

§ 8. Doctrine of Creation

Lecture 1

Creatio Ex Nihilo

Having completed the section on the doctrine of Christ, we turn today to a new section in our class. 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 attributes and existence of God. We looked at the Trinity. We looked at the person of the Holy Spirit. We looked at the person and work of Christ. And 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.

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 that exists 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 [outside of] God. 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.

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 beginning verse in Genesis 1 states that in the beginning God created the entire totality of physical reality, the whole of the world.

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 creation really seems to begin with this chaotic state in verse 2 – the earth is 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.

Number one, he says 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. The Hebrew word *bereshith* means "in the beginning," and it's claimed by some that because it lacks a definite article in Hebrew it doesn't denote an absolute beginning. But Westermann says there's no evidence to think that that's true. In fact, in Isaiah 46:10 we have an example of *bereshith* used without a definite article to connote the idea of an absolute beginning. 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 *bereshith* used in the sense of an absolute beginning in time. Confirmation of this conclusion, says Westermann, comes from the oldest textual witnesses to this verse. 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 is also indicating 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.

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

So the earliest texts that comment on or react to the Hebrew text take *bereshith* to be an absolute beginning.

The second point that Westermann makes is that the syntax of verse 1 does not prove that *bereshith* is part of a subordinate clause. One argument in taking verse 1 to be a subordinate clause would seem to be the fact that you have an identical construction in Hosea 1:2. In Hosea 1:2 you have the same syntactical construction to express a circumstantial idea. Hosea 1:2 says, “When the LORD spoke at first through Hosea,” etc. There you do have this sort of circumstantial subordinate clause expressed. But Westermann points out that you can’t understand Genesis chapter 1 in terms of Hosea which is written in an entirely different time by a different person. You’ve got to understand Genesis 1 in terms 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.

Number three, Westermann says 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.

The fourth point is that 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. This is the typical form that one finds, 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 sort of typical ancient formula “When _____ was not yet, then God.” But what the author of Genesis does is he prefixes then verse 1 ahead of this typical formula and verse 1 is therefore not a subordinate clause or a temporal subordinate idea. 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 this typical formula that you find in ancient creation stories.

Finally, the fifth point is that 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.

As important as this conclusion is, it doesn’t decisively decide the question in favor of *creatio ex nihilo* for now we have to consider the relationship between verse 1 and verses 2 and 3. It might be thought that verse 1 describes God’s creation of the raw material or the stuff from which then the world is fashioned in verses 2 and following. So in the first verse you have God creating the raw material and then in verse 2 he begins to fashion a world out of this stuff. But there are two problems with that hypothesis. First of all, the expression “the heavens and the earth” doesn’t denote simply the stuff or the material out

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

of which something is made. Rather, it already denotes an ordered cosmos – the heavens and the earth. This is an ordered cosmos, not just raw material. The second problem would be that creation of chaos would seem to be a contradiction in terms. When it describes the condition of the Earth in verse 2 you seem to have this chaotic state which would contradict God's creation as a God of order.

So verse 1 then might be construed to be a sort of title for the chapter, or a kind of heading for the chapter, which summarizes everything that is in that chapter. It would be, as it were, like a subheading in a study Bible, which is not part of the text but summarizes what is going to follow. Similarly, verse 1 on this reading might be taken to be a sort of title or chapter heading for the description of the creation of the world. On that reading, again, creation would really begin in verse 3 with God saying, "Let there be light." This might be thought not to entail *creatio ex nihilo*.

Against this understanding of verse 1 as a title or chapter heading, I think it can be rightly objected that the grammatical relationship of verse 1 to verse 2 would become an insuperable problem if you take it to be merely a title or heading. Verse 1 cannot be merely a heading for the rest of the chapter because it is connected to verse 2 by the Hebrew word "and" or *waw* in the Hebrew. This often isn't in your English translations but it's in the Hebrew: "In the beginning God, created the heavens and the earth, *and* the earth was without form and void." So it's not simply a title for the chapter; rather, there is a connection here that indicates in verse 1 God's primary act of creation and then in verse 2 his subsequent acts of creation. This has been demonstrated more rigorously by computer-aided grammatical analysis which Old Testament scholars have carried out. This computer-aided grammatical analysis has shown that whenever you have a construction which consists of *waw* plus a non-predicate (like a subject, for example, of the sentence) plus a predicate (so like a subject and a predicate preceded by the word "and") then what is expressed is either background or circumstantial information. If this construction precedes the main verb, as it does in verse 2, then what is given in the prior clause is background information. On this understanding, the content of verse 1 is not just a title of the chapter; rather, it is the background for what happens in verse 2: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and then the earth was without form and void and so on and so forth. So this interpretation of verse 1, I think, faces insuperable grammatical difficulties.

START DISCUSSION

Student: A general question about Genesis 1. Some skeptics might say something like, "This was oral tradition, and then it was written down much later than when the oral tradition was developed." So if someone says something like that, do they use that as a way of attacking the text?

Dr. Craig: Not really because, as you may have noticed, Westermann himself presupposes that sort of view. He doesn't refer to Genesis 1 as written by Moses, did he? He refers to it as from the P document or source. So he's thinking of this as something that appeared later. In fact, the later you make it appear – the later you date it – the more plausible it is that it could have the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* in it. You can't say this is an idea that these primitive Hebrew tribesmen couldn't have entertained if you think that Genesis 1 dates from after the Exile. So there's nothing in the argument here that Westermann has given that would be undermined by that sort of claim which, as you say, is very widespread among Old Testament scholars.

Student: Even if you take Moses, all the events that are recorded in Genesis 1 are so far in the past to when Moses lived that you would have to say this had to be perpetuated and and developed and kept in its simplicity for all that time even with other traditions of gods of suns and moons.

Dr. Craig: Yes, and I'm going to say later on that the theology of Genesis 1 is actually very sophisticated, very highly developed, and therefore ought to make us very cautious about claims that they couldn't possibly have expressed this idea of creation from nothing. I think that this is a chapter that is very sophisticated theologically, and they could have had the notion that God has created everything that there is – that there's nothing apart from God that is uncreated. That is not a difficult idea to grasp.

END DISCUSSION

Now I want to turn to a possible objection to the point that I've just made, but I think that in interest of time we will reserve that for next week.

I have argued that this is not plausibly taken to be a title or chapter heading, but that will run into some problems then with how you interpret the rest of the chapter. And we'll take those questions up next time.³