“Partakers of the Promise”: Participation between Covenant and Ontology

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Paul’s dramatic claim in Eph. 3:6 that through the gospel gentiles have become “συμμέτοχοι of the promise in Christ Jesus” sits at the intersection of a cluster of themes I would like to explore in this essay. On the one hand, μέτοχη (participation) is a bit of Greek metaphysical terminology which, though not invented by Plato, was nonetheless transmitted to philosophical and theological history in a distinctly Platonic idiom.¹ For partly this reason, the question of whether and to what extent Christian thought can make legitimate use of an ontology of participation has often been bound up with whether certain aspects of a broadly Platonic metaphysics are consistent with certain specifically Christian doctrinal commitments.² Potential conflict appears to lie along at least two different but related axes. The first axis is creational, and the concern is that a Platonic account of participation in abstract Ideas sits uneasily with the Christian view that creation derives its existence not from an impersonal divine essence, but from the personal God of biblical revelation. The second axis is soteriological, and the concern is similar: if salvation indeed involves becoming μέτοχοι of Christ (Heb. 3:14), one might worry that an unduly abstract account of μέτοχη risks transforming redemptive participation in the person of Jesus into what Michael Horton calls “an instance of a more general metaphysical truth.”³

In a certain sense, both concerns hinge on Platonism’s tendency to value the universal over the particular and to subsume whatever happens to stray into its orbit under a kind of

¹ Two quick points. I think Paul wrote Ephesians (or, at the very least, I remain unconvinced by arguments for the letter’s inauthenticity), and I will assume as much throughout the essay. Second, μέτοχη and its variants are not merely metaphysical terms, Platonic or otherwise. They have a range of meanings, both technical and non-technical, that span a wide variety of contexts.
² This question has been at the center of recent debates surrounding Radical Orthodoxy. See especially the essays collected in James K.A. Smith and James H. Olthuis, eds., Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).
metaphysical master code. As I read it, Paul’s claim in Eph. 3:6 adds a third layer of complexity, one that includes and exceeds the first two. For Paul, after all, the phrase “partakers of the promise” is not a vague promise of salvation, nor much less a generic affirmation of creaturely participation in divine Being, but a reference to Yahweh’s irreducibly specific pledge, now fulfilled in Christ, to bless all nations through Abraham (Gen. 3:16, 18). And this suggests, in turn, that if Platonic participation names an ontological relationship between concrete particulars and abstract universals, for Paul participation assumes a decisively covenantal shape—one according to which we “participate in God” by participating in the story whereby God’s promises to Israel reach their glorious, albeit unexpected, climax in Jesus of Nazareth.4

The Abraham story is central to Paul’s proclamation of the gospel, but its conjunction with participation seems to me to raise a series of important questions not only about the nature of participation itself, but also about its proper place within Christian thought. One might approach these questions from a variety of angles, but to prevent an already long essay from swelling to unmanageable proportions, I will limit myself to asking how, if at all, the idea of “covenantal participation” might be related to the rather more philosophically inflected conception of μετοχή that Christianity inherited from Greek metaphysics. My guiding question will be this: can Christian theology tell a story about ontological participation in divine Being without sacrificing the particularity of the story it tells about Abraham, Israel, and Christ? I try to answer this question in three parts.

In Part 1, I offer a brief and necessarily partial outline of ontological μετοχή, with special attention to the way in which certain strands of the Christian tradition have employed participation to articulate an account of creation, redemption, and the relationship between them.

Then, in Part 2, I look more closely at Paul’s remark in Eph. 3 regarding Gentile “participation” in the Abrahamic promise. Although it would be far too much to claim that Paul’s use of συμμέτοχα demands a full-dress theory of participation of the sort developed by later patristic and medieval thinkers, I will attempt to show that, both here and elsewhere, Paul’s account of covenantal participation is framed by language suggestive of a broader ontological participation in divine being. The point of this argument will be to suggest that covenantal participation is itself already a kind of ontological participation—or, better, that Paul’s account of participation in the Abrahamic promise is a recapitulation of a broader, ontological participation in the reality of divine Being. If this is true, moreover, it will also be the case that the choice between ontological and covenantal forms of participation is a false one: ontological participation is intelligible only insofar as it takes its coordinates from participation in the covenantal story of Abraham, while covenantal participation acquires its full weight and measure only to the extent that it implies a broader ontological participation in divine Being. With this argument in place, I turn in Part 3 to reflect on some of the implications of these themes for Christian practice. Here I focus primarily on the Eucharist and argue that if covenantal participation recapitulates ontological participation, the Eucharist contains and recapitulates both. Construed in this fashion, the Eucharist offers not merely a way of thinking about the conjunction of covenantal and ontological participation, but also of enacting it within the concrete life of the Christian community.

1. Creation, Redemption, and Participation

In the most expansive of senses, to say that creation “participates in God” is to say metaphysically what the Psalmist says poetically: “The heavens are thine, the earth also is thine: as for the world and the fulness thereof, thou hast founded them” (Ps. 89:11). It is to say, in other
words, that being is gift, that nothing exists except insofar as it partakes of divine existence, and that all things proceed from and return to God as their origin and their end. In somewhat more strictly linguistic sense, however, the verb μετέχω means something like “have with,” “partake of,” or “share in.” The morpheme -χω, on the one hand, denotes “having” or “possessing,” while the prefix μετ- can mean “with,” “among,” “between,” and “in the midst of.” Further, in certain compounds (e.g., μέθοδος), and when μετά takes an accusative object, μετ- also gives the sense of “searching for,” “pursuing,” or “following after”—as when, in Iliad 10, Agamemnon goes “in search of Nestor” (ιέναι μετὰ Νέστορα) or when, in Odyssey 5, Odysseus sails “in pursuit of copper” (πλέων...μετὰ χαλκόν).

Taken together, these undertones and overtones lend the metaphysical sense of μετοχή a set of peculiar and revealing connotations. To say that A participates in B is to say not merely that A exists “with” or “alongside” B, but also that A exists “behind,” “after,” or even “in pursuit of” B. It suggests, in other words, that A’s reality is fundamentally dependent on, and derivative of, that in which it participates, and hence that it exists only “by virtue of something other than itself.”

In the philosophical tradition, μετοχή is associated most closely with Plato, who uses it together with the μέθεξις to describe the relationship between multiple particulars and a common Form. Despite Aristotle’s famous complaint that this way of speaking amounts to mere “poetic metaphor,” the philosophical and theological tradition came to take μετοχή and its near synonyms as one of the standard ways of describing the relationship between the sensible and intelligible realms. A version of this picture persists, for instance, in Plotinus. Like Plato, Plotinus argues that participation accounts for the intelligible qualities of particulars. In Ennead

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5 Iliad 10.73; Odyssey 1.184. Cf. also Lys. 6, 48; Sophocles, Antigone, 534-5.
7 See Douglas Hedley, The Iconic Imagination (London: Continuum, 2003), 139-140. For Aristotle’s complaint, see Met.1.1991a.
I, to cite an especially clear example, he remarks that beautiful things are beautiful “by participation in form” (μετοχὴ εἰδοῦς). But unlike Plato—or at least arguably unlike Plato—Plotinus also describes the One as an explicitly productive principle and hence as the source not only of the intelligibility of particulars but also of their existence. “If anything exists after the First [μετὰ τὸ πρῶτον],” he writes in Ennead V, “it must necessarily exist from that First [ἐξ ἐκείνου ἐίναι].” For how, he continues, “could the complete and first good, the power of all, remain within itself? And if it grudges or is powerless [to give] of itself, how could it yet be the source [ἀρχὴ]?” Here we edge close to the scholastic notion that the good is diffusivum sui, itself a paraphrase of the Pseudo-Dionysius’s claim in De divinis nominibus that just as the sun “enlightens all things to participate [μετέχειν] in its light,” so the Good “sends into all beings the rays of its complete goodness.” Given this explicitly causal view, it is perhaps unsurprising that Neoplatonism’s account of participation came to play an important role not only in medieval Christian thought, but in Muslim (e.g., Avicenna) and Jewish (e.g., Maimonides) as well.

A complete account of the medieval appropriation of μετοχὴ lies well beyond my competence, and a fuller picture of its place even within medieval Christian theology would take us too far afield. Here I will take my lead from Thomas Aquinas, not only because he is representative of the larger tradition, but also because the Platonic overtones of participation long obscured its importance for the famously Aristotelian Thomas. Fortunately, a pair of studies by Cornelio Fabro and L.B. Geiger in the late 1930s and early 1940s definitively overturned this prejudice, and scholars now generally agree that a Neoplatonic version of participation is central

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8 Plotinus, Enneads, I.6.2.
9 Plotinus, Enneads, V.4.1. I say that Plotinus is “arguably” unlike Plato on this point because Lloyd Gerson thinks that the idea of the good as diffusivum sui can be traced back to the Timaeus. See Gerson, Plotinus (New York: Routledge, 1994), 20-21.
to Aquinas’s metaphysics and theology.\textsuperscript{12} Despite its centrality, however, his preliminary account of participation is rather inconspicuous. The baseline definition is etymological. “To participate,” he tells us in the commentary on Boethius’s De Hebomadibus, “is, as it were \textit{quasi}, to take part.”\textsuperscript{13} The presence of \textit{quasi} is Aquinas’s way of signaling that participation as “taking part” is strictly applicable only in a quantitative sense—that is, only where the parts of a whole (e.g., an inheritance or a birthday cake) can be distributed discretely to a variety of participants.\textsuperscript{14} In metaphysical contexts, of course, this picture is misleading since the properties in question (e.g., goodness, being, beauty, etc.) are metaphysically simple and hence, unlike an inheritance or a birthday cake, cannot be divided into discrete parts.

Partly as a result of this limitation, Aquinas’s etymological definition tends to give way in other contexts to adverbial expressions that highlight the partiality or imperfection of the \textit{participans} relative to the \textit{participatum}. In his commentary on Aristotle’s De caelo, for instance, Aquinas writes that “to participate is nothing except to receive partially from another,” while in the commentary on Colossians he suggests that things participate “imperfectly” in what “exceeds their nature.”\textsuperscript{15} In the commentary on Boethius mentioned earlier, Aquinas goes on to distinguish three non-quantitative ways in which one thing can be said to “participate” in another. In one sense, A can participate in B as a particular participates in a universal: for example, as an individual participates in a species (e.g., Socrates in humanity) or as a species participates in a genus (e.g., humanity in animality). In another sense, A can participate in B as a subject participates in an accident (e.g., as when a person with brown hair participates in color


\textsuperscript{13} Aquinas, \textit{Comm. in Boeth. de Hebd.}, lect. 2.

\textsuperscript{14} See Fabro, \textit{La Nozione Metafisica}, 139-140. It is also worth pointing out that \textit{μετοχή}, unlike \textit{participatio}, does not suggest the idea of “parts.”

\textsuperscript{15} Aquinas, \textit{Comm. in de Coelo et Mundo}, 2.18 and \textit{Comm. in Ep. ad Coloss.}, 1.4.
brownness). In yet a third sense, A can participate in B as an effect participates in a cause (as when water, warmed by fire, comes to participate in heat).

The key point to notice in each of these cases is that participation always implies both dependence and partiality.\(^\text{16}\) Causality supplies the clearest example. On Aquinas’s analysis, an agent \(x\) produces an effect \(y\) in patient \(z\) by communicating its form to \(z\). A form, in turn, is both that in virtue of which a substance actually exists as an individual of certain kind and that in virtue of which a substance acts in whatever way it acts. Fire heats water, for example, by communicating its form to water, and whenever its form is thus communicated, water comes thereby to “participate” in the form of fire.\(^\text{17}\) In such a case, moreover, the water may be rightly said to “depend” on fire since water is by nature cool and could not be warmed except for the presence of fire. Because of its nature, however, water’s participation in heat is materially, though not formally, limited. In other words, when fire heats water, both come to share the same form and are to that extent formally identical. But since water’s natural coolness persists despite its exposure to heat, water does not receive the form of heat to the same degree of perfection as fire. In fact, it is precisely because water has heat in this materially limited sense that it is said merely to participate in heat rather than to be hot by nature.\(^\text{18}\)

The twin themes of partiality and dependence permeate Aquinas’s discussion of participation, but they are perhaps nowhere quite so important as in that instance of participation to which all others are finally subordinate: creaturely participation in divine being. Aquinas’s account of participation in divine being goes to the heart of his account of the relationship

\(^{16}\) Aquinas, Comm. in Boeth. de Heb., lect. 2.

\(^{17}\) Aquinas, Summa theologicae, I.42.1 ad 1. All subsequent references to this text will be given parenthetically and abbreviated \(ST\). The first number refers to the \(pars\), the second to the \(quaestio\), and the third to the \(articulus\).

between God and creation, and is deeply implicated in some of his most distinctive metaphysical and theological ideas, including the notion of a “real distinction” between esse and essentia. As is well known, Aquinas thinks that God is *ipsum esse subsistens*, and part of what it means to say that God is *ipsum esse subsistens* is that God’s “essence” and “existence” are identical. Aquinas thinks this because he also thinks that anything “whose existence is other than its essence has its existence caused by another [*esse causatum ab alio]*.” To suppose a real distinction between divine existence and divine essence would thus be to suppose that God’s existence depends on something other than God. But this is absurd, says Aquinas, simply because if God is the “first efficient cause,” the source of being for all that is, it follows that God cannot depend on anything external and hence that the divine essence and divine existence must be identical (*ST* I.3.4).

The case of creatures is rather different. Since God is the source of all being, it follows that “anything that in any way exists is from God.” Further, since in God alone are essence and existence identical, it likewise follows that “all things other God are not their own being but participate in being [*participant esse]*” (*ST* I.44.1). What Aquinas means to indicate here is simply that whereas God *is* his own being, creatures merely *have* being; and, as in all cases of participatory “having,” creaturely existence is fundamentally partial and dependent—partial because, unlike God, creatures do not contain within themselves the “full perfection of being” (*totam perfectionem essendi*), and dependent because creaturely existence lacks any ground or foundation of its own and instead “hangs from” (*de-pendit*) divine existence as from its source (*ST* I.4.2). In fact, one way of cashing out this claim would be to say that creatures are, in themselves, “nothing”: to be a creature, in other words, is to exist as an utterly groundless instance of pure fortuity held in existence only by the gracious donation of being from its divine source. Aquinas does not put the point in just this way, but partway through the first section of

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19 See also *Quodlibet* II, q. 2, a. 1
the *Summa*, he does draw the inevitable conclusion: since “nothing can exist in beings which is not from God,” it follows that “God brings things into being *ex nihilo*” (*ST* I.45.2). The key point to notice here is that Aquinas takes creation *ex nihilo* to be a direct consequence of participation. Once we admit, in other words, that all things exist by participation in divine existence, we must likewise admit that all things came into being from nothing. To deny this view, by contrast, would be to countenance the possibility of what we might call an “unparticipated remainder,” an aspect of the created order that somehow falls outside the scope of participation in divine being. And this, in turn, would be to admit that certain bits of creation have their existence independently of God and hence that God is not really the “universal cause of all being” (*ST* I.44.2). And that, finally, would be to say that God is not really God after all, at least as Aquinas understands the term.

Although *participatio* has its natural home in Aquinas’s metaphysics of being, it also has implications for other areas of his thought. Perhaps most importantly, to speak of participation in divine *being* is also to speak of participation in divine *grace*. And to speak of participation in divine grace is to move beyond the Doctrine of Creation, narrowly construed, and into the realm of soteriology. There is some debate about this point within Thomistic circles, but according to the standard model Aquinas maintains that rational creatures participate in God in two different sorts of ways: in one way according to the “order of nature” (*ordo naturae*), and in another way according to the “order of grace” (*ordo gratiae*). In the *ordo naturae* creatures participate in divine being “through the principles of their own nature”—that is, in ways appropriate to finite, created natures (*ST* I-II.62.1). In the *ordo gratiae*, by contrast, creatures are, as it were, lifted above the limits of their own natures and brought—through a special infusion of “divine power” (*virtute divina*) which is itself rooted in the incarnation of the divine *Logos*—to participate
directly in the uncreated divine essence (ST I-II.62.1; I-II.110.4; ST I-II.112.1). Only by thus “partaking of the divine nature,” moreover, are human beings cleansed of their sins, made righteous before God, and rendered “worthy of eternal life” (I-II.112.1; I-II.113.2).

Despite certain obvious differences, the twin orders of nature and grace are importantly analogous: both belong to the same economy of salvation, and both represent wholly unmerited displays of divine graciousness. Perhaps even more significant, however, is that Aquinas frames both in language that is at once participatory and Christological. Just as creation participates in divine being because it was brought into existence by the divine Verbum, so likewise creation is redeemed because that same Verbum, desirous that we might become “partakers of his own divinity” (suae divinitatis...esse particeps), assumed our nature in order that “he, having become human, might make human beings gods.”

For Aquinas, then, participation is a kind of master category, a way of telling the Christian story from creation to consummation: to be at all is to participate in divine being, and to be redeemed is to be drawn into God’s inner life and invited to partake of the uncreated divine essence itself.

2. Creation, Participation, and Covenant

That, in somewhat hasty outline, is one way of thinking about the relationship between creation, redemption, and participation. It does not, of course, represent the fullness of the Christian story, nor is it the only way of telling that story. But it does seem to me both plausible in its own right and consistent with important strands of the tradition. Plausible or not, however, to tell the story in just this fashion is already to raise a series of important concerns. Perhaps the quickest way to access those concerns is by recalling a version of the so-called “Hellenization thesis,” a view most closely associated with Adolf von Harnack. In its Harnackian incarnation, the Hellenization thesis holds that certain key Christian doctrines, among them the deity of the Son and the Trinity,

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20 Aquinas, Officium de festo corporis Christi, lectio 1.
amount to little more than “a work of the Greek spirit on the soil of the gospel.” As a general
theory, of course, Harnack’s claims have been widely criticized, and there is little basis indeed
for supposing that the specific case of participation represents an unbiblical cultivation of alien
metaphysical flora “on the soil of the gospel.” In fact, the term μετοχή—together with its
compounds, derivatives, and synonyms, especially κοινωνία (communion, fellowship)—occurs
with some frequency in the New Testament. Sometimes it appears in decisively non-
metaphysical contexts (e.g., Lk. 5:7, where μετοχοὶ means simply “companions”); but it can also
be used in a more metaphysically inflected sense. The author of Hebrews, to give just one
element, describes Christians as μετοχοὶ of a “heavenly calling” (3:1), of the Holy Spirit (6:4),
and of Christ himself (3:14). The same goes for κοινωνία and κοινωνός. Occasionally it means
simply “companion” or “associate” (e.g., 2 Cor. 8:23, Phil. 1:17, Lk. 5:10), but it can also be
used to denote participation in the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:13), in the sufferings of Christ (Ph.
3:10), and in Christ’s (mystical) body and blood (1 Cor. 10:16).

But even if participation is not demonstrably unbiblical, there may be yet be reason to
worry. Michael Horton, for instance, has recently argued that while the category of participation
is not objectionable in itself, undue reliance on metaphysical conceptions of participation risks
“assimilating the event of the cross into a speculative philosophy.” Justin Holcomb lodges a
similar complaint. Though generally sympathetic to participation as a theological category,
Holcomb, like Horton, worries that an emphasis on metaphysical participation threatens to
privilege the “universal, general, and speculative at the expense of affirming and defending the

22 See, e.g., Robert Louis Wilken, The Spirit of Early Christianity (New Have: Yale University Press,
2003), 204.
23 I take 2 Cor. 6:14 as evidence that, for Paul at least, μετοχή and κοινωνία are basically synonymous, and
I will use them interchangeably.
24 Horton, Covenant and Salvation, 174.
particularity of divine redemption in Christ.”25 One way of summarizing Horton’s and Holcomb’s concern would be to say that in the process of telling a story about creaturely participation in divine Being, advocates of participation risk obscuring the story the Bible tells about itself. The force of this critique depends, of course, on some consensus about precisely what story the Bible “tells about itself.” Although the details will vary, I take it as uncontroversial that all versions will say something similar to what Paul says in Rom. 3-4, Gal. 2-3, and Eph. 2-3: namely, that the narrative arc of the New Testament is the story of how Yahweh’s covenantal dealings with Israel have reached their climax in Jesus of Nazareth, and of how, as a result of Christ’s death and resurrection, the promise to bless all nations through Abraham has at last been fulfilled. This way of telling the story rightly places covenant at the center of the biblical narrative, but, as I suggested in the introduction, it also raises an important question. If redemption is at least in part a matter of becoming συμμέτοχος of the Abrahamic promise, might not the importation of a more general conception of ontological participation have the effect of stripping covenantal participation of its particularity and subsuming it under a kind of philosophical master code?

I have neither the space nor the competence to treat this question adequately. So, rather than approach it in general and abstract terms, I would instead like to look more closely at Eph. 2-3, where, it seems to me, the notions of ontological and covenantal participation overlap and mutually reinforce one another. What I will try to show in particular is that Paul’s account of covenantal participation is undergirded by creation-language suggestive of a broader participation in divine being. As I noted earlier, I will not contend that this overlap demands a full-scale theory of participation of the sort developed by later patristic and medieval thinkers.

25 Justin Holcomb, “Being Bound to God: Participation and Covenant Revisited,” in Smith and Olthuis, eds., Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition, 250-1 (italics in original). Holcomb is here discussing the use of participation language among proponents of so-called Radical Orthodoxy.
My goal instead is to open up some biblical space for the metaphysical conception of participation which patristic and medieval theologians found so useful, without at the same time sacrificing the particularity of covenantal participation in terms of which Paul articulates the gospel. This argument, should it prove convincing, will then prepare the ground for my suggestion in Part 3 that the Eucharist recapitulates both ontological and covenantal participation and situates them within the concrete life of the Christian community.

Paul’s claim in Eph. 3:6 that through the gospel gentiles have become συμμέτοχα of the promise in Christ Jesus is framed by the long argument of Eph. 2. The chapter develops like a fugue whose main theme is first stated (vv. 1-10) and then recapitulated in a slightly different key (vv. 11-22). In vv. 1-10, Paul argues that although we were once “dead in our transgressions and sins,” God “made us alive together [συνεζωοποίησεν] with Christ” and “raised us up with him [συνήγειρεν] and seated us with him [συνεκάθισεν] in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:5-6). The proliferation of sun-verbs anticipates the basic theme of the second half of the chapter (vv. 11-22), where the movement from “dead in your transgressions” to “alive in Christ” is reconfigured as Gentile incorporation into Israel. Remember, Paul begins, that you Gentiles in the flesh were once cut off from citizenship in Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, hopeless and godless in the world (Eph. 2:11-12). The problem, then, is not merely that we are “dead in our sins,” but also that, by virtue of our alienation from Israel, we are cut off from the God who might give us new life. And yet, in the midst of our hopelessness, God made gracious provision: though once far away have, we have now been brought near in Christ—the same Christ who, through the cross, tore down the dividing wall and reconciled Jews and Gentiles to God in one body (Eph. 2:13-17). The result is that we are no longer aliens and strangers, but “co-citizens” (συμπολίται) and inhabitants of the house of God, a house “fitted together”
(συναρμολογουμένη) in the Lord through whom we are “built together” (συνοικοδομεῖσθε) into a dwelling place for God (Eph. 2:19-22).

The first point I want to notice is that, in the second half of the chapter, Paul describes Gentile incorporation into Israel through the metaphor of constructing a temple (ναός) or “dwelling place” (κατοικητήριον) for God. The idea of believers as “temples” is a common Pauline motif, but in Eph. 2 the accent falls squarely on the construction of the temple.\(^{26}\) And this, it seems to me, carries at least two important sets of implications. First, in the Hebrew Bible, the construction of temples and tabernacles is often associated with return from exile. The tabernacle at Sinai, for instance, is built after the exodus from Egypt (Ex. 36-39), and the Second Temple is constructed after Babylonian exile. By evoking this context, Paul makes it clear that he wishes us to see the unification of Jews and Gentiles in Christ as rooted in the broader history of Yahweh’s promise to rescue Israel from exile and restore it to the land of promise.\(^{27}\) But this is only part of the story. For if Paul’s account of gentile incorporation into Israel alludes to restoration from exile and the subsequent construction of a “dwelling place for God,” that dwelling place itself carries a further set of connotations. As various scholars have convincingly shown, the creation account in Gen. 1-2 is itself modeled on the temple liturgy and thus presents creation as a “cosmic temple” (or else the temple as a “mini cosmos”).\(^{28}\) Perhaps the clearest example comes from the construction of the Mosaic tabernacle in Ex. 39-40, which is linked through a series of unmistakable verbal parallels to Gen. 2.\(^{29}\) For instance, the report in Gen. 2:1

\(^{26}\) Cf. 1 Cor. 3:16; 1 Cor. 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16.


\(^{29}\) I owe my knowledge of these parallels to Moshe Weinfeld, “Sabbath, Temple and the Enthronement of the Lord—The Problem of the Sitz im Leben of Genesis 1:1-2:3,” in A. Caquot and M. Delcor, eds., Mélanges
that “The heaven and the earth were completed [wayękulū] and all [wěkāl] their array” is repeated in Ex. 39:32: “Thus was completed all [watēkēl kāl] the work of the Tabernacle.” Likewise, the phrase “God finished the work which He had been doing [wayękāl 'elōhîm...mēla'kêto 'ašer 'āšāh]” (Gen. 2:2) finds a nearly identical parallel in Ex. 40:33: “When Moses had finished the work [wayękāl mōšēh 'et hamēlā'kāh].” Finally, God’s “blessing” (wayēbārek) and “sanctification” (wayēqadaš) of the seventh day in Gen. 2:3 is repeated in Moses’ blessing (wayēbārek) of the workers (Ex. 39:43) and sanctification (wēqidašētā) of the tabernacle (Ex. 40:9). The upshot of these parallels is that the construction of the tabernacle is a kind of repetition of creation, a liturgical recapitulation of the formation of the cosmos itself. And this suggests, in turn, that by telling the story of the building together of Jews and Gentiles as “a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:21), Paul is not simply retelling the story of exile, restoration, covenant, and divine dwelling place. He is also retelling the story of creation and thus inscribing covenantal participation within that broader story.

The language of Ephesians 2 bears out the point. Midway through the chapter Paul writes:

For by grace you were saved through faith. And this is not from yourselves, but a gift from God, not from works lest anyone should boast. For we are his workmanship [ποίημα], created [κτισθέντες] in Jesus Christ unto good works. (Eph. 2:8-10)

Several points are worth noticing. First, the term ποίημα (“workmanship”) appears various times in the LXX, usually of divine workmanship (e.g., Ps. 63:10), but also in reference to human activity (e.g., 1 Sam. 19:4 and Eccl. 2:4, 11, 17). It occurs only twice in the New Testament: here, where it stands in contrast with human ἔργα, and in Rom. 1:20, where it refers to divine creation. The verb κτίζω is more emphatic still. It appears in the NT only in reference to divine

creation, both physical (Matt. 19:4; Mark 13:19; Rom. 1:25; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:16) and spiritual (Eph. 2:15, Col. 4:24; 3:10). By using this language, then, Paul not only makes it clear that he is thinking of salvation in explicitly creational terms, but also and more importantly that salvation-as-Gentile-incorporation-into-Israel is itself a recapitulation of creation. Creation, in other words, is the context or framework within which salvation as covenantal incorporation must be understood.

Before I try to say why it might be important to see creation as the context of covenantal participation, it is worth noting that Eph. 2-3 is not the only place where Paul construes gentile incorporation into the covenant as a repetition or reenactment of creation. A similar point emerges in the account of Abraham’s faith in Rom. 4. Rom. 4 has often been read as an instance of Old Testament proof-texting, an exemplum plucked (not quite but almost) at random to demonstrate justification by faith. On this view, the central question of the chapter is whether justification comes by faith or by works of law, and the story of Abraham is designed to tip the scales in favor of the former. This may be part of the story, but I think N.T. Wright is correct to argue that the real point of the chapter has less to do with an abstract conflict between “works-righteousness” and “faith-righteousness” and more to do with Paul’s attempt to show not only that the Abrahamic promise was intended from the beginning to include both Jews and Gentiles, but also that in Jesus of Nazareth God has at last made good on that pledge. It is within this context, moreover, that we should read the following passage:

For this reason it [justification] depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to the whole seed, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”)—in the presence of the God in whom he

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believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist (ἐπίστευσεν θεοῦ τοῦ ζωοποιοῦντος τοὺς νεκροὺς καὶ καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα) (Rom. 4:16-17).

It is tempting to read the final two clauses as an afterthought, a formulaic description of God that functions almost as an extended epithet. I would suggest, however, that the image of creation—the image of a God who calls τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα—in fact frames both the Abrahamic promise and our incorporation into it. This reading is strengthened by the fact that, like Ex. 39-40 discussed earlier, the call of Abraham in Gen. 12ff. is itself riddled with allusions to creation. For instance, God’s promise to “make you a great nation” (Gen. 12:2) is linked to the account of the completion of creation in Gen. 2:2 through the repetition of the verb ‘asah (to do or make), while the subsequent promise to “bless” Abraham (waʾabarekkā) evokes the blessing (wayēbārek) of the seventh day in Gen. 2:3. A further series of intertextual echoes bears out the point. The promise to make Abraham “exceedingly fruitful” (Gen. 17.6), for instance, replaces Adam’s mandate to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen. 1.28), while Adam’s “dominion” over nature (Gen. 1.28) is replaced by the Yahweh’s promise to give Abraham and his descendants “all the land of Canaan for a perpetual holding” (Gen. 17.8).  

Paul, it seems to me, must surely have been aware of these parallels, and so when he tells the story of Abraham, he is also and at the same time retelling the story of creation. To be brought into the family of Abraham and made heirs of the covenant is to be called from non-being into being.

Modern commentators on both Rom. 4 and Eph. 2-3 usually note the connection between creation and salvation in these passages, but, in my view, the patristic and medieval commentary tradition tends to be not only a bit more explicit, but also a bit less metaphysically and theologically inhibited. In his commentary on Rom. 4:17, for instance, Origen remarks that by

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framing salvation as the calling into being of things that do not exist, Paul “marvelously brought to mind [memorasse] the beginning of the first creature when God created all things out of nothing [ex nihilo].”\(^{33}\) For Origen, then, redemption is a kind of commemoration or memorial of creation. In fact, because the Latin memorare probably translates, in Origen’s Greek, a form of verb μνημήσκω, we might even say that salvation is the anamnesis of creation and hence that the one stands to the other in something like the way the Eucharist stands to the Passion—that is, as a kind of sacramental re-presencing. I will return to this suggestion in a moment.

In his commentary on Ephesians, Aquinas makes a similar point but without the sacramental overtones. There he argues that Paul uses ποίημα (factura) and κτισθέντες (creati) to explain the ratio gratiae.\(^ {34}\) Aquinas employs the term ratio in a variety of senses, but here it refers simply to the meaning of a concept—that is, to what the intellect conceives about the essence of an extralinguistic thing. To say, then, that creation expresses the ratio of grace is to say that it gives us some insight into its meaning. And what does it tell us exactly? Essentially this: just as creation involves “making something out of nothing” (aliquid ex nihilo facere), so also when “someone is justified without prior merits, he or she can be said to be created—made, as it were, out of nothing [quasi ex nihilo factus].”\(^ {35}\) For Aquinas, the principal analogy between creation and salvation thus has to do with the fact that neither depends on any preexisting potentiality. Just as creatures are not brought into being on the basis of any preexisting potential, so they likewise lack any preexisting potential for salvation such that they could, through practice or habituation, actuate that potential and save themselves. Instead, as Aquinas later explains, because the gift of grace so radically exceeds the capacity of human nature, salvation requires not the working out of a preexisting capacity, but an act of full-scale re-creation wherein

\(^{33}\) Origen, Comm. in Epist. ad Rom., IV.5 (PG 14: 978).

\(^{34}\) Aquinas, Super Eph., 2.3.

\(^{35}\) Aquinas, Super Eph., 2.3.
humanity is “constituted in new being [in novo esse], out of nothing, that is, not from merits” (ST I-II.110.2 ad 3).

For Aquinas, then, no less than for Origen, redemption is an image of creation. More than simply a matter of having one’s sins remitted or of being found righteous before God, it is also a matter of being re-created in the most radical of senses: called out of the nothingness of sin and corruption and reconstituted in new being. It would be misleading, however, to suppose that salvation is an image of creation in a merely illustrative sense. In fact, to return to a point I hinted at earlier, I would like to suggest that salvation stands to creation in something like the way the Eucharist stands to the Passion. The Eucharist is not, of course, identical with the Passion, but neither, on one reading at least, is it a mere symbol or image. Instead, the Eucharist is a “remembrance” or ἀνάμνησις of the Passion because it both recalls the Passion and because it reenacts the Passion sacramentally and thereby makes it present to the community gathered around Christ’s body. I want to propose that we hear Eph. 3:6 against this background. To be made summetocha of the promise is to be re-created precisely because redemption itself at once recalls and reenacts the transition from non-being to being that sits at the heart of the creative act. In one sense, as Origen points out in his commentary on Ephesians, salvation recalls creation because, although we exist only by participating in God, we nonetheless tend to “forget our participation” (ἐπιλαθέσθας τῆς μετοχῆς) and to suppose instead that we ourselves are “the cause of [our own] being” (τὴν τοῦ εἰναι αἰτίαν). In light of this tendency, the utter gratuity of salvation, precisely by recalling the utter gratuity of creation itself, reminds us that we are “nothing” in ourselves and hence that our very existence, no less than our redemption, is an act of unmerited grace. In another sense, however, as Athanasius argues in De incarnacione verbi, redemption does not simply recall creation, but also it reenacts it and so makes it present within

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36 Origen, Fragmenta ex commentariis in epistulam ad Ephesios, 1.2.
our own lives. According to Athanasius, because we were called in being out of non-being, we carry within ourselves a kind of natural nothingness, a natural tendency toward “corruption unto non-being” (τὴν εἰς τὸ μῆ ἐϊναι φθοράν) that is the result of separation from God. Redemption arrests this process of de-creation and restores us to participation in, and communion with, the divine source of our existence.  

In Ephesians, Paul seems to me to strike a similar note but in a distinctly covenantal register. Because we are “alienated [ἀπηλλοτριωμένοι] from the commonwealth of Israel” (Eph. 2:12), we are also “alienated [ἀπηλλοτριωμένοι] from the life of God” (Eph. 4:18). And because we are alienated from the life of God, our natural condition is “death” (Eph. 2:1). To be incorporated into the covenant is thus not only to be made members of the Abrahamic family but also to be restored to life—that is, reincorporated into God’s own life (τῆς ζωῆς τοῦ Θεοῦ), into the life of the one in whom, as Paul says elsewhere, we “live [ζωμέν] and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). To be made summetocha of the promise is thus also to be made—or, better, remade—summetocha of the God who alone grants us being. At its very heart, then, covenantal participation is also ontological participation: a sharing in God’s covenant that is also a sharing in God’s own life.

Yet even this way of putting the point risks a certain sort of misunderstanding. Specifically, to say that redemption as covenantal participation recalls and reenacts ontological participation in God in God’s life risks giving the impression that ontological participation is the master category and hence that covenantal participation is a moment within, or an inflection of, a broader metaphysical scheme. But this is misleading. As Paul writes in Eph. 1:4: “[God] chose us in himself before the foundation of the world.” In a certain sense, then, election precedes creation, even if in the ordo essendi its implications are worked out against the backdrop of

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37 Athanasius, *De incarnacione verbi*, ch. 4.
creation. And this suggests in turn that ontological participation in God’s life already has a proleptically covenantal shape. Or, put another way, ontological participation in divine being through creation *prefigures* or *anticipates* covenantal participation precisely because creation itself acquires its full weight and measure only in light of God’s eternal design to “gather together all things in Christ” (Eph. 1:9). So that if, from one angle, Gentile incorporation into the Abrahamic covenant is framed by a broader ontological participation in divine being, from another angle, ontological participation is itself intelligible only insofar as it anticipates participation in the covenantal story of Abraham. Ontology and covenant are thus fully mutually implicative. The one modifies and inflects the other at every point.

3. **Enacting Participation: Eucharist Between Covenant and Ontology**

The central argument of the last section was twofold: first, that (a) at certain crucial moments Paul frames covenantal participation in language suggestive of a broader ontological participation in divine being, and, second, that (b) this overlap can be stated in such a way that preserves, even highlights, the centrality and particularity of covenantal participation. This should not be taken to suggest, of course, that Paul has well-developed theory of ontological participation, but it does seem to me to open up a space for thinking about the question of ontological participation not as a category independent of covenant, nor much less in conflict with it, but rather at its very heart. In this final section, I would like to expand this line of thought by returning to a theme introduced earlier. Toward the end of the section 2, I proposed the Eucharist as a model for thinking about how redemption might reenact creation without merely illustrating it. There I was employing the Eucharistic as an explanatory device. It was not designed to be load-bearing, and, as with all explanatory devices, it should be discarded if it fails to explain. As it turns out, however, the Eucharist has a somewhat more substantial role to play
in the relationship between covenantal and ontological participation. What I want to suggest, specifically, is that just as covenantal participation recalls and recapitulates ontological participation, so the Eucharist contains and recapitulates both. As a result, the Eucharist offers not merely a way of thinking about the conjunction of covenantal and ontological participation, but also of enacting that conjunction within the concrete life of the Christian community.

Perhaps we can begin by noting that the crescendo of *sun*-verbs in Eph. 2-3 culminates not simply in *συμμέτοχα* but also in *σύσσωμα*: not merely “co-participants in the promise” but also “members of the same body.” Paul’s image of the church as the “body of Christ” came to exercise an enormous influence on subsequent Christian reflection, but nowhere do the twin themes of “body” and “participation” converge with such explosive theological consequences as in Paul’s account of the Eucharist. In 1 Cor. 10 he writes:

> The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing [*κοινωνία*] in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing [*κοινωνία*] in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake [*μετέχομεν*] of the one bread. (1 Cor. 10:16-17)

The cup and the loaf, the material elements of the Eucharist whose institution Paul will shortly recount (1 Cor. 11), here stand at the center of complex symbolic universe. In one sense, of course, they refer to actual, physical food: the material elements that constitute the Eucharist as a meal. In another sense, however, the materiality of the cup and the loaf have the effect of producing a spiritual [*κοινωνία*] in Christ’s body and blood. The precise valence of [*κοινωνία*] is a matter of significant debate, but the standard patristic and medieval view is that the bread effects a “sharing” in Christ’s body because it *is* Christ’s body. On this view, in fact, because the body of Christ takes on real presence in the Eucharistic bread, we who partake of that bread are united directly to Christ himself. At the same time, moreover, because we all partake of the same bread,

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38 For the sake of expository tidiness, I will henceforth refer only to the bread/body.
we who are united to Christ are likewise united with one another. Through our union with the one bread, which is also Christ’s one body, we too become one body.

As even this short sketch suggests, the Eucharist is a set of interlocking and mutually reinforcing “participations”: by participating (materially) of the bread, we participate (sacramentally) in Christ’s body and thereby come to participate (ecclesially) in the church as Christ’s body on earth. But if the Eucharist is a story of sacramental and ecclesial participation, it is also a story of covenantal participation. Notice first that Paul’s reference to “body” in v. 16 links this passage to Eph. 3:6, where, as we just saw, σύσσωµα is a central metaphor of gentile incorporation in the Abrahamic covenant. This alone suggests a possible link between Eucharist and covenant. The connection is strengthened by the Eucharistic institution narrative themselves, which, in addition to 1 Cor. 11, are also recounted in all three synoptic gospels (Mk. 14:22-24; Mt. 26:26-28; Lk. 22:19-20). Despite slight variations, each account embodies the same basic narrative logic. At supper on the night before he was to suffer, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: “This is my body which is given up for you. Do this in memory of me” (Lk. 22:19). Similarly with the cup: “This chalice that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Lk. 22:20). Importantly, the institution of the Eucharist occurs within the context of the Passover, which in its turn evokes the Exodus from Egypt (cf. Ex. 12). In Jewish tradition, moreover, the Passover is itself part of a larger story, one that looks back to the call of Abraham and culminates in the eschatological return of the Messiah. 

39 By evoking this context, Jesus not only situates his own impending death within the broader history of God’s dealings with Israel, but also casts the “new covenant [καινὴ διαθήκη] in my blood” (Lk. 22:20)

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as a continuation and fulfillment of the Sinaitic covenant (Ex. 19:5: MT: b ’riyyiy; LXX: τὴν διαθήκην μου).

And this has important consequences. For if redemption is at least in part a matter of incorporation into the covenant, the Eucharist is, as it were, the \textit{practice} of covenantal participation. To partake of communion is not only to be joined to the body of Christ, but also to be invited sacramentally into the story of God’s design to save the world through Israel. And this, of course, that stretches back to the beginning, to creation itself. In fact, as Beale points out, Jewish tradition tends to associate the Passover not only with the call of Abraham and the eschatological return of the Messiah, but also with creation itself.\textsuperscript{40} Wisdom 19:6, for instance, describes Passover as the moment when “all creation is refashioned anew in its nature.” Even more interestingly, the so-called “Poem of the Four Nights,” a midrashic paraphrase of Ex. 12:42 included (among other places) in the Neofiti Targum, links the Passover to the beginning of biblical history when “[God] was revealed in creating the world.”\textsuperscript{41} The celebration of Passover is thus a kind of summary reenactment not merely of the Exodus from Egypt, but also of the whole history of Yahweh’s dealings with Israel.\textsuperscript{42}

This Eucharist belongs with this matrix as well. Just as covenantal participation in God through Abraham at once presupposes and reenacts creation, so the Eucharist, as a continuation and fulfillment of the Sinaitic covenant, likewise draws its participants into the whole sweep of biblical history from creation to eschaton. On the one hand, the eschatological character of the Eucharist is well known. In 1 Cor., for instance, Paul tells us that by partaking of the bread and the cup, we “proclaim Christ’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26). But there is also within

\begin{footnotes}
\item[41] The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan ben Uzial on the Pentateuch, ed. J.W. Etheridge (London, 1862), 479.
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Christian thought a consistent tradition of associating Eucharist and creation. In his *De sacramentis*, for instance, Saint Ambrose draws an analogy between the world as *factum* (“made”) and the Eucharist as *confectum* (“confected”) and defends the conversion of the bread into Christ’s body by appealing to creation *ex nihilo*. In *De fide orthodoxa*, John of Damascus makes a version of the same point: “If God said, ‘Let there be light’, and there was light,” he writes, “is God not able to make the bread his own body and the wine his blood?”43 John’s central purpose, like Ambrose’s before, is to defend the conversion of the Eucharistic elements into the body and blood of Christ; and, from one angle, the point is simply if God can call things into existence out of nothing, surely God can also transform bread into body and wine into blood. But the connection is actually much stronger, and, if viewed through a particular lens, it opens up a space for seeing the Eucharist not only the practice of covenantal participation, but also as a window onto the nature of participated being as such.

To spell out this point, I would like to appeal to the traditional Roman Catholic account of transubstantiation. Though I am not prepared to argue the point, my suspicion is that the general thrust of the story could be restated in terms more amenable to other Eucharistic traditions, even if the details would require significant modification.44 As is well known, Catholic doctrine has it that, upon consecration, the Eucharistic elements are “transubstantiated” into the body and blood of Jesus Christ while nevertheless retaining their bread-like and wine-like qualities. This paradox is usually explained in terms of the Aristotelian distinction between *substances* and *accidents*. Substances are things that can exist independently of all other things of that kind (i.e., all other substances) except their parts. Accidents, by contrast, exist only by

43 Ambrose, *De sacramentis*, bk. 4, ch. 4 (PL 17: 439ff), and John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa*, bk. 4, ch. 13 (PG 94: 1137).
inhering in substances. A “horse” is a substance in this sense, and “whiteness” is an accident, since horses exist in their own right, but whiteness exists only as a white something (e.g., a white dog or a white napkin). In Catholic Eucharistic theology, Aristotle’s conceptual apparatus is employed by Aquinas and others as follows: before consecration, both the bread and the wine are substances; both exist as stand-alone entities in their own right. Upon consecration, however, the substance of the bread is replaced by another substance: the body of Christ. The bread, to be sure, still looks like bread, still tastes like bread, but only because it retains accidental bread-like qualities. In terms of substance, what appears to be bread has in fact become Christ’s body.

This is, of course, a deeply controversial view, and it is open to any number of important objections. One of the more common objections is that by making its bed with an Aristotelian ontology of substances and accidents, transubstantiation has the effect of subordinating Eucharistic theology to an alien metaphysical schema. One way to blunt this objection is to say that transubstantiation is meant to explain, not to replace, what the church universal has almost always believed: namely, that Christ is in some sense “really present” in the celebration of communion. Another—better—way of blunting the objection would be to say that while transubstantiation is indeed framed in the categories of Aristotelian metaphysics, it finally exceeds those categories decisively. The problem has to do with the status of the accidental properties that persist after consecration (i.e., the bread’s color, taste, smell, and so forth). Since, for Aristotle, accidents exist only by inhering in substances, it is not clear in what substance the accidental qualities of the transubstantiated bread and wine might be said to inhere. They do not, on the one hand, inhere in the substance of the bread and wine since those substances have been replaced by the substance of Christ’s body. But neither do they inhere in the substance of
Christ’s body, since such a view would entail that Christ’s body possesses a series of odd properties like “being round and white” and “tasting like a baked mixture of flour and water.”

But if neither in the substance of the bread and wine, nor in the substance of Christ’s body, then in what? The short answer is that the remaining accidental properties do not inhere in anything at all—or, at the very least, not in any of the pieces of ontological furniture supplied by Aristotelian metaphysics. They are instead what we might call “free-floating accidents,” accidents that subsist in a state of pure contingency, not dependent on any finite substance but rather sustained in existence “by divine power” (ST 3.77.1 ad 2). In fact, because the remaining accidents subsist in this state of pure contingency, it might be more accurate to say not that they are “free-floating” accidents, but that they have transcended the distinction between substance and accident altogether and have come to participate directly, without mediation, in esse commune itself. And this has important consequences. Since esse commune is the first and most “proper” effect of creation (ST 1.8.1), and since esse commune exists only by participating in divine esse, the remaining accidents reveal most clearly the “condition of createdness” itself. They are a kind of window onto the ontological constitution of creation at its deepest level. And what we see when we look through that window is not a solid, self-standing created order, but an order that exists in a borrowed, participatory, and purely contingent fashion. In fact, as the French priest and theologian Albert Tesnière (1847-1909) points out, because the Eucharistic elements are perched so precariously between being and non-being, they reveal the contingency and fragility of created being as such: called into existence out of nothing, suspended over an abyss of nothingness, and sustained in being only by the gracious donation of esse from its

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In the mysterious nothingness of the bread and wine, we thus catch a glimpse not only of the nothing from which we were called into being, nor merely of the return to nothing from which we were saved, but also of the fact that our very existence has a Eucharistic shape.

From this angle, then, the Eucharist at once recapitulates the central themes of this essay and situates them within the concrete practice of the Christian community. On the one hand, as the repetition and fulfillment of the Sinaitic covenant, the Eucharist invites us to participate sacramentally in the narrative sweep of God’s dealings with the world—a narrative that culminates in the eschatological establishment of the Kingdom of God, but which stretches back to the Exodus, to the Abrahamic covenant, and, further still, to creation itself. In fact, if the account outlined above is correct, the Eucharist is not merely a remembrance of creation, but also a kind of sacramental image of createdness as such, a picture of creation in its “most fundamental ontological dimension.”

In addition to inviting us to partake of God’s eternal design to make available a universal human salvation through covenantal incorporation (Eph. 2-3), the Eucharist is thus also that moment where our existence, no less than our redemption, is shown to be a participation in divine being and hence where the nothingness of both *creatio ex nihilo* and *redemptio ex nihilo* are bound together and made sacramentally present to the community gathered around the wine and the loaf.

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