

7. CREATION AND FAITH IN THE GOD OF THE COVENANT

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1. Some questions:
 - 1.1. What should Christians believe about the origin of everything that exists, what we call the universe?
 - 1.2. Do Christians *have* to believe in God as creator?
 - 1.3. If yes, how does this belief relate to the findings of science?
2. To start looking for an answer to these questions there are some interesting facts about the narrative of creation which we need to know.
3. Even though Genesis 1 and 2 are at the beginning of our bibles, they were written or put together at a later stage
 - 3.1. Genesis 1 during the exile (587-538 BCE) and Genesis 2 during the reign of David or Solomon (10th century BCE).
 - 3.2. Genesis 1 entails the experience of a place where the waters abound and the need to tame their force, that is Mesopotamia.
 - 3.3. Genesis 2 makes the initial chaos coincide with the lack of water, which presupposes an arid region, like Palestine.
4. There are several accounts of creation in Scripture
 - 4.1. Genesis 1 and 2
 - i. “the two creation accounts open with different (indeed, opposite) descriptions of the initial state of the world.
 - ii. Whereas Genesis 1 starts with the earth inundated with water (Gen 1:2), so that God has to separate the waters for the dry land to emerge (Gen 1:9),
 - iii. Genesis 2 begins with the earth as a dry wilderness (Gen 2:5), until a stream or mist emerges to provide water (Gen 2:6).
 - iv. Genesis 1 has water first, then land, followed by plants, animals, and finally humans (*'adam*, consisting in male and female together)
 - v. Genesis 2 begins with the existence of land, then comes water, followed by a human (*'adam*, later specified as a man, *'iš*), then plants, animals, and finally a woman (*'iššâ*).¹
 - 4.2. There are many other passages in Scripture which refer to God’s creative activity in ways that differ from the version in the book of Genesis – for

¹ Cf. <https://biologos.org/articles/what-is-the-relationship-between-the-creation-accounts-in-genesis-1-and-2> 1

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example in Proverbs 8:22-31, in which God creates thorough a personified “Wisdom”:

22 “The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works,
before his deeds of old;
23 I was formed long ages ago,
at the very beginning, when the world came to be.
24 When there were no watery depths, I was given birth,
when there were no springs overflowing with water;
25 before the mountains were settled in place,
before the hills, I was given birth,
26 before he made the world or its fields
or any of the dust of the earth.
27 I was there when he set the heavens in place,
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
28 when he established the clouds above
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
29 when he gave the sea its boundary
so the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.
30 Then I was constantly at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
31 rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind.

5. These various accounts refer to three models of creation: by divine *power*, with divine *wisdom*, or with some form of the divine *presence*.²
 - 5.1. *Divine power*: creation issues from God’s powerful victory over cosmic enemies. The deity is viewed primarily as a warrior-king, and the emphasis is on its power.
 - 5.2. *Divine wisdom*: “This model often presents creation as the work of the divine craftsman, who works variously as builder, engineer, and architect (see Job 28:25 and 38:4-6). In Proverbs 8:22-31, the wisdom of divine creation is embodied by Wisdom personified as a female figure who was with God at the beginning of the divine acts of creation (see also Wis. 6:22). In this model, wisdom is the primary idea, in contrast to power in the first model”.³
 - 5.3. *Divine presence*: this model “focuses on the idea of temple, imbued with aspects of divine presence, such as holiness. [...] The firmament is God’s holy place, the divine sanctuary”. In this model “Psalm 8 discusses the divine *name* in the universe. Psalm 33:6 states that God made the world by the divine *word*. Psalm 148 depicts various parts of creation joining in praise of God because God created them (v. 5); the divine *name* and *splendor* are over all heaven and earth (v. 13).⁴

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² Cf. Smith, Mark S. *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1hqdhc8> and https://ms.fortresspress.com/downloads/080066373X_Chapter%20one.pdf

³ Smith, *op. cit.*, 13.

⁴ Smith, *op. cit.*, 14f.

6. In other words, they try to understand God’s creative activity and his relation to creation like a king in his palace or a deity in a temple.
7. Then it has been established that the creation accounts have many traits in common with the *cosmogonies* (accounts of the origin cosmos) of the Ancient Near East: Egyptian, Canaanite, Hittite, Assyrian, Babylonian.

“The act of creation begins in Genesis 1:2 in a way that is very puzzling to modern interpreters, yet very natural to ancient cosmogonies: with a picture of primordial chaos. This chaos—consisting of darkness, watery deep and formless earth—is then formed, ordered, assigned its proper place and function, in short, made into a ‘cosmos’, that is a “well ordered” reality. Chaos is brought under control. [...] The emphasis in a cosmogony is on the establishment of order (cosmos), and the maintenance of that order, and therefore upon the ultimate sources of power and authority”.⁵
8. Finally, it is quite interesting that no effort was made to harmonise the various versions of creation narrative in one coherent account. The scribes who put together the book of Genesis especially during the exile were quite happy to keep together contrasting versions.
9. This shows us how they saw the relation between faith and understanding of creation.
 - 9.1. The fact that they felt free to borrow from the versions of creation available in the culture of their time shows that faith in God as creator is not meant to explain *how* everything was created.
 - 9.2. Had these scribes lived in our time, they would have had no problem to adopt the current theories on the origin of the universe and of live in our planet: Big Bang, Evolution, String Theory, etc...
 - 9.3. There is a sense in which Genesis 1 and 2 offer a model of how to be receptive to any new theory about the origin of the universe and how to harmonize it with our faith.
10. In other words, we do not need to know *how* God created the world to believe that he is the creator.
11. Faith in God as creator is a consequence of our experience of a God who loves and rescues us. This is the way in which Israel came to the same conclusion.
 - 11.1. Faith in God as creator was for Israel a consequence of their faith in God as the saviour and of the experience of the covenant.
 - 11.2. From this experience they learnt that God is
 - i. *One*
 - ii. *all-powerful,*
 - iii. *he acts out of love,*
 - iv. *he is faithful.*
 - v. *He is free.*

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⁵ Cf. <https://biologos.org/articles/the-genre-of-genesis-1-is-cosmogony>

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12. The freedom of God is a particularly important aspect that helped Israel and the first generations of Christians to develop their own approach to creation.
13. Israel progressively came to know a God who chose them, saved them, remained faithful to them despite their transgressions to the covenant, in a word, a God how *loved* them not because he *had to*, but because he *wanted to*.
 - 13.1. Nothing in the history or the identity of Israel made them more deserving of God's love than any other people – if anything they were aware of being the smallest of all peoples – as stated in the core confession of Israel:

“My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labor. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our ancestors, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, LORD, have given me.” (Dt 26.:5-9)
14. So when it came to thinking about how everything came into existence, they relied on the theories that circulated in the Near East, but changed and adapted anything which was did not correspond to their experience of God as *he who loves in freedom*.
15. What does this mean for the reception of any account of creation? Here are some principles
 - 15.1. God existed before the creation of the world and did not need the world to be God.
 - 15.2. The world is *not* God. This is a key principle. Most ancient civilizations divinized and worshipped the sun, the moon, or aspects of nature. In the Bible the world belongs to a completely different sphere from the divine.
 - 15.3. If everything was created by God, everything is good – so it is impossible to identify evil with any cosmic reality: matter, the flesh etc...
16. These principles are implied in the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* or “out of nothing.
17. This expression is not in Scripture, although there are many declarations that God created *all* things:

“I am the LORD, who made *all things*” (Isaiah 44:24)
“For he created *all things* that they might exist” (Wisdom 1:14)
18. It was the first generations of Christians that formulated this doctrine very early on:

“Believe first of all that God is one, that he created all things and set them in order and brought out of nonexistence into existence

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everything that is, and that he contains all things while he himself is uncontained” (The Shepherd of Hermas, 2:1:1, around 90 CE).

“Men, indeed, are not able to make something from nothing, but only from existing material. God, however, is greater than men first of all in this: that when nothing existed beforehand, he called into existence the very material for his creation” (Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 2:10:4 – end of 2nd century CE)

19. The doctrine of the creation “out of nothing” eventually helped the development of the doctrine of the Trinity:
 - 19.1. There is a clear distinction between creator and creation
 - 19.2. God cannot be created in any form
 - 19.3. If the Son and the Holy Spirit are not creatures then they have to be God according to the full meaning of this word.
20. What happened then when Christians started to think of creation not just as the work of the One God, but also of the Trinity? What is the role of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in Creation?
21. The Christian thinker who most developed this idea was St Augustine (5th century CE).
22. Most thinkers before Augustine had a tendency to see the way God created the world in a way that took inspiration from Plato, that is
 - 22.1. Taking unformed matter
 - 22.2. And giving it a form.
23. This resulted in a static notion of creation – and has caused the criticism of many contemporary theologians, especially ecological and feminist thinkers:
 - 23.1. the doctrine of creation, by staging an active partner and a passive partner, is the terrain where all sorts of dualisms proliferate:
 - 23.2. mind over body,
 - 23.3. man over woman,
 - 23.4. and humanity over nature.
24. According to these thinkers, for creation to be truly an act of love, generator of freedom, it would be necessary for God
 - 24.1. not to be in a dominant or detached or external position,
 - 24.2. but in solidarity with the world.
25. The model form/matter should be replaced with another where God is “incorporated” into creation or “gives birth” to creation, so as to establish a solidarity between God and the world.
26. Two presuppositions not critically verified:
 - 26.1. the act of creation consists in the imposition of a spiritual form or meaning on a recalcitrant or intrinsically worthless material life.

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- 26.2.** any love in which the partners are not united and therefore equal is a form of condescension, the exercise of power in order to manipulate.
- 27.** Especially in the *Confessions*, Augustine thinks about the way God creates the world in a very different way.
‘You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you’⁶
Things which are not in their intended position are restless. Once they are in their ordered position, they are at rest. My weight is my love. Wherever I am carried, my love is carrying me. By your gift we are set on fire and carried upwards; we grow red hot and ascend. We climb *the ascent of the heart* (Psa 83.6), and sing *the song of steps* (Psa 119.1). Lit by your fire, your good fire, we grow red-hot and ascend, as we move upwards *to the peace of Jerusalem* (Psa 121.6).⁷
- 28.** He thinks of the act of creating not as the imposition of a form on inert matter, but as
- 28.1.** the act of setting everything in motion
- 28.2.** “restlessness” here does not mean anxiety – but “search for the place where something belongs”
- 28.3.** And that which brings a thing to its intended place is its *weight* – which is not just that which brings us down but varies according the different elements (for example the ‘weight’ of fire is upwards).
- 29.** This is a vision of created reality as moved by a universal desire which in human beings takes the form of *love* – hence the sentence “My weight is my love”.

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⁶ *conf.* 1.1 (CCL 27, 1. Trans. Chadwick, 3): ‘fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te’.

⁷ *Confessions* 13.9–10 (CCL 27, 246 f. Trans. Chadwick, 277 f.), ‘Pondus meum, amor meus’. 6