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Steven Simpkins  
*Denison University*

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# Liberative Creation: Finding Alternative Meaning in Genesis 1:1-2:3

*Steven Simpkins*

Understanding a text's meaning is by no means an easy endeavor. There are a multitude of factors that play a significant role in how an individual interprets and uses the content. The challenge of interpretation is not made any easier when the text holds religious significance across the world. With this in mind, when one seeks to interpret the creation narrative of the world found in the Hebrew Bible, he or she should do so with nuance and care. Origin stories are fascinating and how they impact our worldview should not be underestimated, particularly when that worldview is widespread and well-known. The narrative described in Genesis 1:1-2:3 covers the creation and ordering of the entire universe and has been interpreted throughout history by well-known scholars and philosophers. Despite the huge amount of ink spilled in attempts to uncover the significance of the creation narrative of the first seven days, there is still no universally accepted interpretation. Over 2,700 years of discussion concerning God's role in creation has not cleared up the meaning of text. By no means do I claim to have the key to unlocking all of the mysteries surrounding the Genesis account; however I urge modern readers to consider reading the narrative with liberation in mind. A liberative interpretation has its foundation in the biblical story arc, restoring and reminding God's community of creation of the covenant they were called into, the covenant that brings them together.

So why Genesis? Why place importance on the interpretation of this text in particular? The short answer is within the text, due to shifting interpretations and understandings of words, there exists the possibility of the development and justification of worrisome, problematic environmental and economic ideas through God's words and actions. Ancient creation stories potentially impact the modern societal structure in fascinating ways. As a result, it is desirable to consider an understanding of the creation narrative that is liberative and non-exploitative in nature. The Babylonian exile plays a critical role in establishing Genesis 1 as a text geared toward combating oppression. This text emerged from a chaotic world in which the Israelites were under control of the Babylonian empire and desperately desired to return back to their homeland and live in self-governance. The context of oppression from which the first creation account emerged provides a wedge into the text and its intended meaning. Surely a reading of the text that allows for the justification of abuse of resources or a social structure that is unjust is a reading that misses the mark of the author's original intention.

The problematic nature of biblical interpretation can never be fully resolved because anytime someone reads the text, they are incapable of removing themselves from society and their particular context. In other words, one does not come to the text as a blank slate, which makes it very difficult to read the text solely for what it is saying. As a result, interpretations should be viewed curiously and critically. That is, they should not immediately be accepted because everyone has an agenda, such as psychological predispositions or social experiences. Reading a text objectively is an impossible task. No one is capable of removing oneself from all of his or her experiences and beliefs, myself included. As a result, I want to be clear and state that, here, the preferred interpretation of the creation narrative is grounded in the theme of liberation: a frame that is capable of recognizing the unjust oppression present in the world and works toward finding understandings that ameliorate the negative uses of the text to improve the social standing of outcasts. This frame is created and validated through considering God's actions that have made God-self known throughout history. These acts are primarily God's leading the Israelites out of bondage from Egypt and Jesus' commitment to exalting social outcasts that find themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Thus, liberation will take precedence over all else. The desire for liberation emerges from the pain and oppression a community faces during times of difficulty, and authentic liberation for these people means that the dominant, familiar, and sometimes comfortable powers are challenged for the sake of improving the quality of life for those at the margins. Here, empire is the enemy. There are certainly other stances one can take; however, the liberation perspective was and is necessary in the midst of massive suffering in the world, both in biblical times and ours. This essay intends to develop a liberative understanding of Genesis 1 through examining creation faith and the contrasting theories of creation emerging out of nothing and out of chaos, both of which take into consideration environmental concerns that have been ignored in a consumption-driven society. Regardless of one's stance on the two theories of creation, the biblical narrative and the idea of creation faith demand that humanity interact justly with the environment and the entire community of creation.

### **Creation Faith**

Thus says the LORD who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you: Fear not, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun [a poetic name for Israel describing its uprightness] whom I have chosen... (Isa 44:2)

In order to read Genesis 1:1-2:3 with liberation in mind, it is necessary to remember the context in which it was written- the Babylonian exile. As a result of this timeline, this excerpt of Genesis should be read alongside Isaiah of the Exile.<sup>1</sup> In this way, the content of the text has its own context that manages to shape its concerns. Pairing the texts together in this way allows for the socio-historical context of the Genesis narrative to come forth rather easily. Further, the pairing of the texts allows for a more thorough picture to be painted of Israel's God. That is, in Isaiah God is not creating at such a prolific rate and as a result much more of God's character can be revealed to the reader. A community in exile surely has little to no hope for the future of their nation and is truly lost. These people lacked all of the things in their lives that were comforting to them and needed something that was able to push them forward into countering the power they faced. Exile is a matter of life and death for a community's traditions and rituals that set it apart from the rest of the world, a troubling reality that calls into question a community's identity and reason for existence.

As the Israelites continued to struggle for purpose during the Babylonian exile, they turned to the creation of their universe. It is important to understand the placement of history in which the Genesis account takes place, so as to avoid any confusion. Despite Genesis 1 being the first text encountered in the Bible, it is not the first event that establishes Yahweh as God. The first act to make God a distinguishable entity was the Exodus from Egypt into the Wilderness.<sup>2</sup> This divine action sets up the potential for God to be known as liberator of the oppressed. With Israel now finding itself exiled to Babylon because of the massive corruption present in Israelite politics, this community began searching for new ways to maintain faith in Yahweh. The first creation narrative encountered in Genesis, as we know it today, was the community's response to their oppressive conditions. The text relied on other creation narrative myths in circulation at the time, such as *Enuma Elish*, for inspiration and plot. However, this narrative set out to show God's dominance over all the other demiurges/creators/gods in existence at the time. Establishing a firm faith in creation that emerged in light of the God the Israelites knew throughout history to that point was a major key for the faith community to emerge from the dreaded experience of exile in tact.

God as creator of all was a comforting thought capable of restoring faith that God would deliver the Israelites from their distress. Isaiah references numerous times the Creator God who made the Earth and will rule over it while strengthen-

1 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 153.

2 Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 9.

ing the powerless so long as God's followers are patient.<sup>3</sup> Creation faith became a key to Israelites' maintaining faith in Yahweh while despising the false gods of the Babylonians. Creation faith resulted in Israel's understanding that God can overpower the Babylonian gods and Babylon's immense political and military domination. Creation faith had two potential roles: it either restored hope to the community or served as royal propaganda to support the oppressive order installed by the King of the empire.<sup>4</sup> The imperial version of creation faith is the opposite of liberative; it restricts the lives of the community and only intends to support the royal order. Meanwhile, the creation faith that restores hope provides an alternative way of life that defies the empire's rule. It reflects a hope that God will continue to reduce the amount of oppression the society faces. Hope that emerges from this understanding of God is a dangerous hope, dangerous in that it threatens the section of society that benefits from a corrupt system.<sup>5</sup> This type of hope is transformative and grants people the courage to resist and counteract the world of pain and anguish, particularly the structures that have created and sustained this kind of world. Hope through creation faith demands that the world's powers be resisted because of the order God (and no other deity or force) established in the world. In addition to being resistant to forces of oppression, it should be noted that this newfound hope emerges within communal suffering. Israel's ability to experience suffering allowed it to be prepared to learn from its experience and change and push for a new reality. When communities fail to suffer or realize they are suffering, the result is a society that has no use for hope.<sup>6</sup> In what, at its surface, seems paradoxical, hope emerges from suffering and the drive to topple oppressive social structures arises. God recognizes the suffering the entire time, but relies on God's community to seek God-self for the energy and power to hope against the Babylonian forces.

The Creator of Heaven and Earth was stronger than any other force known in the world and so would overturn the chaos of exile, just as God-self had previously done during the Exodus and then once again in the act of creation. Having a story to justify the creation of the world by God was critical in solidifying the belief that Israel would be rescued. If God could control cosmic chaos then God could certainly eliminate the worldly chaos Israel endured under Babylonian rule. Creation faith and the context of chaos from which it emerged sets the groundwork for a God who despises oppression and abuse of power. The cohesion of the

3 Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 150

4 Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 33.

5 Walter Brueggemann, *Ice Axes for Frozen Seas: A Biblical Theology of Provocation* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 339.

6 Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1985), 25.

biblical narrative provided by Isaiah's references to the God of Creation lead to an understanding of the Genesis text that is far better at indicating the power of God in the sphere of human actions.

### **Out of Chaos or Out of Nothingness?**

Most of the scholars I have encountered, though a somewhat limited selection, have created various interpretations of Genesis that perceive creation as out of nothing. They do not want to scrutinize over the serious implications that Yahweh did not create everything. Yet, Walter Brueggemann challenges this norm in considering creation as out of chaos, an interpretation that can lead to troubling questions. If creation is out of chaos, wouldn't there have to be another force acting in the universe prior to God's act in creation? If so, is the monotheistic tradition a proper frame for Judeo-Christian faith? And how does this effect understandings of God's sovereignty and power over Creation?

Despite these potential roadblocks, Brueggemann insists the text should be read as creation out of chaos because it allows for a reading of Genesis that keeps the margins of society in mind. Creation is not an act of God's supreme sovereignty, but rather an ethical covenant marked with justice and righteousness that has liberation at its core.<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Moltmann very briefly touches on interpretations that rely on creation out of chaos in stating that such interpretations face the danger of removing actual creation from the story of creation. He insists that those readings are focused on preserving and ordering the world, rather than understanding the implications of the biblical doctrine of creation.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, they escape the original intention of the text to develop an understanding of God's divine grace in creation. His concern arises as a claim aimed against process theologians who neglect the creation narratives in the Bible.

Before beginning the argument that emerges from a reading as creation out of chaos, it is necessary to determine exactly what is meant by "chaos." When referencing chaos, the text is referring to the first verse of Genesis and more specifically the words "formless and empty." In terms of Israel's history, chaos begins once the community recognizes God's call to flee from the corrupt powers of Pharaoh. It is at first life in the wilderness, spent wandering as a result of their transgressions.<sup>9</sup> The unpredictability of the community's life following the escape was similar to a formless existence; there was nothing by which to reliably count upon for any semblance of order. However, over time this chaotic lifestyle became organized

<sup>7</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 158.

<sup>8</sup> Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 79.

<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann, *The Land*, 28.

and, under the guidance of God, the Israelites encountered a land they could call their home. Thus, God's activity in history involves his creating out of something formless and void, which here looks like ordering and organizing the Israelites in a new homeland.

All throughout history, every time Israelites would be hugely unfaithful they would find themselves landless and living in exile or the wilderness. God's grace may be what manages to hold back the chaos until it is used for the purposes of divine retribution. Dominant social classes have a tendency to get "amnesia," numb to the painful, chaotic realities of those within their communities, and as a result, are prone to acting in ways that enable chaos to be present within the community; they do not see the chaos and thus continue to perpetuate it.<sup>10</sup> Thus, it is helpful to extend this understanding of chaos to the notion of oppression. When oppression is most near and active in the Israelite community, chaos re-enters the scene. So as to make this argument pertinent to modern times, one can posit that the stronger the forces of oppression are in society, the more likely the society is to be in a chaotic state, causing widespread unpredictability and a lack of order. As a result, it is the duty of Christians to actively combat oppression not only because divine acts of liberation such as the Exodus show that God's order should be absent of oppression, but also because of the dramatic effects chaos has on our relationships with all of creation.

Brueggemann's stance on the creation story does rely solely on creation out of chaos since he states that *creatio ex nihilo* is of little concern his interpretation of Genesis; however, I cannot help but suggest his argument is able to surpass Moltmann's concerns because it is intricately tied up in creation faith and what the cultural and theological significances of a creator God are in a world full of dehumanizing power struggles. In his work solely concerning Genesis, Brueggemann avoids taking a stance of either chaos or nothingness.<sup>11</sup> However, elsewhere he clearly favors chaos and even in his *Genesis Interpretation* in which he refuses a stance, he spills far more ink over chaos. Moltmann's concerns should be recognized and taken into account though, so to avoid removing God from the beginning of creation, something Brueggemann would certainly not approve of. Brueggemann's argument here, in particular his belief that exile plays a major role in the Genesis text, relies on a reading of creation out of chaos. Without chaos, the connections he draws would be unfounded and much more difficult to make. As a result, chaos takes priority for Brueggemann's theological claims to be logical and

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 29.

believable. Further, it should be noted that Brueggemann neglects to take a definitive stance on creation out of nothing but rather says it is not significant within the framework of his argument in his *Theology of the Old Testament*.<sup>12</sup> This could potentially mean he values the idea of *ex nihilo*, but that it fails to strengthen his reading in light of exile. Since he does not develop the idea of creation from nothingness any further, it is also possible that he completely dismisses it. Yet, in order to create the strongest interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2:3 as an inclusive and liberative text, the positive implications of both views on creation will be explored. This will show the versatility and complexity of the Genesis text while also providing more than one way to read the creation of the world for liberation. The next few paragraphs will discuss the merits of creation out of chaos from Brueggemann's perspective and then the possibilities of *creation ex nihilo* from Moltmann's lens.

Brueggemann's stance of reading Genesis as creation out of chaos ties into the text emerging from Babylonian exile, and it also allows for God to create the possibility of alternative realities, something which is sorely needed in times of oppression. These alternative realities are countercultural to the oppressive forces and create hope for the oppressed that in a society that follows God's order, such terrible conditions do not exist. Creation out of chaos leads to a belief that Yahweh desires God's created world to have a certain kind of character, a character related to the good qualities of life that become available to all, in particular the oppressed.<sup>13</sup> This world is one that does not participate in evil, corruptive, coercive powers because of God's work to fight against the persistence of chaos. God's work in creation is not only an alternative to chaos, but it also emerges from chaos. Essentially, chaos is always in the picture waiting for its opportunity to enter the scene and generate disorder in society. This chaos can rather easily be understood metaphorically as an emperor, dictator, or any other government leader's oppressive rule. As an aside, one should be careful and state that Brueggemann does not seem to favor any one political system or party over any other so long as the system/party is living in accordance with God's promise for reality, which is an alternative to the gloom of oppression that those in need frequently face.

When oppressive forces enter society, God's initial acts of creating and ordering out of this chaos directly show God's resistance of chaos. The current real world implications are serious and cannot be ignored when accepting that God created Heaven and Earth out of chaos, and this sort of understanding of creation leads to questions about oppression and the persistence of evil. Since God has previously acted against a state of chaos, it seems safe to assume God will contin-

<sup>12</sup> Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*, 158.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

ue to act in a manner that defies chaos. God's actions against chaos, as previously discussed, can be seen in Exodus and rejecting the harsh condition of life put forth by Pharaoh and the deliverance of Israel from Babylon in a Judeo-Christian frame. Furthermore, a Christian frame may see God sending Jesus into the world as an attempt to restore order and get Israel and the entire world back onto the proper path of caring for the oppressed, additional proof of God's resistance of chaos established by earthly powers.

Through God's creation out of Chaos, God creates alternate realities. These realities are brought into existence through God's speech. God's power is manifested when God's speech is used to generate a reality, and as a result God's speech is an action.<sup>14</sup> God's words are so dramatically transformative that through speech deeds in the world actually take place. This action not only created the world as it came to be known to humanity, but it also presents everyone who hears or reads the story of creation with an understanding that chaos is not God's reality. Chaos (re)occurs when people turn against God's will and actively seek domination over certain segments of society, which of course results in oppression. Yahweh's actions against chaos present all who are clearly harmed by chaos with hope. Hope in a biblical context is best explained by Brueggemann as "a determined act of subversion that intends always to counter a culture of despair."<sup>15</sup> Culture of despair is Brueggemann's poetic language for communities faced with oppressive forces. The most important part of this understanding of hope is that it comes from within a place of darkness and attempts to drive the forces of evil away. Hope is an essential aspect of countering the status quo, and through hope God recognizes the need for God's own presence within a community and grants the community strength to combat chaos that should not exist in God's order. In short, God's creation out of chaos allows for oppression to be actively combated through hope because of God's initial speech and action in the creation narrative.

Creation out of nothing also provides compelling arguments for the subversion of oppressive powers. These arguments deal with hope too, but obviously have nothing to do with drawing a metaphor between oppression and chaos. In considering the world being created out of nothing, Moltmann seeks to understand the creation narrative from a Trinitarian perspective. Perhaps most profound is his interpretation of nature, with nature in this section of his argument referring to all the earth including humanity. Nature is part of God's creation but does not cover all of the creation. Because of nature's plight throughout history, it can be seen as an object that continually faces destruction and is constantly suffering. This

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>15</sup> Brueggemann, *Ice Axes for Frozen Seas*, 43.

suffering is full of hope for breaking the bondage it faces. Moltmann understands nature as temporary and evolving. As a result, it constantly has to reach for alleviation of its suffering, a process rooted and sustained through hope.

To be fully liberated, creation must continue to push for freedom from suffering and not grow complacent.<sup>16</sup> This is tied into understanding creation as out of nothing through its character of apparent progression through history to return to God's grace. Creation out of nothing has no presuppositions of God's desired order for creation, yet it does offer ideas about human stewardship and avoidance of exploitation.<sup>17</sup> This divine command to avoid exploitation is enough to show that God would not approve of oppressive relationships and establishes a God that supports a liberation framework. Further, a creation out of nothing means God acted in a self-limiting way and willingly gave up some of God's own holy space to create Heaven and Earth.<sup>18</sup> God chose to self-limit God's own power when acting with creative power from nothingness, and this decision should sufficiently express God's disapproval of oppression.

If God brought creation into existence and gave up a part of God-self, giving all organisms places to live even though this action wasn't necessary, then God must be against domination and oppression. God would not want part of God's body to be neglected to the point that it becomes unhealthy. God's act in creation was purely divine grace; God first gives up some of God's own holy, divine space to make room for a creation that God does not need. God seeks to share God's own divine life with all of the creation. Surely that idea is truly radical and has the potential to transform the world if used as a lens into God's creation. Understanding that God gave up part of God-self so other things could exist is by no means a simple feat, but if the idea is accepted then God's care and love for the creation becomes evident.<sup>19</sup> Nothing is outside of God because part of God's existence was transformed into the world, and so the world and all of creation exists in God's space.<sup>20</sup> God did not act gracefully so people and the environment could suffer, because in that way God would suffer as well. The easiest way to understand that God cares for the creation out of nothing is to see the world as part of God's body. Panentheism, which develops an understanding that God interpenetrates all of creation but that God is not synonymous with the universe, meaning that nothing in creation that is outside of God, easily allows for a paradigm in which God

16 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 39.

17 *Ibid.*, 75.

18 *Ibid.*, 143.

19 *Ibid.*, 88.

20 *Ibid.*, 152.

clearly cares for creation and disapproves of any exploitation.<sup>21</sup> Panentheism calls creation to be treated responsibly because God is constantly present within it. *Creatio ex nihilo* can lead to the development of God caring deeply for creation and acting to preserve its integrity and goodness without becoming corrupt. It does not make sense for any other type of God, besides a God that wants liberation for God's own creation, to desire that all of creation figures out how to function in proper community with one another.

Looking forward, humanity cannot continue to ignore or delay facing the ecological dilemmas of today. Environmental crisis exists. Climate change exists. The negative role humans have played in allowing ecological degradation exists. It is time to be responsible and admit our mistakes. Denying that the environmental problem exists is becoming equivalent to denying that the earth is round. The facts have been presented to society over and over again. Everyone needs accept that there is an issue so we can begin working together in community to address and resolve it. It is time for humanity to practice some humility and recognize our faults in interacting with our common home. We must rediscover our role as stewards of the Earth and treat the rest of creation with the respect that it deserves.

One potential way this can be done is through practicing Sabbath. Rest is plainly critical for the sake of the community of creation. The order to rest inherently indicates that there should be a cessation of production and accumulation. God always intended for an abundance to exist; God consistently provided for Israel whenever they needed it the most.<sup>22</sup> Creation faith paired along with Sabbath develops an understanding that God will provide in abundance whenever the community finds itself in difficult situations. In this way, creation faith as a means of ensuring the survival of creation calls the community into Sabbath. Remembering God as Creator invites the community into relationships that are healthy and continuous. Moltmann brings the aspects together quite nicely saying:

The Sabbath laws are God's ecological strategy, designed to preserve the life, which God has created. In its rest and its rhythmical interruption of time, the Sabbath is also the strategy, which can lead us out of the ecological crisis...and can show us the values of sustainable development and harmony with nature.<sup>23</sup>

Sabbath's emphasis on community is unmistakable and should be discussed for the sake of developing a broader, more welcoming understanding of the community of creation. Sabbath taking place within a community impacts economic

21 Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987), 71.

22 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 378.

23 Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 116.

life and life with respect to the environment. Perhaps it would be wise to explain how Sabbath requires, creates, and develops a sense of community. Sabbath at its core creates a community consisting of God, humans, and the entirety of creation. Each individual aspect of the community has their own Sabbath that is interlinked with other members of the community.<sup>24</sup> God's Sabbath is clearly the seventh day of creation, but through God's Sabbath the entirety of Creation gets crowned as being good. Then humans practice Sabbath for the sake of exalting their God and for giving the environment a small reprieve from being toiled with. Lastly, creation's Sabbath, perhaps the most easily forgotten one, requires humans to uphold their end of the deal and let land be unproductive so it may continue the following year to produce fruit as God commanded it to do from the beginning. This multi-layered community of creation, preserved and protected through the paradigm of Sabbath, has the power to restore the world into what God intended it to be. Within this model, exploitation cannot be sustained. The world cannot afford to be considered anthropocentrically for much longer, and a shift toward being community-centered would do wonders. The community of creation has to be rediscovered for the sake of our home and the lives it supports.

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