to make two interrelated points. First, by carefully tracing the emergence of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo in the 2nd century, it has been shown that although the doctrine emerged in the clashes with gnostic and hellenistic thought, the doctrine cannot simply be characterized as a wholesale adoption by Christianity of a hellenistic belief. Rather, although creation ex nihilo is articulated within the frame of reference of hellenistic thought and uses its categories, it presents a radical break with the hellenistic doctrine of preexistent matter. Although biblical scholars may still ultimately find creation ex nihilo unsuitable as a category for the interpretation of Gen 1, they cannot do so based on the caricature of the doctrine as the imposition of Greek philosophy onto Gen 1.

Second, I have argued that the emergence of creation ex nihilo can only rightly be understood as concomitant to the church's commitment to read Gen 1 within the framework

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[145] *The Seven Penitential Psalms* (1525), 306.

[146] *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans*, 99-100.

of the Christian two-part canon.  Within this context, there is a certain pressure exerted on the interpreter as the God who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth is further identified as the God for whom all things are possible, who gives children to the barren, who brings His people out of Egypt and exile, and who raised Christ Jesus from the dead.  Within this context, the early Christian reading of Gen 1 as teaching creation ex nihilo can be seen as a legitimate and rigorous reading, even if it operates within a different frame of reference than modern historical scholarship

While it must be recognized that this canonical context is a context with its own integrity, this does *not* simply resolve all the issues.  Rather, it raises a series of further questions.  First, must the reader simply choose between reading Gen 1 within the historical context of its origin and the canonical-literary context in which it is integrated as Scripture?  Or can the historical and theological contexts together contribute to a coherent reading of Gen 1?  Furthermore, even recognizing the legitimacy of the canon as a context for reading Gen 1 does not guarantee that it will be read as teaching creation ex nihilo.  After all, it still may be the case that the early church made key missteps in its reading or that its reading of the text in Greek rather than Hebrew made a definitive difference.  It might even be argued that the church ought to have rejected even the hellenistic terminology in its formulation of a creation doctrine.  Thus, the fundamental remaining question: In what way, if any, should the text of Gen 1 be read in terms of creation ex nihilo by educated Christians in a contemporary context?  It is to these questions that we must now turn.

CHAPTER 5

THE DEBATED SYNTAX OF GENESIS 1:1-3

'The obscurity of the divine discourse actually serves the useful purpose of giving birth to many views of the truth and bringing them into the light of knowledge, one person understanding the divine words in this way and another in that.'

—Augustine, *The City of God*, 11.19

1. INTRODUCTION

At least since the time of Rashi (d. 1105), who argued that Gen 1:1 was dependent on the main clause Gen 1:3, the syntax of Gen 1:1-3 has been contentious. In the early modern period, Dutch polymath Hugo Grotius (d. 1645) attempted to revive the view of Ibn Ezra (d. 1164), namely that Gen 1:1 was dependent on the main clause Gen 1:2a.[1] Grotius's proposal made little impact, however, and the traditional reading was generally held by modern scholars until Georg Heinrich Ewald (in 1848), supporting Rashi's conclusion with a different syntactic analysis, argued that Gen 1:1 is dependent on 1:3.[2] Since Ewald, the interpretation of Gen 1:1-3 has been a constant controversy, resulting in an immense body of literature. Rather than attempt an exhaustive survey,[3] I consider primarily the discussions of two scholars, E. A. Speiser and Robert Holmstedt, who favor reading Gen 1:1 as a dependent clause, though the arguments of others will be considered where relevant. These studies have been selected for their lucid and persuasive representations of the recent discussion of the syntax of Gen 1:1-3.

2. 'WHEN GOD SET ABOUT TO CREATE…'

In a succinct manner, E.A. Speiser, in his Anchor Bible volume on *Genesis*,[4] sets forward the enduring arguments in recent scholarship for a dependent reading of Gen 1:1. In

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[1] So Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 95.

[2] 'Erklärung der biblischen urgeschichte I, 1,' *JBW* 1 (1848/1849): 76-95, cited in Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 95. As noted below, Ewald also maintains this position in the 8th edition of his *Syntax of the Hebrew Language*, trans. James Kennedy (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004 [1891]). This analysis is not found in the first edition of Ewald's work, *Kritische Grammatik der hebräischen Sprache* (Leipzig: Hahnschen Buchhandlung, 1827). I have been unable to determine in which edition this analysis was introduced.

[3] This task has already been done in a number of places. Cf., Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 74-76, 94-97; Schmidt, *Die Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschrift*, 73-76; Bauks, *Die Welt am Anfang*, 69-92.

[4] (New York: Doubleday, 1964).

addition, Speiser was also the editor of the *Torah* section of the NJPS translation where Gen 1:1 is translated as a dependent clause. Hence, Speiser's comments can be regarded as a mainstream and influential statement of the dependent interpretation of Gen 1:1. Speiser considers discussions of 'the structure of the introductory verses' of Genesis imperative 'since their syntax determines the meaning, and the precise meaning of this passage happens to be of far-reaching significance.'[5]

Speiser recognizes that the vocalization of Gen 1:1 MT, though it indicates Gen 1:1 is an independent clause, 'should not be the decisive factor' since the vocalization is relatively late. Consequently, Speiser's main argument is based on a syntactic analysis of Gen 1:1-3. He maintains that the passage is structured as a dependent clause (Gen 1:1) followed by a parenthetic clause (1:2) both before the main clause (1:3). This yields the structure 'schematically as follows: "(1) When…(2)—at which time…— (3) then…"'[6]

2.1. *Speiser's Argument*

2.1.1 Grammatical Analysis

First, Speiser argues that *běrē'šît* is 'evidently in the construct state' since 'the absolute form with adverbial connotation would be *bārē'šīt*.' Thus, the absence of the definite article indicates that 'the Hebrew Bible starts out with a dependent clause.'[7] Speiser acknowledges that this is unusual since *r'šyt* would then be in construct with a finite verb, instead of the 'normal…infinitive in the second position,' as in Gen 2:4b.[8] 'Nevertheless,' Speiser asserts, 'Hebrew usage permits a finite verb in this position,' as in Hos 1:2. Moreover, this interpretation accords with 'the majority of medieval Hebrew commentators and grammarians, not to mention many moderns.'[9]

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[5] Ibid., 11-12. It is worth noting that Speiser finds historical precedent for his position in Rashi's exposition of the *peshat* ('plain sense') of Gen 1:1. In his argument, Rashi maintains that *rē'šit* is only used in the construct, citing Jer 27:1, Gen 10:10, and Deut 18:4, and suggests that Gen 1:1-3 finds an exact parallel in Hos 1:3 (Cf. Brown, *Structure*, 62). It should be noted, however, that immediately before his well-known statement on the *peshat* of Gen 1:1, Rashi first states that 'this verse calls out to be explained in the same way that the sages have expounded it, viz.: "For the sake of the Torah which is called *reshit*," i.e., "the beginning" (Jeremiah 2:3)' (*Commentaries on the Pentateuch*, 31). Though often only that portion of Rashi's interpretation that is analogous to modern biblical criticism is cited, it is unclear that Rashi himself believed that his *peshat* interpretation could stand in abstraction from his theological reflections on the passage.

[6] Ibid., 12.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

2.1.2 The Argument from Parallels

Speiser argues that the *J* account of creation, in Gen 2, begins with a construction identical to the proposed reading of Gen 1:1-3. Since Speiser considers the analogy self-evident, indicating only that 'vss. 5-6 constitut[e] a circumstantial description,'[10] his argument needs supplementation. Consider the argument proposed by William P. Brown: in both Gen 1:1-3 and 2:4b-7, 'the dependent clauses introduce *'ĕlōhîm*; the parenthetical clauses describe the natural condition…and the main clause describes divine action.'[11] In both, the pattern '*waw* + noun + verb' indicates parenthetical clauses (cp. 1:2 and 2:5-6).[12] In response to the objection that Gen 1:2 uses a *qatal* verb while 2:5-6 uses 3 *yiqtol* verbs, Brown reasons that the adverb *ṭerem* typically accompanies a *yiqtol* verb, accounting for the first two uses, while the third *yiqtol*, in 2:6, is followed by a *wayyiqtol* to indicate iterative action.[13]

Speiser argues that it is 'more important still' that the 'related, and probably normative, arrangement at the beginning of *Enūma eliš* exhibits exactly the same kind of structure.'[14] Before turning to questions of syntax, Speiser has already sought to establish 'a striking correspondence in various details…[and] the order of events' between Genesis 1 and *Enuma elish* 'which is enough to preclude any likelihood of coincidence.'[15] Speiser explains that in *Enuma elish*, lines 1-2 are a dependent temporal clause, lines 3-8 are parenthetic clauses, while line 9 is the main clause.

Speiser considers the parallels with the beginnings of Gen 2 and *Enuma elish* highly significant for clarifying the syntax of Gen 1:1-3 and it is primarily on this basis that he prefers the dependent reading.[16] This coalesces with two concerns that Speiser had previously indicated are central to the interpretation of Genesis 1: establishing the 'borrowing of the general version of creation' and identifying 'the ultimate setting into which biblical

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Brown, *Structure,* 67.

[12] Ibid., 66.

[13] Ibid., 67.

[14] *Genesis*, 12.

[15] Ibid., 9.

[16] The argument for a dependent reading of Gen 1:1 based on the parallel in *Enuma elish* is regularly used. See, for example, Smith, *Priestly*, 45; Sarna, *Genesis*, 5.

tradition incorporated the received account.'[17]  Thus, for Speiser, understanding the text's prehistory and interpreting its given form are inextricably related exercises.

## 2.1.3 Argument from the Logic of Genesis 1

Finally, Speiser posits two arguments concerning the interpretation of Gen 1:1-3 based on the logic of the passage.  First, he asserts that if Gen 1:1 is read as an independent clause and 1:2 describes an ensuing 'chaos,' the God could be 'charged with an inadequate initial performance.'[18]  This, asserts Speiser, is grounds for rejecting the traditional reading of Gen 1:1-3.

Second, Speiser addresses some of the larger conceptual issues influencing the interpretation of Gen 1:1.  He acknowledges that his interpretation 'precludes the view that the creation accounts in Genesis say nothing about coexistent matter.'[19]  Though some may object to the dependent reading since it therefore implies some material that is coexistent with God, Speiser suggests that this indicates erroneous expectations for biblical interpretation: 'the question…is not the ultimate truth about cosmogony, but only the exact meaning of the Genesis passages which deal with the subject.'[20]  In this respect, contends Speiser, 'the biblical writers repeat the Babylonian formulation, perhaps without full awareness of the theological and philosophical implications.'  Nevertheless, 'the text should be allowed to speak for itself.'[21]

## 2.2 *Testing Speiser's Proposal*

In evaluating Speiser's arguments, it must be kept in mind that his book was not 'intended to be a "critical commentary" or indeed a "commentary" at all…it was a fresh *translation* of the Bible with a selection of notes and comments, often such as might explain

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[17] *Genesis*, 11.

[18] Ibid., 12-13.

[19] Ibid., 13.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.  Orlinsky, *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah*, 49-53, follows Speiser, offering essentially the same arguments for justifying the relative translation of Gen 1:1.  (1) The pointing indicates the *r'šyt* is in construct form; (2) the relative translation is then parallel to the second creation account in Gen 2:4 as well as (3) the opening of *Enuma elish*; and finally the word order of Gen 1:2a allegedly supports the rendering 'the earth being…' rather than 'but the earth was…'

or justify the translation.'[22]  Consequently, the following analysis will attempt to focus on the arguments and their possible implications rather than perceived flaws in Speiser's short presentation.

2.2.1 Scrutinizing the Grammatical Analysis

 There are two responses relevant to Speiser's grammatical analysis of *r'šyt* in Gen 1:1.  First, aside from noting that in Gen 1:1 a finite verb stands in 'the second position' to the construct noun, Speiser does not elaborate on grammatical and syntactical issues involved.  In biblical Hebrew, nouns can stand in a genitival relationship with other nouns or infinitives but only rarely with finite verbs.  Recognizing this, Ewald had already suggested that in Gen 1:1, *br'šyt* was the head of an unmarked relative clause.[23]  Speiser may have Ewald's analysis in mind, or perhaps he treats *br'* and following as an independent sentence 'which virtually stands to the construct state (as nomen regens) in a sort of genitive relation.'[24]  However, even accounting for Speiser's philosophy of translations, namely that 'a faithful translation is by no means the same thing as a literal rendering' and that the translator should not substitute 'word for word rather than idiom for idiom,'[25] neither grammatical analysis justifies translating the Hebrew noun *r'šyt* with the English verbal phrase 'set about' or translating the finite verb *br'* as if it were an infinitive: 'to create.'[26]

 Second, Speiser suggests that 'Hebrew usage permits' a noun to be in construct with a finite verb, as in Hos 1:2.  One example, however, is insufficient to demonstrate that this was 'proper' Hebrew usage, much less that it is probable that this construction is found in Gen 1:1.  The grammatical acceptability of this construction is central to the interpretation of Gen 1:1 and so is examined here in some detail.  I have found 47 examples of a noun in construct with a verb referenced in the secondary literature.[27]  Though this list is not exhaustive, it is

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[22] James Barr, 'Remembrances of "Historical Criticism": Speiser's Genesis Commentary and Its History of Reception,' 64.

[23] Cf. §3 below.

[24] GKC, §130d.  Since GKC here references §155 on relative clauses, these two analyses are very similar.

[25] *Genesis*, lxvi, lxiii.

[26] A similar problem is present in Brown's translation: 'When God began to create…' (*Structure*, 60).

[27]  Gibson, *Davidson's Introductory Hebrew Grammar—Syntax*, §25. Harper, *Amos and Hosea*; Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Samuel*; ibid., *Deuteronomy*; Joüon-Muraoko §129q; *IBHS* §19.6.

large enough to be representative and includes all the examples cited as possible parallels to Gen 1:1 or Hos 1:2.

Listed in Table 1, at the end of this chapter, are 47 (43) instances of a noun in construct with a verb.[28]  They are compared to Gen 1:1-3a in eight respects.  First, in Gen 1:1 both the subject and the object of the verb *br'* are specified.  In the other examples, it is noted if the subject (column 1) or the object (or indirect object, column 2) of the verb are specified.

Next, in Gen 1:1-3, the construct + verb construction begins the sentence.  Other instances where the construction begins a sentence are registered in column 3.  It is significant that only in Hos 1:2 and 2 Chron 20:22 is this construction used to begin a prose sentence, perhaps because the construction is usually dependent on the larger context of the sentence for intelligibility.

Similarly, in Gen 1:1, the construct noun has a prepositional prefix; this is also noted in the other examples (column 4).  In Gen 1:1, if the dependent reading is correct, *br'šyt br'* functions as an extended temporal adverb describing when God spoke.  Other instances where a noun in construct with a verb functions as a temporal adverb are logged in column 5.  Columns 4-5 thus helpfully distinguish those examples that are relatively close to Gen 1:1-3.  Only those examples where the construction functions as a temporal adverb helpfully illuminate the syntax of Gen 1:1.

Columns 6-7 are closely related as they indicate when the construct + verb construction occurs before the main verb of the clause and what pattern the main verb follows (i.e., *qatal*, *yiqtol*).  On the dependent reading of Gen 1:1 the temporal adverb *br'šyt br'* occurs before the main, verb, which is *wayyiqtol*, in Gen 1:3a.  This appears to be somewhat unusual, probably because *wayyiqtol* verbs generally begin sentences.[29]  Finally, the relative complexity of the various sentences containing nouns in construct with finite verbs are gauged by the number of words in the sentence (column 8).

A number of observations follow from an examination of the given examples.  First, with 24 words and five clauses, the sentence resulting from the dependent reading of Gen 1:1

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[28] There is partial overlap between the passages listed in Table 1 and those listed in Tables 2 and 3.  Though Ps. 4:8, 104:8, and Prov 8:32 are all cited by Davidson as examples of a noun in construct with a verb, the construction is not apparent.  Moreover, Ps 18:1 = 2 Sam 22:1  and so should not be counted as separate examples.

[29] Hos 1:2, Ps 138:8.  In Exod 6:28, 1 Sam 5:9, 2 Chron 24:11, the construct noun is prefaced with *wyhy* which makes the passages disanalogous to Gen 1:1.

is considerably longer and more complex than the average length of sentences containing a noun in construct with a finite verb.[30]  Conceivably, nouns in construct with verbs tend to appear in otherwise relatively simple sentences because the construction is difficult for the reader or listener to digest.  This is probably also why the construction usually appears embedded within a sentence, where the context can guide the reading, rather than at the beginning of a sentence.

Second, it is conspicuous that in half of the instances (23 times), the noun in construct is either *yōm* or *'ēt*.  Both are identical in their absolute and construct forms possibly explaining their frequent use in this unusual construction.[31]  Alternatively, this may confirm Ewald's claim that 'nouns of time…may also be put in the construct state, by themselves, without *'šr*, at the head of the relative sentence.'[32]

Third, though not noted in Table 1, about half of the examples of nouns in construct with a verb are culled from poetic passages.  Though below I will argue against an overly stringent distinction between the grammar of prose and poetry, given the terse nature of Hebrew poetry it not entirely surprising to find this construction there utilized.

Based on the observations in Table 1, six passages stand out as particularly comparable to Gen 1:1 and are addressed in more detail.  In each instance, the passage is being examined to see if it shares a common syntactical framework or model with Gen 1:1-3.

1) Exod 6:28-29 *wyhy bywm dbr yhwh 'l-mšh b'rṣ mṣrym dbr yhwh 'l-mšh l'mr 'ny yhwh*

Exodus 6:28 presents a viable parallel to Gen 1:1-3 as the subject and indirect object of the verb are specified, while the construction may function as a temporal adverb modifying a *wayyiqtol* verb.  This is the way that numerous translations interpret the passage: 'On the day when the LORD spoke to Moses in the land of Egypt, the LORD said to Moses, 'I am the LORD…' (Exod 6:28-29 ESV; cf. LXX ).  The MT punctuation, however, marks a paragraph break פ between 6:28 and 6:29.  Following the MT punctuation, 6:28 could be read as the heading to the following narrative, picking up after the genealogical interlude in 6:14-27.  This would explain the otherwise labored repetition in 6:28-29.  If Exod 6:28 is read as a heading, however, then it is not analogous to Gen 1:1-3, where the construct + verb forms

[30] The average is 12.7 words.
[31] This could also explain the use of *'šry* in Ps 65:5; 137:8, 9; 146:5; Prov 8:32.
[32] *Syntax*, §332d.  Cf. §3 below.

part of a dependent clause modifying a much longer sentence. Moreover, the initial *wyhy* sets the passage in a context which finds no parallel in Gen 1:1.

2) Lev 25:47-49   *’ḥry nmkr g’lh thyh-lw ’ḥd m’ḥyw yg’lnw*

Leviticus 25:47-49 is analogous to Gen 1:1-3 in its length and complexity and demonstrates the possibility of a noun in construct with a verb in such a sentence. However, the construct + verb occurs in the middle of the sentence and neither the subject nor the object are further specified. Moreover, it is not strictly necessary to read *’ḥry* as a construct noun[33] and the verse is perhaps more clear reading *’ḥry nmkr* as a simple temporal conjunction followed by a finite verb.

3) Num 3:1   *w’lh twldt ahrn wmšh bywm dbr yhwh ’t-mšh bhr syny*

Numbers 3:1 presents a close parallel to Gen 1:1-3 in so far as the subject and indirect object of the verb are specified, the noun in construct has the preposition *b-* prefixed, and the clause functions as a temporal adverb. Unlike Gen 1:1-3, however, the clause comes at the ending of the short sentence. Moreover, the sentence is nominal, apart from the *dbr* in the subordinate clause.

4) Hos 1:2   *tḥlt dbr-yhwh bhwšʿ wy’mr yhwh ’l-hwšʿ lk qḥ-lk ’št znwnym*

Hosea 1:2 is the parade example of syntax parallel to that advocated in the dependent reading of Gen 1:1. A temporal noun is (apparently) in construct with a finite verbal clause, which specifies both the subject (*yhwh*) and the object (*bhwšʿ*). Moreover, this temporal clause as a whole seems to function as an adverbial phrase specifying the time when YHWH spoke to Hosea (1:2b).[34]

Though this is likely the best grammatical analysis of the text, it should not be overlooked that, as in Exod 6:28, the MT text marks a paragraph break (פ) between Hos 1:2a and 1:2b. This apparently supports the LXX translation of the passage which reads Hos 1:2a as a heading for the following unit rather than as an adverbial clause and takes *dbr* as a noun, translating it with *logou*. Hans Walter Wolff, for example, interprets Hos 1:2a as a heading

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[33] Cf. *HALOT*, 35.

[34] So Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea*, 153-154.

while reading *dbr-yhwh* as the *nomen rectum* of a construct chain.[35]  In this case, while the syntax of Hos 1:2a would match that of Gen 1:1, read as a dependent clause, the clause as a whole would not function as a temporal adverb and would not be dependent on a main clause. On any interpretation, it is significant to note that, though Hos 1:2 can be read as a relatively long sentence, its syntax is straightforward containing nothing parallel to the parenthetical clauses in Gen 1:2.

5) Ps 138:3     *bywm qr'ty wt'nny trhbny bnpšy 'z*

Psalm 138:3 is analogous to Gen 1:1-3 since the construct begins the sentence, functions as a temporal adverb, and the main verb is *wayyiqtol*.  This fits the basic structure of Gen 1:1-3.  Simultaneously, the dissimilarities, largely resulting from the genre differences between Genesis 1 and Psalm 138, are obvious.  It is difficult to conceive of Ps 138:3a, with only three words, as a suitable model for the syntax of Gen 1:1-3.

6) 2 Chron 24:11

This passage, too long to quote, is a promising parallel to Gen 1:1-3 as it has rather complex syntax involving multiple clauses.  The object of the verb in the *nomen rectum* is specified (*'t-h'rwn*) and the construct noun (*b't*) is used as a temporal adverb modifying the main verb (*wy'rw*).  This shows that a noun can be used in construct with a verb in a complex Hebrew sentence.  In fact, the omission of the relative *'šr* is typical of the style of Chronicles.[36]  Nevertheless, the use of *wyhy* to preface the temporal adverb in 2 Chron 24:11 is telling (cf. Gen 31:10, Exod 6:28, 1 Sam 5:9).  Perhaps this pattern should be expected in Gen 1:1-3 as well: *hyh br'šyt br'…wymr 'lhym*.

In conclusion, there are several unambiguous examples of nouns used in construct with a finite verb in biblical Hebrew, sometimes even in syntactically complex sentences. These instances are by no means common, however, and in no other example would misreading the syntax affect the sense of the passage as crucially as in Gen 1:1-3.[37]  This, in itself, suggests that the unusual syntax is unexpected in Gen 1:1.

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[35] *Hosea*, 12.

[36] So Driver, *Introduction*, 537

[37] For example,  cp. Dearman's comments on Hos 1:2: 'both readings function similarly' (*Hosea*, 90).

2.2.2 Reexamining the Purported Parallels

Speiser places much weight on proposed parallel texts for clarifying the syntax of Gen 1:1-3 and so his arguments will be examined carefully. Genesis 1 and *Enuma elish* are typically compared because of content (both are cosmological texts) rather than form or genre (one is prose, the other epic poetry). This genre distinction, however, may be more significant than is often acknowledged. Even within the same language (biblical Hebrew), caution must be exercised in comparing the syntax of prose and poetic texts. Even more care, then, must be exercised in building a syntactic argument based on a text that is from another language *and* genre. Is there, perhaps, an underlying logic governing the beginnings of cosmological texts, which is evidenced in Gen 1:1-3, 2:4b-7, and *Enuma elish* I:1-9, and necessitates that they begin with relative clauses? Or is the shared syntax a merely incidental feature of the three accounts?[38] I am unaware of any proposed argument, however, clarifying why ANE cosmologies tend to begin with dependent and parenthetic clauses before the main clause.

Speiser's structural analysis of *Enuma elish*, namely that it begins with a dependent temporal clause (lines 1-2), followed by a series of parenthetic clauses (lines 3-8), before the main clause (line 9),[39] has been challenged as superficial. Brown contends that the structure of *Enuma elish* is rather more complex. Lines 1-7 are all subordinate to line 8. Lines 1-2, 4, 6-7 all contain either statives or verbal adjectives and line 3 is nominal while line 9 contains a finite verb.[40] Lines 1-2 and 7-8 'function syntactically on the same level' since lines 1 and 7 both begin with the temporal conjunction *enuma* while lines 2 and 8 are parallel to 1 and 7, respectively.[41] Furthermore, lines 1-2, 6, 7-8 all contain the negative particle *la*. On the other hand, lines 3-5 make positive statements and the particle *–ma* at the beginning of line 3 and end of line 5 marks an inclusion.[42]

Brown concludes:

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[38] Alternatively, it could be argued that Gen 1 and 2 are directly dependent on a literary version of *Enuma Elish* though this was doubted even by Gunkel: 'the thought of a direct appropriation…is quite remote,' (*Creation and Chaos*, 96).

[39] *Genesis*, 12.

[40] *Structure*, 67.

[41] Ibid., 67-68.

[42] Ibid., 68.

lines 1-2 and 7-8 comprise a series of temporal clauses that depict the "non-nameness" or non-existence of creation, whereas lines 3-5…comprises a parenthetical digression of existence inserted into a series of negative dependent clauses, yet rhetorically they explain the phenomenon described in line 6, the absence of land. In comparison with the Genesis texts, the opening of the *Enuma Elish* is clearly more involved, and illustrates the syntactical complexity of a long sentence in Semitic literature.[43]

Further, though *Enuma elish* begins with a relative clause, it does not begin with an *unmarked* relative or a noun in construct with a finite verb, as Gen 1:1 might.[44] Similarly, Horst Seebass insists that 'Altorientaliche Kosmogonien sage entweder "Am Tage als…" oder "Als noch nicht…" oder "Als…", aber nicht "Am Anfang."[45] Thus it is unclear that the alleged syntactic parallel between Gen 1:1-3 and *Enuma elish* I:1-9 demonstrates anything.

Speiser's argument for the parallel between Gen 1:1-3 and 2:4b-7 is premised on Gen 2:4b being the original beginning to Gen 2. This premise in turn rests on two assumptions. First, contrary to the Masoretic punctuation, Speiser regards 2:4a/b as the proper division between Gen 1 and 2 rather than 2:3/4.[46] Second, Speiser assumes that, in joining Gen 1 to Gen 2, the editor did not adjust 2:4b in order to make it cohere with 2:4a.

Speiser's first assumption rests on a questionable understanding of the *tôlĕdôt* formulae in Genesis. Elsewhere the *tôlĕdôt* formulae in Genesis describe the progeny of the named figure. Thus, in Gen 11:27 the Abraham narratives are introduced *w'lh twldt trḥ*. Genesis 2:4a can be read as an unusual introductory formula wherein *hšmym wh'rṣ* stands in the place of the ancestor and Adam, along with the various flora and fauna, are the progeny whose narrative follows. Despite the variance with Gen 5:1 resulting from this reading, it is preferable to read the *tôlĕdôt* in Gen 2:4a as an introduction to the following narrative (2:4b-25) rather than as a conclusion to the preceding narrative, a use for the formula unattested elsewhere in Genesis.

Regarding Speiser's second assumption, although Gen 2 may have circulated as an independent creation narrative, it *now* functions as a sequel to Gen 1 rather than as a synoptic account of creation. Genesis 2 may have had an 'original' introduction, removed in order to

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[43] Ibid.

[44] Cf. §3.1.2 below.

[45] *Genesis I*, 65; cf. Westermann, *Genesis*, 97.

[46] This an old assumption and goes back at least to Gunkel who argues that 2:4a was originally the superscription to Genesis 1, bringing it in line with 5:1, 6:9, 10:1, 11:10; cf. *Genesis*, 3rd ed., 103.

better cohere with Gen 1.  In any case, it is improbable that Gen 2:4a and 2:4b, originally the conclusion and introduction of discrete narratives, simply 'happen' to form the parallel versets of Gen 2:4.  A more plausible conjecture is that Gen 2:4 was composed, either *de novo* or from inherited material, for its present context, in order to introduce Gen 2 and join it to Gen 1.  Regardless, it is questionable that Gen 2:4b *as it stands* was ever the beginning of an independent narrative and thus is problematic as a parallel to Gen 1:1.

In conclusion, reading Gen 2:4b-7 as a parallel to Gen 1:1-3 depends on a vulnerable hypothetical reconstruction of the original text of Genesis 2.  Moreover, in Gen 2, the narrative, like other ANE cosmologies, is dated to the primordial period by a series of grammatically negative statements (i.e., 'When no bush of the field was yet in the land,' 2:5).[47]  This is in stark contrast to Gen 1:1-2, where the scene is set through grammatically positive statements.  Additionally, if Gen 2:4 is read as a chiastic parallelism[48] then comparing Gen 1:1 to 2:4 would be comparing a poetic passage to more straightforward prose and should be done with caution.  Finally, as was the case with *Enuma elish*, Gen 2:4b conspicuously contains a noun in construct with an infinitive verb which, if anything, demonstrates the expected syntax for a dependent clause.

## 2.2.3 Discovering the Logic of Genesis 1

Speiser has proposed two arguments on the basis of the logic of Genesis 1.  There is little to commend Speiser's first argument, that if Gen 1:1 describes an initial action then the description of 'chaos' in 1:2 opens God to the charge of 'inadequate initial performance.'  As will be argued later, the insufficiencies described in Gen 1:2 should not be conceived as forces opposed to God (i.e., as 'evil') but rather as simply unsuitable for human life, like a shapeless mass of clay prior to the potter crafting it (cf. ch. 'Genesis 1:1 as the First Act of Creation,' §5.3).  This, however, could also be said of the world after each of the creative acts of days 1-5.  Only at the culmination of day 6 that creation is suitable for life and so called 'very good' (1:31).  Thus, that the results would be unsuitable for habitation *does not* mean that a creative act of God is not being described in Gen 1:1.

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[47] Cf. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*, 17-29.

[48] Based on 'heaven and earth' repeated in reverse order in 2:4b with the verbs for creating in the middle, yielding an AB//BA pattern.

Speiser's second argument, attempting to extricate questions of philology and cosmology from each other, entails a complex set of issues. Many biblical scholars would share Speiser's concern that the biblical texts might be domesticated if theological concerns —such as creation ex nihilo—are allowed to eclipse philological considerations. Meanwhile, his dictum that 'the [biblical] text should be allowed to speak for itself' resonates with the Protestant notion of *sola scriptura*. While it would be inappropriate to develop a full response to Speiser at this point, two observations are registered. First, it is increasingly recognized that texts do not simply speak for themselves. Textual meaning, rather, is a complex intersection—via text—of writer and reader, each with their own set of concerns, motivations, and hopes. Thus, even if Speiser is correct that supplying answers regarding 'coexistent matter' was not the reason the author wrote Gen 1:1-3, this does not mean that readers cannot pose the question. Second, based on this observation, one can appreciate that readers who approach the biblical texts with religious motivations presuppose that 'the exact meaning of the Genesis passages' may indeed contribute to an understanding of 'ultimate truth about cosmogony.'[49]

2.2.4 Conclusion

Speiser's arguments have shown that it is possible to read Gen 1:1 as a dependent clause. None of the proposed syntactic analogies, however, are particularly persuasive. At the end of his comments, the impression remains that Speiser finds the dependent reading convincing because of prior commitments to reading Genesis 1 within the context of a specific literary genre (Mesopotamian cosmologies) applying a distinct comparative methodology. For those who do not share Speiser's pre-commitments, or attempt to read Genesis 1 independently before comparing it to other texts, the interpretation of Gen 1:1 remains undetermined.

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[49] Speiser, *Genesis*, 13.

3.  'IN THE BEGINNING WHEN GOD CREATED…'

Though relatively recent, Robert Holmstedt's proposal regarding the syntax of Gen 1:1 has already begun to be cited as a plausible interpretation[50] and it is representative as it develops and advances Ewald's early analysis.[51]  Moreover, Holmstedt lays out the issues well and clearly makes the case for reading Gen 1:1 as a dependent clause and thus is an important interlocutor.

### 3.1 *Holmstedt's Argument*

Homstedt's basic thesis is that, in Gen 1:1, *bĕrē'šît* is the head of an unmarked (or asyndetic) relative clause, *bĕrē'šît* is in construct with the relative clause, and, since the head is in the construct state and the relative is unmarked, the relative clause is restrictive.[52]  This argument builds on the earlier insight of Ewald: 'Such mere nouns of time and place, however, may also be put in the construct state, by themselves, without *'šr*, at the head of the relative sentence.'  Ewald goes on to cite Gen 1:1 as an example, offering 'at the beginning when' and 'when first' as appropriate translations.[53]

### 3.1.1 Possible Options

Holmstedt begins by examining three possible construals of *bĕrē'šît* in Gen 1:1, offering arguments against each.  On the first option, *rē'šît* 'is a grammatically indefinite but semantically determined noun in the absolute state, used adverbially for absolute temporal designation' (57, emphasis removed).  Holmstedt's argument against this position focuses on lack of a definite article on *rē'šît* (*bārē'šît* is the expected vocalization): 'at the heart of this first position is the assumption that, since *bĕrē'šît can* be used without the definite article and still *refer* to a specific "beginning," it need not have the definite article to refer to the

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[50] The initial proposal is in Holmstedt, 'The Restrictive Syntax of Gen i 1,' 56-67.  Those who endorse or cite as plausible Holsmtedt's article include Guillaume, *Land and Calendar*, 35n9; Ellen van Wolde, 'Why the Verb ברא Does Not Mean "to Create" in Genesis 1.1-2.4a,' 6; ibid., *Terug naar het begin: inaugurele rede door Prof. Dr. Ellen J. van Wolde*, 6; Brown, *Seven Pillars*, 253n6; and Smith, *Priestly*, 222n38.

[51] Since Ewald is the first modern scholar to interpret Gen 1:1 as subordinate to Gen 1:3, it is probable that commentators who do not offer an explicit syntactic analysis, such as E. A. Speiser, are assuming a version of the Ewald-Holmstedt analysis.  Cf. Anderson, 'The Interpretation of Genesis 1:1 in the Targums,' 21: 'Modern grammarians have labeled this type of clause an asyndetic relative clause…commentators have largely agreed with Rashi's analysis,' and Bauks, *Die Welt*, 86: Gen 1:1is 'in Form eines asyndetischen Relativsatzes.'

[52] That is, it 'provides information about its head that is necessary to identify the exact referent,' 'Restrictive,' 63.

[53] *Syntax*, 215 (§332d ).

"absolute beginning" in Gen. i 1.' Against this assumption, Holmstedt notes that the examples of *rē'šît* used without a definite article are drawn from poetry and are consequently not very similar to the prose of Gen 1, 'its "poetic" features notwithstanding.'[54] Moreover, 'the linguistic nature of biblical Hebrew prose,' asserts Holmstedt, 'leads us to expect an article on items that are definite and not in construct.'[55] Thus the first option is unfeasible as it is based on these problematic assumptions.

On the second option, *rē'šît* 'is a grammatically and semantically indefinite noun in the construct state, used adverbially for temporal designation relative to a separate main event' recounted in either Gen 1:2 or 1:3.[56] Against this option, Holmstedt argues that the sequence construct noun + finite verb is awkward. Though noting Rashi's proposal to read *bārā'* as *berō'* (infinitive construct), Holmstedt maintains that '[t]he common proposal that the word *rē'šît* can be in construct with the verb *bārā'* itself, or with the whole verbal clause, is not supportable.'[57]

A third option might treat *rē'šît* 'as indefinite and in the absolute state, e.g., "in a beginning, God created…"' Since this third option 'does not appear to have any adherent,' Holmstedt decides to proceed with reference to the previous two options 'that represent the field of scholarship.'[58] This suggestion should be kept in mind, however, as an intriguing possibility.

## 3.1.2 The 'Construct-Relative' Option

Having reviewed these three possible options, Holmstedt concludes that the only 'grammatically sound explanation of the syntax' of Gen 1:1 is to regard it as an 'unmarked relative clause.'[59] Holmstedt argues that this option succeeds where the second option above fails, since 'a relative word "nominalizes" a clause, making it an appropriate candidate for

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[54] 'Restrictive,' 58; though Holmstedt does not cite it, this point may be strengthened with reference to James Barr's observations on the frequent omission of the article in poetry in '"Determination" and the Definite Article in Biblical Hebrew,' 310-312.

[55] 'Restrictive,' 58.

[56] Ibid., 58, emphasis removed.

[57] Ibid., 59n8.

[58] Ibid., 58n4.

[59] Ibid., 59. Holmstedt notes as precursors to his position Anderson, 'The Interpretation,' 21 and Gibson, *Davidson's Introductory Hebrew Grammar*, 12.

serving as the nomen rectum in a construct relationship.'[60]  On this construal, *rē'šît* is 'not semantically absolute' but is in construct with the relative clause *br' 'lhym 't hšmym w't h'rṣ*. This would yield the following proposed translation of Gen 1:1: 'In the initial period that/in which God created the heavens and the earth…'[61]

In support of this proposal, Holmstedt invokes three 'salient features' of Hebrew syntax.  First, he notes that unmarked relatives are common in Hebrew.[62]  By comparing the similar constructions in Jer 42:3 and Exod 18:20, Holmstedt declares that 'unmarked relatives in biblical Hebrew may appear in the same syntactic environments as marked relatives.'[63]

Second, Holmstedt shows that in biblical Hebrew, it is possible for a head to be in construct with the relative clause proper, as in Lev 13:46, and that this construction 'also occurs with unmarked relatives,' as in Jer 48:36.[64]  Holmstedt concludes that this provides 'a grammatically transparent analysis' of Gen 1:1 and of the similar phrasings in Hos 1:2, Isa 29:1, Lev 25:48, 1 Sam 25:15.  Moreover, this analysis parallels Akkadian syntax.[65]  In fact, Guy Deutscher has recently concluded that 'the original RCs [relative clauses] in Akkadian and in other Semitic languages must have been formed on the construct state of the noun… the construct state functions as the marker of relativization.'[66]

Third, referring to his dissertation,[67] Holmstedt argues that 'when the head of the relative clause is in the construct form, the relative clause is always *restrictive*' and serves to identify the exact referent of the head and that unmarked relative clauses are also restrictive in biblical Hebrew.[68]

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[60] Ibid., 59n8.

[61] Ibid., 63, 65.

[62] For Holmstedt's examples, see Appendix 1.  Holmstedt's characterization of unmarked relative as 'common' may be based on his own research (cf. 'The Relative Clause in Biblical Hebrew') but contradicts the consensus: 'rarely in prose,' GKC §155d.   For the relevant discussions, cf. *IBHS* §19.6; Joüon-Muraoka, §158a.

[63] 'Restrictive,' 60.

[64] Ibid., 60.  As examples, Holmstedt cites Exod 4:13, Lev 7:35, Deut 32:35, Jer 36:2, Mic 5:2, Pss 4:8, 56:4, 10, Job 3:3, 6:17, 18:21, Lam 1:21, 1 Chr 29:3, 2 Chr 20:22, 24:11, 24:27, 31:19.

[65] 'Restrictive,' 61.  von Soden and Mayer, *Grundriss der Akkadischen Grammatik*, [Henceforth *GAG*] §166a notes that relative clauses are found in Akkadian with  the relative pronoun *ša* omitted.  A similar phenomenon has also been found in Ugaritic.  Cf. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbooks*,§8.16 (56), §13.68 (125) and Tropper, *Ugaritische Grammatik*, §97.131 (900).  Tropper list the 15 examples known at the time of publication, though the number may have increased with recent finds.

[66] 'The Akkadian Relative Clauses in Cross-Linguistic Perspective,' *ZA* 92 (2002), 97.  Deutscher's article has not gone uncontroverted, cf. Gai, 'The Relationship between the Relative Clauses of Akkadian and Old Akkadian,' 103-107 and Johnson, 'Internally-headed Relative Clauses in Akkadian,' 85-98.

[67] 'Relative Clause,' 119-125.

[68] 'Restrictive,' 61, 62.  At this point, Holmstedt cites the passages in Appendix 2 as evidence.

Having provided these clarifications, Holmstedt suggests that his proposal indicates that Gen 1:1 'is a stage-setting prepositional phrase, providing a temporal frame of reference only for what follows' and *rēšît* is relative to the events of the main clause.[69]  Furthermore, analyzing Gen 1:1 as a restrictive relative clause indicates that 'there were potentially multiple *rē'šît* periods or stages to God's creative work.'[70]

3.2 *Testing Holmstedt's Proposal*

3.2.1 Holmstedt's Assumptions

Holmstedt makes at least two assumptions regarding the initial word *bĕrē'šît* in Gen 1:1 that must be tested: he assumes that *rē'šît* is indeterminate because it lacks the definite article, and dismisses examples of *rē'šît* used elsewhere without the definite article since they are drawn from poetic texts.  Three considerations should be weighed against these assumptions.  First, as argued by James Barr, the relationship between the logical categories determinate/indeterminate and the grammatical categories definite/indefinite is rather more complex than has been assumed in most Hebrew syntaxes; and the two sets of categories should not be conflated.[71]  Thus, while many join Holmstedt in 'expecting(ing) an article on items that are definite and not in construct,' Barr points to a number of counter examples— the frequent non-use of the article in poetry; the use of the article with (apparently) indefinite nouns (e.g., in Amos 5:19); and the inconsistent use of the article with abstract nouns (cp. *'t-hḥkmh w't-htbwnh w't-hd't* in 1 Kgs 7:14 with *ḥkmh wtbwnh wbd't* in Exod 31:3, 35:31, 36:1).  In fact, Barr concludes that 'an abstract with the article is just the same as the same word without it,' as in the example of *'d h'lm* and *'d 'lm*.[72]  Taking into account the multitude of examples provided by Barr, a cautious conclusion is that, at this point, the role of the definite article in biblical Hebrew simply is not understood well enough to draw such definite expectations as Holmstedt presumes.[73]

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[69] 'Restrictive,' 65.

[70] Ibid..

[71] Cf. Barr, '"Determination",' 307-310.

[72] Ibid., 319, 333.

[73] Amongst Hebrew syntaxes, the most recent edition of Joüon-Muraoka footnotes Barr's article (at §137) but dismisses it with a short reference to the response of A.R. Müller, 'Zu den Artikelfunktionen im Hebräischen,' 313-329.  This dismissal is rather ironic given that Joüon-Muraoka is dedicated to Barr.  I have not yet been able to access a copy of the article by Müller.

Second, Holmstedt assumes that other examples of *rēʾšît* used without the article should be discounted because they are drawn from poetic texts. There are, however, relatively few uses of *rēʾšît* in the Hebrew Bible (51 times and only with the definite article in Neh. 12:44) and so it is unclear if the lack of the article in some instances should be attributed to the poetic context or if *rēʾšît* should be added to Barr's list of abstract nouns that do not admit the definite article. Finally, Holmstedt's contention that examples afforded by poetic texts should be discounted is surprising: most of the examples of unmarked relative clauses which he claims are similar to Gen 1:1 are themselves drawn from poetic texts (cf. col. 7 in Appendices 1 and 2).

3.2.2 Holmstedt's Evidence

Holmstedt's argument essentially asserts that Gen 1:1 has troubled interpreters because the syntactical construction has been misclassified while the proposed category, 'unmarked relative clause,' fits the construction well. As support, Holmstedt cites nearly 70 examples of restrictive unmarked relative clauses to demonstrate that, if placed in this category, Gen 1:1 would find a number of parallel constructions from throughout biblical Hebrew.[74] Thus, Holmstedt's proposal for Gen 1:1 is initially compelling since it analyzes the construction according to common, broadly recognized features of biblical Hebrew (and other Semitic languages).

Before turning to the evidence from biblical Hebrew, it should be noted that in *GAG* §166a with reference to unmarked relatives in Akkadian, von Soden and Mayer conclude: 'Die grosse Mehrzahl dieser Rel.-S. ist ganz kurz; es kommen aber auch längere Sätze vor, jedoch keine mit kompliziertem Satzbau.'[75] Though it is uncertain what qualifies as

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[74] It should be noted that the use of unmarked relatives is thought to be a distinctive feature of the Chronicler's Hebrew prose, cf Driver, *Introduction*, 537; GKC §155d. This would account for the eight examples cited by Holmstedt from 1-2 Chronicles. None of the other linguistic peculiarities of the Chronicler (Driver lists 46) are found in Genesis 1.

[75] John Huehnergard, *A Grammar of Akkadian*, §19.3.e similarly reports that 'it is possible for the relative pronoun to be deleted in Akkadian…when *ša* is deleted from a relative clause, the antecedent noun appears in the bound [=construct] form…the deletion of *ša* normally occurs only when the relative clause is quite short.'

'kompliziertee Satzbau,'[76] caution in approaching Gen 1:1 is advisable, since the sentence resulting from this analysis (1:1-3a) would be the longest and most complex sentence (24 words across 5 clauses) in a passage noted for its succinct style.   Moreover, in light of Speiser's arguments above, it is notable that this feature of Akkadian grammar is *not* found in the opening lines of *Enuma elish*.

Given the nature of Holmstedt's arguments, and the particular ways in which he uses evidence, a detailed testing of his hypothesis is inescapable.[77]  Such careful testing elicits at least eight relevant observations as follows.  The results of this examination have been tabulated for ease of use in Table 2 and 3 where a '•' simply indicates non-conformity with Gen 1:1.

First, one of the most obvious features of Gen 1:1 according to Holmstedt's proposal is that the head of the unmarked relative clause is followed by a finite verb.  This appears commonly in the cited examples of unmarked relative clauses (cf. column 1).  Second, on Holmstedt's construal, the head of the unmarked relative clause, *bĕrē'šît*, is in the construct state.  In the cited examples, there are instances where the head is in the construct state (column 2); but only rarely is the head then followed by a finite verb (column 1).[78]

Third, in Holmstedt's proposal, the unmarked relative *br' 'lhym…* is modifying a prepositional phrase that functions as a circumstantial clause.  In most of the cited examples, this is not the case; rather the unmarked relative modifies a subject, object, or indirect object

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[76] As I have no expertise in Akkadian, I contacted Johannes Haubold, who teaches Akkadian at Durham, to check that *GAG* is still considered authoritative and to see if any light could be thrown on the passage in question.  Dr. Haubold kindly replied that *GAG* is certainly still the the main reference grammar for Akkadian but that he could not address the issue of Akkadian relative clauses with any authority.  He suggested that I take up the issue with Martin Worthington, who is lecturer in Assyriology at Cambridge.  Dr. Worthington also very kindly replied to my query, pointing out that although the unmarked relative clause is possible in Akkadian, it is so rare that he did not have a good sense for the limits of how the construction might be used. Dr. Worthington, in turn, gave me the address of Professor Werner Mayer at the Pontifical Biblical Institute who, according to Dr. Worthington, is one of the best Akkadian grammarians but only corresponded through paper letters.  I carefully composed a letter posing the question as to what might qualify as 'kompliziertem Satzbau' and if this feature of Akkadian grammar does in fact provide a good analogy for Gen 1:1.  After posting the letter, I waited for weeks until one day in the mail I received the following, rather cryptic, response: 'Das sollte [referring to the discussion in *GAG* §166a-d], meine ich, für Sie wie für jeden Leser genügen.  Mehr gibt es nicht.'  I keep the note as a reminder to always chase down footnotes.

[77] 'Restrictive,' 62 n. 15.  Since, in the nature of the case, unmarked relatives cannot be looked up in a concordance, the focus is on the examples provided by Holmstedt which, presumably, are among the closest to Gen 1:1.  Apparently Holmstedt is working on a comprehensive database of Hebrew syntax, 'The Holmstedt-Abegg Syntactic Database of Ancient Hebrew,' that will include all the instances of unmarked relative clauses.

[78] Zeph 2:1, Ps 18:3, Lam 1:14 and possibly Deut 32:35, Mic 5:2, Job 6:17, 2 Chron 24:11, 29:27 where the head noun is formally identical in absolute and construct states.

of a clause (column 3).[79]  Fourth, and closely related to the preceding point, while on Holmstedt's proposal the head *bĕrē'šît* stands at the beginning of a rather long sentence, it is interesting that in the cited examples unmarked relative clauses tended to be situated within a sentence, so that the larger context enables comprehension, rather than stand at the beginning (column 4).

Fifth, Mark S. Smith finds it commendable that some of Holmstedt's 'examples involve temporal constructions, as in Gen. 1:1'[80] and this suggests that it may be important to determine how frequently unmarked relative clauses involve temporal constructions.  In examining all the proposed examples, it seems that it is, in fact, relatively infrequent that an unmarked relative is part of a temporal construction (column 5).[81]  Sixth, in a number of cases, unmarked relative clauses are used within nominal clauses (column 6), though not frequently enough to suggest a trend.

Seventh, as suggested by Holmstedt's own argumentation, it is important to note that the majority of restrictive unmarked relative clauses occur in poetry (Table 3, column 7), though for non-restrictive unmarked relative clauses the occurrences in poetry are roughly equal to prose (Table 2, column 7).  Eighth, it is surprising that cited examples of unmarked relative clauses almost exclusively occur in direct speech (column 8).[82]  It may be the case that unmarked relative clauses were a sort of colloquialism comparable to contractions in modern English.  Genesis 1:1, of course, is neither poetry nor direct speech.

What does all this mean?  Reading an unmarked relative clause in a passage like Gen 1:1 involves, in a certain sense, reading between the lines.  It is essential, therefore, to determine how firmly grounded such a given procedure might be in any given context.  If the eight observations made above tell us anything, they indicate that Gen 1:1 constitutes a somewhat unlikely candidate for inclusion in a list of unmarked relative clauses.  Of course exegesis is not algebra and one cannot merely cite the numbers of examples to prove or disprove a proposed reading.  If, however, the attempt is to gauge the level of resemblance

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[79] The exceptions are Gen 15:13, Exod 15:17 (2 times), Lev 7:35, Jer 36:2 Mic 5:2, Ps 4:8, 35:8, 56:4, 56:10, Job 6:17  and possibly Deut 32:25.

[80] *Priestly Vision*, 222 n.38.

[81] However, note Lev 7:35, Deut 32:35, Jer 36:2, Hos 4:14, Mic 5:2, Ps 4:8, 35:8, 56:4, 56:10, Job 6:17, 2 Chron 24:11, 29:27.

[82] The exceptions are Num 7:13, 1 Sam 14:21, Isa 6:6, Zech 6:12, Job 1:1, Eccl 10:5, Ezra 1:5, Neh 8:10, 1 Chron 12:24, 2 Chron 15:11, 20:22, 24:11.  Is it suggestive of a development in the Hebrew language that so many of these exceptions come from post-exilic texts?

between Gen 1:1 and the generally agreed upon instances of unmarked relative clauses, as cited by Holmstedt, the conclusion drawn from the above considerations is that Gen 1:1 is relatively unlikely as an unmarked relative clause.

For the sake of completeness, however, seven instances of unmarked relative clauses which *prima facie* resemble the state of affairs in Gen 1:1 should be noted and addressed directly. They are:

Lev 7:35      *bywm* [*'šr*] *hqryb 'tm lkhn lyhwh*

         from the day [when] they were brought near to be a priest for YHWH

Mic 5:2      *lkn ytnm 'd-'t* [*'šr*] *ywldh yldh*

         therefore he will give them until the time [when] the laborer births

Ps 56:4      *ywm* [*'šr*] *'yr' 'ny 'lyk 'bṭḥ*

         the day [when] I fear, I trust in you

Ps 56:10      *'z yšwbw 'wyby 'ḥwr bywm* [*'šr*] *'qr'*

         then my enemies will turn back in the day [when] I call

Job 6:17      *b't* [*'šr*] *yzrbw nṣmtw*

         in the time [when] they dry up, they vanish

2 Chron 24:11 *wyhy b't* [*'šr*] *yby' 't-h'rwn 'l-pqdt hmlk byd hlwym wkr'wtm ky-rb hksp wb' swpr*

         and it was in the time [when] the chest was brought...then he came

2 Chron 29:27 *wb't* [*'šr*] *hḥl h'wlh hḥl šyr-yhwh*

         and in the time [when] the burnt offering began, the song to YHWH began

Of these, it is unsurprising that Mic 5:2, Ps 56:4, 56:10, and Job 6:17 omit explicit relative words since they are succinct poetry.[83] Furthermore, in each of these passages, it seems somewhat obvious that the head is being modified by the following relative clause.[84] The history of interpretation suggests that Holmstedt's proposed reading of a relative clause in Gen 1:1 is not 'obvious' in the same way. Finally, it is interesting to note that the closest of these parallels, 2 Chron 24:11, suggests a plausible alternative for Gen 1:1: *hyh br'šyt br' 'lhym 't hšmym w't h'rṣ wh'rṣ thw wbhw*, rendering 1:2a as a nominal clause parallel to 1:2b,

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[83] Note, however, Ps 33:12 where one parallel verset uses an explicit relative while the other uses an unmarked relative clause.

[84] In perusing the commentaries on my shelf, I could find no reference to a syntactic difficulty with any of these passages.

c. None of these reflections on the evidence cited by Holmstedt disproves his proposal, though they may diminish its plausibility.

### 3.2.3 Larger Issues, Mostly Conceptual

Holmstedt's *modus operandi* appears to begin with the smallest units of text and work upward which is reasonable so long as the work is checked by a movement in the opposite direction. Though undoubtedly Holmstedt has responses to the following considerations, they are never addressed in his article but should be taken into account in evaluating his proposal.

First, if Holmstedt's argument is accepted, then Gen 1:1 as a dependent clause must be related to 1:2-3.[85] This thorny issue is well known and many arguments have been made for both 1:2 and 1:3 as the main clause but for now it is only important to recognize that Holmstedt's argument is incomplete insofar as it only examines part of a larger sentence. It remains to be shown that there is a suitable main verb and if the rather long sentence Gen 1:1-3, with its multiple circumstantial clauses, is compatible with the style of the rest of Gen 1.[86]

Second, if *rē'šît* is read as absolute rather than construct, then arguably *bĕrē'šît* introduces the prologue to Genesis while each of the eleven *tôlĕdôt* formula introduce a new section of the book yielding a total of twelve (no doubt significant!) parts. It is unclear, however, that a similar argument regarding the structure of Genesis can be made if 1:1 is read as dependent on 1:2 or 1:3.

Less reasonable is Holmstedt's apparent assumption that the path from 'exegesis' to 'theology' is one way.[87] Rather, when the conceptual issues involved in Holmstedt's interpretation are considered, his proposal may create as many problems as it solves. First, as hinted above, there are a number of difficulties involved in Holmstedt's framing of the issue

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[85] Holmstedt knows this: 'most discussions about Gen. i 1 extend to vv. 2 and 3 and include the issue of how all three verses relate, in this study I am concerned with the linguistic features of v. 1 alone' ('Restrictive,' 57).

[86] In his dissertation, Holmstedt identifies 1:3 as the main clause and presumably maintains this view in the article. Cf. Holmstedt, 'Relative,' 124.

[87] Holmstedt complains that 'theological objection' is central to the rejection of the relative analysis of *rēšît* (65) and takes von Rad's comment that 'Syntactically perhaps both translations are possible, but not theologically' as illustrative while 'disagree[ing] strongly' with J.T.K. Lim's suggestion that 'a person's view of God determines his or her translation' ('Restrictive,' 65n18). Perhaps Holmstedt gets hung up on the language of 'theology' and so misses the real issue of appropriate conceptuality that is brought to bear in interpretation.

as a contrast between interpreting *rēʾšît* as 'a grammatically indefinite but semantically determined noun…used adverbially for absolute temporal designation' or as 'a grammatically and semantically indefinite noun…used adverbially for temporal designation relative to a separate main event.'[88]  By definite/indefinite Holmstedt seems to merely indicate the presence or absence of the definite article and this much is straightforward.  It is unclear, however, what precisely Holmstedt means by 'semantically determined,' 'semantically indefinite,' or 'absolute temporal designation.'[89]  More importantly, what exactly is a determinate 'beginning'?  Joüon-Muraoka suggests that 'determination is perfect mainly in cases where the thing can be pointed to'[90] but this conception of determination seems inapplicable to 'beginnings.'

Similarly, Holmstedt characterizes the traditional interpretation of *rēʾšît* as referring 'to the "absolute beginning"' while on his proposal 'there were potentially multiple *rēʾšît* periods or stages to God's creative work' and thus the *rēʾšît* of 1:1 specifies a specific beginning.[91]  The categories used in both instances, however, are questionable.  'Absolute beginning' sounds more akin to discussions of modern cosmology than to the thought-world of Genesis.  Similarly, if Gen 1:1 implies that there are 'potentially multiple' beginnings then this would be a unique OT description of creation.  This points to a problem with unilateral movements from exegesis to theology: while one should not 'flatten' biblical witnesses, at the same time some weight may be given to an interpretation that generally 'fits' with what is known of Hebrew worldviews as witnessed in the various biblical creation traditions.[92]  Thus, at *some* point in the interpretive process, biblical theology(s) provide a crucial perspective for

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[88] 'Restrictive,' 57, 58.

[89] Neither the article nor Holmstedt's thesis contain anything indicating his working definition of 'semantic determination,' which is unfortunate since there does not seem to be a generally held definition in discussions of Hebrew syntax; cp. Joüon-Muraoka, §137; *IBHS*, 721 [index]: 'determination *see* definiteness'; Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 28: 'Nouns in BH are indeterminate (i.e., indefinite) unless marked otherwise'; Williams, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax*, perhaps wisely eschews the terms 'determinate' and 'indeterminate' altogether.

[90] §137f.

[91] 'Restrictive,' 58, 66.  Routledge suggests that perhaps Gen 1:1 can be read as a restrictive relative clause, following Holmstedt, but that this on this reading 'the restricting clause takes on an increased significance as that which defines the "beginning"' ('Did God Create Chaos?' 76-77.).  Along these lines, Routledge argues that Holmstedt's syntactic analysis uncovers a polemical element in the text: the beginning is when '*God* (not Marduk, Baal nor any other Ancient Near Eastern deity) created the heavens and the earth!' (ibid., 77).  I take Routledge's argument as an illustration that the various possible syntactic construals can function within a variety of interpretive frameworks.

[92] Cf. Brown, *Seven Pillars*, where seven OT creation traditions are identified.

exegesis, and proposed categories such as 'absolute beginning' and 'multiple beginnings' need to be integrated into what is known of the Hebrew thought-world.

### 3.3 *Conclusion*

Though Holmstedt describes his position as the only 'grammatically sound explanation,'[93] it is based in part on some problematic assumptions, and a closer examination of the proposed parallels to the alleged restrictive unmarked relative clause in Gen 1:1 reveals extensive dissimilarity. Moreover, given that typically they are found in direct discourse, it was proposed that unmarked relative clauses may be a colloquialism or characteristic of a spoken style of Hebrew, rather than the literary style of Gen 1. Finally, it was noted that a number of larger contextual and conceptual issues must be taken into account when evaluating Holmstedt's proposal.

Thus, one is left deciding between two *implied* features in Gen 1:1— *ha-* or *'šr* as it were. This is precisely when it is inappropriate to bracket out theology and larger conceptual issues regarding the nature of the text and reading and the best contexts for reading, all of which have a bearing on deciding the issue. Furthermore, it is doubtful that the issue will ever be resolved to the point that one could claim that only one option is sound. Rather, there are a number of options ranging on a continuum from more to less plausible: in addition to reading *r'šyt* as definite or as the head of an unmarked relative clause, *r'šyt* could be read as an indefinite, absolute noun ('At a beginning, God created…') or *br'* may begin a relative clause but also be read as a past perfect ('In the initial period when God had created…').

### 4. 'IN THE BEGINNING, GOD CREATED THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH'

Having argued that the case for interpreting Gen 1:1 as a relative clause is not as conclusive as it is often presented, I now turn to offer some of the more convincing arguments for interpreting Gen 1:1 as an independent clause.

### 4.1 *The Use of the Definite Article with* r'šyt

In 1955, Paul Humbert published a short article in which he attempted to clarify the syntactical issues in Gen 1:1-3 through a lexical examination of the term *r'šyt*. He suggested

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[93] 'Restrictive,' 59.

that of the 51 OT occurrences of the term, it is only used in a temporal sense twelve times.[94]
Moreover, of these twelve uses, only Isa 46:10 is in the absolute state and even this instance
has a relative sense.[95]  Thus, concluded Humbert, in Gen 1:1 *r'šyt* is also most likely relative
(and so construct).[96]  Since the publication of Humbert's article, there has been a flurry of
studies launching volleys of verses back and forth attempting to gain lexical ground.[97]  The
battle is now past the point that some previously unconsidered verse might be fired off and
win the day.  In what follows, I merely hope to orient the reader to the lexical debate
regarding *r'šyt* while providing some commentary on the arguments so far proposed.

The starting point for many who read Gen 1:1 as subordinate to either 1:2 or 1:3 is the
observation that *bĕrē'šît* lacks the definite article which one might expect to find based on
familiarity with various traditional translations (e.g., Vulgate, Luther, AV).  Furthermore,
while the versions support reading Gen 1:1 as an independent clause, there is little evidence
to support a re-pointing of the received text.[98]  In order to demonstrate that this starting point
does *not* inevitably lead to the subordination of Gen 1:1 to verse 2 or 3, three observations are
in order regarding our knowledge of biblical Hebrew, the absence of the article with Hebrew
temporal phrases, and alternative implications of the lack of the article.  These comments in
part repeat observation made in response to Speiser and Holmstedt above which will
hopefully be clarified through systematic restatement.

First, as James Barr has provocatively argued, it appears that the rules governing the
use of the definite article in classical Hebrew that have been posited in modern grammars and
introductions have oversimplified matters by placing too great an emphasis on a few leading
examples.[99]  For example, Thomas Lambdin's popular *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* states
simply that 'the definite article of Hebrew corresponds closely to the definite article of

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[94] Namely, Gen 1:1; Deut 11:12; Isa 46:10; Jer 26:1, 27:1, 28:1, 49:34; Prov 17:34; Job 8:7, 40:19, 42:12; Eccl 7:8.  Although Humbert refers to 51 occurrences, he only lists 50 as does Lisowsky's *Konkordanz zum Herbräischen Alten Testament*.

[95] 'Trois Notes sur Genèse I,' 83-96.

[96] A significant problem with Humbert's proposal is the failure to adequately relate the notion of a 'relative sense' to the construct state.  As a result, Humbert's conclusion rests on a sleight-of-hand: he argues for a relative sense but concludes that 'the only correct translation' is that which follows from reading *r'šyt* as a construct.  Cf. N. H. Ridderbos, 'Genesis i 1 und 2,' *OtSt* 12 (1958), 217n17.

[97] Among the most important responses are Ridderbos, 'Genesis i 1 und 2,' and Walther Eichrodt, 'In the Beginning,' 65-73.

[98] Cf. below, Appendix 2.

[99] Barr, 'Determination,' 307-335.

English in usage and meaning.'[100]  The problem is that there are far too many exceptions that cannot be accounted for by modern grammars, including the irregular use of the article with abstract nouns.[101]  For example, GKC §126n cites as an example of the use of the article with an abstract noun *baṣedeq* in Prov 25:5 without noting that in the other thirteen instances that this phrase is used in biblical Hebrew it is *běṣedeq*, with no apparent difference.[102]  Likewise, what is the significance of *haqôhelet* in Eccl 12:8 but only *qôhelet* in 1:2 (and the rest of the book)?  Careful consideration of Barr's argument suggests that in many instances instincts and expectations based on English, or Greek, usage are insufficient for understanding the usage of the article in biblical Hebrew.[103]

Second, the absence of the article with *r'šyt* in Gen 1:1 is not entirely unexpected since the word is only used with the article in Neh 12:44, where it is clearly used as a technical term for the first-fruits offering.  Moreover *'ḥryt*, the antonym of *r'šyt*, is also never found with the definite article.  Thus a lexicographical investigation of *r'šyt/'ḥryt* supports Gordon Wenham's dictum: 'temporal phrases often lack the definite article.'[104]  Perhaps, then, 'temporal phrases' can be added to Barr's other categories where the rules (or lack thereof) governing the use of the definite article are at present insufficiently understood.[105]

Third, as has already been insisted, the supposed link between the absence of the article and the construct state must be rejected.  On the one hand, as is being argued throughout this section, a word (in this case *r'šyt*) might be used without the definite article but nevertheless in a definite manner.  On the other hand, the lack of the definite article may simply indicate that *r'šyt* is *indefinite*.  This consideration has been raised more than once,[106]

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[100] 5, quoted by Barr, '"Determination",' 307.

[101] Cf. above, §3.2.1 for several examples.

[102] This example is cited by Barr, '"Determination",' 317.

[103] It should also be noted that 'Akkadian has neither a definite nor an indefinite article' and so nouns must be interpreted 'according to the context in which it occurs' (Huehnergard, *Grammar*, §2.1.b).

[104] *Genesis*, 12.  Examples include *mērē'šît* (Isa 46:10), *mērō'š* (Isa 40:21; 41:4, 26; 48:16), *miqqedem* (Isa 46:10; Mic 5:1; Hab 1:12; Ps 74:12), *mē'ôlām* (Isa 42:14; 46:9; 47:7; Prov 8:23; Gen 6:4), *lě'ōlām* (Gen 3:22; 6:3). Cf. Seebass, *Genesis*, 64; John Day, *From Creation to Babel*, 6-7.

[105] Other temporal phrases are found with the article.  *br'šnh* is always vocalized with the article while *btḥlh* is found both with and without the article.  In summary, no convincing explanation as to why *br'šyt* lacks the article in Gen 1:1 while *btḥlh* and *br'šnh* are vocalized with the article in Gen 13:3-4 has been proposed.  My provisional conclusion is simply that the abstract words *r'šyt* and *'ḥryt* do not take the article.

[106] E.g., W. Lane, 'The Initiation of Creation,' *VT* 13 (1963), 68; Holmstedt, 'Restrictive,' 58n4.

but is rarely taken seriously.  In either case, the assumption that the lack of the definite article indicates the construct state is unwarranted.[107]


4.2 *The Absolute Use of* r'šyt

Initially, an important distinction must be posited between the *semantic* category 'relative' and the *syntactic* category 'construct,' both of which have been contrasted with the word 'absolute,' which can also be used in multiple senses.  Though much ink has been spilt attempting to establish that *r'šyt* (and its antonym *'ḥryt*) is always used with 'relative rather than absolute meaning,'[108] this is a semantic issue and is only partially related to the syntactic question at hand.  Consider the English word 'top.'[109]  Like the Hebrew word *r'šyt*, 'top' is always relative: it always refers to the 'top' of something: a box, a table, a mountain.  Nevertheless, though phrases like 'top of the mountain' or 'table-top' are common, it still makes good sense when a mountaineer declares 'we are almost to the top' or for a band leader to say 'let's take it from the top.'

Examining the usage of *r'šyt* and *'ḥryt* in biblical Hebrew indicates a similar breadth of usage.  Both terms are always used with 'relative meaning'—they always refer to the 'beginning' or 'ending' *of something*.  This claim, however, really asserts very little and does not contradict the traditional reading of Gen 1:1 since it concerns the semantics of *r'šyt* not the syntax governing its usage.  Given that *r'šyt* and *'ḥryt* are always relative to something or other, it should not be surprising that aside from a handful of instances, the terms are found in construct with another noun or with a pronominal suffix.  The few instances where *r'šyt* and *'ḥryt* are found in the absolute state, however, are sufficient to demonstrate that this may also be the case in Gen 1:1.  Below, two uses of *r'šyt* that offer significant parallels to the traditional reading of Gen 1:1 are examined.

Though pointed out as evidence for the use of *rē'šît* in the absolute state by Ibn Ezra,[110] Deut 33:21 has been overlooked in recent discussions.  This is largely because *r'šyt* has been interpreted here as 'best' and is therefore thought irrelevant as a comparison for Gen

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[107] A recent example of this assumption is found in Ronald Hendel's Gen 1:1-13 sample of the Oxford Hebrew Bible (available at http://ohb.berkeley.edu/Gen%201%20sample.pdf) where he simply asserts that MT 'vocalizes this word as a construct form' (3).

[108] Brown, *Structure*, 64.  Cf. Lane, 'Initiation,' 63-73.

[109] Consider the noun, not the verb.

[110] In his commentary on Genesis 1:1.

1:1.[111]  Two observations, however, may reestablish Deut 33:21 as a parallel for Gen 1:1.
First, there are very few passages where *r'šyt* means 'best' without any connotations of being
'first.'[112]  Amos 6:1, 6 poses an apparent exception to this dictum although, within the larger
context, *r'šyt* is part of a wordplay with *r'š* in 6:7: the 'first' amongst the nations, who anoint
themselves with the 'first' amongst oils, will be the 'first' to go into exile.  Second, and more
importantly, it is doubtful that *r'šyt* means 'best' in Deut 33:21.  A tradition that Gad took the
'best' portion of the land is found nowhere in the Old Testament (cp. Num 32, Josh
13:24-28).  On the other hand, Gad, along with Reuben and Manasseh, were the first tribes to
get land.  The land of Gad is *r'šyt* only because other tribes receive their lands subsequently,
in a temporally extended series of battles.  In this light, a literal rendering is preferable: 'He
saw the beginning (or, the first) for himself.'  Thus, in Deut 33:21, as Ibn Ezra noted, we have
an example of *r'šyt* which corresponds morphologically to Gen 1:1 and is clearly not in
construct with another word, noun or verb.

In contrast to Deut 33:21, the use of *r'šyt* in Isa 46:10 has been the subject of much
scrutiny since Humbert's article.  Humbert himself conceded that *r'šyt* is here absolute
though he, along with others, maintains that *r'šyt* is nonetheless relative in meaning.[113]  Once
again, I believe the distinctions posited above cut through much confusion in the discussion.
Regardless of the referent of Isa 46:10a the clause *mgyd mr'šyt 'ḥryt* demonstrates
conclusively that the temporal use of *r'šyt* is found in the absolute, rather than construct, in
biblical Hebrew.

William Lane, in arguing that *r'šyt* is relative in Isa 46:10a, makes much of the fact
that, in context, Isa 46:10 does not refer to creation.[114]   Lane's claim is debatable[115] and,
more importantly, overlooks the larger context of YHWH's other claims to be 'the first and
last' (Isa 41:4, 44:6, 48:12) along with the recurring theme in Isa 40-48 that God is able to
recount former things and declare later things (Isa 40:21; 41:22; 27; 42:9; 43:9, 18, 27; 46:9;
48:3).  This theme uses a variety of related terms (*r'š, r'šwn, r'šyt, 'ḥrwn, 'ḥryt*, both with

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[111] So Humbert, 85.

[112] Thus *HALOT* lists the third definition of *r'šyt* as 'first and best.'

[113] See also, Lane, 'Initiation,' 67; Brown, *Structure*, 63-64.

[114] 'Initiation,' 67.

[115] E.g. Goldingay and Payne (*Isaiah 40-55*, 2:82) argue that the verse does in fact refer to creation:
'the uniqueness of the occurrence, the link with Genesis 1, and the precedent of 44.24 combine to suggest that v.
10a does refer to the beginning of creation.'

and without the article).  In his study of the theme, H. G. M. Williamson maintains that 'the various forms of wording are virtually interchangeable…Deutero-Isaiah uses a wide range of vocabulary to express what is basically the same thought.'[116]  Goldingay and Payne similarly comment on Isa 46:10a that 'the meaning is hardly very different from the use of *r'š* to mean 'the very first' in similar contexts.'[117]  Thus, not only is *r'šyt* in Isa 46:10 formally absolute but it is functionally correlated with the absolute uses of *r'š* and *r'šwn*.  Noting this context greatly supports Walther Eichrodt's argument based on the use of *mr'š* in Isaiah.[118]

Similarly, *'ḥryt* is also found in the absolute state yet without an article.  For example, in Prov 23:18 'there is a future' (*ky 'm-yš 'ḥryt*) and in Prov 24:14 'there will be a future' (*wyš 'ḥryt*).  Similarly, Ps 37:37 promises a future for the man of peace (*ky-'ḥryt l'yš šlwm*).  *'ḥryt* is also found without the article in Yʜᴡʜ's famous promise to give Israel a future and a hope (Jer 29:11: *ltt lkm 'ḥryt wtqwh*).  As with *r'šyt*, *'ḥryt* can be either construct or absolute but is never found with the article.

Thus, these examples provide a precedent for reading *r'šyt* as absolute even if its sense is relative.  As seen in Deut 33:21 and Isa 46:10, it is not necessary to read *r'šyt* as relative to something verbally present (or in construct with the following word).  This is essentially the interpretation of Gen 1:1 maintained by S. R. Driver who noted that *r'šyt* is used 'not absolutely, but relatively: *at the beginning* of the order of things which we see, and in the midst of which human history unfolds itself.'[119]  Alternately, one might read *r'šyt* in Gen 1:1 as relative to the story which follows.

### 4.3 *The Syntax of* r'šyt

Some attempts to clarify the syntax of Gen 1:1-3 have made arguments based on the way that *r'šyt* generally functions in sentences.  For example, Brown notes that the specific construction *běrē'šît* 'is elsewhere consistently used in construct (Jer 26:1; 27:1; 28:1; 49:34; Hos 9:10).'[120]  Though I am sympathetic to Brown's approach, *r'šyt* is not used frequently enough to provide sufficient evidence for this sort of argument.  Consider that Brown's

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[116] 'First and Last in Isaiah,' 100, 102.

[117] *Isaiah 40-55,* 2:82.

[118] 'In the Beginning,' 67-68.

[119] Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 3.

[120] *Structure*, 64.

observation could equally support reading Gen 1:1 as an independent clause since, based on the same examples, it can be argued that the construction *bĕrē'šît* always adverbially modifies a *qatal* verb but never a *wayyiqtol* verb and thus likely modifies *br'* and not *wy'mr* in Gen 1:3.[121]  Similarly, it could be noted that even if *bĕrē'šît* is elsewhere always construct, it is never in construct with a verb.  Unfortunately, one must admit that barring new examples from extra-biblical sources, the adverbial use of *r'šyt* is simply too rarely used to support abstractions about its 'usual' role within sentences.

## 4.4 *The Use of the* Qatal *Form at the Beginning of Narrative Units*

C. John Collins observes that 'the normal use of the perfect at the very beginning of a pericope is to denote an event that took place before the storyline gets under way.'[122]  Most narrative units, at least within the Pentateuch, begin with a *wayyiqtol* verb, such as in Gen 12:1 (*wy'mr yhwh*, 'And YHWH said…').  In fact, the books of Leviticus and Number begin in this way.  When a narrative unit does begin with a *qatal* verb it generally functions 'to describe an event that precedes the main storyline' (eg., Gen 3:1, 4:1, 15:1, 16:1, 21:1, 24:1, 39:1, 43:1, Exod 5:1, 24:1, 32:1, Num 32:1).[123]  Thus these phrases are translated with variations of 'Now the serpent was more crafty…'; 'Now Adam knew Eve his wife and she conceived…'  Since Gen 1:2 begins with the sequence *waw*-noun-*qatal* verb, as in Gen 3:1, 4:1, it is plausible to regard it as a continuation of Gen 1:1, giving further background information prior to the main narrative.

## 4.5 *A Structural Argument for Reading Genesis 1:1 as an Independent Clause*

Here I would like to argue from the difficulty of the contrary.  If Gen 1:1 is read as a dependent clause, then a main clause must be specified which Gen 1:1 modifies.[124]  Subordinating Gen 1:1 to 1:2a is syntactically awkward—the word order *waw*-noun-verb is unusual for a main clause in a narrative—and thus few have advocated this position.[125]

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[121] Even if the scope of investigation is widened to include the antonym *'ḥryt* and synonyms like *r'šwn* and *tḥlh*, no definitive patterns emerge which might clarify Gen 1:1.

[122] *Genesis 1-4*, 51.

[123] Ibid., 51.  Admittedly, many of Collins's examples bear a close similarity to Gen 1:2.

[124] Jon Levenson, for example, presents the dependent reading of Gen 1:1 as the most likely but never specifies what he takes to be the main clause of the sentence (*Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, 5).

[125] Cf. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part 1*, 19.  Walter Groß, 'Syntaktische Erscheinungen am Anfang althebräischer Erzählungen,'142-143 argues for this position.

However, it is also problematic for the structure of the narrative to read Gen 1:1 as subordinate to Gen 1:3. First, as already noted (§3.2.3), on this reading Gen 1:1-3 forms a rather long and syntactically complex sentence, which is at odds with the style of the remainder of the narrative. Second, although Hebrew regularly makes use of circumstantial clauses (eg, Deut 5:23), this reading would require that Gen 1:2 be read as a rather long and awkward parenthesis, containing information that would more naturally come before or after, but not in the middle of, a sentence (cp. 1 Sam 9:9; 14:18; 1 Kgs 13:18; 2 Kgs 15:12; Ruth 4:7).[126] Third, if Gen 1:1-2 is subordinate to Gen 1:3, it would not only disrupt the typical pattern for the six days of creation but it would also imply that the background information given is particularly relevant to the events of Gen 1:3-5. It is by no means obvious, however, that this is the case. Rather, I argue at length in a subsequent chapter ('Genesis 1:1 as the First Act of Creation'), that the material described in Gen 1:2 is used by God in his work in various ways on each of the six days of creation. Thus, in terms of the structure of the narrative, I find it more plausible to read Gen 1:1-2 as independent clauses providing background information about actions and conditions prior to the beginning of the mainline of the narrative in Gen 1:3.

### 4.6 *Conclusion*

I have argued that it is philologically plausible to read Gen 1:1 as an independent clause and that this reading fits best with the structure of Gen 1. Conclusions must be carefully drawn in such a complex discussion. First, on the basis of the above considerations, it is apparent that *r'šyt* is not necessarily in the construct state in Gen 1:1. Second, it is clear that the issue cannot be resolved based solely on the seven words of Gen 1:1. The probability of a given reading will inevitably be based on our interpretation of Gen 1 as a whole and our understanding of the relationship of our text to various historical, canonical, and theological contexts.

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[126] Tamar Zewi's study *Parenthesis in Biblical Hebrew* is remarkable for the extensive examples discussed. Though Zewi never proposes general principles for discerning parentheses, on the basis of her examples I suggest that it is unusual for a parenthesis providing background information to interrupt a sentence. Additionally, with three clauses, Gen 1:2 would make a rather long parenthesis. Apparently recognizing the troublesome length of a parenthetical clause similar in length to Gen 1:2, the author of 2 Sam 21:2-3 repeats the main verb *wayyomer* before and after the parenthesis. Alternatively, Gen 1:2 as a parenthesis might find a parallel in Judg 20:27-28 although here the initial clause of the parenthesis is nominal.

For example, even if one is persuaded by the arguments for reading *r'šyt* as a construct and Gen 1:1 as subordinate to 1:3 (as in translation 1), one might still legitimately translate the verb *br'* with the English pluperfect (2) depending on how the logical relationship between the actions of 1:1 and 1:3 are understood.  Similarly, *r'šyt* might be translated in the absolute as either (3) definite or (4) indefinite:

(1) In the beginning when God created…(and the earth was desolate)…then God said…

(2) In the beginning when God had created…(and the earth was desolate)…then God said…

(3) In the beginning God created…

(4) Initially God created…

Any of these proposed readings will only gain soundness as they are integrated into larger literary, historical, canonical, and theological contexts.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Although rather strong claims have been made by proponents of both the relative and absolute readings of Gen 1:1, on a sober analysis it is clear that there is no definitive case to be made on strictly philological grounds for any reading.  It seems to me that the relative reading of Gen 1:1 raises more issues than it resolves and it is clear that the early versions of Genesis tended to read Gen 1:1 as an independent clause.  But even so, should Gen 1:1 be read as the heading to the subsequent narrative or a description of its first step?

In order to make headway, the question must be opened up to a larger set of concerns having to do with the narrative logic of the chapter as a whole and the implications of the construal of Gen 1:1 for the reading of that narrative.  Again, this will not finally and definitively prove the 'right' view on the syntax of Gen 1:1 but it will provide a larger context for the questions and give a sense of what is at stake on each reading.

TABLE 1:
Nouns in Construct with a Finite Verb in the Hebrew Bible

| Reference | construct + finite verb | 1 Subj. | 2 Obj. / I.O | 3 Begin Sent. | 4 Prep. | 5 Temp. Adv. | 6 Before Verb | 7 Main Verb | 8 Length |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gen 1:1 | *bĕrē'šît bārā'* | • | • | • | • | • | • | *wayyiqtol* | 24 |
| Gen 31:10 | *bĕ'ēt yaḥēt* | • | | † | | • | | *wayyiqtol* | 16 |
| Gen 39:4 | *wĕkol-yeš-lô* | | | | | | • | *qatal* | 14 |
| Exod 4:13 | *bĕyad-tišlāḥ* | | | | • | | • | *qatal* | 7 |
| Exod 6:28 | *bĕyôm dibber* | • | • | † | • | • | • | *wayyiqtol* | 8 / 26 |
| Lev 7:35 | *bĕyôm hiqrîb* | | • | | • | • | | nominal | 12 |
| Lev 14:46 | *kol-yĕmē hisgîr* | | • | | | • | | *weqatal* | 10 |
| Lev 25:48 | *'aḥărē nimkar* | | | ‡ | | • | • | *yiqtol* | 38 |
| Num 3:1 | *bĕyôm dibber* | • | • | | • | • | | nominal | 11 |
| Deut 4:15 | *bĕyôm dibber* | • | • | | • | • | | *qatal* | 15 |
| Deut 32:35 | *lĕ'ēt tamût* | • | | | • | • | | nominal | 13 |
| 1 Sam 5:9 | *'aḥărē hēsabbû* | | • | † | | • | • | *wayyiqtol* | 22 |
| 1 Sam 25:15 | *kol-yĕmē hithalaknû* | • | • | | | • | | *qatal* | 15 |
| 2 Sam 22:1 | *bĕyôm hiṣîl* | • | • | | • | • | | *wayyiqtol* | 16 |
| Isa 29:1 | *qiryat ḥanah dawid* | • | | | | | | nominal | 12 |
| Jer 2:8 | *wĕ'aḥărê lō'-yôʻilû* | | | | | | • | *qatal* | 9 |
| Jer 6:15 | *bĕ'ēt-pĕqadtîm* | • | • | | • | • | • | *yiqtol* | 20 |

| Reference | construct + finite verb | 1 Subj. | 2 Obj. / I.O | 3 Begin Sent. | 4 Prep. | 5 Temp. Adv. | 6 Before Verb | 7 Main Verb | 8 Length |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jer 36:2 | *miyôm dibbartî* | | • | | • | • | | *qatal* | 27 |
| Jer 49:8 | *'ēt pĕqadtîw* | • | • | | | • | | *qatal* | 13 |
| Jer 50:31 | *'ēt pĕqdtîkā* | • | • | | | • | | nominal | 12 |
| Hos 1:2 | *tĕḥillat dibber-yhwh* | • | • | • | | • | • | *wayyiqtol* | 21 |
| Mic 5:2 | *'ad-'ēt yôlēdâ yālādâ* | • | | | | • | | *yiqtol* | 12 |
| Zeph 2:1 | *hagôy lō' niksāp* | | | | | | | *qatal* | 5 |
| Ps 4:8 | Davidson | | | | | | | | |
| Ps 18:1 | = 2 Sam 22:1 | | | | | | | | |
| Ps 51:10 | *'ăṣāmôt dikkîtā* | • | | | | | | *yiqtol* | 6 |
| Ps 56:4 | *yôm 'îra'* | • | • | • | | • | • | *yiqtol* | 5 |
| Ps 56:10 | *bĕyôm 'eqrā'* | • | | | • | • | | *yiqtol* | 11 |
| Ps 59:17 | *bĕyôm ṣar-lî* | • | | | • | • | | *qatal* | 14 |
| Ps 65:5 | *'ašrê tibḥar* | • | | • | | | • | nominal | 10 |
| Ps 81:6 | *sĕpat lō'-yāda'tî* | • | | | | | • | *yiqtol* | 11 |
| Ps 90:15 | *kîmôt 'inîtanû* | • | • | | | | | *qatal* | 6 |
| Ps 90:15 | *šĕnôt ra'înû rā'â* | • | • | | | | • | *qatal* | 6 |
| Ps 102:3 | *bĕyôm 'eqrā'* | • | | | | • | | *qatal* | 14 |
| Ps 104:8 | Davidson: *mĕqôm zeh yāsadĕtâ* (?) | | | | | | | | |
| Ps 137:8 | *'ašrê šĕšalem-lāk* | • | • | | | | | nominal | 10 |
| Ps 137:9 | *'ašrê šêy'ḥēz* | • | • | • | | | | nominal | 7 |
| Ps 138:3 | *bĕyôm qārā'tî* | • | | | • | • | • | *wayyiqtol* | 6 |

| Reference | construct + finite verb | 1 Subj. | 2 Obj. / I.O | 3 Begin Sent. | 4 Prep. | 5 Temp. Adv. | 6 Before Verb | 7 Main Verb | 8 Length |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ps 146:5 | *'ašrê še'ēl* | | | • | | | | nominal | 8 |
| Job 6:17 | *bĕ'ēt yĕzōrbû* | • | | • | • | • | • | qatal | 6 |
| Job 18:21 | *mĕqôm lō'-yāda'-'ēl* | | • | | • | | | nominal | 9 |
| Job 29:16 | *wĕrib lō'-yāda'tî* | • | | | | | • | yiqtol | 7 |
| Job 29:22 | *'aḥărē dĕbārî* | • | | • | | • | • | yiqtol | 7 |
| Prov 8:32 | Davidson: *wĕ'ašrê dĕrākay* (?) | | | | | | | | |
| Lam 1:14 | *bîdē lō'-'ûkal qûm* | • | | | • | | | qatal | 7 |
| 2 Chron 20:22 | *ûb'ēt hēḥēlû* | | • | • | | • | • | qatal | 16 |
| 2 Chron 24:11 | *wayhî b'ēt yābî'* | | • | † | | • | • | weqatal | 33 |
| 2 Chron 29:27 | *ûb'ēt hēḥēl* | • | | | | • | • | qatal | 18 |

KEY TO TABLE 1

†—construct + finite verb is stands at beginning of sentence but is prefaced by *wayhî* such as in Gen 31:10 *wayhî 'ēt yaḥēt*.

‡‡—verse likely continues sentence from previous verse. As a result, a construct may stand at the beginning of a verse but not the beginning of the sentence.

TABLE 2:

Holmstedt's examples of unmarked relative clauses compared to Gen 1:1

| Reference | 1 finite verb | 2 head in construct | 3 circ. clause | 4 begin sent. | 5 temp. phrase | 6 nominal clause | 7 poetry | 8 direct speech |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gen 1:1 | | | | | | | | |
| Gen 15:13 | • | • | | • | • | • | | • |
| Exod 4:13 | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Exod 9:4 | • | • | • | • | • | • | | • |
| Exod 14:11 | | • | • | • | • | • | | • |
| Exod 15:17a | • | • | | • | • | | • | • |
| Exod 15:17b | | • | | • | • | | • | • |
| Exod 18:20 | | • | • | • | • | | | • |
| Lev 7:35 | | • | | • | | | | • |
| Num 7:13a | • | | • | • | • | • | | |
| Num 7:13b | • | • | • | • | • | • | | |
| Deut 32:11 | | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Josh 7:21 | • | • | • | • | • | • | | • |
| Judg 8:1 | | • | • | | • | • | | • |
| 1 Sam 6:9 | | • | • | • | • | • | | • |
| 1 Kgs 13:2 | • | | • | • | • | | | • |
| Isa 1:30 | | • | • | | • | | • | • |
| Isa 6:6 | | • | • | • | • | | | |
| Ezek 22:24 | | • | • | • | • | • | | • |
| Hos 4:14* | | • | ! | • | | | • | • |
| Jon 1:10 | | • | • | | • | • | | • |
| Mic 5:2 | | † | | • | | | • | • |
| Hab 1:5 | • | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Zeph 2:1 | | | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Zech 6:12 | • | • | • | • | • | • | | |
| Mal 2:16 | | • | • | • | • | | | • |

| Reference | 1 finite verb | 2 head in construct | 3 circ. clause | 4 begin sent. | 5 temp. phrase | 6 nominal clause | 7 poetry | 8 direct speech |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ps 5:5 | • | • | • |  | • | • | • | • |
| Ps 74:2a |  | • | • | • | • |  | • | • |
| Ps 74:2b |  | • | • | • | • | • | • | • |
| Ps 118:22 |  | • | • |  | • |  | • | • |
| Prov 8:32 | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | • |
| Job 1:1 |  | • | • | • | • | • |  |  |
| Job 3:3 |  | • | • | • | • |  | • | • |
| Job 18:21 |  | • | • | • | • | • | • | • |
| Eccl 10:5 |  | • | • |  | • |  |  | • |
| Lam 1:14 |  |  | • | • | • |  | • | • |
| Ezra 1:5 |  | • | • |  | • |  |  |  |
| Neh 8:10 | • |  | • | • | • |  |  | • |
| 2 Chron 15:11 |  | • | • | • | • |  |  |  |

TABLE 3:
Holmstedt's examples of relative clauses with the head in the construct state

| Reference | 1 finite verb | 2 head in construct | 3 circ. clause | 4 begin sent. | 5 temp. phrase | 6 nominal clause | 7 poetry | 8 direct speech |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gen 1:1 | | | | | | | | |
| Gen 15:13 | • | • | | • | • | • | | • |
| Gen 26:10 | | • | • | | • | • | | • |
| Gen 29:25 | | • | • | | • | • | | • |
| Gen 42:28 | | • | • | | • | • | | • |
| Gen 43:18 | | • | • | • | • | | | • |
| Gen 49:27* | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | • |
| ~~Exod 4:13~~ | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Exod 14:11 | | • | • | • | • | • | | • |
| Lev 7:35 | | • | | • | | | | • |
| Deut 32:35 | | •† | ? | • | | • | • | • |
| 1 Sam 14:21 | | • | • | | • | | | |
| Isa 1:30 | | • | • | | • | | • | • |
| Isa 30:9 | | • | • | • | • | •? | • | • |
| Isa 41:24 | | • | • | • | • | • | • | • |
| Isa 43:16 | | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Isa 63:19* | • | • | • | | • | | • | • |
| Isa 65:1 | | • | • | | • | | • | • |
| Jer 2:8 | • | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Jer 2:11 | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | • |
| Jer 36:2 | | • | | • | | | • | • |
| Ezek 13:3 | • | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Jon 1:10 | | • | • | | • | • | | • |
| Mic 5:2 | | † | | • | | | • | • |
| Hab 1:5 | • | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Hab 1:6 | • | • | • | • | • | | • | • |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ~~Hab 1:8~~ | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Hab 1:14 | | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Hab 2:5 | | • | • | • | • | • | • | • |
| Ps 4:8‡ | • | •† | | • | | | • | • |
| Ps 5:5 | • | • | • | | • | • | • | • |
| Ps 7:16 | | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Ps 8:9 | | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Ps 9:16 | | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Ps 9:18 | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | • |
| Ps 12:6 | • | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Ps 17:1* | • | | • | • | • | • | • | • |
| Ps 18:3 | | | • | • | • | • | • | • |
| Ps 18:44 | | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Ps 25:12a | | • | • | | • | | • | • |
| Ps 25:12b | | • | • | • | • | • | • | • |
| Ps 33:12 | | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Ps 35:8 | | • | | • | | | • | • |
| Ps 56:4 | | • | | | | | • | • |
| Ps 56:10 | | • | | • | | | • | • |
| Ps 58:5 | | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Ps 65:5 | | • | • | | • | • | • | • |
| Ps 74:2a | | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Ps 74:2b | | • | • | • | • | • | • | • |
| Ps 81:6 | | • | • | | • | | • | • |
| Ps 103:5 | | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Ps 118:22 | | • | • | | • | | • | • |
| Ps 119:136 | | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Ps 129:6 | • | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Ps 141:9 | | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Job 6:17 | | •† | | | | | • | • |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Job 18:21 | | • | • | • | • | • | • | • |
| Job 29:16 | | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Job 36:27* | | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Prov 8:32 | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | • |
| Lam 1:14 | | | • | • | • | | • | • |
| Neh 8:10 | • | | • | • | • | | | • |
| 1 Chron 12:24 | | • | • | • | • | | | |
| 1 Chron 15:12* | • | • | • | • | • | | | • |
| 1 Chron 16:15 | | • | • | • | • | | • | • |
| ~~2 Chron 1:4*~~ | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| 2 Chron 15:11 | | • | • | • | • | | | |
| 2 Chron 20:22 | | • | • | • | • | | | |
| 2 Chron 24:11 | | † | | | | | | |
| 2 Chron 29:27 | | † | | | | | | • |

KEY TO TABLES 2 AND 3
* unclear example
† absolute and construct formally identical
‡ Psalms are direct speech though, perhaps, representing a special case

Col .1 Is the head followed by something besides a finite verb?
 (In Gen 1:1, the head is followed by the finite verb *br'*)

Col. 2 Is the head absolute as opposed to construct?
 (In Gen 1:1, the head, *bršyt*, is in the construct state)

Col. 3 Does the unmarked relative clause modify the subject, object, or indirect object?
 (In Gen 1:1, the unmarked relative clause modifies a circumstantial clause)

Col. 4 Is the unmarked relative clause somewhere other than the beginning of the sentence?
 (In Gen 1:1, the head stands at the beginning of the sentence)

Col. 5 Is the implied relationship non-temporal ('that'), as opposed to temporal ('when')?
 (In Gen 1:1, the implied relationship is temporal ['when'])

Col. 6 Is the unmarked relative clause a nominal clause?
 (Gen 1:1 is a verbal clause)

Col. 7 Is the unmarked relative clause in poetry?
 (Gen 1:1 is prose, *not* poetry)

Col. 8 Is the unmarked relative clause in direct speech?
 (Gen 1:1 is narrative, *not* direct speech)

CHAPTER 6

GENESIS 1:1 AS THE FIRST ACT OF CREATION


'Let each, then, interpret this passage as he likes, for it is so profound that, to stimulate
each reader's mind, it can give rise to many different options which are not in conflict
with the rule of faith.'

—Augustine, *The City of God*, 11.32


1. JON LEVENSON AND THE PERSISTENCE OF EVIL

1.1 *Introduction*

As the previous chapter ('The Syntax of Gen 1:1-3') concluded, the reading 1:1 as
either an independent or dependent clause cannot be conclusively decided solely on
philological grounds.  Thus larger conceptual issues, such as how each reading might fit
within the narrative as a whole, must be addressed.  First, I engage Jon Levenson's work on
creation as a good example of a theologically rich reading of Gen 1 despite rejecting creation
ex nihilo and reading the first verse as dependent.  Next, with reference to the work of
Hermann Gunkel, I examine how reading Gen 1:1 as a heading to the chapter might influence
the reading of the chapter as a whole.  Finally, I propose how Gen 1:1 might be read as
describing the first act of creation.

Jon Levenson is a significant and careful reader of the Hebrew Bible and offers a
theologically rich account of Gen 1 while rejecting creation ex nihilo.[1]  Thus Levenson's
work provides a good opportunity to understand what is at stake theologically in the rejection
of creation ex nihilo by biblical interpreters.  This section, therefore, will focus on laying out
those parts of Levenson's work that are relevant to this question and only take into account
other aspects of Levenson's argument insofar as they support a charitable reading of his
work.

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[1] Levenson's main work on the topic is *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*.  Subsequent references to
this work will be given parenthetically in the main text.  Cf. 'The Temple and the World,' 275-298; *Sinai and
Zion;* and in 'Cataclysm, Survival, and Regeneration in the Hebrew Bible,' 39-68.  Following Levenson,
'Hebrew Bible' is used in this section as a way to refer to the Tanakh/Old Testament without prejudicing readers
toward either the Jewish or Christian contextualization of the texts.

## 1.2 *Levenson's Motivations in Writing*

Levenson helpfully begins *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* by laying out five reasons for his work (xiii-xv).  First, he believes that the legacy of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo has distorted the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible by ascribing a false definiteness to creation, resulting in a doctrine of God's omnipotence that is static, rather than dramatic. Second, Levenson argues that, though Gen 1 is generally classified as a Priestly text, the potential import of this Priestly context is rarely taken into account in scholarly interpretations.  Third, Levenson sees unexploited potentials in exploring the overlaps between the theologies of God as creator and of God as covenant-lord.  Fourth, on a related note, Levenson complains that there has been a lack of 'sophisticated' theological reflection on creation and covenant.[2]  Finally, while a discontinuity between the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic Judaism has often been posited, Levenson seeks to demonstrate the continuity between the two bodies of literature.  Levenson's first contention, that the tradition of creation ex nihilo obfuscates the Hebrew Bible, is of primary importance for the current argument though the other concerns are always in the background and are relevant at various points.

## 1.3 *Rejecting Creation Ex Nihilo*

Levenson initially recognizes that though the philological issues in Gen 1:1 will not ultimately decide the question of creation ex nihilo in the Hebrew Bible, the two issues are inextricably linked: 'the traditional Jewish and Christian doctrine of creatio ex nihilo can be found in this chapter [Gen 1] only if one translates the first verse as [an independent clause] …and understands it to refer to some comprehensive creative act on the first day' (5).  This, Levenson argues, is an unlikely reading since the creation of heaven is subsequently described on the second day and the creation of the earth on the third day.[3]

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[2] Is the qualification 'sophisticated' a rhetorical device for dismissing other works on creation and covenant?  A frustrating aspect of Levenson's work is that he only engages 'mainline' Protestant scholarship. The reformed tradition, for example, has made much of the connection between creation and covenant since the 17th century (cf. WCF ch. 7).

[3] I argue below that since days two and three describe the formation (*'sh*) and separation (*mbdyl*), rather than creation (*br'*), of the heavens, earth, *and sea*, thus naming the created realm by the tripartite cosmological formula rather than the bipartite formula of Gen 1:1, the activities described in Gen 1:1 are not simply a summary of the activities of Gen 1:6-10.

Furthermore, Levenson follows E. A. Speiser in finding support for a dependent rendering of Gen 1:1 in the parallels between Gen 1:1-2 and the opening lines of *Enuma elish* (121).[4]  Levenson is more nuanced than Speiser, however, on the relationship between the two ancient creation texts.  He recognizes two major differences between the poems as Genesis 1 describes 'creation without opposition' and '*begins* near the point when the Babylonian poem *ends* its action, with the primordial waters neutralized and the victorious and unchallengeable deity about to undertake the work of cosmogony' (122).[5]  Levenson nevertheless argues that 'in spite of some variations, it should now be clear that Gen 1:1-2:3 is quite close to *Enuma elish*' (121).[6]

In recognizing the connections between *Enuma elish* and Gen 1, Levenson poses an implicit criticism of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo: it robs God of a worthy foe (xxv[2], 27, 160n1).  Since one of his larger concerns is to develop connections between covenant and creation, Levenson focuses on the image of God as warrior-king and, as such, God's 'victory [in creation] is only meaningful if his foe is formidable' (27).  This image is undone by creation ex nihilo 'since it is not a great accomplishment to have triumphed over a non-entity or proven superior to one's own handiwork' (xxv[2]).

A further implication Levenson draws from taking *Enuma elish* as an important interpretive context for Gen 1 and other Hebrew creation texts is that these texts focus on the confinement of disorder and evil rather than the transition from non-being to being.  Creation ex nihilo, argues Levenson, offers a static picture of creation, which describes something that happened once, long ago.  In its place, Levenson seeks to offer a dynamic picture of creation wherein God both initially confined *and* continually works to confine chaos and evil so that a stable society can exist, though this created order is fragile.  Thus Levenson's fundamental reason for rejecting creation ex nihilo is because he believes that it distorts the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and obfuscates the dramatic nature of the doctrine of creation.

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[4] As far as I know, Levenson nowhere directly addresses the question as to whether Gen 1:2 or 1:3 is the main clause on which Gen 1:1 depends but rather simply offers the translation 'When God began to create the heaven and the earth—' with an em dash and a full stop as doing the best justice to the temporal force of the clause (121).

[5] This second point would seem to destabilize Levenson's appeal to the opening lines of *Enuma elish* to support his rendering of Gen 1:1 but, again, Levenson never directly addresses the issue.

[6] It is unclear precisely what line of argumentation Levenson believes has made the parallel clear: the main evidence offered up to this point in the book is that both texts begin with relative clauses, both describe the division of previously undifferentiated matter into the world, both culminate with divine rest, and both, though in rather different manners, were used as part of cyclical celebrations (the Sabbath and the *akītu* festivals) that sought to ensure continued cosmological order.

1.4 *Creation as Mastery*

What then, in Levenson's opinion, is the heart of the Hebrew doctrine of creation? It is God's mastery of chaotic elements. In order to demonstrate the centrality of creation as mastery, Levenson offers close readings of Pss 74, 89, Isa 51. From this central theme, Levenson draws a number of interpretive implications.

First, when creation is conceived in terms of God's mastery over chaotic forces, then the 'survival of chaos after the victory of God' must be reckoned with (14). If the forces that threaten stability are only confined and not eradicated at creation, then the interruption of normal order by those forces is always a real possibility and is often a felt reality. The stability of the world, then, should not be conceived of as intrinsic to nature but as a corollary to God's faithfulness: 'The biblical drama of world order is defined by the persistence of those forces on the one hand, and the possibility (or is it an inevitability?) that God will exercise his vaunted omnipotence to defeat them on the other' (16). Accounting for the ongoing survival of chaos forces Levenson to take seriously the tension between the affirmation of the goodness of creation and the often tragic experience of created reality.[7]

As Levenson develops his argument, he focuses on Ps 74, drawing attention to the 'gap between the liturgical affirmation of God's absolute sovereignty and the empirical reality of evil triumphant and unchecked' (19). Similarly, in Ps 89, the *chaoskampf* motif is applied to a historical situation as 'a dialectical counterstatement' (23). The absence of the omnipotent deity is not experienced as final, but as 'a mysterious interruption in the divine life' (24). Levenson characterizes this dynamic, which he also finds in Isa 51, as 'a dialectic of hope and realism' (20) and living out this dialectic demands that the worshipper 'call upon God to close the gap between his reputation and his current behavior' (24). God is culpable, and openly acknowledging 'the ground for doubting the stirring affirmations of the religion has itself become a religious act' (24).

Second, if creation is fundamentally mastery then 'the defeat by YHWH of the forces that have interrupted that order is intrinsically an act of creation' (12). Any time that God

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[7] Oddly enough, in his exposition of Gen 1, Levenson never deals with the repeated phrase 'God saw it was good.' Perhaps Levenson has so focused on forcing biblical scholars to recognize that there *is* a tension between the goodness and pain of creation that he has neglected this side of the issue.

puts down a rebellion of these surviving malignant forces, it can be considered an act of creation (or perhaps re-creation). Levenson finds this movement to restore order in Pss 74, 89, Isa 51 but it also allows him to relate the theme of creation to texts which are not often considered under that rubric—such as Gen 6-9, Isa 27, Eze 28-29—because God's mastery of rebellion is 'intrinsically an act of creation.'

Third, if creation is mastery, then 'the point of creation is not the production of matter out of nothing, but rather the emergence of a stable community in a benevolent and life-sustaining order' (12). If creation is the mastery of chaotic forces, and these forces continue to survive, then creation describes the continual process of God's involvement with the world as He struggles to contain the chaotic forces which threaten human life and the stability of the community. On Levenson's view, these forces include both 'natural disasters' and the eruption of war and other human evils.[8] In either case, the right human response is to lament in order to reactivate God's omnipotent creative power.

1.5 *Levenson's Reading of Genesis 1*

If, as Levenson argues, creation is fundamentally conceived of as mastery in the Hebrew Bible, how does Gen 1 fit into this picture? Levenson argues that Gen 1 is the prime example in the Hebrew Bible of creation without opposition but that the text nevertheless depicts God as working with a given material, in this case the waters/primordial chaos:

> One thing that this primordial chaos shares with Tiamat is that it does not *disappear*, but rather is *transformed* during the act of creation…In Genesis 1, the waters have been not only neutralized but demythologized and even depersonalized. They have not, however, been eliminated. Instead, the process of setting up boundaries and making separations that we have come to call creation forces them to alternate with other elements…God has not annihilated the primordial chaos. He has only limited it. (122-123)

Analogous to this dividing and restraining of the waters is the role of darkness in Genesis 1. It is simply there at the beginning and is not banished by the light but rather alternates with it.

Though Levenson describes this reading of the narrative as creation without opposition, he is ambiguous as to the nature of the 'primordial chaos.' Initially, it is simply a shorthand way of describing the given elements of Gen 1:2—the *tōhû wābōhû*, the waters,

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[8] As will be further pointed out below, for Levenson there is no distinction between, eg, the Flood on the one hand and war (or even the Holocaust) on the other: both are interruptions of God's order by malignant forces.

and the darkness. By the end of the chapter, however, Levenson claims that the narrative 'is not about the banishment of *evil*, but about its control…the dark, *ungodly forces* are effortlessly overcome' (127, emphasis added). What was initially envisaged as a relatively benign 'primordial chaos' can also be described as 'evil' and 'dark, ungodly forces' which are nevertheless easily bested and thus do not form any sort of real opposition.

Levenson's primary focus, however, is not on the initial verses of Gen 1 but on the picture of creation as a whole as a cosmic-temple. Levenson, following Moshe Weinfeld, has done more than anyone else to draw attention to this now widely accepted interpretation of Gen 1. It is unnecessary at this point to repeat the various lines of archaeological and literary evidence that Levenson draws into the discussion.[9] After having laid out his evidence for the various connections between Gen 1 and the Tabernacle and Temple construction texts, Levenson concludes that:

> Collectively, the function of these correspondences is to underscore the depiction of the sanctuary as a world, that is, an ordered, supportive, and obedient environment, and the depiction of the world as a sanctuary, that is, as a place in which the reign of God is visible and unchallenged, and his holiness is palpable, unthreatened, and pervasive…the world—or, as I should say, the ideal or protological world, the world viewed *sub specie creationis*—was conceived, at least in Priestly circles, as a macro-temple, the palace of God in which all are obedient to his commands. (86)

The focus on Gen 1 as depicting a cosmic-temple draws the text more closely into its purported Priestly context while simultaneously emphasizing that through the Tabernacle and the Temple, cosmic order is preserved:

> In building the new structure that is creation, God functions like an Israelite priest, making distinctions, assigning things to their proper category and assessing their fitness, and hallowing the Sabbath…As a result, the creative ordering of the world has become something that humanity can not only witness and celebrate, but something in which it can also take part. Among the many messages of Genesis 1:1-2:3 is this: it is through the cult that we are enabled to cope with evil, for it is the cult that builds and maintains order, transforms chaos into creation, ennobles humanity, and realizes the kingship of God who has ordained the cult and commanded that it be guarded and practiced. (127)

Thus the world as cosmic-temple, at least on Levenson's account, fits together with the earlier arguments that creation has as its goal an ordered society (of which a temple or cult,

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[9] Cf. 78-99 and especially Levenson, 'Temple and World.' I am persuaded by Levenson's argument at this point, so will not belabor the discussion.

for Israel, is a necessary component) and that chaos survives and must be guarded against by the priesthood.

1.6 *The Relationship between Genesis 1 and Other Creation Texts*

Since this view of creation without opposition seems difficult to reconcile with the view of creation as mastery which Levenson expounds in the first part of his book, it raises questions regarding how the texts should be related. Levenson recognizes that 'the placement of Genesis 1 first in the Bible makes a theological statement that must not be evaded' (5). At the same time, he recognizes that too often the initial placement of Gen 1 in the canon has eclipsed other strands of creation theology: 'the theology of the first chapter of the Bible surely relativized the old combat myth and *eventually* required that it be seen as a revolt—primordial, eschatological, or both—but the optimistic theology failed to uproot the older pessimistic combat myth altogether' (49).

Thus Levenson rejects the proposal of Yehezkel Kaufmann, which he takes as a starting point for the book:

> We have already seen that Kaufmann's belief that Israel recontextualized the cosmogonic myth as a mere rebellion is not generally borne out in the texts, which lack the rhetoric of revolt. The fact that the combat may take place after the origination of the physical universe would be decisive only if the point of creation in the Hebrew Bible were *creatio ex nihilo*, but this is not the point even in Genesis 1. (49)[10]

Though Gen 1 describes creation without opposition, there is nevertheless *something* there and this opens up space for taking seriously the various combat myth texts in the Hebrew Bible as creation texts. By engaging these texts, Levenson seeks to uncover the 'rich interplay of theologies and the historical dynamics behind the text' (8).

Levenson never resolves the relationship between Gen 1 and other creation texts but this is precisely his point: there is a tension fundamental to the Hebrew Bible between texts that depicts creation with opposition and those that depict it without. To resolve this tension is to 'harmonize without warrant'—we cannot 'assume that the *real* theology, the *essential*

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[10] It should be noted in passing that Levenson sets up the issue in a prejudicial manner: creation *ex nihilo* does not need to be 'the point' of Gen 1, it merely needs to be an aspect, or even a presupposition, of Gen 1 in order for the text to recontextualize other combat myths as revolts.

theology, is one of serene, divine supremacy, only temporarily interrupted by a revolt of underlings' (8).

1.7 *An Existential Construal of the Doctrine of Creation*

Having surveyed Levenson's reading of Gen 1 and his argument against creation ex nihilo, the theological significance of his position can now be appreciated. By reading Gen 1 in light of various poetic passages which allude to God's conflict with various chaotic forces and, more generally, by bringing lament texts into dialogue with creation texts, Levenson suggests a nuanced understanding of creation that seriously addresses issues of pain and suffering.

Levenson describes the dynamic between creation and suffering in a number of ways. In Ps 74, the dynamic is negotiating between praise and lament as the psalm 'draws attention to the painful and yawning gap between the liturgical affirmation of God's absolute sovereignty and the empirical reality of evil' (19). More generally, the doctrine of creation in the Hebrew Bible is not simply an unambiguous affirmation of the goodness of whatever is since it is part of God's creation but rather can best be described as a 'a dialectic of hope and realism' (20) that is analogous to the dialectic of argument and obedience seen in Abraham's relationship with God, especially in Gen 18 and 22:

> Together…the two perspectives delimit a theology in which human judgment neither replaces the inscrutable God who commands nor becomes superfluous within the life lived in faithfulness to him. In this larger, dialectical theology, both arguing with God and obeying him can be central spiritual acts, although when to do which remains necessarily unclear. (153)

While there is value in these connections between the dynamics of creation on the one hand and the dynamics of covenant (argument and obedience, autonomy and heteronomy) on the other, in the third part of the book, 'Creation and Covenant: The Dynamics of Lordship and Submission,' Levenson only engages creation in a short reflection on Job. Thus, while the connections are valuable and suggestive, they remain underdeveloped.

Levenson reads Job along the same lines as Pss 74 and 89 earlier. The book, read as a whole, juxtaposes several perspectives on the divine-human relationship. Levenson summarizes: 'an innocent sufferer makes just claims against God and, upon submitting and recanting, comes to know anew the justice and generosity of his lord' (155). God's

concluding speech emphasizes that the world is not made solely for human benefit and so they must adjust their presuppositions and expectations to a theocentric, rather than anthropocentric, view of reality. Levenson concludes his work with the illuminating comment that

> though the persistence of evil seems to undermine the magisterial claims of the creator-God, it is through submission to exactly those claims that the good order that is creation comes into being. Like all other faith, creation-faith carries with it enormous risk. Only as the enormity of the risk is acknowledged can the grandeur of the faith be appreciated. (156)

1.8 *Levenson's Argument in a Different Key*

Before proceeding to an evaluation of Levenson's argument, it is worth noting in passing the developments of Levenson's work made by R.W.L. Moberly. In interacting with Levenson's work, which he hails as 'perhaps the most thought-provoking recent biblical study of creation,'[11] Moberly clarifies what Levenson is attempting to do, especially in passages such as that just quoted that emphasize that holding creation-faith is an act of faith which 'carries with it enormous risk.' Moberly begins by acknowledging that the Bible itself offers several 'pictures' of the world which can be set alongside the pictures offered by ANE literature and by natural scientists.[12] World-pictures such as that offered by Gen 1 stress the goodness of the world while other texts, such as Ps 89 or Richard Dawkins' *River Out of Eden*, stress bewildering aspects of the world such as experiences of pain and suffering. Though some non-biblical world-pictures, presumably, may simply be discarded, the goal of the Bible reader should be to refuse 'premature or facile resolution of the conflict they [divergent world-pictures] present.'[13] Rather readers should recognize that

> Genesis 1 is by no means the only picture of the world in the Bible…these [other pictures] do not displace Genesis 1, but are held alongside it in order to give greater existential depth to the engagement with God that is part of Israel's creation faith. So, instead of having to choose between Genesis 1, with its picture of the world as an object of delight, and a picture of the world as full of incomprehensible suffering and

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[11] *Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 54.

[12] Ibid., 50-65.

[13] Ibid., 68.

evil, why should one not hold these in dialectical tension as both true, with each needing the other to give a fuller picture of the truth of the world?[14]

This development of Levenson's position proposes a way of navigating the tensions between the various creation texts and recognizes the role of the reader in this process. On Moberly's suggestion, an interpretation of Gen 1 that emphasizes the goodness of the world can be set *alongside* creation texts that emphasize the struggle inherent in creation and, in fact, holding these pictures in tension is part of the process of maturing as a faithful reader of the text.

## 2. AN EVALUATION OF LEVENSON'S THEOLOGY OF CREATION

Having examined the relevant aspects of Levenson's views on creation and Genesis 1, we can now proceed to use Levenson's work as a way of exploring what is at stake, theologically, in the rejection of creation ex nihilo.

### 2.1 *The Need for Clarification*

### 2.1.1 Clarifying Terms

Right away, it is apparent that there are several major terms in the discussion which need to be clarified. First, although Levenson begins his work by rejecting creation ex nihilo, he assumes that the meaning of creation ex nihilo is more or less obvious and that what its acceptance or rejection entails is straight-forwardly apparent. On the contrary, as Anselm clearly saw, the phrase *creatio ex nihilo* is inherently ambiguous because it is grammatically open to a number of possible interpretations.[15] In the preface to the 1994 edition of *Creation and the Persistence of Evil,* Levenson recognizes that due to this ambiguity that are some senses in which he might still affirm the doctrine. He argues that creation ex nihilo can still be affirmed if 'nothing' is reconceptualized as another name for chaos, evil, and suffering rather than as an ontological negation (xxvii[2]): 'they [unnamed 'ancients'] identified "nothing" with things like disorder, injustice, subjugation, disease, and death' (xxi[2]). This construal will be revisited below but it must be recognized that it emphasizes the existential aspects of creation theology at the cost of the metaphysical.

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[14] Ibid., 66. For a philosophically oriented justification of world-pictures, cf. the discussion of 'onlooks' in Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement*, 124-141 and Briggs, *Words in Action*, 154-157.

[15] Cf. *Monologion*, §8, 19; ch. 3 above.

This attempted reconceptualization of creation ex nihilo raises another term, or rather series of terms, in Levenson's work that need further clarification. 'Chaos,' 'evil,' 'suffering,' 'sin,' 'disease,' 'disorder,' 'injustice,' 'death,' and similar terms are used interchangeably throughout Levenson's writings. In fact, Levenson goes so far as to claim that making the distinction of using 'evil' and 'sin' *only* with reference to human actions which intrude on the divine-human relationship is to 'blame the victim' of evil and sin (49). Thus two overlapping problems weaken Levenson's argument: he never defines his terms (and some, such as 'evil' and 'chaos,' have a variety of both academic and popular uses) and he uses terms as synonymous that should be distinguished.

Because Levenson uses these terms interchangeably, an implicit but unnecessary interpretive dilemma is raised: either suffering results from human behavior *or* it is a fundamental part of the world (and thus is evidence for a 'malignant substratum'[16] of creation). Levenson has drawn attention to a serious problem: the tendency in traditional creation theology to make everything unpleasant from nettles to nose colds a result of human sin. Moving into a literary-canonical frame of reference, for a moment, it must be noted that on a careful reading of Gen 3, God does not *introduce* suffering into the world as a result of human sin but rather suffering is *increased* as a result of human sin (Gen 3:16).[17] Likewise, there are good reasons to read ḥyt h'rṣ of Gen 1:24-25 as referring to predatory land animals, suggesting that predation and (animal) death do not enter the world as a result of human sin.[18] Thus Levenson's work draws attention to the problems with interpretive frameworks that presuppose an edenic golden-age, free of all suffering but lost in a metaphysical fall.

It is possible to argue for more than one kind of suffering (for example, 'suffering that is intrinsic to life in creation' and 'suffering that arises from embracing evil').[19] With this distinction in place, some of Levenson's terms, depending on how they are defined, such as 'chaos,' 'suffering,' 'disorder,' and perhaps even 'disease' and 'death' may accurately describe conditions intrinsic to created reality while other terms, such as 'sin,' 'evil,' and

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[16] Levenson uses the phrase on xx[2].

[17] Cf. Provan, *Seriously Dangerous Religion*, 106; Chambers, 'God's Grandeur and the Groaning of Creation.'

[18] Provan, *Seriously Dangerous Religion*, 230-234.

[19] Ibid., 106-109. Similarly, Hall distinguishes between suffering that serves life, which is compatible with creation, and suffering that only serves death, which results from human rebellion; Cf. *God and Human Suffering*, 64-65.

'injustice' should be reserved for describing rebellion against God and those conditions that follow from it. Positing a distinction between various sources of suffering may suggest a way forward that may retain the sense of existential fragility of our created condition which Levenson masterfully develops without appealing to a 'malignant substratum' of created reality. The question, then, is at what point 'dark, ungodly forces' (127) begin to feature in the narrative—at Gen 1:2 or in Gen 3? By drawing distinctions between various forms and sources of suffering, perhaps we can develop a picture of creation as both wild and difficult for humans without implying that it is intrinsically malignant or opposed to the Creator.

2.1.2 Clarifying Texts

Levenson's argument raises a further set of questions regarding the nature of the text that is being read and the appropriate contexts in which it should be read. Levenson is by no means unsubtle regarding these questions: recall, two of his motivations in writing are to explore the implications of the Priestly context of Genesis 1 and to demonstrate continuity between the biblical texts and subsequent Rabbinic context. Elsewhere, Levenson has argued that

> the price of recovering the *historical* context of sacred books has been the erosion of the largest *literary* contexts that undergird that traditions that claim to be based on them. In modern times, the multicontextuality of the Hebrew Bible has been the source of acute dissension. Much of the polemics between religious traditionalists and historians over the past three centuries can be reduced to the issue of which context shall be normative.[20]

In his discussion of creation, Levenson exploits the tension between historical and literary contexts in order to open up space for his argument. Though the canonical placement of Gen 1 'makes a theological statement that must not be evaded' (5), getting behind this final form of the text opens up a 'rich interplay of theologies' (8). To this end, Levenson reads Gen 1 as part of a purported 'priestly stratum' of the Pentateuch (27) which, incidentally, is never clearly delineated. This in itself is not necessarily problematic and, it should be readily admitted, this move helpfully highlights connections between Gen 1 and other passages which previously had been neglected.

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[20] *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism*, 4.

In the course of Levenson's overall argument, however, this move becomes problematic. Genesis 3-4, the immediate literary context for Gen 1, are entirely absent from Levenson's book. Even if a 'fall' is not the best category for making sense of these chapters, and there are good reasons to question this label, surely the chapters are significant for understanding what Levenson variously calls evil, suffering, and rebellion from a biblical perspective. There is surely something odd in Levenson's movement back and forth between alleged *chaoskampf* creation texts and Gen 1 without noting these intervening chapters. In short, by giving priority to historical-critical perspectives, Levenson replaces the drama of Gen 1-11 with his own reconstructed drama of divine omnipotence. Likewise, though Levenson carefully examines several creation texts (Pss 74, 89, 104, Isa 51:9-11, Job), Gen 2 is never directly addressed, despite being one of the most prominent creation texts in the Hebrew Bible. Again, even if Gen 1 is read as part of a Priestly source, this should be done in a way that does not obscure the interpretive significance of its eventual juxtaposition with Gen 2.

If some texts have been neglected, others are arguably overemphasized in Levenson's argument. It is important to examine how prevalent the *chaoskampf* theme actually is in the Hebrew Bible. Levenson asserts that 'the language of combat, victory, and enthronement that is prominent in so many biblical creation texts is not given its due' (xxv).[21] Leaving 'enthronement' aside, it should be noted that 'combat' and 'victory' language is absent from Gen 1, 2; Isa 40-48; Pss 8, 104, 148; Prov 8; Eccl 1 and is questionable in Job 38-41. To these longer texts, numerous allusions and passing references to creation, such as Exod 4:11-12 and Amos 4:13, seem to presuppose that God creates *without* opposition.

As a specific example of how Levenson rhetorically overplays the significance of the combat theme in biblical creation texts, note how he begins the second part of *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*: 'In the conclusion to the preceding discussion, I pointed out that contrary to what one might expect, there is only one text in the Hebrew Bible in which Leviathan is said to have been created' (53). Taken at face value, this seems to be a fairly persuasive argument that Leviathan is generally thought of as uncreated in the Hebrew Bible.

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[21] Though the last century of biblical studies has made much of the *chaoskampf* theme in the Old Testament, recent studies have begun to question the pervasiveness of the theme and a new, chastened and nuanced consensus may be emerging. For example, Middleton claims that 'the majority of putative creation-by-combat texts turn out, on closer inspection, to refer either to some intrahistorical (or eschatological) conflict described in mythological language or to the nonconflictual containment of the primordial waters at creation'; *The Liberating Image*, 241; cf. Watson, *Chaos Uncreated*; and Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction*.

However, when we realize that the Leviathan is only mentioned in *five* passages (Isa 27:1, Ps 74:14, 104:26, Job 3:8, 40:25), Levenson's statement appears rather misleading: that only one of five allusive passages state explicitly that the Leviathan is created by God is statistically meaningless.[22] Examining other pieces of Levenson's textual evidence for the pervasiveness of combat language in creation contexts yields similar results. Middleton has argued the exact contrary: 'most references to God's defeat of these various monsters are not associated with creation, but rather describe God's historical judgment on foreign military or political powers.'[23]

At least in part, these vastly differing evaluations of the textual evidence result from Levenson's premise, stated early on his work, that 'the defeat by YHWH of the forces that have interrupted that order is intrinsically an act of creation' (12). This premise, following out of the initial rejection of creation ex nihilo, leads to circularity in Levenson's argument: 'the language of combat, victory, and enthronement…is prominent in so many biblical creation texts' but many of these biblical 'creation' texts, such as Isa 51:9-11, are only identified as such *because* they contain combat language. If combat language is inherently creation language, then many passages could be identified as creation texts featuring the combat motif. The number of texts that can *independently* be identified as creation texts which also feature the combat motif, however, are few indeed. Middleton, for example, only recognizes Job 26:7-14, Ps 74:12-17, 89:5-14 as 'clear creation-by-combat texts.'[24]

Levenson rightly complains that texts emphasizing the struggles of creaturely life are often overlooked in studies of creation in the Hebrew Bible. However, the evidence for his framework for interpreting these texts—that there are various uncreated and malignant forces opposed to God—is lacking.

### 2.1.3 Clarifying *Enuma elish*

There are several question about Levenson's use of the Babylonian text *Enuma elish* that require clarification. First, part of Levenson's argument against creation ex nihilo is grounded in the relative rendering of Gen 1:1 which he prefers, in part, because it 'fits nicely

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[22] Moreover, Levenson subsequently argues that the reference to *tannîn* (a synonym for leviathan in Isa 27:1) in Gen 1:21 is intended to make it clear that the leviathan is not primordial (54).

[23] *The Liberating Image*, 238-239.

[24] Ibid., 244.

with the opening words of *Enuma elish*' (121).  But then Levenson asserts that an essential difference between the two texts is that Gen 1 '*begins* near the point when the Babylonian poem *ends* its action' (122, cf. 3).  But if Gen 1 begins where *Enuma elish* ends, why should Gen 1:1 conform to the beginning of *Enuma elish*?  More generally, even admitting that it is instructive to read Gen 1 in the light of *Enuma elish*, what sort of parallels can be expected— surely general thematic overlap more than shared syntax?

Second, Levenson's use of *Enuma elish* as the primary interpretive context for reading Gen 1 raises the larger issues of what points of reference, frameworks, and questions can and should be allowed to guide the interpretive process.  These issues are, in turn, tied up with the goals of any given reading.  Richard Briggs notes that

> treatments of Gen 1-11 struggle to engage with the basic framework questions posed by these unique chapters: a story that stands outside the history of Israel, that introduces concepts that are often not taken up again in any depth until the NT, and for which readers of the Bible have very few internal reference points in terms of other scriptural narratives operating comparably.  One frequent result of these features is recourse to external reference points: creation accounts from the ancient Near East, to take an obvious example.[25]

Levenson is no doubt aware of the hermeneutical significance of the moves that he has made, but it should be noted that his discrediting of creation ex nihilo is tied up with his relativizing of the canonical shape of the received text by displacing Gen 1 from its *canonical* position as the prime creation account, by ignoring its *canonical* context (Gen 2-11), and by emphasizing the (supposed) historical contexts (the 'Priestly source' and *Enuma elish*).  This is not to suggest that readers simply choose between canonical and historical contexts.  Rather, as Briggs argues,

> the framing of historical and canonical questions that readers bring to bear will always interrelate in hermeneutically productive and varied ways.  In the case of Gen 1-11, though, the canonical context is clearly a strong element in how a reader encounters the text, while the historical element is markedly downplayed in the text.[26]

Despite Briggs's claim that the canonical context is 'clearly' dominant in Gen 1-11 while the historical context is 'markedly downplayed,' much scholarship, like Levenson, has focused on external points of reference from the ancient world rather than on the canonical context.

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[25] 'Humans in the Image of God,' 112.

[26] Ibid., 118.

This move toward an external framework is not intrinsically problematic but does raise two further issues. First, as Briggs has elsewhere argued,

> historically relevant frameworks function hermeneutically in comparable ways to historically irrelevant ones, and on closer inspection, the case of the ancient Near Eastern texts and their relevance to Genesis is primarily hermeneutical rather than historical.[27]

Though reading Gen 1 and *Enuma elish* together has been standard scholarly practice for over a century, this does not mean that it is a *necessary* feature of a responsible reading of either text. Rather, it is hermeneutically and heuristically beneficial for Levenson's larger argument to read the two texts together as they generate a reading which furthers Levenson theological agenda.

Second, although there is an elegant simplicity in comparing two individual texts (such as Gen 1 and *Enuma elish*), since it is unlikely that Gen 1 was written in direct interaction with *Enuma elish*, a 'historically relevant framework' should take into account a variety of ANE texts. There is a broad trend in this direction in recent comparative studies.[28] Even then, it must always be remembered that this is an extrinsic frame of reference and is brought to bear on Gen 1 and other creation texts as part of a hermeneutical framework.

The purpose of this argument is not to reject Levenson's hermeneutical framework as an inappropriate imposition on the text but rather to make it explicit that *Enuma elish* is part of a hermeneutical framework which Levenson brings to the text and must be evaluated as such. An aspect of this evaluation might involve questioning the degree of historical relevance, as I have done above, but more importantly it must weigh the value of the interpretive insights generated by the framework and ask if these insights can be accommodated within another framework (ie, creation ex nihilo).[29] To this end, §4 below will attempt to demonstrate how creation ex nihilo as a framework for reading Genesis 1 might accommodate some of the central insights of Levenson's proposal. Before this, the problematic results of Levenson's hermeneutical framework are examined in order to demonstrate that rejecting creation ex nihilo and focusing on *chaoskampf* texts leads to serious theological problems, at least from the standpoint of classic Christian theology.

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[27] 'The Hermeneutics of Reading Genesis after Darwin,' 60.

[28] Eg., Keel and Schroer, *Creation* and John Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*.

[29] Cf. Briggs, 'The Hermeneutics of Reading Genesis,' 68.

2.2 *A Difficult Picture of God*

Having noted various areas in which Levenson's argument is in need of clarification, we arrive at last at the material difference between Levenson's view of creation and that historically articulated with the framework of creation ex nihilo: theology proper.[30]  The difference is clear when focusing on the interrelated questions: What kind of Lord is God? Does God become actualized through the process of creation?  and Is it problematic if violence is intrinsic to creation?

2.2.1 What Kind Of Lord Is God?

While there is much to laud in Levenson's reintegration of the themes of creation and covenant, the particulars of Levenson's understanding of lordship are problematic.  Levenson argues that the traditional doctrine of creation ex nihilo has obscured the prominence of 'the victorious warrior God' in creation texts 'since it is no great accomplishment to have triumphed over a non-entity or proven superior to one's own handiwork' (xxv[2]).  Instead, God's 'victory is only meaningful if his foe is formidable…No emperor will achieve heroic status in the eyes of his subjects if all he forces to march through his streets is a sunken-chested weakling or, worse, if he has no one to force to march' (27).  Note two aspects of this argument: first, Levenson presumes that God's goal in creation is something analogous to an emperor achieving 'heroic status' and, second, he appeals to Hegel in support of this view of lordship.

Though Levenson only uses the phrase 'heroic status' in an analogy, it is an apt summary of his view of God's lordship.  Although the Hebrew Bible conforms to the ancient world in depicting God as a warrior (Exod 15) and celebrating various ordained warriors (such as Joshua or David), it does not do so uncritically.  Leon Kass, followed by Provan, has argued that the Hebrew Bible is critical of the 'heroic ideal,' common throughout the ancient world and typified in the figure of Achilles who chooses to die young, as a hero, in order to be remembered forever rather than live a long and peaceful life only to be forgotten in

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[30] I believe that Matthew Levering's criticisms of Levenson stem from the basic difference between Levenson's theology proper and traditional (Thomistic) theology proper (*Scripture and Metaphysics*, 75ff). Levering, however, does not appear to see the value in Levenson's position or reckon with the significance of the difference contextualizations of the Hebrew Scriptures in Judaism and Christianity.

death.[31]  This 'heroic ideal,' Provan claims, is satirized in figures like Lamech and the

Nephilim and stands in opposition to the affirmation in Gen 1-2 (and elsewhere) of the value

of mundane work in the world.[32]  The comparison of the biblical 'heroic ideal' (if there is

such a thing) with that of surrounding cultures appears to be a promising avenue of research,

although little seems to have been done in this respect.[33]  There is an obvious contrast, for

example, between the exploits of Gilgamesh with the stories of the patriarchs in Genesis.

The basic biblical ideal is not to make a name for oneself so that one will be remembered by

succeeding generations but rather to be remembered by the God of Israel.  While no

definitive critique of the heroic ideal can be advanced at this point, there is good reason to

question the suitability of Levenson's assumption that, like an ancient emperor, God vaunts

His lordship by parading those formidable foes which He defeated in the act of creation.

Levenson supports his dictum, that 'victory is only meaningful if his foe is

formidable' (27), not by developing a Hebrew 'heroic ideal' but rather by twice appealing to

G.F.W. Hegel's master-slave dialectic:

> "Hegel's understanding [was] that mastery is real only if the slave is a human
> consciousness whose conquest is worthwhile"…The conquest of Leviathan is
> meaningful only to the extent that he is an opponent worthy of YHWH.  It is the
> dialectic of opposition and worthiness which unlocks the inner religious meaning of
> the combat myth in the Hebrew Bible.[34]

Hegel, however, is not the sort of authority one can simply appeal to in passing.  It is not

entirely apparent *why* Levenson considers Hegel a significant authority although, as will be

seen in the next subsection, Levenson's doctrine of God bears some resemblance to Hegel's

philosophy.

Although Hegel does argue that in a life-and-death struggle against another

consciousness the individual approaches self-consciousness, once the victor (the master)

subdues the loser (the slave), the situation is destabilized.  By subduing the slave, the master

makes the slave into merely another thing in the world rather than a self-consciousness and

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[31] Kass, *The Beginnings of Wisdom*, 151-167; Provan, *Seriously Dangerous Religion*, 202-209.  Smith, *Poetic Heroes* offers a more general overview of the the heroic warrior in early biblical literature.

[32] *Seriously Dangerous Religion*, 202-209.

[33] In addition to Smith's work, cf. Wright, 'Making a Name for Oneself,' 131-162; Doak, 'Ezekiel's Topography of the (Un-)Heroic Dead in Ezekiel 32:17-32,' 607-624.

[34] Here Levenson quotes Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 8.  Levenson's knowledge of Hegel appears primarily to be mediated through Wyschogrod's work.  Middleton has also noted Levenson's 'strange attraction to Hegel's master-slave dialectic' (*The Liberating Image*, 250).

thus has deprived himself of the opportunity for the acknowledgment of an equal. As a result, in Hegel's philosophy the master-slave dialectic is an early stage in the development of *Geist* which must be transcended.[35]

Hegel's argument, then, actually turns out to undercut Levenson's argument. In the case of the *chaoskampf* creation myth the defeat of a 'formidable foe,' according to Hegel's argument, is insufficient to demonstrate the selfhood of God:

> the object in which the lord has achieved his lordship has in reality turned out to be something quite different from an independent consciousness. What now really confronts him is not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one. He is, therefore, not certain of *being-for-self* as the truth of himself. On the contrary, his truth is in reality the unessential consciousness and its unessential action.[36]

In subjugating the formidable foe (the slave in Hegel's terminology), the god (the master) has established himself as lord, but the lordship is dependent on another—the foe. On the other hand, in the experience of being defeated, the formidable foe

> has been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations. But this pure universal movement, the absolute melting-away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, *pure being-for-itself,* which consequently is *implicit* in this consciousness.[37]

Of course, Hegel is a complex thinker and so is open to several interpretations. Moreover, Hegel's philosophy may not be the best framework for understanding the dynamics of lordship in the Hebrew Bible, and this brief exposition of his thought is not an endorsement of it as hermeneutical framework. Although Hegel's discussion of a master-slave dialectic may be illuminating to various aspects of the Hebrew Bible, it should be kept in mind that Hegel is ultimately advancing a *critique*, demonstrating why the master-slave relationship must be transcended in the progression of self-consciousness. Are we, then, following Levenson's train of thought, to understand the 'creation without opposition' view of Gen 1 as transcending older understandings of creation and of God's lordship that utilize the *chaoskampf* motif? In this case, surely the canonical placement of Gen 1 must also be hermeneutically significant and, in some sense, relativize the view of God as heroic lord.

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[35] The relevant sections are §178-196 in Hegel's 1807 *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. The interpretation offered here is indebted to Peter Singer, *Hegel* and Ludwig Siep, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, 90-95.

[36] G.F.W. Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, 116-117 (§192).

[37] Ibid., 117 (§194).

Analogous issues are raised by the Christian recontextualization of the Hebrew Bible.[38]  In Mark, for example, the depiction of Jesus calming the storms (4:35-41) alludes to passages like Pss 89:8-9 and 107:23-32 that describe God as the lord of the unruly sea.[39]  Yet Jesus is hailed as king only in a mocking manner and crowned with a crown of thorns (Mk 15:17-20).  The way to his enthronement is *through* the cross.  In Acts, Peter summarizes the story: 'this one, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men…know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified' (2:23, 36; cf. 3:18).  The New Testament authors portray the victory of God's absolute sovereignty *in an apparent act of evil triumphant and unchecked.*[40]

Introducing the NT contextualization of the Hebrew Bible at this point raises a variety of questions which move beyond the scope of the present argument and perhaps unhelpfully complicates the picture.  Nevertheless, it must be recognized, in parallel with the argument of the previous chapter ('Biblical Pressures and Ex Nihilo Hermeneutics'), that the NT context forms certain constraints that have led the Christian tradition to develop an account of God's power in creation that sees the exercise of power in the *donation* of power to the creature rather than in the vanquishing of a primordial enemy (cf. §2.2, §4.1 of previous chapter 'Creation from Nothing').  While this picture of power as donation cannot be used to erase the depiction of God's power in defeat of His enemies which Levenson rightly perceives in the Hebrew Bible, the two pictures must function together in Christian theological reflection on the nature of God's lordship.

2.2.2 Does God Become Actualized in Creation?

In a certain sense, all the preceding evaluative discussion has been building up to this central issue: what kind of God are we led by the Hebrew Bible to believe in?  Levenson draws out the implications of his views of creation for the doctrine of God quite clearly:

> My point is that Leviathan, Amalek, Gog, and the like are symbols from different traditionary complexes for the same theological concept: the ancient and enduring opposition to the full realization of God's mastery…We must not forget that the

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[38] On which, cf. Levenson, 'The Hebrew Bible.'

[39] Cf. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 221-225.

[40] On the question as a whole, cf. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*.

optimistic element in this theology, which is the faith in God's ultimate triumph, is dialectically qualified by the pessimistic element, which is the tacit acknowledgment that *God is not yet God*. (38, emphasis added)

Subsequently, in reflection on Rabbinic thought, Levenson concludes that

God becomes God, the good God realizes his goodness, only when he overcomes his negative pole. Until then, his unity is fragmented and his name incomplete. This is a theology with absolute faith in God's *ultimate* goodness, but a rather qualified faith in his *proximate* goodness. God's goodness will be established. In the meantime, we have only earnest of it. (45)

I am not in a position to evaluate how true to Rabbinic thought Levenson is at this point. Note, however, that within the classic Christian account of creation (as argued in ch. 3), an alternate account of the fullness and completeness of God in Himself is developed as the grounds of creation which is strongly at odds with Levenson's argument at this point.

Elsewhere, Levenson supports this view of God by arguing that 'the idea of God's goodness and the idea of his absolute sovereignty are in contradiction. Affirm either, and the other is cast into doubt.'[41] Recognizing this tension, Levenson frames the issue very carefully:

It is characteristic of Judaism that it tends to accept the contradiction as tolerable rather than to reject it as fatal. That is, Judaism generally sees it as a paradox, a mystery of faith, if you will, or a creative tension and it refuses to allow either idea to eradicate the other. Instead, the two are related dialectically…This dialectical theology of divine goodness and total sovereignty, in which each is read in light of the other, underscores our awareness of the eeriness, the uncanniness, the otherness of the God of Israel.[42]

Here it is not God's goodness and sovereignty as such that are in contradiction but rather *human ideas* of God's goodness and sovereignty. The paradox is in the mind of the creature who attempts to understand the God of Israel. Levenson immediately proceeds, however, to argue that the paradox is not resolved in some higher understanding of God or further stage in revelation but rather in a further stage of God's self-realization:

the debate within the [ANE] pantheon becomes a monologue within the one God…we must recognize that those forces are in tension with the benevolent, creative, and life-affirming dimension of God, a dimension that many of the texts believe will definitively emerge triumphant—though so far has not.[43]

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[41] 'Cataclysm,' 54.

[42] Ibid., 54-55. Italic removed.

[43] Ibid., 55.

Levenson insistence on this tension between God's goodness and sovereignty allows him to bring a variety of biblical texts into the discussion of creation and helps him to depict creation as dynamic, rather than static.[44] Nevertheless, Levenson's formulation of the issue is problematic as he continually frames the tension as a *metaphysical* tension within the life of God rather than as an *epistemological* or existential tension within the life of faith. God's goodness is not always perceptible in the world but this does not mean that God is musing, relieving himself, on a journey, or asleep, as Elijah suggests that Baal might be when he is unresponsive (1 Kgs 18:26-27). Rather, it may be the case that God *is* at work in a way that is not immediately perceptible, and this is an invitation to a deepening engagement with God: it is the *relationship* that grows, not God Himself.

2.2.3 Is it Problematic if Violence is Intrinsic to Creation?

Drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur, Middleton has criticized Levenson's work on the grounds that it makes violence central to the act of creation.[45] Though the combat myth is not intrinsically harmful, when linked with creation it

> ontologizes evil, understanding it to be at least equiprimordial with God and goodness and perhaps even more primordial…the conquest of this evil/chaos to found the ordered world enshrines violence as the divinely chosen method for establishing goodness.[46]

The goal of God's victory in creation, Levenson claims, is the formation of a peaceful society but who is this peaceful society for? Note Middleton's caution: often in ANE cosmologies this peaceful society that is the culmination of creation is *not* humanity in general but a specific people group.[47]

The problematic consequence of this sort of cosmology is that 'one's own people or nation [is defined] as the normative and true humanity, whose origin is traceable back to and grounded in creation itself…everyone else is relegated to the status of other—other than truly human, other than legitimate, other than normative.'[48] Though Gen 1 is not explicit, as

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[44] In his work on creation, Levenson has very little to say about the goodness of God, perhaps because this theme is so strongly emphasized in much of the literature. For an account of the theme, cf. Provan, *Seriously Dangerous Religion*, 58-72.

[45] *The Liberating Image*, 250-260. Though Levenson is aware of Ricoeur's work on ancient cosmologies (*The Symbolism of Evil*), he is generally dismissive of it.

[46] Ibid., 254.

[47] Ibid., 251.

[48] Ibid., 252.

*Enuma elish* is, regarding the founding of a specific city, nonetheless since Gen 1, on Levenson's reading, is tied up with the legitimization of the Jerusalem Temple and the priesthood, it is at least open to Middleton's concerns. Creation-by-combat, then, 'legitimates a fundamental us/them distinction, with only a win/lose alternative.'[49] Power can never be shared: the success of one god requires the death of another; the success of one people requires the defeat of others. Ricoeur concludes his reading of *Enuma elish* by noting that

> the ultimate outcome of this type of myth [is] in a theology of war founded on the identification of the Enemy with the powers that the god has vanquished and continues to vanquish in the drama of creation…In other words, the mythological type of the drama of creation is marked by the *King-Enemy* relation, which becomes the political relation *par excellence*.[50]

This is a fair summary of Levenson's reading of creation in the Hebrew Bible as well except Levenson never draws out the political implications of his reading.

While Middleton focuses on the ethnocentric tendencies when the combat myth is linked with creation texts, equally legitimate environmental concerns can also be raised. If the story of creation is about God's victory over chaos, which nevertheless persists in the world, and the establishment of a peaceful society, then those wild aspects of of the world that are not readily accommodating to human society should logically be equated with vestigial chaos. Texts like Gen 1:28, Ps 8:5-8 could then be read as authorizing human eradication of wilderness and replacing it with extensions of the society which God initial sought to setup. Especially in our time of drastic environmental devastation as human society continually and often thoughtlessly expands, this reading's environment implications are frightening. Though the image of God as a victorious warrior is even more neglected now than when Levenson wrote 30 years ago, it is important to remember that there are several images used for God as Creator in the Hebrew Bible, most of which are non-violent.

Nevertheless, Levenson has raised the issue that the Hebrew Bible appears to contain at least fragments of a creation-by-combat tradition that represents a theological understanding of creation divergent from that of the subsequent Christian tradition. This raises pointedly questions regarding the frame of reference and context in which any

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[49] Ibid., 252.

[50] *The Symbolism of Evil*, 197-198.

particular reading of Gen 1 is pursued.  As argued above (ch. 4), the creation ex nihilo reading of Gen 1 emerged in a context of debates regarding the status of the Hebrew Bible in the Christian tradition and the possibility of reading the two-testament Christian Scriptures with reference to one God.

2.3 *The Ethics of Reading Genesis 1*

I sought to demonstrate two things in the preceding consideration of Levenson's work.  First, I attempted to make clear that the prominence of the combat motif in Levenson's work on creation is not simply a given in the Hebrew Bible but rather follows from a series of interpretive moves such as reading creation texts out of their canonical order, exploiting the tensions between the historical and literary contexts of those texts, and especially by reading biblical creation texts in the context of *Enuma elish*.  Levenson masterfully demonstrates that there are various strands of creation traditions in the Hebrew Bible.  Moreover, as Levenson readily admits, within a literary-canonical framework, Gen 1 eventually relativized the combat myth within the canon, not only by giving preeminence to the creation without opposition model but also through its explicit affirmation that the *tannînim* of Ps 74:13 are created by God.

In this respect, the preservation of the *chaoskampf* motif is comparable to the 'transformation' of child sacrifice that Levenson argues is evident in the Hebrew Bible. Levenson argues that although the practice of child sacrifice is rejected in the final form of the Hebrew Bible, the 'religious idea associated with one particular form of it—the donation of the first-born son—remained potent and productive' as evidenced in various narratives of the endangerment of the first-born son, such as Gen 22.[51]  Moberly has convincingly argued that a similar dynamic is at work in the *ḥērem* texts of Deut.  In these texts martial language is used although there is good reason to think that actual physical eradication of the Canaanites is not expected.  Rather, the language of *ḥērem* spells out the theological logic of election: Israel owes its loyalty to YHWH alone and, therefore, should not intermarry or make

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[51] *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, ix.  It has been argued earlier that 'resurrection' forms part of the biblical pressure that led to the formulation of creation ex nihilo as a reading of Gen 1.  Thus I suspect that Levenson's oeuvre may actually lend support to a form of creation ex nihilo in its focus on resurrection; see also *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*.

covenants with the Canaanites.[52]  Thus, in an analogous manner, rather than simply saying the *chaoskampf* tradition is 'rejected' by the Hebrew Bible, it is more appropriate to say that it has been 'transformed.'  This process of transformation takes place both by the relativizing of the combat myth through the canonical shaping of the Hebrew Bible and by the metaphorical reapplication of *chaoskampf* motifs to various historical situations, most prominently the exodus from Egypt.  As a result, relating the various biblical creation traditions together entails an active role on the part of the reader, who negotiates the various contexts in which the texts can be read, and raises serious questions as to why one may, or may not, choose to read against the grain of the text taken in its canonical totality.

Second, I have argued that although Levenson's hermeneutical framework does provide a number of valuable insights into the theme of creation in the Hebrew Bible, it also results in theologically problematic views of God and humanity.  Thus the questions facing the reader of the Hebrew Bible are not only historical and literary but also ethical.  Retelling the story of the world based on the Hebrew Bible, at least within communities that take the Bible seriously, has real implications for how we understand our role in the world.  The question of *why* we might read this text in one way as opposed to another is thus of central importance for working out how we ought to understand ourselves and our world.

In particular, a reading that is sensitive to the concerns of the Christian community will be inclined to read Gen 1 as being a text about a unified God and thus to reject Levenson's view that God's 'unity is fragmented' until His goodness wins out over 'his negative pole' (45), while admitting that *we* cannot always fully reconcile the various images of God given in the Hebrew Bible.  This unity need not be solitary but, on the classic Christian account, is a unity marked by a fullness of life within God Himself, apart from any external conditions (cf. previous chapter 'Creation from Nothing').  Because the starting point is a unified and personal God, God is secure in Himself and does not need to establish His godhood in any ontological sense.[53]  None of this, however, means that God cannot use violence or will not put down rebellions against His authority when He deems it right. Creation is thus a gift and gratitude, rather than violence, is embedded in creation.

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[52] Moberly, 'Election and the Transformation of *Ḥērem*,' 67-89; cf. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology*, 59-74.

[53] Though it should be recognized that establishing His godhood *to humans*—that is demonstrating what is already the case—is a prominent theme throughout the Hebrew Bible, especially in Exodus and Isaiah.

2.4 *Conclusion*

Levenson's work illustrates a theologically significant reading of Gen 1:1 as a relative clause and excluding creation ex nihilo. By setting aside creation ex nihilo, Levenson has been able to draw attention to a variety of overlooked creation texts and motifs. But, having shown the value of bracketing out the doctrine of creation ex nihilo for heuristic purposes, it remains to be seen if the doctrine should be discarded altogether or if it can be constructively reintroduced into the interpretive process. Levenson is right that the several pictures of God and the world offered in the Hebrew Bible should not be displaced by but rather set alongside Gen 1, even if they are relativized by Gen 1 in the ultimate canonical shape of the Bible and its assertion that 'good is somehow more basic than suffering and evil.'[54] Any recovery of the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* must account for both the suffering and evil in the world and the goodness of creation and in this respect, Levenson's *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* is an important call back to the biblical texts. In the following argument, I attempt to accommodate some of Levenson's central insights about creation within the framework of creation ex nihilo.

## 3. Genesis 1:1 as Heading to the Narrative

### 3.1 *An Exposition of Gunkel's Interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2*

Hermann Gunkel's work on Gen 1—found primarily in his *Genesis* commentary (1910) and his monograph *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* (1895) which compares *Enuma elish* with various biblical passages—has been vastly influential in the modern period, setting the agenda for the interpretation of Gen 1 in the last century. While much could be said about various aspects of Gunkel's approach and regarding his historical reconstruction of relationship between *Enuma Elish* and OT creation texts, for our purposes I focus primarily on his interpretation of Gen 1:1-2 as a significant example of an interpretation that reads Gen 1:1 as a heading to the chapter.[55]

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[54] Moberly, *Genesis*, 69.

[55] For helpful comments on the relationship between Gunkel's religious commitments and hermeneutic, cf. Daniel R. Driver, *Brevard Childs, Biblical Theologian*, 105-125. On Gunkel's historical context, cf. Lundström, 'Chaos and Creation: Hermann Gunkel between Establishing the "History of Religions School," Acknowledging Assyriology, and Defending the Faith,' 147-171.

Gunkel's starting point is the recognition that there are a series of tensions within Gen 1: phrases and ideas that do not fit in their context and 'are hardly understandable from the standpoint of the one who finally reports it.'[56]  This is not surprising to Gunkel since 'in antiquity, one did not create cosmogonies.'[57]  Rather, the 'author' of Genesis (P in Gunkel's view) 'found a preexisting creation account whose original arrangement he either did not understand or observe'[58] and shaped it primarily by imposing the seven day scheme and a series of categorizations of various types of creatures.[59]  Traces of the older version of the creation account can be found in the description of Chaos in 1:2, the 'mother earth' concept implied in the earth producing plants and animals, the sun and moon being depicted as living beings with dominion, the plural forms in reference to God in 1:26, humans being made in the image of God, and the golden age vegetarian diet in 1:30.[60]

It should be noted at this point that Gunkel's assumptions lead him to develop a rather sophisticated account of the influence of *Enuma elish* (and other ANE accounts) on Gen 1. Although he agrees with the view that Gen 1, in its final form, likely comes from the exilic period, he ponders whether the base myth that is evident in Gen 1 could have been adopted during the exile.  Gunkel thinks not: P 'with such a pronounced and self-consciously Jewish individuality, would never have translated and reworked a strongly mythological and polytheistic narrative…[this] conjecture is, hence, an unthinkable thing in terms of religious history.'[61]  A more likely scenario, in Gunkel's opinion, is that the creation myth 'made its way into Israel at a much earlier time so that its Babylonian origin had already been forgotten over several generations by the time of the prophets.'[62]  Given the Akkadian of the Amarna documents and the Babylonian hegemony over Canaanite religion c. 1400 BC, Gunkel suspects that at it was at this point that the Babylonian creation myth was taken up into

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[56] *Creation and Chaos*, 6.

[57] *Genesis*, 119.

[58] Ibid., 120.

[59] Thus Gunkel can say of P 'He is no poet…but a scientific man who wants to delve into the essence of things, who categorizes the abundance of phenomena in classes, and ponders the characteristics of these classes' (Ibid., 118).

[60] Ibid.  Of course Gunkel's reading of these details can be challenged at a number of points.

[61] *Creation and Chaos*, 91-92.

[62] Ibid., 98.

Canaanite religion.[63] Israel likely adopted, but did not fully assimilate, a creation faith at this time. Then, in the period of the prophets, the exilic (re-)confrontation with Marduk theology provided the catalyst for the the formalized 'writing' of the Jewish version of the creation account.[64] Thus the revision of Gen 1 was directly parallel to Deutero-Isaiah's 'discover[ing] anew the ancient creation concepts.'[65]

This putative prehistory shapes Gunkel's reading of Gen 1:1-2. Gunkel reads Gen 1:1 as a heading through which 'simply and powerfully, the author first establishes the doctrine that God created the world…everything that follows has the goal, then, of illustrating this clause.'[66] Although the dependent interpretation is also possible, Gunkel concludes that 'the two are only grammatically, not semantically, distinct.'[67] On the other hand, Gunkel argues that Gen 1:1 cannot be read as describing the first act of creation since the phrase 'heaven and earth' elsewhere always refers to the organized, completed world and thus cannot name 'the primordial, still chaotic state of this first creation.'[68] Moreover, 'the notion of a creation of Chaos is intrinsically contradictory and odd, for Chaos is the world before Creation.'[69] Readerly expectations are confounded, however, as

> the continuation [in 1:2] contrasts remarkably with this beginning. Whereas one may expect following this first clause that the world was only created by God and that before him nothing will have existed, the second clause describes the primordial state of the world preceding God's "Creation."[70]

This contradiction cannot be understood narratively but rather it must be

> understood historically: the material of v 2 belongs to the elements found by Judaism; v 1 was added by Judaism itself. That P could adopt such a depiction of Chaos demonstrates that he, too, did not yet clearly conceive of the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* (2 Macc 7:28; Heb 11:3). The description of the chaotic primordial state is "a true mythological treasury."'[71]

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[63] However, note that the Gunkel's dating of *Enuma elish* is now considered to be too early. The newer consensus is that *Enuma elish* likely comes from 1400-1100 BC; cf. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible*, 82-84.

[64] *Creation and Chaos*, 105-107.

[65] Ibid., 107.

[66] *Genesis*, 103.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid., 104.

[71] Ibid., quoting Friedrich Schwally, 'Die Biblischen Schöpfungsberichte,' *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 9 (1906), 169.

Thus, according to Gunkel, Gen 1:2 is a 'mythological treasury' containing allusions to a variety of ancient creation accounts while 'no statement in the cosmogonies of the other peoples approaches this first statement of the Bible [sc. Gen 1:1].'[72]

The first phrase of 1:2, *tōhû wābōhû* is 'to be considered ancient' and is parallel to Gen 2:5 where the earth was originally a desert.[73] Moreover, Gunkel maintains, *bōhû* may preserve the Phoenician goddess Baau, the wife of the wind God Kolpia, or the Babylonian goddess Bau, the wife of the war god Ninib. The darkness and water, however, suggest another mythic view of the origin of the world wherein the deep waters filled the whole of the primordial realm. The reference to the *rûaḥ* over the face of the waters alludes to a third view, that the world began like an egg over which the *rûaḥ* broods. This theory, notes Gunkel, finds parallels in Phoenecians myths but also in Indian, Iranian, and even Polynesian myths. Gunkel concludes that 'the fact that these different views harmonize with one another quite well here results from the fact that they are greatly diluted and—as is the nature of the material—veiled in obscure, dark secrecy.'[74] Similar echoes of various creation myths are found in the subsequent acts of division by God, in the creation of the firmament, and other details of the text. Although these mythic fragments are 'diluted,' 'obscured,' or 'faded,' some of their original connotations still show through.

Although many of Gunkel's specific suggestions have since been discredited, his basic construal of Gen 1:1-2 remains influential.[75] Westermann, for example, maintains that Gen 1:1 'is not the beginning of an account of creation, but a heading that takes in everything in the narrative in one single sentence.'[76] Genesis 1:2 corresponds to the 'when not yet' phrase used to begin various ANE creation accounts, most notably *Enuma elish*. Westermann concludes that Gen 1:2 does not offer a 'coherent and complete picture of Chaos' but rather draws a 'contrast between Chaos and its opposite.'[77] At the same time, Westermann readily

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[72] Ibid., 103.

[73] Ibid., 104.

[74] Ibid., 105.

[75] See esp. Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction*, who demonstrates that *bhw* cannot have any direct connection with the Phoenician divine name (14) nor can *thwm* refer to the Babylonian Tiamat (42-54).

[76] *Genesis 1-11*, 94.

[77] Ibid., 102.

acknowledges that attempts to connect *bōhû* or *tĕhôm* with various ANE deities are untenable.[78]

## 3.2 *An Evaluation of Gunkel's Interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2*

The particulars of Gunkel's interpretation are clear and even plausible within his frame of reference.  The difficulty, however, is that Gunkel never actually offers a coherent interpretation of the final form of the text.  Gunkel will make passing observations on the way that P has assimilated and reworked his inherited material but this does not approach the more comprehensive work of the subsequent generation of redaction critics.  Rather, for Gunkel, identifying the various layers within the prehistory of the text is an end in itself: 'Gen 1 did not fall from heaven in final form, but it developed through a grand and impressive history.'[79]  Likewise, in his earlier work, 'the ultimate object of the investigation, however, is to reconstruct the original context and to indicate the basis of its alteration, i.e., to write the history of the tradition.'[80]  For Gunkel the final form of the text is thus a hindrance, obscuring the 'grand and impressive history' that he sought to uncover: the Gattungen 'nicht auf dem Papier, sondern im Leben bestanden haben.'[81]

At this point, David Tracy's account of Mikhail Bakhtin's hermeneutic provides an interesting analogy.  Like Gunkel, Bakhtin engaged in formalist analysis of various literature and shared Gunkel's fascination with genre and folklore.[82]  Tracy notes that for Bakhtin, various literary forms are never merely studied in a formalist manner.  Rather, one 'must always examine the complex and plural philosophical content rendered present through the dialogic form…the specific social, political, cultural reality of the period can also be unearthed by a close study of literary forms.'[83]  Thus, 'every text implicitly contains in it the whole history of its uses in ever shifting historical, political, social, economic, and cultural

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[78] Ibid., 103-105.

[79] *Genesis*, 132.

[80] *Schöpfung und Chaos*, 256 as translated in Driver, *Brevard Childs*, 110.

[81] Gunkel, 'Biblische Theologie und biblische Religionsgeschichte, I. de AT,' *RGG*[2], 3:1679; quoted in Driver, *Brevard Childs*, 105.

[82] It is beyond the scope of this essay to demonstrate, but the work of early folklorists like the Brothers Grimm (who Gunkel periodically references) and Andrew Lang stands behind both Gunkel and Bakhtin.

[83] Tracy, 'The Other of Dialectic and Dialogue,' 106-107.

settings.'[84]  Interpretation for Bakhtin is not a process that closes in on the single meaning of a text but rather enters into the theoretically endless dialogue of the text.  This clearly goes beyond Gunkel's explicit statements of his interpretive process but does, it seems to me, describe in part what Gunkel actually does in his commentary on Gen 1: various mythological fragments contain within themselves refractions of the various historical, social, cultural settings in which they have been used.

Elsewhere Gunkel appeals to the larger project of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* as a framework for his interpretive endeavor.  He maintains that Gen 1 cannot be valued as totally different than other ANE myths.  Genesis 1 cannot be regarded as 'special revelation' but rather is a 'milestone' in the history of the world and manifests God's 'hand' in the development of Israelite religion.[85]  This corresponds to the nature of the OT generally: it does not record a system in which there can be no contradictions, but rather contains 'a plentitude of records of a great religio-historical process in which there have actually been all sorts of different positions.'[86]  These records have enduring value and can never become obsolete: 'the Old Testament contains conceptions that, although they have now been outgrown in the history of ideas, can never be forgotten, because they are necessary stages in the path of evolution.'[87]  Thus 'everyone with a historical mind will consider it their duty to understand the mind that is revealed in all history…while the process of building goes on, its foundation stones will abide.'[88]  Genesis 1 and the various mythological fragments it contains form a key piece of this foundation.

Given Gunkel's goal of understanding the 'mind that is revealed in all history,' his approach to Gen 1 is sensible: the various stages in which this mind is revealed are set forth and this, in itself, is the goal of interpretation.  Gunkel's basic approach to Gen 1:1-2, however, need not be married to his religio-historical interpretive ends and, in fact, may be used to formulate a reading hospitable to the concerns of creation ex nihilo.  Rather, our

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[84] Ibid., 107.

[85] *Creation and Chaos*, 81.

[86] *Israel and Babylon*, 20.

[87] 'Was bleibt vom Alten Testament?' [1914]; 'Why Engage the Old Testament?,' in Gunkel, *Water for a Thirsty Land*, 15.  The language of 'milestone' must be taken with full seriousness: Gunkel wanted to maintain the priority of the biblical traditions: 'Wenn wir also damals "Religionsgeschichte" auf unser Banner schrieben, so dachten wir nicht an eine "Geschichte der Religionen," sondern an eine Geschichte der *biblischen* Religion' (Gunkel,'Die Richtungen der alttestamentlichen Forschung,' *Christliche Welt* 36 [1922], 66; cited in Driver, *Brevard Childs*, 120).

[88] Ibid., 27.

interpretive goals significantly affect how we construe Gunkel's reading of Gen 1:1-2. Is the goal purely historical? In that case, uncovering various mythical fragments is an end in itself. Is the goal to develop a history of biblical religion as in itself theologically significant? This is what Gunkel sought to do. Although Gunkel's work is of great significance for the development of modern biblical scholarship, it is by no means apparent to me that his attempt to ground theology in the history of traditions was successful or even defensible apart from a series of assumptions common to the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*. Is the goal to recover the prehistory of the text in order to enrich our understanding of the text in its final form? In this case, many of Gunkel's insights—not least that Gen 1 can be read against the backdrop of the matrix of ANE thought—remain important but can be set into an entirely new context.

## 3.3 *Reformulating Gunkel's Interpretation within a Canonical Approach*

In attempting to reformulate Gunkel's interpretation, Brevard Childs is a natural guide as he saw his own work as 'in one sense…simply extend[ing] the insights of the form critical method.'[89] Childs described his project, in Wittgenstein's terms' as the attempt 'to describe one "language game," namely, the use of the Old Testament as scripture by a community of faith and practice.'[90] Given this goal, Childs does not share Gunkel's concern that the final or canonical form problematically obscures the earlier traditions preserved in fragmentary form. Rather,

> the entire history of Israel's interaction with its traditions is reflected in the canonical text…the crucial point to make is that regardless of the exact nature of a text's prehistory, a new dynamic was unleashed for its interpretation when it was collected with other material and assigned a religious role as sacred scripture.[91]

The final form, then, may in some senses obscure the prehistory of the text but for the religious communities that treat the Hebrew Bible as scripture, the final form provides the determinative context for interpretation.

Childs's early work deals with Gen 1 in an extended discussion that is greatly indebted to Gunkel.[92] Like Gunkel, Childs suggests that the 'unresolved tension' between Gen 1:1 and 2 'is of such a nature as to suggest that we are dealing with materials foreign to

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[89] 'Response to Reviewers of *Introduction to the OT as Scripture*,' 52.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ibid., 54.

[92] *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*.

Israel's tradition.'[93]  Childs, however, goes farther than Gunkel, in seeing Gen 1 as evidence of 'two different concepts of the reality of the world…in conflict.  This resulted in a process of assimilation in which the Old Testament understanding slowly destroyed its rival.'[94]  Thus the significance of Gen 1 is precisely in the fact that it is 'a late recension of an earlier form' and so gives insight into 'the Priestly understanding of the creation.'[95]  The theological concerns of the Priestly redactor are clear in various features of the text: the fiat mode of creation, the seven day pattern, the use of the key term *bārā'*, and so forth.  The clearest expression of the Priestly theology, however, is found Gen 1:1 which is a 'unique witness to the nature of the world as a reality lying outside of God.'[96]  By 'reading verse 1 as a superscription, the difficulty of the pre-existent chaos is certainly not overcome' but nevertheless the point is clear: 'God is the complete and sole source of the world, which by his creation exists as a reality outside himself.'[97]  Childs concludes his exposition by observing that

> The Priestly writer has broken the myth with his affirmation in 1.1.  However, he did not fully destroy the myth.  Leaving those elements within the myth which he could use, he reshaped the tradition to serve as a witness to his understanding of reality.  1.1 testifies to the absolute sovereignty of God over his creation.  The resistance of verse 2 to this affirmation does not stem from the inadequacy of the witness, but from the complexity within world reality itself.[98]

At this point in his thinking, Childs has not reached his mature views on canon and yet he is able to move beyond Gunkel by focusing on the significance of the mythic fragments for the interpretation of the text in its final form.  In doing so, Childs's reading actually approaches Levenson's in several key respects.  Creation is not contrasted 'with a condition of nothingness, but rather with a chaos' and the preservation of Gen 1:2 in the final form is a witness to the complexity of the world of human experience.[99]

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[93] Ibid., 35.

[94] Ibid., 38.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid., 39.

[97] Ibid., 39-40.

[98] Ibid., 42.

[99] Ibid., 42.

In his later writings, Childs only addresses Gen 1 in passing. The 'structure of the chapter,' that is, the heading at 1:1, makes it 'out of the question to suggest that creation resulted from a reforming of chaos.'[100] Yet

> although the Priestly writer lays the greatest stress on the creative act of God in bringing into being the world from his power alone, there emerges already in Gen. 1.2 the tension between creation and chaos. There is no question of a primordial dualism, but there remains the threat of non-being which resists the world pronounced good by God.[101]

Childs's interpretation is essentially a succinct statement of his earlier conclusions and he never specifies how a fuller adopting of a canonical framework might effect his earlier arguments.

I want to propose that the tension between Gen 1:1 read as a heading and 1:2 might be further clarified by analogy with the canonical shaping of Gen 1 and 2. Childs accepts the 'literary critical distinctions drawn between the two creation accounts' but argues that they 'have not been simply juxtaposed in Genesis as two parallel creation stories.'[102] Reading the chapters as simply juxtaposed 'disregards the essential effect of the canonical shaping which has assigned the chapters different roles within the new context of the book of Genesis.'[103] Taking this canonical shaping seriously makes it clear that by means of 2:4, the second creation account is subordinated to the first so that now what 'follows proceeds from the creation in the analogy of a son to his father.'[104] Moreover, the reader is thus guided by the structure of the literature. In fact,

> the structure of the book has also altered the semantic level of the chapter in assigning ch. 2 a different function. Its new role in subordination to ch. 1 has been achieved by raising the chapter to a degree of figurative language once-removed from its original literal sense.[105]

Analogously, it could be argued that Gen 1:1 as a heading is not merely distinct from all other ANE cosmogonies, as Gunkel claimed, and is not simply juxtaposed to Gen 1:2 but rather performs a hermeneutical function that shapes the reading of the remainder of the chapter. Put simply, the proposal is that Gen 1:1 is not merely a heading but an instruction to

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[100] *Biblical Theology*, 385.

[101] Ibid., 386.

[102] *Introduction*, 149.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Ibid., 150.

[105] Ibid.

the following story as an account of the creation of the heavens and the earth, that is, all things. Thus, Gen 1:1 alters the semantic level of 1:2, exerting pressure toward a figurative reading of the language.

On this reading, creation ex nihilo is at least contiguous to the concerns of Gen 1. Genesis 1:1 blocks off, as it were, certain avenues of interpretation that make the 'chaos' of 1:2 coexistent with God, and yet the witness of 1:2 to the 'chaotic' nature of reality is preserved at some level. While I believe that this interpretation is sufficient for the sort of creation ex nihilo reading that I am seeking to develop, in the next section I want to see if it is possible to read Gen 1:1, in a responsible manner, as the first act of creation.

## 4. GENESIS 1:1 AS THE FIRST ACT OF CREATION

I now wish to argue, albeit in a tentative and rather experimental manner, that the first verse of Genesis, in the MT, can plausibly be read as describing the first steps in the process of creation.[106] Though this option has fallen out of popularity, it was the predominant view in the early and medieval church, often developed in dialogue with various metaphysical theories. My own argument, however, is not an attempt to recover this traditional reading as such but rather to propose a reading of the first verse on the grounds of a canonical approach to the Hebrew Scriptures—an approach that attempts to take seriously both the historical and literary contexts of the passage.

After noting the central syntactic issues in Gen 1:1-3, I begin my argument with two general observations, the first concerning the use of the term *šmym* in biblical Hebrew and the second concerning the cosmological formulae found in the Hebrew Bible, before turning to the meaning of Gen 1:1.

### 4.1 *Two Senses of šmym*

The interpretation of *šmym* should take into account a recent trend in biblical scholarship. Under the influence of Gustaf Dalman's *Die Worte Jesu* (1898), a 20th century consensus emerged that in Matthew, where the term 'heaven' appears most frequently in the NT, the term is used as a 'reverential circumlocution' in order to refer to God in a way that is

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[106] For sake of space, I do not here consider the effects of the variances between MT and LXX on the issues considered.

non-offensive to the supposedly Jewish audience of that gospel.[107]  I suspect, given that Matthew's use of 'heaven' is one of the most marked in the whole Bible, biblical scholarship in general has been influenced by this theory, remaining cool toward 'heaven' and offering little attention to the development of the term across the canon.  Simultaneously, casual use of 'heaven' in popular imagination and piety has done little to help the situation.[108]  Thus commentaries on Genesis regularly pass over the fifth word of the Bible as if its meaning were perfectly clear and required no further reflection.

My first observation is that of the 480 times or so that the term *šmym* ('heavens') is used in the Hebrew Bible, it is apparent that it is used in two distinct, though interrelated, senses.[109]  On the one hand, *šmym* can be used to refer to the visible sky (which I label as the 'cosmological sense') and, on the other hand, to God's dwelling place (the 'theological sense').  While these two senses can be distinguished, neither sense is entirely settled within the Hebrew Bible.

In the cosmological sense, *šmym* sometimes refers to the firmament and the location of the stars (as in Gen 1:9, 14-15), and sometimes to the space *between* the firmament and the earth, especially when referring to the realm of birds and meteorological phenomena (as in Gen 1:26, 2:19, 6:7, 7:3, and so forth).  In his study, Luis Stadelmann maintains that 'it is impossible to establish a relation between several, at times conflicting, views of the heaven represented in the Bible…since it seems likely that in the conception of the sky there has been some fusion of cosmological traditions which were not native to Israel.[110]  For the argument at hand, it is sufficient to recognize that *šmym* is frequently used to refer to an aspect of Israel's lived experience of the created world and in this respect is equivalent to the English word 'sky,' with its equally varied senses.[111]

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[107] The history of this interpretation is concisely recounted, and the interpretation subsequently demolished, in Pennington's fine study *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew*.  Against the view that Matthew was written for a solely Jewish audience, cf. Bauckham, 'For Whom Were Gospels Written?,' 865-882.

[108] Equally problematic in this respect are the elaborate accounts of visions of heaven and the off-handed references to 'going to heaven' by ordinary Christians.

[109] My conclusions are essentially based on my own work with the concordance as I worked through every use of *šmym*.  The process of thinking through these issues, however, was informed by Pennington, 'Dualism in the Old Testament Cosmology: *Weltbild* and *Weltanschauung*,' 260-277; ibid., *Heaven and Earth*, and David Tsumura, '*šmym*,' in *NIDOTTE*, 4:160-166.

[110] Stadelmann, *The Hebrew Conception of the World*, 43.

[111] 'The jet flew across the sky,' 'not a cloud in the sky,' 'the blue sky,' and the 'stars of the night-sky' are all commonly used English phrases though, strictly speaking, contrails, clouds, and the gasses which scatter blue light  occupy distinct layers of the atmosphere while stars are not within the earth's atmosphere at all.

At the same time, *šmym* is also used throughout the Hebrew Bible to refer to the realm of the divine or the dwelling place of God (eg, Deut 26:15; 1 Kgs 8:30; 22:19; 2 Kgs 19:15; Isa 40:22; 63:15; 66:1). Though some have attempted to show how the Israelite conception of God's dwelling place related to the firmament, frequently by way of Ps 104:2-3, it is better to understand references to God's dwelling place as employing *šmym* in a distinct, even metaphorical sense.[112] Stadelman suggests that 'from the ancient [Babylonian] data it is quite certain that the sky, more than any other phenomenon or subject, expresses the divine essence and the character of divine power. The sky is "god" in general.'[113] While accepting that Israel's association of 'heaven' with God fits well into its larger cognitive environment, it should be noted that the Old Testament itself evidences a significant connection between the cosmological and theological senses of *šmym*. In various passages, God's control over the heavens in the cosmological, and especially meteorological, sense is strongly emphasized (e.g., Josh 10:11, 1 Kgs 8:35-36, Ps 78:23-31, Ps 147:8). This rhetoric leads to striking passages like Deut 28:12 where it is promised that 'Yhwh will open to you His good treasury, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands.' Here the cosmological heavens are metaphorically Yhwh's treasury out of which he blesses Israel with rain. Thus, especially in rain-dependent Palestine, it is easy to see how the heavens as an aspect of the experienced world is suggestive of God's dwelling place. Similarly, in the narratives of Ex 16 and Josh 10, God's control of the physical heavens indicates the ultimately divine source of Israel's provision and deliverance. This connection between the two senses of *šmym* leads to blurring of the boundary between the senses in some passages.[114] Nevertheless, the *šmym*, in both senses, is said to be created by God at various points in the Hebrew Bible.

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[112] Contra Stadelmann, *Hebrew Conception*, but with Pennington, 'Dualism;' Houtman, *Der Himmel im Alten Testament*; Gerhard von Rad, '*ouranos*: B. Old Testament,' *TDNT*, 5:502-509.

[113] *Hebrew Conception*, 37.

[114] Pennington offers two helpful quotes supporting this contention, which are worth repeating: Meredith Kline notes that 'so close is the association of God's dwelling and actions with the visible heaven that is may be difficult to determine in given cases whether "heaven" refers to the visible or invisible heaven, or both at once' ('Space and Time in Genesis Cosmogony,' 3). John Goldingay, in commenting on Daniel 4, observes that '*šamayim* means "heaven" both in the physical sense of the sky and in the metaphorical sense of God's dwelling; the passage makes use of the fact that the former is a symbol of the latter, lets one meaning hint at the other, and sometimes leaves unclear which is referred to' (*Daniel*, 85).

## 4.2 *Bipartite and Tripartite Cosmological Formulae*

My second observation, following Othmar Keel, is that in the 'symbolic-mythical conceptions' of the world in the Hebrew Bible, as well as in various other ANE cultures, 'the world can be described not only as the sum of two parts, but of three or more as well.'[115] David Tsumura helpfully labels these 'bipartite' and 'tripartite' divisions of the world. The bipartite cosmology is described in the Hebrew Bible as 'the heavens (*šmym*) and the earth (*'rṣ*)' while the tripartite cosmology (with some variation) is described as 'the heavens (*šmym*), the earth (*'rṣ*), and the sea (with *ym*, not *thwm*).' Psalm 148 provides an extended example of a bipartite cosmology while Exod 20:11; Hag 2:6; Pss 69:35; 96:11; 146:6; and Neh 9:6 all provide good examples of tripartite cosmologies.[116] That both of these cosmological schemes coexist in the Hebrew Bible should not be surprising since, as von Rad notes, 'it seems that there never was a sacrally canonised view of the world in Israel.'[117]

How do these two observations—that *šmym* is used in both cosmological and theological senses and that the Hebrew Bible employs both bipartite and tripartite cosmologies—relate together? Unfortunately, they do not *directly* correlate. In occurrences of the tripartite cosmological formula ('heavens, earth, and sea'), the 'heavens' rarely, if ever, refer to God's dwelling place. Here a possible exception is Amos 9:6—'[He] who builds His upper chambers in the heavens and founds His vault upon the earth; who calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out upon the surface of the earth; the LORD is His name.' In context, however, 'His upper chambers' likely refers to God's storehouse for His flood, not His dwelling place, since this best fits with the reference to 'His vault on the earth' and the

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[115] *Symolism of the Biblical World*, 35. Cf. David Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction*, 63-69.

[116] Tsumura suggests that *Atrahasis* I.1.7-18 is an example of tripartite cosmology ('Anu went up to the sky/[And Ellil(?)] took the earth for his people//The bolt which bars the sea/Was assigned to far-sighted Enki.' trans. Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 9). On the other hand, *Enuma elish* has at least partially adopted a bipartite cosmology in so far as Tiamat's corpse is divided into heaven and earth (Tsumura notes that W. G. Lambert's argument that *Enuma elish* combines originally distinct bipartite and tripartite cosmologies with only partial success).

[117] '*ouranos*,' 503. Note here that in his influential work, *The Hebrew Conception of the World*, 177, Luis Stadelmann claims that the Hebrew conception of the world is of "three layers" that are "related to one another in a structural relationship…the heavens above, the earth and the sea in the middle, and the underworld beneath" and that this final element can be described by various Hebrew terms including *thwm*, *bwr*, and *š'wl*. While Stadelmann may indeed be correct in identifying three 'layers' of the world referred to in various biblical texts, I can find no single text that combines all three elements in one cosmological formula (that is, something like: *šmym w'rṣ wš'wl wkl-'šr bhm*; 'the heavens and earth and Sheol and all that is in them'). The one possible exception cited by Stadelmann is Ps 115:16-17. Here, however, vv. 15-16 should be read as supporting a *bipartite* cosmology, with v. 17 read as a counterpoint to v. 18 rather than, primarily, as a continuation of v. 16. Thus, the tripartite cosmological formula in the Hebrew Bible is 'the heavens, the earth, and the sea' and *not* 'the underworld' or 'Sheol.'

descriptions of the flood in 9:5b, 9:6b. Similarly, the elaborations in Deut 4:17-19 makes it likely that the prohibition on making images of things in heaven does not refer, in the first instance, to 'angels' or the occupants of God's heavenly throne-room (cf. Job 1-2, Isa 6). It seems safe to conclude then that the tripartite cosmological formula ('heaven, earth, and sea') is used to refer to the created world regularly experienced by humans.

In the bipartite cosmological formula ('heaven and earth'), 'heaven' can refer either to God's dwelling place or to the literal sky. The terms are paired 185 times in the Old Testament; 65 times they are conjoined with a simple *waw* while in an additional 120 instances the terms are linked within a broader context.[118] The Old Testament is by no means anomalous in pairing 'heaven and earth'; it seems to be a common fixed pair in most cognates of Hebrew.[119] It is important to note, however, that in Phoenician, for example, heaven and earth are paired by referring to *'l qn arṣ* and *b'l šmym* ('El, creator of earth' and 'Baal-of-Heaven').[120] Passages such as Gen 24:3 may have this sort of division of heaven and earth as the realm of different gods in mind when emphasizing that YHWH is 'the God of heaven and the God of earth.'

Pennington, while maintaining that Old Testament cosmology is fundamentally bipartite, suggests that when 'heaven and earth' is used in a 'merismatic' manner—that is, in order to name the totality of created reality by naming its extremities—then 'heaven' is generally being used in a cosmological sense. Conversely, when 'heaven and earth' is used 'antithetically,' 'heaven' refers to the dwelling place of God.[121] While this provides a plausible organization of the data, it raises two issues. First, Pennington's proposal can be turned on its head: when 'heaven' is used to refer to God's dwelling place, by its very nature it stands in an antithetic relationship to the 'earth.' Moreover, since it is possible that two terms may be antithetical *and* form a merism, the usefulness of Pennington's proposal is uncertain. There is, then, no exact correlation between the cosmological formulae and the senses of *šmym*.

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[118] Pennington, *Heaven and Earth*, 163-164.

[119] *Ibid.*, 166-167.

[120] Tsumura, *NIDOTTE*, 4:163-164. Tsumura also notes the Akkadian *Ba-al-ša-me-ma* and Aramaic *b'lšmyn*.

[121] *Heaven and Earth*, 167-169.

4.3 *Genesis 1:1 as the First Step in Creation*

We turn from two relatively uncontroversial observations to argue for a way of reading Gen 1:1 as describing the first step in creation. I advance by arguing for three theses: that in Gen 1, a bipartite cosmology has been overlaid on a tripartite cosmology; that *šmym* in Gen 1:1 refers to God's realm within creation; and that *'rṣ* in Gen 1:1 refers to the inchoate part of creation accessible to humanity, which includes the sky and the sea.

*Thesis 1:* A bipartite cosmology has been overlaid on Gen 1, framing the tripartite cosmology of the main narrative. The bipartite cosmological formula of Gen 1:1 is obvious to any reader. What is often unnoticed, however, is that the main narrative is structured around a *tripartite* cosmology. After naming the light 'day' and the darkness 'night' on the first day, God proceeds to name the firmament (*rqy'*) 'heaven' (*šmym*), the dry land (*ybšh*) 'earth' (*'rṣ*), and the gathered waters (*mqwh hmym*) the 'sea' (*ymym*). These three aspects of creation which God names are further associated by the delay (in MT) of the evaluative phrase 'and God saw that it was good' from its expected place at the end of second day (1:8) until the creation and naming of the earth and sea in the middle of the third day (1:10). It is this tripartite formula that structures the remainer of the narrative up to 2:1—the heaven, sea, and earth are each filled with various creatures (1:14-25), and humans are given dominion over 'the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth' (1:26, 28, 30).

That the bipartite formula in Gen. 1:1 and 2:1 is at variance with the rest of the narrative is even more conspicuous when compared with the summary of creation in Exod 20:11. There we read that in 'six days, the LORD made the heavens, the earth, *the sea* and all that is in them' (*kî šēšet-yāmîm 'āsāh yhwh 'et-haššāmāyim wĕ'et-hā'āreṣ 'et-hayyām wĕ'et-kol-'ăšer-bām*; cf. Exod 20:4, 24:10). Given the complex prehistories for both Gen 1 and Exod 20:8-11, it is difficult to propose any clear picture of the relationship between the two texts. Brevard Childs suggests that

> A comparison of Ex. 20:9ff with Gen 2:1ff reveals quite clearly that the Exodus formulation is dependent on a common tradition with that of Gen 2[:1]…However, it is equally important to recognize that the sabbath command was not a creation of the Priestly writer. Rather, the influence was from the reverse direction. The present shaping of Gen 1 on the pattern of seven days presupposes the prior tradition of the

sabbath.  The Priestly writer's contribution lay in working out a profound theology of the sabbath which grounded the day in the act of creation itself.[122]

This appears to be a sound suggestion and demonstrates that it is reasonable to approach the text of Gen 1 with the decalogue formula in mind, and thus ponder *why* Gen. 2:1 does not read 'Thus they were finished, the heavens, the earth, *the sea* and all that is in them.'

What then should be made of the apparently overlaid bipartite formula in Gen 1?  If Paul Ricoeur is correct in arguing that 'the interplay of structure and genesis reveals something that we can call the intention of the text,'[123] then this is potentially a highly significant question.  On the one hand, the bipartite formula occurs *only* in two structurally significant locations in the text, on either side of the description of the six days of creative activity.[124]  On the other hand, the variance between the bipartite formula and the *three* named elements of creation on the second and third days strengthens the claim that Gen. 1:1 is the 'unique' contribution of the author.[125]

If Gen. 1:1 is simply a heading summarizing the subsequent narrative, then it is certainly an *odd* summary: the narrative describes how God creates the heavens, earth, *and seas*; names all three; creates creatures peculiar to each zone; and then gives humans dominion over the creatures of each these three zones.[126]  It could be suggested that the narrator simply uses the bipartite formula 'heaven and earth' because this was the stock-phrase in Hebrew for referring to the totality of things but, as has been observed above, tripartite formulae were also regularly used.  Is it perhaps more plausible to suggest that the bipartite formula in Gen. 1.1 is used because 'heaven and earth' *have different referents* here than in 1:3-31?

*Thesis 2:* 'Heaven' in Gen. 1:1 refers to the realm of God within creation.  Though much has been written about Gen 1:1, commentators often gloss over 'the heavens and the

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[122] Childs, *Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster, 1974), 416.

[123] 'On the Exegesis of Genesis 1:1-2:4a' (1971) in Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 129-143.

[124] Here I follow the MT over against the historical-critical reconstruction that maintains that 2:4a, but not 2:4b, belongs with Gen 1:1-2.3.  It seems clear that Gen 2.4a+b should be read together, given the chaistic parallelism between the two parts, as an editorial bridge between Gen 1.1-2.3 and 2.5ff.  Cf. Childs, *Introduction*, 149-150; Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 49-50; Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, passim; McDowell, *The Image of God*, 33-34.  Similarly, Gen 1:30 names only the beasts of the earth and birds of the heavens but the obvious reason for this is that the green plants of the earth do not provide food for the fish of the sea.

[125] Cf. Gunkel's oft-quoted comment: 'No statement in the cosmogonies of other people approaches this first statement in the Bible.  Everything that follows has the goal, then, of illustrating this clause' (*Genesis*, 103).

[126] For syntactic reasons *not* to read Gen. 1:1 as a heading, cf. Day, *From Creation to Babel*, 7.

earth' as if they are self-explanatory. Westermann, for examples, offers an interesting and lengthy reflection on the Hebrew Bible's dualistic manner of naming the cosmos suggesting that there is 'an important difference when a given totality is described by one word or by two opposites,' but he never identifies the referents of 'heaven' or 'earth' in Gen. 1:1.[127] Alternatively, Gordon Wenham offers several helpful comments which are worth quoting at length:

> On its own *šmym* means "sky" or "heaven," i.e., the abode of God, while *'rṣ* denotes the "earth, world," which is man's home. But in the Old Testament, as well as in Egyptian, Akkadian, and Ugaritic, "heaven and earth" may also be used to denote the universe… Gen 1:1 could therefore be translated "In the beginning God created everything." Commentators often insist that the phrase "heaven and earth" denotes the completely ordered cosmos. Though this is usually the case, totality rather than organization is the chief thrust here. It is therefore quite feasible for a mention of an initial act of creation of the whole universe (v 1) to be followed by an account of the ordering of different parts of the universe (vv 2-31). Put another way, *'rṣ* may well have a different meaning in vv. 1 and 2. Compounded with "heaven" it designates the whole cosmos, whereas in v 2 it has its usual meaning "earth."[128]

It is unclear why Wenham notes that *šmym* and *'rṣ* on their own refer to the realms of God and humanity respectively before immediately turning to another interpretation. It seems simpler to suggest that in Gen 1:1, God created His own 'abode…[and] the "earth, world," which is man's home' and that these two realms *together* constituted created reality.

This reading entails the claim that *šmym* is used with two different referents in Gen 1, and to support this claim, I want to examine two passages, from numerous possible examples, in which *šmym* clearly refers to both the cosmological and theological heavens in close proximity to each other, sliding between the two senses without hesitation (cf. 1 Kgs 8:23-54; Pss 33:6, 13; 102:19, 25; 115:15-16; 136:6, 26; Neh 9:6, 13).

Note first Ps 33 where the use of 'heaven' in the cosmological and theological senses is structurally linked in the progression of the psalm. The psalm begins by praising the LORD, whose *ḥsd* fills the earth. This is elaborated by describing the verbal creation of the 'the heavens' (v. 6) as part of a tripartite cosmology: in v. 7, 'the sea' and 'the deep' are under God's control while in v. 9 'the earth' is established by God's word. The earth is mentioned third, rather than second, so that it is open to thematic development as the psalmist reflects on

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[127] Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 101.

[128] Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 15.

the LORD's governance of the nations and the election of Israel (vv. 10-12). The LORD's rule is then coupled with His exhaustive supervision, from heaven, of human acts and attitudes (vv. 13-15). This second reference to 'heaven' is used to refer to God's throne and is part of a bipartite formula (vv. 13-14).

Two further things should be observed. First, if this reading of the thematic development of the psalm is correct, then the initial reference to 'the earth' (v.5) actually *includes* the heavens, the earth, and the sea as described in vv. 6-9. This inclusive usage of 'earth' parallels that proposed for Gen 1:1 below. Second, in this psalm, God's presence in heaven does not suggest that He is distant from the world but rather ensures His comprehensive insight into human life.

Psalm 115:15-16 provides a another important example: 'May you be blessed by the LORD who made heaven and earth! The heavens are the LORD's heavens, but the earth He has given to the children of man.' Though several structural analyses propose a distinction between vv. 14-15 and vv. 16-18, there is no reason to posit a sharp division between vv. 15 and 16. Verse 16 is clearly related to v. 15 in two ways: it is an interpretive expansion of the phrase *šmym w'rṣ* in v. 15 and it provides a concrete example of God's readiness to bless in terms of His gift of the earth to 'the children of men.' Psalm 115:15-16, then, provides an important example of an expanded bipartite cosmology in which 'heaven' refers to God's dwelling place and 'earth' refers to humanity's dwelling place. Thus, it cannot be categorically asserted that the merismatic phrase *šmym w'rṣ* necessarily uses *šmym* in the cosmological sense.

These examples demonstrate that it would not be unprecedented to read Gen 1 as using *šmym* in both senses. Moreover, *if* Gen 1:1 describes the creation of God's heavenly realm, then this grounds the appeal which biblical scholars routinely make to God's throne room in order to make sense of the plural pronoun in Gen 1:26. Reading Gen 1:1 as referring to the creation of God's throne room would tidy-up the loose ends of this interpretation of Gen 1:26.

*Thesis 3:* 'Earth' in Gen 1:1 refers to the inchoate part of creation accessible to humanity, including the sky and the sea. It should be noted that the interpretations of 'heaven' and 'earth' in Gen 1:1 offered here are mutually reinforcing. If the preceding argument, that 'heaven' in Gen 1:1 refers to God's dwelling place within creation, then the

'earth' in Gen 1:1 logically refers to everything else, including the sea and the 'cosmological' heavens. Here I focus on the use of 'earth' in Gen 1:2 and 1:28, arguing that it is used in the narrative to refer to *both* 'dry land' (as in 1:10) and the human realm, as distinct from the divine, in its entirety.

The repeated use of *'rṣ* in Gen 1:28 can be interpreted in one of two ways. If *'rṣ* has the same referent in both instances, then 1:28a limits the realm which humans are instructed to fill and subdue to the dry land while 1:28b gives humans dominion over the creatures of the sea and the heavens in addition to those of the earth. I prefer, however, to read the initial *'rṣ* (1:28a) as referring primarily to the realm of humanity in its totality, as opposed to the realm of God.[129] Undoubtedly, insofar as humanity is to fill (*ml'*) the *'rṣ*, it refers to dry land in 1:28a. The following imperative (*wĕkibšūhâ*, 'subdue it'), however, refers back to *'rṣ* in 1:28a through a pronominal suffix, while the sense is parallel to the following command (*ûrĕdû*, 'take dominion'), whose objects are spelled out in 1:28b as including the sea, the heavens and the earth (dry land). Thus, syntactically, 1:28 can be read as exhibiting both a broad and narrow sense of *'rṣ*. This second option is more likely if 1:29-30 is taken as a clarification of the meaning of the human vocation since it explicitly specifies that the plants of the earth are to provide food for both creatures of the earth and the heavens (presumably sea creatures are omitted because their food comes from the sea).[130]

If this reading of Gen 1:28 is plausible, then it supports reading Gen 1:1-2 as employing a similar encompassing usage of *'rṣ* to refer to the creaturely realm that, through God' creative work, would eventually include separated heavens, earth, and sea. When used initially as part of the bipartite formula, *'rṣ* would thus include all three realms of the tripartite cosmology, which it is divided into in the subsequent narrative.

In Gen 1:2, the three clauses can be read as describing coextensive conditions: the earth is *tōhû wābōhû* because the darkness and the waters have not yet been separated. The earth, as described in 1:2, is developed and unfolded in the subsequent narrative. First, light is created and then separated from the darkness. Second, God makes the *rqy'* in the midst of

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[129] Cf. Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 42: 'the word *earth* occurs in the double sense we noted earlier. To subdue the earth (in the broad sense) involves having dominion over the populations of sea, air, and earth (in the narrow sense). The earth that people are to subdue is that whole earthly realm in need of forming and filling. It was formed by the divisions into sea, air, and earth, and these divisions were filled by the fish, birds, and land animals, respectively.'

[130] For Gen 1:29-30 as an explication of Gen 1:28, cf. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture* (, 58-59; Iain Provan, *Tenants in God's Land*.

the waters in order to make a space within the water for the dry land to eventually appear.[131] Third, the waters under the heavens are gathered together (*qwh*) into a sea and the dry land (*hybšh*) appears (*r'h*) as the earth. Thus, the tripartite cosmos constituted by those aspects of creation which God names are all made by acting on and through the various elements described in Gen 1:2. Genesis 1:2, then, describes all of creation, apart from God's own realm, as it initially was, before God divides and unfolds it into the heavens, earth, and sea of human experience.

Brevard Childs has argued precisely against this interpretation by stating that 'it is rather generally acknowledged that that the suggestion of God's first creating a chaos is a logical contradiction and must be rejected.'[132] Though Childs provides little elaboration, since this is a significant objection from a significant scholar in the field, it deserves a response. In short, I believe Childs's contention to entail several unjustified presuppositions that, upon examination, undercut the force of his argument.

First, Childs takes for granted that Gunkel has definitively demonstrated that Gen 1:2 describes 'a chaos.' Gunkel's position, however, is now being rethought.[133] If 'chaos' indicates a reality which is opposed to God or antagonistic toward his plans for creation, then Childs is warranted in positing a logical contradiction in the idea of God creating a chaos. That this is what is being described in Gen 1:2, however is by no means obvious: in the narrative itself, there is nothing to suggest malevolence in either the *tōhû wābōhû* or the *tĕhôm*. Moreover, the old argument (made by Childs among others) that *tōhû, bōhû,* and especially *tehôm* are allusions to various ancient Near Eastern 'chaos gods' is philologically untenable.[134] At the same time, William Brown has argued that though Gen 1:2 does *not* describe a *chaoskampf,* its description of the world beginning as undifferentiated matter 'does share some semblance with the chaos theory of science.'[135] This would be a perfectly reasonable initial creation by God.

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[131] If Baruch Halpern's suggestion is accepted that the *rqy'* is pictured as a solid plate with apertures that admit light, it should be pictured as below the alternating light and darkness (cf. 'The Assyrian Astronomy of Genesis 1 and the Birth of Milesian Philosophy,' in *From Gods to God*, 427-442).

[132] *Myth and Reality*, 30.

[133] In addition to Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction*, see Watson, *Chaos Uncreated*.

[134] As argued in detail in Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction*, 36-57.

[135] *Seven Pillars*, 53.

Second, God is explicitly said to create the *tnynm* ('sea-monster'?) later in the narrative (1:21) and recounts His delight in the Behemoth and Leviathan (Job 40:15-41:34), all of which are typically considered 'chaos monsters' by scholars who argue for a *chaoskampf* motif in the Old Testament. Perhaps the real issue at hand, then, is how God is conceived. Has Childs too narrowly circumscribed God by assuming that He would only create things that are beneficial to humanity? It seems that, at this point, Childs has fallen into the exact line of thinking for which Job is chastised. In a recent and fascinating article, Dennis Sylva has argued for an interpretation of Psalm 93 that is suggestive for our argument regarding Gen 1:2.[136] As opposed to proponents of a *chaoskampf* interpretation of the psalm who see a rebellion by the waters in vv. 3-4, Sylva argues that 'the power of the chaotic waters [*nhrwt*] is itself part of, and a sign of, Yahweh's power.'[137] Might the relationship between God and the initial state of the world in Gen 1:2 be similarly reconceived so that the 'chaotic' state of earth is not thought of as inimical to God's will for creation but rather is revelatory of His might and even something of His 'wildness'?

Third, and most significantly, though it could be argued that it does not fit with God's character to create 'a chaos' and leave the world as such (cp. Isa 45:18), God obviously does *not* quit creating after Gen 1:2. So the way that Childs has framed the issue is somewhat misleading: the question is not 'is it a logical contradiction for God to create a chaos?' but 'is it a logical contradiction for God use a "chaotic" first step in creation?' Though it may be difficult to determine *why* God began to create by making a *tōhû wābōhû* earth, I can see no logical or theological contradiction in asserting that He does begin in this way.

Again, the argument of this subsection has not proved anything definitively. It has been argued, however, that it is plausible to read *'ereṣ* in Gen 1:2 in an inclusive sense, parallel to the inclusive uses in 1:28 and Ps 33:5. If this is the case, then it follows that *'ereṣ* in Gen 1:1 also refers to the realm of humanity—albeit in a yet uninhabitable state—as opposed to the divine realm of heaven. Gen 1:1-2 could thus be read as something like: 'In the beginning, God created His realm and a realm for humanity but the realm for humanity was desolate and empty, and darkness was over the face of the deep, and the breath of God hovered over the waters.' Moreover, this reading of Gen 1:1-2 fits together with 2:1—God

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[136] 'The Rising *nhrwt* of Psalm 93: Chaotic Order,' 471-482.

[137] 'Rising,' 479.

created the heavens and the earth but the earth wasn't finished yet, so God set about shaping it into the sky, the dry land, and sea and filling each realm. 'Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them' (Gen 2:1).

## 5. FURTHER QUESTIONS

In conclusion, several questions are drawn together and some tentative suggestions made regarding the potential significance of this reading of Gen 1:1. At this point I begin to draw connections between the reading of Gen 1 and the creation ex nihilo framework developed earlier.

### 5.1 *How Should We Picture the Cosmology of Genesis 1?*

I turn now to the work of Jonathan Pennington on the theme of 'heaven' in the Old Testament and the Gospel of Matthew. Pennington, having distinguished between *Weltbildung* and worldview, argues that the pair 'heaven and earth' is used in two senses in the Old Testament. First, it describes Israel's 'ontological cosmology' which distinguishes between God on the one hand and all of created reality on the other. This 'ontological cosmology' is imprinted in Israel's 'physical cosmology' which divides reality into 'heaven'—that is the sky—and the earth—which includes the sea and underworld.[138] He pictures this with the following diagram:

| *Ontological Cosmology* | *Physical Cosmology* |
|---|---|
| Heaven (God) | Heaven (sky) |
| _____ | _____ |
| Earth (Creation) | Earth (including sea and underworld) |

Pennington is only partially successful in picturing the Old Testament cosmology. First, I can find no clear instance in the Old Testament where 'heaven' simply refers to God in Himself, as Pennington's 'ontological cosmology' suggests it does. Rather, 'heaven' in the theological sense consistently refers to God's realm rather than God Himself. Second, Pennington maintains that the Old Testament is consistently and fundamentally bipartite in both its

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[138] *Heaven and Earth*, 181.

'ontological' and 'physical' cosmology.  In doing so, it should be noted, Pennington is arguing against the dominant view maintained by Stadelman and others that the Old Testament has a fundamentally *tripartite* physical cosmology.  As argued above, I join von Rad, Keel, Houtman, and Tsumura in recognizing both bipartite and tripartite physical cosmologies in the Old Testament.  The authors, editors, and canonizers of the Old Testament do not seem to be bothered by this lack of systematization.  Thus Pennington's diagram may adequately represent the view of Psalm 148, for example, but does not make sense of Exod 20:4, 11 and similar passages.

While I am thus hesitant about attempts to diagram the cosmology of the Old Testament as a whole, it is possible to offer a modified version of Pennington's diagram in order to suggest the basic view of Genesis 1, as argued for above:

*Ontology* | *Cosmology*

| Creator | Heaven (God's presence) | *rwḥ*/darkness | heaven (*rqy'*) |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | earth |
| Creation | Earth | earth/deep | sea |
| | *Gen 1:1* | *Gen 1:2* | *Gen 1:10* |
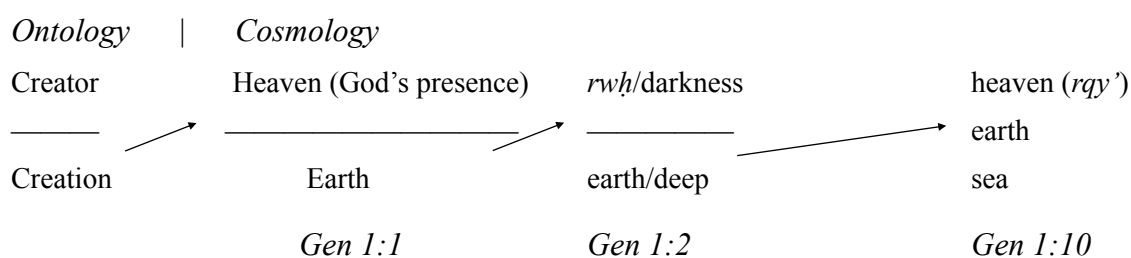
In narrative terms, Gen 1:1 describes an initial action by the creator God, producing all things that are not God.  This both entails the *ontological* distinction between the creator and creation and explicitly posits a bipartite distinction between heaven and earth.  Genesis 1:2, as is typical for clauses beginning with *w*+noun, interrupts the flow of the narrative by describing the earth's initial unsuitability for human and animal life, especially in so far as the three domains are all mixed up: darkness is where the heavens would be and the waters and deep cover the earth.  In Gen 1:3-10, God creates by separating, shaping, and naming a triparite world before filling each of the zones with its appropriate creatures.  The first step in this process is to establish the alternating pattern of darkness and light in order to allow for the historical progression that is above referred to as the drama of creation.  Thus God creates *out of* the earth of Gen 1:2, naming certain elements but leaving other elements unnamed, acting as an archetypal model for humans who are instructed to name the animals and

subsequently 'create' out of the given stuff of the earth.[139]  Here the frequent Old Testament triad bread, wine, and olive oil serve as a good example.  In each case, human cultivation and processing makes inedible thing edible.[140]

This chart attempts to capture the tension between the bipartite cosmological formula of Gen 1:1 and 2:1 and the tripartite cosmology indicated by the various named parts of creation.  Pennington, like many scholars, has not noted this tension in the narrative.  It seems to me, however, that this is a prominent feature that must be accounted for by a good reading of the text.

5.2 *How Should We Conceive of God's Transcendence and Presence in Genesis 1?*

If Gen 1:1 is read as the first act of creation, the has several significant theological implications, especially in connection with God's transcendence and presence (cp. ch.3, §2.2).  If Gen 1:1 is read as either a heading or, even more so, if it is read as the first step in creation, God's 'transcendence' of the created order is emphasized: God has an identity 'beyond' the created order and is not pictured as simply a more powerful element within the same realm of being as creatures.  As Gunkel and Childs both recognize, Gen 1:1 marks a significant difference from the beginnings of currently known ANE cosmogonic accounts, where a "stage" on which the gods interact even prior to creation is presupposed.  Genesis 1 does not give a similar impression of a larger context within which God's creative activity takes place.

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[139] Furthermore, if it is accepted that the created realm of Gen 1:3-2:3 is described as a cosmic-temple, then it can be argued that, in this respect, it is a replica of God's heaven which is created in Gen 1:1.  A similar dynamic can be seen in *Enuma elish*, where Ea shapes Apsû into his cosmic-temple and Marduk subsequently builds a cosmic-temple out of Tiamat's corpse as a replica of Ea's temple (VI:39-62; cf. Andrea Siri, 'The Role of Creation in Enūma eliš,' 22-23)

[140] Cf. MacDonald, *What Did Ancient Israelites Eat?*

If Gen 1:1 is read as the first act of creation, this picture can be further clarified. With reference to the works of Terence Fretheim and John Goldingay,[141] God's heaven can be described in the perspective of the Hebrew Bible as a fundamental aspect of the created order, which is a consecrated zone, open to God but not humanity. This realm is permeated with God's presence and can be called God's 'structural presence' in the world. This 'structural presence' makes possible God's more specific forms of presence with His people, especially in the tabernacle/temple.[142]

On the reading offered, Gen 1:1 then describes God *first* creating His own dwelling place *within* the created realm. This means that God provides His own context for His creative activity and also that the created order is always present to God. That God creates the world in such a way that He is structurally present may, in turn, suggest new ways of conceptualizing language that refers to God 'turning away from' His people or 'departing' for their midst. In a general sense, all people live 'before' God as part of the created order but that does not ensure His particular presence with them. Similarly, this conception of God creating His own place within creation may further clarify the cosmic-temple imagery of Gen 1, suggesting that the Sabbath liturgy implicit in the narrative describes a particular mode of life appropriate for the God-human relationship.

That God first created 'heaven'—the possibility for His presence in the created order—before creating anything else implies at least two things. First, God provides His own context for creation: there is no abstract 'background' context for the interaction between God and world. A comparison with *Enuma elish* is interesting in this respect, since the gods, right from the start, are acting within some unnamed, undefined background context. This is one of the central concerns of the Christian doctrine of creation ex nihilo: there is not some

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[141] Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 37: 'the heavens are an integral aspect of the *world as created*. Using a variety of construction language, God is said to have built his own residence, 'the living space of God,' into the very structures of the created order'; Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:669-670: '"The heavens and the earth" comprise one realm we cannot reach and one to which we do have access; one realm that belongs to God and constitutes a home for God and one that belongs to humanity and constitutes a home for humanity. Heaven suggest "the side of creation that is open to God"; if there were no heaven, the earth would be a closed world, a world without transcendence, in which nothing new can ever happen' (the quote is from Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 163); Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 141-142: 'it is clear that we are dealing with a world picture which is composed essentially of two tiers. The upper tier represents ultimate reality; it is the realm of God and his retinue. The lower tier is that of mundane reality, which is vulnerable to time, change, and flux, in short, open to history. Whereas Sinai...represents the possibility of meaningful history, of history that leads toward an affirmation, Zion represents the possibility of meaning above history, out of history, through an opening into the realm of the ideal.'

[142] On the interplay of God's presence in 'heaven' and 'temple' in 1 Kgs 8, cf. Kamp, 'The Conceptualization of God's Dwelling Place in 1 Kings 8,' 435-437.

ultimate, impersonal context for the God-world relationship.  Rather, God is the ultimate, and absolutely personal, context for the created order.  Second, that God's creation begins by ensuring the possibility of his presence within the created order means that His action within the world is not an interruption or violation of the 'natural' order.

5.3 *Why does God Initially Create the Earth in an Uninhabitable State?*

A central question that arises for this interpretation is *why* God first created an undifferentiated and uninhabitable earth before proceeding to shape it.  From a literary point of view, there would be no story for Gen 1 to tell if creation were simply an instantaneous act: the first verse would say all there is to be said.  This may seem like a rather superficial answer but it stands true.  To discuss God's creation in the form of a narrative, things have to start somewhere; a narrative requires a problem to overcome.[143]

This may not, in fact, be quite as superficial a response as it initially appears.  By describing creation through narrative—rather than through sapiential reflections, propositional assertions, proto-scientific treatises or any of the other possible means of discussing creation—Gen 1 gives creation itself a dramatic, historical character.  Created nature is historically conditioned and historically identifiable; history is fundamental to creatureliness.  The alternation of day and night, the seven day pattern to creation, the careful marking of each day, the giving of stars and planets to mark the seasons and holy days: none of these are incidental features of the texts but hint at the fundamental rhythm of reality.  The beginning of this rhythm with a *tōhû wābōhû* earth and its climax on the seventh day's rest makes this rhythm *move*.  The rhythm of reality is not simply an endless cycle but moves from uninhabitability to divine hospitality as the initially problematic state of the earth is transformed in the drama of creation.

Robert Gordon has drawn attention to the fact that, in addition to the frequently noted the 'fiat' motif in Gen 1, the narrative also depicts God as fashioning the world.[144]  Gordon notes that 'the workman character of the creator' is apparent in the various verbs used in Gen 1-2 with God as subject.  The prominent verb *br'* ('create,' 1:1, 21, 27; 2:3, 4) perhaps does

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[143] Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 80: 'If one were to look for any [narrative] tension in 1:1-2:4a it would be in 1:2 and its link with the preceding or following verses, that is, either in the transition from 1:2 to 1:3 or from 1:1 to 1:2f.  This is the only place in Gen 1 where there could be any sort of dramatic element.'

[144] 'The Week That Made the World,' 228-241.

not directly entail fashioning but the more frequently employed *'sh* ('make,' 1:7, 16, 25, 26, 31, 2:2, 3, 4) does as well as the verbs of Gen 2: *yṣr* ('form,' 2:7, 8, 19) and *bnh* ('build,' 2:22).[145]  Moreover, argues Gordon, the workweek pattern given to the narrative as a whole is 'appropriate to fashioning in a way that does not apply to fiat creation.'[146]  Thus, as a workman or craftsman, God fashions the earth and then takes His sabbath rest.  Exodus 31:17 makes this point explicitly: 'for in six days YHWH made (*'āsāh*) the heavens and the earth and on the seventh day, He rested (*šābat*) and was refreshed (*wayyinnāpaš*).'  Consistent with the picture of God fashioning the world the expression *tōhû wābōhû* can be taken as 'the raw material out of which the earth was made….only the earth is described in relation to its pre-ordered state.'[147]  At this point, a fruitful analogy might be made with the frequent prophetic image of the potter and the clay, which is usually applied to YHWH's relationship to Israel and/or the nations (Jer 18:1-12; Isa 29:16, 45:9, 64:8; cf. Ps 119:73; Rom 9:20-21).  On this analogy, the *'ereṣ* ('world') of Gen 1:2 is like a formless mass of clay which the divine potter fashions into something lovely (*tôb*).  God acts in history, shaping people as a potter shapes clay, reforming it as He desires.  Thus, there is good warrant in the larger canonical context for seeing a 'workman' imagery for God, which is explicit at points such as 2:7, as basic to the picture of God in Gen 1-2.[148]

At this point, I want to draw out three implications in order to make connections with the creation ex nihilo framework.  First, as previously noted (ch.4, §2.2.2), Irenaeus developed his account of creation ex nihilo by juxtaposing two images for God as creator—the creator God is both 'supreme king and wise architect.'[149]  Eric Osborn, who has ably demonstrated this dynamic in Irenaeus's thought, shows that Irenaeus appealed to a broad range of scriptures to support the images of 'king' and 'architect,' or workman—both are ways of describing the imagery of 'building.'  What Osborn does not note is that these two

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[145] Some may object to Gordon's appeal to verbs from Gen 2 as begging the question if the two chapters offer a coherent picture of God as creator.  While the two chapters should not be too quickly assimilated, at the same time, at *some* point it is legitimate to move on to ask about the picture of God as creator given by the early chapters of Genesis taken as a whole.

[146] 'The Week,' 233-234.

[147] Ibid., 233.

[148] Cp. the argument of John Day, *From Creation*, 7: 'This would fit nicely with Gen. 2.4a, which refers to "the generations (lit. begettings) of the heavens and the earth when they were created", a phrase which by analogy with all other references to generations in Genesis…suggests that the heavens and the earth were created first (in some inchoate form), and that the fullness of creation emerged from them.'

[149] Osborn, *Irenaeus*, 69.

basic images correspond roughly to the two 'modes' of creation depicted in Gen 1: God creates by word and by deed.[150] Thus, the use of the material described in Gen 1:2 in the act of creation does not stand in opposition to creation ex nihilo. Rather, for the early church, an account of creation purely by 'word' would lend support to the gnostic view of emanation. On the other hand, creation ex nihilo views creation as a complex act that can be imaged by both command and shaping.[151]

Second, that the created world follows from the elements of Gen 1:2 being changed by division and shaping means that the created nature is such that it can change, it is mutable. Something analogous to Augustine's interpretation might be proposed. Augustine argued that Gen 1:2 describes matter without form. Individual creatures are made from this matter, endowed with form, and can either move toward God, increasing their amount of form, or move away from God, leading to formlessness. Subsequent to Gen 1, the OT uses the term *tōhû* to describe a state of devastation or a desolate wasteland. Israel is said to have been taken out of a *tōhû* place (Deut 32:10, cf. resonance with Gen 1:2c in Deut 32:11) and later Jeremiah threatens that the land of Israel will become a *tōhû* land as punishment for rebellion (Jer 4:23). Indeed, in Isaiah, it is possible that the whole earth will be judged and returned to a state of *tōhû* (Isa 24:10, 34:11, 40:23). Thus Augustine has partially captured the Old Testament dynamic where creaturely life stands, as it were, between Gen 1:2 and 2:1, though the OT uses the far less metaphysical categories to describe this reality—'desolation' and 'verdancy' rather than 'form' and 'formlessness.'

Third, as has been clarified by engaging the world of Levenson, Gunkel, and Childs above, 'lacking in form' is an unsatisfactory description of the state of the world in Gen 1:2, the state to which the land returns when God's people rebel. On the other hand, 'chaos' is a perhaps equally unsatisfactory since since it is used with a variety of connotations in different contexts. Thus, Gen 1:2 should be carefully described.

Those who argue that Gen 1:2 describes a condition opposed to God go beyond the evidence. For example, Childs describes the darkness (*ḥōšek*) as not 'merely the absence of light, but [it] possess a quality of its own. Throughout the Old Testament it is closely

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[150] Cf. Schmidt, *Die Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschrift* for an interpretation of Gen 1 that distinguishes between 'Wort- und Tatbericht.'

[151] Cf. Kathryn Tanner, 'Creation *Ex Nihilo* as Mixed Metaphor,' 138-155.

associated with death…it remains a sphere opposed to life, a land of non-being.'[152]  Similarly, Westermann characterizes the darkness as 'something sinister' and 'the darkness of chaos.'[153]  While it can be admitted that 'light' is a common ANE metaphor for the good, and 'darkness' for its opposite,[154] in a number of significant instance in the OT, *ḥōsek* is associated specifically with YHWH—in describing the manifestation at Sinai (Deut 4:11, 5:23) and on the Day of the LORD (Joel 2:2; Amos 5:18, 20; Zeph 1:15; cf. 2 Sam 22:12).  Thus, Isa 45:7 declares 'I form light and create (*br'*) darkness.'

On the other hand, Gen 1:2 does describe conditions that are not suitable for, and even dangerous to, human life.  Moreover, as Levenson has convincingly argued, these conditions are not eradicated in the process of creation but rather are rather separated, limited, and shaped into the world of human experience.  Thus, there is a dangerous element in the created world that is only partially restrained.  Against this element, the martial language of the command given to the first humans in Gen 1:28 makes good sense.  The world is very good but contains elements that must be subdued and over which humans must exercise dominion.  At this point, returning to Gen 1 can greatly enrich the doctrine of creation ex nihilo.  Genesis 1 does not establish a vague sense of dependence on the creator but provides a narrative context in which this sense of dependence is made concrete: God has restrained elements unsuitable for human life (but not intrinsically opposed to God Himself); human flourishing is dependent on God's continual maintenance of these bounds.

5.4 Conclusion

By engaging several important figures in modern biblical scholarship, this chapter has attempted to tease out the implications of the various readings of Gen 1:1.  By reading Gen 1:1 as a relative clause and bracketing out creation ex nihilo, Levenson recovers much of the dramatic, dynamic nature of a possible creation doctrine of the Hebrew Bible.  His reading, however, does not support a reading of the canon as a unified literary witness to the creator God.

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[152] *Myth and Reality*, 33.

[153] *Genesis 1-11*, 104.

[154] Cf. de Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis and Third Isaiah*, 169-229 for a helpful investigation of the metaphor of 'light' in connection with Isa 60:1-7.

Gunkel's reading of Gen 1:1 as a heading to the chapter, especially as reformulated by Childs, is suggestive of a way of reading Gen 1.  The first verse, it was argued, on this reading could function as a hermeneutical guide for how to read the chapter: as an account of the creation of the heavens and the earth, all things.  While this reading might be adopted and serve for reading the chapter within a creation ex nihilo framework, I finally attempted to read Gen 1:1 as the first act in the narrative of creation.  Although this reading is analogous to the dominant interpretation in the pre-modern period, my own reading is not simply a recovery of this earlier reading but attempts to reformulate it in light of contemporary biblical scholarship.

In the final section of this chapter, I sought to draw connections between this reading of Gen 1:1 and the creation ex nihilo framework, as previously articulated.  Reading 'heaven' in Gen 1:1 as referring to God's dwelling place forms the context for the affirmation of God's *transcendence* of, yet continued *presence* in, the created order.  Recognizing the function of Gen 1:2 as describing the elements that are made into the created order provides a foundation for the claim that the created world is *mutable*.  Moreover, by taking seriously the 'chaotic' nature of these elements, a narrative context is established for the affirmation of the experience of human *dependence* on the creator.

CHAPTER 7

IN CONCLUSION: A WAY FORWARD

'Nicht *wie* die Welt ist, ist das Mystische, sondern daß sie ist. Die Anschauung der Welt sub specie aeterni ist ihre Anschauung als—begrenztes—Ganze. Das Gefühl der Welt als begrenztes Ganzes ist das mystische.'

'Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is. The contemplation of the world sub specie aeterni is its contemplation as a limited whole. The feeling of the world as a limited whole is the mystical feeling.'

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.44 & 6.45

1. INTRODUCTION

The conclusion of this study is, in a sense, really a beginning. I have argued on a number of grounds that creation ex nihilo, when used well, can be a category for biblical interpretation that not only does not force the biblical content into an inappropriate mould but actually may illuminate Gen 1 and other biblical creation texts.[1] Accepting this role for creation ex nihilo does not necessarily close the door on the interpretation of Gen 1 nor does it necessarily mute the voice of the OT and its own interpretive categories (although in practice, the category may be used poorly and so have both of these effects). In principle, however, reconsidering Gen 1 and creation ex nihilo opens up a variety of interpretive possibilities as the categories of the OT and of the Christian tradition are brought into constructive dialogue.

First, one may begin by noting that, although creation ex nihilo is not a category used by the authors of the OT, it is contiguous with the doctrine of creation found in Gen 1. From this point, it could be shown how creation ex nihilo develops various themes and motifs found in Gen 1, perhaps in connection with other biblical creation texts. In itself, this would be a valuable endeavor and it could also indicate ways in which, historically, creation ex nihilo has in fact been deployed in a manner contrary to its biblical warrant in Gen 1.

A second approach to the relationship between Gen 1 and creation ex nihilo might employ the former as a principle in a hermeneutical 'meta-criticism' or 'second-degree reading,' examining 'validity and operational conditions' of various interpretations of Gen 1.[2]

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[1] Cf. Moberly, 'How Appropriate is "Monotheism"?,' 218.

[2] Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 48; Ricoeur, 'Thinking Creation,' 39.

I have, to a certain extent, engaged in this in chapter 6 although it could be carried out in a much more thoroughgoing manner with no doubt interesting results.

A third possible approach is to use creation ex nihilo not only as an interpretive category but as a framework for integrating a coherent reading of Gen 1.  I began on this path in §5 of the previous chapter as I sought to draw a number of connections between Gen 1 and the creation ex nihilo framework developed in chapter 3.  I argued first that reading 'heaven' in Gen 1:1 as a reference to God's dwelling place provided a narrative context for the conceptualization of God's transcendence and presence in relation to the world, especially insofar as 'heaven' ensures God's structural presence in the world and undergirds His particular presence on various occasions.  Furthermore, I argued that Gen 1:2 must be taken seriously, even within a creation ex nihilo framework.  When this is done, a number of connections arise.  The juxtaposition of the images of God as king giving commands and artisan shaping the world supports creation ex nihilo, while  in exclusion from each other, the images might rather suggest the models of emanation or shaping preexisting matter.[3]  Further, that the world is first created in a uninhabitable state and then is changed by God's acts of shaping and division suggests that the world is not created in a static state, but is dynamic and open to being shaped further by God (and humans) or to the possibility of returning to (partial) uninhabitable-ness, as the prophets threaten and the flood narrative depicts.  In these final few pages, I would like to gesture towards several more analogous points where the interpretation of Gen 1 can be made sense of within the framework of creation ex nihilo.

## 2. CREATION EX NIHILO AS A FRAMEWORK FOR READING GENESIS 1

To begin with, I want to briefly suggest how the verb *br'* might be related to creation ex nihilo.  This term has been debated in the last decade as scholars have suggested it really means 'to divide' or 'to assign a function.'[4]  As recently as 1972, however, von Rad simply claimed that 'it is correct to say that the verb *bārā'*, "create," contains the idea of both complete effortlessness and *creatio ex nihilo*, since it is never connected with any statement of material.'[5]  While I am unconvinced by the newer proposals for the meaning of *br'*, I am also hesitant simply to equate the verb with creation ex nihilo since in a number of instances

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[3] Cf. ch. 2; §3.2; ch. 4, §2.2.2.

[4] van Wolde; 'Why the verb'; Walton, *Lost World*, 46.

[5] *Genesis*, 49

it is unclear what it would mean for the object to be created ex nihilo.[6]  In addition to never specifying a material that is used, God is always the actual or implied subject of the verb *br'*.  In this respect, *br'*, in the context of Gen 1, is functionally similar to creation ex nihilo even if the meanings of the two terms should not be directly identified.  Creation ex nihilo means that God creates (like humans) but not from anything (unlike humans).[7]  Thus it established both continuity and discontinuity between divine creation and human creativity.  Analogously, in Gen 1, God's actions are described anthropomorphically, using various verbs that also describe human actions and yet at key places in the narrative, the verb *br'* is used establishing a discontinuity between divine and creaturely action.  Thus, I suggest that *br'* does not mean creation ex nihilo but it functions in an analogous manner within its own realm of theological discourse.

Next, I return to an issue left that was left open in the conclusion of chapter 3.  There it was noted that theologians have traditionally distinguished between God's immediate (ex nihilo) and mediate (shaping, dividing, etc) acts of creation.  There I concluded that although this distinction did bring the doctrine into connection with the narrative development of Gen 1, it could only hold if Gen 1:1 is interpreted as an independent clause and if could be shown that the mediate acts of creation presuppose the prior immediate act, thus giving systematic coherence to the distinction.  In chapter 5, I offered an extended argument defending the viability of interpreting Gen 1:1 as an independent clause; I now want to pick up the issue, arguing that immediate creation is the presupposition of mediate creation in Gen 1.

To briefly recount what was argued above, creation *ex nihilo* entails that God need not establish His identity over-against any external reality.  Rather, He transcends all creation but as a result can also be intimately present to all of created reality.  Moreover, 'the rule for talk of God as transcendent requires talk of it as a universally extensive and immediate agency.'[8]  Thus, God and creatures are not locked into a zero-sum competition.  Rather, as Aquinas saw, 'God's creative agency must be said to found a created cause in the very operations by which

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[6] Ie., Israel in Isa 43:1, 43:15 or the army of Babylon, Ezek 21:35.  Psalm 51:10 [12] is a particularly interesting example, especially in light of ch. 4, §3.1—is creating a new heart ex nihilo?

[7] Cf. ch. 3, §1.3.

[8] Tanner, *God and Creation*, 82.

it proves sufficient to produce an effect within the created order.  The whole of a created effect must be said, therefore, to depend both on divine agency and tis created cause.'[9]

Turning to Gen 1, it has often been noted that the jussive in the divine speeches is addressed to various creatures (esp. the earth, 1:11, 24; the water, 1:20).  Various frameworks have been proposed for making sense of this feature.[10]  I offer two observations on this frequently noted feature.  First, the language used by some scholars to describe this feature of the text appears to presuppose a zero-sum framework which, it seems to me, is foreign to the text: 'God's word…now *abdicates* its creative power.'[11]  God's blessing to multiply is 'an act whereby the power-for-life *monopolized* by Yahweh generously is transmitted' to creatures.[12]  Second, although it is frequently noted that God 'invites' the earth and waters to participate in creation, what frequently goes unnoted is that 1:21 (using *br'*) and 1:25 (using *'sh*), the narrative goes on to say that God *Himself* does the very thing that He invited the waters and earth to do.  While this feature of the text could be accounted for in a number of ways, from within the framework of creation ex nihilo, this description of the fulfillment of the divine speeches makes perfect sense, since 'divine agency is necessary for any action of the creature at all, it cannot be proper to say that God's activity is added on to the creatures.'[13]  This is seen again in the blessing of the creatures (1:22, 28): God exercises power in giving power to the creatures to multiply, to pro-create, to mirror the Creator.

Third, I would like to suggest rather tentatively that Gen 1 depicts creation as contingent.  As has often been noted, the careful structuring of the narrative of Gen 1 subtly reinforces the basic point that God has also carefully structured the created world.  Yet, although Gen 1 has one of the most clearly discernible literary structures in the HB, it must be noted that the structure is marked by a series of 'non-predictable variations.'[14]  This unpredictable element is particularly seen when the MT and LXX of Gen 1 are compared.  For example, although the MT description of the second day omits the phrase 'and God saw that it was good,' which is then repeated twice on the third day, the LXX illustrates that the narrative

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[9] Ibid., 92.

[10] Cf. Middleton, 'Creation founded in Love'; Habel, 'Geophany'; Brown, 'Divine Act.'

[11] Schmidt, *Die Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschrift*, 106 as translated in Brown, *Ethos of the Cosmos*, 41, emphasis added.

[12] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 165.

[13] Tanner, *God and Creation*, 94.

[14] Middleton, 'Creation founded in Love,' 58.

could be structured in a more 'predictable' pattern. Perhaps then the structuring of the natural world also matches the literary structure in respect to its 'non-predictable variations' as well.

Finally, again all too briefly, I pick up the fact that Gen 1 portrays the world as a cosmic-temple.[15] I cannot here elaborate the various details that support this claim but rather simply note that this feature of the text can also be made sense of within a creation ex nihilo framework. Within the ANE cosmogonies, in various ways appropriate to the various cultures, this or that aspect of the world reveals or mediates this or that deity which is associated particularly with that feature. So the storm reveals Baal while the sky is the embodiment of Nut. The logic of these cosmological texts is clear: a deity is revealed through that natural phenomenon over which he or she has control, in contrast to the various features of the natural world over which that deity does not have control. If Gen 1 depicts the entire cosmos as like a temple of God, then all of the cosmos, in a sense, mediates or reveals God. This entails that God has exhaustive control over all aspects of the cosmos, such that the storm or the sky can equally reveal Him. This represents a point at which Gen 1, interpreted in terms of its own categories, makes an important contribution to the doctrine of creation ex nihilo.

### 3. John 1 and the Canonical Context of Genesis 1

By way of conclusion, I want to note an important part of the literary-canonical context of Gen 1 within Christian scripture: John 1. I have delayed addressing this text since it exerts a 'biblical pressure' on the interpretation of Gen 1 that could overwhelm a reading of Gen 1 on its own terms. It is appropriate at this point, however, to note how John 1 reinforces the argument made up to this point. First, John 1:1 is an independent clause and yet clearly a play on Gen 1:1, suggesting that John read Gen 1:1 as an independent clause. This is both an important witness to the early interpretation of Gen 1:1 and, for those reading within the context of Christian scripture, a landmark that should make a difference to the subsequent reading of Gen 1:1.

Second, as noted above, ANE cosmologies in common suggest that it is important to know something about the life of the gods before creation—a conflict or genealogy—in order to make sense of creation. Genesis 1 resolutely resists this trend, such that the rabbis

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[15] Cf. ch. 6, §1.5.

playfully interpreted the *bet* with which the chapter opens as indicating that the reader can only go forward, since the letter is only open to the left.[16]  In John 1, however, creation is not described until verse 3: like the ANE cosmologies, John agrees that a glimpse into the divine life before creation helps make sense of the world.  Thus John begins 'In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God' (1:1-2).  This is, of course, a key text for understanding the relationship between creation and the dynamics of the divine life that will become formalized as 'trinitarian.'[17]

John 1:3 then proceeds to make an exhaustive claim regarding the extent of creation: 'All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.'  Admittedly, this does not explicitly deny primordial (ie., unmade) matter, but it provided a strong impetus for the early church's rejection of preexisting matter.  From here, John continues to offer a reading of various themes from Gen 1, both in John 1 and in the rest of the book, that energized the early church's christological readings of Gen 1.  All of this presents an important further avenue of investigation that cannot be pursued here for lack of space.

## 4. CONCLUSION

In this study, I have sought to reconsider Gen 1 and creation ex nihilo.  This process has involved a number of steps: examining the ANE context of Gen 1; clarifying the meaning of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo within the classic Christian tradition and the development of the doctrine in the early church; elucidating the syntax and narrative function of Gen 1:1-3; and attempting to read Gen 1:1-3 in terms of creation ex nihilo.  If, as I suggested above, this is really only the beginning of reading Gen 1 in terms of creation ex nihilo, this reconsideration is nevertheless an important first step.

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[16] Genesis Rabbah 1:10 on Gen 1:1.

[17] Cf. ch. 3, §2.1.

APPENDIX 1

DOES CREATION EX NIHILO INVOLVE HISTORICAL TRUTH-CLAIMS?


Considering the claims that creation ex nihilo entails about the world raises a specific issue that has not yet been addressed: does creation ex nihilo involve *historical* truth-claims about the origin of the world?  While the majority view among Christians, both historically and contemporarily, is that creation ex nihilo entails a historical claim about a singular origin event at some point in the past,[1] several influential theologians have questioned if this claim is a necessary aspect of creation ex nihilo.  Kelsey, for example, asks

> Could one retain the claim about the dependency relation (metaphysical) and abandon the claim about an originating event (historical), without either internal inconsistency in one's theology or an unwarranted revision of the meaning of the metaphysical claim itself?[2]

Similarly, Lash asserts that 'when…we confess our faith in God, creator of heaven and earth, we are making no claims about, offering no explanations for, the initial conditions of the universe.'[3]  Thus, Lash maintains, creation ex nihilo is not about the initial conditions of the world but about the relationship of creatures to God.  Both Kelsey and Lash appeal to Aquinas in defense of this understanding of creation ex nihilo and, indeed, Aquinas states that

> We must investigate, therefore, whether these two concepts are logically incompatible, namely, that a thing has been created by God and yet has existed forever.  Whatever may be the truth of the matter, no heresy is involved in the contention that God is able to bring it about that something created by Him should always have existed.[4]

Kelsey, in particular, is cautious not to tie Christian doctrine to debatable scientific theories regarding the origin of the universe.  After all, he suggests, it may not 'be a matter of whether the lapse of time since the creation-event comes out as finite or infinite' as the results might depend on the conventions used for measuring time.[5]

Does creation ex nihilo make historical truth-claims?  The question itself can be interpreted in several ways.  Kelsey and Lash are right to point out that the historical claim, that creation originated at a specific point in the past, does support the metaphysical claim

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[1] See, for example, Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation out of Nothing*.

[2] 'Doctrine of Creation,' 184.

[3] *Believing Three Ways*, 39.

[4] *On the Eternity of the World*, 3.

[5] 'Doctrine of Creation,' 181.  For scientific arguments against the possibility of physical infinities, see Peter Bussey, *Signposts to God*, 57-73.

that creation is dependent on God but the reverse is not *necessarily* the case: creation may have always been dependent on God. Thus the historical truth-claim is perhaps not as well integrated into the network of ideas codified by creation ex nihilo as other claims, such as that the world is contingent. Traditionally, however, the historical truth-claim has been affirmed by the Christian tradition alongside the metaphysical claims of creation ex nihilo.

Even Aquinas, who wrote in defense of Aristotle's view that the world is eternal argues that this view is defensible only on the ground of natural philosophy. From a theological perspective, 'nothing except God can be from eternity' and, therefore, 'the universe of creatures' did not always exist.[6] In this context, Aquinas addresses ten possible objections, before concluding that 'the newness of the world is known only by revelation; and therefore it cannot be proved demonstrably…We hold by faith alone…that the world did not always exist.' Thus, 'the newness of the world cannot be demonstrated from the world itself.'[7] Aquinas maintains that it is 'useful to consider this, lest anyone, presuming to demonstrate what is of faith, should bring forward reasons that are not cogent, so as to give occasion to unbelievers to laugh.'[8] Returning to Basil's image, noted above, of a draftsman drawing a circle, the Christian claim that the world has a beginning and end does not necessarily entail that the beginning is empirically discernible.

Finally, it should be noted that arguments against creation ex nihilo making a historical truth-claim are not exegetical arguments. Although Aquinas allows for the coherence of Aristotle's argument for the eternity of the world, when he turns to Gen 1:1, he argues that the phrase 'in the beginning' can be expounded with reference to time to exclude the error 'that time had no beginning.'[9] It is helpful to note that the historical truth-claims of creation ex nihilo are on a different level than the metaphysical truth-claims, and are potentially abandoned without making any unwarranted revisions of the doctrine as a whole. Nevertheless, it is not obvious that the doctrine divorced from its historical claims is still in continuity with the classic Christian view. At any rate, the purpose of this chapter is to

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[6] *STh*, 1.46.1.

[7] *STh*, 1.46.2.

[8] *STh*, 1.46.2.

[9] *STh*, 1.46.3. Aquinas argues that 'in the beginning' can also be expounded with reference to the Son to exclude dualism in creation.

represent the classic Christian doctrine of creation ex nihilo rather than suggest which aspects of the doctrine should be modified.

Before proceeding, two arguments regarding the use of the OT versions for clarifying the reading of Gen 1:1 must be addressed. [1]  First, the various translators' knowledge of the intricacies of classical Hebrew syntax has been criticized: 'LXX tends to miss the subtle grammatical construction in other instances of a noun in construct with a verb'[2] and (with reference to the Targums) 'midrashic exegesis is dependent on a misunderstanding of this grammatical construction.'[3]  These considerations will be addressed in the appropriate subsections below.  Second, Rüterswörden and Warmuth's review of the evidence has concluded that 'Die Änderung des masoretischen Textes in *barē'šît* ist eine freie Konjektur, die sich weder auf griechische Transkriptionen der Väter noch auf das samaritanische Material stützen kann.'[4]  Undoubtedly, they are correct; there is little reason to re-vocalize the MT.[5]  This, however, misses the larger issue: the versions do unanimously appear to read Gen 1:1 as an independent sentence, discrete from 1:2 and 1:3.[6]

In a sober discussion of syntax it is important to be realistic in our expectations of what the versions might show.  The versions do *not* provide definitive proof for a reading nor should they replace independent exegetical work on the Hebrew text.  In this context, the versions can reveal how Gen 1:1 was read early on and a reading that is both old and widespread should not be set aside without due consideration.  Thus, with realistic expectations about the results of this study, we may proceed.

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[1] I would like to thank C.T.R. Hayward for his help with the material discussed in this section.

[2] Brown, *Structure*, 65.

[3] Anderson, 'The Interpretation,' 22.

[4] Rüterswörden and Warmuth, 'Ist *br'šyt* mit Artikel zu vokalisieren?' 175.  Holmstedt somewhat confuses the issues when he cites this article against the use of 'versional support' for reading MT *br'šyt* as 'definite' and 'an absolute noun with the article,' ('Restrictive,' 57 n. 3).  Of these three issues (definite/indefinite, absolute/construct, article/no article), Rüterswörden and Warmuth only address the third issue and their conclusion specifically is that those versions that (apparently) transcribe Gen 1:1 with a definite article (e.g., the Armenian version of Irenaeus, *Epideixis*, 43 or Samaritan Targum) are not related to MT in such a way that they could justify re-pointing the text.  Bauks, *Die Welt*, 68 also quotes Rüterswörden and Warmuth's conclusion, again construing the issue in narrowly text-critical terms.

[5] Some of the versional evidence, however, could be construed to support Barr's argument that definiteness and determination should not be directly coordinated.  Rüterswörden and Warmuth note that *bĕ-* is frequently transcribed as *ba-*, as in *bĕ'am* as *baam* and *bĕnay* as *banē*, possibly because either pronunciation would have carried the same basic meaning; cf. 'Ist *br'šyt*,' 171.

[6] So Schmidt, *Schöpfungsgeschichte*, 75.

1. *Masoretic Text*

While the lack of the definite article in the MT vocalization of *běrē'šît* has drawn much attention as the primary grounds for the construct reading, two other features of MT Gen 1:1 support reading the verse as an independent clause. First and rather obvious (though I have never seen the point raised in the secondary literature), the MT has a verse division between *'rṣ* and *w'rṣ*. The verse divisions apparently were known in the Talmudic period.[7] Though there are instances throughout the OT of sentences extending across verse divisions, it is somewhat unlikely that the editor would have knowingly made a single dependent clause into its own verse. This may suggest that when the verse divisions were introduced in MT, Gen 1:1 was being read as an independent clause.[8]

Second, it has been noted that the *ṭipḥah* accent under *běrē'šît* is a disjunctive accent which is thought to indicate that it is absolute rather than construct.[9] Brown argues that this argument 'is undercut by the fact that disjunctive accents are used elsewhere in obvious construct situations' citing Jer 26:1, 27:1, 49:34, and Jer 28:1.[10] It should be noted that the passages cited by Brown use the *rebia'* and *pašṭa* accents, which mark weaker divisions in a verse, rather than *ṭipḥah* which marks major divisions and sometimes even replaces the *'atnaḥ*.[11] Given the obscure origins of the Masoretic accents, caution is advisable when employing accents in exegetical arguments.

Third, the text-critical questions raised by the BHS apparatus should be addressed. With reference to *br'šît*, the note indicates that Origen gives *Brēsith*, *Barēsēth*, or *Barēseth*, and that the Samaritan texts reads *bārāšit*. In regards to both sorts of evidence, Rüterswörden and Warmuth doubt that they represent an earlier Hebrew text.[12] It may still be posited, however, that these variants conceivably indicate that, at least at certain points in the reception history of Gen 1:1, the difference between *barē'šît* and *běrē'šît* was relatively insignificant.

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[7] Cf. Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, 17.

[8] Is this the basis for Horst Seebass's assertion that 'V 1 sei Hauptsatz (so MT und alle alten Versionen)'? Cf. *Genesis I*, 64.

[9] See, e.g., Young, *Studies*, 5.

[10] Brown, *Structure*, 65.

[11] Cf. Joüon-Muraoka, §15g.

[12] Rüterswörden and Warmuth, 'Ist *br'šyt*,' 170, 175.

2. *Targums*

As noted above, questions have been raised, in this instance by Gary Anderson, regarding the Targum translators' knowledge of intricate Hebrew structures, such as unmarked relative clauses.  It should of course be conceded that the various Targum translators may have missed the subtleties of the Hebrew in numerous places, including Gen 1:1.[13]  At the same time, Anderson never offers any examples where a generally recognized unmarked relative clause is mistranslated in a Targum; rather, he cites *b. B. Bathra* 14b-15a on Hos 1:2 as an example of misunderstanding the construction.[14]  Moreover, Anderson assumes the relative reading of Gen 1:1 as the consensus view since his primary interest is in the theology of the Targums; that the Targums may shed light on the correct reading of Gen 1:1 never arises.  Finally, it simply is not the case that the Targum translators were unaware of unmarked relative clauses (see, e.g., Targum Jer, 36:2, Targum Lam 3:25).[15]

For *br'šyt*, Targum Onqelos Gen 1:1 reads *beqadmîn* which is usually translated something like 'in antiquities God created,' though in Targum Onkelos Deut 33:27 and Targum Jonathan Mic 5:2, the term indicates eternity.[16]  Closely related, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan reads *min avella*, 'from [or at] the beginning God created.'[17]  Both keep close to the structure of the Hebrew text and thus are ambivalent with reference to the relative reading of Gen 1:1.  Neither uses a construct form and both (seemingly) regard Gen 1:2 as the beginning of a new sentence.

Targum Neofiti Gen 1:1 currently reads 'From the beginning [*milleqadmîn*] with wisdom the Memra of the Lord created and perfected the heavens and the earth,'[18] with a double translation of *br'šyt* which seems to indicate some later interpolations.  Again, Gen

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[13] However, Anderson assertion that 'in postbiblical Hebrew, the asyndetic relative clause was no longer used' ('Interpretation,' 22) seems inconsistent with at least some of the evidence.  At Qumran, unmarked relative clauses were recognized but, as in the case with 1QIsᵃ, occasionally supplied with the missing relative *'šr.*  The construction is also used with relative frequency in Ben Sira.  Both suggest that unmarked relative clauses were used in early 'postbiblical Hebrew;' cf. van Peursen, *The Verbal System in the Hebrew Text of Ben Sira*, 306.

[14] 'Interpretation,' 22 n. 4.  To use this passage as evidence for the Targum translator's knowledge of Hebrew is questionable, not least because the principal concern of the larger passage is to understand the canonical shape of the Prophets not the syntax of given passages.

[15] Cf. Hayward, *The Targum of Jeremiah*, ad loc: 'from the day when I spoke *with* you'; NB Philip Alexander, *The Targum of Lamentation*, 150: 'Tg. correctly construes Heb. *tidrešennu* as an asyndetic relative clause.'  On the general social background of the Targums and their (possible) relationship to BH, cf. Alexander, 'How did the Rabbis learn Hebrew?,' 71-89.

[16] Cf. Etheridge, *Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan ben Uzziel*, vol. 1, *Genesis and Exodus*, 35.

[17] Ibid., 157.

[18] Trans. McNamara, *Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis*, 52.

1:1 is apparently treated as an independent clause and the 'wisdom' translation of *br'šyt* suggests that the adverb was read as modifying *br'* since it makes little sense modifying the verbs of 1:2 or 1:3. Fragment Targum Vatican MS 440 (and Nürnberg Fragment Targum manuscript) similarly read 'In wisdom the Lord created the heavens and the earth.'[19]

Fragment Targum Paris MS Hebrew 110 begins with the Hebrew *br'šyt* and is followed by the gloss 'in wisdom' with the marginal note 'other texts: from the beginning.'[20] This Targum anchors the Aramaic text to the Hebrew by quotation of individual words from the Hebrew text, referred to as lemmata. Following this practice, Gen 1:1 and 1:2 are marked as discrete units by beginning the translation of 1:1 with the Hebrew lemma *b'ršyt* and 1:2 with a second Hebrew lemma, *wh'rṣ*.[21]

From the various Targums, two lines of evidence seem particularly relevant to understanding how the Hebrew syntax of Gen 1:1-3 was understood. First, all the Targums (emphatically in Fragment Targum Paris, given the lemmata placements) treat Gen 1:1 and 1:2 as separate, independent clauses rather than as dependent and parenthetical clauses. Second, the 'wisdom' translation makes sense only if *br'šyt* was read not as a construct but as an adverb modifying *br'*. Both lines of evidence support the traditional rendering of Gen 1:1.

### 3. *Septuagint*

The LXX reading for Gen 1:1 (*En archē epoiēsen ho theos ton ouranon kai tēn gēn*) preserves the complexity of the MT. There is no definite article with *archē*, though in Greek it is common for the objects of prepositions to lack the article (cp. John 1:1, Phil 4:15, cf. Luke 5:12, John 1:13, Rom 1:4, 2 Cor 10:3).[22] Genesis 1:1 is treated as an independent clause, emphasized by the use of the contrastive conjunction *de* in 1:2.[23] Moreover, there is no evidence that LXX recognized *r'šyt* as a construct or read Gen 1:1 as an unmarked relative clause. Some manuscripts, like Aquila, have *En kephalaiō* in place of *En archē* (MS 78, 135, 343, 344, 413) which would suggest that Gen 1:1 was a summary rather than the initial act of

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[19] Ibid., 52.

[20] Ibid., 52.

[21] This observation is thanks to C.T.R. Hayward (personal communication).

[22] Cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 247; Brown, *Structure*, 47n31.

[23] Cf. Jobes and Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, 231: 'In the first few chapters of Genesis, the translator seems to reserve the conjunction *de* to represent Hebrew *wāw* disjunctive, especially if a topical shift occurs in the narrative' as exemplified in Gen 2:6, 10; 3:1; 4:1 in addition to 1:2.

creation.[24]  Several MS have hexaplaric marginal notes with *ba-* transliterations marked with the siglum *ho hebr*.[25]  All this would appear to illustrate that early on Gen 1:1 was read as an independent clause.

William Brown, a proponent of the dependent reading of Gen 1:1, has raised two related issues with the use of LXX evidence for clarifying MT syntax.  First, Brown maintains that 'LXX tends to miss the subtle grammatical construction in other instances of a noun in construct with a verb' citing Jer 6:15, 50:31 (= LXX 27:31), and Hos 1:2 as examples.[26]  Second, Brown cites Rabbinic criticism of LXX Gen 1:1 as evidence that the dependent reading of the verse predated the LXX independent reading.[27]

With Brown's first objection, it should be readily conceded that the LXX is governed by other translational principles than syntactic fidelity to the Hebrew Text.[28]  Even so, Brown's examples, particularly Hos 1:2, should be examined closely.  Compare the versions:

MT Hos 1:2     *tĕḥillat dibber-yhwh bĕhōšēaʿ wayyōʾmer yhwh ʾel-hōšēaʿ*

LXX Hos 1:2     *archē logou kuriou en Osēe kai eipe kurios pros Osēe*

First note that the LXX maintains the word order and reproduces the genitival relationship of the MT.  Second, in reading 1:2a-b as separate clauses, the LXX may reasonably be regarded as reading a paragraph division similar to that marked by the *petûḥaʾ* in the MT text.  Third, it is unclear that the meaning of Hos 1:2 has been altered by the LXX in anything like the dramatic change that Brown and others maintain lies between the MT and LXX versions of Gen 1:1-3.  In either version, the basic sense is that the word of YHWH in Hos 1:2b marks the beginning of Hosea's prophetic ministry.[29]  Similar arguments—that the essential meaning of the passage is *not* dramatically altered—could be mounted for Jer 6:15, 50:31 (=LXX 27:31).

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[24] Brown, *Structure*, 47 n. 31.

[25] MSS 73 (11/12th c.); 57 (11th c.); 78 (13th c.); 79 (13th c.); 413 (12th c., dependent on MS 57); cf. Rüterswörden and Warmuth, 'Ist *brʾšyt*,' 169.

[26] Brown, *Structure*, 65.

[27] Ibid., 63.

[28] Brown concludes that the LXX Vorlage represents an earlier version of Gen 1 than that preserved in the MT (*Structure*, 249-251).  This conclusion regards Gen 1 as a whole rather than 1:1 specifically.  It is outside the purview of this discussion to examine the historical relation between the MT and the LXX in depth.  Suffice it to note, if Brown's thesis is correct, this would only sharpen the relevance of LXX Gen 1:1 for clarifying the syntax of MT Gen 1:1 since it is doubtful that the Masoretes would have revised the text to *more* closely resemble *Enuma Elish* or other ANE creation accounts.

[29] Cf. AV Hos 1:2: 'The beginning of the word of the LORD by Hosea.  And the LORD said to Hosea…'

Moreover, as a general point, the LXX translators were aware of unmarked relative clauses (e.g., LXX Exod 6:28-29) and saw them even in passages that modern scholarship does not read as an unmarked relative clauses such as Ps 78:60.[30] To seriously question the LXX Pentateuch translators' ability to understand the syntax of Gen 1:1, an example is needed, preferably from the Pentateuch, where the sense of a passage is radically altered *because the syntax has been misunderstood*. To date, no such example has been found.

In support of his second objection, Brown quotes a passage from the Mekilta which is seconded in *Tanhuma B. Shemot* 1.19. With reference to Exod 12:40, the Mekilta states 'This is one of the passages which they changed when writing the Torah for King Ptolemy. Likewise they wrote for him: "God created in the beginning" (*'elōhîm bārā' berē'šît*).'[31] The inclusion of Gen 1:1 in the list of ten (or thirteen) passages that have been changed certainly requires pause for reflection. In citing this as early support for Rashi's interpretation, Brown sees the word order inversion as indication that the LXX is being criticized for making Gen 1:1 an independent clause. In context, however, the Mekilta never specifies the nature of the criticism being made (or even if the changes are a bad thing).[32] It seems fairly unlikely that criticism intended is that the LXX translators missed an unmarked relative clause in Gen 1:1.[33]

Thus, with due caution, we may conclude that at least as early as the mid-3rd c. BC,[34] Gen 1:1 was read as an independent clause and *bĕrē'šît* as an absolute noun. The marginal notes, while interesting especially in conjunction with the hexaplaric evidence discussed below, are fairly late and therefore should be treated with caution.

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[30] Cp. MT Ps 78:60: *'hl škn b'dm* with LXX Ps 77:60: *skēnōma autou, hou kateskēnōmsen en anthrōpois*. Cf. Richter, *The Deuteronomistic History and the Name Theology*, 102.

[31] Lauterbach, *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, 1:111, quoted in Brown, *Structure*, 63.

[32] Emanuel Tov, for example, thinks that the reference is to a variant word order in an early version of the LXX ('The Rabbinic Tradition Concerning the "Alterations" Inserted into the Greek Pentateuch and Their Relation to the Original Text of the LXX,' 87).

[33] If this were the case, it would further disprove Anderson's claim that Rabbinic Hebrew was unaware of unmarked relatives, thus indirectly supporting the Targum's reading of Gen 1:1 (cf. the discussion at C.2 above).

[34] So Brown, *Structure*, 21-23.

4. *Hexapla*

Two types of hexaplaric evidence are relevant to the interpretation of Gen 1:1: the translations and the transliterations.[35]  The transliterations and the concerns that have been raised regarding their usefulness will be addressed first.

At Gen 1:1, Field provides *brēsith* as the Hebrew with a note finding *brēsith* also in Origen's Psalms commentary, *bresith* in Jerome, and *barēsēth* in Codex Regius 1825.[36]  Paul de Lagarde additionally cites *barēseth*, *brēsēth*, and *brēsid* as Greek transliterations. Rüderswörden and Warmuth trace this *ba-* transliteration back to Codex Regius 1825 as well, which they believe is inspired by the marginal note with a *ba-* transliteration in Codex Coislinianus.[37]  Field notes that Codex Regius 1825 is a parchment text from 11th-12th c. AD containing the Heptateuch, Ruth, and a Catena from the Fathers,[38] while Codex Coislinianus is dated to the 6th or 7th c AD.[39]  Rüderswörden and Warmuth first question if this note predates Codex Coislinianus or was composed for the codex and second ask 'Wird durch diese eine, als späte Randlesart bezeugte Anmerkung hexaplarische Tradition repräsentiert?' They conclude that 'der Satz  ist wohl den Erklärungen der hebräischen Buchüberschriften zuzuordnen.'[40]

This history behind Field's notes is significant as it reminds us that the *ba-* transliterations are not directly from Origen but rather are included since they are thought to preserve hexaplaric tradition.  Regarding the origins of the marginal notes in Codex Regius 1825 and Codex Coislinianus, it certainly would have been helpful if they were explicitly attributed to Origen but the lack of attribution does not necessarily speak against their antiquity and there is no reason to think that they do not predate the 6th c. AD.  Moreover, even if the transliteration originated as a comment on the Hebrew title of Genesis, as

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[35] Throughout, recourse has been made to Field, *Origenis Hexaplorum quae supersunt*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena, Genesis-Esther*.  Though Field is now somewhat dated, Dr. R.B. ter Haar Romeny, who is preparing the Genesis section for the new edition of the Hexapla sponsored by the Hexapla Institute, has informed me in personal communication that in his research no new hexaplaric evidence has been uncovered which might support a dependent reading of Gen 1:1 or a construct reading of *r'šyt*. Thus, for the time being, Field will serve as a base text.

[36] Field, *Hexaplorum*, 7

[37] de Lagarde, *Ankündigung einer neuen Ausgabe der griechischen Uebersetzung des Alten Testaments*, 5 followed by Rüderswörden and Warmuth, 'Ist *br'šyt*,' 169-170.

[38] Field, *Hexaplorum*, 3: 'membraneceus, XI vel XII saeculi, in quo est Heptatuechus et liber Ruth [cum Catena Patrum. Vid. Montef[aucon] ad Cap. i. 1, 2].'

[39] Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*, 140.

[40] Rüderswörden and Warmuth, 'Ist *br'šyt*,' 170

Rüdersworden and Warmuth suggest, this would still be relevant to the reading of Gen 1:1 since the two—title and first word—should not be sharply divorced. Thus, the conclusion of Alexander Heidel, that either *barē'šît* or *bĕrē'šît* could be used 'without any difference in meaning,'[41] is an overstatement and should be nuanced: at least in the late patristic period (and perhaps earlier), Christian commentators did not recognize a sharp distinction between *barē'šît* and *bᵉrē'šît*.[42]

In comparison to the transliterations, the evidence of the Hexapla translations is straightforward. Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion all begin Gen 1:2 *hē de gē* which, like the LXX, suggests that 1:1 should be read as an independent clause. Symmachus and Theodotion both translate *bᵉrē'šît* as *en archē*.[43] Thus, the same conclusion can be drawn from these translations as from the LXX above. Aquila, who 'carried the principle of literal accuracy to [an] absurd point,'[44] is unique in his translation: *en kephalaiō ektisen ho theos sun ton ouranon (kai) sun tēn gēn*. For the present question—the syntax of Gen 1:1-3—the phrase *en kephalaiō* is of central importance. First, it obviously is not an attempt to render an unmarked relative or a construct noun into Greek. Second, in departure from the other versions examined, it seems to interpret Gen 1:1 as a heading or title ('In summary, God created…').[45] This reading of Gen 1:1 has been popular in the modern period at least since Gunkel's commentary.[46] Thus, each of the three translations read *r'šyt* as an absolute noun and Gen 1:1 as an independent clause.

## 5. *Conclusion and Prospectus*

This section began on a note of caution which should be maintained in the conclusions drawn from the versions. The various translators operated at different skill levels

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[41] Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis*, 93.

[42] Cf. the Armenian version of Irenaeus, *Epirdeixis*, 43: *baresiṭ bara* and Samaritan Pentatech *baraset* (quoted in Rüdersworden and Warmuth, 'Ist *br'šyt*,' 171, 175). While Patristic commentators, in general, are not authorities on classical Hebrew, it is interesting that this conclusion coalesces with that of Barr, '"Determination",' as discussed above. In mitigating the evidence of Codex Coislinianus for the vocalization of Gen 1:1, Rüdersworden and Warmuth argue that in the patristic period, both Greek *ba-* and *b-* were used to transliterate Hebrew *bᵉ* ('Ist *r'šyt*,' 171). Again, this would seem to support the conclusion that a sharp distinction between the vocalizations is unsustainable.

[43] Field, *Hexaplorum*, 7 provides nothing further of either Symmachus or Theodotion's translation of Gen 1:1 without comment on the omission.

[44] Würthwein, *Text*, 38.

[45] Following the definition given in BDAG³ 541.

[46] *Genesis*, 103.

and in some instances their grasp of Hebrew syntax has been questioned.  Moreover, a central insight of recent scholarship on the versions is that the various translators each had their own principles, motivations, and purposes—theological and sociological—that guided their work and it would be a mistake to flatly assume that syntactic fidelity was the central concern in all the versions.

If the investigation of the versions of Gen 1:1 is pursued from within a narrowly text-critical framework, the results will not be noteworthy.  There are a few variant readings and vocalizations but with insufficient weight to support re-pointing or 'correcting' the MT.  In this section, however, the purpose was to examine how various text traditions read Gen 1:1 and the results have been instructive.  The versions all read Gen 1:1 as an independent clause.  Moreover, there is no evidence that *r'šyt* was seen as a construct noun or that *br' 'lhym* was considered an unmarked relative.  The unanimity in these respects in diverse languages and geographic locales suggests that the independent reading of Gen 1:1 was broadly followed in the ancient world.  It certainly may still be maintained that the 'correct' reading or 'meaning' of Gen 1:1 is something else (e.g., the dependent reading) but from a rhetorical point of view, the 'effect' that the text has had for a sustained period on a diverse group of readers is captured in the traditional translations of Gen 1:1 as an independent clause.

There still remains at least two ways in which this protracted discussion might be advanced further.  First, there are many versions that have not been addressed in this survey: the Vetus Latina and the Vulgate as well as the Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, and Arabic translations.  Moreover, the various quotations in Rabbinic and Patristic literature, if collated, would helpfully supplement the discussion.  One suspects, however, that if there was a translational tradition that provided relevant evidence it would already have been brought into the debate.  Second, if one wished to continue casting doubts on the various translators' grasp of complex Hebrew syntax, the appropriate thing to do would be to examine how *all* the recognized unmarked relative clauses in MT are handled in each translation.  At this point, however, the burden of proof is on those who would question the ancient translators' knowledge of Hebrew rather than on those who would use the versions as evidence for clarifying the structure of MT Gen 1:1-3.

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