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# *Creatio ex nihilo* in Palestinian Judaism and Early Christianity

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## Abstract

Recent decades have witnessed a near-consensus of critical opinion (1) that the idea of God's creation of matter 'out of nothing' is not affirmed in scripture, but instead (2) originated in a second-century Christian reaction against Gnosticism's convictions about matter as evil and creation as the work of an inferior Demiurge. (3) Judaism's interest, by contrast, was generally deemed late and philosophically derivative or epiphenomenal upon Christian ideas. This essay re-examines all three convictions with particular reference to the biblical creation accounts in Palestinian Jewish reception. After highlighting certain interpretative features in the ancient versions of Genesis 1, this study explores the reception of such ideas in texts like the Dead Sea Scrolls and early rabbinic literature. It is clear that the typically cited proof texts from biblical or deutero-canonical books indeed do not yield clear confirmation of the doctrine they have sometimes been said to prove. Genesis was understood even in antiquity to be somewhat ambiguous on this point, and merely to say that creation gave shape to formlessness need not entail any *creatio ex nihilo*. This much seems uncontroversial. Nevertheless, closer examination also shows that the Scrolls and the rabbis do consistently affirm Israel's God as the creator of *all* things, explicitly including matter itself. Graeco-Roman antiquity axiomatically accepted that 'nothing comes from nothing', which also meant the pre-existence of matter. To be sure, the conceptual terminology of 'nothingness' came relatively late to Christians, and even later to Jews. Yet the substantive concern for God's free creation of the world without recourse to pre-existing matter is repeatedly affirmed in pre-Christian Jewish texts, and constitutes perhaps the single most important building block for the emergence of an explicit doctrine of 'creation out of nothing'. In its Jewish and Christian origins, therefore, the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* affirms creation's comprehensive contingency on the Creator's sovereignty and freedom. This in fact is a point which has been rightly and repeatedly accented in both historic and modern Christian theology on this subject (e.g. by K. Barth and E. Brunner, J. Moltmann and C. Gunton). Well before its explicit articulation in dialogue with Hellenistic philosophy, the doctrine of God's creation of all matter was rooted in biblical texts and their Jewish interpretation, which in turn came to be refined and enriched through Christian–Jewish dialogue and controversy.

**Keywords**: Christianity, creation, divine sovereignty, Genesis, gnosticism, Judaism.

In antiquity, the idea of creation was far from a Truth Held to Be Self-Evident.[1] The idea that whatever exists was created by a supreme God constituted a great intellectual divide – as perhaps it does once again today: obvious to some, obvious nonsense to others. It separated the Epicureans' evolutionary materialism from the providential cosmology of the Stoics, and the ordered linear space-time of creation and redemption in the Bible from avowedly timeless Graeco-Roman cosmologies. What made the latter patently different and superior, to one fourth-century pagan apologist writing in happy but wistful memory of the great myths of the past, is that 'these things never happened – but always are': narratives of gods and cosmogony are just a symbolic way of sequencing what the mind sees to be eternally the case.[2] On that reckoning, any entanglement of the gods in the mess of creatureliness was properly relegated to the realms of mythology, methodologically prefaced by Comfortable Words such as those of Heraclitus of Alexandria, that 'taking Homer literally is to make him blaspheme'.[3] Jews, by contrast, and later Christians, were convinced that believers in the God of Israel, and readers of his scriptures, did not have the luxury of evacuating divinity from contingency, or God from creation. For them, as the church father Tertullian would go on to put it, God was 'wholly employed and absorbed in [creation] – in his hand, his eye, his labour, his purpose, his wisdom, his providence, and above all, in his love' (*De Resurrectione* 6).

In this short article I am interested more narrowly in the question of *creatio ex nihilo*, which is perhaps the aspect of cosmology which showcases Jewish and Christian thought at its most fiercely anti-Epicurean – not to say 'countercultural'. For the Greeks, the origin of the world was not *ex nihilo* but

[1] This article originated in a focused project on the meaning and theological significance of the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, part of an ongoing small annual working group with scholars from a variety of institutions including Notre Dame and Southern Methodist Universities, Princeton and Fuller Seminaries. I am grateful for feedback and suggestions to friends and colleagues in that group as well as in audiences at the 2010 British Association for Jewish Studies conference in Southampton and at the Systematic Theology seminar in the University of St Andrews (2010).

[2] Ταῦτα δὲ ἐγένετο μὲν οὐδέποτε, ἔστι δὲ ἀεί· καὶ ὁ μὲν νοῦς ἅμα πάντα ὁρᾷ, ὁ δὲ λόγος τὰ μὲν πρῶτα τὰ δὲ δεύτερα λέγει. Sallustius, *De Dis et Mundo* 4.9, ed. G. Rochefort, *Saloustios: Des dieux et du monde*, Collection des universités de France (Paris: Société d'édition Les Belles Lettres, 1960).

[3] Heraclitus of Alexandria, *Homeric Questions* 1.1: πάντα γὰρ ἠσέβησεν, εἰ μηδὲν ἠλληγόρησεν.

from material available in a formless or disordered state (ἀκοσμία) to the Demiurge's fashioning of a state of order.[4] This question of creation, Frances Young rightly stresses, is 'an area where early Christianity did develop an understanding of the world which was self-consciously in confrontation with ancient culture'.[5]

The God of Israel, by contrast, did not merely fashion an ordered material world out of disjointed building blocks: far from being formed out of atomic collisions in some primal soup of matter, the world in its entirety was for Jews and Christians in late antiquity shaped *de novo* by God's providential reason and purpose. This act of creation did indeed entail the primal stuff of chaos (*tohu wa-bohu*) in the sense of Genesis 1, to be sure, but the world's 'formless and void' state comes to be seen as *already the product* of the act of creation, rather than merely its material cause.

So far, so predictable, perhaps. But one of the interesting questions here is the difficulty of understanding quite what is meant in Genesis 1. Given the narrative sequence of Gen 1:1–2, we may read: God created the world; and what he created was at first formless and void.[6] Yet the alternative is to see Gen 1:1 as a kind of *title* that is then expounded, beginning in 1:2 with a description of the material state of things *preceding* the act of creation.[7] Thus: 'God created the world. Now let me tell you how he did it: when the earth was still formless and void, the Spirit hovered . . . And then God said, etc.'

Similarly, in Genesis 2 God fashions man out of clay, an image which also brings to mind Jeremiah's observation of the potter's wheel. But this could be read quite differently, as ancient readers already appreciated. Is God's clay the raw material of creation or itself the object of creation? In other words, did God create the chaos itself, and the clay, or did he work with the primeval atomic soup that he found? The Wisdom of Solomon 11:17 takes it to be self-evident that this means God created the world *out of* pre-existing formless matter (ἐξ ἀμόρφου ὕλης), a point on which it does not sound

[4] See e.g. Plutarch, *De Animae procreatione in Timaeo* 1014B: οὐ γὰρ ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος ἡ γένεσις ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ μὴ καλῶς μηδ' ἱκανῶς ἔχοντος, also quoted by Frances M. Young, '"Creatio ex Nihilo": A Context for the Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44 (1991), pp. 139–40.

[5] 'Creatio ex Nihilo', p. 139.

[6] John C. O'Neill, 'How Early is the Doctrine of *Creatio ex Nihilo*?', *Journal of Theological Studies* (2002), p. 454, suggests, perhaps a little too strongly, that putting Gen 1:1 first 'converts the old mythology into a statement of *creatio ex nihilo*'.

[7] So e.g. Justin, *1 Apol.* 110.2; Athenagoras and the anonymous *De Resurrectione*; cf. Wisdom 11.17 (κτίσασα τὸν κόσμον ἐξ ἀμόρφου ὕλης). See further e.g. Gerhard May, *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), pp. 120–39.

very different from Plato, Aristotle or for that matter Philo of Alexandria, for whom it also seems to be unproblematically the case that creation is a matter of giving shape and identity to what is shapeless.[8]

And yet, at some point in the early Christian centuries, it came to be taken for granted in both Jewish and Christian exegesis that God created all things, including the primeval void and the clay from which man was made. By the third century, in fact, a Christian writer like Origen could show himself exasperated by any view seeming to lend hostages to Epicureanism's principle that nothing comes from nothing, even if gods be involved:[9]

> I cannot understand how so many distinguished men have been of the opinion that matter . . . was uncreated (*materiam . . . ingenitam*). That is, it was not formed by God himself, who is the Creator of all things. Rather, they say that its nature and power were the result of chance . . . thinking that so great a work as the universe could exist without an architect or overseer'. (*Princ.* 2.1.4)

Jewish writers were perhaps less immediately challenged and threatened by pagan ideas of uncreated matter, but as and when they did encounter them, at least from the third century onwards, they too firmly rejected them. At the same time, it repays close scrutiny to examine why this conclusion was not immediately obvious either to Jewish interpreters or even to Christian ones.

*Creatio ex nihilo* is often said to be absent from the New Testament, as a later distinctively Christian development in reaction to second-century Hellenistic challenges. Thus Frances Young writes:

> It is often supposed that Hebraic understanding lost out in the assimilation of the Bible to Greek philosophy, but increasingly this seems to be a false estimate of what was going on . . . *Creatio ex nihilo* was affirmed in the face of Greek assumptions: 'nothing comes from nothing' was a Greek commonplace, and implied that anything coming from nothing is a sham![10]

[8] References cited in Paul Copan, 'Is *Creatio Ex Nihilo* a Post-Biblical Invention? An Examination of Gerhard May's Proposal', *Trinity Journal* 17 (1996), p. 83, nn. 29–32; I am also indebted to an unpublished paper by J. Ross Wagner, '*Creatio ex Nihilo* in Hellenistic Judaism' (Notre Dame, 2010).

[9] So, famously, Lucretius *De Rerum Natura* 1.149–50 (*nullam rem e nihilo gigni divinitus umquam*), following Parmenides ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος οὐδὲν γίνεται (cited e.g. in Philo *Aet.* 5; Aristotle, *Metaph.* 11.6 (1026B)). Note also Persius 3.83–4, in an anti-Epicurean taunt.

[10] Young, 'Creatio ex Nihilo', p. 139.

In this assessment, and the concomitant view that the doctrine has no substantial foothold in Judaism prior to the Middle Ages, Young follows the influential work of Gerhard May. May argues that the second century's inner-Christian debates occasioned by the Gnostic challenge enhanced the need for a free and sovereign Creator over against those who, like the Valentinians, divided matter as the corrupt emanation of the creator-demiurge from the purely spiritual supreme deity. Like David Winston, May holds that the doctrine is not articulated in what he calls 'Hellenistic Judaism' (by which he means mainly Philo, who seems happier to affirm that God created the world of pre-existing matter).[11] In May's view, quite possibly Basilides was the first to posit that God created matter itself – a suggestion that serious students of that Alexandrian theologian have since come to regard as highly unlikely.[12] May, like Young and other exegetes, believes that Judaism remained remarkably uninterested in this doctrine and that the biblical text of neither Testament requires a doctrine of creation out of nothing.[13] The most that Frances Young will allow for the Jewish texts is that the doctrine emerged as a distinctively Christian, second-century 'implicate' of the affirmation of a sovereign Creator (Young, p. 145).

It is certainly true that frequently cited Septuagintal and New Testament passages which assert God's creation of what is seen from what is not seen, or things which are out of things which are not, should not be short-circuited into statements about *creatio ex nihilo*. Exegetes are today in widespread agreement on this point. 2 Maccabees 7:28, for example, affirms not that God made the heavens and the earth out of 'nothing',[14] merely that he made

[11] David Winston, 'The Book of Wisdom's Theory of Cosmogony', *History of Religions* 11 (1971), pp. 185–202; '*Creation Ex Nihilo* Revisited: A Reply to Jonathan Goldstein', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 37 (1986), pp. 88–91; May, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, pp. 6–26.

[12] So e.g. Winrich A. Löhr, *Basilides und seine Schule: Eine Studie zur Theologie und Kirchengeschichte des zweiten Jahrhunderts*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 83 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), p. 314 and n. 110 questioning May's appropriation of secondary phraseology in Clement of Alexandria. Cf. previously Young, 'Creatio ex Nihilo', pp. 147–8; See also G. C. Stead, review of Gerhard May, *Schöpfung aus dem Nichts: Die Entstehung der Lehre von der creatio ex nihilo* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1978), *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 30 (1978), p. 548, who suggested that first-century BC 'scraps' of philosophical evidence for the existence of such a doctrine can in fact be found in Eudorus and Cicero.

[13] May, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, p. 24. This latter point too has been staunchly challenged, e.g. in Sean M. McDonough, *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[14] Contrast e.g. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans*, Word Biblical Commentary 38 (2 vols. Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), vol. 1, p. 218, on Rom 4:17, who assumes this text, like passages in Philo (*Opif.* 81; *Leg. All.* 3:10; *Migr.* 183; *Heres* 36; *Mut.* 46; *Som.* 1:76;

them 'not out of existing things' (οὐκ ἐξ ὄντων). The writer applies this principle to human conception in the womb, which is clearly a case of God making human beings out of what is not a human being. Other examples could be multiplied. If God makes 'out of non-being the things that are' this need not be *ex nihilo* but merely his making out of shapelessness the things which have shape.

Romans 4:17, likewise, links God's 'calling into existence things that do not exist' to Abraham and Sarah's preternatural biological conception, also comparing it to resurrection from the dead. Other New Testament passages which are less explicit than is often assumed include John 1:3, Colossians 1:16, Hebrews 11:3. While we may all agree that such statements are *compatible* with God's sovereign creation out of nothing, what they actually affirm seems to be rather less than this.

My purpose here is not so much to question the suggestion of May and others that the explicit doctrine emerged in Christian circles in the second century. I wish instead to illustrate the extent to which, in positive substance if not in terminology, the same convictions about creation were in fact already intrinsic to Palestinian Judaism in both the Second Temple and rabbinic periods. I will refer in passing to the New Testament and patristic literature as well; but specifically here I wish to focus more narrowly on the question of what pedigree, if any, the idea of God's creation of *matter itself* can be shown to have produced in ancient Jewish sources composed or extant in Hebrew or Aramaic.[15] Given the ambiguity of the biblical narratives, how and when did Jews and Christians move so decisively to the affirmation that God created matter itself? After a brief observation on Genesis 1 in the ancient versions we will turn to the Dead Sea Scrolls and proceed from there to the rabbinic literature. Aside from accommodating the exigencies of time and space, this very brief sketch will allow us to focus on material that Gerhard May and Frances Young entirely ignore, thereby potentially constituting a useful external point of reference.[16]

*Mos.* 2:100, 267; *Spec. Leg.* 4:187) and Jewish apocryphal literature (*Joseph and Aseneth* 12:2; 2 *Baruch* 21:4; 48:8; 2 *Enoch* 24:2; *Ap. Const.* 8.12.7) to be straightforwardly about *creatio ex nihilo*.

[15] Key passages in the Hebrew Bible include Gen 1, Isa 44:24, Prov 8:22–6 and perhaps Ps 33:6, 9. While these texts may be judged *consonant* with a notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, they do not in my view establish such a notion and were not judged by pre-Christian readers to do so.

[16] We thereby also usefully bracket out several customarily cited but relatively fleeting 'hot-button' proof texts – including the Jewish 2 Macc 7:28 (οὐκ ἐξ ὄντων ἐποίησεν αὐτὰ ὁ θεός) and Wisdom 1:14, along with more doubtfully classifiable ones like *Joseph and Asenath* 12:1–2; 2 *Baruch* 48:8; *Shepherd of Hermas* (Mand. 1.1; Vis. 1.1.6); *Odes of*

## The influence of the ancient versions

It would not be possible to debate *creatio ex nihilo* if the biblical creation account had been unequivocal on this point. As it is, the ambiguities of Genesis 1:1 were widely appreciated in post-biblical times and attracted a good deal of semantic, cosmological and mystical speculation.[17] This culminated during the rabbinic period in the so-called *ma'aseh bereshit* – present already in the Mishnah (e.g. at m. *Hag.* 2.1) and eventually in the *Sefer Yetzirah* and medieval kabbalah, but with many intervening midrashic manifestations.[18] The fundamental argument derives from the Bible's intriguing first word *bereshit*, which could be (and sometimes was) understood to mean 'by/with/in a *reshit*' – a chief or principle (Aquila's Greek version famously has ἐν κεφαλαίῳ).[19]

Quite what that *reshit* might be was open to interpretation which drew at times on Proverbs 8:2 in order to identify it with Wisdom (God's *reshit darko*, the beginning of his way) or, in the case of Philo's more Hellenised reading, the Logos. Palestinian Hebrew and Aramaic sources sometimes made that connection explicit, but it is striking to trace two quite different variants in the *Fragment* and *Neofiti* Targums to Genesis 1:1. Some manuscripts side with the Septuagint tradition's seemingly unanimous and poignant rendition

*Solomon* 16:18–19; *Apostolic Constitutions* 8.12.7. Suffice it to say that some (like O'Neill, 'How Early is the Doctrine of *Creatio ex Nihilo*?', with a pedigree reaching back to Origen on 2 Macc 7:28 in *Joh.* 1.17.103; *Princ.* 2.1.5) regard these texts as 'slam dunk' evidence while others (including the present writer) consider them to illustrate what May calls 'factors tending to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in Judaism' (May, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, p. 21). For Philo of Alexandria's views see, in addition to May, Gregory E. Sterling, '*Creatio Temporalis, Aeterna, vel Continua*? An Analysis of the Thought of Philo of Alexandria', *Studia Philonica Annual* 4 (1992), pp. 15–41.

[17] See Menahem Kister, '*Tohu wa-Bohu*, Primordial Elements and *Creatio ex Nihilo*', *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 14 (2007), pp. 229–56. *Pace* Jaroslav Pelikan, *What has Athens to Do with Jerusalem? Timaeus and Genesis in Counterpoint* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 48, the LXX choice to render ברא 'to create' by ποιέω (rather than e.g. κτίζω) is not in my view among the more interesting of these ambiguities; nor is the supposedly unique divine subject of ברא (which does in fact repeatedly take a human subject in the *piel* and *hiphil*).

[18] A. Peter Hayman, *Sefer Yesira: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary*, TSAJ (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), pp. 35–6, demonstrates text-critical emendations of *Sefer Yetzirah* in the direction of *creatio ex nihilo*, preferring the use of ברא to חצב and יצר. This is most striking in the case of Qoh 7:14, substituting ברא for the MT's עשה (para. 60; contrast para. 48a).

[19] Similarly R. Yehudah bar Ilai is cited as saying that the word בהבראם in Gen 2:4 should be interpreted not 'when he created them' (*be-hibar'am*) but 'by the letter *he* [sc. of his divine name *YaH*] he created them' (*be-He bar'am*), leaving the *yod* of the divine name to be the letter by which he creates the world to come (*b. Men.* 29b).



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'in the beginning' (ἐν ἀρχῇ: מלקדמין or מן אוולא), which in a sense firmly contextualises 1:2; others, however, side with Proverbs in taking the first letter of the Tanakh instrumentally, 'with wisdom' (בחכמה so e.g. a textual variant in *Neofiti*).[20] Much always rides on whether one regards the phrase 'formless and void' (תהו ובהו, Gen 1:2) to be the raw material or, *au contraire*, the state of creation (LXX ἡ δὲ γῆ ἦν ἀόρατος καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος and *Jubilees* 2:1–2 appear to opt for the latter, thereby preparing the way for a denial of uncreated matter).[21]

Numerous other illustrations attest the fascination exercised by this cosmological speculation about creation (*ma'aseh bereshit*) on the popular imagination.[22] So, for example:

> Rabbi Yona said in the name of R. Levi: why was the world created with the letter *Bet* (ב – cf. בראשית)? The reason is that the *bet* is closed on all its sides, but open only in the forward direction. In the same way it is not allowed to investigate what is above and beneath as well as what is before and after.[23]

This same mystical tradition about Genesis 1:1 may even surface in documents close to early Jewish Christian circles, as in a widely transmitted apocryphal anecdote about the rabbinic teacher of the schoolboy Jesus, preserved in a variety of sources including both infancy gospels and the generally orthodox mid-second-century *Epistula Apostolorum* 4:

> Our Lord Jesus Christ was sent by Joseph and Mary his mother to be taught. [And] when his teacher told him, Say *Alpha*: then he answered and said: You tell me first what is *Beta*.

If the allusion is indeed present (rather than merely a fetching play on the infant Saviour's precociousness), we may see here the mysterious significance

[20] Variants in *Neofiti* and *Fragment Targum* MSS attest readings including בחכמה/בחוכמתא/מלקדמין for the first word of the Pentateuch; some *Neofiti* MSS further insert ושכלל 'and formed' after ברא 'he created', as if to underline that *both* generation and formation are in view.

[21] Kister, 'Tohu wa-Bohu'; contrast more critically Maren Niehoff, '*Creatio ex Nihilo* Theology in Genesis Rabbah in Light of Christian Exegesis', *Harvard Theological Review* 99 (2006), p. 44 and n. 35. For further discussion see also Philip S. Alexander, '"In the Beginning": Rabbinic and Patristic Exegesis of Genesis 1:1', in Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling (eds), *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*, Jewish and Christian Perspectives (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2009), pp. 1–29.

[22] Cf. also Giuseppe Veltri, *Eine Tora für den König Talmai: Untersuchungen zum Übersetzungsverständnis in der jüdisch-hellenistischen und rabbinischen Literatur*, TSAJ 41 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), pp. 30–1, on this material. He comments that the rabbis tend to side with the LXX translation.

[23] *Gen. Rab.* 1.10.

of the letter *beth*, by which hangs the power of creation – a power the boy Jesus displays in other apocryphal infancy stories.[24] The theme of Christ as Creator is one to which we will return briefly at the end – but here it suffices to say that the *reshit* of Jewish discussion is Christ in New Testament and patristic discussion, as Philip Alexander has nicely illustrated, suggesting that there may well have been 'exegetical encounters' between the traditions – though the specific identification with Torah may be late (*Genesis Rabbah*).[25]

## The Dead Sea Scrolls

Unsurprisingly, the Scrolls have no trouble with the biblical account of the entire world, including all its constituent matter, as created by God. The philosophical question of whether that creation occurred *ex nihilo* is of no explicit concern to the covenanters, even if the comprehensive language they do employ would seem to cover all bases. At the same time, in the Scrolls as already in the canonical frame of the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g. Jeremiah 5:22; Job 38:8–11; Psalm 104), even though this doctrine is not explicitly affirmed, any hint of a dualistic cosmogony is firmly rejected.[26]

These are points that, strictly speaking, neither require nor sustain proof; but they do bear illustration from three or four key scrolls.

The constitutional document known as the Community Rule or *Serekh ha-Yahad* exists in multiple different manuscripts (versions or drafts[27]) from Caves 1 and 4 spanning the first half of the first century BC. The *Serekh* clearly affirms a maximalist view of the biblical God as Creator of all things.

> From the God of Knowledge comes all that is and shall be. Before ever they existed He established their whole design, and, when, as ordained

[24] As when he makes clay birds to fly by speaking the ineffable Name over them (*Infancy Gospel of Thomas* A 2.3; *Qur'an* 5.110; *Toledot Yeshu*, etc.)

[25] Alexander, 'In the Beginning', pp. 14–17.

[26] Cf. Michaela Bauks, *Die Welt am Anfang: Zum Verhältnis von Vorwelt und Weltentstehung in Gen 1 und in der altorientalischen Literatur*, Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997), pp. 14–33. Taken in isolation, texts like Pss 74 or 29 do arguably suggest hints of creation as a matter of *Chaoskampf*, but in the canonical frame this is relativised by Gen 1, including e.g. its affirmation that the sea monsters (*tanninim*) of Ps 74 are themselves created on Day 5 (Gen 1:21).

[27] Charlotte Hempel has argued that the S manuscripts should perhaps be seen not as successive variants on a base text but as attesting a formative document in continual flux and development (Seminar paper on the Tolerance of Textual Diversity at Qumran, Oxford, 13 Oct. 2009).

for them, they came into being, it is in accord with His glorious design that they accomplish their task without change.[28]

The idea of an *uncreated reality*, in other words, is quite simply an oxymoron to the writer of the *Serekh*, who in foregrounding divine 'knowledge' and 'design' plots a course that is remarkably cognate to the seemingly more 'Hellenistic' philosophical approach of Philo or other writers influenced by middle Platonism. Similarly, in a lyrical meditation towards the end of this scroll the writer reflects in quasi-creedal, Nicene-sounding terms about God's creation of all things:

By his knowledge everything shall come into being,
and all that does exist
he establishes with his calculations
and nothing is done outside of him.
. . . For beyond you there is no perfect path
and without your will, nothing comes to be.
You have taught all knowledge
and all that exists is so by your will.[29]

Similar themes already emerge in classic second-century Qumran documents like the Hymns (*Hodayot*) and the *War Scroll*. Without God nothing either exists or happens; and he it is who directs and determines the course of created reality by his wisdom (1QH 1.19–20; 1QH 6.27). The Hymnist believes that 'through the heavenly host God judged all his works before he created them . . . he established (the heavenly host?) before eternity'[30] (1QH 13.10 [5.16]). Significantly, the idea of universal dependence on God as creator of everything appears here as elsewhere in liturgical or quasi-liturgical contexts. This is a fact which lends these assertions rather more *gravitas* than mere religious opinion.

In the *War Scroll* (2nd cent. BC) manuscripts from Caves 1 and 4, God is clearly the Creator of all things including the furthest recesses of the cosmos (1QM 10.11–15). Even the prince of darkness himself has his origin in the will of the Creator, who

created Belial for the pit,
angel of enmity;
his domain is in darkness,
his counsel is for evil and wickedness.
(1QM 13.11 = 4Q495 frg 2 3)

[28] 1QS 3.15–16. DSS translations are adapted from Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar (eds), *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition* (2 vols. Leiden/Grand Rapids: Brill/Eerdmans, 1997–8).

[29] 1QS 11.11, 17–18 = 4Q264 frg 1.4–6.

[30] 1QH 13.7–8, 10 (5.13–14, 16).

The same theme of God's creation even of the abyss, the darkness and the water is, incidentally, present in the earlier *Book of Jubilees* (2:1–3), highly regarded at Qumran. Menahem Kister argues that this already expresses a non-philosophical intuition that God's creation is all-encompassing.[31]

In the evidently important, multiply copied liturgical composition known as the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, finally, we also hear that 'from the God of knowledge comes all that existed for ever' (4Q402 frag 4.12–13). This includes all the different possible spirits and divinities there may be, since 'he is the God of the gods of all the chiefs of the heights, and king of kings of all the eternal councils' (4Q403 1.34–6 = 4Q404 frg 4.1–2, 4Q405 frg 4–5.2–3).

Based even on this fairly slender selection of some of the leading sectarian scrolls, it seems evident that, although we find here no sustained investment in either the language or the concept of a *creatio ex nihilo*, nevertheless the covenanters' belief in the supreme Creator God is thoroughgoing and all-inclusive, so that all that exists was created by him.[32] What Jon Levenson says about the Tanakh applies here too:

> The concern of the creation theology is not *creatio ex nihilo*, but the establishment of a benevolent and life-sustaining order, founded upon the demonstrated authority of the God who is triumphant over all rivals . . . What makes this a confession of faith in YHWH's mastery rather than a shallow truism is the survival of those potent forces of chaos that were subjugated and domesticated at creation.[33]

## Some notes on rabbinic literature

By the time of the great rabbinic corpora we may expect to find a more conscious acknowledgement of the argument about *creatio ex nihilo*, which had by then become somewhat more explicitly familiar. Even here, however, a worldview predicated upon God's creation of 'the heavens and the earth' and all they contained, spiritual as well as material, remained relatively untroubled by Greek philosophical palpitations about materiality and contingency.

Like the Dead Sea Scrolls, rabbinic literature has no trouble affirming all-encompassing divine sovereignty in creation and resisting cosmological dualism even despite an awareness of elements of evil or conflict. Similarly,

[31] Kister, 'Tohu wa-Bohu', pp. 249–53 and *passim*.

[32] Cf. *b. B. Bat.*16b; *b. Qidd.* 30b; *b. Šab.* 146a: God created both the Evil Desire and the Torah as its antidote; also (*b. B. Bat.* 74b; *Nid.* 22b) the sea monsters.

[33] Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 47.

the rabbis were untroubled by problems of scale in relating God's creation of the universe to the particularity and intimacy of Israel's election. Answering a question from 'Daughter Zion',

> The Holy One, blessed be He, answered her: My daughter, twelve constellations have I created in the firmament, and for each constellation I have created thirty hosts, and for each host I have created thirty legions, and for each legion I have created thirty cohorts, and for each cohort I have created thirty maniples, and for each maniple I have created thirty camps, and to each camp I have attached three hundred and sixty-five thousands of myriads of stars, corresponding to the days of the solar year, and all of them I have created only for your sake, and you say, You have forgotten me and forsaken me! Can a woman forsake her nursing child?[34]

The rabbinic texts report discussion about which was created first – earth or heaven (*b. Ḥag.* 12a), light or darkness (*b. Tam.* 32a), earth or Gehenna (*b. Pes.* 54a); whether earth was created beginning from Jerusalem outwards or the other way round (*b. Yoma* 54b, etc.). But there is never any doubt that all material and immaterial reality are created by God, and that he continues to be active in creation:

> Every day ministering angels are created from the fiery stream, and utter song, and cease to be, for it is said: They are new every morning: great is Thy faithfulness. . . . R. Samuel b. Nahmani said that R. Jonathan said: From every utterance that goes forth from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, an angel is created, for it is said: By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth. (*b. Ḥag.* 14a)

The trend in rabbinic discussion is towards the assumption that in the Genesis account the verb *bara'* denotes *creatio ex nihilo* – a point of view more explicitly developed in medieval commentators like Sa'adia Gaon and Naḥmanides.[35]

[34] B. Ber. 32b.

[35] Sa'adia, *Sefer Emunot ve-Deot* (*Book of Beliefs and Opinions*) 7.7: *Sa'adia ben Joseph: The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, ed. Samuel Rosenblatt, Yale Judaica Series (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), cited in Jonathan A. Goldstein, '*Creation Ex Nihilo*: Recantations and Restatements', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 38 (1987), pp. 187–94. Cf. Gerhard Bodendorfer and Matthias Millard, *Bibel und Midrasch: Zur Bedeutung der rabbinischen Exegese für die Bibelwissenschaft*, Forschungen zum Alten Testament (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), p. 146, n. 86: Ramban is consistent in maintaining that *bara'* always refers to *creatio ex nihilo*.

According to a famous catena of 'tens' in Mishnah *Aboth* 5.1, God created the world (not with matter, but) with ten words. In a discussion involving the Amoraic Rabbis Yoḥanan and Joseph, the former explains that these ten must be understood as:

> the expressions 'And [God] said' in the first chapter of Genesis. But there are only nine? The words 'In the beginning' are also a [creative] utterance, since it is written, 'By the word of the Lord *the heavens* were made, and *all the host of them* by the breath of his mouth' (Psalm 33:6).

Interestingly, however, the rabbis tend to sit loosely to systematisations on this topic. Thus Yoḥanan b. Nappaḥa himself elsewhere appears to affirm God's use of pre-existing matter like the potter shapes clay:

> How did the Holy One, blessed be He, create His world? Said R. Johanan: The Lord took two balls, one of fire and the other of snow, and worked them into each other, and from these the world was created.[36]

The evidence for the rabbinic view, then, is evidently inconsistent, although clear on the idea of the supreme God as universal creator.[37]

Another widespread affirmation is that creation is not limited to the material world of heaven and earth. Not only did God create the angels and the heavenly hosts, but:

> Seven things were created before the world, viz., The Torah, repentance, the Garden of Eden, Gehenna, the Throne of Glory, the Temple, and the name of the Messiah. The Torah, for it is written, The Lord possessed me [sc. the Torah] in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. Repentance, for it is written, Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world . . . Thou turnest man to destruction, and sayest, Repent, ye sons of men. The Garden of Eden, as it is written, And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden from aforetime. Gehenna, as it is written, For Tophet is ordained of old. The Throne of Glory, as it is written, Thy Throne is established from of old. The Temple, as it is written, A glorious high throne from the beginning is the place of

[36] *Genesis Rabbah* 10.3. This is also a point well put in Niehoff, '*Creatio ex Nihilo* Theology', p. 47.

[37] See Ora Limor and Guy G. Stroumsa, *Contra Iudaeos: Ancient and Medieval Polemics between Christians and Jews*, Texts and Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Judaism (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1996), p. 75, point out that an outsider like Eusebius praises the Hebrew account of *creatio ex nihilo* (*Praep. Ev.* 7.16–22).

> our sanctuary. The name of the Messiah, as it is written, His name [sc. of Messiah] shall endure for ever, and [has existed] before the sun![38]

One of the more interesting features of rabbinic texts alluding to *creatio ex nihilo* is their frequent linkage of this allusion to the affirmation that God raises the dead (as also of course in Romans 4:17). Although by his own admission exaggerating the supposed causal link, Jonathan Goldstein has rightly stressed the close correlation of these two *topoi*, from perhaps 2 Maccabees onwards.[39] This of course is true already in Paul's suggestive comment in Romans 4:17, even if Paul (like the earlier and contemporary Jewish writers) is hardly interested in the *nihil*, an ontology of nothingness: forming something out of what it is not may or may not entail forming it strictly out of 'nothing'.[40] Stripped of its strictly causal logic, however, Goldstein's more general point also finds support among some New Testament scholars who have surmised that the eventual Christian doctrine's affirmation of materiality mattered crucially to Christians because of their belief in the resurrection.[41] This is a point which came to be well attested in second-century writers like Tatian, Irenaeus and Tertullian.

Perhaps the key flashpoint in the discussion of rabbinic evidence has been the standard rabbinic narrative trope of an apologetic encounter between a rabbi and a pagan in the fifth-century Palestinian midrashic commentary on Genesis known as *Genesis Rabbah*. In this case the narrative ostensibly involves Rabban Gamaliel II (grandson of St Paul's teacher) and a pagan philosopher, who challenges him on a point of interpretation in the biblical text.

[38] *B. Ned.* 39b (Soncino trans.).

[39] Jonathan A. Goldstein, 'The Origins of the Doctrine of *Creatio ex Nihilo*', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 35 (1984), p. 129. Note the critique of Winston, '*Creation Ex Nihilo* Revisited' with the rebuttal (and partial self-correction) in Goldstein, '*Creation Ex Nihilo*: Recantations and Restatements'. NB the same creation/bodily resurrection link continues to be made in later rabbinic thought: cf. Harry Sysling, *Tehiyyat ha-Metim: The Resurrection of the Dead in the Palestinian Targums of the Pentateuch and Parallel Traditions in Classical Rabbinic Literature*, Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1996), pp. 1–2. Cf. also 2 *Bar.* 21.2; 48.8.

[40] As Kister, 'Tohu wa-Bohu', p. 245, puts it in relation to 2 Macc 7:28 and related texts, 'the things are not considered *existent* before they are formed, but this does not necessarily mean that the author believed in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in the strict sense'. Similar questions pertain to New Testament texts like John 1:3; Rom 4:17; Col 1:16; Heb 11:3.

[41] So e.g. Martin Hengel, *Studien zur Christologie: Kleine Schriften IV*, ed. Claus-Jürgen Thornton, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 201 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), pp. 410–11.

> A certain philosopher asked R. Gamaliel: Your God was indeed a great artist, but surely He found good materials which assisted Him? What are they? he said. He replied, *Tohu*, *bohu*, darkness, water, wind (*ruaḥ*), and the deep. May that man perish, exclaimed Gamaliel: The term 'creation' is used by Scripture in connection with all of them. *Tohu and bohu*: I make peace and create evil (Isa 45:7). *Darkness*: I form the light, and create darkness (Isa 45:7). Water: Praise Him, you heavens of heavens, and you waters that are above the heavens (Psa 148:4); why? For He commanded, and they were created (Psa 148:5). Wind: For lo, He that forms the mountains, and creates the wind (Amos 4:13). The depths: When there were no depths, I was brought forth (Prov 8:24).[42]

Given its somewhat clichéd setting, the early date Goldstein assigns to this text is in my view problematic, a point underscored by the evidence for the later (Amoraic) form of Aramaic here in view.[43] To be sure, Goldstein does seem right (as against Winston) to suggest that one finds here a clear insistence against a characteristic philosophical opponent that God created not only the world, but all the possible building blocks used in making it. We have here a surprisingly clear affirmation that God's creation of heaven and earth included matter (and the denial that God created *out of* matter), even if the form this takes is still the doctrine's positive substance without the explicit terminological wrapper of 'creating something out of nothing'. Maren Niehoff argues that the linguistic and philosophical clues combine to suggest that in its present form this is a third or fourth-century composition designed to lend Jewish pedigree to an affirmation of *creatio ex nihilo* which developed out of Christian–Jewish contact and controversy.[44] If true, that reveals important insights about exegetical interactions in Palestine (possibly

[42] *Genesis Rabbah* 1.9. Cf. the discussion in Goldstein, 'Origins'; Winston, '*Creation Ex Nihilo* Revisited'; Goldstein, '*Creation Ex Nihilo*: Recantations and Restatements'; Niehoff, '*Creatio ex Nihilo* Theology'; Kister, 'Tohu wa-Bohu'. Young, 'Creatio ex Nihilo' mentions the text but dismisses its relevance fairly summarily.

[43] See Niehoff, '*Creatio ex Nihilo* Theology', p. 46 (citing Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period*, 2nd edn, Dictionaries of Talmud, Midrash, and Targum (Ramat Gan/Baltimore, MD: Bar Ilan University Press/Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 355), p. 48 on the late expression 'may that man perish' (תפה רוחה דהוא גברה).

[44] So e.g. Niehoff, '*Creatio ex Nihilo* Theology', pp. 48–9. Bidirectional influence on Christian and Jewish exegesis is also affirmed e.g. in Herbert W. Basser, *Studies in Exegesis: Christian Critiques of Jewish Law and Rabbinic Responses, 70–300 C.E.*, The Brill Reference Library of Ancient Judaism 2 (Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2000); also Edward Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and for the extent of the ongoing relationships cf. e.g. Samuel Krauss and William Horbury, *The Jewish-Christian Controversy: From the Earliest Times to 1789*, TSAJ

Caesarea) in late antiquity, even if it does not take away from the argument of Menahem Kister and others that the building blocks of a Jewish affirmation of this idea were in place several centuries earlier.

## Summary

No known ancient Jewish text affirms the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* in precise terminology, and few do so even indirectly.[45] Nevertheless, biblical passages and their reception in the interpretative world of the Dead Sea Scrolls and of rabbinic literature manifest a lively and consistent conviction that the God of Israel is the creator of all that is in heaven and earth, seen and unseen, material and spiritual. Some Jewish and early Christian writings continue for quite some time to regard this conviction as fundamentally compatible with the idea of God's use of raw materials, whose existence is apparently not thought subversive to God's sovereignty in creation. In *Genesis Rabbah*, however, we arrive at a position which is substantially indistinguishable from the Christian account of *creatio ex nihilo,* from whose exegesis, influenced in turn by Jewish precedent, it may in fact derive. There seems to have been two-way traffic here, from Jewish readings of Genesis to Christian affirmations about creation out of nothing, and back again.

## *The origins of* creatio ex nihilo *and Christian theology*

What is the significance of all this for Christian theology? *Creatio ex nihilo* is a doctrine that cannot be straightforwardly established by a *sola scriptura* approach, despite Protestant theologians' persistent claims to the contrary. What scripture and its earliest Jewish and Christian interpretation do confirm, however, is the central concern which that doctrine seeks to safeguard. In my limited soundings in modern theology, one of the clearest statements I have found of this radical doctrine is by Emil Brunner: for him, the precise meaning of the doctrine is this:

> God is the One who absolutely determines all things, and is determined by none. He is conditioned by nothing, therefore, not even by a 'Nothing'. Were He to be thus conditioned He would not be Creator, but simply a

(Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1995); William Horbury, *Jews and Christians in Contact and Controversy* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998); Günter Stemberger, *Jews and Christians in the Holy Land: Palestine in the Fourth Century* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

[45] Goldstein, '*Creation Ex Nihilo*: Recantations and Restatements', p. 187, writes, 'No known pre-rabbinic Jewish text can be proved to assert the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*, though passages from scripture and Hellenistic Jewish literature are ambiguous enough to have had that meaning read into them by intelligent believers.'

> demiurge. All that existed 'before' all creation was God and His Word. The Creation has its foundation and its origin in God alone.[46]

Brunner also explains that this 'Nothing' should not be explained as having some sort of metaphysical or ontological reality alongside God, as it always is in Gnostic and related mythologies;[47] Wolfhart Pannenberg similarly criticizes Karl Barth (*CD* III/3, pp. 289–368) and Jürgen Moltmann along these lines.[48] This important caveat is not always sufficiently acknowledged: the 'nihil' in *ex nihilo* excludes any eternal antithesis to God's creative activity. Colin Gunton develops this point in a similar fashion:

> The teaching that creation was 'out of nothing' affirms that God, in creating the world, had no need to rely on anything outside himself, so that creation is an act of divine sovereignty and freedom, an act of personal willing. It further implies that the universe, unlike God who is alone eternal and infinite, had a beginning in time and is limited in space. Here Christian teaching is in contradiction of almost every cosmology that the world has known. The biblical stress on the sovereignty of God, allied with the demonstration of that sovereignty in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, led in due time to the realization that to attribute eternity to anything other than God was to make that in effect divine.[49]

My argument here has been that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in its origin states the creation's comprehensive and absolute contingency on the Creator while at the same time affirming his unlimited sovereignty and freedom. Contrary to persistent assertions from biblical and systematic theologians, this doctrine has no explicit terminological basis in scripture. Contrary to

[46] Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, Dogmatics 2 (London: Lutterworth, 1952), vol. 2, p. 10. Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991–8), vol. 2, p. 14.

[47] Cf. further Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (2 vols. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 2.12 (citing *Loci Communes* 638): '"Before" there is the creature there is God and nothing. Nor is this nothing of the kind that can be the antecedent condition of something. God speaking is the creature's only antecedent condition: as Philip Melanchthon formulated, "When things were not, God spoke and they began to be."'

[48] Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 2.14. Moltmann famously and somewhat questionably draws on the kabbalistic notion (in Isaac Luria, 1534–72) of a divine *tzimtzum* (contraction) in order to allow for the womb-like Nothing out of which creation then 'issues' or emanates. See Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation. The Gifford Lectures 1984–1985* (London: SCM, 1985), pp. 86–8.

[49] Colin E. Gunton, 'The Doctrine of Creation', in Colin E. Gunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 141–2.

twentieth-century claims like those of Gerhard May and others, however, it is at the same time *not* a second-century afterthought, primarily a backlash against Gnosticism. The meaning and substance of the doctrine, though not the terminology, is firmly rooted in scripture and pre-Christian Jewish literature, even if in formal terms it seems to be adopted by Jews only in the rabbinic period – quite possibly in dialogue with Christian writers.[50]

[50] The vital role of Christ as the Word or *reshit* in this *creatio ex nihilo* has been stressed by a variety of modern theologians including T. F. Torrance (who in reliance on Athanasius regards the *homoousion* as the key to this doctrine): cf. the discussion in Tapio Luoma, *Incarnation and Physics: Natural Science in the Theology of Thomas F. Torrance*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 44–6, 143–7. Note also McDonough, *Christ as Creator*.