

Creation Out of Chaos

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In my first systematic theology class back in seminary, I remember being mesmerized by the concept of *creatio ex nihilo*, or creation out of nothing. Perhaps it was the Latin or maybe it was my own utter lack of artistic ability, but the notion that God could create something—let alone the entirety of the universe—from sheer nothingness inspired in me a sense of awe and wonder. This one little phrase brought into focus God’s immensity and generative potential more than any other I knew. It signaled the power of God to do anything—in me, the church, or the world.

Years later, I still find value in a theology of creation out of nothing. But I now know that the opening pages of the book of Genesis tell a slightly different story. At the beginning of the first creation account there is definitively something present. The NRSV describes it as a “formless void” (or in Hebrew, *tohu wabohu*). Despite what the NRSV’s translation might imply, in Hebrew *tohu wabohu* is not exactly a synonym for nothingness. It signals the presence of a watery, dark, and deadly chaos. Close parallels are found in the Babylonian creation myth, *Enuma Elish*, in the figure of Tiamat, the chaos deity of the salt sea whose defeat in battle by the chief deity Marduk is the necessary starting point for the process of creation.

Unlike *Enuma Elish*, the biblical creation account is decidedly non-militaristic in tone. But much like its Babylonian counterpart, Genesis 1 describes creation as emerging out of chaos, not nothingness. In verse 2 we find God’s wind (or Spirit, *ruakh*) sweeping across the watery chaos like an evening breeze that glides over the surface of a lake. In Hebrew, the imagery has additional layers. The verb translated sweep (*rakhaph*) elsewhere in Scripture is used to describe the activity of a mother bird hovering over her nest. Such hovering is a protective and nurturing posture, with the mother’s wings being a source of refuge for her young.¹ In Genesis, creation proceeds from this hovering of the Spirit over the *tohu wabohu*.

That God brings forth creation out of chaos rather than out of nothing is not a technical point for contemporary systematic theologians to quibble about. For ancient Israel, it was a matter of profound pastoral significance. Ancient Israel’s history was one of perpetual chaos. Located at the intersection of major geopolitical powers (e.g., Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Hatti, Persian, etc.), the land of Israel was often and repeatedly the subject of imperial conquest. In fact, what was arguably the only period of relative stability for ancient Israel—the United Monarchy under David and Solomon—lasted less than sixty years, and even that was more tenuous than we often admit. For the Israelites, the experience of exile, division, displacement, and uncertainty was not only the norm but was the very context for the writing of much of what we now call the Old Testament. Much like creation, the canon emerged out of chaos.

A vivid example of how a theology of creation out of chaos served as a point of pastoral comfort for ancient Israel is found in the book of Jeremiah. Writing during the exilic period and at about the same time as the author of Genesis 1, the prophet Jeremiah describes the reality of the land of Israel after the Babylonian invasion in this way: “I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void” (4:23). The phrase “waste and void” in Hebrew is *tohu wabohu*—the exact phrase we encounter in Genesis 1:2. For Jeremiah, the fall of Jerusalem and Judah in 587 BCE brings about a state of chaos reminiscent of, if not exactly like, the pre-creation conditions. The *tohu wabohu* of conquered Israel, much like the *tohu wabohu* of the primordial deep, is a barrier to God’s shalom and a cause for lament.

Such a description is not all that uncommon for Jeremiah, who, as it turns out, is something of a bull frog when it comes to pronouncing the harsh reality of Israel’s fallen state. Be that as it may, Jeremiah 4:23 is a word imbued with expectant hope. Jeremiah realizes that in bearing witness to a God who brings life and beauty out of *tohu wabohu*, Genesis 1 offers an important insight into God’s character and way of being in the world. What God did in the beginning is a pattern of what God can and will do again. This was not lost on Jeremiah’s original audience. For them, the message was clear: What was happening in the exile, though novel in its details, was not unique in its dynamics. The God they worshipped is one whose pattern is to bring life out of chaos, even the chaos of exile.

Like ancient Israel, few of us today face the sort of blank slate implied by the theology of *creatio ex nihilo*. Our families, churches, and communities all are the products of complex, messy, and often broken systems. We don’t get to parachute in and start creating, loving, and leading out of nothing. We inherit chaos—it is, in fact, the very context for life and ministry. Our calling is thus not to create loving families, healthy churches, and flourishing communities out of nothing. Rather, our calling as disciples and ministers is to follow God’s example of finding a way to nurture something good and beautiful out of the chaotic *tohu wabohu* that we are facing, whatever form it might take. Much like Jeremiah, I find the theology of creation out of chaos deeply hopeful. The chaos we are facing in our lives and ministries is not unfamiliar to God. This chaos is the very stuff from which creation proceeds. God isn’t in need of a blank slate or a fresh start. It is in the very nature of God—in the beginning and still now—to bring forth something new and beautiful out of the messy, often despairing, surely disordered stuff of our lives and our world.

Equally significant for the church today is the manner in which God creates out of chaos. Consider again the imagery from Genesis 1. The Spirit hovering over the *tohu wabohu* is, at one level, a protective posture. It is exactly what we might expect of a mother bird seeking to shelter her young from harm, be it in the form of the natural elements or predators. However, the same Hebrew verb, *rakhaph*, carries the secondary meaning of “to arouse or stir up.” The job of a mother bird is not just to protect her chicks from danger, but also, when the time is right, to nudge them

out of the nest so that they can learn to fly on their own. Mother birds are thus both protective *and disruptive*.

The disruptive quality of the Spirit brings into focus two aspects of what it means for God to create out of chaos. First, as implied by the imagery of a mother bird stirring up her brood of fledglings, life is not something God brings to the chaos from the outside. It is something God urges forth from within the chaos itself. In the creation story, the potential for life and goodness is already there within the *tohu wabohu*. It only need be stirred up and urged to come forth. In other words, God doesn't flee chaos or even lament its disorderliness—God dares to work with it. Second, the disruptive work of God's Spirit is inherently risky. When a mother bird nudges her young out of the nest, it is with the hope, but not yet the full assurance, that her chicks can fly. The potential for failure—even injury and harm—cannot be avoided. The disruptive hovering of the Spirit in Genesis 1 is thus an expectant movement that, though filled with hope and possibility, is not guaranteed to succeed by either empirical data or the promise of a false gospel. God's creation out of chaos, then and now, is risky, vulnerable, and open-ended.

The rest of the first creation story bears this out. The account of creation in Genesis 1 comes to us in a highly structured literary form, with each day beginning with the declaration "let there be" and each ending with the chronological tag "and there was evening and there was morning." The rhythmic quality of the narrative belies the complex, even chaotic, nature of what God brings forth. On days three, five, and six we learn that God has created trees, birds, fish, and animals "of every kind." The picture that emerges is of creation swarming with diverse and sundry things of dizzying variety, form, and function. Humanity for its part was also created according to its kind (i.e., male and female). More significantly, the first commandment given to them is to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (1:28). From the beginning, humanity's calling is to increase and scatter, processes that from an anthropological perspective will ultimately lead to further diversification. As people spread out, change inevitably follows. The scattering of humanity thus leads to the diversification of languages, customs, traditions, experiences, and even physical appearance. Theologically, God assesses the complexity and diversity of what is created out of chaos as being "very good" (1:31).

What is clear from Genesis 1 is that God does not respond to chaos by demanding conformity or by limiting variety and difference. The problem is, that's exactly what we often try to do in the face of chaos. When we encounter chaotic things in our lives and ministries, our impulse is to grip more tightly, to find ways to simplify the situation and tidy up the loose ends, to invent or apply rules ever so rigidly with the hope that it will keep the chaos at bay. With pre-made categories and solutions in hand, we try to bring some artificial order to the complexity of our world. We seem fixated on always being able to clearly label the differences we see: male *or* female; black *or* white; Republican *or* Democrat. And often we live in ways that ensure

that the things created according to their kind stay with their kind. Our blue neighborhoods have gotten bluer and our red states have gotten redder; our conservative churches have slid right and our progressive churches have leapt left. Even those congregations who would be quick to affirm the value of diversity and inclusion have often lived into a type of liberal Puritanism in which only a small band of viewpoints is tolerated. Rather than embracing our calling to follow God's model of stirring up the nest, we seem bent on ushering the fledglings back into the nest, where at least it's easier to keep things decent and in order. Paradoxically, what God brings forth from the chaos we end up treating as a type of chaos that must be overcome.

The human impulse to suppress and constrain the work of God's disruptive Spirit is not new. A telling case is found in the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11). Whether in sermons or children's Sunday School lessons, this story is often framed as a classic tale of pride and punishment. The people of Babel want to build a tower up to the heavens and to make their name great among all the nations. In response, God comes down and mixes up (the Hebrew verb *balal* is a play on the name of the city) their language, a process which apparently brings the project to a grinding halt (11:8). Be that as it may, there's something more at work in this story than hubris run amuck.

In Genesis 11:1, we learn that "the whole earth had one language and the same words." This phrase is often interpreted as a description of a natural linguistic condition—that is, at this time only one language existed. Such a reading, however, is at odds with the situation described in Genesis 10. This chapter, often referred to as the "table of nations," charts the offspring of the three sons of Noah. As they increase and scatter, the families and nations these offspring give rise to come to have their own languages (vv. 5, 20, 31). Thus, when Genesis 11:1 says that the people of Babel "had one language," it is not to be understood as a statement of natural linguistic homogeneity but rather a description of forced linguistic conformity. In other words, there were plenty of other languages in use at the time of the building of the tower (as Genesis 10 affirms), but at Babel only one language was allowed to be spoken.

Why? The answer is found in the concessive clause in verse 4: "otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." This is the crux of the matter. The building of the tower, much like the establishment of a linguistic monoculture, was the perceived antidote to the fear that the people of Babel—a thinly veiled cipher for Babylonia, the author of Israel's exile in 587 BCE—would, as God intended from the beginning, scatter and diversify. Through the eyes of the rulers of Babel, such scattering and diversifying is an unwanted form of chaos that must be controlled and suppressed. The tendency of empire then and now is to grip more tightly, to double down on the insistence of cultural conformity, to shore up the borders, and to ratchet up systems of control.

With this detail in view, the ending of the Tower of Babel story takes on new meaning. The confusion of languages is a punishment, but only for those whose am-

bition it was to build the tower and establish an empire that would be as permanent as it was prominent. For everyone else, including those tasked (or likely enslaved) to build the tower, the confusion of languages was not a punishment but an act of liberation. It unleashes in them the freedom and potential to speak other languages, including their own native tongues if we assume, as was often the case in the ancient Near East, that the slave labor needed for monumental building projects was supplied through foreign conquest. This confusion of languages is exactly the sort of activity we would expect from God's disruptive Spirit. Just as God's Spirit urges forth staggering diversity from the *tohu wabohu* of pre-creation, so, too, does that same Spirit arrive on the scene in Genesis 11 to disrupt an empire-building process that at every turn favored conformity and homogeneity. Thus, the picture that begins to emerge from Genesis 1 and 11 is of a God who creates out of chaos, but not in a way that establishes or demands simplistic uniformity. In God's economy the opposite of chaos is not tidiness but rather is a form of holy disruption that urges forth something new, beautiful, and vital.

This is God's way throughout the Old Testament, and it is also the pattern we find at work in the New Testament. A striking example is the story of Pentecost in Acts 2. Much like Genesis 11, Acts 2 is a story about languages.² As the chapter begins, we find Jews from all over the world gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost. In the Old Testament, Pentecost (also known as Weeks or Shavuot), along with Unleavened Bread and Ingathering was one of the three main festivals that required a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. By the first century CE, most Jews lived in the Diaspora, separated from the land of Israel by great distances. For them, a pilgrimage to Jerusalem would have been no small feat. The long, arduous, and no doubt expensive journey to the Temple was a sign of deep piety and devotion.

As Pentecost began, the population of Jerusalem would have swelled exponentially. Those who arrived from all ends of the earth (cf. 2:9–11) would have brought with them different languages, cultures, and traditions. While there would have been a certain type of chaotic beauty in this intermingling of pilgrims, there also arose a practical problem. The disciples in Jerusalem were eager to share the news of Jesus, but very few, if any, of the pilgrims would have known Aramaic, the native language of Jews living in Judea.³ This communication gap is addressed by the Holy Spirit who, as the story goes, descends on the scene in the form of tongues of fire (v. 4).

What is more remarkable is *how* the Holy Spirit bridges the linguistic gap. It would have been possible for the Spirit to have descended upon the pilgrims and downloaded Aramaic into their brains, thus instantaneously creating a new *lingua franca* amongst the pilgrims and the disciples. This would have worked just fine in terms of cross-cultural communication, but it's not what happens. Verse 4 specifies that the Spirit descends upon the disciples and enables them "to speak in other languages." Thus, rather than creating a *lingua franca* out of Aramaic, the Spirit enables the disciples to speak in the native tongues of those pilgrims who had gathered for Pentecost.

Can you imagine the scene that would have ensued? The disciples would have been speaking of Jesus in all sorts of different languages, all at once. I once experienced something akin to this situation while visiting the Church of the Beatitudes just off the southwestern edge of the Sea of Galilee. There, in a hot, octagonal-shaped sanctuary, pilgrims from around the world gathered to pray out loud in languages that were utterly unfamiliar to me. I tried in vain to pick out familiar words or even syllables. Instead, I was enveloped in the hum of indecipherable prayers. It was, admittedly, a dizzying and disorienting moment—and far from what my Presbyterian roots would consider decent and in order. Part of me yearned for silence. Or failing that, a translator to make sense of it all or some type of agreed upon liturgy that would unite our voices in English or Latin or Spanish. Of course, none of this was possible, nor would it have been beneficial. What I was encountering in that moment on the Mount of Beatitudes was a holy cacophony of the faithful convening with God.

Much like in Genesis 1 and 11, the Spirit in Acts 2 does not demand simplistic uniformity. Those on the margins (the pilgrims in Diaspora) did not need to conform to the ways and language of those at the religious center (the disciples in Jerusalem). Rather, it was the other way around. The center changes to accommodate the margins. The pilgrims hear the disciples speaking each according to their own native tongues (v. 8). The birth of God's church could not and would not be founded on the insistence of a linguistic monoculture. The way of Babel would not be the way of the church.

Though not explicitly recorded in Acts 2, after Pentecost the pilgrims would have returned to their native countries equipped to bear witness to Jesus in and through language, idioms, and imagery that their friends and neighbors would already have known. This not only would have made sharing the gospel easier. It would have underscored theologically that the message of Jesus could not be pinned to any one culture, it could not be tethered to any one set of experiences, traditions, practices, or modalities. Acts bears witness not so much to the birth of the church but rather the proliferation of different *churches*, each according to its kind.

What God does in Acts 2 is thus not all that different from what God does in Genesis 1. Rather than creating the church from a clean slate or blank canvas, God brings forth the church from what would have been a disordered array of pilgrims, languages, and cultures. As these pilgrims scattered away from Jerusalem, so, too, did the forms and expressions of Christianity. For the earliest followers of Jesus, this was not a problem to overcome but a tangible expression of the work of God's disruptive Spirit. The ecumenical councils of the second through sixth centuries would eventually try to impose some measure of order on this situation by insisting on uniform adherence to certain formalized doctrines and creeds (including *creatio ex nihilo*). While the work of these councils had value, it once again highlights the human tendency to want to usher the chicks back into the nest. But this is not typically God's pattern. Our calling as disciples and ministers is to follow the example of God's hov-

ering Spirit, bringing forth something good, beautiful, vital, and not necessarily tidy out of the chaos we find in our churches and communities.

Notes

1. Such imagery is found in Psalm 57:1, where the psalmist declares, “in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by.”
2. The Revised Common Lectionary pairs Acts 2 and Genesis 11 on Pentecost Sunday of Year C.
3. Throughout the Roman Empire, the lingua franca of the 1st c. CE was Greek. However, it is uncertain how many of the disciples, let alone the pilgrims, would have known this language.