INTRODUCTION
Reconsidering Genesis 1 and Creation Ex Nihilo

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

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

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

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Writing Sampler*, 76

The Question

Although the doctrine of creation ex nihilo was developed as a guideline for rightly reading Gen 1 and for rightly talking about how God relates to the world, it has fallen on hard times. Modern biblical scholarship has declared creation ex nihilo "post-biblical" and, as such, it is frequently rejected as an anachronistic imposition, unsuitable as an interpretive category. Rather than illuminating the text, creation ex nihilo is thought to obscure it. Systematic theologians have criticized the doctrine for a variety of reasons. Some see cre-ation ex nihilo as undergirding a "logic of domination," which has led to a dis-astrous Christian environmental ethic.[1] Others maintain that although cre-ation ex nihilo "lacks biblical warrant," it holds an uncontested "doctrinal hegemony" over the language of the church, codifying a "pure dualism" of Logos and nothingness.[2]

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[1] E.g., Bauman, *Theology, Creation, and Environmental Ethics*, 3.

[2] Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 6, 4, 10.

John Goldingay suggests that

> The discussion in the world of Greek thought regarding matters such as the trinitarian nature of the one God, the divine-human person of Christ, creation out of nothing, and the "Fall" is not in principle alien to the Scriptures as a whole, but it does take scriptural thinking further than the Scriptures do themselves or takes them sideways or backwards from them ... and risks losing the wisdom that appears there. If we are to learn from the Old Testament theologically ... [it is] wise to keep closer to the Old Testament's own categories of thought in order to give it more opportunity to speak its own insights rather than assimilating it to Christian categories.[3]

While Goldingay's point may be granted—various theological categories such as creation ex nihilo move beyond Scripture in a variety of ways and these moves can be detrimental—it leaves open a subsequent and, it seems to me, central question. How should we relate these subsequent movements in "scriptural thinking" to "the Old Testament's own categories of thought"? If there is the risk of losing the wisdom of the Old Testament by imposing subsequent Christian categories, is there not an equal risk of losing the wisdom and insight of previous generations, codified in "post-biblical" doctrinal formulations such as creation ex nihilo, which may draw out possible implications of the biblical text?

This question, however, is in conflict with the Enlightenment sensibilities that have characterized modern biblical scholarship. Ellen van Wolde, in her inaugural lecture at Radboud University, addressed the question of the interpretation of Gen 1:1–3, advancing her widely publicized argument that *bara*' in Gen 1:1 means "to separate" rather than "to create."[4] What is of note here is neither her rejection of creation ex nihilo for the interpretation of Gen 1, a commonplace in biblical scholarship, nor her interpretation of *bara*', which has not found general acceptance. Rather, van Wolde concludes her lecture with a "credo":

> Ik geloof in onbevangen lezen en leven,
> in het steeds weer opnieuw beginnen,
> in je zelf leeg maken van eerdere opvattingen,
> om telkens opnieuw alles als nieuw gewaar te worden.
>
> I believe in unrestrained reading and living,
> in starting ever anew,
> in emptying yourself of previous opinions,
> in order to be aware of everything as new again.[5]

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

[4] E.g., *Daily Telegraph*, October 8, 2009, reported on the lecture under the ridiculous headline "God is not the Creator, claims academic."

[5] Van Wolde, *Terug naar het begin*, 21 (translation mine). The credo includes several

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

From a variety of angles, however, the Enlightenment claim that the rejection of tradition is the beginning of wisdom, or at least of critical knowledge, is being reconsidered. For instance, Gadamer argues that "If we want to do justice to man's finite, historical mode of being, it is necessary to fundamentally rehabilitate the concept of prejudice and acknowledge the fact that there are legitimate prejudices."[6] The contemporary pejorative connotations of "prejudice" are a direct result of the Enlightenment critique: "there is one prejudice of the Enlightenment that defines its essence: the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice, which denies tradition its power."[7] As finite beings, we find ourselves located in a particular place, a particular historical period. We understand ourselves in a self-evident manner in relation to family, church, community, and state.[8] These "traditions" (variously linked with *sensus communis*, *Bildung*, and *paideia*) furnish us with preconceptions which enable us to make sense of our world and of given texts. But our location within tradition also limits our perspective.[9] We can understand the world and texts because we are brought up in a tradition that furnishes us with "prejudices"—provisional pre-judgments. But this does not mean that we are bound to only see the world in terms of these "prejudices."

The biblical scholar finds a simple illustration of Gadamer's point in learning to read Hebrew. We had to provisionally accept the authority of our teacher and were initiated into a particular understanding of the language. Over time, however, perhaps we discover that a term has different connotations than we had been taught or that the verb functions differently than our instructor had led us to believe. If we progress in our understanding of biblical Hebrew, inevitably we must revise our initial understanding and yet we would never be able to read Hebrew or revise our pre-understanding apart from our initiation into a tradition. We have to start somewhere. Analogously, we approach the contents of Gen 1 with preconceptions about the meaning of the text, supplied by the various traditions (cultural, ecclesial, and academic) in which we are located.

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more stanzas along similar lines. Note echoes Spinoza's principles of biblical interpretation set out at the beginning of the Enlightenment, four hundred years earlier, in ch. 7 of his *Theologico-Political Treatise*. To reject tradition in this manner ironically identifies van Wolde with the Enlightenment tradition.

[6] *Truth and Method*, 278. "Prejudice" is used in the etymological sense of "pre-judgment"; "precedent" may be a more helpful term for describing the sensibilities instilled by our communities and traditions (cf. Westphal, *Whose Community?*, 71).

[7] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 272–3.

[8] Ibid., 278.

[9] Westphal, *Whose Community?*, 71.

If we allow for this rehabilitation, a basic question is "what distinguishes legitimate prejudices," which are the precondition of understanding, "from the countless others which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome?"[10] Does a specific precedent for reading remain illuminating or has it become blinding? In my opinion, the critique advanced by Gadamer is such that it is no longer tenable for biblical scholarship to reject creation ex nihilo as "post-biblical" or "traditional" simply on the grounds of Enlightenment assumptions regarding the relationship between critical reason and tradition. However, rejecting Enlightenment assumptions does not mean that creation ex nihilo must automatically be accepted as "traditional wisdom." "Legitimate prejudices" that yield understanding must still be critically distinguished from illegitimate prejudices. Traditions are, in principle, revisable. Consequently, we are faced with a genuine question regarding the suitability of creation ex nihilo as a category or framework for the interpretation of Gen 1 and it is this question that I set out to reconsider.[11]

Overview

My reconsideration of Gen 1 and creation ex nihilo takes the following shape. In chapters 1 and 2, I set out to clarify the context for the question. We can view Gen 1 from several perspectives. Chapter 1 adopts a perspective typical of modern biblical scholarship. Genesis 1 is viewed against the background of various ancient Near Eastern texts. Here I address the question of appropriate

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[10] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 278. Cf. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, 36–44.

[11] The question has been addressed recently by others. In his theological commentary, Reno sees a basic division between "traditional readers" who see that "*creatio ex nihilo* guides us toward a reading of the ambiguous words and phrases in Genesis that downplays the obvious, literal sense" (*Genesis*, 44) and "modern biblical scholarship" which can only describe "ancient Israelite religion" through "sophisticated reconstructions of historical context" but are unable to integrate Gen 1 with the rest of the Bible, contemporary Christian practices, or "a cogent view of God" (44–45). For Reno, the choice is obvious. Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, 90-91, follows a similar line, arguing that new translations which interpret Gen 1:1 as a relative clause are rooted in the human desire for "a foothold outside of God." Again, a "creedal approach" dictates how the ambiguities of Gen 1:1-3 ought to be resolved. Anderson, *Christian Doctrine*, 41–58, and "*Creatio ex nihilo*," recognizes the philological difficulties in Gen 1:1–3 but argues that, following Childs, we must distinguish between the textual witness of Gen 1 and the *res*/*Sache* of the text. Further, creation ex nihilo can be exegetically grounded as we "widen our frame of reference as to what counts as biblical evidence" by focusing on the relationship between God and creatures ("*Creatio ex nihilo*," 22). Finally, Ticciati, "Anachronism or Illumination," maintains that creation ex nihilo resolves the ambiguity in Gen 1 as to whether the "chaos" described in 1:2 existed alongside God or was brought into being by him. But it preserves the ambiguous nature of the "chaos" and so holds open a central ambiguity of the text. While all insightfully raise the question of Gen 1 and creation ex nihilo and offer helpful considerations, more can be said.

interpretive categories as well as some of the hermeneutical issues raised by reading Gen 1 in connection with other ancient texts.

In chapter 2, I consider a second possible perspective by examining the doctrine of creation ex nihilo. This doctrine is often treated, both by those affirming and denying it, as if its meaning is obvious. I offer an exposition of the classic Christian form of the doctrine, laying out several claims that the doctrine entails about God, the world, and humanity.

The perspectives of modern biblical scholarship and the Christian theological tradition, which adopt different focal points and frames of reference in their approaches to Gen 1, stand in tension. I suspect that readers will find one or the other of these opening chapters challenging as it presents an unfamiliar mode of discourse. Biblical scholars may find the second chapter dispensable while systematic theologians may question the importance of engaging ancient Near Eastern materials. The apparent antithesis between these chapters is one expression of the broader tension between biblical and theological studies. Yet both chapters are necessary if Gen 1 is to be engaged in a genuinely hermeneutical manner. While creation ex nihilo provides a traditional (provisional) category for reading Gen 1, by engaging ancient texts and modern biblical scholarship, we are made aware of our distance (*Verfremdung*) from the text. The tradition is confronted by the text, once again, in its strangeness, its foreignness.[12] In both chapters, I have tried to be clear and to explain things in a manner accessible to all readers. I ask for the reader's patience.

Chapter 3 moves toward a synthesis of these divergent perspectives by examining the rise of creation ex nihilo in the early church. Although I accept that creation ex nihilo is 'post-biblical' in that it was first explicitly formulated in the second century, I argue that the doctrine results from reading Gen 1 within the literary-canonical context of the two-testament Christian Bible.

Chapter 4 turns to a discussion of the syntax of Gen 1:1–3. I conclude that Gen 1:1 is more plausibly read as an independent clause. However, the issue cannot be conclusively resolved on philological grounds. A broader appeal must be made to the narrative dynamics of Gen 1 and its larger literary-canonical context. To this end chapters 5 and 6 examine the implications of the various interpretations of Gen 1:1 for reading the chapter as a whole. In chapter 6, I offer a new argument for the old view that Gen 1:1 describes the first act in the process of creation and suggest some ways that Gen 1 might be read in terms of creation ex nihilo.

By examining the various historical and theological frames of reference for reading Gen 1, I hope to illustrate the differing purposes with which one can read the biblical text and the differing methods of study which relate to these purposes. That is to say, *how* one reads Gen 1 depends on *why* one reads it. The meaning of this text is, in principle, inseparable "from the questions and concerns of its interpreters" and cannot "be established without reference

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12 Cf. Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 93–106.

to the use made of it by the interpreter."[13] We can read Gen 1 as a source for understanding the religious thought of ancient Israel. But we can also read it as part of the canonical Scriptures of the church or the synagogue. These latter approaches naturally include philological and historical issues alongside other issues which relativize some of the historical questions and also reshape the overall nature of the discussion.

A Note on Sources

As this work reconsiders the relationship between a biblical text and a doctrine, it crosses now-traditional divisions between disciplines. This sort of interdisciplinary work is important but entails several difficulties, not least of which is the question of sources. In this book, in addition to detailed arguments concerning Hebrew philology, I discuss the New Testament and numerous ancient Near Eastern, patristic, medieval, and reformation sources. I have tried to make judicious use of modern translations and of the work of scholars in fields that are not my own but have undoubtedly overlooked certain nuances and sources. My presentation is likely open to challenge by experts in their respective areas and I have undoubtedly fallen short of Kierkegaard's ideal of "competence in everything." This, it seems to me, is inevitable when trying to make the sorts of broad connections between various fields that I attempt to do here. As a result, I make no claim to offer a complete review of the "many volumes" which stand as "monuments to the genius" of those who have gone before.

Throughout, references are given using authors' last names and an abbreviated title of their works. Full details are found in the bibliography. Occasionally, I have replaced Hebrew characters in quotes with transliteration. Finally, I have capitalized masculine pronouns when used with reference to God. This practice keeps close to the Hebrew and Greek texts while the capitalized form signals that the pronouns do not function in their normal sense and are not intended to "gender" God.

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[13] Moberly, *The Old Testament*, 2.