NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

God's Creation: ברא in the Priestly Source*

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1. If there is one verb that distinctly expresses God's creative activity in the Priestly cosmogony, that verb is ברא 'create'. ברא summarizes the activities of God's workweek (Gen 1:1; 2:3), and it implements creative acts within the first six days as well (1:21, 27 [*tris*]). But ברא is not the only verb of creative activity in the cosmogony. There are other modes of creation, such as those described by the words הבדיל 'divide, separate' (v. 4) and נתן 'give' (v. 17; see also v. 29). There is also עשה 'make'. It appears more often within the cosmogony than the others (e.g., vv. 7, 16, 25). And after the cosmogony proper, it too summarizes the activities of God's workweek (1:31; 2:2 [*bis*]; see also 2:3). The distributions of ברא and עשה, then, are similar. They are similar enough, even, to support the claim that ברא and עשה are functionally alike or, perhaps, synonymous. Whatever distinct identity ברא may have had, it seems obscured both by the correlative term עשה (see also 1:27aβ // 9:6b; 5:1; 6:7; Exod 34:10) and by the other verbs expressing what God did in Gen 1:1–2:3.[1]

This problem has not proven insurmountable.[2] On the one hand, the identity of ברא has been recovered by intertextual comparison. In this case, ברא implies an extraordinary marvel (e.g., Num 16:30) and something wholly new (e.g., Jer 31:22; Ps 51:12). On the other hand, the identity of ברא has been deduced from the cosmogony itself. In this latter case, ברא "contains the idea of effortless production";[3] suggests the absence of opposition to God's creative purpose; or connotes manifest divine power in particular events, especially as an expression of God's order and/or sovereignty in the world. But here again, these interpretations do not establish whether (the use of) ברא in the Priestly Source (P) is different from

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[1]For the supplementary status of Gen 2:4a, lying outside of the cosmogony proper, see Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (2d ed.; Mythos; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 67.

[2]For a concise sample of opinions, see W. H. Schmidt, "ברא *br'* to create," *TLOT* 1:254–55.

[3]John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (2d ed.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930) 15 (italics deleted).

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that of other biblical writers. Nor is the nature of P's ברא established independently of the Priestly themes that have been recognized in the larger cosmogonic narrative. P's (use of) ברא should be given a new hearing.

2. In comparison with the other creative verbs in the cosmogony, ברא is unique. Unlike נתן, for example, it does not express placement or assignment. ברא expresses performance and production. In addition, ברא has a unique agent: "it is used exclusively of divine activity."[4] The grammatical subject of the other creative verbs is not so specific. True, God 'divided' light and darkness (Gen 1:4b), but the heavenly dome and the luminaries will perform the same separative role for all time to come (e.g., vv. 6 and 14a, respectively). Similarly, עשה expresses the productive activity of God (e.g., v. 7) as well as the (re-) productive activity of fruit trees (vv. 11, 12). Moreover, prior to the last act of creation, God proposes that he and his divine council jointly 'make' the human race (v. 26a [נעשה]).[5] This last example is important. It shows that ברא is not merely restricted to "divine activity" but to God's divine activity (see v. 27). ברא is a power that God does not share but which he exclusively controls.

The distribution of ברא is also telling. Within P, ברא is restricted to the cosmogony.[6] Within the cosmogony, its pattern is more restricted still. Of its six attestations, two pertain to the entirety of the cosmogony and are each embedded in a synoptic statement (Gen 1: 1; 2:3). Another three tokens of ברא are concentrated in the single verse that narrates the creation of human beings (1:27). Its final token marks the creation of the large sea monsters, other marine life, and birds (v. 21). In other words, P's ברא encloses two phases of creation: the beginning and finale of all cosmogonic activity (1:1; 2:3); and the first and last living creatures (1:21, 27). ברא demarcates the creation of a physical domain and all the animate beings that inhabit it.

3. Outside of the cosmogony, the few non-Priestly pentateuchal attestations of ברא provide a context in which these cosmogonic tokens can be evaluated. There is Deut 4:32, for instance, which simply corroborates Gen 1:27 and recalls that God created humankind. The other non-Priestly pentateuchal passages, however, tell something different.

The first is Gen 6:7 (J).

> Yahweh said, "I will wipe out humankind whom I have created (את־האדם אשר־בראתי) from upon the surface of the ground—from humankind to beasts, moving things, and birds of heaven, for I regret that I made them."

Wenham recognizes that "[t]he very terminology [of this verse] reflects the account of Gen 1."[7] But the grammar does not. The sequence מן - עד - ועד is attested only here and in 7:23 (J), where Yahweh fulfills his commitment to eradicate everything standing on

[4]Ibid. (italics deleted).

[5]So, e.g., Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. Mark E. Biddle; Mercer Library of Biblical Studies; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997) 112–13.

[6]Cf. Gen 2:4a, which is attributable to a Priestly redactor (R^P) (see n. 1, above); and Gen 5:1–2, which may reflect a different, genealogical component of the larger Priestly tradition (P^T) (see Marshall D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies with Special Reference to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus* [2d ed.; SNTSMS 8; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988] 16–17).

[7]Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC 1; Waco: Word, 1987) 1–5.

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earth.[8] Further, the sequence את־האדם אשר reappears only in 2:8 (J): 'Yahweh God planted a garden in Eden in the east, and he placed there the man whom (את־האדם אשר) he fashioned.' Thus Gen 6:7 reverses 2:8. Absent the protected security of Eden, Yahweh promises to destroy human beings as well as all animate creatures which accompany them and which they control (see 2:19–20a). Humanity, whom only Yahweh could have created (אשר־בראתי), must be punished by their Creator. ברא justifies Yahweh's self-imposed role as agent of destruction.

The second non-Priestly pentateuchal text deploys creation language in another way.

> [Yahweh] said, "I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform extraordinary things not before created (נפלאת אשר לא־נבראו) in the whole earth or in all the nations. All the people around you (lit., in whose midst you are) will see Yahweh's deed—that it is awesome—which I perform with you." (Exod 34:10 [J])[9]

To a great extent, the narrative situation here is comparable to that of Gen 6:7: impending divine punishment for corrupt human behavior. But unlike Genesis 6, Yahweh concedes to forgive and even repair the breach. He extends a covenant, and he promises to act on Israel's behalf and perform נפלאת. But according to Exod 3:20—the only other pentateuchal mention of נפלאת—Yahweh produces such 'extraordinary things' in order to devastate Israel's opponents (see also 15:11b). "[T]he intervention of God on Israel's behalf requires the use of creation language. . . . God will make a covenant such that all people will testify to the wonder of God's work."[10] Still, God's wondrous work can terrify, punish, and destroy life.

The final pentateuchal example of non-Priestly ברא supports this double-edged interpretation. The scene is the insurrection of Dathan and Abiram against Moses, and the punishment the two may face.

> (Moses said, . . .) "If these men die like any (other) human being, (if) theirs be the fate of any (other) human being, Yahweh was not the one who sent me. But if Yahweh creates a creation (בריאה יברא), and the ground parts its mouth, swallows up them and all that is theirs, and they descend alive to Sheol—you will know that these men despised Yahweh." (Num 16:29–30 [J])

Here, Moses presents the condition under which God's own hand can be detected in response to the dissidents. The instrument of God's curse on Cain will rupture and engulf the rebels (see Gen 4:11 [J]; Exod 15:12), as it indeed does (Num 16:31–33 [J]). Alongside creation language, then, "we read of the elimination of the insurgent faction by divine wrath, realized as an earthquake. We encounter a melange of themes associated with cataclysm and with signs from God."[11] In this case, 'creation' reflects God's power to punish by death.

[8]B. Jacob, *Das erste Buch der Tora. Genesis* (Berlin: Schocken, 1934) 181.

[9]Cf. the source-critical discussions by Shimon Bar-On, "The Festival Calendars in Exodus xxiii 14–19 and xxxiv 18–26," *VT* 48 (1998) 185 n. 57, 190–91 (reference courtesy of Bernard Levinson); and Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, "Das Privilegrecht Ex 34,11–16 in der Diskussion," in *Recht und Ethos im Alten Testament. Gestalt und Wirkung. Festschrift für Horst Seebass zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. Stefan Beyerle, Günter Mayer, and Hans Strauß; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1999) 40–41, 55.

[10]Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 613.

[11]Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1–20* (AB 4A; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 428.

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4. It is possible that J's punitive, destructive, and devastating ברא is quietly echoed in P's cosmogony.

> God said, "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living things, and birds fly over the earth across the surface of heaven's dome." God created (ויברא) the great sea monsters, and every living thing that moves with which the waters swarm according to their kind, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. (Gen 1:20–21)

"Of all the creatures that are enumerated in the Genesis 1 account, the ones that stand out most by their . . . unexpectedness are the 'great sea monsters.'"[12] For unlike all other creations of God, these monsters have a mythological prehistory. They appear "in precreation battle traditions in the Bible (note Isaiah 27:1; 51:9; Psalms 74:13)" where they are "turbulent, restive and antagonistic creatures that must be quelled by the Creator's might."[13] There, at least, they represent active opponents of God. Here, they symbolize "all the menacing creatures, all the elements of creation that make life precarious and uncertain."[14] In both cases, they are antithetical to God and "hostile to God."[15] But in the cosmogony, they are also powerless. Without ceremony, they are 'created'; they are incorporated into a wider, unpernicious zoological category that is itself spread between marine and heavenly regions; and they are all deemed 'good' (v. 21bβ).

God's last act of creation conforms to a similar paradigm. But in this case, God's power is not directed against the created entity. It is directed elsewhere.

> Then God said, "Let us make (נעשה) humankind in our image, according to our likeness. . . ." So God created (ויברא) humankind in his image, in the image of God he created (ברא) it, male and female he created (ברא) them. (Gen 1:26–27)

נעשה is the key. For between the proposal to make a human race and its execution, two parts of this verb form are replaced. Its grammatically plural subject, which includes God and his divine council, is replaced by an unambiguous singular (cf. Job 38:4–7). Conjointly, the egalitarian verb 'make', which appropriately includes God and his council in the scope of this divine plan, is replaced by God's exclusive 'create'.[16] This bipartite replacement, though, does not happen only once. It happens repeatedly, three times, in the three overlapping sentences of v. 27. Its significance seems unmistakable: God's power thoroughly replaces that of his council and, in so doing, completely precludes any involvement of theirs whatsoever in humankind. God's last act of creation vaporizes his divine peers.

The remaining trace of an eradicating force to God's creative power appears at the head of the cosmogony. For as it is described in Gen 1:2, there was a world which preexisted

[12]Edward L. Greenstein, "Presenting Genesis 1, Constructively and Deconstructively," *Proof* 21 (2001) 15.

[13]Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken, 1979) 15.

[14]Greenstein, "Presenting Genesis 1," 16.

[15]Skinner, *Genesis*, 28.

[16]W. Randall Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness: Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism* (CHANE 15; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 203–4.

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creation.[17] This world, as it were, had a reality all its own. It consisted of "the earth . . . in its primitive chaotic, unformed state."[18] It was dark. And, like the very first 'created' life, this world also had an aquatic element: the watery 'deep' of mythological lore.[19] As Childs describes it, the entirety of this preexisting world was "an active chaos standing in opposition to the will of God."[20] Hence, the beginning of creation (v. 1), at least, can be viewed as the undoing of this un-Godly opposition. God starts by facing the 'deep' (v. 2b), and, whatever destructive power it had before, he neutralizes its waters. He counteracts darkness with light (v. 3). He splits the water between two spheres (vv. 6–7) and restricts its lower portion to a designated area (vv. 9–10a), once and for all (v. 10b). God incrementally retrieves the un-Godly 'earth' of precreation chaos, isolates it from water (vv. 9–10aα), oversees its production of flora (v. 11–12), and institutes terrestrial life (vv. 24–25a). By the end of the cosmogony, the active elements of the precreation world are, with rare exception, neutralized and subsumed under God's one power.

5. These elements are not eliminated, however. When provoked, the earth can erupt violently (e.g., Lev 18:26–28 [H]; see also Num 13:32b [P]).[21] Darkness begins each and every daily cycle as 'evening' (e.g., Gen 1:5b).[22] And the watery deep, through its innate destructive force, is a looming danger to God's creative order (7:11 [P]). "[Chaos] is a reality which continues to exist and continues to threaten [God's] creation."[23]

But God instituted safeguards. The deep apparently falls under God's control, for he alone forces back the waters rushing from above and below (Gen 8:1–2). Darkness, like the light, is assigned an astral overlord (1:16, 18aα). Similarly, the earth receives a human overlord who will control it with great might (vv. 26bα, 28aβb). By design, God shares rulership of creation.

He shares rulership with humankind in particular. Of all his creations, God uniquely invests himself in human beings. Created 'in the image of God' (Gen 1:27aβ) to 'have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of heaven, and over the beasts, and over the whole earth, and over everything that moves on the earth' (v. 26b; see also v. 28b), humankind is appointed by God to represent his own sovereignty ('image') over two categories of creation. God gives it dominion over the terrestrial domain that he 'created' (see v. 1). God also gives it dominion over all the animate life within this domain, beginning with the large aquatic animals that he 'created' (v. 21). No wonder the Priestly writer affirms, reaffirms, and reaffirms again that God 'created' human beings (v. 27). P's ברא is an expression of God's sovereign power which he intensely invests in the human race. To this extent, God empowers the human race to continue the work that he had begun.

[17]J. M. Powis Smith, "The Syntax and Meaning of Genesis 1:1–3," *AJSL* 44 (1928) 110.

[18]S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis with Introduction and Notes* (12th ed.; WC; London: Methuen & Co., 1926) 3.

[19]See B. Alster, "Tiamat תהום," *DDD*[2] 867–69.

[20]Brevard S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (2d ed.; SBT 27; London: SCM, 1962) 43.

[21]J. Joosten, *People and Land in the Holiness Code: An Exegetical Study of the Ideational Framework of the Law in Leviticus 17–26* (VTS 67; Leiden: Brill, 1996) 152–53.

[22]Levenson, *Creation*, 123.

[23]Childs, *Myth and Reality*, 43. See also Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (trans. John H. Marks; rev. ed.; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 50–51.

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6. For the Priestly writer, the celebratory and well-nigh triumphant work that God had begun is exclusively his. He alone ברא "created a good, ordered world; . . . He 'separated' and hierarchically ordered the primordial mass into a 'good' pattern; . . . the created world of nature is, as a result, a harmony; and . . . Elohim is Omnipotent and without rival."[24] Creation is God's good, constructive cosmogonic activity. But through ברא, P's God also acts as counteragent. He quiets the turbulent land. He takes control of the sea monsters. And he ousts his divine colleagues. ברא is an interventionist activity through which God demonstrates that he is "Omnipotent and without rival."

Whether this creative activity comes to an end is not immediately clear. Schmidt implies that it does. "P uses [ברא] to indicate a final action that needs no supplement."[25] Gorman says it doesn't. "The process of the creation of the divine order . . . is not fully complete at the end of the creation account."[26] The text will decide.

At first blush, the text seems to support Schmidt. For as Gen 1:31 states, God retrospectively deems everything that he had made-and-done (עשה) to be 'very good'. 'Good', in this context, has at least two complementary interpretations: P's God positively endorses and approves of a particular work; and he also signals that, "as far as its nature required and permitted," each work is "complete."[27] By implication, the intensified comment 'very good' at the end of the cosmogony expresses absolute divine approval as well as the absolute finale of creation *in toto*.

But these interpretations need to be qualified. Barr points out that, despite "a final judgment of goodness to the whole, . . . the created world . . . still contained equivocal elements" such as darkness and the deep which "are negative and dangerous, signs of chaos."[28] Further, Driver qualifies the notion that creation is complete: it is complete but *only* "as far as its nature required and permitted."[29] Taken together, these qualifications suggest a more dynamic and ambivalent view of creation. Problems notwithstanding, P's God initiates a self-sustaining ordered universe—without an endpoint in sight—of which he very much approves. The activity of creation is not and cannot be "finished and concluded" for good.[30]

As a matter of narrative fact, of course, creation does not end with the cosmogony. J's God will twice poise himself to 'create' something entirely new. Arguably, the promise of Exod 34:10 will be fulfilled later in the wilderness and conquest stories; certainly, it lies in the future. The other creation of Num 16:30 is less speculative. It happens just as Moses says it could (vv. 31–33). Twice, then, the pre-Priestly Yahwist tradition stipulates that creation occurs long after the world has been formed.

[24]Fishbane, *Text and Texture*, 8.

[25]Schmidt, "ברא *br'*," 256.

[26]Frank H. Gorman, Jr., *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology* (JSOTS 91; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990) 230.

[27]Driver, *Genesis*, 5.

[28]James Barr, "Was Everything That God Created Really Good? A Question in the First Verse of the Bible," in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (ed. Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 60.

[29]See n. 27.

[30]Cf. August Dillmann, *Genesis Critically and Exegetically Expounded* (trans. Wm. B. Stevenson; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1897) 1:61.

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The Priestly cosmogony provides for this possibility, too. Compare these two adjacent statements:

> On the seventh day, God finished his work (מלאכתו) that he had done (Gen 2:2a);
>
> On the seventh day, he rested from all his work (מכל־מלאכתו) that he had done. (Gen 2:2b; see also v. 3b)

Whereas God's cessation from work is complete ('all'), the work itself is not. The work that God finished is simply labeled 'his work' rather than *all* 'his work'. Collaterally, the definite direct object מלאכתו is not governed by את. This omission is all the more remarkable when Gen 2:2a is compared with its echo in Exod 40:33b (P) where, at the completion of the tabernacle, the Priestly writer applies the language of Genesis (compare also the notice in Exod 39:43 < Gen 1:31).

> Gen 2:2a: ויכל אלהים . . . מלאכתו
>
> Exod 40:33b: ויכל משה את־המלאכה

In imitation of God's cosmogonic prototype, God's chosen agent finishes the tabernacle project. Yet Moses does not replicate God's model exactly. את signifies that the tabernacle project is "finished and concluded" and complete[31] (see also Samaritan Pentateuch and LXX). By contrast, the absence of this marker in Gen 2:2a, recurring nowhere else in P's creation story, allows for a more open-ended reading. Gen 2:2a states that God finished his work but not necessarily all his work in its entirety.

The description of God's cosmogonic activity as מלאכה 'work' is another indicator of nonfinality. This term, which is rarely applied to God, is doubly cataphoric. First, it foreshadows the tabernacle narrative when, at God's behest, Moses, the foremen (e.g., Exod 36:1 [P]), and the Israelite people (35:29 [P]) each furnish מלאכה towards its completion. The construction of God's domain is expressed identically whether it is performed by God or by human beings. Second, מלאכה foreshadows the language of Sabbath strictures in which מלאכה is permitted for six days but prohibited on the seventh (e.g., 31:15 [P]). Either way, humankind/the Israelite people continue to do מלאכה after God stopped.

The opportunity for an ongoing human participation in, and extension of, creation lies even earlier in the cosmogony. For unlike every other creative act but one, P's God does not explicitly label the human creature 'good'. That other act is the second: the construction of a dome divider to separate the cosmic waters (Gen 1:6–8). That is, neither the dome nor the prototype of the human race is "fully complete" or "finished and concluded," presumably each in its own manner. In the case of the dome, that manner is clear enough. The work of the second day is not fully complete and finished until the seas and the dry land have been separated (see v. 10b).[32] In the other case, though, the manner in which human beings are incomplete cannot be inferred from its immediate context. Perhaps the human creature is as 'good' as the unfinished celestial dome within the scope of God's creation. Alternatively, the human creature is as 'good' as the "equivocal elements" that persist from precreation times.

While the equivocal nature of human beings cannot be dismissed, the Priestly text favors the notion that God created a human race that is not finished, concluded, or complete from

[31]W. Randall Garr, "Affectedness, Aspect, and Biblical Hebrew *ʾet*," *ZAH* 4 (1991) 130–33.
[32]E.g., Driver, *Genesis*, 7.

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the start. Creation merely launches a human mission and dynamic trajectory which will both continue as long as the world that God himself created. Its mission of sovereignty and domination extends over two realms of God's creation: the natural world (Gen 1:26bαbβ, 28aβb) and all of its animate life (1:26bαa–bα, 26bβ, 28b), potentially including human life (see 9:6). Its trajectory—characteristically known as תולד(ו)ת—is biological, genealogical, and expansive (1:28aβa, 9:1b, 7a, etc.). First applied to the creation of the world (2:4a [R^P]), תולד(ו)ת is thereafter applied to the developing world of (proto-) Israelites: from Adam (5:1 [P^T]) and Noah (6:9aα [P^T]), to Jacob (37:2 [P^T]), and so on. The Priestly cosmogony yields all human and Israelite history. תולד(ו)ת begins with the creation of the world, leads to the Israelites, and continues further still.

It is perhaps not coincidental that ברא occurs six times—one short of seven, a number suggesting completeness—in the Priestly cosmogony. For in the Priestly source, creation begins with God's unique power to construct a physical world and populate it with animate beings. It also demonstrates God's triumphant force that controls and quiets restive rivals. But this 'work' does not end. It continues with human beings who are emphatically empowered to procreate, conquer the world, and dominate its many creatures. Creation, then, will continue as long as the human race exists.

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