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IS *CREATIO EX NIHILO* A POST-BIBLICAL INVENTION? AN EXAMINATION OF GERHARD MAY'S PROPOSAL

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"Let this, then, be maintained in the first place, that the world is not eternal, but was created by God."
—John Calvin, *Genesis*

I. INTRODUCTION

The noted philosopher of science Ian Barbour has boldly declared, "*Creation 'out of nothing' is not a biblical concept.*"[1] Rather, so he claims, the doctrine was merely a post-biblical development to defend God's goodness and absolute sovereignty over the world against "Gnostic ideas regarding matter as evil or as the product of an inferior deity."[2] Furthermore, in Barbour's view, the Bible is not simply ambiguous about the nature of God's relationship to creation but actually asserts that God created from pre-existent materials:

> Genesis portrays the creation of order from chaos, and . . . the *ex nihilo* doctrine was formulated later by the church fathers to defend theism against an ultimate dualism or a monistic pantheism. We

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[1]I. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (reprint; New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 384. Philosopher of Science E. McMullin states that the doctrine of creation out of nothing, "an act of absolute bringing to be," took "firm shape only in the first centuries of the Christian era, in part at least in response to the prevalent dualisms of the day that represented matter as evil, or at least, as resistant to God's action" ("Natural Science and Belief in a Creator," in *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology* [ed. R. Russell, W. Stoeger, and G. Coyne; Vatican City: Vatican Observatory, 1988] 56). McMullin is at least willing to concede that hints of *creatio ex nihilo* can be found in Scripture (pointing to 2 Macc 7:28 and Rom 1:20). Anglican priest and physicist J. Polkinghorne sees 2 Macc 7:28 as the "earliest unequivocal statement of the idea of creation out of nothing" although he believes Genesis 1 stresses at least "the dependence of all upon the sovereign will of God for its existence," which is "certainly consonant with the central significance of *creatio ex nihilo*" (*Reason and Reality* [Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991] 72).

[2]Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion*, 384.

> still need to defend theism against alternative philosophies, but we can do so without reference to an absolute beginning.[3]

Now if it can continue to be shown that the Big Bang is the most convincing scientific theory, Barbour states, "the theist can indeed see it as an instant of divine origination." However, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not theologically necessary: "this is not the main concern expressed in the religious notion of creation."[4]

Along similar lines, Arthur Peacocke in his 1978 Bampton Lectures asserted that "the Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation" only implies that the world owes its existence to God, which would not contradict science were it to discover that the cosmos is eternal.[5] So the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is of marginal theological significance for Peacocke as well. Instead, both he and Barbour emphasize preservation in God's creation of the universe rather than its temporal beginning.

Langdon Gilkey, whose *Maker of Heaven and Earth* has significantly influenced Barbour and Peacocke, loosely outlines what he believes the Christian doctrine of creation of out nothing is: (1) God is the source of all that there is; (2) creatures are dependent, yet real and good; (3) God creates in freedom and with purpose. But although the doctrine's essential element of the universe's dependence on God is clear, what Gilkey omits is any clear reference to the material world's absolute beginning.

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[3]I. Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science* (The Gifford Lectures 1989-1991, vol. 1; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) 144.

[4]Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science*, 129.

[5]A. Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science: The Bampton Lectures, 1978* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979) 78-79. Although God is transcendent, Peacocke strongly emphasizes the immanence of God and his continual creation (*creatio continua*) within the world—but at the expense of initial creation: "The postulate of God as Creator of all-that-is is not, in its most profound form, a statement about what happened at a particular point in time. To speak of God as Creator is to postulate about a perennial or 'eternal' . . . relation of God to the world" (*God and the New Biology* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986] 95).

Barbour, Peacocke, and L. Gilkey (in his *Maker of Heaven and Earth: The Christian Doctrine of Creation in Light of Modern Knowledge* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959]) have used the term "continuing creation" to refer to God's continuing activity and providence. T. Peters urges that the motive for switching the meaning of creation from ultimate temporal beginning (which is what Thomas Aquinas took *creatio* to mean although he did not think creation out of nothing could be known apart from revelation) to the process of change within the world is "to merge creation with preservation or providence," but this runs the risk of "a total elimination of any theological commitment to a temporal beginning" ("On Creating the Cosmos," in *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology*, 291. See also R. J. Russell's essay "Finite Creation Without a Beginning," in *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature* [ed. R. J. Russell, et al.; Vatican City: Vatican Observatory, 1993]). Polkinghorne calls for greater discrimination between the two types of creation rather than combining them—a view which "sits somewhat uneasily with the 'seventh day' of sabbath rest . . . with its implication of the completed work of creation" (*Reason and Reality*, 73); see also Polkinghorne's discussion in *The Faith of a Physicist* (Princeton: University Press, 1994) 73-76.

Is the traditional Christian belief in *creatio ex nihilo*, God's creation of the universe out of nothing, one that is *inherent* to biblical doctrine or one that is simply *compatible* with it? Is *creatio ex nihilo* nothing more than a defensive theological reaction to Gnosticism? Moreover, does the well-accepted Big Bang theory confirm the allegedly biblical doctrine of creation out of nothing? Is it solely up to science rather than Scripture to point us toward the nature of God's creation—whether it is finite or eternal?

These questions are explored afresh by Gerhard May, Professor of Theology at the Johannes Gutenberg Universität in Mainz, in his book *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of "Creation out of Nothing" in Early Christian Thought*.[6] May answers that Christian thinkers in the second century tried to reconcile their belief in a God who creates freely and unconditionally with Greek metaphysics, resulting in their formulation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (p. 2). Up to this point, there had been no explicit formulation of precisely how God created the world. May also claims that the doctrine of creation out of nothing is "not demanded by the text of the Bible" (p. 24). All that the NT asserts is that creation is *dependent upon* Christ and is *subordinate* to him (p. 29). The idea of the universe's ontological origination from God is not evident in Scripture, according to May.

May's book serves as a convenient entré into a new examination of creation *ex nihilo*. This is particularly important because May's book is both incorrect and potentially misleading. The book is incorrect in that it does not portray the biblical and relevant extra-biblical Jewish and Christian writings accurately or fairly. Also, May's book could mislead people into thinking, as Barbour does, that the doctrine of creation out of nothing is only a Christian theological innovation (as opposed to its being a biblical formulation).

II. WHAT CREATIO EX NIHILO *IS*

Before exploring these themes, we must first ask what is meant by *creatio ex nihilo*. May states that this doctrine proclaims "the absolutely unconditioned nature of the creation and specifies God's omnipotence as its sole ground" (p. xi). The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 formally declared:

> We firmly believe and simply confess that there is only one true God . . . . the Creator of all things visible and invisible, spiritual and corporeal; who from the very beginning of time by His omnipotent power created out of nothing [*de nihilo condidit*] both the spiritual beings and the corporeal.

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[6]G. May, *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of "Creation out of Nothing" in Early Christian Thought* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994); originally published as *Schöpfung aus dem Nichts* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1978). Since I interact fairly frequently with May, all paginated references to his book will be in the text rather than footnoted.

The Westminister Confession of Faith (1646) asserts that "It pleased God . . . in the beginning, to create or make of nothing the world, and all things therein" (IV.I). In contrast to process theology's affirmation of creation out of eternal chaos, the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* maintains God's creation out of absolute nothingness. God is not merely "with" all creation as its Preserver but is also "before" all creation as its Originator.[7]

In general, it seems that at least two things are implied by the doctrine of creation out of nothing: (1) all things are ontologically dependent upon God; and (2) the universe began and has not always existed.[8] This doctrine goes beyond the assertion that the universe either somehow "depends" upon or is subordinate to God or Christ, both of which options allow for the possibility of God's having shaped pre-existent matter as a mere artificer.

Hinting at these two ideas, Augustine argued that since God alone is Being, he willed to exist what formerly did not exist. So he is not a mere shaper of formless and eternal primordial matter: "You did not work as a human craftsman does, making one thing out of something else as his mind directs. . . . Your Word alone created [heaven and earth]."[9] Creation *ex nihilo* then refers to the ontological origination of the material world by divine decree.[10]

Translated into the contemporary physicist's terms, the spatio-temporal world was created by God's word at the Big Bang, the beginning event and initial cosmic singularity (which has been dubbed t=0 or t_0). Astronomers John Barrow and Joseph Silk state that science points to "the traditional metaphysical picture of creation out of nothing, for it predicts a definite beginning to events in time, indeed a definite beginning to time itself."[11] "Before" this initial singularity, space, time, matter, and motion did not exist. There was simply nothing (the simpler term for "infinite density").[12] It must be added that when we speak of nothing, we must not imagine "nothing" as empty space or "an area of non-existence alongside of or over against the existence of God which would thereby be reduced to an existence with limitations."[13] Nothingness

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[7]Polkinghorne, *Faith of a Physicist*, 74.

[8]Peters, "On Creating the Cosmos," 273-74. To avoid a deistic flavor of *creatio ex nihilo*, the doctrine of *creatio continua*, God's continued creative and sustaining power in the universe, must be added to give a fuller, biblical picture of God's creation. See Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* I.q.45, art. 2.

[9]Augustine, *Confessions* 11.5.7.

[10]Russell, "Finite Creation," 309.

[11]J. D. Barrow and J. Silk, *The Left Hand of Creation: The Origin and Evolution of the Expanding Universe* (rev. ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 38.

[12]For a discussion of the relationship of theism and the Big Bang theory, see W. L. Craig and Q. Smith, *Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

[13]P. E. Hughes, "The Doctrine of Creation in Hebrews 11:3," *BTB* 2 (1972) 76. Hughes asserts that "nothing" or "non-existent" entities must be qualified. Created things were made according to certain pre-existent forms or archetypes (in the mind of God)—although not shaped out of pre-existing matter (p. 76).

has not co-existed from eternity with God. "Before" the creation, God was all that there was—there was no empty space or a dark void or non-existence, and he himself is both "pure and eternal existence and the source of all other existence, which is derived from and dependent on his existence."[14]

III. AN EXPANSION OF MAY'S THESIS

May argues that the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* emerged in order to "express and safeguard the omnipotence and freedom of God acting in history" (p. 180). During the latter part of the second century, this doctrine emerged through controversy with two schools of thought: Gnosticism (with its emphasis on emanations) and Middle Platonism (with its belief in eternally pre-existent matter). Before this period, there was no real discussion about the doctrine of creation.

Gnostics generally had a negative view of the material world, and they believed that it came into being as the result of a disturbance of the original divine plan through the fall of some Aeon at the bottom of the emanation ladder. (In the case of the Valentinians, it was the Aeon Sophia.) Around the middle of the second century, the Christian Gnostic Basilides (who believed Jesus was a mere man on whom the heavenly light descended at his baptism) was the first to articulate that God created matter—in seed form (the "world-seed")—in a single act of creation. After this initial creation, however, God played no further role in creating. For Basilides, God was not merely a craftsman or artificer, as Middle Platonists believed. He was the originator of matter. Despite Basilides' un-gnostic characterization of God's direct creation of matter, his followers soon abandoned his main teachings. Yet the Christian Church soon thereafter came to formulate the doctrine of creation out of nothing *independently* of Basilides' influence (p. 180).

Tatian became the "first Christian theologian known to us who expressly advanced the proposition that matter was produced by God" (p. 150). Following on his heels, Theophilus of Antioch asserted it more forcefully: "God has created everything out of nothing into being." While Theophilus commended Plato's belief that God is uncreated, he disagreed with the notion that matter existed co-eternally with him, which would make matter equal to him: "But the power of God is manifested in this, that out of things that are not He makes whatever He pleases."[15] With Irenaeus, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was well established. He also argued that the world was not coeternal with God:

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[14]P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 443.

[15]Theophilus, *Autolycus* 2.4; cf. Peters, "On Creating the Cosmos," 278.

> But the things established are distinct from Him who has established them, and what [things] have been made from Him who has made them. For He is Himself uncreated, both without beginning and end, and lacking nothing. He is Himself sufficient for this very thing, existence; but the things which have been made by Him have received a beginning. . . . He indeed who made all things can alone, together with His Word, properly be termed God and Lord; but the things which have been made cannot have this term applied to them, neither should they justly assume that appellation which belongs to the Creator.[16]

Consequently, Christian apologists like John of Damascus came to distinguish between God's "creating" or "making" and his "generating" or "begetting." The former refers to producing something that is essentially or ontologically distinct from its creator while the latter refers to that which is derived from the essence of God.[17] Augustine himself simply declared that God "created heaven and earth out of nothing."[18]

In tracking the development of the doctrine of creation out of nothing, Middle Platonism, which ran from the latter half of the first century BC to the first half of the third century AD, significantly figures in our discussion. The central metaphysical theme of Plato, the doctrine of Ideas, came to be replaced by God. Even though God was the Ground of all Being, the eternity of matter was generally accepted. May argues that the Christian doctrine of creation was completed in its controversy with Middle Platonism,[19] when "God" had come to replace the "Ideas" or "the Good" of Plato's original writings. Plato's Demiurge, "the Maker and Father of All," in his *Timaeus* came to be equated with the supreme God (p. 4).[20]

Before examining some of May's contentions, we cannot overlook the fact that Christian theologians like Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria were greatly indebted to many aspects of Platonism. Church historian Jaroslav Pelikan remarks that, notwithstanding Clement of Alexandria's claim that Plato was "indebted to the Hebrews" for his ideas in the *Timaeus*, Clement himself was indebted to the *Timaeus*.[21]

Justin also, under Platonist influence, declared that Plato's belief in God's creating from pre-existing matter was "from no other

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[16]Irenaeus, *AH* 3.10.3; cf. 2.10.4.

[17]John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 1.7.

[18]Augustine, *Confessions* 12.7.

[19]This period extended from the second half of the first century BC until the first half of the third century AD. It included thinkers like Plutarch (AD 45-125), Albinus (second century AD), Apuleius (b. ca. 125), and Atticus (latter half of the second century).

[20]*Timaeus* 28C: ποιητὴς καὶ πατὴρ τοῦ πάντος.

[21]J. Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University Press, 1971) 35. See Clement's *Stromata* 5.14; 5.89.5-6, where he shows acceptance of the Middle-Platonic belief that God created using pre-existent matter.

source than from Moses."[22] He appealed to the unfortunate translation of the Septuagint in Gen 1:2, the earth had been "invisible and unfashioned" before God created the cosmos that we "perceive by the senses."[23] Also, Basil of Caesarea's *In Hexaemeron* (2.2) takes the Platonic view of creation, declaring God to be the "artificer" and that matter "came to the creator from without"; consequently, "the world results from a double origin [ἀρχή]."

Pelikan asserts that Plato's *Timaeus* in its vocabulary (e.g., the δημιουργός) and conceptual framework had an influence on Eastern theology (although in many fundamental respects it transcended the Platonic and Neoplatonic framework).[24] The Cappadocian fathers with regularity turned to Plato's *Timaeus* when explaining the creation.[25] Gregory of Nyssa asserted that the Classical notion of "two eternal and unbegotten existences, having their being concurrently with each other" represented "an intuition that was valid in Christian thought":[26] that the one God who was the Creator had always stood in a relationship to his creation, but did not need the world to know the meaning of authentic relationship because of the Trinity's interrelationship from eternity.[27] So although matter had existed co-eternally with God, matter was in some sense contingent and dependent upon God.[28]

The Jewish theologian, Philo of Alexandria, makes statements that at times reflect the belief that God's creating was actually a shaping of pre-existing matter: "Just as nothing comes into being out of that which has no existence, so nothing is destroyed into that which has no existence."[29] But even in the Philonic view of creation, some ambiguity exists since at times Philo expresses himself along the lines of *creatio ex nihilo*. For instance, he writes that "God, the begetter of all things, not only brought them into sight, but even made things which previously had no existence, being not merely an artificer but the Creator Himself."[30]

The Wisdom of Solomon, a book strongly influenced by hellenistic philosophy, reflects the Platonic notion that creation is

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[22]Justin, *Hortatory Address to the Greeks* 29. (See also his *Apology* 1.59.)

[23]Ibid., 30. However, alluding to Gen 1:2, Prov 8:24 clearly negates the idea of a pre-existent deep before God created ("when there were no oceans"). G. M. Landes, "Creation Tradition in Proverbs 8:22-31 and Genesis 1," in *A Light Unto My Path* (FS Jacob B. Meyers) (ed. H. Bream, et al.; Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974) 286.

[24]J. Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 96.

[25]Ibid., 95-96.

[26]Ibid., 235; cf. *De hominis opificio* 2.3.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Ibid., 257-58.

[29]*The Eternity of the World* 5.

[30]*On Dreams* 1.76. For a helpful discussion on Philo's view of creation, see R. Sorabji, *Time Creation and the Continuum* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983) 203-9. Sorabji concludes on the basis of Philo's *de Providentia* 1 and 2 that Philo implies that the universe—including its matter—had a beginning; he admits, however, that Philo in a few minor passages is not always consistent (p. 208).

"out of formless matter [*ex amorphou hyles*]" (11:17). This concept of "formless matter" is found in both Plato[31] and Aristotle.[32]

Despite the undeniably strong influence of Middle Platonism upon these thinkers, we must be cautious about attributing ambiguity to the biblical text about creation out of nothing simply because of the overlapping of certain concepts common to both Middle Platonism and Scripture. F. F. Bruce reminds us that "the idea of imposing form on pre-existent matter is Greek rather than Hebrew in origin."[33]

IV. EXTRA-BIBLICAL JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN CONFIRMATION OF CREATIO EX NIHILO

May asks "why the Jewish theology of antiquity did not bring its conception of creation to the unambiguous conceptual form of . . . *creatio ex nihilo*" (p. 23).[34] Why did it only arise later in the context of Christianity in the second century? May answers that the colliding of Platonism and Gnosticism with Christian beliefs gave rise to the doctrine of creation out of nothing. However, it must be remembered that Jewish thought was preoccupied with the God of the cosmos rather than with the cosmos itself;[35] with the *creatio* rather than the *ex nihilo*.[36] The OT viewed natural phenomena primarily as pointers to God, who created them and whose glory was revealed through them. For example, Psalm 104, which describes the awe-inspiring natural world, begins:

> O LORD my God, you are very great;
> you are clothed with splendor and majesty.

To these writers, God was the "King of the Universe."[37]

We can go further by asserting that the *Umwelt* of OT Judaism (and, by implication, that of early Christianity) furnished an appropriate context for belief in creation out of nothing. Such a belief would not have been foreign to the Hebrew (and early Christian) mentality. To give support to this claim, we will note a variety of relevant extra-biblical Jewish and Christian passages that attest to

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[31]*Timaeus* 50D (matter as "formless and free").

[32]*Physics* 191a,10 ("the formless before receiving form").

[33]F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 281n.

[34]Some ambiguity has existed among Jewish thinkers regarding the nature of creation. As late as the third century, Palestinian teacher Rabbi Johanan stated that God took two coils—one of fire and the other of snow—wove them together, and created the world (*Genesis Rabbah* 10:3). The Jewish thinker Gersonides (1288-1344) adopted the Platonic view of God's imposing form on eternally pre-existent matter—a minority view by this time. See L. Jacobs, "Jewish Cosmology," in *Ancient Cosmologies* (ed. C. Blacker and M. Loewe; London: Allen & Unwin, 1975) 72, 75-76.

[35]Jacobs, "Jewish Cosmology," 66.

[36]I am grateful to D. A. Carson for this point.

[37]Jacobs, "Jewish Cosmology," 67.

the fact that *creatio ex nihilo* was not alien to biblically-influenced thinking.

Many have suggested that the intertestamental book of 2 Maccabees states clearly the traditional doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo.* There a mother pleads with her son willingly to accept torture rather than recant his beliefs:

> I beg you, child, look at the sky and the earth; see all that is in them and realize that God made them out of nothing [ὅτι οὐκ ἐξ ὄντων ἐποίησεν αὐτὰ ὁ θεός], and that man comes into being in the same way. (7:28)

Although May thinks that this passage does not have the necessary doctrinal context for the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* (pp. 6, 16), others are not so convinced. For example, Gerhard von Rad maintains, "The conceptional formulation creatio ex nihilo is first found" in this passage.[38] Moreover, to say that there was no doctrinal context at all for such a statement does not seem quite right. After all, the Jewish understanding of creation was that "the world as a whole can only be understood in the context of its coming into being."[39] It is, then, not a far step from this assumption to creation out of nothing.[40]

We find another reference to creation out of nothing in the Dead Sea Scrolls (which May does not even mention):

> From the God of Knowledge comes all that is and shall be. Before ever they existed He established their whole design, and when, as ordained for them, they come into being, it is in accord with His glorious design that they accomplish their task without change. (1QS 3:15)

The noted first-century rabbi, Gamaliel, seems to have reflected this concept of creation in his thinking (although May calls this an "isolated" reference [p. 23]). A philosopher challenged him, "Your God was indeed a great artist, but he had good materials [unformed space/void, darkness, water, wind, and the deep] to help him." Gamaliel, responded, "All of them are explicitly described as having been created by him [and not as preexistent]."[41]

In the early Christian homily, *Shepherd of Hermas,* the first command is to believe that God brought all things "into existence

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[38]G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology,* vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 142n.

[39]C. Westermann, *Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 36.

[40]For a different perspective, see J. A. Goldstein, *II Maccabees* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983) 307-15. See also Goldstein's "The Origins of the Doctrine of Creation ex Nihilo," *JJS* 35 (1984) 127-35.

[41]Unformed space/void was formed by God (Isa 45:7) as were darkness (Isa 45:7), water (Ps 148:4-5), wind (Amos 4:13), and the depths (Prov 8:24). J. Neusner, *Confronting Creation* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991) 41-42.

out of non-existence."[42] Denis Carroll claims that this is the first allusion to *creatio ex nihilo* in Christian literature.[43]

The Jewish pseudepigraphical book *Joseph and Aseneth*, whose date of composition is estimated to be between the second century BC and the second century AD, contains a passage which also seems to imply *creatio ex nihilo*. Aseneth, having thrown her idols out of the window and put on sackcloth for a week, addresses the God of Joseph:

> Lord God of the ages,
> who created all (things) and gave life (to them),
> who gave breath of life to your whole creation,
> who brought the invisible (things) out into the light,
> who made the (things that) are and the (ones that) have an
> appearance from the non-appearing and non-being,
> who lifted up the heaven
> and founded it on a firmament upon the back of the winds . . .
> For you, Lord, spoke and they were brought to life,
> because your word, Lord, is life for all your creatures. (12:1-3)

2 Enoch, which was written in the late first century AD, also reflects the doctrine of creation out of nothing in a couple of places: "I commanded . . . that visible things should come down from invisible" (25:1ff.); "Let one of the invisible things come out solid and visible" (26:1). Composed around AD 100, the *Odes of Solomon* (written originally in, most probably, Syriac)[44] seem to indicate creation out of nothing:

> And there is nothing outside of the Lord,
> because he was before anything came to be.
>
> And the worlds are by his word,
> And by the thought of his heart. (16:18-19)

May passes off this passage, asserting, "Yet in their whole essence the Odes are unphilosophical. Their thought and diction are poetically descriptive, not speculative" (p. 37). But this comment seems overly dismissive; it appears that May, when confronted with a fairly clear obstacle to his position (as this passage quite obviously is), strains to find some loophole to support his thesis. But after noting quite a long string of such dismissals, one eventually suspects him of having an inflexible and closed historiography.

In the early second century, the author of *2 Baruch* wrote: "O thou . . . that hast fixed the firmament by the word, . . . that hast

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[42]*Shepherd of Hermas*, V. 1.6: κτίσας ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος τὰ ὄντα; 26:1: ποίησας ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος τὸ εἶναι τὰ πάντα.

[43]D. Carroll, "Creation," in *The New Dictionary of Theology* (ed. J. Komanchak, et al.; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987) 249.

[44]J. Charlesworth, "Odes of Solomon," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (2 vols.; ed. J. Charlesworth; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985) 2:726-27.

called from the beginning of the world that which did not yet exist" (21:4). In his dissertation on 2 *Baruch*, Frank James Murphy comments that *creatio ex nihilo* is being expressed here, indicating that the present visible world is not eternal. It had a beginning.[45] Once again, May does not comment on this passage.

A final example is taken from the *Apostolic Constitutions*, which was written perhaps as early as the mid-second century AD and which reflects a belief in creation out of nothing. The "one who is truly God" is "the one who is before things that have been made . . . the only one without origin, and without a beginning." The eternal God is the one through whom "all things" have been made. He is "first by nature and only one in being" (8.12.6,8).[46]

Because of the slant of May's thesis, he repeatedly dismisses some of these extra-biblical passages (and omits the mention of others entirely). But it seems that we have here sufficient references to creation out of nothing to call into question the assertion that this doctrine was nothing but a late second-century phenomenon. And despite various aberrations in this belief among some Jewish and Christian thinkers through the influence of Platonism, the conviction that God created absolutely everything ("before" which was nothing) is taken for granted by a good number of pertinent independent sources; this fact also casts serious doubt upon May's allegations regarding the ambiguity of the biblical text, to which we now turn.

V. BIBLICAL SUPPORT FOR CREATIO EX NIHILO

We noted earlier that Professor May does not think that the text of the Bible demands belief in creation *ex nihilo* (p. 24). Unfortunately, he does little to defend this claim. While he makes passing reference to certain biblical passages that seem to hint at the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, he does not seriously interact with them. He focuses on patristic study (as his subtitle indicates) rather than on biblical exegesis. This turns out to be a weakness for May because, if properly done, sound biblical exegesis refutes the notion that creation out of nothing is a mere theological invention. For instance, Rom 4:17 (where God is said to call into being things that are not) and Heb 11:3 (where the visible world is not created from anything observable) are passages which May simply writes off as fitting in with other statements of hellenistic Judaism—statements that *seem* to affirm absolute creation out of nothing but are actually only asserting belief in world-formation.

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[45]F. J. Murphy, *The Structure and Meaning of Second Baruch* (SBLDS 78; Atlanta: Scholars, 1985) 43.

[46]May (22n) and others (like W. Bousset) view this section (12) of the Constitutions as being a later Christian interpolation, but J. Charlesworth, among others, does not think so ("Hellenistic Synagogal Prayers" in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:690n). At least the lack of consensus should preclude us from hastily dismissing it.

One wonders if that is all there is to the matter. It seems that such assertions, given without any arguments whatsoever, can be rather misleading. Indeed, May gives the false impression that *creatio ex nihilo* was nothing more than the invention of well-meaning Christian theologians who were trying to defend what they believed to be the biblical notions of God's absolute sovereignty, freedom, and omnipotence in the face of heretical gnostic doctrines. I believe that examining the relevant biblical passages more extensively will adequately show that the traditional teaching of *creatio ex nihilo* has strong biblical grounds.

Walter Eichrodt expresses the implicit assumption that the OT makes regarding absolute creation: "The idea of the absolute beginning of the created world thus proves to be a logical expression of the total outlook of the priestly narrator."[47] For example, Isa 40:21, which refers back to Gen 1:1 but utilizes the parallel expression "from the foundation of the earth," is "a clear reference to an absolute beginning" and not an "arbitrary judgment," according to Eichrodt.[48] He considers the doctrine *creatio ex nihilo* as being "incontestable"[49]—especially in light of the author's strict monotheism as well as his radical distinction between ancient cosmogonies, in which the gods emerged out of pre-existing matter, and his own. Eichrodt argues that "the ultimate aim of the [creation] narrative is the same as that of our formula of creation *ex nihilo*."[50] Although this formula does not occur in the OT, the object of God's creative activity is "heaven and earth and all that is in them"; so God's creation cannot be restricted to "the stars and things on earth" but must include "the entire cosmos."[51] Claus Westermann agrees: Gen 1:1 does not refer to "the beginning of something, but simply The Beginning. *Everything* began with God."[52]

Another OT scholar, R. K. Harrison, asserts that while *creatio ex nihilo* was "too abstract for the [Hebrew] mind to entertain" and is not stated explicitly in Genesis 1, "it is certainly implicit in the narrative."[53] The reader is meant to understand that "the worlds

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[47]W. Eichrodt, "In the Beginning: A Contribution to the Interpretation of the First Word of the Bible," in *Creation in the Old Testament* (ed. B. W. Anderson; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 72.

[48]Ibid., 67.

[49]Ibid., 72.

[50]W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967) 2:101.

[51]Eichrodt, *Theology*, 2:102. The fact that "heaven and earth" is a merism signifying "the totality of cosmic phenomena" points us toward an absolute beginning of the universe—including matter (N. M. Sarna, *Genesis* [JPS Torah Commentary; New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1989] 5). R. K. Harrison affirms that the phrase "the heavens and the earth" is a merism which indicates totality, not simply two antonymic elements. See Harrison, "Creation," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (5 vols.; ed. M. C. Tenney; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 1.1022.

[52]C. Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 7.

[53]Harrison, "Creation," 1023.

were not fashioned from any pre-existing material, but out of nothing"; "prior" to God's creative activity, "there was thus no other kind of phenomenological existence."[54]

In contrast to ancient cosmogonies, Genesis posits an absolute beginning. Elohim was not limited by chaos when creating (as in the Babylonian cosmogony) but is sovereign over the elements. Genesis 1 stands as an independent assertion, claiming that God created the entire cosmos. In fact, the very structure of Gen 1:1 argues for creation out of nothing. Grammatically and contextually, a very good case can be made for seeing Gen 1:1 as referring to absolute creation.[55] Consequently, Gen 1:1 should not be translated, "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland . . . ," as the NAB does. (This would mean that Ian Barbour's assertion that Genesis argues for "the creation of *order from chaos*" rather than from nothing[56] is misguided.)

Lending further support to *creatio ex nihilo* in Scripture is that God (or Christ) is said to be the Creator or the ultimate Source of the totality of existing things. Although May leads one to believe that the biblical evidence for creation out of nothing is ambiguous, it is hard to deny the scope of biblical language: "from him . . . are all things" (Rom 11:36); "through [Christ] are all things" (1 Cor 8:6); "God, who created all things" (Eph 3:9); "by him all things were created" (Col 1:16; cp. 20); "you created all things and because of your will they existed and were created" (Rev 4:11). The clear implication of Yahweh's title "the first and the last" (Isa 44:6) or "the Alpha and the Omega" (Rev 1:8) is that he is the ultimate originator and only eternal being. Proverbs 8:22-26 states that before the depths were brought forth (i.e., most likely the "deep" of Gen 1:2), Wisdom was creating with God. Nothing else besides the Creator existed—and this would preclude any pre-existent stuff. Referring to creation, John 1:3 unambiguously states that all things—that is, "the material world"—came into being through the Word.[57] The implication is that all things (which would include pre-existent matter, if that were applicable to the creative process) exist through God's agent, who is

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[54]Ibid.

[55]See J. Sailhamer's discussion in "Genesis" in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2 (ed. F. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 21-23n. See also U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis Part 1* (reprint; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1992) 20. Cassuto argues that beginning with v. 2, the focus changes from the cosmos to creation's relationship to humanity, stressing the themes of "land" and "blessing," which prevail throughout the Pentateuch.

[56]Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science*, 130.

[57]Although R. Brown wrongly asserts that John 1:1-18 "does not necessarily have the same theology as the Gospel" (see D. A. Carson's discussion on how John's prologue actually introduces the gospel's major themes: *The Gospel According to John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991] 111-12), Brown makes plain that the word ἐγένετο ("come into being") is used consistently to describe creation in the Septuagint in Genesis 1 (R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* [AB 29; New York: Doubleday, 1966] 6.)

the originator of everything.[58] So when Scripture speaks of God's creation, there is an all-embracing nature to it. Despite their lack of precise formulation of a doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, the biblical writers have "a natural habit of speaking as comprehensively as possible about Yahweh's creative power."[59]

In addition, the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* is reinforced when Scripture declares the eternality and self-sufficiency of God in contrast to the finite created order (Ps 102:25-27; cp. Heb 1:10-12). The God "who called forth creation out of nothing has power also to reduce it to nothing again."[60] Implicit throughout Isaiah 40-48 is the supreme sovereignty and utter uniqueness of Yahweh in creation, besides whom there was no other god—or anything else—when he created: "I am the first and the last" (44:6; cp. 48:12); "I, the LORD, am the maker of all things" (44:24); "I am the LORD, and there is none else" (45:18; cp. 46:9).

Moreover, the Bible assumes that God's word *alone* is what brings the universe about—not simply God's word acting upon previously existing matter. Psalm 33 declares that it was by "the word of the Lord [τῷ λόγῳ τοῦ κυρίου]" and "the breath of his mouth" that "the heavens were made" (vv. 6, 9).[61]

A passage that deserves significant attention is Heb 11:3, which declares, "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen [τὸ βλεπόμενον] was not made [κατηρτίσθαι] out of what was visible [μὴ ἐκ φαινομένων]." This text declares that the visible universe "was not made out of equally visible [pre-existent] raw material; it was called into being by divine power."[62] Jaroslav Pelikan states that this passage, along with Rom 4:17, "explicitly" teaches creation out of nothing.[63] The word order of the phrase μὴ ἐκ φαινόμενων is common in Classical Greek and should be rendered "from things unseen."[64] The philosophical sense of τὰ φαινόμενα referred to sense experience.[65] The physical worlds (τοὺς αἰῶνας) are described as being that which is seen (τὸ βλεπόμενον); this is in contrast with that which is invisible—namely, the word of God.[66] Paul Ellingworth argues that the phrase ῥήματι

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[58]For a survey of the biblical data regarding creation, see K. H. Schelkle, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1971) 3-61.

[59]Eichrodt, *Theology*, 2:102.

[60]C. F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 6 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983) 122.

[61]God's creation by divine fiat is also reflected in 2 Esdr 6:38: "I said, O Lord, You have indeed spoken from the beginning of creation; on the first day You said: 'Let heaven and earth be made,' and Your word accomplished the work."

[62]Bruce, *Hebrews*, 280.

[63]J. Pelikan, "Creation and Causality in the History of Christian Thought," in *Evolution After Darwin*, vol. 3 (ed. S. Tax and C. Callender; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960) 34.

[64]P. Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews* (NIGNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 569.

[65]Ibid., 571.

[66]Ibid., 568.

θεοῦ, "the word of God," would "conflict" with any idea that the visible world was made out of materials in the invisible world. It is much more satisfactory to understand τοὺς αἰῶνας as referring to the visible world, and thus as synonymous with τὸ βλεπόμενον.[67] As C. F. D. Moule notes, "the reference seems to be to creation *ex nihilo*, the *visible* having come into being out of the *invisible*."[68] Commentator William Lane remarks that, although Heb 11:3 does not state *creatio ex nihilo* in positive terms, but negatively, "it denies that the creative universe originated from primal material or anything observable."[69] Lane goes on to assert that the writer's insistence that the universe was not brought into being from anything observable

> would seem to exclude any influence from Platonic or Philonic cosmology. It may, in fact, have been the writer's intention to correct a widespread tendency in hellenistic Judaism to read Gen 1 in the light of Plato's doctrine in the *Timaeus*.[70]

So, contrary to May's assertion, Heb 11:3 states something that is quite distinct from Classical Greek concepts of creation.

In light of this discussion, it is a serious distortion to portray the doctrine of creation out of nothing as a post-biblical phenomenon, as does May, along with Ian Barbour. The biblical data indicate that God was ontologically prior to all that is, which is the basis for the doctrine *creatio ex nihilo*. Just as the doctrine of the Trinity is clearly found within Scripture (despite the fact that Arianism later flourished) though it was not formulated until Tertullian's time, so the doctrine of creation out of nothing is biblical (despite the flourishing of Middle Platonist thought and its influence on Jewish and Christian thinkers) even though it was clearly articulated and expanded upon only in the latter part of the second century.

Moreover, one wonders what May would take as unambiguous evidence for creation out of nothing in Scripture (or in extra-biblical sources). It seems that he would not be satisfied with any formulation in a given text other than "creation out of [absolutely] nothing" or the like. But one can legitimately ask, "What does the *Alpha* in the divine title 'Alpha and Omega' really mean if not that God is the absolute Originator of all there is? What does the *all* in the

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[67]Ibid., 569. Ellingworth indicates that the two halves of the verse are parallel in meaning and form a chiasmus:

(1) κατηρτίσθαι	(1') γεγονέναι
(2) τοὺς αἰῶνας	(2') τὸ βλεπόμενον
(3) ῥήματι θεοῦ	(3') μὴ ἐκ φαινομένων

[68]C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (reprint; Cambridge: University Press, 1968) 168. Moule adds, however, that the order of the negative μή before the preposition ἐκ, "from" or "out of," is somewhat awkward grammatically.

[69]W. L. Lane, *Hebrews* (WBC; 2 vols.; Dallas: Word, 1991) 2.332.

[70]Ibid. Without giving any substantial evidence for his assertion, H. Attridge asserts that "a Platonic cosmogonic model" lies behind the formulation of this verse (*Epistle to the Hebrews* [Her; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989] 316).

clause `by him all things were created' really mean if not that God created the totality of all that exists?"

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have taken note of the strong evidence for absolute creation in both Scripture and various Jewish and Christian writings, which attest to a broader theological context which often took creation *ex nihilo* for granted. So, to say that the biblical information about creation is ambiguous on the basis of the fact that several early church fathers held to world-formation is simply inaccurate. This reads back a Greek way of thinking into the OT text. To my mind, it seems doubtful that an un-hellenized Jewish student of the OT would have formulated something analogous to a Middle Platonist cosmology on his own. What is clear is that these church fathers were strongly influenced by (Middle-)Platonism, which held firmly to belief in eternal formless matter. Their belief in God as an artificer was not due to Scripture's ambiguity on the topic but because of the strength of the philosophical grid within which they operated.

May claims that "theologians who represent the orthodox line of clarification leading to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* do not reveal any acquaintance with philosophical theories about the creation of the world out of nothing" (p. viii). But in light of the fact that they did steep themselves in Scripture, this factor provided a sufficient theological arsenal against heretical gnostic doctrines. If, as May asserts, the Christian doctrine of creation out of nothing took shape *independently* of Basilides' influence, then this would all the more confirm that *creatio ex nihilo* is grounded in Scripture.

Even though May's main thesis—that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was *formulated* in the midst of controversy in the late second century—is correct, this would still leave untouched the issue of whether or not it is a biblical doctrine. Christian doctrines such as Christ's deity, the hypostatic union, and the Trinity were similarly forged in the fires of theological controversy. To assert then that this doctrine is not biblical simply because it has been formulated through the provocation of heresy does not follow. After all, it usually takes the heretic to create the theologian.[71]

By way of implication, we should note two things. First, our study has shown that although some noted theists (e.g., Clement of Alexandria, Justin Martyr) have believed that theism is not incompatible with pre-existent matter, some contemporary religious thinkers deny the traditional notion of creation out of nothing in order to support their proclivity for process theology—like Peacocke and Barbour. Barbour, for instance, states that the process view stresses divine immanence—although it does not exclude transcendence.[72] (Barbour diminishes the God of theism by declaring

[71]Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth*, 44.
[72]Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science*, 146.

that he is "neither omnipotent nor powerless"; "God does not act directly"; "God does not intervene sporadically from outside."[73]) So, from an empirical and theological perspective, the finitude of the universe would be an argument against process theism since God cannot exist without the world. Consequently, Barbour leaves open the question of an oscillating universe[74] (as has the noted process theist Charles Hartshorne).

A second (and related) point is this: the scientific problems with an infinitely-oscillating universe (for which we have no basis in physics),[75] alongside the prevailing Big Bang model, and the additional factor of the universe's winding down toward an eventual "heat death," point toward a contingent universe. It seems quite credible to believe that the very contingency of the world begs for a self-existent and non-contingent explanation. If the universe began to exist, and if we accept the intuitively obvious metaphysical principle that "whatever begins to exist must have a cause,"[76] we are pointed in the direction of the biblical God who created out of nothing.

So, contrary to May and others, the doctrine of creation out of nothing was not simply created *ex nihilo* by post-biblical theologians of the second century to counteract gnostic ideas. We have good reason to believe that the doctrine of creation out of nothing is rooted in biblical passages indicating that God is the ontological Originator of all that exists.[77]

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[73]Ibid.

[74]Ibid, 129.

[75]Craig, *Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology*, 56. Barrow and Silk consider the oscillating universe model to be in the realm of "science fiction" (*The Left Hand of Creation*, 72).

[76]For a defense of this principle, see W. L. Craig, *The* Kalam *Cosmological Argument* (London: Macmillan, 1979); "Creation and Big Bang Cosmology" and "A Response to Grünbaum on Creation and Big Bang Cosmology" in *Philosophia Naturalis* 31 (1994) 217-24, 237-49. Arguments asserting that vacuum fluctuations in the quantum world are an example of something's coming into existence out of nothing are confused. Physicist J. Polkinghorne makes clear that "the vacuum in quantum theory is a humming hive of activity"—not absolutely nothing (*One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology* [Princeton: University Press, 1986] 67): "Only by the greatest abuse of language could such an active and structured medium [i.e., the quantum vacuum] be called *nihil* (for in quantum theory, when there is 'nothing' there, it does not mean that nothing is happening)" (Polkinghorne, *Faith of a Physicist*, 75). Moreover, such assertions confuse unpredictability, which is certainly the case in the quantum world, with uncausedness. Also, it is simply unwise to make an extrapolation from the quirky micro-world of quantum physics to the macro-world of mountains, oceans, and galaxies (Barrow and Silk, *The Left Hand of Creation*, 59).

[77]Thanks to D. A. Carson and Bill Craig for their suggestions.