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God's Work of Creation

Sources for a Theology of Origins

'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.' There were no human observers about when God created the world. Our only source of authentic, first-hand information, then, is the creator-God, Himself. If He does not tell us about creation we shall never know about it—tenuous inferences derived from geology, astronomy, physics and biology notwithstanding. Inferences based on 'science', as to how and when the 'universe' came to be, have always changed with the times and the changing theories of science. Revelation, however, has not changed since God last spoke 'through a Son'. Christian interpretation of enscriptured revelation has made few changes as regards the main features of the doctrine of creation since earliest times. From the standpoint of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*) the changes have not been very important. Christians have believed from the beginning that in the early chapters of Genesis they have a God-given and therefore truthful account of the creation of the world. Such affirmations as 'All Scripture is breathed out by God' (2 Tim. 3:16) was Paul's conviction. Jesus said, 'Scripture cannot be broken' (John 10:35).

That Jesus meant to include the Genesis creation account is evident. At every point in His ministry He plainly employed Scripture as God's Word—factual and true. At several critical junctures of His ministry, He quoted Scripture in support of His own perseverance in the task God gave Him. This is seen especially at the temptation. He also made several comprehensive statements about the Old Testament Scriptures.²

Our Lord never argued that the Bible, including the creation story, is true. Nor do we find such words as inerrant and synonyms in His estimate of Scripture. He did say that 'Scriptures cannot be broken'. He simply used the Scriptures as God's true Word. Two basic human institutions are marriage and the Sabbath. He traced the origin of both back to the Genesis creation story. Followers of Jesus will therefore follow the Lord in trusting the Genesis account of creation as true. This, of course, is not to deny the same breadth of interpretation in the first chapters of the Bible which all claim for the last chapters of the Bible. No one I have heard or read has declared his group's understanding (whether literal or figurative) of Revelation 21, 22 as the only possible orthodox, believing

view possible. At present, however, we are afflicted by some writers and promoters who seem to think their view of the Creative week (of twenty-four hour days) and the Flood (that it created geological history) is the only view consistent with orthodoxy and possible to an honest reading of the text of the first nine chapters of Genesis.

The creation itself witnesses to its creation by God. Francis Pieper affirms: 'All creatures bear the divine stamp.... But our knowledge of the particular circumstances of the creation ... is derived solely from God's revelation in Scripture. Men who presume to correct God's record of the creation through conclusions drawn from the present condition of the world are playing the role of scientific wisecracks, a procedure unworthy of Christians.' It is not wrong, however, for geologists, physicists, astronomers and other scientists reverently to seek better to understand the biblical revelation and to increase their knowledge of creation by their researches, provided always they do not put nature in a class with Scripture as revelation.

As noted elsewhere in this book, strictly speaking, nature gives information but is not revelation, even though for some time writers have been speaking of nature as a part of 'general revelation'. We are not quite ready to classify scientific orthodoxy and the geologic table with the first chapter of Genesis in degree of authority on earthly origins, even though some recent writers seem inclined to do so. Moreover, interpreting the fossil record is not quite parallel to interpreting the Bible as regards creation. The Bible is designed primarily as a message from God, while the earth was designed as a habitation for mankind, not a guide to the subject of its own origin. [Current writers on 'intelligent design' discuss this principle in nature as the 'anthropic principle'.]

All parties to the present debate over creation—theories of 'young earth', 'creation science' and 'progressive creation'—should acknowledge this. The Bible is a book intended to be an interpretation of our world from the standpoint of the divine mind for religious purposes, while the earth is a creation, designed by the same mind as a habitation for mankind. Information about origins is scanty and obscure in the creation. It is apparently not spiritually necessary for us to know anything at all about the physics and chemistry of creation. It is mixing things that are essentially different to speak of Scripture and earth as both revelations of God requiring interpretation. There is just enough truth in the statement to make it dangerous in the hands of some people.

References to God's acts in creation are made in many parts of the Bible, often with interpretation of the spiritual meaning thereof. In addition to Genesis 1

and 2, mention should be made of Psalms 8, 33 and 148; Job 38; Proverbs 8 and John 1:1–5. The texts outside of Genesis that interpret Genesis take on an importance for doctrine as great as the Genesis creation accounts and will be quoted and cited throughout the discussion now to follow.

The World's Beginning

There was a time when there was no world. It did not exist. The Psalm of Moses puts it this way, 'Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God' (Ps. 90:2). Passages speak of time 'before the world existed' (John 17:5) and 'before the foundation of the world' (John 17:24).

That the world had a beginning is assumed in all the Scriptures teach concerning such doctrines as decrees (predestination) and preservation. It is a patent fact so obvious in the biblical world-and-life view that Bible-reading-and-loving people can scarcely think in any other way about the world. They know the world is not without beginning and not self-generated.

Simple observation teaches us that though the processes of regeneration and restoration are at work in nature, they do not quite restore nature. Most of the mountains are a little lower each year. The energy given off by the sun is never returned to it. The more sophisticated observations of science report that the universe is spreading out and running down. This, too, points to a beginning in finite time.

Wiseacres of our secularist age have nothing to say as to what the cause of beginning was. A few, contrary to the material evidences, speak vaguely of an eternally existing, uncaused world.

Followers of existentialist theology are told that God is Being, not another being, and that 'How did the world begin?' and 'Who made it?' are improper questions. We must rather look at mankind 'in order to learn what the Creator-creature relationship is'.⁶ God does not create, He only 'lets be' in this theology.

In Process Theology it is unimportant to ask how the world began. Rather we must seek to understand how God who is in the world (pantheism) is growing with it and we along with Him. There is no affirmation of God's omnipotence or omniscience in a traditional sense in either of these approaches to theology. There have always been religious people who opposed the idea of a beginning of the world. This opposition has usually taken one of two forms. One is emanation. The world is identical in substance with God. It has been produced by successive emanations out of Him. The things we see are little pieces of

God. Folk who identify God with what they see in nature, rather than seeing nature as His work, are taking this view of things whether they know it or not. There are many anti-biblical affirmations and implications involved. The doctrine of emanation virtually denies God's transcendence; it compromises God's holiness by making all that is evil a part of Him. Ancient Gnosticism, a system which sought to interpret Christianity in the forms of Eastern theosophy (such as Hinduism), taught emanationism. Emanationism has always been a temptation to the mystically inclined, that is, to people who seek direct routes to God through meditation and ascetic practices apart from the historical Christ and a written revelation. Contemplate almost anything about yourself and you have a bit of God. Follow it back through prescribed exercises and you may get a clear vision or feeling of God. This is a simplified description of the mystical approach.

Another form of denial of a beginning (and of creation) is dualism. Dualism teaches that God (thought of as idea) and matter, though distinct from one another, have always existed and always shall. It is essentially an effort to explain the presence of evil by attaching it to material things.

Absolute Beginning

The world was brought into existence by the one, true, eternal God out of no materials at all. There was an absolute beginning of things.

'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth' (Gen. 1:1). These words must be understood as taking the reader back to the time when, in the presence of nothing outside the Godhead, God brought the heaven and earth into existence. 'By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible' (Heb. 11:3).

Sometimes this act or series of acts has been further defined as creation 'out of nothing' (ex nihilo). This is correct as long as a certain error is avoided. 'Nothing' must not be regarded as a 'something'. It is not a designation for primeval chaos. This error is found in classical Greek philosophy, frequently as formlessness, a source of evil, and in modern existentialism as the principle opposing authenticity. It might be better to say God created into nothing, that is, where nothing (non-existence) was, God created something. This involves ambiguities also, owing to the fact that we cannot conceive of nothingness apart from a mental image of a 'nothing', thereby confusing the idea. We are apt to end up being dualists.

Genesis 1:1 does not say that God used no materials in the creative work of

that verse. But if it is absolute beginning to which Moses refers, then the situation requires it. The nature of the idea and its context must decide for us. Very early, Christian theologians had to deal with the views of the origin of the world held by pagan authors and schools as well as heretical views among Christian teachers who were affected by the pagans. The Greek 'Apologists' of the second century and other early writers felt particularly obliged to clarify and to defend the absolute beginning of the world by an uncreated eternal divine being who brought the world into being by speaking it into existence. Of these Christian scholars (Marcianus, Aristides, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus), and others shortly after them (Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian), Jaroslav Pelikan says:

Apologists ... recognized that the coeternity of God and matter was inconsistent with the sovereignty and freedom of God. In spite of the difficulties raised by the doctrine of creation ex nihilo for any attempt to cope with the problem of evil, the alternatives to this doctrine appeared to be a pantheism ... or a dualism.

Theophilus of Antioch found explicit Christian creationism in direct conflict with six philosophical theories among the Greeks.

These theories Thomas Oden has parsed out as: (1) there is no God; (2) God cares for none but himself; (3) the world is uncreated and nature is eternal; (4) God exists only in each person's conscience; (5) God is a spirit which pervades all things; and (6) both God and matter are uncreated, i.e. coeval. Oden's grasp of both theology and modern philosophy led to this comment:

All these views were late to appear and grow into major challenges to the Christian teaching of Creation and remain as modern challenges in the voices of 1) Nietzsche, 2) Freud, 3) Hume, 4) Kant, Schleiermacher, Feuerbach, 5) Wieman and 6) Schelling.

Further Statements of Method and Scope of Treatment

1. Though seldom first in any general treatment of Christian doctrine, and even found in a special development of the doctrine of God, 'God the creator of heaven and earth' is fundamental and primary to all Christian teaching and a Christian world-view. E. P. Siegfried, a Roman Catholic scholar, rightly said:

[B]elief 'in God the Creator of heaven and earth' is the theoretical basis of all religious and theological truth, the real foundation underlying all other truths concerning God, and the objective principle whence all other truths proceed.

2. The topic of this chapter is God as the originating cause of all that exists except God Himself. It is apparent that this title, the text (Gen. 1:1) and the

opening sentences commit this study to classical, Christian theism, to a biblical theology of existence, and to a particular tradition of translation of the opening verse of the Bible, as shall appear as the discussion develops.

3. In previous chapters our discussion has not at every point related directly to science and philosophy. If, however, we claim that all that human perception experiences, or can imagine as existing in the universe of which we occupy a part, was brought into existence by the God of the Old and New Testaments, then we are already in territory claimed by every branch of science and philosophy. The treatment will necessarily respond to that fact.

4. The treatment to follow presupposes the God of Christian theism of the previous chapters, for whom 'the maker of heaven and earth' of the Creed is an appropriate title. Many have followed this route before and done so admirably well. Alternate explanations, both religious and philosophical, of the origin of the world in which we live were proposed at least as early as the Genesis account. In recent times science has been heard from in this regard also. Within limits of a chapter or two—not a whole book—I shall respond to these proposals. The creationist paradigm has undergone very serious attacks from many quarters. Problems, especially the presence of evil in a world created by an almighty, benevolent God, must be recognized and responded to.

5. What St Paul called 'the whole creation' or 'all things' (Gr. *ta panta*), Genesis 1:1 designates simply as 'the heavens and the earth', and the Prayer of Moses portrays as 'the earth and the world' (Ps. 90:2) teach no form of cosmology. Neither the Ptolemaic geocentric universe is propounded, nor the Copernican solar-centric systems, nor any other. '[T]he heavens and earth' to Moses and his first readers meant simply everything above our heads and everything beneath our feet as far as they extend in any direction. The world they meant was the one they saw, felt, heard, smelled and tasted, however constituted. But the modern term, universe, 'the world of existing things as constituting a systematic whole' (Oxford English Dictionary) is an interpretive term implying both variety and unity in a system—though not any particular sort of system. The one thing all these expressions share is reference to all created existences—whether a system or chaos. Whether God be the Creator or exists in some other relation to 'the world of existing things' is a major consideration of this chapter.

Our discussion will be arranged under a series of propositions to be understood as what 'The Bible teaches'. It might please lovers of the inductive method to cite all the supporting passages, in context, first, and then generalize in some conclusions, but that is inversion of the declarative, didactic approach the

present task calls for.

I. The World, including Heaven and Earth, all that exists, was Created by God
Says Langdon Gilkey.

Were one to ask 'What is the first thing Christians say when they begin to state their beliefs?', he might reasonably conclude this primary role was filled by the idea of creation. For when he opened the Scriptures, he would find the first line stating this belief: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' And if he listened to the most universally repeated Christian creed, he would hear the opening words: 'I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.'

The Bible states this unequivocally from beginning to end, usually in support of or accompanying some related truth, derived benefit or duty. The first reference is connected with the privilege and duty of a weekly Sabbath rest (Gen. 1:1; 2:1–3 cf. Exod. 20:9–11) while among the last is the correlate duty and privilege of worship: 'Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created' (Rev. 4:11). In between, other biblical passages connect God the Creator with renewal of strength for those who wait on Him (Isa. 40:28–31; 43:1–13), and with assurance of the restoration of Jerusalem and the cities of Judah (Isa. 44:24–26). In the Psalms there is frequent conjunction of God's redemption, salvation, mercy and government with His being the universal 'Maker'. In the New Testament, the Word made flesh is also the eternal 'God,' the 'life' and 'light of men' (John 1:1–12).

Indeed the fact that God created a world planned by Him, preserved and governed by Him, is the most fundamental affirmation of a Christian world-view, distinguishing biblical religion from all others as false. It separates biblical religion from every form of polytheistic worship, because 'the Lord is the true God; he is the living God ... "The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth' (Jer. 10:10, 11, cf. whole context). The identity of the Maker of heaven and earth with 'God manifest in the flesh' distinguishes the New Testament faith from every other faith (see Rom. 11:25–36 and Eph. 3:9).

II. The World had Absolute Beginning when God created the Heavens and the Earth

The world had absolute beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, at which moment (or epoch) both time and space came into existence. These are matters which have puzzled both philosophers and theologians as

well as scientists since antiquity. Perhaps more than one complementary perspective appears in Scripture about time and space, but I think there are definitive statements and necessary inferences.

1. The world had a beginning. It has not always existed. There is a 'before the world began' (2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 1:2 kjv) 'before time began' (nkjv). Jesus spoke to His Father about 'the glory that I had [was having; eichon, first person imperfect] with you before the world existed' (John 17:5) and that 'you [the Father] loved me before the foundation of the world [kosmos]' (John 17:24). Before the world 'to be' or its 'foundation' the Son was loved by the Father and He had a glory with the Father. Paul says that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ 'chose us in him before the foundation of the world' (Eph. 1:4) and Moses in praise to God rhapsodizes that 'you are God ... Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting' (Ps. 90:2).

2. It is noteworthy that in these passages no mention is made of a 'time' as such before creation; nor does any other passage, unless it be Romans 16:25. (There are similar statements at 2 Timothy 1:9 and Titus 1:2.) Paul speaks of a mystery kept silent *chronois aiōniois*, in or through times eternal. *Chronos* signifies the durative not the seasonal aspect of time. Commentators are divided as to whether reference is to ages before or after creation, probably because of opinions brought to interpretation. Whether there was time before creation or not, however, there are two reasons for the judgment that the *chronoi* (times) are post-creation. The first is scriptural, the second rational. (1) The author of this statement (Rom. 16:25) put time in this *ktisis hetera* (any other created thing) a few columns earlier in the same autograph (Rom. 8:39). The times are 'enestōta ... mellontai' (things present or things to come). Scholastic theology may rightly speak of God's 'uncreated glory' but not of His 'uncreated time'. (2) Both time and space have to do with things, objects. Before creation there were no 'things', God alone is self-existent and all things outside of Him are neither contemporaneous with His 'origin' (if we may so speak), nor with Him when He creates them. He has no reference to them nor He to them. It is customary and correct to say that time existed 'in God' from eternity, and so existed before creation. But that existence is not concrete, objective existence any more than are Plato's eternal forms or the monads of German philosophers or whatever is reckoned to be in the Absolute. My right hand and the Japanese mechanical pencil I hold in it existed in God's eternal counsels before the world began also, but not as real existence in a created world.

Commenting on eternity as an attribute of God, A. H. Strong observes:

'We must not make Kronos (time) and Ouranos (space) earlier divinities before God'. They are among the 'all things' that were 'made by him' (John 1:3) [quoting I. A. Dorner]. Yet time and space are not substances; neither are they attributes (qualities of substance); they are rather relations of finite existence ... With finite existence they come into being; they are not mere regulative conceptions of our minds; they exist objectively, whether we perceive them or not... 'They furnish the conditions of our knowledge... Space and time are mental forms, but not only that. There is an extramental something in the case of space and time as in the case of sound' [quoting G. T. Ladd].

This topic is among listings of about every encyclopedia.

3. This biblical concept of time as created, linear durative has had a determinative influence on Christendom, where it has been nourished.

Carl F. H. Henry, in two dictionary articles, starts his development of time in history, theology, philosophy and the Bible with this fine statement, speaking of one of the most vexing problems of philosophy. The Bible presents a distinctive conception of time ... Instead of viewing time abstractly as a problem, it regards time as a created sphere [emphasis added] in which God's redemptive plan is actualized.

The importance of regarding time as a creature of God, not a condition within which He exists and works, has been seen clearly by most theologians—as opposed to the idealistic philosophers of the nineteenth-century (Hegel and disciples) who placed time and history in the Absolute, their God. Neo-orthodox writers credit the Hebrew people (not Old Testament Scripture as such) with correcting among the ancients the cyclical view of history. Early Christian theologians saw the cultural importance of doctrine long ago. In a comprehensive treatment of the doctrine of divine creation Langdon Gilkey has this to say:

One of the most significant and dramatic points in the development of Western culture was the victory over [the] deadly view of circular time achieved by the biblical understanding of history. As important culturally as the destruction of the pagan gods was the overthrowing of the endless cycles: for on nothing does the modern sense of life depend so directly as on the Christian view of time. The contrast between these two conceptions of time was absolute; and only a faith as virile and certain as that of early Christianity could have uprooted the ingrained sense of temporal meaninglessness that permeated and deadened the ancient world.

Gilkey goes on to warn the Western world once transformed by the biblical view of time but now operating on a theory of evolutionary 'progress' (and, I would add, of 'cultural diversity'):

Having dispensed ... with its religious foundation on the rock of the divine eternity, the divine creation, and the divine providence, this edifice [belief in progress as norm] has proved too shaky. Based now solely on the sand of historical observation instead of the rock of faith, it has no deeper foundation on which to stand the recent storms of history, and threatens to collapse.

Unfortunately Gilkey, who came to write theology after a short career in literature, accepted the disjunction between a factual revelation and a myth-but-true revelation of the then prevalent neo-orthodoxy. He has no assurance that the absolute beginning taught in Scripture and understood by numberless generations of Jews and Christians is factually true. Thus the unstable tension between 'religion' and 'science' as he understood it is given the status of a learned form of enlightened 'orthodoxy'. Though he and others of similar persuasion keep the 'religious value' of absolute creation, they tie it to the idea of a continuation of divine creation in the evolutionary process. Hence, to borrow Browning's line, Gilkey's idea of creation 'That began best' did 'end worst', and what was 'once blessed' has indeed 'proved accurst'.

III. Genesis 1:1–3 and the Doctrine of Creation

The discussion of God's work of creation to this point has established that the Bible teaches (1) the world, including heaven and earth, all that exists, was created by God and (2) the world had a beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, at which moment (or epoch) both time and space came into existence.

Before proceeding to discuss the methods, means and purposes of the triune God in creation some problems and questions related to our discussion thus far call for at least brief attention. They are as follows. First, is Genesis 1:1 a distinct, independent sentence or is it a subordinate clause qualifying the second verse? Second, is Genesis 1:1 a summary of the passage on to the end of the creation narrative or a statement of absolute origin of the matter and energy of the universe with the rest of the narrative relating what happened following? Third, how should the seven days of creation and of Sabbath rest be interpreted? The first two questions just proposed, as necessary preliminaries to further consideration of the doctrine of creation, will be answered together.

The first 'official' translation of Genesis 1:1–3 is the Greek Septuagint of about 280 bc. It was made by Jewish scholars familiar with Hebrew as a second

(perhaps first) language and probably used at home as well as synagogue. At any rate they were familiar with Hebrew syntax, grammar and idiom. They translated verse 1 as an independent statement of which verse 2 is an enlargement about the same as kjv, rv, rsv and, recently, esv. Juxtaposed below are the rsv of 1952, the nrsv of 1989 and Spieser's translation in Genesis of The Anchor Bible of 1964. rsv retains the independence of verse 1 and represents the obvious, simple syntax of the Hebrew text and of previous versions. The other two introduce principles of modification that scarcely fit any category except adaptation to modern evolutionary, materialistic understanding of reality. That principle is evolutionary theory applied to translation and interpretation. Hold in mind that though some recent evangelical, orthodox scholars might accept one or the other of the 'new syntax' versions, it originated in liberal (if not post-modern) interpretation of the history of ideas.

rsv of 1952 '1. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2. [and' omitted] The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving upon the face of the waters. 3. And God said, "Let there be light", and there was light', nrsv of 1989 '1. In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2. 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.'

The Anchor Bible: Genesis of 1964 '1. When God set about to create heaven and earth—2. the world being then a formless waste, with darkness over the seas and only an awesome wind sweeping over the water—3. God said, 'Let there be light'. And there was light'.

Except for the omission of 'and' as the first word of verse 2 the rsv of 1952 has essentially the same sense as all translations from the Greek Septuagint of about 280 bc to Luther's Bible of four centuries ago and on to the asv of 1901. Thoroughly to report, discuss and document the reasons for the obvious changes in Speiser's translation in the Anchor Bible and the nrsv, now standard in liberal churches and used in some conservative evangelical ones, cannot be undertaken here. Having myself, over an initial period of ten years of teaching seminary courses, taken students painstakingly through the first twelve or fifteen chapters of Genesis annually, it is tempting to wade in more deeply than is prudent here.

Let us make one general observation and several specific ones. I shall try to avoid use of technical grammatical-syntactical jargon.

1. There is ongoing controversy over how much of the translator's interpretation of the text should be incorporated into translation from original languages of the Bible to current languages. The degree varies within the first known one, the Septuagint, but generally speaking the translators who issued the Authorized Version of 1611 held as close to literal rendering as possible for conveying meaning in language of minimally educated people. Yet they rendered the text as elegantly as possible. If slang existed then they did not use it but made few concessions to prissy sensibilities (as, for example, David's oath). However, several of the new Versions, sometimes with reserve, sometimes blatantly, adjust the translation, against the long tradition of meaning and against the natural reading, to fit their opinions of what the ancient Hebrews really thought and said. This is clearly the case in these late twentieth-century translations.

2. Both nrsv and Anchor Bible say that when God 'created' heaven and earth 'the earth' (nrsv) or 'the world' (ab) was already in existence. The translators are assuming, in spite of the simple and plainest sense of this passage, that the cosmology and cosmogony (order and origin of the world) prevalent among ancient heathen nations of the Levant and Mesopotamia was shared by the author(s) of Genesis 1:1–3. It is true that the myths of the priests of Mesopotamia and Canaan presuppose the existence of formless matter previous even to the birth of their gods. So their 'creation' myths have the gods creating the heavens and earth (and underworld too) of pre-existing materials. About the standard Mesopotamian form of the myth, the Enuma Elish epic, Jack Finegan, in one of his many standard volumes says:

The account begins with the time when only the two divine principles, the mythical personalities Apsu and Tiamat, were in existence. These two represented the living, uncreated world-matter, Apsu being the primeval sweet-water ocean and Tiamat the primeval salt-water ocean ... Tiamat is explicitly called a woman in the myth ... and she and Apsu become the mother and father of the gods.

After awhile, in one of the myths, Marduk, one of the created gods, created the earth. Later on, one of the pantheon named Kingu 'was slain and when his arteries were cut open the gods fashioned mankind with his blood.' Speiser points out (correctly) that in ancient Mesopotamia (whence Hebrew ancestors came) 'science often blended into religion' and claims 'that on the subject of creation, biblical tradition aligned itself with the traditional tenets of Babylonian "science"'.²⁴ He thinks (as about all who follow this line of thought) that the Hebrew account (Gen. 1) is the myths, purified by ethical monotheism.

Speiser marshalls his arguments from grammar-syntax for the new view on one and one-third pages. They are not definitive, however, as even the scholars of nrsv acknowledge in their first footnote, which says: 'The traditional translation as an independent sentence, following the Greek Bible (Septuagint) of the 3rd century bc, is defensible', etc. In their notes nrsv proposes three defensible translations, of which the traditional is one. In any case they know the evidences are not compelling.

Franz Delitzsch (not in the Keil and Delitzsch series) brought his immense mastery of Hebrew and related studies to these three verses. He commits himself to the traditional translation, in the way he introduces comments on Genesis 1:1—'The Fact of creation in a universal statement: In the beginning Elohim created the heavens and the earth.' Yet he gave full range to contrary views and proposed contrary evidence, making this statement:

Ancient translators all regard verse 1 as an independent proposition. Rashi [celebrated Jewish Scholar, 1040–1105], however, and among moderns Ewald, Bunson, Schraeder, Budde construe: In the beginning, when Elohim created heaven and earth—and the earth was waste and desert, etc.—then God said; otherwise Abenezra [1092–1167, one of the most distinguished Jewish scholars of the Middle Ages] and Grotius [Dutch savant]: In the beginning, when Elohim created the heaven and the earth, the earth was waste and desert.

So the current departures from the traditional rendering of Genesis 1:1 have these precedents. Delitzsch, however, in a display of technical finesse hard either to report or to match, I think, demolished the notion of this supposed biblical ground for a world of chaotic mass of material in existence before God first moved to create the present world order. H. C. Leupold, in his justly praised work, declares:

The phrase, 'In the beginning (bereshith) refers to the absolute beginning of created things ... This fact is supported by the following arguments in the face of many and strong claims to the contrary.

Leupold is an arch conservative, but Gerhard Von Rad, a celebrated recent Form-Critical Old Testament scholar, and convinced advocate of the documentary theory of pentateuchal origins, regards the view we are resisting here as impossible for theological reasons, precisely because the late priestly (post-exilic) author could not have assigned any truth at all to the Babylonians. This he emphatically renounces, holding as plain sense the demand for full rejection of the myths. I must agree when he states, 'These sentences [Gen. 1:1–2, 4a] cannot be easily overinterpreted theologically' (p. 46)! I must quote

somewhat at length. After his strong language in support of the ancient and traditional translation of Genesis 1:1–3, one reads:

Syntactically perhaps both translations are possible, but not theologically. One must not deprive the declaration in v. 1 of the character of a theological principle. If one considers vs. 1–2 or 1–3 as the syntactical unit, then the word about chaos would stand logically and temporally before the word about creation. To be sure, the notion of a created chaos is itself a contradiction; nevertheless, one must remember that the text touches on things which in any case lie beyond human imagination. That does not mean, however, that one must renounce establishing quite definite and unrelinquishable theologumena. The first is that God, in the freedom of his will, creatively established for 'heaven and earth,' i.e. for absolutely everything, a beginning of its subsequent existence. The second is expressed in v. 2, for unless one speaks of chaos, creation cannot be sufficiently considered at all. To express divine creation, the Hebrew language already had a verb, which, as the Phoenician shows, could designate the artistic creation. But the Old Testament usage rejects even this comparison. The verb was retained exclusively to designate the divine creative activity. This effective theological constraint which extends even into the language is significant (cf. *salah*, 'to forgive,' alluding only to divine forgiving). It means a creative activity, which on principle is without analogy. It is correct to say that the verb *bara*, 'create,' contains the idea both of complete effortlessness and *creatio ex nihilo*, since it is never connected with any statement of the material. The hidden pathos of this statement is that God is the Lord of the world. But not only in the sense that he subjected a pre-existing chaos to his ordering will! It is amazing to see how sharply little Israel demarcated herself from an apparently over-powering environment of cosmological and theogonic myths. Here the subject is not a primeval mystery of procreation from which the divinity arose, nor of a 'creative' struggle of mythically personified powers from which the cosmos arose, but rather the one who is neither warrior nor procreator, who alone is worthy of the predicate, Creator.

Robert L. Reymond provides a valuable advocacy of the syntactical independence of Genesis 1:1, including the excellent contributions of Edward J. Young.

I summarize reasons for continuing to treat Genesis 1:1 as an independent sentence, opening the Bible with the profound declaration of absolute origin of the world by God's act of creation 'in the beginning'.

1. Bereshith (in the beginning) as accented by the Massorites (standard in all Hebrew Bibles) tends to support the independence of the sentence.

2. Though contested, as noted above, the Massoretic pointing (vowels) and accentuation, standard now for over 1,000 years, supports (if it does not demand) the independence of verse 1 from verses 2 and 3.

In other words, the technical features in no wise require a change from the traditional rendering. This is convincingly supported by Delitzsch and Edward J. Young among many others. See also G. J. Spurrell.

3. The proposal to unite verses 1–3 into one complex sentence 'is opposed ... to the simplicity of style which pervades the whole chapter, and to which so involved a sentence would be intolerable, apart altogether from the fact that this construction is invented for the simple purpose of getting rid of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, which is so repulsive to modern pantheism.' Though I cite the authority of Keil, thousands of readers of Genesis in the standard versions before the nrsv of 1989 would share Keil's opinion as well as the thousands of seminarians who have learned to read the verses in Hebrew. Speiser does not document his statement: 'the majority of medieval Hebrew commentators and grammarians ... could see no objection to viewing Genesis 1:1 as a dependent clause.' Are Rashi (1041–1105) and Aben Ezra (1092–1167) a 'majority' of Jewish scholars of the Middle Ages?

4. Liberal modern scholarship is opposed to the idea of revelation to divinely accredited messengers (Moses, apostles, prophets). This predisposes most of them to assume the author(s) of Genesis 1–3 shared the view of the ancient Near East that chaotic matter, not a self-existent Creator, was already present 'in the beginning'. Dr Raymond enlarges on this important point. This explains why—although most of them acknowledge that verse one may properly be an independent sentence—they prefer to regard it as subordinate to verse 2. This supports their views of the evolutionary origin of cultural ideas.

5. John's Gospel, in obvious and usually uncontested reference to and dependence on Genesis 1:1, says: 'In the beginning was the Word.... All things were made through him'. This depends entirely on understanding Genesis 1:1 as an independent sentence.

6. The Septuagint of Genesis 1:1, the most ancient extant translation, reads *en archē epoiēsen ho theos*, etc. (and there is no proof of modification of the text of this verse). This translates the Hebrew as an independent sentence. It is also the obvious source of the opening of John 1:1. In each case the phrase refers to absolute beginning.

7. The Jews in ancient times, when Hebrew was still a living language for some, and widely comprehended by others, understood Genesis 1:1 as teaching the absolute origin of all things in acts of God. This too is acknowledged by some of the scholars who think that a mistake. We have already noted the Septuagint rendering of about 280 bc.

8. Creation out of 'things that were not' was the common faith of ancient Jews throughout their history. This is apparent in the many references to creation in the Old Testament. Also, in the inter-testamental period we have the confession of the martyr mother of the seven martyr brothers who admonished her son: 'I beseech thee, my son, look upon the heaven and the earth, and all that is therein, and consider that God made them of things that were not' (2 Maccabees 7:28). A faithful regard for the Bible's own claim for the Mosaic antiquity of the first chapter of Genesis would insist, it seems to me, that these ancient people derived their view of creation from the first chapter of the Torah, not by inference from some experiences in the eighth to fifth centuries bc (as Von Rad supposes).

9. What has been said in the previous paragraph applies to statements of the New Testament, such as Hebrews 11:3—'the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible'—and Romans 4:17, which speaks of 'God in whom he [Abraham] believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist', and much more.

A Final Comment

Von Rad, as many who share his opinion, acknowledges that ancient Jews interpreted Genesis 1:1 as an independent sentence affirming 'creation out of nothing' by God, yet holds they were mistaken.

Arguments as to the grammar and syntax of Genesis 1–3, pro and con, have been vigorously pursued for about two centuries now in the scholarly literature. The reader should be aware that this is contemporary with the rise of evolutionary theories of development of all religions, including the religion of Israel. The same is true of most critical theories of the origin and growth of the literature of Israel which we call the Old Testament. This led negative critical scholarship away from any notion of supernatural (special) revelation. Hence the appearance of a strictly monotheistic religion and a doctrine of fiat 'by the word of God' creation in the fifteenth or fourteenth century bc and a prophet like Moses is unthinkable. So if feasible such critics will take fiat (ex nihilo) out of Genesis 1:1–3. They prefer a primeval, pre-existing chaos to be expressed in

Genesis 1:1–3, such as was the view of second millennium bc Babylonians, Assyrians and Canaanites. Interestingly, however, Von Rad sees the logic of a late Priestly origin (P of the JEDP theory) for Genesis chapter 1 would require the doctrine of creation ex nihilo, then admittedly present in Jewish minds. He advocates the same documentary theory of origin held by those represented by Speiser but a better logic and, hence, a better syntax!