

Doctrine of Creation

I. Introduction

Let's take a step back to look at the big picture. The bulk of our time has been spent talking about the doctrine of God, quite appropriately so. After an initial section on the Doctrine of Revelation, we plunged into a discussion of the Doctrine of God. We examined the attributes of God and arguments for/against existence of God. Then we looked at the Trinity and then at the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Today we want to shift our attention from God to the world that he has made. This is the subject of the Doctrine of Creation.

II. *Creatio ex nihilo*

You'll remember when we discussed the attributes of God, we saw that one of God's essential attributes is aseity; that is to say, his self-existence. We saw that God is the only uncreated being. He is the sole ultimate reality. There is nothing apart from God that is uncreated. If you could think of anything that is uncreated other than God then the correct answer to that example would be to say that is, too, created or else that does not, in fact, exist. Everything that is real other than God has been created by God. This is the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* which lies at the very heart of the Doctrine of Creation.

The phrase in Latin – *creatio ex nihilo* – means literally “creation out of nothing.” But when theologians affirm that God has created the world out of nothing, they do not mean that he has created it out of something, and that is nothing. That would be to treat

nothing as though it were something. Rather, to say that God created the world out of nothing means that he created it, but not out of anything. That is to say, there is no uncreated substratum out of which the world was made. Everything that exists has been created by God. In that sense creation is out of nothing; that is to say, it is not out of anything else that is uncreated. We want to look first in our discussion at the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, and we'll begin by looking at the biblical data concerning this doctrine.

A. Biblical Data

1. Genesis 1:1

The Bible begins with the words, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). With that terse and majestic statement the author of Genesis 1 differentiated his viewpoint from all of the ancient creation myths of Israel's neighbors. The expression "the heavens and the earth" is a Hebrew idiom meaning the whole of the universe. There was no word in Hebrew for the totality of physical reality, but this idiom "the heavens and the earth" expressed the totality of physical reality. Notice that in verse 1 there is no preexistent material present. There are no warring gods and no primordial dragons, as you have in pagan creation myths. Rather, there is simply God who creates the world. The word in Hebrew is *bara*, a verb which has only God as its subject. Only God can *bara* something. This is a word which does not presuppose a material substratum. It doesn't presuppose that that which is created was created out of something. So the first verse in Genesis 1 states that in the beginning God created the entire totality of physical reality, the whole of the world.

a. Main clause or subordinate clause?

At face value, therefore, this verse would seem to imply *creatio ex nihilo*. God has made everything that there is, and he didn't make it out of any sort of material substratum. It was certainly understood this way by later biblical authors, as we'll see when we look at other passages from Scripture, but many modern commentators have denied this face value reading of Genesis 1:1. Usually their claim is that verse 1 should not be understood to be an independent clause or sentence; rather, it's a subordinate circumstantial clause which modifies verse 2. So they would translate it in this way: "When in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" and then the rest of the second verse would follow. Or, "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void," etc. They take it to be a subordinate clause, and in this way the story of creation really seems to begin with this chaotic state in verse 2 – the earth without form and void, darkness upon the face of the deep, and then creation begins in verse 3: "and God said, 'Let there be light.'"

This issue has been discussed at considerable length, and it seems to me that the Old Testament commentator Claus Westermann has given a very good case for thinking that Genesis 1:1 is an independent clause rather than a subordinate clause.¹ Westermann makes five points as part of his case.

(1) There's no evidence that the word *bereshith* (that is to say, "in the beginning") used without a definite article cannot be used to denote an absolute beginning. It's claimed by some that because *bereshith* lacks a definite article in Hebrew it doesn't denote an

1 See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, trans. John Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

absolute beginning. But Westermann says there's no evidence to think that that's true. In fact, in Isaiah 46:10 the Lord says, "I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things not yet done." There you seem to have the word "beginning" used without a definite article in the sense of an absolute beginning in time. Confirmation of this conclusion, says Westermann, comes from the oldest textual witnesses to Gen 1:1. For example, in the Masoretic Hebrew text, vowel points were added to the Hebrew consonants so that the original text (which just had Hebrew consonants) would now have vocalization through these vowel points. In the Masoretic text they indicate that this is an absolute beginning. Similarly, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint (usually abbreviated LXX) it also indicates an absolute beginning. And finally in the New Testament, the New Testament authors, as we'll see, take Genesis 1:1 in the sense of an absolute beginning. So the earliest texts that react to the Hebrew text take *bereshith* to denote an absolute beginning.

(2) The syntax of verse 1 does not prove that *bereshith* is part of a subordinate clause. One argument for taking verse 1 to be a subordinate clause is that you have an identical construction in Hosea 1:2 to express a circumstantial idea. Hosea 1:2 says, "When the LORD spoke at first through Hosea," etc. There you do have a circumstantial subordinate clause expressed. But Westermann points out that you can't interpret Genesis 1 in terms of Hosea, which is written in an entirely different time by a different person. You've got to interpret Genesis 1 in light of the rest of Genesis. And what you discover is that when the author of Genesis wants to express a circumstantial idea (for example, in Genesis 5:1) he uses

a different syntactical construction, which is the usual form for circumstantial clauses. Genesis 5:1 says, “When God created man, he made him,” etc. That expresses a circumstantial idea – “when God did this” – and it uses a quite different sort of construction than you have in Genesis 1:1. Therefore Hosea’s syntax is the one that is out of step with Genesis. When you look at the way the author of Genesis uses his syntax, Hosea is unusual, and the normal way to express a circumstantial clause will be by a different syntactic construction.

(3) Theological arguments alone cannot resolve the issue. People will sometimes say that the idea of creation out of nothing would have been theologically impossible for these primitive Hebrew authors to express. Westermann says that’s begging the question. You cannot just presuppose that the notion of creation out of nothing could not have been expressed by Genesis 1:1. You need to do an exegesis of the verse first in order to determine that. So you can’t avoid an exegesis of these verses in order to determine their meaning, and this exegesis needs to be carried out in the context of the book of Genesis and also in the wider context of ancient creation narratives.

(4) When you do this – when you carry out such an exegesis –, then what you discover is that Genesis 1:1 is without parallel in ancient creation stories. The usual form of these ancient creation myths took the form: “When _____ was not yet” (and you can fill in the blank with something) “then God _____” (fill in the blank with what God did). “When _____ was not yet, then God did something” (and you fill in the blank). The first clause expresses the state of affairs before God’s action, and then the second clause

expresses God's subsequent activity in making something out of that state. One finds this typical form, for example, in Genesis 2:5-7. There the author says, "When no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up . . . , then the LORD God formed man." You notice this follows the typical ancient formula, "When _____ was not yet, then God _____." According to Westermann, the author of Genesis 1 took the typical form "When _____ was not yet" and he made that verse 2 of Genesis 1. Verse 2 says, "The earth was without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters." This is the description of the state of affairs before God's action. Then he took the second clause, "then God _____," and he crafted that as verse 3, "then God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light." So in Genesis 1 verses 2 and 3 you have this typical ancient formula "When _____ was not yet, then God _____." But the author of Genesis then prefixes this typical formula with verse 1. So verse 1 is therefore not a subordinate clause. Rather, it is an independent statement, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." So Westermann says verse 1 lies completely outside the typical structure, and it is the author's own new formulation. I quote Westermann who says,

It acquires a monumental importance which distinguishes it from other creation stories. . . . Verse one has no parallel in other creation stories while all three sentences of verse two are based on traditional material . . . the tradition history of the creation stories provides us with an answer to the

question about the interrelationship of the first verses of Genesis which is certain.²

So in Westermann's view, it is certain that verse 1 is not a subordinate clause; it is an independent clause which the author of Genesis has placed ahead of the typical formula that you find in ancient creation stories.

(5) Finally, the style of the author of Genesis 1 favors taking verse 1 as a main clause. Again I quote from Westermann, "It would be completely out of harmony with P's style in Genesis 1 [P is the arbitrary letter that's used to designate the source that critics use for this part of Genesis] to arrange the first three verses into one complete sentence." For stylistic reasons, verse 1 is an independent sentence, not a subordinate clause.

The most plausible interpretation of verse 1 is that it is not a subordinate circumstantial clause, but rather it's a main clause, an independent sentence which affirms God's creation of everything that there is.

2 Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, trans. John Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), p. 97.