

# Lecture 6: The Doctrine of Creation

- Paul Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy: Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- David Fergusson, *Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).
- Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).
- Mark Harris, *The Nature of Creation: Examining the Bible and Science* (Durham: Acumen, 2013).
- Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014).
- Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988)

# 1. What is the Doctrine of Creation?

- Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed: ‘We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.’
- Belief in God as creator *central* in Christianity (as well as Judaism and Islam).
- Main ideas:
  1. Radical difference between God and the world as a whole (creator – creation). Note in Creed the emphasis on ‘*all* things’.
  2. Relationship between the two: God *made* the world.

# What is the Doctrine of Creation?

- Main topics:
  1. God as creator: What does it mean for God to 'make' the world? How is this related to other ideas about him.
  2. The world as creation: What does it mean for the world to think of it as made by God?
- Today, belief in creation appears as characteristic of Christian faith – science and religion debates.
- Yet in the context of history of religions, notions of creation are ubiquitous – what is *special* about Christian doctrine?

## 2. Biblical background: OT

- Creation frequent topic of OT texts.
- Famously Gen. 1, but also Gen. 2, 4 ff. ('second' creation narrative), Ps. 104, Job 38.
- Evidently an *important* theme, but diversity of accounts a problem.
- In Gen. 1, God creates through his word; in Gen. 2, he is depicted as a craftsman.
- 'Six days' only in Gen. 1.

# Creation in Old Testament II

- Popular idea: 'chaos struggle' (*Chaoskampf*).
- In Gen. 1, the original state of creation is described as 'tohu wa-vohu' ('formless void').
- Sometimes, there is reference to God's victory over mythological creatures.
- He 'crushed the head of leviathan' (Ps. 74, 14).
- Historical background of creation stories in Near Eastern mythology.
- There, 'creation' = establishment of order.

# Creation in Old Testament III

- In OT, then, creation was *important*, but it wasn't a belief *specific* to the people of Israel.
- Biblical authors make use of existing stories and theories.
- But: they are inscribed into the biblical view of JHWH as sovereign.
- There is no real 'struggle' against chaos: JHWH is Lord over the elements.
- Creation puts his power on display; it doesn't establish it.
- Creation is unique event 'in the beginning', not cyclical.

# Creation in Old Testament IV

- Results:
- No evidence of later 'creation from nothing'.
- No 'doctrine' of creation, but mythological stories.
- Fundamental idea is that God's power is visible in his absolute sovereignty over the world as a whole.
- In this way, it provides the backdrop to the main story of the Bible: God's covenant with his people.
- God can protect, save, govern his people because he rules supreme over the entire world.

### 3. Creation in the New Testament

- Creation not a major topic in NT writings.
- OT view clearly presupposed.
- Beginnings of a 'theology of creation':
- Rm 4, 17: 'God in whom he [sc. Abraham] believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.'
- Context: The faith of Abraham.
- For Paul, this *faith* is underwritten by God's actions implying his absolute power.
- God is inscribed into the opposition of life/death and existence/non-existence.



## Creation in the NT II

- Special idea: Christ's role in creation.
- John 1,3: 'All things came into being through him [the Word], and without him not one thing came into being.'
- Col. 1, 15-7: 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.'

## Creation in the NT III

- Christ as the pre-existing Son of God is connected with God's creative activity.
- Reflects the problem of how a transcendent God can create?
- Frequent idea in Jewish and Platonic texts: God *uses* a mediator.
- Identification of Jesus with this concept shows his exalted status but also the need to distinguish him from the one God.
- Also: identity of creation and redemption.

## 4. Creation from Nothing

- Main novelty in Christian *doctrine* of creation.
- Emerged in early centuries of Christian era; is widely taken for granted from third century.
- Reference text: 2 Maccabees 7: ‘I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed.’
- Problem: general assumption that God *made* the world from matter.

## Creation from Nothing II

- Second century author Theophilus: 'As God is immutable because he is uncreated, if matter is uncreated it must also be immutable, and equal to God; for what is created is changeable and mutable, while the uncreated is unchangeable and immutable.'
- 'What would be remarkable if God made the world out of preexistent matter? Even a human artisan, when he obtains material from someone, makes whatever he wishes out of it. But the power of God is revealed by his making whatever he wishes out of the non-existent, just as the ability to give life and motion belongs to no one but God alone.'

# Creation from Nothing III

- CfN *extension* of biblical idea that God is entirely sovereign in his work.
- *Not* in need of anything, not reliant on any resources.
- Also: rejection of any dualism.
- Nothing is *co-eternal* with God.
- Problem: what does *from nothing* (lat. *ex nihilo*) mean? What can it mean?

# Creation from Nothing IV

- Some fathers teach God first creates matter, then everything else out of it.
- Others say matter doesn't exist, but the world consists of God's intelligible ideas.
- Yet others think that 'from nothing' means 'from God'.
- Related difficulties:
- Does creation have a beginning in time?
- Did God always create?

# Creation from Nothing V

- Creation from nothing extends the biblical notion of God as a sovereign creator unrestrained by external factors.
- Emphasises radical ontological distinction between God and world.
- Raises the problem how God and world can then be related, which creation also implies.
- Important: doctrine of creation developed together with Logos Christology.
- Creation never separated from soteriology.

## 5. Creation and Science

- Often now seen as fundamental dimension.
- Does belief in creation collide with scientific explanation of the world.
- At one level, the answer is clearly no.
- ‘Creation from nothing’ indicates that God is not a physical cause of the universe.
- By the same token, the creation cannot *prove* the existence of God.



# Creation and Science II

- And yet ...
- Arguing for the existence of God from creation has always been popular, e.g. watchmaker analogy.
- In this sense, the divine origin of the world becomes something of a hypothesis that can be contested.
- Ambiguity of natural theology.
- Problem: how can *relationship* of God and world be understood as meaningful but different from that of a physical cause?

# Creation and Science III

- Further problem: mythological shape of OT creation narratives.
- These stories clearly present a proto-scientific theory of the world and its origin.
- As such, they were outdated already in antiquity.
- St Augustine was initially unwilling to become Christian because of his embarrassment by these crude ideas.
- His solution: allegorical interpretation.

# Creation and Science IV

- Augustine was cited by proponents of early modern science, e.g. Galilei.
- ‘What is it to me whether heaven, like a sphere, surrounds the earth on all sides as a mass balanced in the centre of the universe, or whether like a dish it merely covers and overcasts the earth? [...] Hence let it be said briefly, touching the form of heaven, that our authors knew the truth but the Holy Spirit did not desire that men should learn things that are useful to no one for salvation.’ *De Genesi ad litteram* II 9.
- Quoted in Galilei’s *Letter to Christian of Lorraine*, <http://inters.org/Galilei-Madame-Christina-Lorraine>

# Creation and Science V

- Augustine assumed that biblical authors knew better but adapted their accounts to capacity of their readers (accommodation theory).
- This is implausible from a historical point of view.
- Yet it points to the need for a hermeneutical approach.
- Creation stories are not Jewish or Christian because of their science but because of their theology.
- This is as true today as it was in Augustine's time.

## 6. Creation and Salvation

- Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*:
- “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.”  
*What does this mean?* I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them.’
- Creation is not primarily about an event that happened in the past but about God’s relationship with the world now.

# Creation and Salvation II

- Is the notion of creation 'in the beginning' then dispensable?
- Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* III 21:
- As the protoplast himself, Adam, had his substance from untilled and as yet virgin soil (...), and was formed by the hand of God, that is, by the word of God, for 'all things were made by him,' and the Lord took dust from the earth and formed man; so did he who is the Word (i.e. the Logos), recapitulating Adam in himself, rightly receive a birth, enabling him to gather up Adam [into himself] from Mary, who was as yet a virgin.

# Creation and Salvation III

- The doctrine of creation is misunderstood if it is isolated from the core message of the gospel.
- Its purpose is not the metaphysical (or physical) claim that the world was made by God 'in the beginning'.
- It describes the paradoxical relationship of God to *all things* as (a) radically distinct and (b) intimately related.
- As such it underwrites the promise of salvation central to the Bible.

# Creation and Salvation IV

- Creation is therefore closely connected with the Doctrine of the Trinity as well as the Incarnation.
- Cf. again the key NT passages Rm 4, 17, Jn 1, 3, Col. 1, 15-17.
- Karl Barth: 'Creation is the external basis of the covenant' (CD III 1, p. 94).