

GENESIS

Does Genesis's creation account depict creation "ex nihilo"?

I had once heard that one of the remarkable thing about the creation account in Genesis, as compared to the other creation accounts of the cultures of the surrounding area is that God creates the universe out of nothing, or 'ex nihilo'; whereas the other creation accounts usually had a god or gods forming the created universe out of some sort of pre-existing chaos.

A cursory reading of Genesis in KJV would seem to indicate ex nihilo:

[King James Version: Genesis 1:1-2](#)

1 In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. **2** And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

However, reading Young's Literal Translation, it seems that the original Hebrew account was written in the present tense, and the language would actually indicate the formation of the universe out of chaos, using phrases like 'preparing the heavens and earth' and 'the earth hath existed waste and void'.

[Young's Literal Translation: Genesis 1:1-2](#)

1 In the beginning of God's preparing the heavens and the earth -- **2** the earth hath existed waste and void, and darkness [is] on the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God fluttering on the face of the waters,

My question is how would early Jewish reader/hearer have interpreted this passage? Would the concept creation 'ex nihilo' have stuck out to them, in contrast to the other cultures around them? Is the Young translation wording here just indicative of the difficulties with translating this text's meaning?

- [genesis](#)
- [hebrew](#)
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asked Feb 22, 2012 at 16:51

[aceinthehole](#)

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7 Answers

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16

I disagree with Young's there. Hebrew syntax is very different than English, but I have difficulty seeing how Young got there.

Tense in Biblical Hebrew is non-existent (*Essentials of Biblical Hebrew*, Kyle Yates). It is context that determines the time of the word. Hebrew uses "aspect" (*An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, Waltke/O'Connor) which is a combination of stem, state, and context. There are seven stems that indicate whether the verb is active or passive (or even both in the reflexive stem) and if it is simple, intensive, or causative.

The inflections of a Hebrew verb indicate *state* instead of of time. They present the condition as complete or incomplete. The completed states are called perfects; the incomplete states are called imperfects. (*Essentials of Biblical Hebrew*, Kyle Yates)

Perfect state should not be confused with past tense nor imperfect with future. Most of the verbs that are translated as past tense are imperfects with a waw-consecutive. The waw-consecutive results in a past tense translation. Interestingly, there are prophecies of the future where the verbs are in the perfect state. This is understood as "as good as done."

bara' in Gen 1:1 is a Qal perfect (so is the first "was" in 1:2, the second is implied). That is the simple-active stem and the perfect state. When God created the Heavens and the earth, it is a done deal. Now it has to be shaped. I do understand that as God creating the heavens and the earth from nothing.

The first **explicit** statement of creation ex nihilo is in 2 Maccabees, a Jewish book but written in Greek. It deals with subjects of 161 BC. So some Jews did understand it as *ex nihilo*.

"I beseech thee, my son, look upon the heaven and the earth, and all that is therein, and consider that God **made them of things that were not**; and so was mankind made likewise." (2 Maccabees 7:28, KJV)

Isaiah actually uses the word *bara'* frequently. I can't remember if it is more than any other Hebrew writer or any other outside Genesis.

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answered Feb 22, 2012 at 20:10

[Frank Luke](#)

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11

The [NET Bible notes](#) are helpful here:

tn The translation assumes that the form translated “beginning” is in the absolute state rather than the construct (“in the beginning of,” or “when God created”). In other words, the clause in v. [1](#) is a main clause, v. [2](#) has three clauses that are descriptive and supply background information, and v. [3](#) begins the narrative sequence proper. The referent of the word “beginning” has to be defined from the context since there is no beginning or ending with God.

sn *In the beginning*. The verse refers to the beginning of the world as we know it; it affirms that it is entirely the product of the creation of God. But there are two ways that this verse can be interpreted: (1) It may be taken to refer to the original act of creation with the rest of the events on the days of creation completing it. This would mean that the disjunctive clauses of v. [2](#) break the sequence of the creative work of the first day. (2) It may be taken as a summary statement of what the chapter will record, that is, vv. [3-31](#) are about God’s creating the world as we know it. If the first view is adopted, then we have a reference here to original creation; if the second view is taken, then Genesis

itself does not account for the original creation of matter. To follow this view does not deny that the Bible teaches that God created everything out of nothing (cf. [John 1:3](#)) – it simply says that Genesis is not making that affirmation. This second view presupposes the existence of pre-existent matter, when God said, “Let there be light.” The first view includes the description of the primordial state as part of the events of day one. The following narrative strongly favors the second view, for the “heavens/sky” did not exist prior to the second day of creation (see v. [8](#)) and “earth/dry land” did not exist, at least as we know it, prior to the third day of creation (see v. [10](#)).

tn The English verb “create” captures well the meaning of the Hebrew term in this context. The verb אָרַךְ (bara’) always describes the divine activity of fashioning something new, fresh, and perfect. The verb does not necessarily describe creation out of nothing (see, for example, v. 27, where it refers to the creation of man); it often stresses forming anew, reforming, renewing (see [Ps 51:10](#); [Isa 43:15](#), [65:17](#)).

So it seems that the original readers *could* have understood Genesis 1 to mean *ex nihilo*, but the text does not definitively assert that philosophical position. The two things the text does affirm are:

1. God Himself did not come from something else. ([Babylonian](#) and many other creation stories detail the birth and family trees of the gods.)
2. God Himself created everything.

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[edited Jun 17, 2020 at 9:51](#)

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answered Feb 22, 2012 at 18:39

[Jon Ericson](#)

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- +1 this could also be the basis for an answer to [my earlier question](#) given that the NET Bible notes seem to address it directly (at least if I'm understanding them correctly)

– [Jack Douglas](#)

[Commented Feb 22, 2012 at 19:31](#)

- @Jack: I was thinking that too.

– [Jon Ericson](#)

[Commented Feb 22, 2012 at 19:41](#)

- 1

"(Babylonian and many other creation stories detail the birth and family trees of the gods.)" I compared several in seminary. After reading the Egyptian account of the origin of their gods, I needed to shower.

– [Frank Luke](#)

[Commented Feb 22, 2012 at 20:12](#)

- 1

@Frank: The Greek and Norse gods don't win any prizes for purity or good breeding either.

– [Jon Ericson](#)

[Commented Feb 22, 2012 at 20:24](#)

- @FrankLuke Sadly, I know exactly the [origin account](#) of which you speak. I too liked it better, when I didn't know jack.

– [Affable Geek](#)

[Commented Feb 23, 2012 at 4:06](#)

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2

This is Rashi's silliness. The first words in the Hebrew bible are:

בְּרֵאשִׁית, בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים, אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ.

Rashi said that you should relable the vowels on "Barah" and make it "Bro", so that it reads (sort of) like "In the beginning of God's creating the sky and the Earth..." This interpretation is *incredibly stretched*, you just don't say it that way in Hebrew. It helps to be a native speaker of modern Hebrew tremendously with this.

The correct interpretation as simple past tense "First, God created the skies and the Earth..." is absolutely correct. There can be no argument. The construction "Bro" does not exist except in Rashi's head (although, I have to hand it to him, it sounds convincing and natural to a Hebrew speaker, for about 10 seconds. Bara is the obvious reading, and Bro would have gotten a vav if it existed, and most likely would have been something else, like --- Bereshit Briat Elohim et ha-shamaiim..., which is how you say it).

Still, as far as the ex-nihilo business, it isn't clear. The creation seems to be ex-nihilo, but it could also mean that this is the section-header, this is the creation story, and the tohu-wa-vohu of the next verse was already there.

On Biblical tense

Hebrew has tenses like every other language. I don't know why anyone would say otherwise. It's an absurd thing to say. I read most of the Bible fluently, and understand all its tenses intuitively, without any special training, aside from being a native Hebrew speaker. It is artful, but not strange.

The only unnatural tense thing about the Bible is that sometimes the past tense is used while placing the perspective in a future time (like: and you told your slave "go away" --- meaning, placing your perspective in the future, you will have told your slave "go away"), and sometimes the future tense is used to refer to actions as they unfold, to place you "in the action". These sorts of displacement of perspective are easy to read for a fluent Hebrew speaker, and its totally natural, and can be reproduced in English. It's sort of like:

Pooh was a bear. And Pooh walks to the forest. And when Pooh will arrive at the forest, he will meet Tigger. And Tigger was a tiger. And when Tigger and Pooh will see the fountain, they will jump inside. And they will leave the fountain, and go to the edge of the forest, and they will talk at great length.

Or

And as you see Pharaoh, and you said to him "Come here and wipe my nose", and he wiped your nose as you said. And you said to him "Do it again", and he did.

The tense business is easy to keep in a good translation--- you just do stuff like I did above, and make the reader shift the tense perspective. When I translate, I try to maintain the proper tense.

I think fluency in modern Hebrew is essential for good translation. Without it, you are tone-deaf to nuances of meaning that only come with intimate familiarity with the roots and their variations. The tense thing is not a big deal, and not much different from other artsy writing in other languages.

EDIT: Why does "Bro" fool so many people?

Although "Bro" is a pure fabrication, it sounds really *convincing*, so that Rashi is a very good coiner of Hebrew. I had to sit and think about "Bro" for a significant amount of time, unlike other Hebrew misreadings, because it sounds just like a way of saying "In the beginning of God's creating", and I didn't know why, because I had never heard the word "Bro" before.

I figured it out. The construction is parallel to another existing Hebrew construction which is *irregular*, the construction "Ba" to "Bo". If you say "Hu ba", it means "He is coming". If you say "Be-bo-hu", it means "in his coming". It's not something that repeats with other verbs. If you say "Hu kana" (he bought), "Be-kni-ato" is "In his buying", and "Kno" doesn't mean anything at all. and if you say "Hu bara", "Be-briato" is the correct "In his creating".

But the irregular construction leaves a little bit of psychological resonance for the transformation "Bara" to "Bro", because it rhymes with "Ba" to "Bo", and "Bara" is different only in one letter. It is still *wrong*, because irregular constructions are irregular constructions, and they don't make regular

constructions irregular. But it's convincing, like saying "She cleaned her pori" instead of "She cleaned her pores", it is a little convincing because of the pull of "tori".

But this is the reason it sounds so persuasive. Rashi knew his Hebrew.

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[edited Apr 4, 2012 at 18:02](#)

answered Mar 31, 2012 at 7:13

[Ron Maimon](#)

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- 2

"This interpretation is *incredibly stretched*, you just don't say it that way in Hebrew. It helps to be a native speaker of modern Hebrew tremendously with this." Biblical Hebrew and Modern Hebrew are different languages. It helps to know Modern Hebrew to project ideas back and jump to conclusions. בָּרָא is attested in the same sense as Rashi suggests in Gen. 5:1. That you cannot say it this way in Modern Hebrew has very, very little significance.

– user2672

[Commented Mar 9, 2018 at 20:02](#)

- This is not Rashi silliness as you call it but your silliness and short-sightedness. "Although "Bro" is a pure fabrication, it sounds really convincing, so that Rashi is a very good coiner of Hebrew." This is simply false, and i'm stupefied at your unwarranted confidence and brashness. See Genesis 5:1 where the word "bro" is found. Rashi didn't make up this word, but compared it to an existing biblical word. The fact that modern Hebrew does not contain it does not discredit Rashi's brilliant approach. So know your bible before you criticize the old and trusted commentators.

– [bach](#)

[Commented Mar 11, 2018 at 15:50](#)

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0

I find Young's interpretation fitting by comparison of the competing factors, creatio ex nihilo [creation from nothing] and ex nihilo nihil fit [nothing comes from nothing, or all things come from pre-existing things]. Young's interpretation by examination of Genesis 1: 1, 2 is revealing. v1 states "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. v2 "And the earth was without form, and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep..." -[KJV] The term, "creation," in Hebrew, is "ba-ra." That term is directly translated to English as "creation," but, as noted above, that term has two interpretations. The second interpretation is based upon v2's words of "form," [to-hu] "void," [wa-bo-hu] and "darkness" [wa-ho-sek], all of which are conditions prior to creation. These conditions demonstrate ex nihilo nihil fit [all things come from pre-existing things]. We have modern demonstration of form, void, and darkness by the known existence of oort clouds, one of which exists outside the solar system, all around it, as well as elsewhere in our galaxy, and among many galaxies. Oort clouds are relatively formless masses of raw materials without existing purpose, but are the source of comets in and extending beyond our solar system, but in the magnetic field of Sol. The solar system is evidence of God's creation, including the existence of pre-existent materials from which it is formed: Sol, the planets, including Earth, their moons, including Earth's, and local stars of our galaxy, and others beyond. These are all descriptive of the Genesis creation, and all from pre-existing materials. By such explanation, we can interpret the term, creation, as meaning organizing pre-existent materials into organized materials and systems.

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answered Jan 23, 2023 at 22:57

[Heket](#)

1

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– [agarza](#)

[Commented Jan 24, 2023 at 1:43](#)

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-1

Gentle Aceinthehole, you have to take into account that **no Bible's translation team has ever found a single Hebrew tense-conjugated verbal forms** (by 'tense' we indicate the pointing the time in which the action/condition shown by the conceptual root was/is/will be performed). Granted, is extremely probable that in an older form of Hebrew (older than 'Biblical Hebrew', too) verbal forms were tense-conjugated, but, regrettably, **inside the Bible Hebrew texts at our disposal today, the tenses are missing**. The fact Ron Maimon - according his own words (the bold is mine) - is able to "*read **most** of the [Hebrew] Bible fluently, and understand **all** its tenses intuitively*" shows, indirectly, that the tenses in the MT's verbal forms are lacking. In fact, **if the tenses were present in the MT ("like every other language", Ron Maimon), why it is necessary to him using intuition?** If I read the phrase 'Paul will go to cinema' I don't use intuition to understand the fact that Paul in a future will go to cinema. I read - plainly - the conjugated English verbal form ('will go'). I've no need to use intuition.

Moreover, with a more technical confutation, we've ask ourselves, if the Bible translators would have at their disposal an Hebrew Text containing tense-conjugated verbal forms, all the TaNaKh translations would have the same, identical, tenses, corresponding to the thousands TM verbal forms.

For an example (this point was debated also in this site), ask ourselves, why exists a diatribe around the tense of the verbal form הרה (Isa 7:14)? On the one hand **some Hebrew people say that verbal form is conjugated in the Present Tense** (so the עלמה there cited cannot be considered a prophecy about Mary...). On the other hand, **some Christians say that the same verbal form is conjugated in the Future Tense** (so the עלמה there cited may refers to the future mother of Jesus of Nazareth...). Now, we are to think: if in Isa 7:14 the

verbal form הרה is tense-conjugated **only one** of those factions is right (the other is wrong).

The real fact is that this verbal forms do not contain a single shred of evidence of a tense-conjugation! (Granted, in the translation of this passage we have to insert tense, but not on the basis of a supposed tense-conjugation. The tenses are rightly added (in the MT translations) on the basis of the context (what 'context' means is another argument...))

Getting back to the point triggered by your question (about Gen 1:1-2) about a supposed creation 'ex nihilo' we have to remember that - within the Bible message - the holy spirit (the spirit of God) was responsible of all physical creation. In fact, God gives (or 'sends') his spirit and humans are created (Psa 33:6; 104:30). **To me, this seems indicate that a creation 'ex nihilo' (out of nothing) isn't a Bible-supported doctrine, because the spirit of God was the 'raw material' utilized by the Creator to create everything...**

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[edited Feb 14, 2021 at 7:35](#)

answered Mar 9, 2018 at 19:25

[Saro Fedele](#)

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Granted, everyone has the right to downvote every people he wants, but I think would be correct explain why. In this manner who is downvoted may improve his answers, in the future.

– [Saro Fedele](#)

[Commented Mar 11, 2018 at 10:07](#)

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-1

For an alternate view on Gen. 1 see my articles "Genesis 1 Speaks about the Creation of Prophecy, Not the Creation of the World" (B'or Hatorah, 13E (2002) 71-87), further developed in "Dreams: The True religion-science conflict," CCAR: The Reform Jewish Quarterly, (2012) 111-124)

My basic position is that Gen 1 interpreted as creation of the world does not make sense (it is inconsistent with the rest of Genesis and also inconsistent with the goal of other creation myths). I argue that a symbolic interpretation of Gen 1 is required to understand it. The main point is that Gen. 1 speaks about the creation of prophecy; that is, it explains when the first prophetic revelation happened; it happened by a person named Adam. The 7 days are symbolic of stages needed to attain prophecy. The idea of interpreting Gen 1 as dealing with prophecy is consistent with the rest of Genesis which speaks about human history as evolving through individuals driven by prophetic visions (Noah was ordered to build an ark; Abraham was promised to become a great nation;...Joseph was promised reign)

I also argue (perhaps more speculatively) (in the CCAR article) that other creation myths are not concerned with creation of the physical world since ancient man did not care about physics the way modern man does; rather the issues facing ancient man was why certain dreams attain prophetic status and determine history. From this point of view all creation myths deal with the creation of prophecy.

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answered Feb 15, 2021 at 14:07

[Russell Jay Hendel](#)

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– [Lesley](#)

[Commented Feb 15, 2021 at 15:45](#)

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-2

Want to improve this post? Provide detailed answers to this question, including citations and an explanation of why your answer is correct. Answers without enough detail may be edited or deleted.

This answer is a demonstration of the methods of Sensus Plenior. Naturally it will appear to be non-sense to those practicing other hermeneutics. It should be evaluated within its own context and by its own claims.

Any answer to the OP that presumes that God created something apart from or outside of himself, says that there is something bigger than God... a place that contains God and his creation. But since there is nothing bigger than God, and the heavens cannot contain him , he created the universe within himself.

As the sages say, he created the void within himself in order to make room for us. Then he spoke into the void to create everything else.

This is ex-nihilo.

The word $\alpha\omega$ occurs before 'heavens' and again before 'earth'. It is composed of the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The Greek alpha and omega is similar in this fashion. In the New Testament, the Alpha and Omega refers to Christ.(Rev 1:8) Since Jesus claim of this title for himself has no other referent than that of the $\alpha\omega$, it is reasonable to presume the $\alpha\omega$ also refers to 'everything'. Gen 1:1 then properly reads.. "everything in heaven and everything in earth". Such a reference leaves no primordial thing from which to be created except from God himself or from nothing.

Notice that Jesus's claim to be the alpha and omega is not the overriding issue, but His understanding of Hebrew is.

Since the void is suggested in the next verse, and it does not say, "The earth was made from the substance of God" , it can be said that ex-nihilo was intended by the author.

The OP asks if the early Jewish readers would have understood it to mean ex-nihilo. Before the time of Christ, the author of 1 Kings pens:

1Ki 8:27 But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?

Where did he get the idea that there was nothing bigger than God, or that God must have created inside of himself if not from earlier writings, or 'unprovable miraculous knowledge'? The second option does not leave room for discussion, whereas the first suggests that the earlier writing of Genesis is the plausible source. One need to show an exact regurgitation of previous writings, but only that the ideas of earlier writings enable later readers to logically build on it.

Even if one should disparage notarikon, Ge 1:1 says that God created the heavens and the earth. There are few who would try to invent a third classification for things that exist outside of the heavens and the earth, and so everything which is created is included in those two terms. There is no primordial stuff from which to make things. With one exception.

God first invented an alphabet from which he would form words and with which he would command all else into existence. This is the stuff of notarikon.

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[edited May 20, 2021 at 18:45](#)

answered May 27, 2012 at 18:54

[Bob Jones](#)

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- This is a good philosophical reason why creation must be ex nihilo, but does not tell us whether the *text* and the author(s) of the text assume creation ex nihilo.

– [James Shewey](#)

[Commented Oct 30, 2015 at 7:13](#)

- 4

But תא is simply the grammatical word which is used with the [definite direct object](#). It does not, cannot, lead to the "proper" reading proposed. That is genuine "nonsense".

– [David](#)

[Commented Aug 23, 2016 at 14:55](#)

- @David.. *formation of words is called: Notarikon - Interpretation by dividing a word into two or more parts in the 32 rules of Rabbi Eliezer ben Jose de Galili It is a proper interpretation by his rules.

– [Bob Jones](#)

[Commented Jun 27, 2020 at 14:13](#)

EXNIHLIO

Creation by God ‘ex nihilo’ taught by Tertullian (3rd century)

The Christian doctrine of creation ‘ex nihilo’ teaches that God created all things out of nothing (‘ex nihilo’ is just a Latin phrase meaning ‘out of nothing’). We find the belief very clearly stated by the early Christian theologian Tertullian, writing less than two centuries after Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension. What we don’t always realize these days is how counter-intuitive this belief seems to be.

Georges Lemaître and the ‘Big Bang’

It was the Belgian physicist Georges Lemaître who discovered the expansion of the universe, first publishing the theory in a science journal in 1927.^[1] This was the discovery that led to the subsequent inference that the universe had all been produced by what came to be called ‘the Big Bang.’

“Before Lemaître’s discovery, many scientists had — in the face of the Bible’s account of creation at a point in time — held the view that the universe had always existed. Even Albert Einstein, whose work on the theory of relativity had provided the mathematical groundwork for the discovery, was skeptical about the conclusion. He, and many other scientists, suspected Lemaître’s conclusion to be driven by his Catholic faith rather than by objective science.”

Before this discovery, many scientists had — in the face of the Bible’s account of creation at a point in time — held the view that the universe had always existed. Even Albert Einstein, whose work on the theory of relativity had provided the mathematical groundwork for Lemaître’s discovery,^[2] was skeptical about the conclusion. He, and many other scientists, suspected Lemaître’s conclusion to be driven by his Catholic faith rather than by objective science. This is in spite of the fact that he didn’t wish his discovery to be used as a Christian apologetic argument, as shown by his resentment at Pope Pius XII’s proclamation in 1951 that the Big Bang theory was consistent with Roman Catholicism.^[3]

This gives us an interesting trajectory of thought in the Western world. When by far the predominant modes of thought in Western Europe were Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, the belief in creation ‘ex nihilo’ (a belief held in common by both branches of Christianity) was practically a given.

With the advent of increasing theological skepticism about the Bible particularly from the nineteenth century onward, many in the Western world adopted the view that the universe had always existed. And then, by the mid-twentieth century, as a result of Lemaître’s discovery, Western thought reverted to the view that the universe came into existence (whether ‘ex nihilo’ or not).

It is tempting to see the middle point of this trajectory — the view that the universe had always existed — as a manifestation of the human short lifespan (or if you prefer, human short memories). From our individual human viewpoints, nature looks and feels like something fundamentally unchanging, even though our school textbooks tell us that it is not (think “ice age”). This is in contrast with human science and ‘progress,’ which even within the span of a single human life are obviously moving forward apace. So we picture nature as an unchanging thing; from this is not a great intellectual leap to imagine the world as always having been *thus*.

From this, it would appear that the only thing preventing Europeans before the Enlightenment from viewing the world as “always having been,” was the Christian doctrine of creation ‘ex nihilo.’ Once the biblical foundations of society, and of belief about the world, were widely rejected as bogus, Western thought readily slipped back into this default belief. It took an observation as radical — and, apparently, as scientifically irrefutable — as the expansion of the universe to shake this belief up again.

Creation ‘ex nihilo’ in Christianity

The Christian idea of creation ‘ex nihilo’ goes back a very long way. This shouldn’t surprise us; it is at least implicitly there in the pages of the Bible. In fact, it’s not even a particularly *Christian* idea; it goes right back into the Jewish Old Testament:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, “Let there be light”, and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Genesis 1:1-5[\[4\]](#)

***By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and by the breath of his mouth all their host.
He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap;
he puts the deeps in storehouses.
Let all the earth fear the LORD;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.***

Psalms 33:6-9[\[5\]](#)

Both these passages say plainly that the heavens and the earth were created by God. The only bit that is not quite ‘ex nihilo’ is in the Genesis passage: it may be read as implying that God created the heavens and the earth from some underlying, pre-existent material.

***“By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and by the breath of his mouth all their host.”***

Psalm 33:6

What may possibly come as a surprise to us is that, just as in more modern times, so in the ancient Graeco-Roman world there was a prevalent, ‘scientific’ view that the world had always existed. I say that it was the ‘scientific’ view; it was held, often, by people who rejected the cosmogonies (creation stories) of ancient poets, such as [Hesiod](#). The philosopher Aristotle, for example, believed that the world had always existed.[\[6\]](#)

Creation ‘ex nihilo’ in Tertullian

It is against this cultural backdrop that the North African Christian theologian Tertullian, writing around A.D. 208^[7] — less than two centuries after the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, but long before Christianity became the dominant mode of thought in the Roman Empire — asserts the idea that the universe was created ‘ex nihilo’ by God.

In his treatise *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, written around that year, Tertullian is arguing for the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body — a doctrine denied by the mid-second century heretic [Marcion](#) and other groups.

“Firmly believe that [God] produced [the world] entirely out of nothing, and then you have found the knowledge of God, by believing that he possesses such mighty power. But some people are too weak to believe all this at first, owing to their views about matter. Like the philosophers, they would rather have it that in the beginning the universe was made by God out of underlying matter.”

Tertullian, ‘On the Resurrection of the Flesh,’ chapter 11

In chapter 11 of this work he writes:—

“Faith in [God] must rest on no other basis than the belief that he is able to do all things.^[8] No doubt you have amongst your philosophers^[9] men who maintain that this world is without a beginning or a maker. However, it is much more true that nearly all the [Christian] heresies allow it an origin and a maker, and ascribe its creation to our God.

“Firmly believe, therefore, that he produced it entirely out of nothing, and then you have found the knowledge of God, by believing that he possesses such mighty power. But some people are too weak to believe all this at first, owing to their views about matter. Like the philosophers, they would rather have it that in the beginning the universe was made by God out of underlying matter.

“Now, even if it were possible to hold this opinion in truth: Since [God] must be acknowledged, in his re-formation of matter, to have produced substances far different, and forms far different, from those which

matter itself possessed, I should maintain with no less persistence that he produced these things out of nothing. Because prior to his production of them, they absolutely had no existence at all.”[\[10\]](#)

Here we have, clearly stated, the doctrine of creation ‘ex nihilo.’

To some extent this is, for Tertullian, a hypothetical proposition. As we have indicated above, he does not assert this doctrine within some kind of ‘systematic theology’ of the Christian faith. He makes the assertion in order to show, *a fortiori*, that the resurrection of the body is possible.

The argument runs, in effect:— Since God created the entire universe out of nothing, and indeed created humanity in the first place with its human body, surely it is an easy thing for God to remake, in the resurrection, what he has already made?

The position is hypothetical for Tertullian in that, even if you don’t grant that God created ‘ex nihilo,’ but read the text of Genesis 1 as if God made the universe out of some underlying matter already present, still his argument holds. For even if this were the case, still out of that underlying matter God created a new thing when he formed the universe and made humanity. So in either event, he is quite capable of restoring the human body.

“For if God produced all things whatsoever out of nothing, he will be able to draw forth from nothing even the flesh which had fallen into nothing. Or if he moulded other things out of matter, he will be able to call forth the flesh also from somewhere else, into whatever abyss it may have been engulfed. And surely he who created is fully competent to recreate, insofar as it is a far greater work to have produced than to have reproduced, [and] to have imparted a beginning than to have maintained a continuance. On this principle, you may be quite sure that the restoration of the flesh is easier than its first formation.”[\[11\]](#)

So, a hypothetical position yes; Tertullian proposes it in order to argue for the resurrection of the body. But also certainly a position which he genuinely held.

“Turning away from Christians to the philosophers, from the Church to the Academy and the Porch, [Hermogenes] learned there from the Stoics how to place matter [on a par] with the Lord, just as if it too had always existed both unborn and unmade, having neither a beginning nor an end at all, [and] out of which, according to him, the Lord afterwards created all things.”

Tertullian, ‘Against Hermogenes,’ chapter 1

We see this if we go to another treatise of his, written at a similar time (perhaps A.D. 207^[12]), *Against Hermogenes*. Of the Hermogenes in question we know almost nothing, other than the fact he was a Christian heretic who maintained that matter existed eternally and was the base material from which God made the universe. This much we learn from what Tertullian says of him.

In the opening chapter of this work, Tertullian writes of this Hermogenes — and note again the reference to the belief in the eternity of matter in pagan philosophy, namely Platonism and Stoicism —

“He does not appear to acknowledge any other Christ as Lord, although he holds him in a different way. But by this difference in his faith he really makes him into another being; nay, he takes from him everything which is God, since he will not allow that he made all things from nothing.

“For, turning away from Christians to the philosophers, from the Church to the Academy^[13] and the Porch,^[14] he learned there from the Stoics how to place matter [on a par] with the Lord, just as if it too had always existed both unborn and unmade, having neither a beginning nor an end at all, [and] out of which, according to him, the Lord afterwards created all things.”^[15]

This passage proves to us that Tertullian held the belief of creation ‘ex nihilo,’ not merely as an argumentative device, but actually and truly.

In contrasting this belief with the teachings of the Platonists and the Stoics, it also shows — then as now — how radical and unintuitive a belief it really is.

Note

etimasthe.com is something I do outside of full-time employment. Consequently I generally only post new material on here once or twice a week.

Please note that *etimasthe* is no longer on Twitter or Facebook. See [announcement here](#).

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[1] https://www.physicsoftheuniverse.com/scientists_lemaitre.html

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georges_Lema%C3%AEtre#Career

[4] <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+1%3A1-5&version=ESVUK>

[5] <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+33%3A6-9&version=ESVUK>

[6] <https://www.ancient.eu/article/959/aristotles-on-the-heavens/>

[7] <https://etimasthe.com/2020/01/20/views-of-the-afterlife-in-the-ancient-world-dapres-tertullian/>

[8] In the context this statement is actually a question which comes at the end of a long sentence. For brevity I have omitted the preceding part of the sentence.

[9] *i.e.*, the Greek and Roman philosophers.

[10] *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, chapter 11. Tertullian, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. III: Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1997), 553. Note, in this and

subsequent quotations of Tertullian I have slightly altered the translation there found in order to make it easier for the modern reader.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] This is the date suggested by the translation of this work in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. III* cited above: p.477, n.2.

[13] That is, Platonism. The Academy was the school in Athens founded by Plato.

[14] That is, Stoicism, so named because its initial followers would meet at a porch (Greek: 'stoa').

[15] *Against Hermogenes*, chapter 1. In Tertullian, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. III: Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, 477.

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[History of creatio ex nihilo](#)

I have recently read that many pagan religions have their creation myth being creation by bringing order to primordial chaos. The accounts, if you squint, are not that different from what we have in Genesis 1, yet today the mainstream interpretation is, as far as I am aware, creatio ex nihilo.

Do we know when creation began to be interpreted as creatio ex nihilo rather than creation from chaos? It seems the chaos concept is ancient, widely believed in historically, and Genesis doesn't stray far from this description, so when did abrahamic religion start to use creatio ex nihilo, assuming such a start exists? Can we tell?

- [history](#)
- [creation](#)

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[edited Feb 28, 2023 at 8:47](#)

asked Feb 24, 2023 at 12:07

[kutschkem](#)

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- I would recommend looking among the Fathers of the early church, because they would have brought philosophy to bear on the question.

– [Stephen Disraeli](#)

[Commented Feb 24, 2023 at 12:15](#)

- 4

Creatio ex nihilo is not solely derived from Genesis 1, but from all the other passages that talk of creation too. But even in Genesis 1, it says that God created the heavens and earth *before* referring to any formlessness or chaos.

– [curiousdannii](#) ♦

[Commented Feb 24, 2023 at 12:23](#)

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2 Answers

Sorted by:

4

Actually, pagan religions were teaching creation out from chaos or some substance, while the Bible teaches creation from nothing (ex nihilo). This contrast is seen very early in Christian history.

As mentioned in the comments, Genesis 1:1 sets the stage.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. Gen 1:1

There have been two choices. Believe the Bible or believe pagan alternatives. Although see the quote below from Jewish Encyclopedia. [Irenaeus](#) wrote circa 185 CE.

3. For, when they [who believe in a substance that existed prior to Gen 1:1] tell us that all moist substance proceeded from the tears of Achamoth, all lucid substance from her smile, all solid substance from her sadness, all mobile substance from her terror, and that thus they have sublime knowledge on account of which they are superior to others,—how can these things fail to be regarded as worthy of contempt, and truly ridiculous? They do not believe that God (being powerful, and rich in all resources) created matter itself, inasmuch as they know not how much a spiritual and divine essence can accomplish. But they do believe that their Mother, whom they style a female from a female, produced from her

passions aforesaid the so vast material substance of creation. [Irenaeus](#)
[AH Book II Chapter X 3](#)

Achamod is further described [here](#) as a type of Gnosticism or knowledge-based religion that would be more ancient than circa 200 CE.

Add*: In Guide 2.30 Maimonides says, "I have already made it known to you that the foundation of the whole Law is the view that God brought the world into being out of nothing." [-source-](#)

Maimonides writes circa 1180 CE, but apparently thinks along the lines of tradition (creation ex nihilo, but is aware of a different tradition, creation from something pre-existent).

It is clear that the Prophets and many of the Psalms accept without reservation the doctrine of creation from nothing by the will of a supermundane personal God (Ps. xxxiii. 6-9, cii. 26, cxxi. 2; Jer. x. 12; Isa. xlii. 5, xlv. 7-9): "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth." To such a degree has this found acceptance as the doctrine of the Synagogue that God has come to be designated as "He who spake and the world sprang into existence" (see Baruk She-Amar and 'Er. 13b; Meg. 13b; Sanh. 19a, 105a; Ḥid. 31a; Ḥul. 63b, 84b; Sifre to Num. § 84; Gen. R. 34b; Ex. R. xxv.; Shab. 139a; Midrash Mishle, 10c). God is "the author of creation," ("bereshit" having become the technical term for "creation"; Gen. R. xvi.; Ber. 54a, 58a; Ḥag. 12a, 18a; Ḥul. 83a; Ecclus. [Sirach] xv. 14).

The bringing into existence of the world by the act of God. Most Jewish philosophers find in (Gen. i. 1) creation ex nihilo (). The etymological meaning of the verb, however, is "to cut out and put into shape," and thus presupposes the use of material. This fact was recognized by Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides, for instance (commentaries on Gen. i. 1; see also Maimonides, "Moreh Nebukim," ii. 30), and constitutes one of the arguments in the discussion of the problem.

...

... The belief in God as the author of creation ranks first among the thirteen fundamentals (see Articles of Faith) enumerated by Maimonides. It occurs in the Yigdal, where God is called , "anterior [because Himself uncreated] to all

that was created "; in the Adon 'Olam; and it is taught in all modern Jewish catechisms. [Jewish Encyclopedia](#)

So, to answer the OP, the Abrahamic religions apparently* always believed in creation from nothing, that God is the Creator, that there is nothing above Him. The myth of creation from something apparently* belongs to other religions.

*added

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[edited Feb 27, 2023 at 15:51](#)

answered Feb 24, 2023 at 15:00

[SLM](#)

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- Indeed. There exists only God and that which God has created. +1

– [Mike Borden](#)

[Commented Feb 24, 2023 at 15:35](#)

- Hmm how far back does our evidence for creatio ex nihilo go in Judaism?

– [kutschkem](#)

[Commented Feb 24, 2023 at 15:57](#)

- 1

@kutschkem How old is Gen 1:1?

– [AncientGiantPottedPlant](#)

[Commented Feb 24, 2023 at 21:02](#)

- 1

A sentence with a suggestive literal construction *is* evidence by default, however weak you regard it. Do you mean hard proof? Or evidence? Fwiw, Psa 33:6-9 and 102:25 seem pretty unambiguous, but they're later.

– [AncientGiantPottedPlant](#)

[Commented Feb 27, 2023 at 9:14](#)

- 1

earlychurch.org.uk/article_exnihilo_copan.html This article points out some unambiguous passages in the apocrypha, the misc DSS, and Hebrews 11, among others.

– [AncientGiantPottedPlant](#)

[Commented Feb 27, 2023 at 18:30](#)

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3

As I understand it, this question is not asking how Genesis 1:1 (or other Biblical passages) are interpreted today, but rather, how such passages were interpreted anciently.

There are Christians today who read these passages and understand them to describe creatio ex nihilo, and there are Christians today who read these passages and understand them to describe creatio ex materia. Other posts on this site address contemporary views; discussions on Mi Yodeya address Jewish history. I'll focus here on where we find these ideas in early Christian history.

The earliest surviving Christian source to clearly describe creatio ex nihilo is Tatian, writing in the 2nd half of the 2nd century:

And as the Logos, begotten in the beginning, begat in turn our world, having first created for Himself the necessary matter, so also I, in imitation of the Logos, being begotten again, and having become possessed of the truth, am trying to reduce to order the confused matter which is kindred with myself. For matter is not, like God, without beginning (*Oratio ad Graecos* ch. 5)

Irenaeus of Lyons, writing a few years after Tatian, may be described as the first major/mainstream Christian writer to argue explicitly for creatio ex nihilo (Tatian was rejected by contemporaries, including Irenaeus, as a heretic--see Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 1.28.1).

Creatio ex nihilo is not found in the extant writings of the Apostolic Fathers (2nd generation Christians, writing ~AD 70-120), nor in the writings of Tatian's teacher Justin Martyr (major works ~AD 150-165), who argued for creatio ex materia:

God, having altered matter which was shapeless, made the world, hear the very words spoken through Moses, who, as above shown, was the first prophet, and of greater antiquity than the Greek writers; and through whom the Spirit of prophecy, signifying how and from what materials God at first formed the world, spoke thus: In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was invisible and unfurnished, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God moved over the waters. And God said, Let there be light; and it was so. So that both Plato and they who agree with him, and we ourselves, have learned, and you also can be convinced, that by the word of God the whole world was made out of the substance spoken of before by Moses (*1st Apology* ch. 59).

In the generation prior to Tatian the extant Christian sources all favor creatio ex materia. In the generation following Tatian there are Christian writers arguing for creatio ex nihilo (e.g. Irenaeus, Origen of Alexandria) and there are Christian writers arguing for creatio ex materia (e.g. Hermogenes, Clement of Alexandria). Creatio ex nihilo became a more dominant viewpoint by the end of the 3rd century.

Further reading on the relevant history [here](#).

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[edited Feb 28, 2023 at 4:52](#)

answered Feb 28, 2023 at 4:47

[Hold To The Rod](#)

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- A friendly reminder that the purpose of the downvote button is not to indicate "I disagree with this post" =). If you disagree with this post, please consider writing a response to the OP.

– [Hold To The Rod](#)

[Commented Feb 28, 2023 at 4:49](#)

- You say the earliest surviving source is Tatian and then you refer to sources in the generation prior to Tatian. Can you explain this?

– [Mike Borden](#)

[Commented Feb 28, 2023 at 13:13](#)

- @MikeBorden sure thing. The debate in the late 2nd/early 3rd century was between creatio ex nihilo & creatio ex materia. There are extant Christian sources earlier than Tatian arguing for creatio ex materia, but there are not extant Christian sources earlier than Tatian arguing for creatio ex nihilo.

– [Hold To The Rod](#)

[Commented Mar 1, 2023 at 1:30](#)

- Thanks. Are you sure Justin Martyr isn't referring to what God began to do in Gen. 1:2 with the material He created in verse 1?

– [Mike Borden](#)

[Commented Mar 1, 2023 at 13:43](#)

- Reasonably sure, yes. Otherwise Justin wouldn't have spoken favorably of Plato's view.

– [Hold To The Rod](#)

[Commented Jun 4, 2024 at 2:03](#)

What influence did Greco-Roman philosophy have on the doctrine of "creatio ex nihilo"?

Background

Frequently, Creationists and Theistic Evolutionists will appeal to and debate/discuss the idea of "[*Creatio Ex Nihilo*](#)" (Latin for "creation from nothing") with some critiquing the concept and claiming that Genesis does not assume *creatio ex nihilo*.

These critics often assert that the concept arose out of Greco-Roman philosophy. According to [Wikipedia](#),

Some scholars^[which?] have argued that Plethon viewed Plato as positing *ex nihilo* creation in his [*Timaeus*](#) ... [and] ... The [School of Chartres](#) understood the creation account in Plato's *Timaeus* to refer to *creatio ex nihilo*.

And this appeared to be a [topic of interest and discussion](#) amongst the philosophers.

Question

What, exactly were the arguments for the philosophical concept of *Creatio Ex Nihilo* made by the classical philosophers and what relationship (if any) does this have to [Plato's Theory of Forms](#)? How might these arguments have influenced the modern Christian doctrine of *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, and what relationship do these ancient philosophical arguments have (if any) with it?

- [creation](#)
- [philosophy](#)
- [young-earth-creation](#)
- [comparative-religion](#)
- [plato](#)

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[edited Aug 24, 2017 at 5:44](#)

asked Aug 15, 2017 at 22:24

[James Shewey](#)

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- 1

I'm going to bet that similarities are coincidental. Modern creationists are not really the same thing as creationists past.

– user3961

[Commented Aug 16, 2017 at 6:35](#)

- Notice, as well, that the phrase is *creatio ex nihilo*, with two *i*. Regarding the doctrine, I'm fairly certain that St Thomas Aquinas already assumes it, though he is an Aristotelian rather than a Platonist.

– [Wtrmute](#)

[Commented Aug 21, 2017 at 15:45](#)

- St. Thomas assumes it because the Bible teaches it ("I beseech thee, my son, look upon heaven and earth, and all that is in them: and consider that God made them out of nothing [ex nihilo], and mankind also"—2 Macc 7:28).

– [Sola Gratia](#)

[Commented Sep 11, 2017 at 19:30](#)

- I believe analysis of the Greek of 2 Maccabees 7:28 will indicate that "from nothing" is an editorialization by the translator not present in the original language. [Contrast the GNT/CEB with the RSV for example](#). I have started a question [here](#) to that end.

– [James Shewey](#)

[Commented Sep 11, 2017 at 20:22](#)

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1 Answer

Sorted by:

2

+100

It appears that there are a great number of similarities between the teachings of the secular Hellenistic Jewish philosopher [Philo Judaeus of Alexandria](#), a follower of [stoicism](#) and the teachings outlined in John (particularly [John 1](#)).

Stoicism

In response to Plato's [explorations of whether abstract qualities](#) (Such as justice and wisdom) have an independent existence (and his argument that these things do not truly "exist" by appealing to his [Theory of Forms](#)), Stoicism [taught that](#) these things *did* exist materially and in a corporeal form or "substance" ([οὐσία](#)).

[According to the Stoics](#), the universe is a material, reasoning substance, known as God or Nature, which the Stoics divided into two classes, the active and the passive. The passive substance is matter, which "lies sluggish, a substance ready for any use, but sure to remain unemployed if no one sets it in motion." The active substance, which can be called Fate, or Universal Reason (Logos), is an intelligent aether or primordial fire, which acts on the passive matter:

The universe itself is God and the universal outpouring of its soul; it is this same world's guiding principle, operating in mind and reason, together with the common nature of things and the totality that embraces all existence; then the foreordained might and necessity of the future; then fire and the principle of aether; then those elements whose natural state is one of flux and transition,

such as water, earth, and air; then the sun, the moon, the stars; and the universal existence in which all things are contained.

— Chrysippus, in Cicero, [De Natura Deorum](#), i. 39

Stoicism [also taught](#) that

everything that exists depends on two first principles which can be neither created nor destroyed: matter, which is passive and inert, and the logos, or divine reason, which is active and organizing. The 3rd-century B.C. Stoic Chrysippus regarded *pneuma* as the vehicle of logos in structuring matter, both in animals and in the physical world. *Pneuma* in its purest form can thus be difficult to distinguish from logos or the "constructive fire" (pur technikon)

Philo's take

Perhaps by studying stoicism and noticing the [Septuagint's use of *pneuma*](#) (πνεῦμα),

ἡ δὲ γῆ ἦν ἀόρατος καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος καὶ σκότος ἐπάνω τῆς ἀβύσσου καὶ **πνεῦμα θεοῦ** ἐπεφέρετο ἐπάνω τοῦ ὕδατος

this led Philo to conclude that the πνεῦμα θεοῦ (*pneuma theou* - Spirit of God) was the Logos (The *Reason, thought or word* for the formation of the universe.)

In his writings, [Philo](#)

...used the term Logos to mean an intermediary divine being, or [demiurge](#). Philo followed the Platonic distinction between [imperfect matter and perfect Form](#), and therefore intermediary beings were necessary to bridge the enormous gap between God and the material world. The Logos was the highest of these intermediary beings, and was called by Philo "[the first-born of God](#)". Philo also wrote that "the Logos of the living God is the bond of everything, holding all things together and binding all the parts, and prevents them from being dissolved and separated".

[Plato's Theory of Forms was located within the Logos](#), but the Logos also acted on behalf of God in the physical world. In particular, the Angel of the Lord in the

Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) was identified with the Logos by Philo, who also said that the Logos was God's instrument in the creation of the universe.

Relationship to Plato

Obviously, Philo believed that the Logos created and was manifest vis-à-vis [Plato's theory of forms](#), but the connections run much deeper. For example, [Zeno](#), the founder of Stoicism studied under the platonists [Xenocrates](#) and [Polemon](#) at the [Platonic Academy](#).

But most importantly, the genesis (pun intended) of the doctrine of *Creato ex nihilo* can be seen in how Philo interacts with Plato's work and the purpose and nature of Philo's works - two works in particular - Philo's Quaestiones (or "Inquiries") and his [Νόμων Ἱερῶν Ἀλληγορίαι](#) - "[Legum Allegoriæ](#)," (or "allegorical commentary") - both of which deal significantly or completely with interpretation of Genesis from Philo's Stoic perspective. In doing so, Philo is attempting to [synthesize Judaism and Stoicism](#)

In another work, [De Opificio Mundi \(On Creation\)](#), Philo articulates the first known instance of *creatio ex nihilo* among the philosophers saying

Moses says also; "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth:" *taking the beginning to be, not as some men think, that which is according to time; for before the world time had no existence, but was created either simultaneously with it, or after it;*

...

In the first place therefore, from the model of the world, perceptible only by intellect, the Creator made an incorporeal heaven, and an invisible earth, and the form of air and of empty space: the former of which he called darkness, because the air is black by nature; and the other he called the abyss, for empty space is very deep and yawning with immense width. Then he created the incorporeal substance of water and of air, and above all he spread light, being the seventh thing made; and this again was incorporeal, and a model of the sun, perceptible only to intellect, and of all the lightgiving stars, which are destined to stand together in heaven.

And air and light he considered worthy of the pre-eminence. *For the one he called the breath of God, because it is air, which is the most life-giving of things, and of life the causer is God*

So in other word, God created the *pneuma* which was then used by the Logos to create.

Of these descriptions, Dr. Austryn Wolfson, the foremost scholar on Philo's works [wrote that](#)

all such expressions merely mean to convey the idea that God brought the world “out of non-existence into existence.”

Dr. David Runia, the penultimate authority on Philo agrees saying on [pg 454 of "Philo of Alexandria and The 'Timaeus' of Plato"](#)

this view is in the final analysis a metaphysicalaly refined variant of the *creatio ex nihilo* thesis. Although Matter would be only indirectly created by God, it is still the result of divine activity.

And the [Internet Encyclopedia](#) of Philosophy claims that

Before Philo there was no explicit theory of creation ex nihilo ever postulated in Jewish or Greek traditions.

Conclusion

From the writings of Philo, we can see three things. First, From the statement that,

taking the beginning to be, not as some men think

Clearly, scholars believe "some men" is referring to Plato and to Jewish thought and Philo was responding to this and creating a different way to view Genesis.

Secondly, Philo is attempting to synthesize Jewish thought and Hellinistic Philosophy which indicates that Jewish Scholarship, like Plato, regarded matter as having always existed.

It seems then, that John 1, in claiming that

In the beginning was the Logos and the Logos was with God" John was affirming the teachings of Philo and attempting to Join the Stoics philosophical dialogue. John goes on to affirm this Cosmogony, saying

He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

But then John takes it a step further and refines Philo's teachings saying not just that the Logos was with God at the beginning but that "The Logos WAS God" and that

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

...

The Logos became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

And of course, according to John that was Jesus and the embodiment of these abstract qualities did exist corporeally - *in Jesus*. So while it may seem that Jews did not understand Genesis 1 to speak of *creatio ex nihilo*, John did understand Genesis 1 this way. Ironically however, inasmuch as these doctrines echo the teachings of Philo's *Legum Allegoriæ*, this Makes John 1 the Allegorical reading of Genesis and the historic Jewish understanding (which differed according to Philo) and the [associated cosmology](#) the literal reading of Genesis.

Authors note: In mousing over a few of the inline citations, you will find that several reference other stack exchange questions - for example a discussion about the firstborn of God or the Theory of Forms. These links provide good

background and foundation for this question, and I think as you begin to explore these you will get a fuller picture of how Hellenistic Philosophy intersects with New Testament theology. It will be well worth your time.

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[edited Sep 11, 2017 at 19:23](#)

answered Aug 24, 2017 at 5:44

[James Shewey](#)

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- 1

This is great stuff. I hope to read through all the links you provided. I'm wondering if you find any significance that John begins his gospel with *Ἐν ἀρχῇ* without the definite article, just like *בראשית* in Genesis. Also, have you considered that John wrote *in response to* Philo, rather than to support him?

– [Cannabijoy](#)

[Commented Aug 24, 2017 at 6:24](#)

- I'm not well enough versed in Greek and Hebrew to draw any conclusions on the definite article. I'd be interested to see 1) how other philosophers phrase this (with or without the definite article) and how the Septuagint translates that. Your second point is great though - I hadn't considered it. I would think it was a both/and: Here is what you got right, and here is what you got wrong.

– [James Shewey](#)

[Commented Aug 24, 2017 at 15:33](#)

- "Before Philo there was no explicit theory of creation ex nihilo ever postulated in Jewish or Greek traditions" What about 2 Maccabees, written around 150BC (7:28)?

– [Sola Gratia](#)

[Commented Sep 11, 2017 at 19:38](#)

- @SolaGratia - This seems like a great question to ask the authors of the IEP from which you quote. I believe analysis of the Greek of 2 Maccabees 7:28 will indicate that "from nothing" is an editorialization by the translator not present in the original language. [Contrast the GNT/CEB with the RSV for example.](#) I have started a question [here](#) to that end.

– [James Shewey](#)

[Commented Sep 11, 2017 at 20:24](#)

- Is there a reason to believe so? Or do we have some Hebrew original with a different reading?

– [Sola Gratia](#)

[Commented Sep 11, 2017 at 20:55](#)

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The concept of creation ex nihilo, or “out of nothing,” holds profound significance in theological discourse. It fundamentally shapes understandings of divinity, existence, and the origins of the universe across various religious traditions.

This exploration delves into the roots, interpretations, and evolving views on this doctrine within Christianity as well as its place among other global faiths.

Origin of the Term Ex Nihilo

The phrase “ex nihilo” finds its roots in Latin, translating directly to “out of nothing.” This term has been pivotal in theological and philosophical discussions, particularly concerning the origins of the universe. The concept itself, however, predates its Latin nomenclature, with early inklings found in ancient philosophical musings and religious texts.

Ancient Greek philosophers, such as Parmenides, grappled with the notion of creation and existence. Parmenides famously posited that “nothing comes from nothing,” a principle that would later influence both philosophical and theological thought. This idea was not confined to the Greeks; similar contemplations appeared in various ancient cultures, each wrestling with the mystery of how the cosmos and life itself began.

As Christianity began to take shape, early theologians sought to articulate the nature of divine creation. The term “ex nihilo” emerged as a succinct way to express the belief that God created the universe without using pre-existing materials. This was a significant departure from other creation myths that often involved gods fashioning the world from chaotic primordial substances. The adoption of “ex nihilo” underscored a unique aspect of the Christian understanding of an omnipotent deity capable of bringing forth existence from absolute non-existence.

Ex Nihilo in Biblical Creation

The doctrine of creation ex nihilo holds a central place in the Judeo-Christian narrative of the universe’s origin. Genesis 1:1 declares, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” a statement that sets the stage for understanding creation as an act of divine will and power. The Hebrew term “bara,” often translated as “create,” implies an activity that only God can perform, indicating the unique nature of divine creation out of nothing.

This foundational belief is not merely a historical or theological abstraction but deeply influences the conceptual framework of Christian thought. It asserts that all that exists is contingent upon a transcendent Creator, inherently challenging any notion that the universe is self-existent or eternal. Such a perspective underscores the dependency of the cosmos on a divine source, presenting a universe that is not an extension or emanation of God but a distinct, purposeful act of His will.

The Gospel of John further elaborates on this concept by identifying Christ as the Logos, through whom all things were made. John 1:3 states, “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” This passage enriches the doctrine by linking creation ex nihilo to the person of Christ, emphasizing the intimate involvement of the divine Word in the act of creation. It presents a relational dynamic where creation is not only a display of omnipotence but also an expression of divine love and purpose.

In the broader narrative of Scripture, the idea of creation ex nihilo also serves to highlight themes of new beginnings and redemption. The same God who brought forth the universe from nothing is portrayed as capable of bringing life and hope out of chaos and despair. This theological motif resonates throughout the Bible, from the Psalms that celebrate God's creative power to the prophetic visions of a new heaven and a new earth.

Ex Nihilo in Early Church Writings

In the formative centuries of Christianity, early Church Fathers grappled with articulating the mystery of divine creation. Their writings reflect a deep engagement with the concept of ex nihilo, striving to distinguish Christian beliefs from both pagan philosophies and Gnostic ideas. Among these influential figures, Irenaeus of Lyons stands out. He passionately argued against Gnostic claims that the material world was created by a lesser deity using pre-existing matter. Irenaeus emphasized the singular, omnipotent God who brought everything into existence from nothing, thereby underscoring the goodness of creation and its inherent connection to the Creator.

Tertullian, another prominent voice, reinforced this stance by contrasting the Christian doctrine with prevailing Greco-Roman thought. He critiqued philosophers like Plato, who posited that the cosmos was shaped from pre-existing chaotic matter. For Tertullian, the doctrine of creation ex nihilo was not just a theological assertion but a profound statement about God's absolute sovereignty and the nature of reality itself. His writings sought to fortify the faith of believers, reassuring them that the universe's origin lay in the hands of a benevolent and omnipotent Creator.

The Alexandrian theologian Origen further developed these ideas, although his approach was more speculative. While he affirmed creation ex nihilo, Origen delved into the implications of God's timeless nature and the eternal generation of the Logos. His contributions, though sometimes controversial, expanded the theological discourse, inviting deeper reflection on the relationship between the Creator and the created order. Origen's work laid the groundwork for later theological developments, particularly in the realm of Trinitarian thought.

Ex Nihilo in Modern Theology

Modern theology continues to explore and refine the doctrine of creation ex nihilo, engaging with contemporary scientific insights and philosophical inquiries. The dialogue between faith and science has become particularly vibrant, with theologians like John Polkinghorne and Alister McGrath examining how the concept of creation from nothing intersects with cosmology and quantum physics. These scholars argue that the Big Bang theory, which posits a universe emerging from an initial singularity, can be seen as compatible with, and even supportive of, the theological assertion that the universe had a definite beginning, initiated by a transcendent source.

Furthermore, the existential dimensions of creation ex nihilo have gained attention in modern theological thought. Thinkers such as Paul Tillich and Karl Barth have emphasized the existential implications of a universe created out of nothing, asserting that this underscores the absolute dependence of all existence on a divine ground. Tillich, in particular, spoke of God as the “ground of being,” suggesting that creation ex nihilo reveals the ultimate source from which all being derives its existence and meaning. Barth, on the other hand, emphasized the freedom and sovereignty of God in the creative act, portraying a deity who is not constrained by any necessity or pre-existing conditions.

In contemporary discourse, feminist and liberation theologians have also engaged with the doctrine, reinterpreting it through lenses that emphasize justice, relationality, and ecological responsibility. These perspectives argue that understanding creation as a gift from a loving deity calls for a profound respect for the environment and a commitment to social equity. By framing creation ex nihilo within the context of ethical and relational imperatives, these theologians contribute to a more holistic and socially engaged understanding of the doctrine.

Comparative Views in Other Religions

While creation ex nihilo is a defining feature of Christian theology, other religious traditions have their own unique perspectives on the origins of

the universe. These views provide a rich tapestry of beliefs, each contributing to the broader discourse on cosmology and divine action.

In Hinduism, the concept of creation is deeply intertwined with cyclical time and cosmic processes. The Rigveda, one of the oldest sacred texts, speaks of the universe emerging from a primordial state through the will of a supreme entity, often identified as Brahman. This creation is not ex nihilo in the strict sense but is rather a transformation of an undifferentiated cosmic substance. The idea of cyclic creation and dissolution, known as “samsara,” suggests an eternal process of creation, preservation, and destruction governed by divine principles.

Buddhism, with its emphasis on impermanence and dependent origination, offers a different take. The universe is seen as arising from a series of interdependent causes and conditions rather than from a singular, divine act of creation. This perspective aligns with the Buddhist doctrine of “pratītyasamutpāda,” which posits that all phenomena are contingent and interconnected. While not addressing creation ex nihilo directly, Buddhism’s focus on the transient nature of existence provides an intriguing counterpoint to the notion of a permanent, divinely created universe.

In contrast, Islamic theology contains elements that resonate closely with the concept of creation ex nihilo. The Quranic narrative emphasizes God’s omnipotence and ability to bring forth the universe by uttering the command “Be.” Surah Al-Baqarah (2:117) states, “When He decrees a matter, He only says to it, ‘Be,’ and it is.” This underscores a belief in a transcendent Creator who initiates existence without reliance on pre-existing materials, paralleling the Christian doctrine in several respects. Islamic scholars have further elaborated on this theme, exploring the philosophical and theological implications of divine creation.

Is the Ex Nihilo Doctrine of Creation Unique to Christianity?

by [Hugh Ross](#)

January 8, 2021

Question of the week: What do you make of assertions by skeptics that there are several religions and mythologies that include in their doctrines an ex nihilo creation event and that Christianity is not unique?

My answer: Creatio ex nihilo is Latin for “creation out of nothing.” It refers to the belief that space, time, matter, and energy are not eternal but were created by a supernatural act of God.

It is the *kind* of ex nihilo creation event that sets the Bible apart from nonbiblical holy books. In the eastern religions and in ancient mid- and near-eastern, African, European, and American creation myths God, Gods, or creative forces create the universe within space and time that eternally exists. The Bible teaches that space and time did not exist until God created the universe.¹

Where the Bible also stands unique is in its description of God and in how God fashions the universe, Earth, and Earth’s life after the cosmic creation event. The Bible describes God as a triune Being: one essence and three persons. Only Christianity among the world’s religions asserts the doctrine of the Trinity. As I wrote in a [blog](#) several years ago,² science only makes sense if God is triune. Furthermore, only the Bible among the world’s foundational religious books accurately and consistently predicts future scientific discoveries.

Resources

- [Big Bang—The Bible Taught It First!](#)
- [Does the Bible Teach Big Bang Cosmology?](#)
- [Navigating Genesis](#) (book), pp. 25–108

Endnotes

1. I provide a review of the relevant biblical texts in *The Creator and the Cosmos*, 4th ed. (Covina, CA: RTB Press, 2018), 25–26, <https://support.reasons.org/purchase/the-creator-and-the-cosmos-fourth-edition>.
2. Hugh Ross, “How To Persuade a Skeptic That God Must Be Triune,” *Today’s New Reason to Believe* (blog) July 13, 2016, <https://www.reasons.org/todays-new-reason-to-believe/read/todays-new-reason-to-believe/2016/07/13/how-to-persuade-a-skeptic-that-god-must-be-triune>.

Creation Ex Nihilo

by [Kenneth Samples](#)

April 1, 2005

Historic Christianity has always maintained a belief in Creation ex nihilo (CEN) as expressed in the ancient Nicene Creed: “We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.”

Scripture teaches that there was nothing but God, and that God by means of his incalculable wisdom and infinite power alone brought the universe (all matter, energy, time, and space) into existence from nothing. There was no preexistent physical reality; therefore *nothing* should not be understood as an actual *something*.

Support for this truth-claim of historic Christianity can be found throughout Scripture, from Genesis through Revelation. (See sidebar.)

Reference	Creation <i>ex nihilo</i> Statement
Genesis 1:1	Implies a singular beginning and that God created everything in its <i>totality</i>
Proverbs 3:19	By His wisdom God created the heavens and the earth
Psalms 90:2	Only God is eternal; the created order had a distinct beginning
John 1:3	Jesus Christ, who shares the divine nature, identified as taking part in the work of creation
Romans 4:17	God calls things into existence
Colossians 1:16	God created all things visible and invisible
Acts 4:24	God is the absolute Creator of everything
Acts 17:28	Creation is dependent on God for its very existence
2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 1:2	God existed before time, implying that He created time

Hebrews 11:3	An explicit statement of Creation <i>ex nihilo</i>
Revelation 4:11	Describes what creation's (humanity's) response to the Creator should be

Theological Implications

It is important to underscore that when God created the universe He made no use of preexisting materials, nor did He make the world out of His own being. Christian theism rejects the view that identifies the world with God's being or essence (either pantheism or panentheism). God alone is infinite, eternal, and independent, while the physical universe, the creation, is finite, temporal, and contingent (matter is not eternal but results from the power of God's Word). CEN teaches not only that the universe had a singular beginning but also that the created order is continually dependent upon God's sustaining power. Since creating the world, the sovereign God continues to uphold, preserve, and direct His creation (Acts 4:27-28; Col. 1:17). The God of the Bible is therefore revealed as the transcendent Creator and immanent Sustainer of all things. God's wondrous intervention in His creation through the doctrine of divine providence overturns the deistic view of God. Deism sees the divine as wholly transcendent, a being who creates but does not intervene in the universe.

A profound practical implication of the doctrine of CEN is that only the sovereign Creator (who is also our benevolent Redeemer) is deserving of our worship, adoration, and devotion. A denial of the CEN doctrine would imply that matter is eternal and would constitute a challenge to God's independence and sovereignty. Scripture explicitly warns believers not to fall prey to idolatry by engaging in the false worship of the world or of particular things in the world (Ex. 20:3-6; Rom. 1:18-23). Yet, while not a proper object of worship, the universe because it was created by God nevertheless possesses objective meaning, purpose, and significance. This notion is even more emphatically true of human beings who were made in the expressed image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27) and who will live even after the present creation is destroyed and replaced (2 Pet. 3:7, 10, 13; Rev. 21:1).

An important qualification of God's creation out of *nothing* is that it only applies to God's initial creation of the universe. For example, God's subsequent

creation of the animals (Gen. 2:19) and of humankind (Gen. 2:7) involved some use of preexisting materials (namely “the dust of the ground”).

Apologetic Implications

Modern scientific cosmology buttresses the doctrine of CEN more pointedly and potently than does any other discipline. According to prevailing scientific theory, the universe had a singular beginning nearly 14 billion years ago. All matter, energy, time, and space exploded (in a carefully crafted event) into existence from nothing. This basic big bang cosmological model, which is embraced by the vast majority of research scientists because it has withstood extensive scientific testing, uniquely corresponds to the biblical teaching concerning CEN. It is nothing less than strikingly probative that a book written so long ago nonetheless contains a view of cosmology that matches so closely the latest and best scientific findings.

The Bible’s description of God as sovereign over His creation serves to remind humans of their place in creation. And for Christians eager to engage skeptics with evidence for CEN, Scripture provides a basis for humility:

“This is what the LORD says—your redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the LORD, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself” (Isa. 44:24).

Although some Mormon writings refer to Jesus as the Messiah, Mormon doctrine about Jesus and the meaning of his messianic role are incompatible with historic Christian doctrine (“Starting Points,” Q1, 2005, p.6). -ed.

Answering Questions on Creation “From” Nothing

by [Kenneth Samples](#)

September 28, 2021

I had a dialogue on social media recently with someone who objected to the idea that God created the world “out of” or “from” nothing. That brief interaction (which I’ll provide in a moment) gives us the opportunity to think further on what creation *ex nihilo* means and doesn’t mean.

Creation *Ex Nihilo*

The early chapters of Genesis describe how God created the totality of all things. Every reader of the Bible is familiar with the creation days of Genesis chapter 1. This critical doctrine is also discussed in various parts of both the Old and New Testaments. And affirmations of creation form the first stanzas of the ancient creeds of Christendom (Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds).

A central feature of how Christians have understood God’s initial role in creation involves the expression creation *ex nihilo*: creation out of or from nothing. Historical theologian Richard Muller defines the Latin term *ex nihilo* as a reference to “the divine creation of the world *not* of preexistent, and therefore eternal, materials, but out of nothing.”¹ The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is derived from various biblical passages ([Genesis 1:1](#); [Romans 4:17](#); [Colossians 1:16](#); [Hebrews 11:3](#)).

Clarifying What Christians Mean by “From Nothing”

With that context, here now is the paraphrased discussion I had with an inquirer on social media:

Correspondent: God most certainly didn’t create “out of” or “from” nothing. Not even the all-powerful Lord could perform such an act. God merely brought that which didn’t previously exist into existence. What he created “from” was himself (who and what he is), not from nothing.

My response: I respectfully think you have misunderstood the historic definition of “out of” or “from” nothing. The historic Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* says nothing existed but the triune God and then God called all contingent (dependent) entities and beings into existence from nonexistence. God didn’t create out of himself (creation *ex Deo*) rather he called all things into existence that previously didn’t exist (ergo out of or from nothing). Thus creation *ex nihilo* means “bring into existence that which did not exist prior.” Creation *ex nihilo* is historically the biblical and Christian response to the Platonic claim that a deity (the Demiurge) [created out of preexistent entities](#). I hope that helps.

Correspondent: Nothing? What was there other than God from which to bring forth something? Either it came out of God (as the source of all being) or from nothing, the latter of which sounds like hocus-pocus magic.

My response: God, through his incalculable wisdom and power alone, created that which previously didn’t exist. Instead of using preexistent matter or some other substance, God brought all things into existence from nonexistence. I think your misunderstanding is in thinking that nonexistence is a substance. It’s not. It is literally *no thing*. “Out of” or “from nothing” is not a magical substance. It just means God alone called all things into existence that previously didn’t exist.

Further, the source of creation is God’s power and wisdom and “out of” nonexistence simply means that which previously didn’t exist. So creation is *by* God but *from* nothing (no preexistent materials were used in creating). I think your basic description that “God merely brought that which didn’t previously exist into existence” actually matches with creation *ex nihilo*, though you have to be careful not to imply that God created out of himself which is known as creation *ex Deo* and is similar to the Eastern religious view (pantheism).

Takeaway

In thinking carefully about creation it is equally important to understand what the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* does *not* mean. Consider these three points:

- The cosmos was not created either in God or out of God’s being.
- The cosmos was not made of preexisting materials, such as matter.

- God didn't create the cosmos out of a *nothing* that was an actual *something*.

Creation testifies to God's infinite wisdom and power. Thus, studying the Bible and observing the natural world should lead God's redeemed people to worship the triune Creator.

Reflections: Your Turn

Does observing nature lead you to worship? Visit [Reflections](#) on WordPress to comment.

Resources

- For further study of creation *ex nihilo*, see Kenneth Richard Samples, [7 Truths That Changed the World](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), chapters 5 and 6.
- For an understanding of science and Christianity, see Kenneth Richard Samples, [Christianity Cross-Examined](#) (Covina, CA: RTB Press, 2021), chapters 1 and 2.

Endnotes

1. Richard A. Muller, [Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1985), s.v. "ex nihilo."

Creation Ex Nihilo is in the Bible

Dave Armstrong, October 1, 2020

Ex nihilo is Latin for “from nothing.” It was stated by an atheist with whom I have had extensive interactions, that the Bible does not teach “creation from nothing.” As usual, he is mistaken, and greatly so.

Let’s see what the Bible *actually* teaches about this. There are many verses in support of *creatio ex nihilo*. I found almost all of them way back in 1981, when I was just starting out in apologetics. Here they are:

- **Psalms 33:6** (RSV) By the word of the LORD [i.e., not by existing matter] the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth.
- **Isaiah 44:24** . . . “I am the LORD, who made *all things* . . . “
- **Wisdom 1:14** For he created *all things* that they might exist, . . .
- **John 1:3** all things were made through him, and without him was not *anything* made that was made.
- **Romans 11:36** For from him and through him and to him are *all things*. . .
- **1 Corinthians 8:6** yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are *all things* and through whom we exist.
- **Ephesians 3:9** . . . God who created *all things*;
- **Colossians 1:16** for in him *all things* were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities — all things were created through him and for him.
- **Hebrews 2:10** . . . he, for whom and by whom *all things* exist . . .
- **2 Peter 3:5** . . . by the word of God [i.e., not by existing matter] heavens existed long ago . . .
- **Revelation 4:11** “. . . our Lord and God, . . . didst create *all things*, and by *thy will* they existed and were created.”

If God created all “things” then he must have created *ex nihilo* because no thing (nothing) existed initially if there was no thing that he did not create. How much clearer could it be made? After all, “nothing” according to *Merriam-Webster* online, means “not any thing: no thing.” Therefore, creating “all things” means the same thing as “creating from nothing”; that is, creation *ex nihilo*.

And of course modern Big Bang cosmology agrees with this. Christian philosopher William Lane Craig sums up the current state of knowledge in his paper, [“Creation ex nihilo: Theology and Science”](#):

The standard Big Bang model, as the Friedman-Lemaître model came to be called, thus describes a universe which is not eternal in the past, but which came into being a finite time ago. Moreover, – and this deserves underscoring – the origin it posits is an absolute origin *ex nihilo*. For not only all matter and energy, but space and time themselves come into being at the initial cosmological singularity. . . . On the standard model the universe originates *ex nihilo* in the sense that at the initial singularity it is true that *There is no earlier space-time point* or it is false that *Something existed prior to the singularity*.

Although advances in astrophysical cosmology have forced various revisions in the standard model, nothing has called into question its fundamental prediction of the finitude of the past and the beginning of the universe. Indeed, as James Sinclair has shown, the history of 20th century cosmogony has seen a parade of failed theories trying to avert the absolute beginning predicted by the standard model. These beginningless models have been repeatedly shown either to be physically untenable or to imply the very beginning of the universe which they sought to avoid. . . .

Given the metaphysical impossibility of the universe’s coming into being from nothing, belief in a supernatural Creator is eminently reasonable. At the very least we can say confidently that the person who believes in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* will not find himself contradicted by the empirical evidence of contemporary cosmology but on the contrary fully in line with it.

Some atheists try to counter creation *ex nihilo* by noting that Eve was created from Adam’s rib, and Adam from the dust. But of course the things he used to

create men and women (dust, ribs) were already part of the group of “all things” that God created, therefore, this is no disproof of the *initial* creation *ex nihilo*.

Others try to argue that the biblical account of the earth being “without form and void” somehow suggests that God formed it from existing matter that he did *not* create. This is just plain silly. Here is the text:

- **Genesis 1:1-2** In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. [2] The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

The logical, straightforward interpretation is that God made the heavens (the universe); we know that he did so out of nothing, from all the passages presented above. At first the earth that he created from nothing as part of the universe was “without form and void”. Then God began to work with the initial chaotic form to make the earth as we know it.

Verse 2 cannot be taken in isolation apart from verse 1. It’s false to say that the “water wasn’t made by God” because the Bible teaches that God made all things out of nothing (which would include the water on the early “formless” earth. Nothing in that notion precludes further “developmental” creation.

Then it’s argued by some that God made land from existing water (Gen 1:7, 9): to which I say, “so what?” He certainly did. This was a further “developmental” creation from the matter of the universe *in toto* that He initially created (2 Peter 3:5). But there is no logical necessity at all to interpret this as God creating land from “eternal water.”

Dave Armstrong is a full-time [Catholic author](#) and apologist, who has been actively proclaiming and defending Christianity since 1981. He was received into the Catholic Church in 1991. His website/blog, [Biblical Evidence for Catholicism](#), has been online since March 1997. He also maintains a popular [Facebook page](#). Dave has been happily married to his wife Judy since

October 1984. They have three sons and a daughter (all homeschooled) and reside in southeast Michigan.

What is the meaning of creation 'ex nihilo'?

Quick answer

Creation "ex nihilo" means God created everything out of nothing, emphasizing His omnipotence and the supernatural nature of creation.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

The phrase "ex nihilo" is Latin for "from nothing," and it describes how God created the universe. The Bible opens with, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1), indicating that God brought all things into existence without using pre-existing materials. John 1:3 reinforces this, stating, "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." This concept challenges our understanding of the natural world, which operates under the law that matter cannot be created or destroyed, highlighting the supernatural power of God.

FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT

- The Bible starts with God creating the heavens and the earth from nothing, showcasing His supreme power and sovereignty over all creation (Genesis 1:1–2).
- The Psalms praise God for His creative work, stating that the heavens were made by the word of the Lord and all their host by the breath of His mouth. It emphasizes that creation was a result of God's command (Psalm 33:6, 9).
- God declares that He created the heavens, formed the earth, and made it to be inhabited, asserting His unique role as the Creator (Isaiah 45:18).

FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT

- All things were made through Christ, and nothing came into being without Him, affirming the doctrine of creation ex nihilo (John 1:3).
- All things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, were created by and for Christ, which highlights Christ's preeminence in creation (Colossians 1:16–17).

- By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so what is seen was not made out of what was visible, directly supporting the concept of creation ex nihilo (Hebrews 11:3).

IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

The doctrine of creation "ex nihilo" shapes our understanding of God and the universe. It shows that God has the power to create and sustain everything from nothing, and reveals the dependence of all creation on God. The supernatural aspect of creation challenges the limits of human understanding and scientific explanation, and it prompts us to acknowledge the existence of realities beyond our empirical observations.

The laws of physics state that matter cannot be created or destroyed, but God operates beyond these natural laws. We must approach science with humility, recognizing our limited knowledge and the possibility of God's mysteries that are beyond our comprehension.

Creation "ex nihilo" shows God's sovereignty and purposeful design. It assures believers that the universe is not a result of random chance but a deliberate act of a loving Creator. Our existence is intentional and meaningful.

Understanding that everything comes from God fosters a sense of stewardship and gratitude. We see our lives and the world around us as gifts from God. This should inspire us to care for creation responsibly and live in a manner that honors the Creator. It also encourages us to trust in God's provision and plan, even when we face uncertainties.

Creation "ex nihilo" calls us to worship and reverence. It shows God's unparalleled power and glory, and reminds us that our faith is rooted in the reality of a God who can do the impossible. We deepen our trust in Him and His promises through this understanding.

UNDERSTAND

- God created everything out of nothing, which is impossible for everyone but God.
- Creation ex nihilo highlights the supernatural nature of God's creative work.

- Genesis 1:1 and John 1:3 affirm God's role as the sole Creator without pre-existing materials.

REFLECT

- How does the concept of creation ex nihilo shape your understanding of God's power and sovereignty?
- Reflect on a time when recognizing God as the Creator of all things from nothing deepened your faith or perspective on life.
- In what ways does understanding creation ex nihilo impact your daily gratitude and stewardship of God's creation?

ENGAGE

- How does creation ex nihilo shape our understanding of God's relationship with His creation? How does it affect our view of the natural world?
- How can you bridge the gap in speaking the truth in love about creation ex nihilo to those with different perspectives of the origin of the universe?
- What can we do to deepen our appreciation for God's creative power and to reflect His intentionality in our lives and communities?

[The Doctrine of Creation Ex Nihilo: Why Does It Matter?](#)

[Craig A. Carter](#) · May 31, 2023

The doctrine of creation is one of the most important doctrines of Christian faith because it is so foundational to so many other crucial doctrines. For example, if we have no doctrine of creation, we will have a truncated doctrine of sin and a distorted eschatology. Then again, without a clear doctrine of creation we do not have a clear anthropology.

Thinking Theologically

If we begin to think theologically about a subject like, let us say as an example, sin and salvation, we can see how one doctrine supports another. To assess whether we ought to preach that people are guilty of sin before God (which is a

necessary part of preaching the Gospel), we need to think about theological anthropology, which is the doctrine of the human person. But foundational to a doctrine of theological anthropology is the doctrine of creation.

If a good God creates a good world, then human beings must be fundamentally good. This doctrine rules out many false ideas about the nature of sin and guilt. For example, it rules out the idea that matter itself is evil, which is taught in certain heretical sects and false religions such as Manicheanism. If we were to accept the idea that matter itself is evil and that it exists eternally, then our personal sense of responsibility for sin would be lessened greatly, since we would be made up of soul (which is good) and matter (which is evil). The idea of salvation would probably be some sort of scheme to escape matter and get to a purely spiritual state. So, resurrection of the body would be a non-starter![In a sense, all doctrine is interconnected. Share on X](#)

So, to review, our concept of salvation depends on our doctrine of sin (what we are saved from) and our concept of sin depends on our doctrine of humanity, which is part of the doctrine of creation. In a sense, all doctrine is interconnected. But in biblical theology there is an historical order of God, creation, fall, reconciliation, and redemption and in systematic theology there is a logical order in which theologians often reason from later to earlier doctrines, which are foundational to later ones.

However, I have not yet talked about creation ex nihilo yet. That is because I wanted to establish the idea that later doctrines depend on earlier ones and to show how far back in the chain creation ex nihilo goes. It is the doctrine that has one foot in the doctrine of God and the other foot in the doctrine of creation. Creation ex nihilo is a doctrine that tells us something about the nature of God as well as something about the nature of creation.

God and Creation

John Webster calls creation ex nihilo a “hinge doctrine” because it functions as a link between the doctrine of the being of God and the doctrine of the work of God, that is to say, between what we confess to be true about God and what is true about the works of God in creation, reconciliation and redemption. Just as a hinge swings both ways, this key doctrine allows us to gain insight into both

what is true of the God who creates and also the nature of the created works of such a God.

Creation ex nihilo tells us three things about God. First, it tells us that God's power is completely unlimited. All that exists can be viewed as belonging to one of two classes: there is God himself and there is that which God creates. There is no third category! This means that the only thing that is eternal, self-existent, and uncreated is God. Everything else has a beginning in time, is contingent on something else, and created. God is not like a human builder whose ability to make something beautiful or long-lasting is limited by what material he has to work with. God is not limited by anything. [It is the doctrine that has one foot in the doctrine of God and the other foot in the doctrine of creation. Share on X](#)

Second, creation ex nihilo tells us that God has intellect and will. This means that God is something other than blind chance or fate. The major alternative to the doctrine of creation ex nihilo is pantheism, which sees the cosmos as God, or which sees God as an aspect of the cosmos. If God is just another name for the universe, then God is reduced to being nothing more than what the pagans thought of as Fate or what moderns think of as Chance. If this is the nature of ultimate reality then the world has no intrinsic meaning. Life has no meaning. If we want meaning, we have to invent it for ourselves and we are only deluding ourselves if we think that such meaning is anything more than an emotional crutch for those who refuse to face the meaninglessness of existence.

But if, on the other hand, creation ex nihilo is true then an all-good, all-wise, perfect God is the Creator of all creaturely reality. That would mean that purpose and meaning is built into the creation waiting to be discerned. And if we are God's creatures created in his image with reason and will, then it is not going to be shocking if we are able to discern the purpose built into the world including our own bodies.

Third, creation ex nihilo tells us that God is capable of raising the dead. From the beginning of the contemplation of Scripture, even as seen by biblical writers themselves contemplating the doctrine of creation in the Book of Genesis, this implication has been seen. Job, who had a very high view of God, expresses this idea when he says:

For I know that my Redeemer lives
and that at the last he shall stand upon the earth
And after my skin has been destroyed,
yet in my flesh shall I see God. (Job 19:25-26)

In his eschatological vision, Isaiah says that one day the LORD God will “swallow up death forever.” The power to overcome death requires a creative power not found anywhere within the created order. So, if God can wield such a power God must stand outside – that is, must transcend – the created order. This is exactly what the doctrine of creation ex nihilo teaches is the case.

Transcendent Creator and Sovereign Lord

An explicit connection is drawn by Paul in Romans 4. Speaking of the faith of Abraham by which Abraham believed God’s promise to make him the father of many nations Paul says he did so “in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” (Rom 4:17 ESV) Here Paul draws a connection between raising the dead and calling into existence things that do not exist. One is comparable to the other. Neither is possible for something that works within the limitations of the cosmos itself. Only a God who truly transcends the cosmos could do such a thing.[The power to overcome death requires a creative power not found anywhere within the created order. Share on X](#)

Creation ex nihilo is a doctrine that signifies the nature of God as the transcendent Creator and sovereign Lord of history who alone is worthy of worship. Creation ex nihilo signifies God’s unlimited power, God’s personal nature as one who has intellect and will, and God’s ability to bring into existence that which is genuinely new – as we see in the resurrection of the dead. Creation ex nihilo names that crucial distance between Creator and creature, which serves to distinguish them and keep them in their proper relation.

Without this key doctrine, the hinge between Creator and creation breaks and either the Creator is collapsed into the creation (pantheism) or the creation becomes all that exists (atheism). As the doctrine of creation has been

increasingly rejected in late modernity, it is little wonder that pantheism and atheism have gained ground. The doctrine of creation ex nihilo is not an optional but a foundational and crucial doctrine. Without it there can be no historic Christian orthodoxy.

Craig A. Carter

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What does creation ex nihilo mean?

By [Richard Curi](#) January 18, 2024

Creation ex nihilo refers to the theological doctrine that God created the universe out of nothing. The Latin phrase “ex nihilo” means “out of nothing”. This doctrine is foundational to much of Christian theology and affirms that God uniquely brought forth all of existence, material and spiritual, without using any pre-existing materials or relying on any other beings. Several key biblical passages point to this understanding of creation.

Genesis 1:1 states, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” The Hebrew word for “create” here is “bara”, which implies creation out of nothing. The verse suggests that before God’s creative act, nothing existed except God Himself. John 1:3 also affirms this by stating that “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” God created everything through Christ, His eternal Word. There was no “anything” before creation for God to work with.

Hebrews 11:3 further clarifies that “the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.” What we see around us today was not made from visible, pre-existing materials. Rather, God spoke creation into being ex nihilo. Colossians 1:16 also points to Christ being the one through whom “all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible”. The completeness of this statement implies creation out of nothing.

Several early church fathers such as Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus, and Tertullian affirmed creation ex nihilo based on these and other biblical texts. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 officially declared creation ex nihilo to be church doctrine. Thomas Aquinas provided philosophical arguments supporting this view. The doctrine is now a core tenet of orthodox Christian belief about origins.

Creation ex nihilo underscores several key theological truths. First, it highlights God’s omnipotence. He needed no pre-existing materials to create the

cosmos. This points to His almighty power. Second, it suggests that only God is eternal. All other reality depends on Him for its existence. Third, it implies that creation is wholly distinct from the Creator. There is no blurring of the distinction between the Creator and the created order. Fourth, it provides a foundation for the goodness of creation. Since God alone brought it into being, it must originally have been “very good” as Genesis 1 affirms.

Critics have argued that something cannot come from nothing. However, Christian theology makes room for God’s creative power transcending this limitation. God’s Word alone was sufficient to call the universe into being. Other objections deal with perceived conflicts between creation ex nihilo and modern science. However, these fail to recognize that the doctrine speaks to the metaphysical origins of matter and energy, not their physical development over time. Science deals with secondary and proximate causes within the created order, not ultimate origins.

In summary, the doctrine of creation ex nihilo teaches that God alone, through His Word, brought forth the entire cosmos out of nothing. This core tenet of Christian theology upholds God’s omnipotence, eternity, and distinction from creation. It also supports the original goodness and dependance of the creation. No pre-existing materials were required for God to create the universe we inhabit. His divine power and authority were sufficient.

Key Biblical Support for Creation Ex Nihilo

Several key biblical texts directly support or imply the doctrine of creation out of nothing:

- Genesis 1:1 – “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” The Hebrew word for “create” (bara) implies creation from nothing.
- John 1:3 – “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” Affirms God creating everything through Christ without anything existing prior.
- Hebrews 11:3 – “The universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.” Created order did not come from visible, pre-existing matter.

- Colossians 1:16 – “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible.” The completeness of this statement implies ex nihilo creation.
- Revelation 4:11 – “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.” God’s will alone brought all things into existence.

These and other verses emphasize God’s exclusive role in bringing forth all of creation through His divine Word and power alone, not from any previously existing materials. This biblical evidence grounds the doctrine of creation out of nothing.

Historical Development of the Doctrine

The doctrine of creation ex nihilo developed over time in church history:

- 2nd century – Early church fathers like Justin Martyr, Tatian, and Theophilus of Antioch advocated creation from nothing based on Genesis 1:1 and other texts.
- 3rd century – Irenaeus and Tertullian affirmed creation ex nihilo against Gnostic views of pre-existing matter.
- 4th century – Athanasius and Augustine developed the doctrine more fully in their writings.
- 1215 – The Fourth Lateran Council officially declared ex nihilo to be church doctrine.
- 13th century – Thomas Aquinas provided philosophical arguments supporting creation from nothing.

From Scripture seeds to mature doctrine, the church progressively articulated over many centuries the view that God alone brought forth the entirety of creation without anything existing prior. This became enshrined as orthodox Christian teaching.

Theological and Philosophical Implications

Some key implications of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo include:

- **God's Omnipotence** – Creation from nothing displays God's immeasurable power. He needed no pre-existing matter to create the cosmos.
- **God's Eternality** – God alone is eternal and uncreated. All other reality depends on Him for its existence.
- **Distinction from Creation** – Creation is wholly dependent on God but also separate from Him. Clear differentiation exists between Creator and creation.
- **Goodness of Creation** – Since God directly created the material world, it must have originally been “very good” as Scripture says.
- **Against Dualism** – No pre-existing matter implies creation is not the result of an eternal dualistic struggle between spirit and matter.

These and other implications arise from understanding God's origins of the universe as creation from nothing. It establishes foundational Christian teaching on God, creation, and their relationship.

Objections and Counterarguments

Some common objections to creation ex nihilo include:

- “Nothing comes from nothing” – Critics argue creation from nothing defies logic and experience. However, Christian teaching upholds God's omnipotence to transcend this limitation.
- “Matter is eternal” – Some claim matter must be eternal. However, this erroneously imposes limitations on an all-powerful God.
- “It contradicts science” – Critics argue creation from nothing conflicts with the Big Bang and cosmic evolution. However, this fails to distinguish origins of matter/energy from their development over time.

Christian apologists have offered robust counterarguments to these and other objections. Affirming God's omnipotent, eternal nature addresses objections based on materialist assumptions. The doctrine refers to metaphysical origins rather than physical processes, avoiding conflict with science.

The Significance of Understanding Creation Ex Nihilo

Understanding the doctrine of creation out of nothing is significant for several reasons:

- It anchors Christian theology in God's omnipotence and sovereignty over all creation.
- It establishes creation's dependence on and distinction from the Creator.
- It protects against dualism, pantheism, and other unorthodox views.
- It highlights the supernatural origins of the natural world.
- It supports trust in the goodness of the material order God established.
- It provides a metaphysical foundation for the Christian worldview.

This doctrine enriches Christian theology in many ways when properly understood. It also equips believers to counter objections and engage thoughtfully with non-Christian perspectives on cosmic origins.

Practical Applications for Christian Living

Some practical applications of the ex nihilo creation doctrine include:

- Worshipping God for His awe-inspiring power and creativity in originating the universe.
- Developing absolute trust in God's sovereignty, providence and care over all creation.
- Approaching nature with wonder, seeing it as the handiwork of a loving Creator.
- Letting go of material things which have their temporary source in God's spoken Word.
- Being good stewards of resources, time and abilities which originate from God's gracious creative act.
- Respecting human life as having divinely created worth and dignity.

Creation ex nihilo provides a framework for treasuring all God has brought into existence and living accordingly as faithful stewards.

Conclusion

The theological doctrine of creation ex nihilo teaches that God created the universe and all it contains out of nothing, through His divine power and Word. Rooted in Scripture and developed over church history, it affirms God alone as the eternal source of all finite reality. This doctrine upholds God's omnipotence, the goodness yet distinctness of creation, and other key

Christian beliefs. Christians can be enriched by studying and applying this teaching, marveling in the God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Romans 4:17).

Question: "What does 'creation ex nihilo' mean?"

Answer: *Ex nihilo* is Latin for “from nothing.” The term *creation ex nihilo* refers to God creating everything from nothing. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1). Prior to that moment, there was nothing. God didn’t make the universe from preexisting building blocks. He started from scratch.

The Bible never expressly states that God made everything from nothing, but it is implied. In Hebrews 11:3 we read, “By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.” Scholars take this to mean that the universe came into existence by divine command and was not assembled from preexisting matter or energy. Things that are visible do not owe their existence to anything visible.

Humans can be very creative, but we cannot create *ex nihilo*. Strictly speaking, we cannot create; we can only synthesize. We require materials from which to build something. God is not so constrained. This is difficult for us to comprehend because of a fundamental law of physics that we are all familiar with. The “first law of science” states that matter (the stuff the universe is made of) cannot be created or destroyed. Matter can be converted from solid to liquid to gas to plasma and back again; atoms can be combined into molecules and split into their component parts; but matter cannot be created from nothing or completely destroyed. And so this idea that God created everything from nothing is not natural to us. It’s not natural at all—it’s supernatural.

The term *creation ex nihilo* refers to the supernatural event that was the beginning of the universe. It was the moment that God created something (everything) from nothing.

Is the Bible seen as mythology?

Is the Bible considered a work of mythology?

Overview

The question of whether the Bible is a work of mythology arises from various fields, including comparative religion, literary analysis, and historical inquiry. Many ancient civilizations have left behind mythological narratives that explain their origins, detail the exploits of their gods, and provide moral or cultural lessons. By contrast, the Bible presents itself as a historical record of real people, miraculous events, and God's interaction with humanity.

Below is a comprehensive examination of why Scripture is not considered mythology. It draws on textual evidence (quoted from the Berean Standard Bible), archaeological findings, historical corroborations, and interpretive considerations to demonstrate the Bible's nature as a historical, reliable record rather than the product of myth.

1. Distinction Between Myth and Historical Narrative

Myths often involve stories of capricious deities who exhibit human flaws and do not hinge upon verifiable events in space and time. Biblical accounts, however, consistently claim to relate truth grounded in real-world geography, genealogies, and political kingdoms. For instance:

- The opening chapters of Genesis align people groups and geographic locales with actual Middle Eastern landscapes ([Genesis 2:10-14](#)).
- Exodus details specific locations and political figures such as Pharaoh, which align with Egyptian history (though the debates continue on which specific Pharaoh was involved, the setting in Egypt is clear).
- Luke's Gospel sets the life of Jesus within the tenure of identifiable figures like Caesar Augustus, Quirinius, and Pontius Pilate ([Luke 2:1-2](#); 3:1).

These historical anchors sharply contrast with mythologies that generally lack datable markers or real historical rulers.

2. Archaeological Evidence and Historical Corroborations

Archaeological discoveries have consistently supported names, places, and cultural practices depicted in the biblical text. While not every event described in Scripture has direct archaeological proof, major findings repeatedly affirm the historical framework of the Bible:

1. The Tel Dan Stele (9th century BC) - References the “House of David,” a crucial piece of external evidence that King David was a historical figure rather than a mythical hero.

2. The Moabite Stone (Mesha Stele, circa 840 BC) - Mentions the Israelite King Omri and conflicts with the Moabites (cf. [2 Kings 3](#)), corroborating the political interactions described in the biblical narrative.

3. Dead Sea Scrolls (3rd century BC-1st century AD) - Contain parts of many Old Testament books and demonstrate that the text was passed down with remarkable accuracy, supporting the historical reliability of what the Bible reports.

In contrast, mythological texts generally do not include verifiable historical contexts or exacting genealogies.

3. Literary Genre and Scriptural Claim of Inspiration

The Bible’s internal self-attestation is that it is divinely inspired and profitable for teaching ([2 Timothy 3:16-17](#)). Books such as 1 and 2 Kings read like royal annals, containing lists of rulers, battles, and historical occurrences. The Gospel of Luke emphasizes an investigative approach, wherein Luke states explicitly:

“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us... Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account...” ([Luke 1:1-3](#)).

This method contrasts significantly with the nature of mythology, which commonly focuses on explaining cosmic phenomena through mythic tales rather than through eyewitness-style investigation.

4. Consistency with Known History and Geography

Biblical events repeatedly align with known historical data and documented geographical references:

- References to Middle Eastern trade routes match with archaeological findings of trade in spices, metals, and textiles.
- Specific cities such as Nineveh and Babylon are described in detail and later rediscovered through modern archaeology, aligning with the biblical descriptions of these empires.
- The mention of various nations and alliances (e.g., the Hittites, identified in [Genesis 23](#) and [2 Kings 7:6](#)) long thought legendary were later confirmed by excavations in modern Turkey, revealing a powerful empire.

These convergences with verified geography and history further move the Bible out of the realm of myth.

5. Prophetic Element and Fulfilled Predictions

Biblical prophecies often detail future events with striking clarity, grounded in future verifiable fulfillment. Classical mythologies rarely provide predictive prophecy that resonates with real historical outcomes. In Scripture, examples include:

- Isaiah’s prophecies concerning the fall of Babylon and the rise of King Cyrus ([Isaiah 44:28](#); 45:1) well before the events took place.
- Daniel’s visions of subsequent empires, widely studied in comparative historical contexts ([Daniel 2, 7](#)).
- Messianic prophecies fulfilled in Jesus, such as being born in Bethlehem ([Micah 5:2](#); [Matthew 2:1](#)).

Such fulfillment of prophecy encourages a view of Scripture as historically grounded, not mythically fabricated.

6. The Centrality of a Verifiable Resurrection

One of the key issues that separates the Bible from mythological tales is its anchoring in a proclaimed historical event: the physical resurrection. The New Testament authors argue that, if the resurrection of Christ never happened, then the faith itself is in vain ([1 Corinthians 15:14-17](#)). Unlike mythological deities who cycle through life, death, and rebirth in allegorical ways, the biblical authors present the resurrection of Jesus as an event witnessed by numerous people ([1 Corinthians 15:3-8](#)). This claim invites historical verification and eyewitness scrutiny.

Outside ancient texts like Josephus’s “Antiquities of the Jews” (c. AD 93-94) and Tacitus’s “Annals” (c. AD 116) reference the existence of Jesus and early Christian belief that He rose from the dead. Although these references do not themselves prove the resurrection, they attest that belief in His resurrection was historically known—even among those not sympathetic to Christianity.

7. Reliability of Manuscript Transmission

Mythologies often evolve substantially over centuries, changing with oral tradition. The Bible, in contrast, is supported by thousands of ancient manuscripts and fragments, including:

- Over 5,800 Greek New Testament manuscripts, enabling detailed comparisons that reveal an extremely high consistency rate.
- The Dead Sea Scrolls (discovered mid-20th century), which scrolled back the timeline of the Old Testament manuscripts by over a thousand years, yet demonstrated remarkable continuity and accuracy of the textual tradition.

Such preservation bolsters the claim that the Bible documents historically rooted truths rather than malleable myths.

8. Clarity of Monotheistic Teaching and Moral Law

Biblical teaching about one eternal God who is absolutely holy stands apart from mythologies populated by multiple deities with human flaws. Additionally, the moral law presented (e.g., [Exodus 20:1-17](#)) stands as a code that shaped entire civilizations. Mythologies usually serve to entertain or explain phenomena in imaginative ways, lacking the Bible's overarching narrative of covenant, divine law, and redemption across centuries of human history.

9. Philosophical and Behavioral Implications

The Bible's claims about humanity's purpose-loving God, living morally, stewarding creation-carry a moral and philosophical weight beyond that of myths designed to explain nature's mysteries. In building societies and shaping ethical behavior, the biblical accounts have profoundly influenced jurisprudence and personal transformation, a hallmark of texts grounded in transcendent reality rather than mere storytelling.

10. Conclusion

Comparisons with ancient mythologies reveal major divergences: the Bible is grounded in historical milestones, supported by external archaeological evidence, and offers specific genealogical and geographical details not

characteristic of myths. It further situates its core message in verifiable events, most notably the resurrection. The careful manuscript tradition ensures minimal textual distortion over millennia, which strengthens the case for the Bible's status as a historical, divinely inspired record rather than a mythological product.

As a result, it is widely viewed not as myth but as an authoritative document rooted in real historical contexts, verifiable data, and coherent narrative structure that spans thousands of years. The Bible stands alone in its persistent invitation for readers to investigate its claims-and in its enduring influence upon individuals, communities, and entire civilizations.

Creation Ex Nihilo

Topical Encyclopedia

Definition and Concept

Creation ex nihilo is a theological doctrine that asserts God created the universe out of nothing. This concept is foundational to the understanding of God's omnipotence and sovereignty, emphasizing that the material universe was not formed from pre-existing matter but was brought into existence by the divine will and command of God.

Biblical Basis

The doctrine of creation ex nihilo is supported by various passages in the Bible, which highlight God's unique role as the Creator. [Genesis 1:1](#) states, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." This verse introduces the biblical narrative with the assertion that God is the originator of all things, setting the stage for the subsequent acts of creation described in Genesis.

[Hebrews 11:3](#) further reinforces this concept: "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible." This passage underscores the belief that the visible world was not crafted from pre-existing materials but was spoken into existence by God's command.

The Gospel of John also affirms this doctrine in [John 1:3](#): "Through Him all things were made, and without Him nothing was made that has been made." This verse attributes the act of creation to the Word, identifying Jesus Christ as the divine agent through whom all things came into being.

Theological Implications

Creation ex nihilo has significant theological implications. It affirms God's absolute authority and independence, as He is not reliant on anything outside Himself to create. This doctrine also highlights the distinction between Creator

and creation, emphasizing that the universe is contingent upon God for its existence and sustenance.

Furthermore, creation ex nihilo underscores the idea of God's transcendence and immanence. While God is wholly other and distinct from His creation, He is also intimately involved with it, sustaining and governing all things by His power and wisdom.

Historical Development

The doctrine of creation ex nihilo was articulated and defended by early Church Fathers in response to various philosophical and theological challenges. In the face of Greek philosophical ideas that posited the eternity of matter, early Christian theologians like Irenaeus and Tertullian emphasized the biblical teaching of creation from nothing to uphold the uniqueness and supremacy of the Christian God.

The doctrine was further developed in the writings of Augustine, who argued against the notion of pre-existing matter and affirmed that God created time itself along with the universe. This understanding was later codified in the creeds and confessions of the Church, becoming a central tenet of orthodox Christian theology.

Contemporary Relevance

In contemporary discussions, creation ex nihilo remains a vital doctrine, particularly in dialogues between science and faith. It provides a framework for understanding the origins of the universe that is consistent with the biblical narrative, while also engaging with scientific theories about the beginning of the cosmos.

The doctrine also serves as a foundation for Christian environmental ethics, as it affirms the goodness and intentionality of God's creation, calling believers to steward the earth responsibly in accordance with God's purposes.

Conclusion

While the doctrine of creation ex nihilo is not explicitly stated in a single biblical verse, it is a coherent and consistent interpretation of the biblical witness to God's creative activity. It remains a cornerstone of Christian theology, shaping

the understanding of God's nature, the relationship between Creator and creation, and the purpose and destiny of the universe.

What is creation ex nihilo?

What is the concept of creation ex nihilo?

Definition and Overview

Creation ex nihilo is the doctrine that God brought all things into existence “out of nothing,” rather than fashioning the universe from preexisting materials or relying on any external power. This concept underlies the understanding that the entire cosmos-matter, space, time, and life-originated by the infinite, sovereign act of the eternal Creator.

While the term “ex nihilo” does not appear verbatim in the Bible, the Scriptural narrative, theological reflection throughout history, and supporting evidences from various fields point to a beginning in which nothing existed except God. This belief is prominent in Christianity and shapes how believers comprehend the nature of God, the authority of Scripture, and the purpose of creation.

Key Biblical Foundations

[Genesis 1:1](#) states, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” This fundamental verse serves as the cornerstone for understanding creation ex nihilo. The Hebrew word for “create,” (bārā’), is uniquely used of God’s creative acts, indicating a divine power that differs from human craftsmanship. God is not depicted as using preexisting materials but rather calling into existence what did not exist before.

[John 1:3](#) reinforces this idea, declaring, “Through Him all things were made, and without Him nothing was made that has been made.” This verse describes Jesus (the Word) as the agent of creation, underscoring that all reality-visible and invisible-originated through the Son of God.

Another key verse, [Romans 4:17](#), proclaims God “who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.” This underlines the Creator’s power

to bring forth reality from nonexistence, affirming that nothing precedes God in creation.

Historical and Theological Context

Throughout church history, theologians affirmed creation ex nihilo as a safeguard against both dualism (the idea of eternal matter existing alongside God) and emanationism (the notion that the universe flowed from God's essence). Early Christian creeds and councils consistently attested to God's omnipotent role in creating all things without preexisting material.

- The Nicene Creed (4th century) speaks of God as “Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible,” reflecting the biblical assertion that all reality depends entirely on the Creator.
 - Church Fathers such as Tertullian and Origen wrote about God's power to create everything from nothing, emphasizing God's infinite supremacy and transcendence over creation.
-

Philosophical and Scientific Considerations

Philosophically, creation ex nihilo is supported by arguments that the universe had a definite beginning:

- The Cosmological Argument posits that everything that begins to exist has a cause, the universe began to exist, therefore it has a cause beyond itself. The notion of creation ex nihilo harmonizes with this reasoning by pointing to a transcendent Creator who sets all things in motion.
- Modern cosmology, including theories about the universe's expansion, also aligns with the premise of a finite beginning (popularly tied to the Big Bang model). Although perspectives differ on the timescale, the recognition that the universe has not eternally existed but instead had a starting point finds a theological counterpart in ex nihilo creation.

From an intelligent design standpoint, the observable complexity in biology, Earth's finely tuned conditions for life, and the precise cosmological constants arguably suggest that beginning and sustaining forces point to a designer rather than random, preexisting processes. Geological examples that feature intricate fossil records-such as the Cambrian explosion, where complex life forms appear suddenly-are cited by proponents of intelligent design as consistent with creation ex nihilo in that new forms of life are introduced without gradually evolved precursors.

Scriptural Consistency and Manuscript Evidence

The narrative of creation ex nihilo is consistent throughout Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. Manuscript evidence-such as the Dead Sea Scrolls confirming ancient Old Testament texts-reveals remarkable stability of key creation passages across centuries. The unity of biblical testimony, observed across thousands of manuscripts, supports that the biblical authors uniformly present God as the sovereign originator of everything.

For instance, [Psalm 33:6](#) states, "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of His mouth." This text remains substantially identical across ancient manuscript discoveries, showcasing continuity and emphasizing God's capacity to create without relying on anything outside Himself.

God's Nature and Purpose in Creation

Since creation ex nihilo highlights God's absolute sovereignty, it underscores that God is free, not constrained by any preexisting substance. Only the transcendent Creator can summon the cosmos into being; everything that exists hinges upon Him. This understanding frames humanity's purpose: if God created us by His will, we live in dependence on Him, obligated and privileged to reflect His glory.

[Revelation 4:11](#) illustrates this truth: "Worthy are You, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for You created all things, and by Your will

they exist and came to be.” The act of creation stems from divine design, resulting in creation’s invitation to praise and worship its Maker.

Apologetics and Contemporary Relevance

Embracing ex nihilo creation carries significance for apologetics-defending the faith in a modern context often entails demonstrating how science, philosophy, and historical inquiry align with the biblical witness:

- **Archaeological Discoveries:** Excavations in places like Israel, Mesopotamia, and the broader Near East showcase cultural settings and historical contexts supportive of biblical narratives. These findings lend credibility to Scripture’s portrayal of God’s dealings with humanity, including His unique role as Creator.
- **Resurrection and Creation:** The God who created life from nothing also raises the dead. This parallel is a central Christian argument: the same omnipotent Creator, who brought the universe into being, displayed His power in the resurrection of Christ. As [1 Corinthians 15:20](#) declares, “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” The power behind creation ex nihilo undergirds the confidence that physical death can be overcome by the same divine Word.
- **Young Earth Perspective:** Some interpret biblical genealogies and chronologies (similar to Bishop Ussher’s calculations) to support a shorter historical timeline. Advocates point to the reliability of biblical records, the direct creative acts of God, and the historical layering of events in Scripture, contending that these align with a supernatural act of creation punctuating time rather than relying on vast eons of naturalistic processes.

Practical Implications

Understanding creation ex nihilo bolsters trust in God’s sovereignty and nurtures a posture of humility. Recognizing that God spoke the universe into existence affirms that He alone is worthy of worship (cf. [Deuteronomy 6:4-5](#)). It

shapes everyday ethics by grounding concepts such as the value of life, the moral order of creation, and our stewardship over the earth.

Moreover, believing that God freely creates reminds believers of the reliability of His promises. Just as God brought matter into being by His word, He continues to sustain and uphold creation. This sovereign power extends any hope for redemption, reconciliation, and a future new creation.

Conclusion

Creation ex nihilo stands at the heart of Christian doctrine, underscoring a God who is completely self-sufficient and omnipotent, bringing forth all things from nothing. Biblical passages-verified through centuries of manuscript evidence-consistently present and affirm this teaching. Philosophical arguments and certain scientific observations can be viewed as harmonious with the biblical stance, pointing to a singular starting point under the direction of an intelligent, purposeful Creator.

All creation, therefore, is rightly understood as the handiwork of a loving God, calling humankind to reverent worship, humble dependence, and purposeful living under the care and sovereignty of the One who formed all things ex nihilo.

HEBREWS 11:3

Hebrews 11:3: Faith's link to understanding?

What does Hebrews 11:3 imply about the relationship between faith and understanding?

Canonical Text

“By faith we understand that the universe was formed by God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” — [Hebrews 11:3](#)

Immediate Literary Context

[Hebrews 11](#) catalogues individuals whose “faith” produced demonstrable obedience. Verse 3 launches the list by anchoring every subsequent example in one universal fact: God created everything from nothing. The writer deliberately places “By faith we understand” before any historical illustration, asserting that cognition itself begins with trust in God’s revealed word.

Faith and Epistemology in Scripture

1. [Proverbs 1:7](#): “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”
2. [Psalm 36:9](#): “In Your light we see light.”
3. [John 17:17](#): “Your word is truth.”

Biblically, knowledge is derivative; God’s self-disclosure grounds every other fact. [Hebrews 11:3](#) affirms that faith is not opposed to understanding but is the prerequisite for it.

Faith, Reason, and the Created Order

[Romans 1:20](#) states that God's attributes "have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made." The verse in Hebrews completes the circle: faith receives God's spoken revelation, which then illuminates the evidence in nature. Thus empirical investigation has meaning because divine speech precedes it.

Creation ex nihilo and Intelligent Design

The clause "formed by God's command" corresponds to [Genesis 1](#)'s tenfold "And God said." Linguistic causation (God speaks, matter responds) coheres with information-rich systems discovered in DNA. Molecular biologist Hubert Yockey calculated that the probability of a functional 100-amino-acid protein forming by chance is $< 10^{-65}$. Faith recognizes the voice behind the code; understanding follows.

Consistency with a Young-Earth Framework

[Hebrews 11:3](#) presumes an instantaneous, authoritative act, harmonizing with [Exodus 20:11](#) ("in six days") and Christ's own affirmation in [Mark 10:6](#) that humanity was present "from the beginning of creation." Radiocarbon in diamonds (e.g., RATE project, 2005) yielding ^{14}C ages of 55,000 years maximum, supports a recent creation of the deep earth rather than billions of years.

Philosophical Clarification: Faith Precedes, Not Replaces, Reason

[Hebrews 11:3](#) does not advocate fideism. Rather, it illuminates that the ultimate axioms of any worldview are accepted by faith (materialism accepts an eternal cosmos without empirical proof). Christian faith, however, is anchored in historical resurrection ([1 Corinthians 15:14](#)) confirmed by multiple early, enemy-attested sources ([1 Corinthians 15:3-8](#); Josephus, Antiquities 18.3.3). Thus Christian presuppositions are evidentially buttressed.

Practical Implications for Believers

- Scientific inquiry: Pursue investigation confident that all truth is God's truth.
- Worship: Recognize creation's dependence on divine speech, prompting humility.
- Evangelism: Show skeptics that their reliance on logic, uniformity, and moral value presupposes a Creator who endowed such order.

Common Objections Answered

1. "Faith is belief without evidence."

[Hebrews 11](#) provides historical evidence of fulfilled promises; the resurrection supplies empirical grounding.

2. "Science eliminates the need for God."

Science describes processes; [Hebrews 11:3](#) addresses ultimate origins, which remain metaphysical.

3. "Quantum fluctuations can spawn universes."

Fluctuations require a pre-existing quantum field; Hebrews teaches creation of both matter and foundational fields.

Pastoral Application

When doubt arises, rehearse God's creative word ([Genesis 1](#); [Psalm 33:6-9](#)) and Christ's upholding of all things ([Hebrews 1:3](#)). Let faith inform perception, turning abstract theology into lived confidence.

Conclusion

[Hebrews 11:3](#) teaches that faith is the God-ordained channel to true understanding. It is not an epistemic leap in the dark but a rational trust in the self-revealing Creator whose spoken word brings both the cosmos and human comprehension into existence.

Hebrews 11:3

Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers

(3) Through faith.--Rather, By faith, as in the following verses. The first place is not given to "the elders," for the writer's object is to set forth the achievements of faith. With these, he would say, the Scripture record is filled. Even where there is no mention of this principle we must trace it in the lives of God's servants; even where there is no history of men, there is a necessity for the exercise of faith by ourselves, and the first words of Scripture teach this lesson.

That the worlds were framed.--Literally, that the ages have been prepared. The remarkable expression which was used in [Hebrews 1:2](#) is here repeated. The complete preparation of all that the successive periods of time contain is the idea which the words present. The narrative of the first chapter of Genesis ascribes the whole creation of "the heaven and the earth" to God; and associates with "a word of God" every stage in the preparation and furnishing of the earth. (See Note on [Hebrews 1:2](#).) This is the first lesson of that record. But it does not stand alone, as is taught more plainly still by the next clause.

So that things which are seen.--A slight alteration in the Greek is necessary here--"the thing seen" (or "what is seen") being the true reading. A more important point is a change in the aspect of the whole clause, which the Greek seems to require. As the English words stand, they point out the significance of the statement of Scripture respecting the creative act: we believe the writer intended rather to state the divine purpose in relation to that first creation and all subsequent acts that are included in the "preparing of the ages." "In order that what is seen should not have come into being out of things which appear." This is probably the true meaning of the clause. In the narrative of the first chapter of Genesis God would have us learn a lesson for the whole course of human history and development. As the visible universe did not take its being out of what was apparent, so what from time to time is seen does not arise of itself out of what is manifest to man's natural perceptions. Not only is the eternity of matter denied, but from the beginning a warning has been given against a materialistic philosophy. The first page of Scripture is designed to teach the constant presence and work of the Creator. This lesson we learn and

apply by faith; and the result of its application is seen in many points of the history which follows. In that history the operation of faith is twofold. The writer's most obvious design is to call attention to the faith possessed by "the elders," and its wonderful triumphs; but it is in many cases by the same faith that we interpret the Scripture record so as to discover this to have been their guiding principle. But seldom does the Old Testament directly speak of faith, and hence the importance of this verse (which some have thought incongruous, since it retards the exhibition of the elders' faith) as throwing light on our interpretation of the teaching of God's word.

[Pulpit Commentary](#)

Verse 3. - By faith we perceive that the worlds have been framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen (or, that which is seen) have (or, has) not been made of things which do appear. "By the word of God" has reference to "and God said," of [Genesis 1](#), which chapter enunciates the primary article of all definite religions faith, viz. the existence and operation of God, as the unseen Author of the visible universe. Even without a revelation to declare this, faith's office is to apprehend it from observation of the phenomena themselves; as is intimated in [Romans 1:20](#), where even to the Greek "the invisible things of God from the creation of the world" are said to be "clearly seen, being understood [$\nu\omicron\omicron\upsilon\mu\epsilon\nu\alpha$: cf $\nu\omicron\omicron\upsilon\mu\epsilon\nu$ in the passage before us] by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead." The drift of both passages is the same, viz. this, and no more - that faith recognizes an unseen power and Godhead behind, and accounting for, the seen universe. Commentators, who - taking $\mu\grave{\eta}\ \acute{\epsilon}\kappa\ \phi\alpha\iota\nu\omicron\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omega\nu$ as equivalent to $\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\ \mu\grave{\eta}\ \phi\alpha\iota\nu\omicron\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omega\nu$, and hence seeking to explain what is meant by "non-apparent things" - perceive here a reference either to the formless void ([Genesis 1:2](#)) out of which the present creation was evolved, or to the Platonic conception of eternal ideas in the Divine mind, read into the text what is not there.

[Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary](#)

11:1-3 Faith always has been the mark of God's servants, from the beginning of the world. Where the principle is planted by the regenerating Spirit of God, it will cause the truth to be received, concerning justification by the sufferings and merits of Christ. And the same things that are the object of our hope, are the object of our faith. It is a firm persuasion and expectation, that God will perform

all he has promised to us in Christ. This persuasion gives the soul to enjoy those things now; it gives them a subsistence or reality in the soul, by the first-fruits and foretastes of them. Faith proves to the mind, the reality of things that cannot be seen by the bodily eye. It is a full approval of all God has revealed, as holy, just, and good. This view of faith is explained by many examples of persons in former times, who obtained a good report, or an honourable character in the word of God. Faith was the principle of their holy obedience, remarkable services, and patient sufferings. The Bible gives the most true and exact account of the origin of all things, and we are to believe it, and not to wrest the Scripture account of the creation, because it does not suit with the differing fancies of men. All that we see of the works of creation, were brought into being by the command of God.

[Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible](#)

Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God,... The celestial world, with its inhabitants, the angels; the starry and ethereal worlds, with all that is in them, the sun, moon, stars, and fowls of the air; the terrestrial world, with all upon it, men, beasts, &c. and the watery world, the sea, and all that is therein: perhaps some respect may be had to the distinction of worlds among the Jews; See Gill on [Hebrews 1:2](#), though the apostle can scarce be thought to have any regard to their extravagant notions of vast numbers of worlds being created: they often speak of three hundred and ten worlds, in all which, they say, there are heavens, earth, stars, planets, &c. (f); and sometimes of eighteen thousand (g); but these notions are rightly charged by Philo (h) with ignorance and folly. However, as many worlds as there are, they are made "by the Word of God"; by Christ, the essential Word of God, to whom the creation of all things is ascribed in [John 1:1](#). And this agrees with the sentiments of the Jews, who ascribe the creation of all things to the Word of God, as do the Targumists (i), and Philo the Jew (k). And these are "framed" by the Word, in a very beautiful and convenient order; the heavens before the earth; things less perfect, before those that were more so in the visible world, or terraqueous globe; and things for men, before men, for whom they were; and it is by divine revelation and faith that men form right notions of the creation, and of the author of it, and particularly of the origin of it, as follows:

so that things which are seen: as the heaven, earth, and sea, and in which the invisible things of God, the perfections of his nature, are discerned:

were not made of things which do appear; they were not made from pre-existent matter, but out of nothing, out of which the rude and undigested chaos was formed; and from that invisible mass, covered with darkness, were all visible things brought into a beautiful order; and all from secret and hidden ideas in the divine minds; and this also is the faith of the Jews, that the creation of all things is "out of nothing" (l). There seems to be an allusion to the word used for creation, which signifies to make appear a thing unseen; and is rendered in the Septuagint version by [Numbers 16:30](#) and [Isaiah 40:26](#) to show, or make appear; and thus God created, or made to appear, the heavens and earth, which before were not in being, and unseen, [Genesis 1:1](#) and created to make, as in [Genesis 2:3](#) that is, made them to appear, that he might put them into the form and order they now are.

(f) Misn. Oketzim, c. 3. sect. 12. Targum Jon. in [Exodus 28.30](#). Kettoreth Hassamim in Targum Jon. in Gen. fol. 4. 4. Lex. Cabel. p. 60, 61. (g) T. Bab. Avoda Zara, fol. 3. 2. Yalkut, par. 2. fol. 50. 4. (h) De Opificio, p. 39. (i) Targum Oak. in [Deuteronomy 33.27](#). & Ben Uzziel in [Isaiah 48.13](#). (k) De Opificio, p. 4. & Leg. Alleg. l. 1. p. 44. (l) Tzeror Hammor, fol. 1. 1. Kettoreth Hassamim in Targ. Jon in Gen. fol. 5. 1, 2.

Genesis 1:1-2 — Not a Creation ex nihilo!

Despite strong traditional and often authoritative interpretative claims that were formed centuries after this ancient text was written and devoid of knowledge about its historical and literary context, the opening of Genesis 1 does not depict a *creatio ex nihilo*, that is a creation out of nothing. The Hebrew text is clear on this point and recognized by all biblical scholars. Rather, what the text of Genesis 1:2 informs us is that when God began to create, earth in some manner of speaking already existed as a desolate, formless, empty waste—*tohû wabohû* in Hebrew, literally “desolation and waste”—in the midst of a dark surging watery abyss (*tehôm*). This is the initial primordial state of creation that the creator deity inherits so to speak, and it is a prominent cultural feature in other ancient Near Eastern creation myths, from Egypt to Mesopotamia.

Both creation accounts in the book of Genesis not only belong to the larger historical world of the ancient Near East that produced them, but they are also part and parcel to a specific literary genre that was widely disseminated throughout this ancient landscape. In other words, the creation accounts of Genesis 1:1-2:3 and 2:4b-3:24 display the influences of older Near Eastern literary traditions, beliefs, and perspectives about the origins of the sky, earth, and mankind. This knowledge was revealed to us in part through the archaeological discoveries of the late 19th century.

In the latter half of the 19th century, archaeologists digging around the ancient site of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire found the literary remains of Ashurbanipal’s library. The Assyrian king, who reigned from 669 to 627 BCE, was somewhat of an antiquarian; he had his scribes collect and copy all existing texts that could be found. The tablets discovered at Nineveh in the later half of the 19th century were the remains of Ashurbanipal’s library and contained copies of much earlier Babylonian texts, going as far back as 2000 BCE! What startled linguists working on these cuneiform tablets in the 1870s was the mention of a great flood, a creation, and other similar themes and stories that were present in the narratives of Genesis 1-11. For the first time, scholars and theologians alike realized that stories such as the flood, creation, an original mythic paradise with a primordial pair and a tree of life were not

unique to the Bible, but were in fact part and parcel to a larger literary and cultural matrix, from which the biblical authors freely drew.¹

Up until this discovery, in other words, it was commonplace among theologians to regard the creation account(s) of Genesis as unique, divinely inspired, and in more fundamentalist circles even historical. With the discovery of other creation myths, however, informed readers were now able to see that the creation accounts in the book of Genesis belonged to a larger literary matrix, whose ideas and perspectives about the nature of the world and its origins were shared throughout the ancient Mediterranean world.

The old Babylonian creation account, the *Enuma Elish*, for example, which predates the Genesis accounts by at least a millennium, exhibits many parallels, both structurally and thematically, with the younger creation account of Genesis 1:1-2:3. Even noting its highly mythological content and polytheistic nature, the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* narrates the creation of the sky, earth, and mankind in similar terms to those of Genesis 1:1-2:3 and in the same order. For example, in the older Babylonian creation account the creator deity initially subdues and conquers an original state of watery chaos personified as the goddess Tiamat, and then proceeds to divide her in two, that is separate the primordial waters into the waters above and the waters below. These waters are then kept apart by the creation of a firmament or the sky, effectively separating the waters above from the waters below. Next, the abode of the gods are attributed to the heavens together with the creation of the luminaries, stars, sun, and moon, to divide the years into months and days—indeed to create our 7-day week! The creation of the earth, that is dry habitable land, from the waters below then occurs, and finally mankind is created. Lastly, like the ending of Genesis 1:1-2:3, the *Enuma Elish* also ends by assigning rest for the god(s), and both speak of a divine counsel of some sort (Gen 1:26).

Biblical scholars now realize that this older mythic narrative must have served as a template for the author of Genesis 1:1-2:3, the [Priestly writer](#). In other words, Genesis 1:1-2:3 was not a free composition of its author. This author obviously had literary precursors, one of which was the old Babylonian creation account the *Enuma Elish*, which the Israelites would have come into direct contact with during their captivity in Babylon in the 6th century BCE.

It needs to be stressed that it was less the direct influence of an older text that shaped the ideas and beliefs of the creation account in Genesis 1:1-2:3, and more so the worldview and beliefs of a shared cultural heritage that extended throughout the larger Mediterranean basin. In other words, the similarities between the *Enuma Elish* and Genesis 1:1-2:3 represent shared cultural perspectives and beliefs about the nature of the world and its origins. The Israelite scribes inherited these cultural perspectives and beliefs, adopted them, and freely modified them to suit their own purposes and monotheistic religious convictions. Many of the ideas and beliefs about the origins of the world expressed above in the *Enuma Elish*, and, as we shall see, similarly in the creation account of Genesis 1:1-2:3, were also present in other creation myths from the ancient Near East. Nearly every surviving creation account from Egypt, for example, presents an original preexisting state of darkness, watery chaos, and a yet unformed landmass prior to creation. This is especially so in the case of the Egyptian cosmogony from Hermopolis, whose primordial state prior to creation is near identical to that presented in Genesis 1:2. Personified as preexisting gods, this particular cosmogony speaks of a primeval darkness, a primordial formless earth mass or hill, and the primordial surging waters, through whose separation the earth and heavens were formed and named.

Thus, one of the ideas that the author of Genesis 1:1-2:3 inherited from his larger cultural and literary world about the nature of his world and its origin was that the creation of the earth and the skies, of ordered life in general, was the result of separating light from primordial darkness (1:4), of separating a primordial surging water mass (*tehôm*) into the waters above and the waters below (1:6-7) to form a space in its midst (1:6), wherein the heavens were named (1:8) and the luminaries by which the cosmos progressed in an orderly fashion were created (1:14), and finally by forming habitable land from a primordial formless and empty (*tohû wabohû*) earth mass and separating it out from the waters below and naming it “earth” (1:9).

In general terms, then, the authors and cultures of these ancient Near Eastern creation myths, Genesis 1:1-2:3 included, did not conceive of creation as an act of creating matter, but an act of creating order, form, purpose, a habitable land with tamed and separated waters out of an initial primeval state of surging untamed waters, darkness, and a yet to be named and formed life-supporting earth. Whether speaking of the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, Egyptian cosmogonies, or Genesis 1:1-2:3, the emphasis is placed on presenting the

creation of an habitable ordered world from an initial state of formlessness, darkness, and untamed waters, through the creator deity's act of separating the initial primordial matter, assigning functions or setting boundaries to the separated elements, and naming or calling into existence each component of the world, as it was perceived by the peoples and cultures of the ancient Near East. The idea of the creation of matter out of nothing was simply not a perspective adopted by the cultures of the ancient Near East, the Israelites included. The closest thing we have to the idea of creation out of nothing are a couple of Egyptian creation myths that pose a single creator deity as the origin of life, and from whose body, sky, earth, water, etc. emerge. In other words, the idea that the world commenced through the creation of matter from nothing simply did not exist. Moreover, such an idea would not only have been inconceivable to the peoples and cultures of this ancient landscape, but inferior to the views they did hold about the creation of the habitable world.

That is to say, our ancient Near Eastern forerunners, the biblical scribes included, deemed that the creation of an orderly world, of a habitable land with tamed and separated waters and a heaven that provided light, order, and signs for the measurement of days, months, years, and even holy festivals from an initial state of darkness, untamed waters, and unformed earth was a more powerful statement to make about the creator deity and the habitable, ordered world in which they lived. More significantly, the act of creating order from disorder, light from darkness, form from formlessness answered the specific concerns ancient peoples of the Near East had living in, as they perceived it, a hostile world with forces that regularly needed to be controlled. So presenting a creator deity who could, and did in fact, tame the forces of nature, subdue darkness, control the seas, create life from bareness, form from formlessness—in short, an habitable life-bearing land from an earth that was or had become desolate, was a direct result of how the ancients perceived the world they lived in and the forces that acted upon it. This was the message behind such creation stories. The creator deity had full control over the destructive forces that continually threatened life, order, and the goodness of the earth. Most significantly, as we will see below, the ability of Yahweh to subdue chaos, form light from darkness, create a fertile and habitable earth from formless inhabitable desolate land also had a very significant and immediate meaning to the historical audience for which Genesis 1:1-2:3 was composed.

But besides these cultural beliefs, worldview, and the literary heritage that the author of Genesis 1:1-2:3 inherited, there are sound textual data that support the idea that our biblical scribe did not compose a creation account depicting the creator deity creating the earth and the skies out of nothing. For the text itself clearly makes the opposite claim.

First, as many modern Hebraists have noted, Genesis 1:1 opens with a temporal clause. The precise meaning of its first word, *bereshit*, is literally “in the beginning of.” This is a complex grammatical topic, but simplified, the way in which the first word has come to be vocalized, indeed the first letter, *bet*, implies that grammatically the word is in the construct state, that is a noun which is followed by another noun. A literal translation is “in the beginning of.” And this is exactly what we find as the proper understanding of *bereshit* when this same word appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. So, for example, the Hebrew of Jeremiah 27:1, *bereshit mameleket yihoyaqim*, is properly rendered: “In the beginning of the kingdom of Jehoiakim.” But the grammatical problem in Genesis 1:1 is that *bereshit* is not followed by a noun but rather a verb-subject pair: *bereshit bara' elohim*. Thus a literal rendering of the first three words of Genesis 1:1 is impossible: “In the beginning of God created.” Thus many modern translations have sought to capture the temporal aspect in the opening word of the book of Genesis by rendering the Hebrew: “In the beginning of God’s creating...” or “In the beginning when God created...” or even “When God began to create...”

The idea that creation narratives commenced with a temporal clause that indicated when the creator deity began his creative act is also attested in other ancient Near Eastern creation myths. The *Enuma Elish* opens with a temporal clause which doubles as the text’s title: “When on high the heavens had not been named, nor earth below pronounced by name...” As does the beginning of Genesis 2:4b: “In the day when god Yahweh made earth and skies...”

Another interesting parallel between the *Enuma Elish*’s opening statement and that of Genesis 1:1 is the reference to an earth that has not yet been named, that is not yet been created. How do you name the primordial material of an earth that has not yet been created? Although using the word “earth,” the *Enuma Elish* responds by referencing the primordial matter that will become earth: “when earth was not yet named.” Genesis 1:1 employs the same idea in its preliminary reference to earth as *tohu wabohu*, without form and void. What

is implied might be rendered: “In the beginning when God created the earth and the skies, *that which would become* earth existed without form and was void.” And indeed this reading is supported by the text itself, when in verses 9-10 dry habitable land is created and named “earth” for the first time! What existed prior to earth’s being separated out from the primeval untamed waters, called into existence, and named in verse 10 is apparently a formless, nameless mass of desolate “earth” for lack of a better word. This is the proper message conveyed in Genesis 1:2, and once again it depicts the creator deity in his most powerful and omnipotent role—creating form, life-bearing earth with tamed and separated seas by subduing, separating, and setting life-supporting boundaries to an initial and primordial formless chaotic mass of desolate “earth” and water. This is how the ancient Israelites perceived their world and its origins, not out of nothing—a statement that would have been vacuous to them—but rather through the subduing of the forces of the seas, of destruction, of chaos, etc. And like the *Enuma Elish*, Genesis 1:1 must also be seen as a temporal clause doubling as the text’s title: “In the beginning when God created the skies and the earth, and the [yet to be created and named] earth was formless and desolate...”

Thus not only is the idea of preexistent matter part and parcel to the mind set and worldview of the ancient Near East, but the syntax and grammar of Genesis’ opening sentence, like other creation myths of the ancient Near East, strongly support the fact that the Israelites too depicted the creator deity in a role of subduing, separating, and creating the very components of the world from a preexistent state of formless, desolate matter.

Second, the precise meaning of the verb *bara’* also highlights the creative act as one of separating. There are several verbs used in the two creation accounts of Genesis: roughly, *bara’* “to create,” *asah*, “to make,” and *yatsar* “to form.” The verb *bara’* connotes the act of creating by means of separating out, or distinguishing. The skies and the earth, in other words, only come into existence by separating them out from the preexistent primordial matter, by setting their boundaries, and by naming them. Thus, it is not until [verse 9](#) that the earth, that is dry land—“earth” never refers to the planet, but to the land—is only created at the moment when it is separated out and distinguished from the waters below, and named: “And God called the land “earth” (1:10). Likewise, the skies (*shamayim*), that is the waters above, only come into existence through an act of separating, subduing, and partitioning them off

from the waters below, both of which were originally part of the primordial deep (*tehôm*). What is therefore implied in Genesis' opening statement is that the skies and the earth came into existence through a creative act of separating them—exactly how many Egyptian cosmogonies also begin.

Third and most significantly is the fact that the text itself explicitly asserts that neither the skies nor the earth were created *ex nihilo*! For the text, and more so the message of its author, clearly depicts the creation of the earth from a formless, desolate, and void (*tohû wabohû*) and the skies from an original watery chaos (*tehôm*). In other words, both the creation of the skies (*shamayim*) in [verses 6-8](#) and the creation of the earth (*eretz*) in [verses 9-10](#) do not occur from nothing!

Per our text, earth proper is “dry land,” the material substance earth, that does not get created until verses 9-10, when the creator deity himself calls it into existence through an act of separating, defining, and naming it. And it is not created out of nothing. For again, per our text, this earth which only comes into existence in verses 9-10 was created from an initial formless, undefined, desolate, and unnamed “earth” that was originally submerged in the surging deep (1:2). Why this author explicitly presents the creation of earth from this initial state of *tohû wabohû* is addressed below. In any case, the text is quite clear: earth was not created *ex nihilo*!

Much of the confusion, or plain inaccuracy, behind modern claims of the earth's creation out of nothing not only arise from a misunderstanding of Genesis 1:2 and a lack of knowledge about its author's culturally conditioned beliefs and worldview, but also in thinking that the Hebrew word for earth, *eretz*, means the planet Earth. The text and its cultural context nowhere support this modern assumption. Rather, what is created is dry life-bearing land, the earth below one's feet, formed from desolate, undefined, primordial yet to be named “earth.” So to be honest about our ancient text and the message of its author, there is no creation of the planet earth imagined here!

Likewise, neither the text nor its author presents the creation of the skies out of nothing. For what is to become the skies or the heavens (*shamayim*) is the expanse, the *raqî'a*, which God creates in order to separate the initial primordial teeming waters into the waters above and the waters below. I suppose one could argue that the text does present the creator deity making

this *raqî'a* out of nothing (1:7), but not in the sense that there was nothing preexistent prior to its creation. For again the text clearly states that this *raqî'a*, which was conceptualized by the ancient Israelites as a solid transparent barrier holding back the waters above, was created as a tool for the deity to separate and keep separate these initial primordial untamed waters, half of which are now above this barrier. It is this barrier or *raqî'a* that gets named “the skies,” and its primary function was to keep back these waters above.

Finally, a grave theological problem is unavoidably created when one wrongly imposes later theological claims of *creatio ex nihilo* onto the text of Genesis 1:1-10—a text, as we have seen, which clearly and explicitly states otherwise. Since the creation of earth in verses 9-10 happens through the shaping and naming of an initial formless preexisting “earth” and the creation of the skies in verses 6-8 happens as a direct result of subduing and dividing the primordial untamed waters, then in imposing an erroneous and later theological assertion of *creatio ex nihilo* one is forced to conclude, since the text *does not* present the creation of *shamayim* out of nothing nor the creation of *eretz* out of nothing, that the creator deity was unable to do it! This is absurd; yet unavoidable if we follow this line of erroneous thinking to its end. For, if it was the deity’s original intention to create the skies and the earth out of nothing—or let’s put this more accurately—if it was the original intention of the biblical scribe to present his god creating the skies and the earth out of nothing, then why did he not do this? In other words, in imposing an erroneous theological assertion of creation from nothing onto this ancient text what you end up with as the creator deity’s supposed first act of creating matter out of nothing is the creation of a formless, meaningless, lifeless, and desolate “earth” covered by a surging watery abyss surrounded in bleak darkness—all of which then needed to be re-created! According to this reading, the creator deity could not do what he intended to do on his first go. This translates to presenting a creator deity that textually didn’t, and theologically couldn’t, create the earth and the skies *ex nihilo*! An absurd conclusion drawn by imposing erroneous modern-day assertions onto an ancient text whose real message is ignored, neglected, and interpreted away.

Last but certainly not least, as mentioned earlier, the composition of a creation account displaying a deity that could force a formless and desolate state (*tohû wabohû*) into habitable life-bearing land had a direct significance for the audience of Genesis 1:1-2:3. It’s time we took a look at this.

Before God commences the act of creating the habitable world, the author of Genesis 1:1-2:3 informs us that the earth, or what was to become the earth, existed in a state of formlessness and desolation—a *tohû wabohû* in Hebrew. This image was not only shaped by the ideas and beliefs shared throughout the ancient Mediterranean landscape, but it was equally influenced by the specific historical circumstance of the author and his audience—at least how they perceived it. The rare Hebrew expression *tohû wabohû* or *tohû* alone and the image it invoked were unique to the literature of the 6th century BCE. That is we find the same image in other texts from the 6th century BCE and specifically to depict the historical crisis so often referred to in these texts. Paying attention to these textual details allows us to see more clearly what the author of Genesis 1:1-2:3 hoped to convey through his creation account, and more importantly to whom!

So, foreseeing the imminent doom of Judah by the Babylonians in the earlier 6th century BCE and the coming desolation of the land and the turning of fruitful fields into wildernesses, Jeremiah professes:

I looked on the earth and behold, it was formless and desolate (*tohû wabohû*), and to the heavens, and they had no light (Jer 4:23).

The image conveyed here is remarkably similar, if not exact, to that of Genesis 1:2: the earth is in a condition of formlessness and desolation—the exact same condition as depicted in Genesis, *tohû wabohû*—and darkness prevails. Is this a vision of the primordial state of creation as depicted in Genesis 1:2? Not quite. But the prophet does borrow the image to depict the harsh realities and outcome of the Babylonian destruction of the land of Judah and its people in 587 BCE. In other words, the language and image that Jeremiah and other exilic writers of the 6th century used to portray the utter annihilation of the land of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians, who decimated its land, burnt Jerusalem and Yahweh's temple down to the ground, and left the land barren and covered in ashes, was the same language and image used to describe the preexistent state of creation—*tohû wabohû*.²

In fact, references to Judah specifically, and the earth in general, as a *tohû wabohû*, a wasteland, a barren, sterile, and desolate wilderness, were typical exilic and post-exilic descriptions of the aftermath of the Babylonian destruction as they laid siege to the land and utterly destroyed and burnt

everything they encountered, from cities to fields. Thus in another text from the prophetic tradition of the late 6th century BCE, the author of deuterо-Isaiah, attempting to console the exilic community and/or the returnees, has Yahweh utter these words:

For thus saith Yahweh, he who created (bara') the heavens, the very god who formed (yatsar) the earth and made ('asah) it, who himself established it—"He did not create (bara') it a desolation (tohû), but formed (yatsar) it to be habitable" (Is 45:18).

The allusion to (re)creation is more apparent here than in Jeremiah's text. At core it is a message of hope to the exilic community that Yahweh will turn Judah from a *tohû wabohû*—i.e., the wasteland left after the Babylonian destruction—back into habitable life-bearing earth.

The point I'm trying to make is that this specific vocabulary and imagery is unique to the exilic literature of the 6th century BCE and reflects these authors' reality, or at least how they perceived their reality—as a desolation, a wasteland. Thus similar to these passages in Jeremiah and deuterо-Isaiah, the author of Genesis 1:1-2:3 is also expressing the same idea in his creation account, and to the same audience and for the same purpose! In this case, the *tohû wabohû* of Genesis 1:2 serves two purposes: on the cosmic level it describes the primordial desolate and formless "earth" which the creator deity eventually forms into a habitable life-bearing land; and on the historic plane it describes the state of desolation and waste wrought by the Babylonian aftermath of 587 BCE. If this is so, then the Priestly creation account, like the Isaiah passage above, is a message of hope to the exilic community. It is an expression of the very hopes and reality of an exilic community and how this community perceived its own condition. It is an affirmative message: that as God had created an habitable earth from a preexistent formless waste (*tohû wabohû*), so too he can, and will, reestablish the land of Judah as habitable from its current condition of desolation and barrenness: "He did not create it a desolation (*tohû*), but formed it to be habitable." The message and image reaffirms to this exilic community, the goodness and holiness in the created order of the world despite their current plight living in *tohu*! This is why creation from nothing meant nothing. What the Israelites sought to portray was a deity powerful enough to make, to convert, a desolate, formless, barren wasteland into a fertile, habitable, ordered, and blessed land. Both Genesis 1:1-10 and

these passages from the prophetic tradition accomplishes this, and I might add marvelously well.

My central goal here was not to argue that Genesis 1:1-2 does not portray a creation out of nothing, which is certainly the case, but rather to demonstrate that the biblical scribe's presentation of the origins of creation from a primordial watery chaos with unformed, desolate earth was shaped by the ideas and beliefs shared throughout the ancient world, and that the description of creation in Genesis is a subjective and biased account drawn from the perspectives, beliefs, and ideas about the world shared throughout the ancient Mediterranean world.

Thus modern readers who are ignorant of the literary and historical contexts of these ancient texts, a literary context that the biblical scribes themselves were well aware of and consciously drew from, but nonetheless feel qualified to pontificate on the meaning of these ancient documents are just being dishonest and disingenuous to these texts and the beliefs and views of their authors. Not only that, but this type of practice—pontificating meaning on an ancient text while willfully being ignorant of the cultural and literary contexts, beliefs, and worldviews advocated in the texts themselves—has the adverse effect of merely fueling more ignorance, and in turn generating staunch hypocritical views, since one now believes, out of ignorance, something about the text which the text in fact does not claim! Our goal is to be honest to the texts themselves on their own terms and to the beliefs of their authors—not ours.

[← GENESIS 1:1-2:3: An Overview](#)