



Creation as a Triune Act

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I. THE DOGMA

Creation is one of the few churchly dogmas—perhaps the only one—that appears in the Bible *as* dogma. According to Genesis, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (1:1).¹ According to John, “...all things were made through [Christ]” (1:3). The christological doctrine of Chalcedon, for contrasting example, answers questions posed by Scripture and gives answers consonant with Scripture; but that Christ is “one person in two natures” is not itself said in Scripture. But that the God of Israel is Creator of all is.

Moreover, that this biblical assertion is dogmatically binding was recognized by the church as soon as the church existed. “Intertestamental” Judaism’s creed dominantly included the item: “...look at the heavens and the earth...and acknowledge that God made them, and not from anything that already was” (2 Macc 7:28).² The church simply took over the Jewish dogma. In the early second century writings of *Hermas*, in which every conceivable other matter of theology is in utter flux, this one is not: “First of all believe that God is one, who created and formed all, who made all to be from not being,³ who embraces all and alone is not embraced” (*Herm. Man.* 1.1). The doctrine heads “the rule of faith” in all versions. So Tertullian: “The rule of faith...is: to believe in one sole God, the All-Powerful, the Creator of the world” (*On the Veiling of Virgins*, D). And when the baptismal creeds appear, they all explicate “...the Father...” with “...Creator of...”

Finally on this line, what was dogmatized was simply the biblical assertion itself and as such, over against the straightforwardly contrary views of pagan antiquity. The broad religious movement whose most strongly profiled forms we call “gnosticism” was quite willing to believe that someone made the world, but not that a savior-god had, since it is from the world that we need to be saved.

¹For definitive vindication of this traditional translation, see Claus Westermann, *Genesis* (BKAT 1/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1966) 130ff.

²“...ouk ex ontōn...”

³“...ek tou mē ontos...”

Religious and intellectual currents more unbrokenly derived from paganism’s time of vigor clung to the world’s goodness and just so denied its createdness; since for all pagan antiquity, to be good and to be eternal are the same. The Christians often thought they saw one or the other point—and sometimes both at once!—but stayed with the Bible.

II. PUZZLES

In view of the creation-doctrine's unique biblical simplicity and doctrinal primacy, it is the more remarkable that the doctrine is, in its historical use and interpretation, also uniquely ambiguous. It has not even been clear what the doctrine is about. Or rather, the doctrine's referent is precisely what has been unclear about it. I will evoke the problem from three sides.

First: Is the doctrine about past events or present events? We say: "God is the Creator," But as soon as we switch from the copula with predicate to the finite verb, there is a universal tendency to switch also to the past tense: "God created...." And we have biblical precedent for our habit in Genesis 1:1 and John 1:3. Yet on reflection we see that limitation to the past tense will not do. The religious impact of the doctrine is precisely that—as Luther's Catechism has it—I, my world, and my present life are the work of God's fatherly goodness and mercy. But I was not present "in the beginning;" and if I must look only *back* to God's creating act, then that act cannot be saving, not an act of mercy.

The judicious solution is of course to say that *both* are true: God created, and God creates. And in the history of theology, a large array of terminology has been devised to let us say both. Theology has spoken of "initial creation" and "continuing creation," of "immediate creation" and "mediate creation," or perhaps most often of "creation" simply and "preservation." The old Lutherans made a general distinction of "creation" from "providence," under which latter they then spoke of "preservation"—explicitly noting that this is a mode of creation, "concurrence," and "government." But it is impossible to escape the impression that all this terminology gives only an illusion of insight and analysis by loudly reformulating the problem. When God moves from "creating" to "preserving," does he move from one sort of act to another? If he does, then God's creating is in fact over and done; if he does not, the distinction accomplishes nothing.

The second puzzle is almost but not quite the same as the first: Does "creates," predicated of God, denote a particular *act* done by him, or a standing fundamental *relation* between him and other beings? Insofar as patristic theology was pressured by Platonism, which conceives God's eternity as changelessness, and so dislikes thinking of him as acting, it was impelled to think of God's creating as a standing relation. The founder of systematic theology, Origen of Alexandria, labored here without result. On the dogma he is clear (*On First Principles*, 9.13-14). Interpreting it, he describes God as "the benevolent and world-creating Power"—and is promptly bewildered. For "to think that such powers of God were ever, even for a moment, idle, would be as absurd as impious" (*ibid.*, 66.1-3). So God must always, timelessly, be creating—and the creation therefore also eternal? Subsequent theology became adept at avoiding Origen's unacceptable conclusions, but not necessarily at replacing his premises. In modern theology, the tendency to think of creating as a standing relation has returned; and the cur-

rently most influential Anglo-Saxon school, "process theology," is more Origenist than Origen, simply denying that creation is a particular act.⁴ Only—we ask—can the Bible's assertion really be interpreted merely of a standing relation?

Third: Are the world's numerous other origin-stories and theories actually about the same thing as is the biblical doctrine? It is—and has been—the common notion that the confession of creation provides a shared starting point for all religious persons; here at least Christians and others can speak together. The notion is by no means peculiar to the unsophisticated. Origen

again: “But all who in any way suppose that there is Providence, confess that there is the unbegotten God, who created and ordered the universe” (ibid., 48.18-20).

That such bold assertions as Origen’s are empirically false is easy to show. And at least since the “dialectical” movement contemporary theology has doubted even the creation-doctrine has the same matter as philosophical and other religious origin-accounts. Yet surely the universal impression must have some reason, perhaps one that should be reckoned with.

Our question in the following is thus about the referent of the assertion, “God creates.” My strategy is dictated by the specifically biblical character of the assertion, and by the mode in which it is problematic for us. I shall exegete Genesis 1:1-2:4 with special attention to the referent of the passage, i.e., to form and tradition criticism. The strategy is classical, going back at least to Augustine. Through the following, I am dependent on Westermann’s enormous new commentary;⁵ my questions, however, are not his.

III. SOME BIBLICAL EXEGESIS

Genesis 1:1-2:4 belongs to the priestly writer’s “primal history” which stretches through Genesis 1-11. It belongs to P’s account of the history “at the beginning” that sets the pattern of all history. Therein the vulgar apprehension is partly justified that the creation-doctrine is a point of commonality between all religions; for all cultures do indeed tell such originating history and moreover spin their stories around the same set of motifs. Thus, for example, metallurgy is decisively important in every culture that has achieved it, and there is therefore regularly a story of the first smith. In Genesis it is an irascible fellow named Tubal-Cain.

Such stories are initially cultic in function: they are told to *certify* the patterns of reality as experienced by the tellers. The historical world is fragile: that, e.g., the irrigation-works that made civilization possible in Mesopotamia would endure, or that technology—Tubal Cain!—will not overreach itself, was and is by no means self-evident. The primal stories anchor the historical world in its Beginning. By the time we get to the stage of development represented in Israel by P, the origin-stories have become literary; their function is now more to *interpret* and *explain* reality. Either way, their existential object is the experienced world of the tellers/writers and hearers/readers, which world they illumine by talking about the initiating past. The “primal history” is the aetiological legend of the general state of the world; basically, the whole of 1-11 is Genesis’ origin-story.

Thus Israel could and did share the universal concern to secure and grasp life in the present by anchoring it in the Beginning, and could and did tell the uni-

⁴E.g., John Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965) 203ff.

⁵Westermann, *Genesis*, passim.

versal stories to that end. The existence of Genesis 1-11 refutes all insufficiently nuanced assertions that Israel had abandoned the mythic mode of experience. But Israel did use the stories in its own way—as of course every religion did. In P the primal stories are told to incorporate the universally remembered and invoked primal history in the particular history whose decisive event is not the Beginning but the Exodus. In P precisely the genealogies that stretch through Genesis 1-11 are the chief matter in that they establish a continuous sequence of events through the primal history to Abraham and beyond to Joseph and the rest, i.e., to the people of the Exodus.

And the drastic difference between P's genealogies and those of other cultures' primal histories corresponds to this historicizing purpose: P's genealogies include no gods and divine begettings, so that P's primal history occurs on earth and not in heaven.

Also in Israel the primal history was told to certify historical reality as Israel found it. But Israel did not to that end posit a timeless *Persistence* of the Beginning, in which the Beginning happens and then in the persons of the gods simply remains. Yet neither did the primal history lose its past tense. The way things now are was illumined for Israel as being the result of what indeed happened "in the Beginning"—in one continuous story with what has been happening since and now, and specifically with those acts of Yahweh that create and activate Israel. In P present reality is certified as the result of initial actions of *that* God who is identified as the One "who got us out of Egypt."

But why does present reality need such certification? Because most of it—the Canaanites, the Assyrians, etc.—did *not* come out of Egypt. By telling the universal primal stories, Israel acknowledges the fact: Israel takes its place as one and only one of the many nations, living with the same threats and possibilities as the others, coping with the same daily concerns. But also with its particular telling of the stories, Israel certifies this fact as the consequence of a previous act of the same Yahweh who created Israel by within history rescuing it from Egypt.

We have still not quite come to the heart of the matter. To do that we must back up one more step into general exegesis. Already the patriarchal history (Genesis 12ff.) is a prelude of similar function with the primal history, told to incorporate antecedent reality into the Exodus-history. Yahweh *is* the God of Israel. But how then, before Exodus, before there was Israel, could he be God? Because, says Genesis, before there was Israel in fact, there was Israel in promise; the patriarchal history is the story of that Israel. The answer has decisive consequences: just so, Israel understands itself as created by God's promise. Israel comes to tell its own history as a history *of* God's promise: as a leapfrog of prophecy and events.⁶ And in that the primal-history prelude in turn incorporates the universal Beginning into the Exodus-history; it incorporates the Beginning into a history *so* understood. Also the primal events are understood as evoked by the word of God—e.g., "Then the Lord said to Noah..."—and as themselves setting free new promise—"Behold, I establish my covenant..., that never again shall all flesh be cut off..."

So I can finally state the precise form of Israel's participation in humanity's universal anxieties and hopes, and of its participation in humanity's universal attempt to certify and anchor the goodness and meaning of present experience by

⁶It is, of course, above all Gerhard von Rad who taught us this; *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (2 vols., München: Chr. Kaiser, 1957-60) 1.13-177.

telling the history that sets the pattern of history. What in Israel is guaranteed for the present by its Beginning is the universal scope of God's promises.

We turn to the creation-story more narrowly so-called. I shall follow tradition and stick to Genesis 1:1-2:3, the "Hexameron."

Among the primal stories, what distinguishes *creation*-stories? The distinction appears clearly if we restore the continuity of P by jumping from Genesis 2:4a to 5:1. From 5:1 on, history is carried also by the agency of human creatures; but up through 2:4a, human agency is lacking. Also such stories are universal among humankind. They are many and various; what

seems essential to our race is merely that there *be* such stories. For not only our historical world, shaped by human acts, needs certification; so also does the pre-condition of that world, the world in its sheer givenness, prior to all we do or think about it. The world's fragility appears here as its *mystery*, as sheer opacity to understanding; that there should be, e.g., metallurgy is, given metals, understandable—but why metals? Why *this* world? Why not—what seems more likely—chaos? Indeed, as Heidegger put it: “Why is there anything at all?”⁷ Moreover, the mystery is threatening, as appears when Heidegger states the converse of his question: “Why not, rather, nothing?” We tell stories of the Beginning to fend off also *this* threat.

In Genesis, after the dogmatic summary-statement of 1:1, the creation-account itself begins with 1:2-3a. Its form is that standard at the beginning of creation-stories: “When things were still..., God...” The form makes creation narratable. The point is not necessarily to describe an actual state before creation; but if creation is to be narrated, we have to start before it happens. Sometimes elsewhere such language works in that the pre-creation stage is indeed an actuality, which the Creator undoes or overcomes—as Marduk created by slaying Tiamat. But there is nothing like that in Genesis 1; pre-creation is described entirely by negations. Before God acted, there was only nothing—and “the *ruach* of God.”

The exegetes whom I ordinarily follow without much question agree that this latter phrase should be rendered “big wind.” I cannot this time follow them. Our passage belongs to the “priestly” tradition, i.e., to the tradition in which the apprehension of God's Spirit, as the agent of prophecy and all revelation, was most precise and dominant.⁸ Whatever may have been understood in the traditions P adapted, that the priestly writer should have written *ruach Elohim* without thinking of the prophetic Spirit is not credible. So: before God created, there were neither creatures nor the dynamism of the Spirit who would agitate Moses and all the prophets.

Is this *creatio ex nihilo*? The concept is, of course, foreign to the text. But the assertion of *creatio ex nihilo* is nothing more than the assertion of Genesis' doctrine against a contrary intellectual pressure: the pressure to ask, “But what was there *before* God ‘created’?” or perhaps at least in the form, “But what was God doing before he ‘created’?” The pressure appears in many creation-stories to be related to Genesis' story, in that chaos is conceived as a *state* which God then remakes or conquers. Jewish and Christian theology encountered the pressure as Platonic limitation of divine agency to the shaping of—itsself timelessly subsistent—pure

⁷Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1953) 1.

⁸To this, see my “The Holy Spirit,” in the forthcoming *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. C. Braaten and R. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) *ad loc.*

matter; against this doctrine it formulated the *ex nihilo*. The pressure has diminished no whit. It is exerted by our standard interpretations of *time*, whether “linear” or “cyclical,” which can make no sense of an absolute starting time—or ending time. Genesis' account demands an interpretation of time radically different from the standard one. But what would that be?

“When things were still..., God *said*...” That God thus creates by speaking could itself be the thread of my argument. But here I shall instead attend to what he says: “Let there be...”, and to the response: “And there was...” The magnificent monotony of this antiphony constructs the whole framework of the six days, and it subordinates whatever other concepts or metaphors of creation there were existing in P's antecedent traditions. The world is created by God's

command, and its coming into being is an act of *obedience*; P's account of creation is thus in perfect coherence with its following account of Israel's history. Let me put it as strongly as possible: the world is created by *Torah* and "righteousness." Creation is indeed a past act; God spoke. But *what* was done was an utterance that—to allow myself some jargon—opens the future.

And then there is the other invariable refrain: "And God saw that...was good." Hebrew *tov*, like "good" with which we translate it, carries the notion of purpose; "good" means "good for...." The judgment that creatures are good is not subsequent to their creation; it belongs to the framework of the creation-*account*. That God sees that the world is good for his purpose belongs to the act by which the world exists.

Putting the above observations—especially those of the two previous paragraphs—together, we may formulate: the world *is* in that it *has been* commanded *to be for* God's purpose—the purpose that is worked out in the history of Israel. That is P's answer to the world-mystery, to "Why is there anything at all?"

IV. THE LOCUS OF A SOLUTION

It is time for me to begin my solution to the puzzles about the creation-dogma's referent. The elements of the solution are all before us. The underlining in the previous paragraph tips my hand: the puzzles must be solved within the doctrine of God by explicit interpretation of creation as an act of the *triune* God, indeed as a triune act. Genesis' teaching about creation can only be accounted for by a full-blown doctrine of the Trinity.

I may approach the Trinity-doctrine itself by way of the creation-doctrine's demand for a new interpretation of time. We must—to accommodate creation "from nothing"—be able to conceive an absolute beginning of creaturely time, and we may extrapolate—in view of the centrality in this context of the notions of Spirit and purpose—also an absolute end. But the only way to speak of an *absolute* beginning and *absolute* end is to speak of God as the Beginning and End, as the one who—as *Hermas* puts it—"embraces" time and is not himself embraced. Linear and cyclical interpretation of our time can be overcome only by thinking of our time as *encompassed* in God's own life.

Such interpretation of God's eternity—as *including* our time—is already far removed from that of normal religion, which conceives God's eternity by abstracting *from* time. But the radicality of Genesis' demand is only reached by a further question: *How* is God both our End and our Beginning? A normal religious or Platonist-philosophical answer would be: by abolishing the difference between

them, by being the identity of beginning and end. In this answer, God's eternity is understood as the indifference in him of past and future, as timelessness. Just so, time itself, which is indisputably real for us, must be understood without more than negative reference to God, and the problem about an absolute beginning or end will recur. The doctrine of the Trinity consists in a very different answer: God can be both the Beginning and the End of time in that he within time reconciles the Beginning and the End. God is the Father, the sheer Given for all time. God is the Spirit, the time-giving Goal of time. And he is both not by being a Father-spirit—i.e., *not* by being anything like the average God—but by being the Son, the one who *in* and *through* time

reconciles the given world to its goal.

The triune God is in himself Given, Goal, and Reconciliation; Purposer, Purpose, and Word; Start, Finish, and History. His being is the Life among the Three. And if the triune God is the real God, then time is the *accommodation* this life makes in itself for the particular History that the Son in fact and freely is, Jesus' history with what is not God. Only this interpretation of time can make sense of Genesis' assertion of creation "out of nothing."⁹

V. SOLUTIONS

I come to the listed problems. I shall begin with and spend most of my space on the one about tenses. The makings of a solution are the following: (1) the exegetical section's concluding definition; (2) the interpretation of time just offered; (3) a key proposition of all traditional trinitarian theology, which I will state in the next paragraph; and (4) a choice between two sorts of trinitarian theory using that proposition, which I will make in the next paragraph but one.

The just-promised proposition of traditional trinitarianism is that the three identities of God are distinguished from each other by and only by the relations of origin between them: that the Father "begets" and "breathes," the Son "is begotten" and "breathes," and the Spirit "is breathed." These abstruse-sounding terms are in fact slogans for temporal structures of the evangelical history, taken as realities in God himself. Thus, e.g., the Father's and the Son's "breathing" of the Spirit is the Father's and the Son's inspiration of Israel and the church, understood as the very event by which God in himself *is* a Spirit. It should be noted that in thus formulating the temporal structure of the evangelical history, and using the formula to evoke the structure of God's own life, the theory of innertrinitarian relations distinguishes the three identities fundamentally by the three arrows of time, correlating the Father to the Beginning, the Spirit to the End, and the Son to present Saving History. It is this that has always made modalism a temptation.

In order to avoid modalism, all classical interpretations of God's Trinity obey the rule that, as Augustine formulated it, "The externally-directed works of the Trinity are indivisible" (*opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa*). But the rule means something radically different in the thought of the Eastern fathers who created trinitarian theology, particularly "the Cappadocians," and in Augustine's adaptation of their work, which became standard in the West.¹⁰ In original trinitarian-

⁹It is worth noting that thus process theology's denial of "out of nothing" and its blatantly heretical "Trinity"-doctrine, which replaces Jesus with all creation, are mutually supporting, and wholly bound to the interpretations of pagan antiquity.

¹⁰To the problems of Augustinianism, see my forthcoming *The Triune Identity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) *ad loc.*

ism, each godly "externally directed" work is a *joint* work of the three identities, in which each of the identities appears in a role specified by the inner-trinitarian relations that define it, i.e., by the reality of God in one of time's arrows. Thus, for example, in creating the church the Father elects, the Son heads, and the Spirit calls. Augustine notes this character of Eastern trinitarian teaching and explicitly disapproves of it for the sake of his Platonist axioms, which will allow no such lively goings-on in God. That the Trinity's external works are indivisible means, for

Augustine, that the distinction and relations of the triune identities are irrelevant to the character of God's external works, so that the inner-divine relations can be purely timeless relations. Thus, for example, the Father or the Son or the Spirit, or the Trinity as such, could, according to Augustine, equally have become incarnate in Jesus. That Augustine's form of trinitarianism in fact cancels the point thereof is now widely noted; I will stick with the Cappadocians.

So to my specific proposal about creation. Creating is a work of the Trinity as such. Just so, it is a joint work of the three identities, wherein the role of each identity is identical with the determination of the work by one of time's arrows. Insofar as "the world is created" is equivalent to "the world has been commanded (to be)," creation is the work of the Father. Insofar as "the world is created" is equivalent to "the world now is (by God's command)," creation is the work of the Son. Insofar as "the world is created" is equivalent to "the world is (commanded now) to be for God's purpose," creation is the work of the Spirit. But these are one work; that they happen is one event. And that event is the proper referent of "creates." All discourse about distinctions and relations between "creation" and "preservation" or the like must be replaced by discourse about the trinitarian identities and their relations. "Creation," "preservation," and—!—"new creation" are neither three acts nor one, but trinitarian identities of one act. The christological and pneumatological determinations of creation are not subsequent additions but belong to creation's own one reality.

The christological determination of creation is the New Testament's chief explicit assertion about creation. Therein the New Testament only specifies a character of Old Testament understanding. Also in Genesis 1 creation is through and for the saving history. This understanding became variously explicit in Israel's tradition—particularly in "intertestamental" Judaism—as the specific doctrine that the world is created for Israel.¹¹ The primal church simply took over Israel's claim for itself: e.g., "[the church] was created first of all, and for its sake the cosmos was formed" (*Herm. Vis.* 11.4.1). But it is Christ's resurrection and ascension that create the church; thus Christ is agent precisely of the first creation and of the purpose of all creation. This pattern too is anticipated in the Old Testament in the creative agency of God's "Wisdom."¹² Colossians 1:15-20 alone puts it all together: "He is...the first-born of all creation;...all things were created through him and for him....He is the head of...the church..."

The reality of Christ—his death, resurrection, and present Lordship—is not merely a set of events *within* what is created by some other act of God. It is a trinitarian identity of the one act of God by which the world is.

To give a case of the point's importance, it is our neglect of trinitarianism and so of this truth that has made our whole difficulty with "justification." We are

¹¹E.g., 2 Esdras 6:55.

¹²Proverbs 8:22-30.

to preach, unconditionally, that our hearers are good and righteous for Christ's sake. But as long as we think we are speaking to persons who *already* are created, who *prior* to our speaking "really" are whatever they are, how can our statement to them be *true*? Since if they already were righteous, we would not be speaking to them? We think that, strictly, the gospel cannot be simply true, and either interpret the attribution of righteousness to our hearers as a legal fiction, or exhort them to make it true by "actually" becoming a little righteous on their already-created own.

Whereas in truth, the hearers of the gospel are—*actually!*—righteous because and only because we say they are; since our speaking about Christ belongs to God’s one act of creating, by which our hearers are and are whatever they are.

With this application I have already touched also the pneumatological determination of creation. The proposal to acknowledge that it too is intrinsic to God’s one creating act is an innovation over against the tradition. It should not have been. That the goal of creation is *new* creation is in the Catechism. And the Catechism is merely in the line of the Old Testament, as soon as Israel’s hope became decisively eschatological, i.e., hope for the final coming of the Spirit.¹³ Contemporaneously with this development, the wisdom-thinkers produced a full-fledged doctrine of the Creator Spirit.¹⁴

The reality of the Spirit—that there will be a final Transformation and Fulfillment—is not merely the fulfilling of what was created by some other act of God. The occurrence of the End belongs to that one act of God by which this world at all is. Indeed to balance centuries of malformed tradition, I must formulate more strongly. Of the trinitarian identities, the Spirit has metaphysical priority: “God *is* Spirit” (John 4:24). The biblical God is not the Persistence of the Past but the Power of the Future. And therefore it is from the future that he creates, that he summons the world into being. He creates by commanding—and he commands us *to* himself, forward through time into his own, essentially eschatological, reality. It is in that we *will* be what we will be with him, that we *are* at all. God creates by transforming.

My other two puzzles can now be dealt with summarily. The third on the list was in fact solved in the course of the biblical exegesis. There remains only to note the trinitarian character of the solution. All humanity tells origin-stories to meet the mystery of mere being—we are one in the question, “Why is there anything?” And if the Bible’s answer, made by specifying a final purpose of time, is true, it must hold for all. It is in between, in the historical making of the answer, in the reality of the Son, that we are not in fact one. And therefore we must say that the *doctrine* of creation is not a shared or now sharable universal basis.

The second on the list: Is creating an act or a standing relation? I can now say, with meaning: both. In that creating is one act of the *triune* God, it is an event that brackets us in time, that occupies all three temporal dimensions; just so it indeed makes our permanent relation to God. That God is our Creator is a relation of the kind that participants in an event have to each other as the event is occurring; here the event is the occurrence of all that is other than God.

¹³Consider, e.g., Ezekiel 37 and Joel 2:28f. together.

¹⁴Job 26:12-13.