

With this, the stage is set for the structure of the book as Chambers asks if creation *ex nihilo* is sustainable as a category or framework for the interpretation of Genesis 1. The structure of the chapters is logical. Chapters 1 and 2 look at creation *ex nihilo* from the perspective of modern biblical scholarship and from historical/theological studies respectively. The third chapter attempts to synthesise these perspectives as the author examines the rise of creation *ex nihilo* in the early church. The conclusions of this chapter reveal the crux of Chamber's position, as he argues that it was actually 'biblical pressure' that led the early church to teach creation *ex nihilo* as the discernible 'deep logic of Scripture' (p. 132). This is the point where the literary-canonical context brings the two seemingly disparate positions together.

It is also this larger literary-canonical context that serves to bring the philological examination of the syntax of Genesis 1:1–3 in chapter 4 together. Although Chambers believes that the opening words of Genesis 1 are best understood as an independent clause, he admits that philological evidence alone is inconclusive. Thus, chapter 5 expands the hermeneutical horizons and uses Levenson, Gunkel and Childs as a way into seeing how the broader narrative might inform conclusions. The book culminates in the sixth chapter where Chambers offers two options for reading Genesis 1. The first follows Gunkel's and Childs' approaches that Genesis 1:1 should be read as a heading to the entire narrative of the chapter, and in that respect should be seen as providing hermeneutical guidelines for how to read it. The second option, and the one that Chamber 'tentatively' argues, is that Genesis 1:1 describes an initial comprehensive act. In this act, God created his own domain within creation and then the domain for his creatures. Interestingly, Chambers insists that 'the larger argument of this work reconsidering the role of creation *ex nihilo* in reading Gen 1 does not stand or fall on this particular proposal' (p. 240). This being the case, the author concludes with some suggestions for how creation *ex nihilo* can illuminate Genesis 1, wherein the Christian theology and modern biblical scholarship can be brought into constructive dialogue.

From the perspective of a historical theologian, Chambers' work shows a promising reunion of two disciplines that were inseparable for so long. The importance of recognising development in the biblical text is balanced with the inevitability of the necessity of development in the theological task as the text continues to live.

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Sandy Finlayson, *Chief Scottish Man: The Life and Ministry of Thomas Chalmers*

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Without Thomas Chalmers' vision, organisational talents and ability to rally opinion, it is likely that the Free Church would never have come about. Building on his previous,

shorter study *Thomas Chalmers* (also from the Evangelical Press), Sandy Finlayson traces the life of Chalmers from humble beginnings to his lasting impact. Finlayson is Library Director and Professor of Theological Bibliography at Westminster Theological Seminary. This book includes a new chapter on the extensive reach of Chalmers' preaching and pastoral leadership. Such was Chalmers' influence in Scotland and beyond that fellow countryman Thomas Carlyle dubbed him 'the chief Scottish man of his time' (p. 12).

Finlayson organises his work around eleven chapters. Emphases include 'Scotland in Transition' (setting Chalmers' context), 'Early Life' (1780–1803), chapters on his parishes/pastorates in Kilmany, Tron and St John's (1803–23), 'St. Andrews University' (1823–8), 'The Scottish Church Crisis' (1828–42), 'The Disruption' (1842–3), 'The Free Church' (1843–7), 'Preacher and Leader' (including samplings from his sermons) and 'Chief Scottish Man' (covering his death and legacy). All are weighty chapters well worth the investment, but three in particular call for a closer look.

Chapter 1, 'Scotland in Transition', supplies material for understanding Chalmers' era. A tide of revolution sweeping across Europe, the merging of England and Scotland, and the burgeoning industrial revolution led to a time of great prosperity and creativity (including the contributions of Hume, Burns, Scott and others) in Scotland. Still, massive social problems (working conditions, crime and immigration) abounded. The Church of Scotland offered few answers, for she had her own issues. How ministers were appointed, the 'establishment principle' (i.e. the link between the church and the state) and two divergent streams of theology wrestled for the soul of the church. The 'moderates' stressed societal recognition at the expense of spiritual vitality, refusing gospel application to social problems. Conversely, 'evangelicals' were full of gospel zeal for Scotland and the world. This included passionate preaching and a brand of 'congregationalism' spiritually independent of the state.

Chapters 10 ('Preacher and Leader') and 11 ('Chief Scottish Man') are highlights. Chalmers' ministry model of strong preaching, team leadership and active laity was a rare commodity. Reinvigorating the office of elder and deacon, Sabbath schools, lay visitation and mid-week meetings were just some of his innovations and emphases. Finlayson reflects:

While his leadership in the church, his views on social issues, his work as an academic and writer were all important, they were not the preeminent thing in his life. Rather, the primary focus should be on Chalmers as the pastor, who cared for his people and preached the good news about Jesus Christ. It was this good news of sins forgiven, and new life in Christ, that animated his life. (p. 158)

A couple of points in particular are worth noting from this study. First is Chalmers' gospel emphasis. Early on, Chalmers believed the church was for making people good, thereby maintaining an orderly society. After a bout with consumption, questioning his priorities and subsequent conversion, his gospel perspective changed. 'His first objective was to preach the gospel and through his preaching and teaching invite his hearers to repent of their sins and turn to Christ for salvation' (p. 63). His evangelical conversion impacted his life and his congregation. For Chalmers, a changed heart meant a changed life that impacted all areas of life. While some may dismiss Chalmers' activism as simply a version of the later North American Social Gospel, Finlayson counters, 'This is untrue. Rather, it is the application of the gospel to every area of life which Christians are called upon to do' (p. 156).

Second, Finlayson's balance is commendable. Chalmers was a scholar, teacher, pastor, public theologian, family man, in many things excelling; still, we must learn from his failures as well as his successes. A leader by word and example, having the gift of self-promotion, Chalmers was moody and impulsive, did not receive criticism well and was not always gracious in debate. Finlayson asserts, 'He could be very stubborn and possessed a formidable temper, which he displayed all too often. His pen, which he had used so successfully to promote the gospel and social change, could sometimes be turned on his foes' (p. 96). 'He could be ruthless' (p. 153).

Finlayson is not interested in hagiography; his desire is to paint a true picture of God's servant: 'Chalmers was a complex man who did much good, but at the same time he made mistakes, and it is my hope that this expanded volume will deal fairly with both his achievements and his failures' (p. 11). The content is both compact and potent. Anyone interested in church history, Christian biography or the history of preaching will welcome this volume. *Chief Scottish Man* will fit nicely beside *Letters of Thomas Chalmers* (Banner of Truth, 2007) or *The Works of Thomas Chalmers: Complete in One Volume* (Andesite, 2017). This exploration of the life, theology and method of one of history's great preachers will enable us to minister more effectively by standing on the shoulders of a giant.

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Paul Molnar, *Freedom, Necessity, and the Knowledge of God: In Conversation with Karl Barth and Thomas F. Torrance*

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Molnar's book delineates his relentless opposition to 'Natural Theology', in any form, on any front, together with his assessment of the deleterious implicates of such theology. The ligature rendering the book consistent and coherent is Molnar's insistence that Jesus Christ, as attested by holy scripture (Molnar eschews all putative contemporary 'Christ figures') is the first and final Word, the One who is rejected as soon as he is modified or supplemented. To begin anywhere but with Jesus Christ (whose identity includes Israel as the people of God, attested by the Older Testament) is to skew theology from the outset; and unless Jesus Christ is the final Word, the sufficiency of Christ is denied. Such denial, as Molnar's exposition and critique of liberation theology illustrates, reduces the gospel to an ideology spawned by a socio-political agenda, while the mission of the church is perverted into a programme of social adjustment. Briefly, unless Jesus Christ is the first and final Word, the gospel is denatured, theology is deprived of its proper orientation and substance and the church's mission ceases to be formed, informed and normed by the truth of the God whose eternal self-naming as Father, Son and Holy Spirit admits no substitution or alteration.