

**Creation *\_ex nihilo\_*: Origins, Development, Contemporary Challenges**

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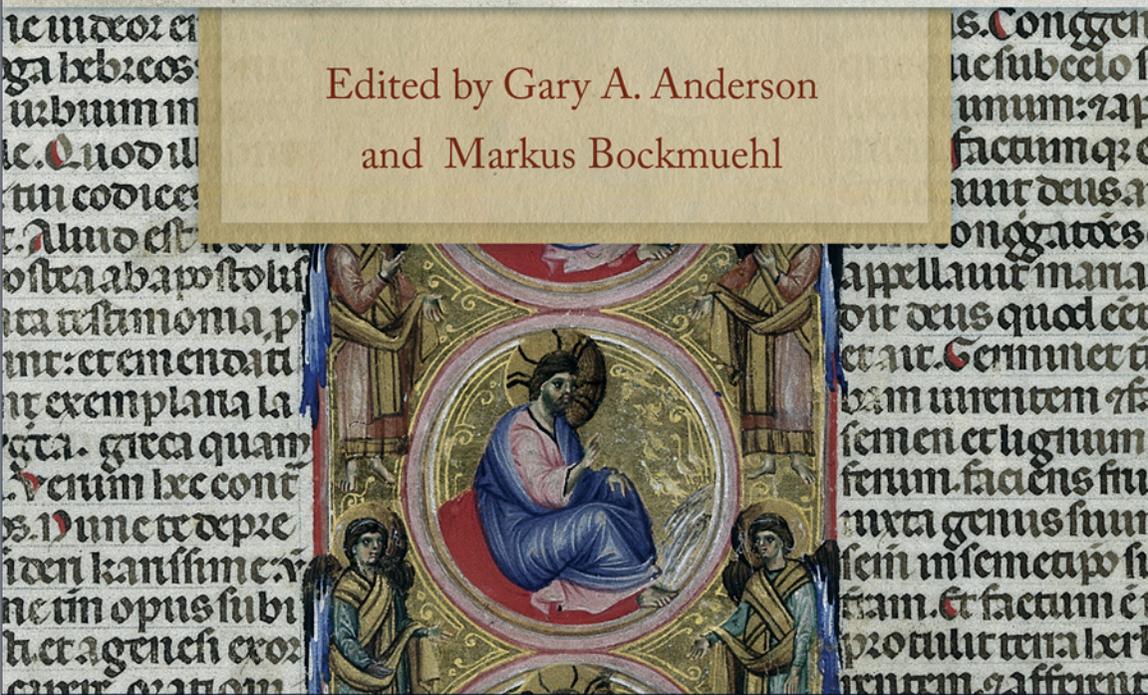
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# Creation *ex nihilo*

ORIGINS, DEVELOPMENT,  
CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Edited by Gary A. Anderson  
and Markus Bockmuehl



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Creation  
*ex nihilo*

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*Origins, Development,  
Contemporary Challenges*

*edited by*

GARY A. ANDERSON

*and*

MARKUS BOCKMUEHL

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## CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
Introduction MARKUS BOCKMUEHL	1
1 <i>Creatio ex nihilo</i> and the Bible GARY A. ANDERSON	15
2 Why <i>Creatio ex nihilo</i> for Theology Today? JANET SOSKICE	37
3 <i>Creatio ex nihilo</i> in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible RICHARD J. CLIFFORD, S.J.	55
4 Being and Nothingness in the Book of Revelation SEAN M. McDONOUGH	77
5 “The Most Perfect Work”: The Role of Matter in Philo of Alexandria GREGORY E. STERLING	99
6 <i>Creatio ex nihilo</i> in Athanasius of Alexandria’s <i>Against the Greeks—On the Incarnation</i> KHALED ANATOLIOS	119
7 <i>Creatio ex nihilo</i> in the Thought of Saint Augustine JOHN C. CAVADINI	151

vi Contents

8	Aquinas and Bonaventure on Creation JOSEPH WAWRYKOW	173
9	Creator, Text, and Law: Torah as Independent Power in Rabbinic Judaism TZVI NOVICK	195
10	Reason, Will, and Purpose: What's at Stake for Maimonides and His Followers in the Doctrine of Creation? DANIEL DAVIES	213
11	Spinoza and the Eclipse of Creation from Nothing CYRIL O'REGAN	233
12	The Doctrine of Creation and the Problem of the Miraculous in the Modern Theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher RUTH JACKSON	275
13	The Devil's March: <i>Creatio ex nihilo</i> , the Problem of Evil, and a Few Dostoyevskian Meditations DAVID BENTLEY HART	297
14	What Does Physical Cosmology Say about Creation from Nothing? ADAM D. HINCKS, S.J.	319
15	Eyesight with Insight: Cosmology and Second-Person Inspiration ANDREW PINSENT	347
16	Looking Back toward the Origin: Scientific Cosmology as Creation <i>ex nihilo</i> Considered "from the Inside" ANDREW DAVISON	367
	<i>List of Contributors</i>	391
	<i>Subject Index</i>	393
	<i>Index of Citations</i>	417

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*Gary Anderson, University of Notre Dame  
Markus Bockmuehl, University of Oxford  
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# Introduction

MARKUS BOCKMUEHL

“In the beginning, [when] God created the heavens and the earth . . .” To Jews and Christians, this has always seemed a foundational statement about who we are and how we got here. But debates of the last two centuries richly illustrate the extent to which religion and science have struggled even to maintain a common conversation about it—let alone to agree on what, if anything, it might truthfully mean.

The last two centuries have seen vast and, for the ordinary observer, often disorienting gains in scientific understanding—not just of the fundamental cosmological and physical kind, but also in terms of empirical observation whether of astronomy or paleobiology. For a long time the most obvious dissensions have concerned questions of *origins*: How did life—including our own life—evolve on this planet? Does the universe itself have a finite beginning or end? Do we perhaps inhabit just one of a vast number of parallel universes?

Christian theology, too, has traveled a long way from debates about the supposedly “literal” meaning of Genesis that once occupied public concern in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but which would in fact have seemed incomprehensibly myopic not just to classical

authors<sup>1</sup> but equally to the leading Christian teachers of late antiquity.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, scientific ideas of quantum physics, general relativity, or indeed evolution have long been invoked with mixed success and persuasiveness by theologians, apologists, and others as providing a way out of discourses mired in either scientific determinism or a God of ever-shrinking gaps.

All this has certainly assisted what in recent years has become a newly reinvigorated engagement with the Christian doctrine of creation “out of nothing”—and with the objections to it that have emerged from a variety of directions both scientific and ideological, and many of which are engaged in the pages that follow.<sup>3</sup> Are we, for all this effort, any nearer to understanding what that opening quotation might signify in the twenty-first century? In his 2016 Reith Lectures on the origins of the universe and the nature of black holes, the iconic British cosmologist Stephen Hawking reiterated the famous dictum of Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749–1827) that science has no need for the “hypothesis” of God. The point, in other words, is not so much to deny God’s existence as to insist that “he doesn’t intervene” in scientific laws.<sup>4</sup>

In relation to that fundamental question of God’s relation to the world, what might “creation” signify?

#### CREATION *EX NIHILO*? THE OXFORD–NOTRE DAME PROJECT

It was against the backdrop of questions like these that the editors of this volume called together a group of scholars from across a wide spectrum of expertise to investigate one ancient and seemingly obsolescent aspect of this debate. What, if anything, does the Judeo-Christian tradition now have to say about its ancient doctrine that the nature of God’s relation to the world is always, both initially and continually, sovereign and unconditioned—in other words, creation “out of nothing,” *ex nihilo*? What could that possibly mean? Why and how did this idea arise out of a biblical tradition that *prima facie* appears not to support it? And what significance or relevance, if any, might this doctrine still have today, whether for theology or for the dialogue between religion and science?

The preliminary fruits of our labors are here presented in the hope that they will help to energize the continuing rediscovery of this subject matter's importance for theology more broadly. We lay no claim to comprehensive coverage either historically, philosophically, or indeed cosmologically. Nevertheless the resulting volume offers a contribution that is greater than the eclectic sum of its parts, offering for perhaps the first time a reconsideration of the doctrine against such a broad historical sweep of exegetical, theological, philosophical, and scientific reflection.

The discussion below clearly illustrates that the questions thus resourced and articulated promise rich potential for continued research and interdisciplinary engagement, both between theology's own sub-disciplines and also with those of scientific cosmology. And of course our work here is extensively indebted to a much larger forum of debate and publications on this subject, some of them authored by contributors and other participants in these conferences.

#### THE ARGUMENT OF THIS VOLUME

In keeping with the central research question for this project, the present volume is divided into five parts, progressing from the doctrine's biblical roots to its eclipse in modern theology—and on to the question of its interface with and relevance, if any, to scientific cosmology.

#### Biblical Roots

The first and most extensive part addresses the biblical origins of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.

Gary A. Anderson's opening essay takes its starting point from the locus classicus of Genesis 1, showing that while the Hebrew text appears to show God creating the world out of preexisting matter, even the earliest Jewish translations and interpretations of this text already voice the understanding that this act of creation includes the materials from which God proceeds to make the world. Yet even the priestly creation account's emphatic elimination of polytheistic themes of conflict against chaos from the standard ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies

already demonstrates that the divine act of creation is for Scripture constrained by no rival or contingency and is matched in Genesis 2:1–3 by a definitive and indeed eschatological rest. Anderson follows Ian McFarland, Janet Soskice, and Kathryn Tanner in noting that, far from being preoccupied with protological interpretations of Genesis 1, the Christian development of this doctrine is less concerned with how the world came to be than with how it is sustained and governed.<sup>5</sup> Unlike for Greco-Roman philosophy, matter does not limit what God can do: God’s unconstrained sovereignty over the world does not exclude but includes his intimate involvement with his creatures, and indeed this sovereignty alone permits the interrelationship of human and divine agency.

Examining “why *creatio ex nihilo* for theology today?,” Janet Soskice recovers what she finds to have been be a foundational but also a “recessive” doctrine, often unexamined in modern times. Instead of implying any preoccupation either with ecological matters or with “big bang”-type theories of the origins of the universe, this is above all part of the doctrine of God rather than a statement about the nature of the world. It concerns God’s sovereign power, goodness, and freedom to create, to govern, and to sustain—involving a “scripturally driven” metaphysics, which means that, even if not itself “in the Bible,” the doctrine is nevertheless “biblical.” And far from asserting an aloof or oppressive deity as some like Catherine Keller imagine,<sup>6</sup> the development of creation *ex nihilo* from its biblical roots in Philo and the patristic authors foregrounds God’s simultaneous transcendence and presence, immutability and mercy, intimately—and in the end christologically—sustaining the goodness of his creation, “all things visible and invisible.”

Following these programmatic essays to set the stage, two further chapters sample particular cross sections of the biblical evidence. Richard J. Clifford reviews key Old Testament texts in comparison with other ancient Near Eastern material.<sup>7</sup> While Sumerian and especially Akkadian cosmogonies like *Enuma Elish* and *Atrahasis* clearly influenced the biblical accounts, Genesis 1 distinctively stresses the sovereign and complete transformation of chaos into order, and darkness into divine light, while Genesis 2–3 introduces “agricultural” and especially “anthropological” scenarios of creation. Chaos threatens to return in other ways, as Job implies; the Psalms implore God to rule as King again in the face of the apparent reintroduction of chaos in the de-

struction of the temple, while Deutero-Isaiah relates the restoration of Zion to a renewal of the exodus and of creation.

The New Testament has in the past also borne the burden of furnishing proof for a Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. In the wake of critiques by Gerhard May, Frances Young, and others, however, it has long been recognized that formerly “classic” proof texts like Romans 4:17 (cf. John 1:3; Col. 1:16; Heb. 11:3) fall some considerable way short of the doctrine of creation specifically “out of nothing” that they were once assumed to establish.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, several Pauline texts in particular demonstrate a vital link between creation and *resurrection* that is also, incidentally, familiar among rabbinic commentators.<sup>9</sup> But while all agree that the New Testament statements are *compatible* with God’s sovereign creation *ex nihilo*, what they actually affirm is arguably rather less specific than this.

That said, however, many New Testament texts do in fact support precisely the “metaphysics” of creation to which we have already alluded—including in Paul, John, and Hebrews. An exciting and richly suggestive reading of this insight in a more unexpected location is the subject of Sean M. McDonough’s interpretation of “being and nothingness in the book of Revelation.”<sup>10</sup> Revelation’s repeated, christologically articulated affirmation of God as the One “who is and who was and who is to come” (Rev. 1:4, 8; cf. 4:8) contrasts the One who sits on the throne against the transitory nature of all other power in earth and even in heaven. This contrast plays out particularly vis-à-vis the nothingness of the dragon and the two beasts who find their culminating shape in the political “countercreation” of Babylon. They are a kind of antitrinity that “was and is not” (17:8) and goes to destruction, flagging the real potential of a dismantling or “decreation” of earth and heaven *into* nothing.<sup>11</sup> This is a possibility that, like the “nothingness” of evil (familiar to Augustine but also developed by Karl Barth), is superseded in the end only by the revelation of the New Jerusalem and by God’s concomitant resurrection of the flesh *ex nihilo*.

With his treatment of creation and matter in Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BC–c. AD 50), Gregory E. Sterling enables the argument to transition from the biblical to the patristic discussion. Taking his cue from Philo’s influential but much-debated and variant statements about the origin of matter and about the temporality or eternity of creation,

Sterling examines *De opificio mundi* (*On the Creation of the World*) as a test case. Standing within the extensive reception history of both Genesis 1 and Plato's *Timaeus*, Philo identifies God and matter as the two causes of creation, one active and one passive, with God introducing order into the chaos of matter. Both are apparently eternal in *De opificio* (in contrast to *De providentia* [*On Providence*], which may address a more elite audience in his own school). Philo's primary concern throughout, however, is the unique transcendence and eternal power of God as the one who constitutes order into the temporality and chaos of matter. Thus, although Philo never asserts creation *ex nihilo*, he insists on the uniquely transcendent role of God in creation, thereby constituting an important bridge between Hellenistic and early Christian thought and setting the stage for the explicit articulation of this doctrine.

#### Creation out of Nothing in the Ancient and Medieval Church

The three following contributions survey the Christian development of the doctrine in late antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Khaled Anatolios examines Athanasius (c. 293–373) in *Against the Greeks* and *On the Incarnation* as among the most definitive statements of creation *ex nihilo* in all of patristic literature. Most significantly, perhaps, this doctrine is seen to carry existential as well as metaphysical import: in terms of the latter, creation *ex nihilo* rests in the idea of God's goodness, which comes to sublime expression in all creatureliness wholly and exclusively subsisting as the gift of God. Creatures commune with God exclusively through ecstatic participation in God's life, which in the self-giving narrative of Christ makes good the shortcomings of creation. Existentially, however, that metaphysic also sustains the very fiber of human life. It does so not least by overcoming death, which demonstrates humanity's propensity to nothingness, *ad nihilum*, wherever the gift of communion in the divine life is either absent or rejected—a theme distinctly reminiscent of motifs encountered in Revelation, above. In this way, the cross and resurrection effect a creation *ex nihilo* afresh, a “therapy of death” whose appropriation Anatolios finds ideally encapsulated in the Eucharist.

Working in the western Mediterranean a little over half a century later, Augustine (354–430) takes this doctrine of creation out of noth-

ing as a given—and yet, as John C. Cavadini shows, both creation and nothingness are not straightforward either as philosophical concepts or as derivatives of Scripture, but rather remain grounded in the primacy of revelation itself. The very possibility of being, potential itself, is already the creational gift of God. Far from being a “myth,” Genesis expresses (and “compresses”) the reality of God’s works analogously through the language of human experience in just the same way as the remainder of the biblical history does: creation and salvation constitute the same narrative. Augustine’s further reflection on this in the *Confessions* gives voice to his ultimate conviction that the unmerited goodness of creation, out of nothingness and formlessness, is most visibly recapitulated in redemption—and evokes our response of unreserved thanksgiving.

Joseph Wawrykow traces the further development of this doctrine in two great thirteenth-century doctors of the church, Aquinas (c. 1225–74) and Bonaventure (c. 1217–74). Both carry forward the fathers’ doctrinal theme of finding in divine creation the continuity of beginning and redemptive end. For them both God creates freely and intentionally in a Trinitarian act, granting both potentiality and actuality *ex nihilo*. Divine creation is good, free, and unconstrained. For Aquinas in particular, this finds an important point of departure in scriptural commentary. Aquinas also considers that God *could* have created (though he did not) a world without temporal beginning or end: *ex nihilo* means simply that only by the divine gift does a creature come into being and flourishing, and without this gift it would cease to exist. Turning then from creation’s beginning to its end, Aquinas asserts that created being attains its fulfillment in communion with God, a coming forth that is at the same time a return to its source. For Bonaventure the study of visible reality furnishes traces of the Word—that is, the uncreated and incarnate Christ—showing the world to be the Creator’s handiwork. Aquinas finds creation and salvation to be furnishing joint proof of the Triune God’s love, wisdom, and desire for communion with others.

### Creation *ex nihilo* in Jewish Thought

One of the more intriguing twists in the history of the idea of creation *ex nihilo* is the extent to which the doctrine appears to have taken shape

partly in parallel and partly in observable interaction with Jewish and indeed Muslim thought in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Two chapters addressing its impact in Judaism must here suffice to document this development.

The first, by Tzvi Novick, highlights the extent to which rabbinic thought is concerned with this doctrine not only from the cosmological point of view of God's creation of matter but also, and with equal seriousness, with an eye to God's intimate providential involvement in the world's affairs. The doctrine in the former sense is classically articulated (though not without reticence or ambivalence) in the late antique commentary known as *Genesis Rabbah*. Novick here chooses to foreground the additional, hugely influential "mythic" theme of creation by means of the Torah as a kind of blueprint, which is widely attested in this and other rabbinic as well as liturgical literature, and which draws heavily on the role of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22, 30. This primordial Torah is not only textual but its own person, God's Logos but also his daughter espoused to Moses at Sinai, and thus potentially distinguishable as a locus of authority apart from God. Thus the Torah is at once cosmically alongside God and yet in some sense independent from him.

Moving forward to the twelfth century, Daniel Davies examines the importance of this doctrine for the more philosophical work of Maimonides (1135–1204). What matters in the *Guide of the Perplexed* is above all divine creation as such, with the question of the world's temporal beginning left somewhat in abeyance as not subject to thorough philosophical scrutiny, since there are no logical analogies to creation either *de novo* or *ex nihilo*—and one therefore cannot rationally prove such creation to be either possible or impossible. Consideration of the Torah requires creation *de novo* and indeed the possibility of miracles: this implies God's particular rather than merely universal knowledge, which in turn suggests that some aspects of the world may not be scientifically explicable. A more careful distinction between creation *de novo* and *ex nihilo* was only developed by subsequent interpreters of Maimonides, here found to culminate in Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508). Davies finds it arguable that Maimonides in fact accepts an eternal creation, although this is unlikely to be rooted in a conflict sometimes supposed between divine will and divine wisdom: God is free to create or not to create, which both validates and limits the scope of philosophical reason.

Creation *ex nihilo* in Christian Systematic Theology

The philosophical and theological arc of this volume's argument reaches its preliminary conclusion in three chapters addressing the doctrine's function in the history of modern systematic theology.

Cyril O'Regan sets the context by tracing modern theology's eclipse of the doctrine to the work of Baruch Spinoza (1632–77), who sought to counter earlier arguments about God's creation *ex nihilo* with a strictly mathematical account of reality. Spinoza's intellectual genealogy, O'Regan believes, is to some extent indebted to the Renaissance revival of Christian Neoplatonism, culminating in the work of Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), who had developed an earlier polemic against traditional theistic accounts of the world's contingency. In his resulting naturalism and antisupernaturalism, Spinoza went on to influence certain antimetaphysical convictions characteristic of German Romanticism and Idealism (despite their supposed opposition to naturalistic reductionism). Drawing attention to the importance of this intellectual-heritage genealogy for more recent theology including the work of Jürgen Moltmann and Catherine Keller,<sup>12</sup> the chapter attempts to account here for the twentieth- and twenty-first-century strength of conviction against the very viability of creation *ex nihilo* and indeed of any classical theistic account of creation.

Ruth Jackson provides a case study in the work of the seminal early nineteenth-century Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Developing his critical stance in dependence on Kant's critique of reason, he regarded doctrine as not susceptible to rational proof but only to historical taxonomy. The substance of a traditional doctrine of creation as such, by contrast, is subverted by scientific inquiry and, like all doctrine, requires adaptation to the rational demands of the day. Jackson shows that Schleiermacher nevertheless develops such a doctrine as concerned not with questions of cosmogony but with the present divine purpose of sustaining and redeeming the world. Creation *ex nihilo* means simply that the world and its history are utterly contingent on God at every moment, creation and its preservation being a single act of divine will. Reality coheres as to both divine and natural causality, with scientific inquiry and faith's feeling of "absolute dependence" sharing the same world.

Our systematic section concludes with David Bentley Hart’s programmatic, full-bodied account of the relationship between God, creation, and evil, articulated in a sustained dialogue with the engagement of hell and theodicy in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. He argues that, quite apart from its cosmological or metaphysical dimensions, the doctrine of creation is also a fundamentally eschatological claim about the way the world as a whole exists in relation to God and the way God exists in himself. Hart concludes that all theodicy is contingent on the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, since all causes are reducible to their first—and their final—cause. This renders views of God as an agent of eternal retribution and pure sovereignty incompatible with God as loving and self-giving; such ideas are incompatible with the God who created the world good and whose nature will be disclosed in full at the last judgment.

### *Creation ex nihilo* and Scientific Cosmology

But does all of this have any bearing on the physical world we actually inhabit and observe, and which is today so comprehensively described and codified by science and technology? This is, to be sure, no trivial question. The present project’s labor on the interface of the doctrine of creation with scientific cosmology has taken a deliberately cautious, tentative, and inceptive approach. This obviously leaves at one level plenty of scope for further research and interaction. At the same time, however, this tentativeness rightly expresses our sense that the points of genuine intellectual intersection and synergy between the disciplines are far from obvious but remain in need of discovery and patient exploration.

That interface is here addressed in three chapters by colleagues formally trained both as scientists and as theologians.

Adam D. Hincks examines the notion of creation out of nothing from the perspective of physical cosmology. Setting to one side discussions about whether God is “necessary” for the “design” of the universe, Hincks offers a brief survey of modern scientific cosmology’s account of the origin of the universe including the so-called Big Bang theory, before focusing respectively on recent debates about a “multiverse” (i.e., multiple parallel universes), cyclical conceptions of time, and finally quantum cosmology’s efforts to articulate the possibility of

a universe from nothing. The apparent fine-tuning of the physical conditions of the earliest universe has sometimes been addressed by recourse to multiple parallel universes. But even such intrinsically unverifiable theories suppose that there exists in the very fabric and matter of the universe a “landscape of possibility” whose presence creation *ex nihilo* explains in terms of the world’s radical contingency of being. Scientifically, the idea that the universe could have come from nothing has attracted increasing interest even on the part of those who seek to eliminate any divine role in creation, although this penultimate “nothing” of space and time still assumes a contingent potentiality driven by pre-existing laws of physics. In the end physical cosmology always presupposes and more concretely explicates the same explanatory metaphysic of contingency which impels creation *ex nihilo*.

Andrew Pinsent concedes that at first sight there appears to be very little meaningful interaction between the claims of cosmology and theology. Yet might it be the case that, conversely, the loss of theological narratives of creation from the “background” of our scientific thinking may in turn begin to erode the longer-term viability of our insights into cosmology? Part of the problem, Pinsent suggests, is due to misapprehensions about the very nature of scientific *insight* rather than merely quantitative analysis or deduction. True understanding is often a matter of I-you relatedness—and particularly so when the second person is divine rather than human.<sup>13</sup> One aspect of God’s ways of relating to the cosmos in this way is expressed through *creatio ex nihilo*, which encourages the expectation of order in creation and has in turn shaped our understanding of the cosmos. The loss of this second-person-perspective dimension in the West is documentable not only in philosophy but also in the history of art. Theological discourse enables the cultivation of such I-you insight precisely because it engages a God who seeks to communicate understanding.

In the final chapter, Andrew Davison returns once more to the recurring theme of contingency in proposing that the “ex” in creation *ex nihilo* furnishes an important clue to the nature of natural science, which invariably proceeds *from* something actual to its consequences. This is true even for recent physical cosmologies involving the universe’s sudden “inflation,” or, for that matter, for accounts of “no boundary” quantum gravity in which there is no longer a beginning of time. Yet science

looks upon the appearing of the world from the inside of creation. It is theology, by contrast, which distinctively articulates the property of God as creating out of nothing, the divine agent constituting not an initial cause among other causes, not just “the beginning,” but every moment of reality, time, or space. God’s creation is the appearing of the world, of being and of potential itself, against no background.

## NOTES

1. See David N. Sedley, *Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 66.

2. See, e.g., Peter Bouteneff, *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

3. In addition to Catherine Keller, Ian A. McFarland, Gerhard May, Janet M. Soskice, and others referenced below, among recent publications it is worth singling out David B. Burrell et al., eds., *Creation and the God of Abraham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); David Fergusson, *Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014); David Vincent Meconi, *On Earth as It Is in Heaven: Cultivating a Contemporary Theology of Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016). For scientific as well as ideological objections see several of the contributors to Thomas Jay Oord, ed., *Theologies of Creation: Creatio ex Nihilo and Its New Rivals* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

4. Stephen W. Hawking, transcript of “Black Holes Ain’t as Black as They Are Painted,” lecture 2 in the Reith Lectures 2016, broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on February 2, 2016, <https://is.gd/Hawkin2016>.

5. See Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014); Janet M. Soskice, “*Creatio ex nihilo*: Its Jewish and Christian Foundations,” in Burrell et al., *Creation and the God of Abraham*, 24–39; Soskice, “Creation and the Glory of Creatures,” *Modern Theology* 29 (2013): 172–85 (part of an entire journal issue edited by Soskice on this topic; also published as Soskice, ed., *Creation “ex Nihilo” and Modern Theology* [Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2013]); Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

6. Cf., e.g., Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003).

7. Cf. previously Richard J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and the Bible* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 1994).

8. See Gerhard May, *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of “Creation out of Nothing” in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A. S. Worrall (Edinburgh: T&T

Clark, 1994); Frances M. Young, “‘Creatio ex Nihilo’: A Context for the Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44 (1991): 139–51.

9. Cf. further Markus Bockmuehl, “The Idea of Creation out of Nothing: From Qumran to Genesis Rabbah,” in *Visualising Jews through the Ages: Literary and Material Representations of Jewishness and Judaism*, ed. Hannah Ewence and Helen Spurling (New York: Routledge, 2015), 17–31, and literature cited there; see also my comments on Tzvi Novick’s chapter in this volume (page 8).

10. Cf. further Sean M. McDonough, *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Jonathan T. Pennington and Sean M. McDonough, eds., *Cosmology and New Testament Theology*, Library of New Testament Studies 355 (London: T&T Clark, 2008).

11. This term is often associated with the anthropology of Simone Weil. See, e.g., J. P. Little, “Simone Weil’s Concept of Decreation,” in *Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Culture: Readings Toward a Divine Humanity*, ed. Richard H. Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Lissa McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil: An Introduction* (London: Tauris / New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 171–212. An eschatological interpretation of the term is articulated by Paul J. Griffiths, *Decreation: The Last Things of All Creatures* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

12. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985 [The Gifford Lectures 1984–85]); Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London / New York: Routledge, 2003).

13. Cf. further Andrew Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective in Aquinas’s Ethics: Virtues and Gifts* (New York: Routledge, 2012).



## CHAPTER 1

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# *Creatio ex nihilo* and the Bible

GARY A. ANDERSON

The relationship of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* to the Bible has been a much-vexed issue since the rise of historical criticism. All of the standard prooftexts for the doctrine have been shown to lack the clarity and precision that they were once thought to possess. This essay will come at this challenge from three directions. First, I will examine Genesis 1:1–3, the standard point of departure for every student of the doctrine. Second, I will turn to the central theological concerns that the doctrine addresses. Here I will take up Janet Soskice’s important claim that the theological center of *creatio ex nihilo* should not be restricted to the question of the origins of the universe.<sup>1</sup> Gerhard May’s influential work on the origin of the doctrine is not the only account that can be given.<sup>2</sup> To fill this out I will consider Kathryn Tanner’s brilliant study, *God and Creation in Christian Theology*, a book which goes a long way toward reorienting the terms of discussion.<sup>3</sup> For Tanner the doctrine explains how the Bible can speak of God’s utter transcendence from and immanence to the world in a noncontradictory fashion. A different set of biblical prooftexts will need to be examined in order to test the

viability of this approach. My final point concerns the affective character of the doctrine, something I have learned from the writings of John Webster and David Hart. “The Christian vision of the world,” Hart has observed, “is not some rational deduction from empirical experience, but is . . . a moral and spiritual labor.”<sup>4</sup>

#### BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

Let me begin with the Bible. The two most commented-upon texts are Genesis 1:1 and 2 Maccabees 7:28.<sup>5</sup> For many modern scholars, 2 Maccabees appears to be the better candidate of the two, for it seems to contain an explicit denial of the preexistence of matter: “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.” But, as scholars have shown, the assertion that God did not make the world out of things that existed could have merely implied that he fashioned the world from unformed matter. For we have contemporary Greek evidence for the use of an almost identical idiom to describe the engendering of children by their parents.<sup>6</sup> This does not mean that the author of 2 Maccabees understood the term this way; at the same time, that possibility cannot be ruled out. As a result this text fails as a decisive proof-text for the doctrine. The most we can say is that 2 Maccabees is patient of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.

The so-called priestly creation story, Genesis 1:1–2:4a, is also a contested text. The consensus among scholars (with which I agree) is that the first three verses depict God forming the world out of preexistent matter. On this view the first two verses constitute a set of subordinate clauses that set up the main clause in verse 3: [1] “When God set out to create the heavens and the earth, [2] and when the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters, [3] then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”<sup>7</sup> On this understanding, verse 2 is a description of the chaotic substrate that preceded God’s first creative act. To this we can add the problem of the “darkness” that is mentioned in verse 4 (“And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness”). It precedes God’s creative work of making light.

One way out of this impasse is to appeal to the Greek translation of the Hebrew original. The Septuagint renders Genesis 1:1 as an independent sentence and thus portrays the making of the heavens and the earth as the first act of creation and the subsequent description of the chaotic nature of the earth, heaven, and waters as a description of how they appeared after this first creative act.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as Menahem Kister has shown, it is a short step from the LXX to an early Jewish exegetical tradition that understood all the items listed in Genesis 1:2 as items created by God.<sup>9</sup> The adoption of the LXX translation in the prologue to the Gospel of John lends considerable authority to this particular translation for the Christian reader of the Bible.<sup>10</sup> Although I am very sympathetic to using both the Septuagint and John to supplement what we learn from Genesis 1, I do not think we should abandon the Hebrew text as a lost cause. Let me explain why the first chapter of the Bible may still be of some value for *creatio ex nihilo*.

A crucial point to bear in mind is a distinction that Brevard Childs has made between a discrete textual witness and its underlying subject matter.<sup>11</sup> We have the discrete, literary witness of each biblical author, whose distinct, perspectival voice must be heard. But there is also an underlying subject matter that these various witnesses are grappling with, something that Childs identifies with the Latin word *res* or the German *Sache*. As an example let us consider the person of Jesus Christ. The biblical scholar is responsible for two things: first, hearing the distinctive voice of each of the various New Testament authors and allowing them to speak about Jesus in their own singular fashion and without harmonization. The Lukan Jesus, for example, must not be confused with the Johannine. But the scholar must also take an additional step and address the underlying reality of the Jesus who is confessed in the creeds. To limit the task of exegesis to that of uncovering different voices is to abandon the theological task proper to exegesis in the first place.

When biblical scholars address the literary shape of Genesis 1:1–3, one of the first things to be noted is the parallels with the Mesopotamian story of creation, the *Enuma Elish*. But just as significant are the differences between the two accounts. As biblical scholars have pointed out, the material that preexists creation is presented in vastly different ways in the two cosmogonies. The *Enuma Elish* presumes an epic battle between the God who will emerge as sovereign and the

powers of chaos, while the Bible describes the creation of the world as taking place without any opposition.<sup>12</sup> As Jon Levenson succinctly puts the matter: “Genesis 1:1–2:3 *begins* near the point when the Babylonian poem *ends* its action!”<sup>13</sup>

To emphasize the dramatic turn that Genesis 1 takes, let us consider what happens to the figure of Leviathan or the sea dragons in the course of creation’s six days. As is well known, a wide variety of biblical texts trace a path not dissimilar from what is found in Assyriological and Canaanite materials. In these texts the sea dragon (*tannin*, singular; *tanninim*, plural) appears as a primordial chaos monster who acts with purposes athwart those of God. Consider, for example, Psalm 74:13: “You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons [*tanninim*] in the waters.” Or Isaiah 51:9: “Was it not you . . . who pierced the dragon [*tannin*]?” But also important is the way in which the term for the sea dragon can stand as a poetic variant for other terms for the primeval monsters: “On that day the LORD . . . will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, . . . and he will kill the dragon [*tannin*] that is in the sea” (Isa. 27:1).

In stark contrast to all of these examples stands the witness of Genesis 1:

And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” So God created the great sea monsters [*tanninim*] and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day. (vv. 20–23)

Here the sea monster is created by God and wholly under his control. No longer an adversary of any stripe, he can be included within the formula of approbation: “And God saw that [what he had made] was good.” Jon Levenson summarizes the novelty of Genesis 1 in this fashion: “In Genesis there is no active opposition to God’s creative labor. He works on inert matter. In fact, rather than *creatio ex nihilo*, ‘creation without opposition’ is the more accurate nutshell statement of the theology underlying our passage.”<sup>14</sup>

At one level there is nothing to dispute here. But at the same time, this evaluation is not completely satisfying. We must recall that *creatio ex nihilo* is a doctrine that arises in a Greco-Roman environment. That is, it arose in a world in which the eternity of matter implied that the gods were constrained by its limitations when they created the world. But this particular problem is not something that the biblical writer ever faced or could even imagine.

This is an important clarification to make because many commentators make the strong claim that Genesis 1 refutes the doctrine. But if we are pursuing this question strictly from the perspective of what our textual witnesses allow, it would be fairer to say that God does not face any opposition to his creative endeavors as is the rule in the ancient Near East. True, matter is preexistent, but one must concede that this datum means something quite different when we import it into a Greco-Roman environment. For there the issue of preexistent matter connotes a significant qualification of divine power.

Here is where the notion of the text's *res* or *Sache* comes into play. There can be no doubt that the author of Genesis 1 inherits an account of creation that presupposes the need to destroy the forces of chaos first. These so-called *Chaoskampf* texts have been well studied by biblical scholars. But the author of Genesis 1 has consciously and utterly rejected this idea. If we were to sit down with our priestly scribes and give them a brief introduction to Greek cosmology, emphasizing for them the fact that preexistent matter necessarily restricts what God can accomplish in the material world, can we imagine that they would accept such a notion? Though certainty obviously alludes us, I find it hard to imagine.

But let me return to the issue of the chaos substrate. As Levenson has noted, the materials listed in Genesis 1:2 form a primordial chaos. But, as he goes on to say, the same holds true for darkness. "Light, which is God's first creation, does not banish darkness. Rather it alternates with it: 'There was evening and there was morning' in each of the six days of creation. . . . The priority of 'evening' over 'day' reminds us of which is primordial and recalls again that chaos in the form of darkness has not been eliminated, but only confined to its place through alternation with light."<sup>15</sup> On this understanding, darkness is part of the primordial chaos substrate that confronts God as he sets out to create the world. Like the "matter" of Greek cosmogonies, it would appear to limit God.

Yet such a notion is overturned by a close reading of the entire narrative. For, as countless commentators have noted going all the way back to the rabbinic period, the seventh day does not append the formula that was standard for the previous six days: “There was evening and there was morning, the Xth day.” On the seventh day, all trace of this primordial darkness disappears. Gerhard von Rad writes:

The Sabbath at creation, as the last of the creative days, is not limited; the concluding formula (“and it was evening and it was morning . . .”) is lacking, and that too, like everything else in this chapter, is intentional. Thus Gen 2.1 ff. speaks about the preparation of an exalted saving good for the world and man, of a rest “before which millennia pass away as a thunderstorm” (Novalis). It is tangibly “existent” protologically as it is expected eschatologically in Hebrews (Heb., ch. 4).<sup>16</sup>

And Jon Levenson adds:

“No wonder the Mishnah can call the eschatological future, “a day that is entirely Sabbath and rest for eternal life” and designate Psalm 92, the song “for the Sabbath day,” as the special hymn for that aeon. The reality that the Sabbath represents—God’s unchallenged and uncompromised mastery, blessing, and hallowing—is consistently and irreversibly available only in the world-to-come. Until then, it is known only in the tantalizing experience of the Sabbath.”<sup>17</sup>

But it is not simply the Mishnah that makes this move. As Yair Zakovitch points out, Isaiah 60 utilizes a tradition about the special light that was available for the first days of creation to describe the conditions that will define the city of Jerusalem at the eschaton.<sup>18</sup> The pertinent section reads:

The sun shall no longer be  
     your light by day,  
 nor for brightness shall the moon  
     give light to you by night;

but the LORD will be your everlasting light,  
and your God will be your glory.  
Your sun shall no more go down,  
or your moon withdraw itself;  
for the LORD will be your everlasting light,  
and your days of mourning shall be ended. (vv. 19–20)

What is striking about this text—indeed something it shares with the seventh day—is that darkness is not some sort of primordial chaos that God must work around. Rather, darkness is an element of the cosmos that not only is under God’s providential power but can and will be eradicated at the close of the world’s history.

Robert Wilken, in his book *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, noted that the Roman thinker Galen had intimated the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* prior to its appearance in the works of Theophilus and Irenaeus. What Galen observed was that the Bible describes the created order as arising from the power of the divine word alone and not limited by the physical characteristics of matter. Though Galen’s remarks were based on some knowledge of Genesis 1, it is not hard to imagine that Isaiah 60 would have been just as bothersome to him. Light, in his mind, required the mediating agency of the sun and stars. Summarizing Galen’s train of thought, Wilken writes:

Certain things are impossible by nature and God does not—indeed cannot—do such things. He chooses the best possible way, the way according to reason. . . . The world of nature cannot be understood unless it is recognized that all things, including the creator, are governed by unalterable laws according to reason. The laws determine the way things are and always will be, not because God decided they should be this way, but because that is the best way for them to be. God is part of nature. He is, in the hymn of the Stoic Cleanthes, “leader of nature, governing all things by law.”<sup>19</sup>

The only conclusion I think we can draw from the Bible’s final canonical form is that the existence of darkness at creation must have been something God permits rather than confronts by necessity. Or, putting the matter differently, Genesis 2:1–3 (read in conjunction with

Isa. 60) provides the standard historical-critical interpretation with an aporia. As we have seen, reading Genesis 1:1 in light of *Enuma Elish* suggests that God is both confronted with and limited by the state of the universe prior to creation. Hence, the modern propensity to treat Genesis 1:1 as a subordinate, temporal clause. But by the time we get to the seventh day (or the eschaton), this assumption must be qualified. In other words, the close of the first creation story forces the reader to go back and rethink what is described at the beginning. But let me be clear. I am not suggesting that this changes how we view the grammar of 1:1. Grammar remains grammar. But the close of this story stands in some tension with the beginning. Though Genesis 1 does not teach *creatio ex nihilo* in the way early Christian theologians might have thought, it does not rule it out as decisively as many modern readers have assumed.

#### CENTRAL CONCERNS OF THE DOCTRINE

Let me turn from the first creation story to what systematic theologians have identified as the central theological concerns of the doctrine. The reason for doing so is that many biblical scholars have presumed that the doctrine stands or falls on the interpretation of Genesis 1. But if the doctrine is more than just an account of the world's origin, then Janet Soskice is certainly correct in exhorting us to widen our frame of reference as to what counts as biblical evidence. I will take, as my point of departure, Ian McFarland's recent book, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation*.

He begins his account with the figure of Theophilus of Antioch, a bishop who around the year 180 wrote a treatise titled *To Autolycus*. Therein we find the claim that "God brought everything into being out of what does not exist, so that his greatness might be known and understood through his works."<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, of course, makes the very same claim. But the larger issue at stake here is not so much how the world came to be as how the world is governed. Theophilus and Irenaeus want to establish that God's transcendence over the world does not come at the cost of his intimate oversight of its affairs.

The concern of governance can be seen in the striking contrast between the way Justin Martyr on the one hand and Theophilus and Ire-

naeus on the other treat the relationship between divine transcendence and immanence. Because Justin is beholden to the Platonic notion of preexistent matter, “God is unable to act directly on or be immediately present to creation: God is and remains outside the phenomenal world.”<sup>21</sup> For Irenaeus, on the other hand, God’s transcendence does not connote remoteness from the material order. Quite the contrary, McFarland writes: “This divine fullness establishes the most profound intimacy between Creator and creature: the same God ‘who fills the heavens and views the depths . . . is also present with everyone of us. . . . For his hand lays hold of all things . . . is present in our hidden and secret parts, and publicly nourishes and preserves us.’ God’s transcendence does not imply distance from creatures, but is rather the ground for God’s engagement with them.”<sup>22</sup> As R. A. Norris summarizes the matter: “What makes God different from every creature—his eternal and ingenerate simplicity—is thus, for Irenaeus, precisely what assures his direct and intimate involvement with every creature.”<sup>23</sup> In a world in which matter stands over against God, God is necessarily limited by the constraints it imposes. Though divine transcendence is not at risk, the degree of intimacy that God can have with the world is severely qualified.

This distinctive feature of *creatio ex nihilo* is the subject of Kathryn Tanner’s remarkable book *God and Creation in Christian Theology*. In this work, she shows how this doctrine enables one to affirm both divine immanence and transcendence without qualifying one in terms of the other. The blurb that Eugene Rogers provides on the back cover of the book is most illuminating: “Before I read *God and Creation*, I thought Christians had to choose between grace and free will. If they chose grace, so much the better. As I read, I found myself moved. Grace and free will were not rivals but companions.”

Rogers’s candid remarks reveal the deep philosophical assumptions that most readers bring to the Bible. Even two thousand years into the Christian project readers still think of divine grace as an external power that stands over against human free will. If an action, for example, requires 80 percent grace, then we contribute the other 20 percent. But Tanner would call such a worldview more Greek than biblical. In other words, because God’s being is not distinct from the being of everything else that exists, he must establish his identity over against it. This is what the eternity of matter entails. *Creatio ex nihilo*, on the other hand,

allows one to conceive this relationship quite differently: both God and the human agent can contribute 100 percent to any particular action. Tanner puts the matter thus: “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 creature’s.” To which she adds this citation from Karl Barth: “In the rule of God we do not have to do first with a creaturely action and then—somewhere above or behind, but quite distinct from it . . . with an operation of God Himself. To describe *con-cursus divinis* we cannot use the mathematical picture of two parallel lines. But creaturely events take place as God Himself acts.”<sup>24</sup>

One way to appreciate the importance of this teaching is to consider an exegetical example. A doctrine, after all, is useful only to the degree that it makes us better readers of the biblical text. In his recent work on divine and human agency in the writings of Saint Paul, John Barclay articulates a position that closely resembles what Kathryn Tanner has articulated.<sup>25</sup> And importantly he arrives at this view as a result of a close reading of several key passages in the Pauline correspondence. For my part, I will turn to two of the most important moments in Abraham’s life and the challenge they have posed for biblical commentators. In Genesis 12:1–3 Abram is called by God “out of the blue”: “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’” At this point in the story, Abram has done nothing to merit the stupendous promise that he receives. This point was not lost on ancient exegetes, who proceeded to invent a myriad of stories to fill in this lacuna. In so doing, they simply accented the fact that there is no explanation for the choice. Gerhard von Rad saw, and innumerable other commentators have seen, this choice of God as an excellent example of divine grace.<sup>26</sup> Everything depends on the will of the electing deity.

When we come to Genesis 22, however, after Abraham’s extraordinary act of obedience to God’s command to sacrifice his beloved son, the terms of the covenant are now reformulated, but this time as a fitting reward for his obedience:

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."

Although the terms of the promise in both texts are similar, the grounds for the promise could not be more different. Whereas Genesis 12 places the matter wholly in God's hands, Genesis 22 ascribes the promise to the merits of Abraham's deed: "Because you have done this . . . I will indeed bless you." It is striking to observe that von Rad makes no mention of this repetition of the promise. Although one cannot be certain, it is likely that this silence has to do with the author's discomfort with meritorious human actions. If so, von Rad enacts in his commentary the position confessed by Rogers above prior to his grappling with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*: divine grace and human merit are irreconcilable.

Tanner's work shows us that had von Rad digested Barth or Aquinas on this issue, he could have done justice to the text in question.<sup>27</sup> One need not see the Bible's emphasis on human merit in Genesis 22 as canceling out the grace that was given in Genesis 12. To adopt the vocabulary of Thomas Aquinas, we could understand the act of election in Genesis 12 as the moment of "justification" when grace is given by God apart from any human merit. But having received this grace, Abraham is then enabled by this divine power to effect meritorious deeds that mark his progress toward sanctification. Barclay's description of Paul's "participationist" soteriology could easily be transferred to the book of Genesis: "Grace does not just invite 'response' but itself effects the human participation in grace, such that 'every good work' can be viewed as the fruit of divine power as much as the product of believers themselves."<sup>28</sup>

It is striking that Barclay's amplification of what he learned from E. P. Sanders is already evident in the thinking of Athanasius. In a key passage he writes: "When we render a recompense to the Lord to the utmost of our power . . . we give nothing of our own but those things

which we have before received from Him, this being especially true of His grace, that He should require, as from us, His own gifts.” And Khaled Anatolios explains as follows:

Our response to God’s grace both is and is not our own. It is not our own insofar as even this response derives from God’s grace and is “received.” And yet it is our own precisely because we do actually receive it: “those things which you give Me are yours, as having received them from Me.” Moreover, it is precisely their becoming “our own” through our having received them which makes it possible for us to “give” them back to God. If they do not become our own, we would not be able to give them back to God; neither would God be able to require them back of us. But the fact that they do become our own means that the reciprocity of human and divine continues in an ascending cycle: God gives us grace and requires it back of us; we receive it and offer it back to God. “Virtue” and “holiness” are thus conceived in terms of this ascending dialectic, as the “offering back” as gift, of what is already received as gift. Here we see how a perceived dichotomy between striving for virtue and the participation in grace is really quite far from the more complex conception of Athanasius.<sup>29</sup>

The last sentence speaks volumes for the theological problem we have been tracing. It is almost impossible not to think of striving for virtue and participation in grace as irreconcilable opposites. One of the principle functions of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is to allow the reader of the Bible to make sense of passages in which divine grace and human free will seem to be set against one another. And that, I would suggest, is the sine qua non of any Christian doctrine. *Creatio ex nihilo* provides a metaphysical account of the world that allows for a deeper engagement with the way the Bible characterizes the divine and human agency. As John Webster has put the matter, “Creation out of nothing served to spell out the ontological entailments of the distinction between the eternal creator and the temporal, contingent creatures who are the objects of his saving regard, resisting ideas of the creator as one who merely gave form to coeval matter, and so accentuating the limitless capacity and freedom of God.”<sup>30</sup>

## ONTOLOGICAL ENTAILMENTS

Let me dwell on the subject of these “ontological entailments” just a little longer. Robert Wilken, let us recall, showed us that Galen intuited the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* before the Christians themselves had come to broad agreement about it. In particular, Wilken argues that the Christian view of God’s providential power offended Greek and Roman sensibilities:

God, in the Greek view, dwelt in a realm above the earth, but he did not stand outside of the world, the *kosmos*. Earth and heaven are part of the same cosmos, which has existed eternally. The world is not the creation of a transcendent God. The cosmos has its own laws, and all that exists—the physical world, animals, man, and the gods—are subject to nature’s laws. “Certain things are impossible to nature,” said Galen, and “God does not even attempt such things at all.” Rather, “he chooses the best out of the possibilities of becoming.”<sup>31</sup>

We have already noted the challenges posed by Genesis 1:3 and Isaiah 60. Both of these texts claim that God can illumine the world without recourse to the means that nature has provided: the sun, moon, and stars. Another offense against reason can be found in the revolutionary way that wisdom texts (and eventually, the New Testament and early Christian thinkers) came to understand the charitable act. In these materials, showing kindness to the suffering was not just a good deed but an alignment of one’s actions with the structure of the universe. One could argue that a discussion of the virtue of charity fits better within a theology of creation than a discussion of religious ethics.

Peter Brown’s magnificent recent book, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, has highlighted the significance of the theological shaping of this distinctive practice. Greco-Roman citizens, he observes, were not miserly. Wealthy donors funded lavish public buildings all over the empire. But their generosity always included the expectation that honor and other public accolades would come their way. In a world ruled by what Brown calls the iron laws of reciprocity, “it was considered bad luck to dream that one gave money to a beggar.” Such dreams portended

death: “For Death is like a beggar,” the saying went, “who takes and gives nothing in return.”<sup>32</sup>

In the synagogue and church, however, a different construal of the charitable act was taking shape. The fact that the poor could not repay was a crucial ingredient for the value of the almsdeed. But not because of a concern for unadulterated altruism—that is more a modern than an ancient value—but because of the statement deeds of charity made about the way God governed the world.

This point is made well in a story that the rabbis told about an encounter between Rabbi Gamliel and an unnamed pagan philosopher.<sup>33</sup> The latter was bothered by the Torah’s command that one should assist the poor and have no second thoughts while doing so. Acting so carelessly would bankrupt the man of means, and the result would be two indigent persons, not just one. In the response that R. Gamliel gives, it is important to make one point clear. In the Bible, a gift to the poor was often understood to be a no-interest loan.

R. Gamliel said: “If a poor man sought a loan from you, would you consent?” He replied, “No!” “And if he brought a deposit?” He replied, “Yes!” “If he brought you someone not quite fitting to stand as surety?” He replied, “No.” “And if he brought you the governor as surety?” He replied, “Yes.”

“Isn’t it a matter of *a fortiori* logic: If you will issue a loan when a person of means goes surety, how much the more so when ‘He who spoke and made the world’ goes surety. For scripture says, ‘*He who is generous to the poor makes a loan to God, and God will surely repay.*’ (Prov. 19:17).”<sup>34</sup>

The retort of R. Gamliel is astounding. Our Greco-Roman philosopher imagines the charitable act solely within the framework of intrahuman reciprocity. “Certain things are impossible to nature,” Galen had claimed. “God does not even attempt such things at all.” That neatly sums up why this pagan thinker rejected R. Gamliel’s understanding of charitable action. But in the biblical understanding, charity is an action that God directly oversees. The ways of providence conform with the intentions of the creator when he made the world.

*Creatio ex nihilo*—recalling the words of John Webster—rejects the idea that the creator simply gave form to coeval matter. If that was

the case, then the rules of reciprocity ought to govern charitable behavior. Matter, we must assume, restricts what God can do. The fact that the world does not operate within the ambit of these expectations gives eloquent testimony to “the limitless capacity and freedom of God” in creating and governing the world.

It may be worth recalling that Christian charitable practices were envied by many in the Roman world. Julian the Apostate famously attempted to import them into a non-Christian setting. Yet his ambitions failed. Rodney Stark explains: “For all that [Julian] urged pagan priests to match these Christian practices, there was little or no response because *there were no doctrinal bases or traditional practices* for them to build upon.”<sup>35</sup> The doctrine that was conspicuously lacking was *creatio ex nihilo*, a doctrine that allowed Christian thinkers to see that the gracious intentions of the creator were not limited by the materials at his disposal. Rather, it was through those very materials that those intentions were granted expression. Inserting Christian charitable practices into a pagan context was something like transplanting an organ into a new body. Without powerful drugs in place, the recipient will not recognize the new organ and will reject it. For Christian charity to flourish, a radical new way of thinking about God’s relationship to the world had to take root.

#### CREATIO EX NIHILO AS A SPIRITUAL LABOR

And this leads to my final point, which I will make more in the way of a suggestion than a detailed argument. Affirming *creatio ex nihilo* is, as David Hart asserts, “not some rational deduction from empirical experience, but . . . a moral and spiritual labor.”<sup>36</sup> Nowhere is the truth of this better reflected than in the way the virtue of charity is enacted with the life of Tobit. Tobit is something of a Joban figure—his heroism in assisting the poor is not rewarded; instead, it leads to blindness and what threatens to be a premature and tragic death. And yet, in spite of these challenges, Tobit holds fast to the commandment. With characteristic insight, Saint Augustine captures nicely the irony of the moment:

Tobit was blind, yet he taught his son the way of God. You know this is true, because Tobit advised his son, *Give alms, my son, for*

*almsdeeds save you from departing into darkness* (Tob 4:7, 11); yet the speaker was in darkness himself. . . . He had no fear that his son might say in his heart, “Did you not give alms yourself? Why, then, are you talking to me out of your blindness? Darkness is where almsgiving has evidently led you, so how can you advise me that *almsdeeds save you from departing into darkness?*” (*Enarratio in Psalmum* 96.18)<sup>37</sup>

The confidence of Tobit is altogether puzzling. “How could Tobit give that advice to his son with such confidence?” Augustine goes on to ask. And this is the answer he provides: “Only because he habitually saw another light. The son held his father’s hand to help him walk, but the father taught his son the way, that he might live.—And the ‘other light’ that Tobit saw, of course, is the light of *faith!*” (*Enarratio in Psalmum* 96.18).<sup>38</sup>

The notion that Tobit saw another light recalls an important passage from the *Confessions*. At the end of this work, when Augustine is commenting upon the story of creation, he makes an astute observation about the literary structure of that narrative. During the first six days of creation—which describe the world that we live in—God concludes his successive efforts with an affirmation of the goodness of what he has made. This judgment is given special emphasis at the close of the sixth day, in which God declares that all that he has made is “*very good.*”<sup>39</sup>

But this raises an important question. Can we, as readers of the biblical text, affirm what God declares to be the case? The only way to do so, Augustine argues, is through divine grace (*Confessions* 13.31, 46):<sup>40</sup>

But as to those who do by Your Spirit see these things, it is You who see in them. Thus when they see that these works are good, it is You who see that they are good; when anything pleases us because of You, You are what pleases us in that thing, and when by Your Spirit something pleases us, it pleases You in us. “*For what man knows the things of a man, but the spirit of a man, which is in him? So the things also that are of God, no man knows, but the spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of this world, but the spirit that is of God, that we may know the things that are given us from God*” (I Cor 2:11).

In this text we see the two themes we have been following tightly stitched together. On the one hand there is the ability to discern the goodness with which God not only made the world but continues to uphold and guide it. As that pagan philosopher with whom R. Gamliel spoke knew so well, the world does not present itself as a place directed by divine mercy. The Greeks were not unwise to presume that one would be better off relying on the principle of reciprocity. Even the gods are constrained by the ways of nature. For R. Gamliel (and Saint Basil) only divine revelation (in this case, Prov. 19:17) could enable one to see the astonishing manner in which God is related to the world. But revelation on its own is not sufficient. One also needs the assistance of the Holy Spirit to act in accordance with the commandments God has given. In his stupendous obedience to the command to offer his only son, Abraham was not earning his salvation—period. Rather, he was enabled to complete this meritorious deed in a way that honored both divine and human agency. “In crowning our merits,” Augustine had said, “you are crowning your own gifts.”<sup>41</sup> And so for the affirmation of the goodness of the created order. The world, as it is presently constituted, does not present itself as good to the sensitive observer. We can only speak of it as such when we are graced to see it as God sees it. Affirming the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not simply an exegetical task; it requires the supernatural gift of faith.

The relationship between doctrine and biblical exegesis is both complex and fraught with controversy. A hallmark of modern approaches to the Bible is the independence of the exegete from the disputes that have arisen in interconfessional contexts. Given the fact that many presentations of the doctrine ground the concept on a faulty reading of Genesis 1:1–3, a consensus has arisen that the doctrine has little to do with the Bible itself. But in the early Christian sources themselves, Genesis 1:1 is not the most important piece of the puzzle. As Anatolios, for example, has shown, the doctrine is more interested in the dependence of the created order on God than in clarifying the conditions of its initial origin. As we saw in the second part of this essay, a major concern of the doctrine is to clarify how human and divine agency interrelate. I suggested that one way of testing the doctrine’s biblical character would be to ask whether the doctrine can help us exegete biblical texts where the question of divine and human agency is at issue.

In addition to this, because the doctrine puts such a premium on dependence, the practice of charity also confirms the doctrine. As I have argued at great length elsewhere, early Christian charity has more to do with metaphysics than morals. That is, the teaching about charitable actions and the rewards they generate is meant to reveal the (wondrous) type of world God has created and—on the basis of this information—how one might flourish in it. Roman thinkers greatly esteemed Christian charity, and some like Julian tried to import these patterns of living into the pagan realm. Yet those efforts were unsuccessful because they lacked the requisite theological underpinning. Behind the practice of charity as taught in the Bible is the presumption that God superintends such acts and that those who give in this sacrificial fashion will ultimately be rewarded. The reward is not so much a motivator of the behavior in question, but an indicator of the type of world God has fashioned. To pagan thinkers, this was an irrational assertion. Matter restricts what the gods can do. Better to conduct one's affairs in accord with the "iron-clad laws of reciprocity" than cherish notions about divine sovereignty that do not hold water.

In both these instances (charity and grace/merit) certain metaphysical assumptions are presumed. God governs the natural order in a way that respects human autonomy and rewards sacrificial generosity. God does not operate within the rules of intrahuman (and so, this-worldly) reciprocity. Though we did not claim that Genesis 1:1–3 establishes this, we did show that Genesis 2:1–3 profoundly qualifies the independence of matter that we might have inferred from the first three verses of the Bible. This, plus the evidence of Second and Third Isaiah, strongly push the reader of the Bible toward the doctrine itself. It is a trajectory internal to the larger canonical witness. The fact that as early as the book of Jubilees we have texts claiming that God created the primordial matter of Genesis 1:2 confirms this. It is on these grounds that the doctrine has deep biblical roots.

## NOTES

1. J. Soskice, "Creation and the Glory of Creatures," *Modern Theology* 29 (2013): 172–85.

2. Gerhard May, *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of "Creation out of Nothing" in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A. S. Worrall (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1994).

3. Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988).

4. David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 58.

5. For an example of this, see the recent discussion in Paul Copan and William L. Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), and the literature cited therein.

6. May, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, 8.

7. The text of the NRSV has been slightly adjusted.

8. See chapter 7 in this volume, by John Cavadini, for an excellent explanation of how Augustine reads the first few verses of Genesis.

9. Menahem Kister, "Tohu wa-Bohu, Primordial Elements and *Creatio ex Nihilo*," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 14 (2007): 229–56.

10. This is the tack that Ian McFarland takes in his recent book *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014). For him, the significance of the Gospel of John is twofold. First, no mention is made whatsoever of the formless waste of Gen. 1:2, and second, "the sole precondition . . . for creation is God." And not a solitary God, McFarland is quick to add, but a God who is defined by his relationship to his Word: "In this way, at the same time that John 1 stands as the most explicit biblical statement of the unconditional character of God's creating work, it also signals that creation from nothing is not merely a claim about God's relation to the world, but also a statement about God's own identity" (McFarland, *From Nothing*, 23).

11. Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 80–90.

12. In the world of Gen. 1, the only grounds for explaining the emergence of evil is human sin. So Ronald Hendel (from a typescript of his forthcoming *Anchor Bible* commentary): "God's perception of the goodness of things in Genesis 1 is reversed at the beginning of the P flood story, when God sees that the earth and all flesh have become corrupt (6:12). In the intertextual relations between Gen. 1 and 6:12, the initial goodness of things turns out to be a somewhat fragile quality, capable of being disrupted and corrupted by violent deeds. The goodness of things seems to be God's intention, but it is an ideal condition which living things can spoil, and which then requires a (cleansing) destruction and re-creation."

13. Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 122 (emphasis original).

14. *Ibid.*, 122.

15. *Ibid.*, 123.

16. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 62–63.

17. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, 123.

18. Yair Zakovitch, *Mashmi'a shalom mevasser tov* (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 2004).

19. Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 87.

20. *To Autolytus* 1.4 as quoted in McFarland, *From Nothing*, 1.

21. McFarland, *From Nothing*, 11. In support of this position, McFarland cites this passage from Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*: "He who has but the smallest intelligence will not venture to assert that the Creator and Father of all things would leave behind everything above heaven and appear on a little portion of the earth."

22. McFarland, *From Nothing*, 12.

23. R. A. Norris, *God and World in Early Christian Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1965), 86.

24. Tanner, *God and Creation*, 94. The citation from Barth is taken from *Church Dogmatics*, 3:1.

25. John Barclay, "Grace and Transformation of Agency in Christ," in *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities: Essays in Honor of E. P. Sanders*, ed. Fabian E. Udoh (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 372–89.

26. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 159.

27. But the point I want to make is more Websterian—the doctrine depends on the spiritual affection of human wonder. We should not reduce it to a piece of objective knowledge. As Tanner's work shows: the modern world has demonstrated a massive forgetfulness about what the doctrine teaches even by those who affirm it!

28. Barclay, "Grace and Transformation," 385.

29. Both the citation from Athanasius and the commentary of Anatolios come from Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 174–75.

30. John Webster, "Creation from Nothing," in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 126–47.

31. Wilken, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 91.

32. Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 76.

33. For a strikingly similar Christian version of this story, see the passage from Saint Basil that I discuss in *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 30–32.

34. The translation is mine. The original text is from *Midrash Tannaim zum Deuteronomium*, ed. D. Hoffmann (Berlin: Itzkowski, 1908), 84.

35. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 88 (emphasis original).

36. Hart, *Doors of the Sea*, 58.

37. *The Works of St. Augustine: Exposition of the Psalms 73–98*, trans. M. Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), 456.

38. *Ibid.*

39. But Augustine also knows that the world which God fashioned on the first six days is not “the best of all possible worlds,” to quote Leibniz. That awaits the seventh day, that is, the eschaton. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (§310) puts it this way: “But why did God not create a world so perfect that no evil could exist in it? With infinite power God could always create something better (*STh* I, 25, 6). But with infinite wisdom and goodness God freely willed to create a world ‘in a state of journeying’ towards its ultimate perfection. In God’s plan this process of becoming involves the appearance of certain beings and the disappearance of others, the existence of the more perfect alongside the less perfect, both constructive and destructive forces of nature. With physical good there exists also physical evil as long as creation has not reached perfection (*SCG* III, 71).”

40. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 317.

41. As found in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), §2006. The original is from *Enarratio in Psalmum* 102.7.

