

Creation *Ex Nihilo*

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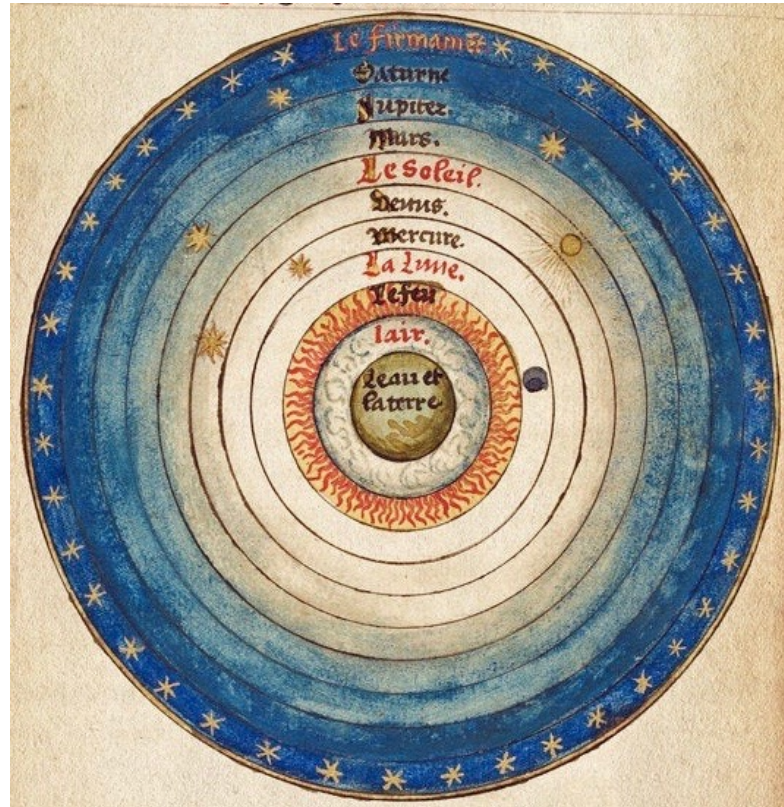


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Ancient Religion

- Ancient Greek and Roman religion treated nature and divinity as opposing poles which existed on a spectrum — a thing can be more or less divine.
- Matter was generally held to be eternal and indestructible.
- The order of the universe may have been imposed by a divine figure, or developed by chance.
- The stars are immaterial, divine agents that give life and order to the rest of the universe.
- The planetary bodies are divine — but as material and created bodies, they are less divine than the stars.



Monotheism & the Jewish Tradition

- Jewish theology treats God and nature as binaries — something is *either* divine *or* created.
- God is not the highest point on the sliding scale of existence, but transcends all other forms of existence.
- Exodus 3:14-15 — God reveals his name to Moses in the burning bush: “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites, ‘I AM [*Jehovah*] has sent me’.”
- The Hebrew Bible thus depicts God as eternal and radically *independent* of the world. So the most important question for the Jewish tradition is not why God has made the world in the manner he has, but why there is something rather than nothing.



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The Creation Narrative

- Genesis 1 contains the Jewish Creation narrative. This narrative is also foundational for the Christian and Islamic traditions.
- The narrative shares some similarities with other ancient cosmogonies, e.g., the *Enuma Elish*, a nearly 4,000 year old Akkadian text.
 - Both texts present creation as the imposition of form on a chaotic mass.
 - Both follow a similar sequence in the various parts of creation.
- The author of Genesis clearly knew the *Enuma Elish* and crafts his narrative as a polemic against it.



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The Creation Narrative

- Unlike the *Enuma Elish*, God creates the world directly without mediators, and there is no conflict with other gods.
- Seven 'days' structure the narrative.
 - 1) Light & Darkness; 2) Sky & Waters; 3) Sea, Land, Plants; 4) Sun and Moon; 5) Animals; 6) Humans; 7) God rests.
 - Each day is followed by 'evening' and 'morning', except the 7th day, which has a morning but no evening.
- Genesis sets creation in a wider story about God's covenant with Abraham & his children.
 - Sailhamer thinks the formation and placement of Adam in 'the Land' (*ha'aretz*) alludes to the covenant promise made to Abraham (Gen. 12:7).



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The Creation Narrative

- Genesis 1:1-5 — “In the beginning God **created** (בָּרָא [bārā']) the heaven and the earth. 2 And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. 3 And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. 4 And God saw the light, that it was good: and God **divided** (בָּדַל [bādal]) the light from the darkness. 5 And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.”



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The Creation Narrative

- The second verb in the passage above, *bādal*, means “to divide”. It runs throughout the narrative to describe the work of God in communicating *form* to creation.
- This would later be referred to as the second creative act — the act of “distinction”, b/c God distinguishes them according to their created kind.
- In this act, God assigns creatures their natures, including all properties, powers, and faculties that determine the character of their existence.
 - This concept would be crucial for Christian accounts of natural law.
- The agent of this work of formation is divine speech — God’s “Word”, which in the ancient world, was often a sign of *reason*.



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The Creation Narrative

- The first verb, *bārā'*, is qualified by “in the beginning”. This may be a statement summarising the whole narrative — “When God created the heaven and the earth”.
- Others have read it as expressing a distinct act. “In the beginning”, on that reading, denotes an act prior to the work of distinction which forms the chaotic mass on subsequent days of the narrative.
- Theologians in the Abrahamic traditions have often taken this reading because:
 - It is more consistent with other biblical themes.
 - It affirms the uniqueness of God’s perfection.
 - It distinguishes b/w God and Creatures.



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1. Other Biblical Teachings

- “The Lord possessed me from the beginning of his ways, before his works of old.” — Prov. 8:22
- “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.” — John 1:1-2
- “For from him, and through him, and to him are all things.” — Romans 11:36



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2. The Uniqueness of God's Perfection

- Abrahamic religions generally held that only God's existence is necessary.
- God's life is full and complete. He possesses every perfection immediately in his own existence.
- Because God's essence is perfect and complete, he does not depend on anything outside of himself for his existence.
- This is called God's "*aseity*" — from the Latin *a se*, meaning "from himself".
- God is thus eternal and changeless.



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3. The Contingency of the World

- The world is not eternal and does not exist *necessarily* but only *contingently*: it does not *have* to exist. It could have *not* existed.
- The existence of anything other than God is thus dependent upon God for its existence.
- B/c creatures do not exist necessarily, their existence depends on a free and voluntary act of God's generosity.
- Created realities are fundamentally *derivative* — they come from God's own nature and will.



Creation *Ex Nihilo*

- Creation *ex nihilo* is thus the first creative act.
- It is understood as God's production of created matter "out of nothing", donating it a share in his own existence.
- The crossing of an infinite distance between being & non-being.
- "Nothing comes from nothing" — Parmenides
 - An article of *faith*, rather than *reason*.
- An act is fundamentally different from acts of *human* creativity.



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Creation *Ex Nihilo*

- Form — human creation imitates existing forms, but the exemplary cause here is only in God's wisdom.
- Material — works of art always involve some material *medium*, but there is no medium here.
- Time — creation is a process extended in time, but this is an act which is instantaneous and brings time into being.
- Power — human creativity can grant form to things; we have no analogy for a power that grants *existence*.



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Creation *Ex Nihilo* & The Natural World

- To speak of “creation” or of the world as “created” is to describe its nature as derived from this foundational act which constitutes the whole of material existence.
- In that sense, creation *ex nihilo* ties the mystery of our existence to the mystery of God’s love — why would God will *something* rather than *nothing*?
- Existence is not a *given*, it is a *gift*.
 - Cosmological order reflects divine wisdom.
 - The world depends on the ongoing support of divine providence.



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Creation *Ex Nihilo* & History

- Belief in creation forms the condition for understanding time as *purposive*.
 - Analogy b/w protology & eschatology: the beginning is like the ending.
 - If time is a donation from eternity, then it moves toward an end that *transcends* the world.
- History is not random, arbitrary, or circular; it is moving toward a goal — namely, its confrontation with God.
- To understand the nature and purpose of our lives requires us to come to grips with the nature, identity and will of God, upon whom we are dependent.



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