

**THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION *EX NIHILO*  
WAS CREATED OUT OF NOTHING:  
A RESPONSE TO COPAN AND CRAIG  
PART 1: THE SCRIPTURAL ARGUMENT**

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**1.0 Introduction.** In their contribution to *The New Mormon Challenge*, entitled “Craftsman or Creator: An Examination of the Mormon Doctrine of Creation & a Defense of *Creatio Ex Nihilo*,” Paul Copan and William Lane Craig argue that the notion of creation *ex nihilo* is both biblical and required by modern cosmology and logic.<sup>1</sup> They begin by examining Mormon scripture. They suggest that Mormon scripture itself is susceptible to a reading consistent with creation out of nothing. In the next section they argue against the vast majority of biblical scholars that the Bible requires the doctrine of creation out of nothing. They add for good measure that this doctrine was not an invention of the philosophers but has always been the well-established “Christian” doctrine. They next offer two deductive arguments to show that it is absurd that there could be an infinitely old universe based on: (1) the supposed impossibility of an actual infinite; and (2) the supposed impossibility of successive formation of an actual infinite. They lastly argue that modern cosmology requires the notion of creation out of nothing based upon the standard model of the big bang theory and the second law of thermodynamics.

I argue that each of their arguments is a seriously flawed. I begin by showing that Copan and Craig (hereafter “C&C”) have misread the Mormon scriptures and failed to even consider the strongest scriptures against their view. I argue that there are compelling reasons to support the view of the majority of biblical scholars that the Bible teaches creation out of a pre-existing chaos. I next argue that C&C have seriously misrepresented the biblical data to read into it their doctrine of absolutist creation. I add that their argument that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* was not a philosophical development is uninformed and fails to grasp the essential distinctions necessary to make sense of the doctrine as it developed in Patristic theology. I show why the vast majority of scholars agree that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was first formulated around 200 A.D. in arguments with the gnostics, Stoics and the Middle Platonists.

I then argue that the scientific evidence supports the chaotic inflationary and quantum vacuum models of the big bang theory against the Standard Big Bang theory. I show why the vast majority of astrophysicists currently support these models of cosmology against the standard model favored by C&C. These two models are not mutually exclusive and both are contrary to the view that the universe was created from absolute nothing. I argue that both models allow that the universe, in the sense of all that exists in any way, has always existed without a beginning.

Finally, I deal with the infinity arguments. I argue that neither argument is sound. I also argue that neither arguments applies to the eternal universe presupposed in the chaotic inflationary and quantum vacuum models of cosmology in general and the Mormon view of creation in particular even if they were sound. I give an argument showing that it is logically possible that the universe, understood as all that exists rather than as our local universe, has always existed without a beginning.

**2.0 The Doctrine of Creation in Mormon Scripture.** I begin with a caution: we must protect against the unwarranted assumption that the very use of the word “create” means “creation out of absolute nothing.” As Stanley L. Jaki, a Catholic priest of the Benedictine Order, stated:

The caution which is in order about taking the [Hebrew] verb *bara* in the sense of creation out of nothing is no less needed in reference to the [English] word *creation*. Nothing is more natural, and unadvised, at the same time, than to use the word as if it has always denoted

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Beckwith, Carl Mosser and Paul Owens, eds., *The New Mormon Challenge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 113-77. (I worked from a pre-publication manuscript and therefore the page numbers may not correspond to the published book). The first section of the article dealing with scriptural arguments is essentially the same as Copan’s article, “Is *Creatio Ex Nihilo* a Post-Biblical Invention? An Examination of Gerhard May’s Proposal,” *Trinity Journal* 17 (1996), 77-93.

creation out of nothing. In its basic etymological origin the word *creation* meant the purely natural process of growing or of making something to grow. This should be obvious by a mere recall of the [Latin] verb *crescere*. The crescent moon [derived from *crescere*] is not creating but merely growing. The expression *ex nihilo* or *de nihilo* had to be fastened, from around 200 A.D. on, by Christian theologians on the verb *creare* to convey unmistakably a process, strict creation, which only God can perform. Only through the long-standing use of those very Latin expressions, *creare ex nihilo* and *creatio ex nihilo*, could the English words *to create* and *creation* take on the meaning which excludes pre-existing matter.<sup>2</sup>

This caution is significant. In fact, look at the very title C&C adopt for their article which assumes that the term “Creator” must mean creation *ex nihilo*. However, a person who organizes materials in a completely new way is a creator. For example, God “created the earth” by organizing the existing matter available in the proto-solar system whether he organized eternally existing matter or previously created that matter *ex nihilo*. Certainly, a painter is properly said to be the creator of a painting and a craftsman is a creator of, say, a new chest that had never before existed, even though they use existing materials to create them. Indeed, I will argue that God created all that is made, and there is not anything made that he has not created. I will show that this is precisely the sense in which God is said to create in the earliest Christian texts. However, organizing in a new way all that is made does not mean that materials were not used in the new creation.

C&C begin by arguing that statements in the *Book of Mormon* and *Doctrine & Covenants* (“D&C”) may actually support the traditional view. The Mormon scripture states: “there is a God, and he hath created all things, both the heaven and the earth, and all things that in them are.” (2 Nephi 2:14; c.f., Mosiah 4:9; 2 Nephi 11:7; D&C 14:9; 20:17; 45:1). C&C suggest that one: “could even argue that some of these early passages imply *creatio ex nihilo*.”<sup>3</sup> But of course only the prior assumption that the word *create* means creation out of nothing can support this assertion. As I will show, this prior assumption which forces the text with unwarranted assumptions is endemic to the way C&C read scripture, including especially the biblical texts.

Joseph Smith received the revelation now in D&C 20 in 1830. This revelation has added significance because it constituted the “Articles of the Church,” the first published statement of the Latter-day Saints’ beliefs. D&C 20:17 states that: “By these things we know that there is a God in heaven, who is infinite and eternal, from everlasting to everlasting the same unchangeable God, *the framer of heaven and earth, and all things which in them are.*” Now the Mormon scriptures are quite subtle. Notice that God is the “framer” of all things. Is this one word significant? In the context of later revelations it becomes important to notice such nuances. C&C fail to take account of *The Lectures on Faith* in their reading of Mormon scripture. Now the *Lectures* are not included in present compilations of Mormon scripture, but they were included as a part of the Mormon canon from the time of their publication in 1835. The first Lecture states God’s mode of creation: “It was by faith that the worlds were *framed* – God spake, *chaos heard*, and worlds came into order by reason of the faith there was in him.”<sup>4</sup> This text is not speaking merely of this earth but of worlds. God creates by speaking, and he does not speak to nothing at all but to the chaos which responds to him in faith. From very early in the Church, God’s mode of creation was understood to be *creatio per verbum* or creation by speaking his word. His word is efficacious because he is not talking to himself, he speaks to “chaos” which responds faithfully.

C&C argue that Mormon scriptures can be interpreted in a way that is consistent with creation out of nothing so long as they are not read in the context of Joseph Smith’s statements. C&C quote parts of D&C 93 as follows: “‘intelligence, or the light of truth’ was not created or made, that ‘man was in the beginning with God’ and the elements are ‘eternal.’”<sup>5</sup> They then conclude: “epexigetical [sic] equation of ‘intelligences’ with ‘light and truth’ indicates that ‘intelligence’ here probably refers to what Doctrine and Covenants 88 calls the ‘light of

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley L. Jaki, *Genesis 1 Through the Ages* (Royal Oak, Mich.: Real View Books, 1998), 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> *NMC*, 116.

<sup>4</sup> *The Lectures on Faith* (1835 edition of the *Doctrine & Covenants*), I, 22 (p. 8).

<sup>5</sup> *NMC*, 117.

Christ'... Understood in this way uncreated intelligence/light of truth can be viewed as part of God's eternal being."<sup>6</sup> However, this interpretation simply ignores the context of D&C 93. The entire text is structured to show that persons are like God and can share God's glory. In more complete context, D&C gives a very different message:

I was in the beginning with the Father .... Ye were also in the beginning with the Father; that which is Spirit, even the light of truth .... Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth was not created or made, neither indeed can be .... For man is spirit. The elements are eternal. The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth. (D&C 93:21, 22, 29, 33, 35)

In context, the scripture says that "man" existed in the beginning just like God. The point is that because "man" was in the beginning and exists just like God, "man" can share fully God's glory. While it is possible to give an idealist (i.e., mind-dependent) reading to "intelligence," it is much more difficult to see how "elements" can be seen as a merely ideal reality existing only within the mind of God. It seems to me that the fact that intelligence is said to be "not created or made" and that "elements are eternal" is saying that both have always existed without creation.

C&C next suggest that the "affirmation that 'man was in the beginning with God' and that the elements are eternal can be understood in a relative sense and need not imply that they are literally uncreated." By "relative sense" they mean that D&C 93 is only speaking of "this earth and its inhabitants" as in the Book of Moses (1:33, 35). However, that context will not work for D&C 93 for the simple and sufficient reason that even if limited to this earth, the earth is never said to be either eternal or uncreated -- to the contrary, Moses says that God created the earth. Unless the earth could be understood to be eternal like the elements from which it is made, the interpretation offered by C&C simply misses the point.

C&C also argue that their reading "removes the tension between D&C 93 and 2 Nephi 11:7." What tension? Well, 2 Nephi 11:7 says that: "if there be no God, we are not, for there could have been no creation." I take it that what they mean, though they don't say, is that 2 Nephi 11:7 implies that we would not exist in any way at all because we could not be created if there were no God, and the implication of D&C 93 is that persons are eternal and uncreated like God. Note that they slip into their eisegesis of this passage the implicit assumption of creation *ex nihilo*. But 2 Nephi 11:7 clearly does not need to assume creation *ex nihilo*, for Nephi is speaking of this life and the fact that we exist as mortals in this life. Thus, as mortals we are created by God, but as immortal spirits we are not. 2 Nephi 11:7 can be read as consistent with the view that persons, as spirits, have always existed, but as embodied mortals are created and if there were no God, we could not exist as mortals.

Most importantly, C&C simply fail to quote the most important text of all regarding the eternal existence of uncreated intelligences! C&C state: "The Book of Abraham creation narrative implies that *the earth* was created from pre-existing materials, but it does not preclude the possibility that God created this matter *ex nihilo* at some point prior to the earth's formation."<sup>7</sup> Fair enough. Yet why read *that* assumption into the text when there is nothing at all in the text to suggest it and what *is* there is directly contrary to it? Further, how could C&C miss the outstandingly clear statement of Book of Abraham 3:18 which directly refutes their thesis?

[I]f there be two spirits, and one shall be more intelligent than the other, yet these two spirits notwithstanding one is more intelligent than the other, have no beginning; they existed before, they shall have no end, they shall exist after, for they are *gnolaum* [Hebrew *'olam*], or eternal.

As I argued in an article that extensively discussed these issues, it is this scripture above all that shows that intelligences/spirits are not created and have always existed without a beginning.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the fact that

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Blake T. Ostler, "The Idea of Preexistence in the Development of Mormon Thought," *Dialogue* 15:1 (Spring 1982).

spirits/intelligences are individuated in the sense that one is more intelligent than another shows that we are not dealing with mere ideal realities, but with mind independent realities that are eternal. The use of the word “intelligences” is surely intentional here to recall the statements in D&C 93 that “intelligence ... was neither created nor made; neither indeed can be.” This is the most important scripture in the Mormon canon which pulls the idea of uncreated intelligences together, and C&C fail to even take cognizance of it!

Further, C&C suggest that it is open to LDS to reject as binding Joseph Smith’s non-scriptural statements expressly rejecting *creatio ex nihilo* and adopting the view that creation consists of organizing chaos. In this contention I agree with them. We are bound by covenant only to accept what is in scripture. However, we should take the uniquely LDS scriptures in the interpretive context established for them by Joseph Smith for a very good and overwhelmingly compelling reason: these scriptures came through him. It is like suggesting that we ignore what the apostle Paul would have to say about what he meant when he wrote his epistles found in the New Testament simply because his statements were not included in the New Testament. Wouldn’t we love to have such an explanation from Paul? Who would have the gall to suggest that they could interpret Joseph Smith’s revelations better than he can? Isn’t such a suggestion presumptuous in the extreme? This suggestion points out one very stark difference between Mormons and evangelicals. Mormons place their interpretations of scripture in the context of the prophets who wrote them and of further light and knowledge received by revelation from God. Evangelicals want us to base our salvation on their brain-power and ability to interpret scripture by the methods of scholarship. Well, based on the results, the evangelical stress on scholarship as the basis for knowing what scripture means is not only precarious, it is downright foolish.

Now from C&C’s perspective, I suspect that they believe that they are being charitable to Mormons. After all, they seem to believe that they have obliterated any possible Mormon world-view. Thus, from their perspective they undoubtedly believe that they are throwing us a bone. I can imagine them saying: “look, you are not stuck with a naive theology that we have just obliterated, for we have fashioned a better theology for you than you or your prophets could. You could save your belief in Mormonism by trashing it and adopt what evangelicals believe instead.” After I’ve stated it this way, I trust that evangelicals will see why the charity that they believe that they offer appears, from my perspective, to be hubris *in extremis*. There simply is no need for a saving interpretation, for it is the view of C&C that is contrary to sound biblical exegesis.

**3.0 The Biblical Doctrine of Creation from Pre-existing Chaos.** C&C argue that the Bible is consistent only with the view that all things are created *ex nihilo*. They first address the argument that Genesis expressly adopts the view that the world was created from pre-existing chaos – a view adopted by many, perhaps most, biblical scholars. They argue that the notion of a “beginning” in Genesis 1:1 entails an absolute beginning. They also argue that the Hebrew verb *bara’* is inconsistent with the view of creation from a pre-existing chaos. Finally, they adopt the view argued by Jim W. Adams that because the Hebrew account of creation does not contain a theogony (birth or origin of the gods) narrative like other Ancient Near Eastern (“ANE”) documents, therefore the Hebrew account is radically different in all respects. They conclude that the biblical account must therefore also reject the view of other ANE cultures that God created by organizing a preexisting chaos. Finally, they argue that the New Testament data also require *creatio ex nihilo*. They add that *creatio ex nihilo* is the well established doctrine of orthodox Christianity from the time of Christ to the present.

I argue for the view that there are compelling reasons to see the creation account of Genesis as expressly teaching creation out of a preexisting chaos. However, I also argue that the account in Genesis is pre-scientific and deals only with the creation of the earth and what can be seen from an earthly perspective without aid of instruments. The Bible is therefore irrelevant to the issue of creation of the universe as we know it in modern astrophysics. I also argue that the New Testament materials do not address the issue of *creatio ex nihilo* and are consistent with the view of creation from a preexisting chaos. I then argue that C&C fail to distinguish between “absolute nothing” (*ex ouk on*) and “relative non-being” (*to me on*) or a state of there not yet being any “thing.” This distinction was well established in discussions that gave rise to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and is necessary to consciously formulate the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.

**3.1 The Argument from the Hebrew Verb *bara’*.** The first argument asserted by C&C is that Genesis 1:1 begins by “positing an absolute beginning.”<sup>9</sup> They base three arguments on the meaning of the verb *bara’*.

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<sup>9</sup> *NMC*, 129.

This verb is the second word of Genesis 1:1 (third person, perfect) that is often translated as *created*. First, they argue that “the significance about *bara’* is not that it implies creation *ex nihilo* by itself, but that *God* is always the subject of this verb.” (emphasis of C&C) They argue that Joseph Smith’s position that *bara’* means to create from a preexisting chaos is wrong, for “the verb *bara’* does not *ever* have an object ... mentioning a material out of which something has been made.” (emphasis added) Finally, they argue that “Joseph Smith’s understanding of the Hebrew word *create* is mistaken as he was applying *reorganization* to *bara’* when it should properly have been applied to *asah*.”<sup>10</sup> Each of these claims is demonstrably mistaken.

First, the claim made by C&C that God alone is the subject of the verb *bara’* is simply and plainly inaccurate. The primary meaning of the word *bara’* is to cut, divide, or separate. Even in the Genesis account this is the primary meaning of the word. As James Atwell recently stated, the verb *bara’* “has a deliberate and considered significance when it occurs in P [the Priestly document], but this falls short of *creatio ex nihilo*. It is best understood in the context of the alternative verbs ‘separate’ and ‘make’.”<sup>11</sup> There are at least three uses of the verb *bara* in the Old Testament where humans, not God, are the subject of the verb.<sup>12</sup> After the Israelites left Egypt and entered the promised land, Joshua divided it among the tribes of Israel. They immediately began to argue over the land. Joshua told the people of Israel: “If thou be a great people, then get thee up to the wood country and **cut down** (*bara’*) for thyself there in the land of the Perizzites and of the giants if mount Ephraim be too narrow for thee.... The mountain shall be thine; for it is wood, and thou shalt **cut it down** (*bara’*) ....” (Joshua 17:15, 18). The subject of the verb *bara’* here is clearly the people of Israel. Second, in Ezekiel 23:47 the verb *bara’* is used to denote a command to a company of people to “**hack to pieces** (*bara’*) with swords” those who had committed adultery. The subject of the verb *bara’* is once again humans. As Jaki commented:

It should seem significant that both the book of Ezechiel, certainly a post-Exilic product, and in the book of Joshua, a product quite possibly some seven hundred years older, one is confronted with the very human connotation of *bara*, a verb which exegetes love to raise to a quasi-divine pedestal. The significance remains intact whether one takes Genesis 1 for a Mosaic document, or for a post-Davidic composition, or even for a post-Exilic one, the latter being the most likely case. In all of these cases the taking of *bara* for an exclusively divine action, let alone for taking it for creation out of nothing, can only be done if one overlooks those three uses of it that span more than half a millenium.<sup>13</sup>

The assertion made by C&C that “when *bara’* is used, there is *never* any mention of preexisting material” is puzzling, for just two pages earlier they admitted: “Now it is well known that *bara’* (*create*) is used for, say, God’s creation of the people of Israel (e.g., Isa. 43:15) or his creation of a clean heart (Ps. 51:12), but obviously this should not be understood as being *ex nihilo*.”<sup>14</sup> Why is it so obvious that in these instances *bara’* does not mean creation out of nothing? Well, because it is obvious that there is some preexisting material out of which God created. God organized Israel out of the people he brought out of Egypt and a clean heart out of a sinful heart. Thus, it seems abundantly clear that *bara’* is used sometimes with preexisting materials in mind. However, the verb *bara’* is in fact never used in the accusative form, that is, it is never used in the form “created from this or that.”

There are three words in Hebrew scripture that can be translated in English as *create*. According the C&C, *bara’* means to bring about something with an absolute beginning, not created out of preexisting material.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> James A. Atwell, “An Egyptian Source for Genesis 1,” *Journal of Theological Studies, NS*, vol. 51, Pt. 2 (October 2000), 441, n. 1.

<sup>12</sup> The verb *bara* is also used in 1 Samuel 2:23 and Ezek. 21:24 where a human is probably the subject of the verb, but the interpretation is quite uncertain so I don’t include them.

<sup>13</sup> Jaki, *Genesis 1*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 126.

They argue that the verb which should have been used in Genesis 1:1 if Joseph Smith were correct is *'asah*, which they argue means to make something out of preexisting material in the same way that humans do, to fashion, accomplish, make, work or produce.<sup>15</sup> In addition, there is the verb *yatsar* which means to form, fashion, frame, or make. But a sharp distinction between organizing preexisting material for *'asah* and absolute creation where before there was nothing in any sense for *bara'* is simply an oversimplification. God made Israel out of preexisting people and a clean heart out of an existing heart.

On the other hand, these three verbs are often used interchangeably and in parallel structures showing that they have essentially the same semantic field. In Hebrew poetry, when words are placed in a parallel form (*parallelismus membrorum* is the technical term) the words are often used as synonyms or antonyms. For example, Isaiah 43:6-7 says:

Bring my sons from far,  
and my daughters from the ends of the earth;  
even every one that is called by my name:  
for I have **created** (*bara'*) him for my glory,  
I have **formed** (*yatsar*) him;  
yea, I have **made** (*'asah*) him.

Isaiah uses all three words for *create* to describe what God has done for those called by his name. Moreover, none of these uses of the word *create* in Hebrew mean to create *ex nihilo*, for they address how God has taken an existing person and created a new personality in that person to manifest his glory. Consider also Psalm 51:10 which uses the verb *bara'*: “**Create** (*bara'*) in me a clean heart, O God; and renew my spirit within me.” In Psalm 33:15 the same thought is expressed using the verb *yatsar*: “He **fashioneth** (*yatsar*) their hearts alike, he considereth all their works.” The verbs *bara'* and *yatsar* appear to be used interchangeably or as synonyms.

Similarly, in Genesis 1:21 and 27 it says that: “And God **created** (*bara'*) great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind, and God saw that it was good ... So God **created** (*bara'*) man in his own image, in the image of God **created** (*bara'*) he him, male and female **created** (*bara'*) he them.” In comparison, Genesis 2:7 says: “And the Lord God **formed** (*yatsar*) man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into him life; and man became a living soul.” Man was not created from nothing, but from preexisting dust of the ground. Further, Genesis 2:19 states that: “And out of the ground the Lord **formed** (*yatsar*) every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them.” Both man and beasts were created from existing matter, yet in chapter one of Genesis the verb *bara'* is used for the same acts of creation whereas in chapter two the verb *yatsar* is used.

More importantly, both *bara'* and *'asah* are used in parallel form in Isaiah 45:12 to describe the creation of the earth and man: “I have **made** (*'asah*) the earth and **created** (*bara'*) man upon it.” In the same chapter of Isaiah, God is said to **create** (*yatsar*) the earth: “God himself that **formed** (*yatsar*) the earth and made (*'asah*) it; he **created** (*bara'*) it not in vain, he **formed** (*yatsar*) it to be inhabited.” (Isaiah 45:7, 18) It is abundantly clear from this verse that *bara'*, *yatsar* and *'asah* are used interchangeably, for God creates the earth in all three senses.

The verb *bara'* must be considered the sexiest verb in the Bible given all the fantasies that scholars in the creedal tradition seem to have about it. It seems to have seduced C&C. The siren song of a verb that only God can use of himself is, alas, mere wishful thinking. However, the use of the verb *bara'* does show that God accomplished a marvelous act of creation with absolute ease by speaking and dividing asunder preexisting realities. God makes by dividing asunder. He created Israel by separating her from the existing nations in the same way that he created the earth by dividing it from the primeval watery chaos. In Hebrew thought, the cosmic world mirrors the social structure of the Israelite nation. They were brought out of a state of chaos and a desert waste to a sacred society ordered by God's law and covenant. However, there is always the threat of returning to this chaos if Israel rejects God. Joseph Smith's assertion that the verb *bara'* as used in Genesis 1:1 means that God organized a preexisting chaos is actually quite plausible in context. In the next section I argue that he was right on the mark.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

**3.2 The Argument for Creation from Chaos.** In this section I review the arguments that have convinced many, perhaps most, biblical scholars that Genesis 1 states that God created by organizing a preexisting chaos in precisely the sense taught in Mormon scripture.<sup>16</sup> However, I want to begin by pointing out some puzzling conclusions reached by C&C and Jim Adams. The puzzle is that even though both C&C and Adams admit that “nowhere in the Old Testament is it explicitly and precisely stated that God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing (*ex nihilo*);” nevertheless, they argue for the conclusion that “the Old Testament depicts no preexistent material or realm from which God emerged or created.... God created the universe *ex nihilo* and established the laws that govern the workings of the world.”<sup>17</sup> Adams quotes Claus Westermann who asks of Genesis 1:1 – “Is it *creatio ex nihilo* or not?” He answers by stating that the question of creation *ex nihilo* “is not relevant to the text”, however, “had the question been put to him [the author] must certainly have decided in favor of *creatio ex nihilo*.”<sup>18</sup> I am puzzled by such statements. It seems that Westermann, and for that matter Adams and C&C, are engaging in mind reading rather than exegesis. If the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is not relevant to the text, then why cite this text as support for the view that it teaches precisely that creation must be *ex nihilo*? Similarly, just how Adams concludes that the Old Testament somehow states that God created natural laws is beyond me. He doesn’t cite anything to support such an anachronistic reading and the notion of natural laws that govern the universe after they have been created by God is quite foreign to the Biblical text. As Bernhard Anderson observed: “The idea of ‘nature’ as an autonomous sphere governed by natural law or set in motion by a first cause is not found in the Old Testament. The creator stands in personal relation to the creation. It is the divine decree (*hoq*) that determines order.”<sup>19</sup>

It is important to see how Adams and C&C attempt to smuggle modern views into the text, for they read it as totally isolated from the Ancient Near Eastern Cultures and texts. It is precisely this reading of the text divorced from its context that leads C&C and Adams to major errors.

I intend to dispose with Jim Adams’ entire analysis with a few simple observations. Adams spends several pages laying out other ancient Near Eastern creation accounts.<sup>20</sup> He attempts to show that there are differences between the creation accounts from Mesopotamia and Egypt and creation accounts in the Old Testament. He points out, correctly, that whereas the Egyptian and Mesopotamian sources include a theogony (account of the origin of the gods), there is no trace of theogony in the biblical accounts. He also argues that God is seen in the Old Testament as completely transcending the physical creation. He then leaps to the conclusion that the idea of creation out of absolute nothing is “implicit” in the Old Testament for two reasons: (1) the Old Testament “presents a view of God and creation radically different from the cosmogonies of the ancient Near East. In Israel’s understanding God existed prior to the creation and he seems to have created the heavens and the earth *ex nihilo*.”<sup>21</sup> (2) Because God is seen as transcendent it must be concluded that “God created the universe *ex nihilo* and established the laws that govern the workings of the world.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See e.g., Shalom Paul, “Creation and Cosmogony: The Bible,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 5 (1972), 1056; David Winston, “The Book of Wisdom’s Theory of Cosmogony,” *History of Religions* 11:2 (1971), 187-91; Francis Young, “‘Creatio Ex Nihilo’: A Context for the Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44 (1991), 139-51; Gerhard May, *Shopfunf aus dem Nichts* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1978); Keith Norman, “Ex Nihilo: The Development of the Doctrines of God and Creation in Early Christianity,” *BYU Studies* 17:3 (Spring 1977), 291-318.

<sup>17</sup> *NMC*, 194 and 220.

<sup>18</sup> As quoted in *NMC* 197.

<sup>19</sup> Bernhard W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 31.

<sup>20</sup> *NMC*, 182-211.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 198.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 220.

However, Adams' analysis is question begging and circular. It does not follow from the fact that the Old Testament differs from Mesopotamian and Egyptian accounts in *some* respects that they differ in *all* respects. It is quite possible that the Old Testament does not contain a theogony but adopted other ancient Near Eastern views, including creation by organizing chaos. Indeed, I will show that it is virtually certain that the Old Testament creation accounts assumed the ancient Near Eastern world view in significant respects – including very likely creation by organizing a preexisting chaos. Further, Adams rejects the view that Genesis 1 teaches creation by organizing chaos because he claims that the Old Testament differs “radically” from other ancient Near Eastern accounts. How does he know that Genesis 1 differs from other ancient Near Eastern creation accounts? Only because he assumes that it does not teach creation by organizing chaos. Obviously, if Genesis 1 in fact teaches creation by organizing chaos, then it doesn't differ! Thus, Adam's argument is question begging and circular. Similarly, how does Adams know that the Old Testament teaches that God entirely transcends all creation? Well, because the Old Testament does not teach creation by organizing chaos. How does he know that the Old Testament does not teach creation by organizing chaos? Well, because it teaches that God transcends the entire world. Once again, his entire argument is circular and question begging. Moreover, I will show that his conclusions are simply contrary to the evidence.

The most respected translation of Genesis is by E.A. Speiser in the *Anchor Bible* series. Speiser translates Genesis 1:1-3 as follows:

When God set about to create heaven and earth – the world being a formless waste, with darkness over the seas...– God said, “Let there be light.” And there was light.

This translation is significant, for it means that chaos preexisted God's creative activity. The earth was in a state of chaos and without form when God began to create. As Speiser says: “To be sure the present interpretation precludes the view that creation accounts in Genesis say nothing about coexistent matter.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, this translation supports the notion of creation from chaos in precisely the sense taught in Mormon scripture and by Joseph Smith.

**3.2.1. The Argument from *beresit* as a Temporal Clause.** Speiser takes the first word of the Bible translated in the KJV as “in the beginning,” (*beresit*) in the construct state as a temporal clause defining when God set about to create. The first verse also functions as a title of the work as in other ancient Near Eastern accounts, notably the Babylonian *Enuma elish*. The first verse is subordinated to verse 3, with verse 2 taken as a parenthesis. As Speiser comments:

The first word of Genesis, and hence the first word in the Hebrew Bible as a unit, is vocalized as *beresit*. Grammatically, this is evidently in the construct state.... Thus, the sense of this particular initial term is, or should be, “At the beginning of...,” or “When,” and not “In/At the beginning”; the absolute form with adverbial connotation would be *bare'sit*. As the text is now vocalized, therefore, the Hebrew Bible starts out with a dependent clause.<sup>24</sup>

Speiser thus gives the first argument supporting a reading which requires that God creates by organizing a chaos and does not create as an absolute beginning. It is based upon the particular form of the word translated in the KJV as “In the beginning.” The form of the word here is extremely unusual in the Old Testament. It consists of two words *be* (“when” or “in”) and *reshit* (“first” or “initiation of action” or “beginning”). The word *reshit* occurs 50 times in the Old Testament and is always in the construct state with only the possible (debated) exception of Isaiah 46:10. The word *bereshit* occurs elsewhere in the Old Testament only four times, all four occurring in Jeremiah (26:1; 27:1; 28:1; 49:34) and always in the construct state which requires it to be taken as a temporal clause as Speiser translates it. Now as the word is vocalized in Hebrew in the present Bible (as shown by the vocal markings for vowels) it is undoubtedly a construct and not an absolute. However, as Speiser acknowledges: “vocalization alone should not be the decisive factor ... [f]or it could be (and has been) argued that the vocalized text is relatively late.” The vowels are not included in the most ancient Hebraic texts. Significantly,

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<sup>23</sup> Speiser, *Genesis*, 13.

<sup>24</sup> Speiser, *Genesis* 12.



the fact that the word *beresit* is always in the construct form elsewhere in the Old Testament strongly supports the translation of Genesis 1:1 as a temporal clause as Speiser has done it. This form of translation of Genesis 1:1 has been widely accepted in recent translations.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, it must be noted that because the word *resit* (though not *beresit*) may be used in the absolute form in Isaiah 46:10, we cannot construct a rule from the Old Testament that it is impossible for the word *beresit* to appear in the absolute form.

The view that Genesis 1:1-3 should be so translated was recognized long ago by the well-known Jewish scholar, Rashi. He proposed that Genesis 1:1 constituted a dependent clause. He considered Genesis 1:1 the **protasis**: “When God began to create,” or “In the beginning of God’s creation;” verse 2 as a **parenthesis**: “The earth being/was void...;” and verse 3 as an **apodosis**: “God said, let there be light.” Rashi argued:

At the beginning of Creation of heaven and earth, when the earth was desolate and void and there was darkness, then God said, “let there be light.” This verse does not appear in order to show the order of Creation and tell us that the heaven and earth were created first. Because whenever the word *beresit* appears in Scripture, it is in the construct, so here too, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” should be translated as “In the beginning of God’s creating the heaven and the earth.”<sup>26</sup>

The interpretation of *beresit* in the construct state means that *beresit* is bound to the following word or phrase and thus demands that Genesis be translated as a temporal clause. Rashi also argued that Genesis 1:1-3 does not provide the order of creation because the water already exists before God begins his creations. Thus, order of creation is not indicated, but the state of the earth when God began to create is: it was preceded by chaos. Matter already existed in a chaotic state when God began his creation.

C&C quote several well-respected scholars – notably Claus Westerman and Walter Eichrodt -- who take the word *beresit* to be an absolute rather than a construct as Speiser has done. However, I believe that C&C have misunderstood Eichrodt. It is true that he takes *beresit* to be an absolute rather than a construct. Nevertheless, Eichrodt addresses the fact that Jewish commentators in the Middle Ages, prominently Rashi, understood the text as meaning, “In the beginning, *when* God...” so as to harmonize the first verse with the primordial chaotic state of the earth in Genesis 1:2.<sup>27</sup> Further, I should point out that no scholar bases his/her case solely on the form of the word *beresit*. They all make subsidiary arguments. Those who support the absolute reading, however, are arguing against the grain of the word *beresit* as it appears in Genesis 1:1.

**3.2.2 The Argument from the Syntactic Structure.** This temporal construction in Genesis 1:1 is also strongly supported by the fact that it is exactly parallel in structure with the J account beginning at Genesis 2:4. Speiser argues that the construct or temporal clause reading is also supported by the structural parallels of the account with both the J account and the *Enuma elish*. Speiser states: “A closer look reveals that vs. 2 is a parenthetic clause: “the earth being then a formless waste...,” with the main clause coming in vs. 3. The structure of the whole sentence is “(1) when... (2) – at which time ... –; (3) “then...” Significantly enough the analogous account (by J) in Genesis 2:4b-7 shows the identical construction...”<sup>28</sup> Consider the similarity:

**Genesis 1:1-3**

**Genesis 2:4-9**

**Protasis:** When God set about to create

At the time when God Yahweh made

<sup>25</sup> The NEB, NAB, RSV, NSRV, NJB, the Living Bible, and AB. This view is accepted by Ewald, Sebright, Eirsfeldt, Orlinsky and Bauer, among others. See Gerhard F. Hasel, “Recent Translation of Genesis 1:1,” *The Bible Translator* (1971), 156-57.

<sup>26</sup> Chaim Pearl, ed. and trans., *Rashi: Commentaries on the Pentateuch* (New York: WW Norton & Co., 1970), 31.

<sup>27</sup> Walter Eichrodt, “In the Beginning: a Contribution to the Interpretation of the First Word of the Bible,” in *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage*, eds. Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: SPCK, 1962).

<sup>28</sup> Speiser, *Genesis*, 12.

the heaven and the earth.

earth and heaven

**Paranetical:** – the world being then a formless waste... – no shrub of the field being yet on the earth...

**Apodosis:** God said, “Let there be light....” And out of the ground God Yahweh caused to grow various trees....

The closest possible parallel account to Genesis 1 is Genesis 2. It shows that the temporal clause is precisely the structure used to begin creation accounts in the Hebrew mind-set. This reading is also supported by the syntax of the account in Genesis 1 because verse 1:2 begins with *waw* (translated as “and,” “but,” “now,” “even,” or “also”) accompanied by a noun and a verb. Such a syntax supports the view that Genesis 1:2 is in fact a paranetical statement that sets it off as a disjunctive from verse 1. These considerations are strong reasons indeed to adopt the reading of Genesis 1 favored by Speiser and those taking the view that it teaches that God created by organizing a preexisting chaos. Both Genesis 1 and 2 envision the world to exist in a chaotic state prior to creation. As Luis Stadelmann explained in his excellent work *The Hebrew Conception of the World*:

It has long been recognized by Bible scholars that the Priestly account of creation of the world [in Genesis 1] reveals traces of Mesopotamian influence. This influence is most apparent in the cosmological presuppositions, and in this sense the Priestly account differs significantly in outlook from that of the Yahwist [in Genesis 2]. For example, where as the Yahwist record envisages the primeval state as a desert needing water to make it fertile, the Priestly presupposes the existence of an unformed chaos enveloped in primeval darkness.... The world is pictured as “being then a formless waste, with darkness over the seas,” in short a watery caos (sic). The passage concerned seems to indicate a situation in which the world is envisaged as immersed in the *thwm*, the ‘seas.’ As further development of the idea shows, the chief features of the primeval chaos were those of the raw material of the universe.<sup>29</sup>

Umberto Cassuto described the situation of the primeval chaos before creation as follows: “In this chaos of unformed matter, the heaviest materials were naturally at the bottom, and the waters, which were the lightest, floated on top. This apart, the whole material was an undifferentiated, unorganized, confused and lifeless agglomeration. It is this terrestrial state that is called *thw wbhwh* [a formless waste].”<sup>30</sup> I would add that there can be little doubt that the Hebrew word *thw* (tohu) when used alone with *wbhwh* means primarily a desert or wasteland.<sup>31</sup> As the *Harper’s Bible Commentary* notes:

As most modern translations recognize, the P creation (1:1-2:4a) begins with a temporal clause (“When, in the beginning, God created”); such a translation puts Gen. 1:1 in agreement with the opening of the J account (2:4b) and with other ancient, Near Eastern creation myths.... The description of the precreation state in v.2 probably means to suggest a storm-tossed sea: darkness, a great wind, the watery abyss. God’s superiority over the sea here and in vv. 9-10 may be reminiscent of the ancient Near Eastern mythic portrait of creation as the victory of order over hostile, chaotic forces like the divinized sea.<sup>32</sup>

Now this parallel is important for another reason: It completely undermines Adams’ argument that the Old Testament creation accounts do not speak of a preexistent chaos because they differ from other ancient Near

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<sup>29</sup> Luis I. J. Stadelmann, S.J., *The Hebrew Conception of the World* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1970), 12.

<sup>30</sup> Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, 1* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1951), 23.

<sup>31</sup> David Toshio Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2: A Linguistic Investigation* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 39-43.

<sup>32</sup> John Kselman, “Genesis,” in James L. Mays, ed., *Harper’s Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 89.

Eastern accounts. The account showing the structure of Genesis 1 to be a construct beginning with a temporal clause is from the bible itself. Nevertheless, the reading of Genesis 1:1-3 as a statement of creation by organizing chaos is also strongly supported by comparisons with other ancient Near Eastern accounts – despite Adams’ assertion that the Bible must be utterly unique.

**3.2.3 The Argument From Near Eastern Sources.** It is typical of ancient Near Eastern creation accounts to begin with a parenthetical statement describing the chaos present at the time the creation begins. Indeed, these same sources show that the first line of such works functions as both a title of the entire work and a temporal clause. The Sumerian tale *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World*, begins with such a title and temporal clause in words very similar to Genesis 1:1-3:

After heaven had been moved away from earth,  
After earth had been separated from heaven,  
After the name of man had been fixed....<sup>33</sup>

However, the most strikingly similar text is the Babylonian *Enuma elish* which begins by describing the primordial state of the world before the birth of the gods when only two primeval forces existed: *Apsu* or fresh water and *Tiamat* or salt water – both in a chaotic state:

When on high the heavens had not been named,  
Nor earth below pronounced by name,  
Apsu, the first one, the begetter,  
And maker Tiamat, who bore them all  
Had mixed their waters together,  
But had not formed pastures, nor discovered reed-beds,  
When yet no gods were manifest,  
Nor names pronounced, nor destinies decreed,  
Then gods were born within them.<sup>34</sup>

As Speiser notes, the importance of the parallel with the *Enuma elish* is threefold. First, both accounts have the same structure: “the related, and probably normative, arrangement at the beginning of the *Enuma elish* exhibits exactly the same kind of structure: dependent temporal clause (lines 1-2); parenthetic clauses (3-8); main clause (9). Thus, grammar, context, and parallels point uniformly in the same direction.”<sup>35</sup> That direction is taking Genesis to teach that when God began to create there was already a preexisting chaos.

Second, the *Enuma elish* supports the view that Genesis 1:1 is separated from verse two because it also functions as a title of the work. More specifically, this form adopts the so-called *telodeth* formula. The Hebrew word *telodeth* means “generations.” Genesis 2:4a is translated: “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when God created them.” The *telodeth* formula occurs at the beginning of works as a title (see e.g., 5:1 [of Adam], 6:9 [of Noah], 10:1 [of Shem, Ham and Japheth], 11:10 [of Shem] 11:27 [of Terah], 25:19 [of Ishmael], 25:9 [of Issac], 36:1 [of Esau], and 37:2 [of Jacob]). In all of these occurrences, the word *telodeth* introduces the section as a title or caption. Thus, Genesis is also likely to be taken as a title just as in the *Enuma elish* and the J creation account in Genesis 2:4a. When it is understood in this sense, then the second verse actually describes the pre-creation state of the world as a watery chaos and God’s creation begins with verse 3 by creating light. As Bernhard Anderson stated:

Stylistic and contextual considerations ... favor the view that Gen. 1:1 is an independent sentence that serves as a preface to the entire creation account. On this view, the story actually begins in

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<sup>33</sup> Text in Samuel L. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1970), 37.

<sup>34</sup> In Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 231.

<sup>35</sup> Speiser, *Genesis*, 12.

v. 2 with a portrayal of uncreated chaos as the presupposition and background of God's creative work. The notion of creation out of nothing was undoubtedly too abstract for the Hebrew mind; in any case, the idea of a created chaos would have been strange to a narrative that is governed by the view that creation is the antithesis to chaos (cf., Isa. 45:18).<sup>36</sup>

Third, these ancient Near Eastern works show that the Priestly account in Genesis 1 shares a strikingly similar world view. As Ronald Simkins noted, the ancient Near Eastern sources adopt metaphors of separation and differentiation as God's mode of creation. In the Sumerian *Gilgamesh* epic, creation begins with the separation of earth from heaven. In the *Creation of the Pickax Enlil*, another Sumerian account, the god of air separates the originally united heaven and earth. "In both of these myths, the creation metaphors present creation as the process of differentiation through the establishment of boundaries."<sup>37</sup> Of course, the *Enuma elish* begins with the same metaphor of separation of heaven and earth by splitting and arranging the corpse of Tiamat, representing the division of the chaotic waters. The Hebrew word *tehom* found in Genesis 1: 2 is a cognate of the Babylonian word *tiamat* meaning "sea" and is translated as the "deep" in the KJV. As Simkins observed:

Creation in the Bible is never *ex nihilo*, "from nothing." This doctrine was not formulated until the Hellenistic Age.... In the biblical tradition, and in the ancient Near East in general, God always works with some material that is either primordial or already there when God begins to create, though the ancient Israelites would not have made this distinction.... God creates either through establishing order and fixing boundaries, usually by separating a primordial substance, or through the natural physical processes of birth and growth. In the Yahwist creation myth the earth itself is primordial. God never creates the earth, but the earth without God's creative activity is barren and lifeless.<sup>38</sup>

Coote and Ord explain why Genesis 1:1 must be seen as a title which assumes that a preexisting watery chaos already existed:

Readers of the creation story in Genesis 1 are frequently puzzled by the statement that the first thing God created was "sky and earth." They observe that although the text says God created the sky and earth on the first day, it was not until the second day, when God made the "firmament," that the sky came into being. They also note that although light and darkness, day and night, are said to be created on this same first day, it was not until the fourth day that the sun, moon, and stars were made. The answer to this puzzle is that the opening statement that God created "sky and earth" is a summary anticipating the whole of what follows.... Obviously much did already exist, however, at the moment of creation. The ocean was present. The word for ocean is related to the Babylonian word for Tiamat. The RSV follows the traditional rendering "deep," which perhaps was meant to suggest an abyss of nothing, whereas it actually should suggest deep water. A wind likewise existed. As creation begins, the scene involves the ocean, in the darkness, with the wind blowing. Something already exists, but what is not present is order.<sup>39</sup>

It is easy to forget that the Hebrews who wrote the Old Testament did not have a scientific world view. We know that the sun did not come into being after the earth. The Hebrews did not know that. The earth is separated from heaven before the sun is created in Genesis 1. This order makes no sense given our present world view. However, if we place the Hebrew creation texts in the ancient Near Eastern context from which it came, then it begins to make sense. While it would be improper to fail to recognize that there are distinctive differences

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<sup>36</sup> Bernhard Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation*, 30.

<sup>37</sup> Ronald Simkin, *Creator and Creation: Nature in the Worldview of Ancient Israel* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 77.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>39</sup> Robert B. Coote and David Robert Ord, *In the Beginning: Creation and the Priestly History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 50-51.

between Israel's faith and the view of other ancient Near Eastern people; nevertheless, it is equally important to recognize that the Bible is not a scientifically accurate account of the cosmos – nor was it meant to be. Bernhard Anderson stated it well:

In a formal sense Israel's creation faith and the cosmological views of antiquity have numerous points of contact. The Bible takes for granted a three-storied structure of the universe: heaven, earth, and underworld (Ex. 20:4). According to this *Weltbild*, the earth is a flat surface, corrugated by mountains and divided by rivers and lakes. Above the earth, like a huge dome, is spread the firmament that holds back the heavenly ocean and supports the dwelling place of the gods (Gen. 1:8; Ps. 148:4). The earth itself is founded on pillars that are sunk into the subterranean waters (Pss. 24:2; 104:5), in the depths of which is located Sheol, the realm of death. In this view, the habitable world is surrounded by the waters of chaos, which unless held back, would engulf the world, a threat graphically portrayed in the flood story (Gen. 7:11; c.f. 1:6) and in various poems in the Old Testament (e.g., Pss. 46:1-4; 104:5-9).<sup>40</sup>

I have provided a picture of the Hebrew view of the world to give a better idea of the view presupposed in the Old Testament and indeed throughout the ancient Near East (See Figure 1). This particular picture of the world is extensively documented in Stadelmann's work, *The Hebrew Conception of the World*. Of immediate interest is the status of the chaotic waters of the deep that simply appear in Genesis 1:3 without having been created by God and the firmament in 1:6-8 that God creates to divide the waters under the firmament from those above the firmament. The reason that this division is important is because Hebrews thought of this firmament as a solid dome dividing the heavens from the waters *above*. The firmament, in Hebrew *raqia'*, was conceived as a solid dome which divided between the heavens and the primeval waters. As Paul Seely concluded in an extensive study of the meaning of *raqia'*, the firmament cannot mean merely an atmospheric expanse as conservative scholars since the time of Calvin have argued; rather, the Hebrews thought of the firmament as a solid dome above the sun, moon and stars and the primeval waters were above the sky.<sup>41</sup> The sun, moon and stars were in the sky *below* the firmament. *The New International Commentary on the Bible* translates Genesis 1:6-8 as follows:

And God said, 'Let there be a vault in the middle of the waters, and let it be a separator between the waters and waters.

So, God made the vault and he separated between the waters beneath the vault and waters above the vault. And so it was.  
God called the vault 'sky.' And there was evening and morning - a second day.<sup>42</sup>

The reason that this is important is that God creates only those things located in the "heavens and the earth." The primeval ocean above the vault or firmament is never created by God; rather, it is the assumed background already existing when God begins to create the heavens (sky) and the earth. Simkins asserted: "There is a slight anomaly in the Priestly writer's symmetrical scheme because the waters are never created. They are primordial. God creates the sky by separating the waters above ... from the waters below."<sup>43</sup> As Seely noted:

The question, however, naturally arises in the modern mind, schooled as it is in the almost infinite nature of sky and space: Did scientifically naive peoples really believe in a solid sky, or were they just employing a mythological or poetic concept?.... The answer to these questions ...

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<sup>40</sup> Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation*, 20.

<sup>41</sup> Paul H. Seely, "The Firmament and the Water Above Part I: The Meaning of *raqiaa* in Gen 1:6-8," *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (Fall 1991), 227-40 and "Part II," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (Spring 1992), 47-63.

<sup>42</sup> *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, R.K. Harrison, ed., (Grand Rapids: Michigan, 1990), 121-22.

<sup>43</sup> Simkins, *Creator and Creation*, 196.

is that scientifically naive peoples thought of the solid sky as an integral part of their physical universe. And it is precisely because ancient peoples were scientifically naive that they did not distinguish between the appearance of the sky and their scientific concept of the sky. They had no reason to doubt what their eyes told them was true, namely that the stars above were fixed in a solid dome and the sky literally touched the earth at the horizon. So they equated appearance with reality and concluded that the sky must be a solid part of the universe just as much as the earth itself.<sup>44</sup>

This observation is important to note because neither Genesis nor any other creation account in the Old Testament deals with anything other than the creation of the earth and what is visible from it to the naked human eye. The sky appeared to be the deep blue of the ocean to them, so they thought of it as a boundary holding back chaotic waters. The Bible simply does not address the creation of the universe as we know it. It speaks of creation in a form that we cannot accept as a scientifically accurate description of matters. Thus, whatever else the creation stories in the Old Testament may tell – and Genesis is only one of many in the Old Testament that assume this paradigm of the world – it does not tell us about creation of the scientific view of the universe as a whole as C&C would have it. It is true that the phrase “heavens (sky) and earth” is a merism that represents all that there is. But it is “all that there is” from the Hebrew perspective and not from the modern perspective. When the Book of Moses says that God gave Moses “only an account of this earth,” (Moses 1:35) that statement reflects reality – and it is reality limited by what the ancient writers could grasp.

I conclude that C&C commit a grand category mistake by equating their dogma of creation *ex nihilo* in the Bible with creation *ex nihilo* as they argue for it based upon the Big Bang theory and modern scientific cosmology. These two arguments don't even address the same thought world – for the world as conceived by the Hebrews is not something that we can take seriously as a description of reality – except to the extent it teaches us deep truths about God and his covenant relationship to us. He creates us as his people by separating us from the profane world, by setting us apart as holy. He creates us as his people by entering into a covenant relationship with us. If we heed his laws which we accept by covenant, then our world is well ordered and good and not chaotic and threatening. That is the primary meaning of the Old Testament creation stories. Ludwig Kohler stated it well:

The Old Testament story of creation does not answer the question “How did the world come into being?” With the answer: “God created it,” but answers the question “From where does the history of God's people derive its meaning?” with the answer: “God has given the history of His people its meaning through creation.”<sup>45</sup>

The Old Testament teaches us that a part of the reason that chaos continually threatens us is that chaos precedes the creation. Without God's actively organizing the chaos, the world would collapse into chaos once again. The Old Testament creation accounts do not teach creation *ex nihilo*. To the contrary, the Old Testament teaches us that God created by organizing a chaos into a world reflecting the goodness of the order he established. As Jon Levinson concluded: “Two and a half millennia of Western theology have made it easy to forget that throughout the ancient Near Eastern world, including Israel, the point of creation is not the production of matter out of nothing, but rather of the emergence of a stable community in a benevolent and life-sustaining order.”<sup>46</sup>

I also want to be clear that Mormon doctrines are not the same as the cosmogonies and myths of the Sumerians, Babylonians and Egyptians, despite Jim Adams' attempt to equate them. Such a view is absurd. Mormons don't see God as the personification of the sky and the earth any more than the ancient Hebrews did. Just how Adams could so carefully distinguish Israel's views from those of her Near Eastern neighbors and then fail to note any distinctions at all between Mormon beliefs and those of the ancient Near East is beyond me. In the

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, Part I, 227. See also, Richard J. Clifford, “The Hebrew Bible and the Theology of Creation,” *Theological Studies* 46 (1985), 508-12; and Richard J. Clifford, “Cosmogonies in the Ugaritic Texts and in the Bible,” *Orientalia* 53 (1984), 184-88.

<sup>45</sup> Ludwig Kohler, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. A.S. Todd (Phil: Westminster, 1957), 87.

<sup>46</sup> Jon Levinson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 12.

*Enuma elish* Marduk struggles to overcome chaos. In Genesis 1 there is no struggle. The Mormon God does not struggle against chaos; rather, he persuades it effortlessly through love and trust to do his will. God creates like a hot knife slicing effortlessly through butter to divide asunder the heavens and the earth, or the waters from the earth, or the waters above and the waters below. God is in fact transcendent in the Old Testament in a way that God is not transcendent in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. God transcends the heavens and the earth in the sense that he is distinct from them and has mastery over them – he is not the personification of heavens and earth as in ancient Near Eastern accounts. However, in the Hebrew scripture God is not transcendent in a sense that assumes creation *ex nihilo* as being above and beyond the spatio-temporal world altogether. After all, he walked in the garden with Adam. He enters into real relations with us. I believe that Jon Levinson, the Albert A. List Professor of Jewish Studies at the Harvard Divinity School, stated well his critique of those who read *creatio ex nihilo* into the Bible:

Although it is now generally recognized that *creatio ex nihilo*, the doctrine that God produced the physical world out of nothing, is not an adequate characterization of creation in the Hebrew Bible, the legacy of this dogmatic or propositional understanding lives on and continues to distort the perceptions of scholars and laypersons alike. In particular, a false finality or definiteness is ascribed to God’s act of creation and, consequently, the fragility of the created order and its vulnerability to chaos tend to be played down .... and a static idea of creation then becomes the cornerstone of an overly optimistic understanding of the theology of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>47</sup>

Jon Levinson also summarizes well the evidence showing that Genesis 1 teaches that God created by organizing a preexisting chaos and that there were already other beings in existence when God set about his work of creation:

Nowhere in the seven-day creation scheme of Genesis 1 does God create the waters; they are most likely primordial. The traditional Jewish and Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* can be found in this chapter only if one translates its first verse as “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” and understands it to refer to some comprehensive creative act on the first day. But that translation, subject to doubt since the Middle Ages, has fallen into disfavor among scholars, and the rest of the chapter indicates that the heaven was created on the second day to restrain the celestial waters (vv. 9-10), and the earth on the third day (vv. 9-10). It is true – and quite significant – that the God of Israel has no myth of origin. Not a trace of theogony can be found in the Hebrew Bible. God has no nativity. But there do seem to be other divine beings in Genesis 1, to whom God proposes the creation of humanity, male and female together: “Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness” (v. 26). When were these other divine beings created? They too seem to have been primordial.... From the biblical accounts of the divine assembly in session, it would appear that these “sons of God/gods” played an active role and made fresh proposals to God, who nonetheless had the final say.<sup>48</sup>

Jim Anderson argues that we cannot understand Genesis 1:1-3 to refer to uncreated, chaotic waters because of Psalm 104. Psalm 104 images Genesis 1:1-3 in poetic form. Adams quotes Psalm 104:5-9:

5You are the one who set the earth on its foundations,  
it cannot move for ever and ever.  
6The deep covered it like a garment.  
The waters stood above the mountains.  
7From your rebuke they fled;  
from you loud chamber they ran away.  
8They rose up to the mountains, ran down into the valleys  
to the place that you set for them.  
9You established a boundary they cannot pass,

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, xxix.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

hey will never return to cover the earth.

Adams then concludes: “In this text we see that God initially set the earth upon its immovable foundations (v. 5) and *then* the mountains are covered with ‘the deep’ (v. 6). Clearly, ‘the deep’ is not some primordial realm or preexistent reality out of which God created. The earth and the mountains are described as already having been created before “the deep.”<sup>49</sup> However, Adams is fudging a bit here. First, the waters of the deep are not said to be created at all in Psalm 104. They merely run over and cover the mountains and the earth that God creates precisely because they are already there. More importantly, Adams has taken the sequence out of order, for he fails to note that in the prior verses in Psalm 104 the waters already existed when God created his heavenly palace *before* God created the heaven and the earth:

1O Lord my God, thou art very great;  
    thou art clothed with honor and majesty.  
2Who covered thyself with light as with a garment:  
    who stretches out the heavens like a curtain:  
3Who lays the beams of his chambers *in the waters*:  
    who makes clouds his chariot:  
    who walks upon the wings of the wind.

God created his heavenly palace amidst the already existing waters. The waters were there already when God set the foundation of the earth. Further, the order suggested by Adams is not the same order of creation as in Genesis 1– God creates the earth on the fourth day (Genesis 1:10) and he divided the waters on the second day (Genesis 1:6-8). Thus, Psalm 104 does not attempt to give the order of creation as Adams assumes. As Carroll Stuhlmueller noted in her commentary on the Psalms: “The language of praise (Ps. 104:1-4) and of cosmogony (vv. 5-9) can be traced back into ancient mythology: the Lord’s palace built above the heavenly waters (Pss. 11:4; 18:5-10; 29:10), surrounded by stars and moon and wind as attendants and servants (Pss. 29:82; 103:20). Psalm 104:9, repeated almost verbatim in Jer. 5:22, refers to the taming of primeval chaos.”<sup>50</sup> In reality, Psalm 104 is strong confirmation that the chaos preceded God’s creative activities; not the other way around as Adams argues.

**4.0 The New Testament.** C&C next turn to the New Testament. They assert that several passages expressly teach *creatio ex nihilo*. However, in so arguing they once again swim against the tide of the contrary conclusions reached by the vast majority of scholars who have treated this issue. However, before considering the New Testament passages cited by C&C I want to deal with a passage that C&C ignore. 2 Peter 3:5 presents a New Testament text which clearly refers back to the Old Testament teaching that God created by organizing the preexistent, chaotic waters. In fact, this scripture seems to have been directed at people like C&C who ignore it:

They deliberately ignore the fact that long ago there were the heavens and the earth, formed out of water and through water by the Word of God, and that it was through these same factors that the world of those days was destroyed by the floodwaters.

This text rather clearly teaches creation of heaven and earth *per verbum* out of the existing waters. It recalls the interpretation of Genesis which we have already discussed that the waters existed before the heavens and the earth and they were organized out of this preexisting chaos which provided the water for the great flood. In essence, the flood represents a return of the world to chaos because the people that God had created had not obeyed his commands.

Of course, C&C do not deal with this text. They begin with Hebrews 11:3 which says in the KJV:

Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.

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<sup>49</sup> NMC, 195.

<sup>50</sup> In *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, 480.



Another translation states: “It is by faith that we understand that the ages were created by a word from God, so that from the invisible the visible world came to be.”<sup>51</sup> What this text says is that God created visible things literally “from” invisible things (*eis to me ek fainomenon to blepomenon gegonenai*). However, the invisible things are not nothing; they already exist. C&C wrongly assume that invisible things can be equated with absolute nothing. C&C argue that the reference to creation by the word of God “ would conflict with the idea that the visible world was made out of materials in the invisible world.” However, we can see from 2 Peter 3:5 just cited that this argument simply begs the question, for 2 Peter 3:5 teaches that God created *from the waters* by his Word or command. Thus, the notion that creation by God’s command or word must assume creation *ex nihilo* is simply false.

C&C also argue that the reference to those “things which are not seen” teaches *creatio ex nihilo* because it “denies that the universe originated in primal material or any thing observable.”<sup>52</sup> Yet this is simply argument by assertion without any evidence or reasoning to back it up. Moreover, it is demonstrably wrong. For example, C&C also cite *Second Enoch* (probably written about the same time as Hebrews – 70 A.D.) which uses very similar language about God’s command and things visible created from the invisible. They argue that this text too “reflects the doctrine of creation out of nothing in a couple of places.”<sup>53</sup> However, they fail to cite the entire relevant text. They cite 2 Enoch 25:1ff as follows: “I command ... that visible things should come down from invisible.” However, the entire relevant text provides:

Before anything existed at all, from the very beginning, whatever exists I created from the non-existent, and from the invisible the visible.... For before any visible things had come into existence, I, the ONE, moved around in the invisible things, like the sun, from east to west and from west to east.<sup>54</sup>

In context it is clear that the “invisible things” are not absolute nothing; rather, they are things which are not visible. That these invisible things already exist in some sense is demonstrated by the fact that God moves among them. The translator, J.I. Anderson, explained: “The impression remains that God was not the only existent being or thing from the very first .... God made the existent out of the non-existent, the visible out of the non-visible. So the invisible things co-existed with God before he began to make anything.... Vs. 4 is quite explicit on this point: Before any of the visible things had come into existence, God was moving around among the invisible things.”<sup>55</sup> Not only does this text not teach *creatio ex nihilo*, it teaches the very opposite! The visible things are created out of invisible things. This reading of “invisible things” as already existing realities is also very strongly supported by Romans 1:19-20: “Because that which may be known is manifest in them; for God hath shown it unto them. For the *invisible things* of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power.” Note that the invisible things already exist to be seen through the power of God. This scripture fits well with the Mormon view that before God created the earth out of matter which is visible to us, he had already created a world out of spirit that is not visible to us. (See, Moses 6:36) This same view is expressed in Hebrews – things which are not visible or are unseen are still things which already exist. As James N. Hubler observed in his excellent Ph.D. Dissertation on the emergence of the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*: “the notion of creation *me ek fainomenon* was comfortable for dualists and Stoics, because it lacked all qualities.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, both the Platonic dualists and Stoics could easily see the reference to “things invisible” as a type of formless matter that lacks any qualities of individuation, but a form of matter nonetheless.

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<sup>51</sup> *The New Testament of the New Jerusalem Bible* (NTJB).

<sup>52</sup> *NMC*, 134.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 144.

<sup>54</sup> 2 Enoch, in James Charlesworth, ed., F. I. Anderson, trans. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1983), 142.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 142, note f.

<sup>56</sup> James Noel Hubler, *Creatio ex Nihilo: Matter, Creation, and the Body in Classical and Christian Philosophy Through Aquinas*, Ph.D. Diss. University of Pennsylvania (Ann Arbor: UNI Dissertation Services, 1997), 108.

The view that the “invisible things” are not “absolute nothing” is also supported by Colossians 1:16:

For in him were created all things  
in heaven and on earth:  
everything visible and everything invisible,  
thrones, ruling forces, sovereignties, powers –  
all things were created through him and for him.  
He exists before all things. (NTJB)

In this scripture it seems fairly evident that the “everything invisible” includes things that already exist in heaven such as the angelic powers: thrones, dominions, principalities and powers. Further, the “invisible things” are also created by God, yet the fact that they are invisible only means that they are not seen by mortal eyes; not that they don’t exist. The reference to invisible things does not address whether they were made out of a preexisting matter. However, 2 Corinthians 4:18 states that these invisible things are eternal: “the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

C&C next cite Romans 4:17: “Abraham is our father in the eyes of God, in whom he put his faith, and who brings the dead to life and calls into existence what does not yet exist (*kalountos ta me onta os onta*).” (NTJB) Keith Norman has already pointed out that it is contradictory for God to call to that which does not exist.<sup>57</sup> Hubler comments: “The verse’s ‘non-existent’ need not be understood in an absolute sense of non-being. *Me onta* refers to the previous non-existence of those things which are now brought into existence. There is no direct reference to the absence or presence of a material cause.”<sup>58</sup> In other words, the Greek text suggests the view that God has brought about a thing which did not exist as *that thing* before it was created. For example, this use of *me onta* is consistent with the assertion that “God called forth the earth when before that the earth did not exist.” However, the fact that the earth did not exist before it was created as *the earth* does not address the type of material that was used to make the earth.

Note also that Romans 4:17 uses the negative *me* referring to merely relative non-being and not to absolute nothing as required by the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. At this point it is important to understand a bit about the ancient concept of matter in the Greek speaking world. We must distinguish between relative non-being (Greek *me onta*) and absolute nothing (Greek *ex ouk onta*). Platonic philosophy, both neo-Platonism and Middle Platonism, posited the existence of an eternal material substratum that was, nevertheless, so removed from the One ground of Being that it was often said to not have “real” existence. As Goldstein observed: “Platonists called pre-existent matter ‘the non-existent’.”<sup>59</sup> This relative non-existence is indicated by the Greek negative *me*, meaning “not” or “non-”, in relation to the word for existence or being, *ontos*.<sup>60</sup> When the early Christian theologians speak of creation that denies that there was any material state prior to creation, however, they use the Greek negation *ouk*, meaning “not in any way or mode.” As Henry Chadwick explained the usage in Philo’s *Stromata*: “In each case the phrase he employs is *ek meontos*, not *ex oukontos*; that is to say, it is not made from that which is absolutely non-existent, but from relative non-being or unformed matter, so shadowy and vague that it cannot be said to have the status of “being,” which is imparted to it by the shaping hand of the Creator.”<sup>61</sup> Edwin Hatch explained that for Platonists: “God was regarded as being outside the world. The world was in its origin only potential being (*to*

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<sup>57</sup> Keith Norman, “Creation Ex Nihilo,” *BYU Studies* 17:3 (Spring 1977), 275-290.

<sup>58</sup> Hubler, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, 109.

<sup>59</sup> Jonathan Goldstein, “The Origins of the Doctrine of Creation Ex Nihilo,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 38 (1987), 187-94.

<sup>60</sup> Francis Young, “Creation Ex Nihilo,” 146.

<sup>61</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 46-47. See also, Keith Norman, “Ex Nihilo,” 300-308.

me on).<sup>62</sup> He explained more fully:

The [Platonic] dualistic hypothesis assumed a co-existence of matter and God. The assumption was more frequently tacit than explicit.... There was a universal belief that beneath the qualities of all existing things lay a substratum or substance on which they were grafted, and which gave to each thing its unity. But the conception of the nature of this substance varied from that of gross and tangible material to that of empty and formless space.... It was sometimes conceived as a vast shapeless but plastic mass, to which the Creator gave form, partly by moulding it as a potter moulds clay, partly by combining various elements as a builder combines his materials in the construction of a house.<sup>63</sup>

Aristotle wrote that things are created from “that which is not” in *de Generatione Animalium* (B5, 741 b 22 f): “For generation is from non-existence into being, and corruption from being back into non-existence.” Here Aristotle says that things are generated “from non-existence (*tou me ontos*)” and pass back into “non-existence (*to me on*)” when they decay. He is using the phrase “from non-existence” in a sense of relative non-being where “things” do not yet exist, but only a formless substratum which has the potentiality or capacity to receive a definite form. This substratum is not absolutely nothing, but not yet a thing. It is “no-thing.” Thus, to say that God called to existence that which “does not exist,” as in Romans 4:17, actually assumes a preexisting substrate which God organizes into a thing that exists by impressing form upon it.

C&C quote James Dunn’s comments on Romans 4:17 who says in relevant part: “As creator he creates without any precondition: he makes alive where there was only death, and he calls into existence where there was nothing at all. Consequently that which has been created, made alive in this way, must be totally dependent on the creator, the life-giver, for its very existence and life.”<sup>64</sup> However, it easy to see that Paul’s analogy of God’s bringing the dead to life in the same way he creates “things that are not” does not support *creatio ex nihilo*. Resurrection does not presuppose that the dead do not exist in any way prior to their resurrection. Nor does it presuppose that previously they did not have bodies which are reorganized through resurrection. Just as God does not create persons for the first time when he brings them to life through resurrection, so God does not create out of absolute non-being “things that are not.”

C&C also argue that John 1:3 supports the idea of creation out of nothing: “All things were made by him; and without him there was not any thing made that was made.” (KJV) C&C assert of this verse: “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 the originator of everything.”<sup>65</sup> However, this verse says nothing about the creation of “pre-existent matter.” One must assume that the word “create” must mean to create *ex nihilo* to arrive at this conclusion, for this verse only says that if some thing was made, then it was made through the Word. This verse does not address anything that may not have been made. More importantly, it does not address *how* those things were made. The point of this verse is not *how* but *through whom* the creation was made. Anything that was made was made by Christ. However, since the translation one reviews is so critical to interpretation, I will provide another translation: “All things came about through him and without him not one thing came about, which came about.”<sup>66</sup> The question is whether the final phrase “which came about” is part of this verse, or the beginning of the next verse. As Hubler states:

The punctuation of [John 1:3] becomes critical to its meaning. Proponents of *creatio ex materia* could easily qualify the creatures of the Word to that “which came about,” excluding matter.

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<sup>62</sup> Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1970), 178.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 194-95.

<sup>64</sup> *NMC*, 136.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Hubler, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, 108.

Proponents of *creatio ex nihilo* could place a period after “not one thing came about” and leave “which came about” to the next sentence. The absence of a determinate tradition of punctuation as New Testament [Greek] leaves room for both interpretations. Neither does creation by word imply *ex nihilo* (contra Bultmann) as we have seen in Egypt, Philo, and Midrash Rabba, and even in 2 Peter 3:5 where the word functions to organize pre-cosmic matter.<sup>67</sup>

Of course, the reality of this text is that it simply does not consciously address the issue of creation *ex nihilo*. A person who accepts creation from chaos can easily say that there is not any “thing” that came about which is not a result of the Word’s bringing it about, but there is a chaos in which there is not yet any “things” which existed prior to creation.

C&C end their treatment of New Testament texts which they allege imply *creatio ex nihilo* with this charge:

In light of the above discussion, it is a serious distortion to portray the doctrine of creation out of nothing as a purely post-biblical phenomena, as some Mormon apologists have done. *Where in the relevant scholarly references to which LDS scholars point is there a rigorous exegetical treatment of the relevant biblical passages on creation?* The silence is deafening.<sup>68</sup>

Such an assertion by C&C seems to be mere bravado. Keith Norman has provided at least an initial start to such an exegesis which I take up here.<sup>69</sup> In addition, there really is no need for Mormons to provide such an analysis because it has been provided by non-Mormons who don’t have a theological axe to grind – and indeed by some who accept the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* but are honest enough to admit that they cannot find such a doctrine in the Bible.<sup>70</sup> The fact is that Hubler’s dissertation engages in a fairly rigorous exegesis of the relevant biblical passages. He reaches a conclusion radically different than C&C:

Several New Testament texts have been educed as evidence of *creatio ex nihilo*. None makes a clear statement which would have been required to establish such an unprecedented position, or which we would need as evidence of such a break with tradition. None is decisive and each could easily be accepted by a proponent of *creatio ex materia*.<sup>71</sup>

Similarly, in his extensive study of the origin of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in Christian thought Gerhard May explains why he does not believe that the New Testament texts can be taken to refer to *creatio ex nihilo*.

The passages repeatedly quoted as New Testament witnesses for the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* are Romans 4:17, where Paul says that God ‘calls into being the things that are not’, and Hebrews 11:3 where it says that ‘the visible came forth from the invisible.’ But these formulations fit with the statements in hellenistic Judaism ... about creation of non-being, or out of non-being, and mean, no more than those, to give expression to creation out of nothing in the strict sense, as a contradiction in principle of the doctrine of world-formation.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *NMC*, 137. Emphasis in C&C.

<sup>69</sup> Keith Norman, “Ex Nihilo,” 294-301.

<sup>70</sup> Francis Young and Bruce Waltke are excellent examples of such brave traditional Christians.

<sup>71</sup> Hubler, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, 107-08.

<sup>72</sup> Gerhard May, *The Doctrine of ‘Creation out of Nothing’ in Early Christian Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 27.

May explains that *creatio ex nihilo* is a metaphysical doctrine that requires conscious formulation, and such an approach was completely foreign to any of the biblical writers: “The biblical presentation of the Almighty God who created the world ... possess for early Christianity an overwhelming self-evidence and was not perceived as a metaphysical problem. This new question first concerned the theologians of the second century, deeply rooted in philosophical thinking, and wanting consciously to understand the truth of Christianity as the truth of philosophy.”<sup>73</sup> The truth is that these scholars feel that a “rigorous” exegesis is not needed to show that these biblical passages do not address the issue of *creatio ex nihilo* because it is fairly obvious on the face of such passages that they do not consciously formulate such a metaphysical doctrine. The argument that these texts must *assume* the doctrine of creation out of nothing simply begs the question – especially where the text does not address the issue *and does not engage in the type of philosophical analysis necessary to formulate the doctrine*. To force a view on the text which it does not address with the argument that the view must be implicit always risks simply reading one’s own theological preferences into the text. I believe that is precisely what C&C have done. An approach which resists reading *creatio ex nihilo* into the text unless it is expressly formulated is especially appropriate where, as we shall see, the earliest Christian philosophers assumed that the doctrine of creation from preexisting chaos was *the* Christian view. The issue simply had not been addressed or settled prior to the end of the second century when the adoption of a middle-Platonic view of God and matter as a background assumption of discourse made adoption of *creatio ex nihilo* the only rational doctrine to adopt.

C&C also assert that Mormons have simply failed to address the biblical evidence:

One wonders what LDS scholars would take as unambiguous evidence for creation out of nothing in Scripture (or even extra-biblical sources). It seems that they would not be satisfied with any formulation in a given text other than “creation out of absolutely nothing” or the like before admitting the possibility of finding evidence of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Apart from the strong case just made for the biblical doctrine of creation out of nothing, we must note that even if the biblical evidence *were* ambiguous and took no position on this issue, the LDS view would not win by default.... On the one hand, to date Mormons have neglected to interact with biblical evidence on this subject; on the other, they have put forth no significant exegetical evidence to support their position.<sup>74</sup>

Well, I can’t speak for other LDS scholars, but what I would like to see as “unambiguous evidence” of *creatio ex nihilo* is evidence that is truly unambiguous and is not better explained by the reading that it teaches the contrary doctrine of *creatio ex materia*. I would like to see a text that actually addresses the issue of *creatio ex nihilo* in a conscious way and not a reading that merely assumes or reads into the text the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. I’d like to see an exegesis of the text that does not depart from the erroneous assumption that if the Old Testament differs from ancient Near Eastern accounts in the sense that it does not contain a theogony then it must be utterly different in *all* respects. Is it too much to ask for a discussion that doesn’t ignore the background assumptions of the world out of which the text arises? For if a text is truly taking a polemical position, then it should make clear that it is rejecting a position of creation out of matter and in favor of creation out of nothing. To see a text as teaching *creatio ex nihilo* coming out of a world that universally adopted *creatio ex materia* requires a text that actually formulates the kinds of philosophical distinctions that underlie the doctrine in the first place. I want to see an exegesis that doesn’t erroneously assume that the word “create” must mean *creatio ex nihilo*. Not only do the biblical texts not make such a distinction consciously, they in fact adopt the contrary position. C&C ignore the arguments in favor of seeing Genesis 1 as a text teaching creation out of chaos. They ignore 2 Peter 3:5 which teaches the same thing. They ignore the fact that in the ancient world “invisible things” are still things but simply not seen. Thus, it is rather clear that a text they take to adopt creation out of nothing, Hebrews 11:3, actually teaches exactly the opposite. This reading is confirmed by an approximately contemporaneous text, *Second Enoch*, that uses almost exactly similar language and clearly adopted creation of preexisting realities. Indeed, C&C are so bent on reading *creatio ex nihilo* into any text that says that God “created that which is from that which is not,” that they even read *creatio ex nihilo* into *Second Enoch* which rather clearly teaches creation *ex materia*. In addition, why should Mormons have to defend their doctrine against evangelical exegesis when

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>74</sup> *NMC*, 138.

evangelicals such as Bruce K. Waltke in his excellent book *Creation and Chaos* have already done a fine job of arguing the very position that Mormons assert?<sup>75</sup>

**5.1 Extra-Biblical Texts C&C Assert Teach *Creatio Ex Nihilo*.** C&C suggest that extra-biblical texts from around the time of Christ from the Dead Sea Scrolls teach creation out of nothing. For example, they quote the Manuel of Discipline found among the Scrolls:

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.<sup>76</sup>

They also quote 1QS XI, 11 which states:

By his knowledge everything shall come into being,  
and all that does exist  
he establishes with his calculations  
and nothing is done outside him.

They assert that in these texts “we see an *ex nihilo* understanding of creation during this period.”<sup>77</sup> However, such a reading forces the text with assumptions that simply are not addressed in the text. These texts do not address whether God used prior material or how God created the earth. All of the texts from the Scrolls cited by C&C address only the fact that God has predestined the course of the world and has knowledge of all things before they occur. The mere assertion that God knew of something before he created it and that he created it through his power are not inconsistent with *creatio ex materia*. For example, I can say that Mormons consistently believe that before God created the earth he knew its whole design and by his knowledge he created all things that come into existence, and yet God created by organizing a chaos. In other words, there is nothing asserted in these texts that is inconsistent with what Mormons believe (except Mormons reject the all-pervasive predestination that the Dead Sea Covenantors believed in).

C&C next refer to a statement by the first century Rabbi Gamaliel as support for *creatio ex nihilo*:

A philosopher asked Rabban Gamaliel “Your God was a great artist, but he found himself good materials which helped him.” Rabban Gamaliel replied, “What are these?” The philosopher said, “Chaos, darkness, waters, wind and depths” [See Genesis 1:2]. Rabban Gamaleil replied, “May the breath go forth from this man. It is written concerning each of these. Concerning the chaos, “Who made peace and created evil” (Isaiah 45:7). Concerning darkness, “Who formed the light and created darkness.” Concerning the waters, “Praise him, heavens and the waters, etc. (Psalm 148:4). Why? Because, “He commanded and they were created” (v. 8). Concerning the wind, “For behold he forms the mountains and creates the wind” (Amos 4:13). Concerning the depths, “When the depths were not, I danced” (Proverbs 8:24)<sup>78</sup>

However, Gamaliel does not adopt the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. David Winston has argued that, “Gamaliel denies that any of these cosmic forces aided God in creation. He does not deny that there was a passive

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<sup>75</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *Creation and Chaos* (Portland: Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1974); “The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3. Pt. III: The Initial Chaos Theory and the Precreation Chaos Theory,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132 (1975), 222-28. See also, W. R. Lane, “The Initiation of Creation,” *Vetus Testamentum* 13 (1963), 64-65. For a response, see Mark F. Rooker, “Genesis 1:1-3: Creation or ReCreation?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July-Sept. 1992).

<sup>76</sup> Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), 75.

<sup>77</sup> NMC, 142.

<sup>78</sup> *Bereshit Rabba* 1.9.

material, merely that there was any material which aided God in the construction of the cosmos.”<sup>79</sup> Hubler places this text in the context of other Rabbinic texts which strictly prohibit any speculation about what there may have been prior to the creation in Genesis. In this context, it seems fairly evident that Gamaliel is actually teaching that God did not have any helpers in the creation – but in good rabbinic fashion, Gamaliel refuses to go beyond that principle and speculate about what might have existed before the creation.<sup>80</sup>

C&C next cite *The Shepherd of Hermas*, a text from the middle second century: “God who dwells in heaven and created that which is out of non-existence (*ktisas ek tou me ontos*).”<sup>81</sup> It is extremely significant that when the first “scriptural” arguments in history were formulated to support the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* by Irenaeus (about 185 A.D.) and Origen (220 A.D.) they do not cite scriptures from the canon accepted by evangelicals and Mormons. Rather, they cite *The Shepherd of Hermas* and 2 Maccabees 7:28.<sup>82</sup> The reason they cite these texts rather than other scriptures is obvious – they did not know of any scriptures which supported the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. It is ironic therefore that even these two texts do not teach the dogma of *creatio ex nihilo*. It is also significant that *Hermas* adopts the technical language for creation from relative non-being *ek tou me ontos* which makes it fairly clear that God created what is from potential being, not from absolute nothing or *ex nihilo*.<sup>83</sup> The same analysis applies to a verse from *Hermas* not cited by C&C which states: “One must believe that God is one and that he has created and ordered and made them from the non-existence (*ek me ontos*) into existence....”<sup>84</sup> As Hubler argued:

Once again, *ek me ontos* alone cannot be taken as absolute denial of a material substrate. By itself this definition is insufficient to carry the burden of a decisive and well-defined position because both *ek* and *on* are notoriously equivocal. *Ek* does not necessarily designate material cause, but it can be used temporally. *On* does not necessarily refer to absolute non-being, but the non-existence of what later came to be. To read *creatio ex nihilo* in *Hermes* (sic) goes far beyond the warrant of the text, which makes no clear claims to the presence or absence of material and provides no discussion of the position.<sup>85</sup>

C&C next cite the Jewish pseudepigraphical book, *Joseph and Aseneth*, written sometime between second century B.C. and the second century A.D. This documents states: “Lord God of ages ... 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.”<sup>86</sup> However, once again C&C fail to note that God’s “making to appear those things which are invisible” actually imputes an existing status to those things which are not seen. Just as in *Second Enoch* and Colossians, the assertion that God makes visible things “from the non-appearing and non-being” simply refers to the already existing, invisible substrate out of which God creates “visible things.” Invisible things are still things, they simply have not been made visible by God.

<sup>79</sup> David Winston, “Creation Ex Nihilo Revisited,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 37 (1986), 88-91.

<sup>80</sup> Hubler, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, 94-101. However, May believes that Gamaliel “denies that Genesis 1:2 refers to unformed matter and thereby implicitly asserts *creatio ex nihilo*.” May, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, 23. Similarly, Goldstein accepts Gamaliel’s statements as an express adoption of creation *ex nihilo*. See, Goldstein, “Creation Ex Nihilo: Recantations and Restatements,” 187. Nevertheless, Gamaliel is not asserting that these realities were not created out of a prior chaos, for he is not addressing that issue; rather, he is asserting that these realities are not helpers to God.

<sup>81</sup> *Shepherd of Hermas*, Visions, 1.1.6.

<sup>82</sup> See, Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 4.20.2; and Origen, *De Principiis*, 1.3.3.

<sup>83</sup> See, Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity*, 197.

<sup>84</sup> *Hermas*, Mandate 1.

<sup>85</sup> Hubler, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, 110.

<sup>86</sup> *Joseph and Aseneth*, 12:1-3.

C&C also cite the *Odes of Solomon* which were composed about 100 A.D. They state:

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.<sup>87</sup>

Once again C&C read the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* into a text that simply does not address the issue. This text stresses that before the world was created God existed and that God created the world by his Word. However, such beliefs are not inconsistent with *creatio ex materia*. In particular, this Ode is a poetic expression of Genesis 1. C&C fail to note that earlier in this same Ode God is said to investigate “that which is invisible” and thus posits an already existing reality prior to God’s creation. Before the creation of the world, God begins his creative activity by investigation of the invisible things:

For the word of the Lord investigates that which is invisible,  
and perceives his thought.

For the eye sees his works,  
and the ears hear his words.

It is he who spread out the earth,  
and placed the waters of the sea. (Ode 16:8-10)

As Mario Erbetta noted in his commentary on the Odes of Solomon: “The poet, taking up again the theme of the word of the creator, finds that it examines that which up until now does not appear, it does not exist, but it still unveils the divine thought. This thought is nothing other than the divine plan before being realized in being.”<sup>88</sup> These invisible things which have not yet been created are not absolute nothing, for they have the power to reveal themselves to God in their potential being and bring about the thought that gives rise to God’s plan to create. As such, the invisible things from which God creates the visible things to be seen already exist as a potentiality. This passage is actually contrary to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.

C&C next cite 2 Baruch 21:4 as evidence for *creatio ex nihilo*: “You who created the earth, the one who fixed the firmament by the word and fastened the height of heaven by the spirit, the one who in the beginning of the world called that which did not yet exist *and they obeyed you*.”<sup>89</sup> However, this text rather clearly does *not* express *creatio ex nihilo*, for God calls to “that which did not yet exist” and it *obeys him*! Ironically, this text seems almost identical to the expression in the *Lecture on Faith*, 1, 22 – “God spake, chaos heard, and the worlds came into order by reason of the faith there was in HIM.” This text is an especially poignant reminder that the phrase “that which did not exist” is something which exists already in potentiality and has capacities to receive yet greater being from God. In particular, “that which does not yet exist” has the capacity to obey God’s command and to be given form by God’s word.

The poster-child “scripture” to support *creatio ex nihilo* in Jewish sources prior to the time of Christ has always been 2 Maccabees 7:28, a text found in the apocrypha and considered scripture by the Catholic Church but not by either Mormons or Protestants. C&C assert that it “states clearly the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.”<sup>90</sup> It

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<sup>87</sup> *Odes of Solomon* 16:18-19. C&C fail to quote the relevant text regarding God’s being among the invisible things, just as they failed to acknowledge similar language in 2 *Enoch*.

<sup>88</sup> Mario Erbetta, *Gli Apocrifi del Nuovo Testamento* (Torino: Marietti, 1975), 634.

<sup>89</sup> Trans. A.F.J. Klijn, “2 (Syriac Apocalypse of) Baruch” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vol. 1, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), 628. C&C fail to quote the relevant text regarding not-being obeying God’s word.

<sup>90</sup> *NMC*, 141.



reads:

I pray you son, look to heaven and earth and seeing everything in them, know that God made them from non-being (*ex ouk onton epoiesen auta ho theos*), and the human race began the same way.

However, this text is quite unclear as to whether creation from absolute nothing is intended. One reason that many scholars believe that 2 Maccabees teaches creation *ex nihilo* is because it uses the phrase *ex ouk onton*, which in the much later Christian apologetic in the late second century was a technical term of art signifying *creatio ex nihilo*. However, in this context it is inappropriate to see the phrase as a philosophical term of art – after all, it is a mother speaking to her son, not a philosopher addressing learned interlocutors. The text is probably best read as creation from non-being in the sense that “an artist, who by impressing form on matter, causes things to exist which did not exist before.”<sup>91</sup> An artist creates something completely new by using preexisting materials. Werner Forster maintains that in 2 Maccabees “the non-existent is not absolute nothing, but ... the metaphysical substance ... in an uncrystallized state.”<sup>92</sup> May states:

The best known, constantly brought forward as the earliest evidence of the conceptual formulation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, is 2 Maccabees 7:28. The need for caution in evaluating this is apparent from the context in which there is talk of creation ‘out of nothing.’ There is no theoretical disquisition on the nature of the creation process, but a parenthetic reference to God’s power.... A position on the problem of matter is clearly not expected in this context. The text implies nothing more than the conception that the world came into existence through the sovereign act of God, and that it previously was not there.<sup>93</sup>

Thus, May suggests that the words “*ouk ex onton*” in 2 Maccabees should be translated “not out of things being, i.e., already existent individual things.” Hubler states: “Non-being [in 2 Maccabees] refers to the non-existence of heavens and earth before God’s creative act. It does not express absolute non-existence, only the prior non-existence of heavens and earth. They were made to exist after not existing.”<sup>94</sup>

**5.2 Extra-Biblical Texts Which Teach *Creatio Ex Materia*.** It is virtually certain that several Jewish texts expressly teach the doctrine of creation out of a preexisting matter or substrate of potential matter (potential matter is sometimes called “non being” or “that which does not exist” – *to me on*). I have already shown that *Second Enoch* (a document very likely dated to about 70-100 A.D., a time contemporaneous with New Testament texts such as Hebrews and probably the Gospel of Matthew) taught that God created visible things from already existing invisible things.<sup>95</sup> *Joseph and Aseneth* also fairly clearly teaches creation from already existing realities, the visible from the invisible. Similarly, 2 Peter 3:5 teaches that God created the world from the already existing waters and Hebrews 11:3 teaches creation from invisible things. Similarly, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, a Jewish work dated from 37-41 A.D. by David Winston,<sup>96</sup> expressly teaches the doctrine of creation from matter:

For your omnipotent hand found no difficulty even in creating the world from formless matter (*ex amouphou hyles*). (*Wisdom of Solomon* 11:17a)

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<sup>91</sup> Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity*, 197.

<sup>92</sup> Werner Forster, “*Ktizo*” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Kittell, ed., Geoffrey W. Bromley trans., 9 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 3:1001.

<sup>93</sup> May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, 7.

<sup>94</sup> Hubler, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, 90.

<sup>95</sup> This date is supported by F. I. Andersen, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 94-97. However, this dating is debated.

<sup>96</sup> Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, 3.

Writing at the beginning of the second century, Philo Judaeus, the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher, also expressly taught that God created out of already existing matter. He stated: “This cosmos of ours was formed out of all that there was of water, and air and fire, not even the smallest particle being left outside.”<sup>97</sup> Elsewhere Philo stated: “when the substance of the universe was without shape and figure God gave it these, when it had no definite character God molded it into definiteness...”<sup>98</sup> C&C suggest that in Philo’s writings perhaps the matter that was organized by God was itself created at a prior instant *ex nihilo*. However, Frances Young has demonstrated why such a reading of Philo’s texts forces an unstated and contrary assumption into the text.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, such a reading simply attributes to the text something it doesn’t address at all.

Also writing at the beginning of the second century, Clement, Bishop of Rome, stated that God “made manifest (*efaneroipoiesas*) the eternal fabric of the world (*eu ten aennaon tou cosmou sistasin*).”<sup>100</sup> Now Clement is important because he is at the very center of the Christian Church as it was then developing. Clement’s view assumed that God had created from an eternally existing substrate. Indeed, he created by “making manifest” what already existed in some form. The lack of argumentation or further elucidation indicates that Clement was not attempting to establish a philosophical position; he was merely stating a generally accepted position that is more tacit than explicit. However, the fact that such a view as assumed is even more significant than if Clement had argued for it. If he had presented an argument for this view, then we can assume that it was either a contested doctrine or a new view. However, because he accepts it as obvious, it appears to be a generally accepted belief in the early Christian Church.

In addition, there are at least four late second-century Christian philosophers who believed that creation out of matter was the established Christian doctrine. Now it must be noticed that as we pass from the biblical texts and into the late-second-century, the scope of discourse passes from a non-technical devotional and revelatory literature to the technical discussions of philosophy. By this time philosophical distinctions and assumptions are used to make sense of the received doctrine. However, the importance of these philosophers is not found in their arguments or philosophies, but the fact that they accepted the background assumption of creation from already existing matter precisely because they thought it was the received Christian doctrine.

For example, Justin Martyr, writing about 165 A.D., taught that Plato had received his doctrine of creation from Moses’ writings:

And that you may learn that it was from our teachers – we mean the account given through the prophets – that Plato borrowed his statement that God, having altered matter which was shapeless, made the world, hear the very words spoken through Moses, who, as shown above, 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*, spake 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 so 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*.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> *De Plantatione* 2.6.

<sup>98</sup> *De Somniis* 2.6.45. However, it has long been debated whether Philo taught *creatio ex nihilo*. See generally, Hubler, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, 91-93; May, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, 10-21.

<sup>99</sup> Frances Young, “Creatio Ex Nihilo,” 139-51.

<sup>100</sup> 1 Clement to the Corinthians, 60, 1. See, Oscar de Gebhardt and Adolphus Harnack, *Patrium Apostolicorum Opera: Clemenitis Romani* (Lipsiae: J.C. Hinrichs, 1876), 8 vols., 1:100.

<sup>101</sup> 1 *Apology* 59, 1-5.

Like Philo, Justin Martyr thought that there was no problem interpreting Genesis in Platonistic terms – God had created by organizing matter. Yet it is Justin’s statement that this is a doctrine “we have learned” that gives pause, for he is speaking to Greeks who agree with Plato. He is arguing that he has learned in the Christian tradition that God created by his word all things by organizing matter, and this is a view older than Plato’s. The verb used by Justin where he says that God created by “altering matter,” is *strepsanta*, meaning “rotating or turning.” Such language echos Plato’s view taught in the *Timaeus* that the demiurge created the cosmos by setting the world soul in rotation and by the same act matter is ordered.<sup>102</sup>

Athenagoras of Athens, writing about 170 A.D., also taught that God created by crystallizing an already existing substrate. He stated that the *Logos* or Word “came forth to be the idea and energizing power of all material things, which lay without attributes, as inactive earth, the grosser particles being mixed up in the purer.”<sup>103</sup> It must be recognized that Athenagoras’s doctrine is thoroughly Platonic notwithstanding the fact that he seeks to defend Christian doctrine. His view of the *Logos* is derived from Platonism.

From the writings of Tertullian, we also know of another Christian philosopher writing around the end of the second century who believed in creation *ex materia*. Hermogenes writes after Tatian and Theophilus have formulated the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. By this time, all parties discussing the issue are departing from Middle-Platonic assumptions about God and matter. Tertullian tells us that Hermogenes argued for the existence of eternal matter based on the Middle-Platonic assumption that matter is evil and therefore cannot be created by a good God:

But we find evil things made by him, although not by choice or will. Because if they were made by his choice or will, he would have made something inconsistent or unworthy of himself. What he does not make by his choice, must be understood to be made by the fault of another thing: from matter without doubt.<sup>104</sup>

Finally, Clement of Alexandria, writing about 220 A.D., also adopted the view that matter is eternal and that God creates by organizing a chaotic substratum. Indeed, Clement uses the phrase “made out of nothing” three times in the *Stromata*, but each time he uses the technical term *ek me ontos* which shows that he is discussing creation from relative non-being rather than *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>105</sup> Clement clearly favored creation *ex materia* in a poem:

O King...  
Maker of all, who heaven and heaven’s adornment  
By the Divine Word alone didst make;  
... according to a well-ordered plan;  
Out of a confused heap who didst create  
This ordered sphere, and from the shapeless mass  
Of matter didst the universe adorn...<sup>106</sup>

These texts are significant because they show that creation out of matter was still the accepted view. Further, as Frances Young indicates, these texts show that *creatio ex nihilo* is not an inheritance from either the Jewish or earliest Christian tradition during the apostolic period. Frances Young argues that the reasons for rejecting the assumption of a Jewish origin for the doctrine include:

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<sup>102</sup> *Timaeus*, 34 A. B 36 E.

<sup>103</sup> *Legatio pro Christianis* X

<sup>104</sup> *Adversus Hermogenes* 2.5.

<sup>105</sup> Keith Norman, “Ex Nihilo,” 308.

<sup>106</sup> Clement, *The Instructor*, 3.12.

- (i) the sparsity of reference to the doctrine in Jewish texts, and indeed the earliest Christian materials, and the problem of interpreting those materials...
- (ii) the contrary evidence of the *Wisdom of Solomon* and the works of Philo, and in early Christianity, of Justin, Athenagoras, Hermogenes and Clement of Alexandria. All of these authors seem quite happy to adopt without question the Platonic view of an active and passive element, namely God plus matter. The fact that Philo can even so speak of things being created *ek ouk onto-n* shows that the term could be understood as consistent with the notion of pre-existent matter which he takes for granted elsewhere. Middle Platonism was married with Jewish tradition without any sense of tension.
- (iii) the lack of interest in *creatio ex nihilo* in Jewish tradition prior to the Middle Ages: the Rabbis condemn speculation about creation as much as about the chariot-throne of God!<sup>107</sup>

Thus, the significance of these texts for Mormons is not that they teach a Mormon view of matter and of God – they do not. Rather, they show that the view that God created *ex nihilo* was an innovation which occurred around the end of the second century A.D. They show that a wholesale adoption of Middle-Platonist views had overrun the “Christian” apologists. As Hubler put it:

*Creatio ex nihilo* marked a major redefinition of the material cosmos by the Christian apologists of the late second century, Tatian and Theophilus of Antioch... For Stoic, Platonist, and Peripatetic alike matter imposed the natural necessity of corruption upon the body. The moral limitations imposed by matter made a bodily resurrection seem offensive. Christian hopes for resurrection seemed misguided both intellectually and morally. The Christian apologists of the late second century struck back by redefining matter as a creature of God, which he directed toward his purposes. The religious claims of the Christian apologists signaled a major philosophical change.<sup>108</sup>

However, it must be noted that the position adopted by Justin, Athenagoras, Hermogenes and Clement of Alexandria that God created by organizing matter was inherently unstable within the context of their theology of God. Each of them adopted a thoroughly Middle Platonic view of God. For example, the early Christians had been accused of being atheists (much the same way Mormons are now accused of not being Christian) because they did not accept the Greek views of God. Instead of responding by defending that the Christian view of God who could reveal himself in flesh, Athenagoras argued that “Christians” believed in the same God as the Greeks:

I have sufficiently shown that they are not atheists who believe in One who is unbegotten, eternal, unseen, impassible, incomprehensible and uncontained: comprehended by mind and reason alone, invested with ineffable light and beauty and spirit and power, by whom the universe is brought into being and set in order and held firm, through the agency of his own *Logos*.<sup>109</sup>

As we shall see, the adoption of the Middle Platonic notion of God by Christian apologists in the late second century was a major motivating factor behind the invention of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. In particular, God was conceived as being completely beyond and independent of the world. Given the Middle Platonic view of God, creation out of nothing became a logical extension of God’s otherness and transcendence.

**6.0 The Creation Out of Nothing of the Doctrine of Creation *Ex Nihilo*.** C&C argue that *creatio ex nihilo* is not a doctrine that developed in the late second century as a result of the interaction between Greek philosophy and Christian philosophers. They argue that the doctrine was already clearly well established prior to that time. Once again, in taking this position C&C are departing from virtually every other scholar who has

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<sup>107</sup> Frances Young, “Creatio Ex Nihilo,” 141.

<sup>108</sup> Hubler, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, v.

<sup>109</sup> *Legatio*, 10.

carefully treated the issue.<sup>110</sup> There conclusion is contrary to the scholarly consensus on this issue. In the extensive investigation regarding the origin of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in his 1995 Doctoral Dissertation, James Hubler concluded:

*Creatio ex nihilo* appeared suddenly in the latter half of the second century C.E. Not only did *creatio ex nihilo* lack precedent, it stood in firm opposition to all of the philosophical schools of the Greco-Roman world. As we have seen, the doctrine was not forced upon the Christian community by their revealed tradition, either Biblical texts or the Early Jewish interpretation of them. As we will also see it was not a position attested in the New Testament or even sub-apostolic writings. It was a position taken by apologists of the late second century, Tatian and Theophilus, and developed by various ecclesiastical writers thereafter, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen. *Creatio ex nihilo* represents an innovation in the interpretive traditions of revelation and cannot be explained merely as a continuation of tradition.<sup>111</sup>

Hubler explores at length why the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* should suddenly appear at the end of second century. The answer is that Christian philosophers accepted two key Middle-Platonist doctrines which made *creatio ex nihilo* the only acceptable position to them. First, they confronted the Middle-Platonic view of the body which “imposed the natural necessity of corruption upon the body.”<sup>112</sup> Thus, the doctrine of bodily resurrection seemed offensive to Greeks because it implied that persons would be eternally embodied in corruptible material bodies. The first “Christian” philosophers to adopt *creatio ex nihilo* attacked this view of matter by redefining the matter of which the body was made as a creation *ex nihilo* of God which he directed to his purposes.<sup>113</sup> Second, these same philosophers also adopted the Middle-Platonic view that whatever is eternal is absolutely immutable or unchangeable. They reasoned (fallaciously) that if God is immutable in this sense then matter cannot be unchanging like God. However, given Platonic and Middle-Platonist views that everything that is eternal is immutable, and matter cannot be immutable, so it follows that matter must be created *ex nihilo*.<sup>114</sup> Gerhard May reaches a similar conclusion in his extensive study:

If one reviews only the orthodox line of development that lead to the formation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, there emerges a picture unambiguous in its main outline. For the primitive Christian thinkers the origin of the world does not yet present a problem. Even in the early second century, after the intensive concern of gnosticism with cosmology had set in, the spokesmen for church Christianity still stand by the traditional statements about the creation of the world and do not allow themselves to get involved in controversy over the new questions. At the same time philosophically educated teachers like Justin interpret the creation as world-formation and establish a relationship between the ‘cosmogony of Moses’ and the myth of world-creation in the *Timaeus*.... Then in the controversy, partly conducted in parallel and partly overlapping with both the gnostic and the philosophical cosmologies, the world-formation model is overcome and the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* formulated as a counter-

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<sup>110</sup> See, Gerhard May, *Creatio ex Nihilo*; David Winston, “Philo’s Theory of Cosmogony,” *Religious Syncretism in Antiquity*, ed. B. A. Pearson (Missoula: Scholar’s Press, 1975), 157-71; David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon: The Anchor Bible Series* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979), 3, 38-40; Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science: The Gifford Lectures 1989-91* (San Francisco, Harper, 1990), 144-46; Frances Young, “Creatio Ex Nihilo,” Jonathan Goldstein, “Creation Ex Nihilo: Recantations and Restatements,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 38:2 (Autumn 1987), 187-194. Goldstein argues that Rabban Gamaliel II adopted the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, but admits that no Jewish text until about 855 A.D. adopted it before or thereafter. However, Young and Hubler disagree with Goldstein and hold, instead, that not even Gamaliel taught *creatio ex nihilo*.

<sup>111</sup> Hubler, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, 102.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, v.

<sup>113</sup> Hubler, 117-21, quoting Tatian, *Oratio ad Grecos* 8.

<sup>114</sup> Hubler, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, v, 121-23; quoting Theophilus, *Ad Autolyicum* II, 4.

proposition, which as early as the beginning of the third century is regarded as a fundamental tenet of Christian theology.<sup>115</sup>

Thus, it is not just Mormons who argue that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is essentially a philosophical innovation at the end of the second century A.D. which was not contained in scripture – it is the accepted view of virtually every scholar who has reviewed the evidence at length except C&C.

Tatian was a pupil of Justin. However, his views were quite different. He begins by defining a new view of God: “Our God does not have an origin in time, he alone is without beginning, while he is the beginning of all.”<sup>116</sup> The Middle Platonists had adopted a view of God as transcendent and utterly independent while limiting his involvement with the world to creation by matter and the necessities inherent in matter. Tatian created a new view of God who is alone in his power and able to create matter out of nothing. Tatian is the first person in history to expressly teach the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>117</sup> The reason that matter had to be created *ex nihilo*, according to Tatian, is that otherwise it would be equal to God:

Neither is matter without cause as is God, nor is it equal in power to God because it is without cause. It was generated and it was not generated by anyone else, but it was expressed only by the demiurge of all. Therefore, we believe that there will be a resurrection of bodies after the consummation of everything, not as the Stoics who dogmatize about cycles of things becoming and the same things becoming again without again. When the ages are once completed for us at the end, there will be a resurrection of humans alone for ever for the purpose of judgement.<sup>118</sup>

Tatian adopted the notion of creation of matter to avoid two problems: first, he sought to avoid the eternal cycles of matter taught by the Stoics. Second, he sought to establish a notion of God transcending the world caught in such an eternal cycle of material necessity. Tatian argued that matter is not an ultimate principle (*anarkon*), it is not uncaused. He adopted this argument to counter the Stoic view that a personal resurrection makes no sense because everything is bound by a necessity of an eternal recurrence in a never-ending cycle (*ekpirosis*). Tatian’s rejection of eternal matter as an *arche*, or uncaused principle like God, removed matter from the eternal cycle of never-ending recurrence and the necessity of *ekpirosis*.<sup>119</sup> Tatian also argued that it is not impossible for God to restore the dead from life through resurrection because he could create individuals out of nothing initially: “God the regent (*monarchia*), when he wills, will completely restore the substance which is visible alone to him to its original state.”<sup>120</sup> For Tatian, matter is the sensible expression of the rational *Logos*, derived from the Middle Platonic doctrine of internal reason which gives form to matter through verbal expression.<sup>121</sup> As Hubler concludes:

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<sup>115</sup> Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, 179.

<sup>116</sup> *Oratio ad Graecos*, 5, 3; in Molly Whitaker, ed., *Tatian: Oratio ad Graecos and Fragments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 8.

<sup>117</sup> May argues that Basilides, a gnostic writing about 160 A.D., was the first person to develop a notion of *creatio ex nihilo*. May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, ch. 3. Basilides stated: “There was a time ... when there was nothing; not even the nothing was there, but simply, clearly and without sophistry, there was nothing at all. When I say ‘there was’, ... I do not indicate a Being, but in order to signify what I want to express I say... that there was nothing at all.” *Ref.* VII.20.2. While I am open to this view, I tend to agree with Frances Young and James Hubler that Basilides is not expressing the concept of *creatio ex nihilo*, but speaking of the limits of language regarding the non-being. See, Frances Young, “Creatio Ex Nihilo,” 147-50.

<sup>118</sup> *Oratio ad Graecos*, 5-6.

<sup>119</sup> Hubler, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, 119.

<sup>120</sup> *Oratio ad Graecos*, 6.

<sup>121</sup> *Oratio ad Graecos*, 5.

The coincidence of *monarchia*, the need to defend the resurrection and the Logos theology conspired to produce an entirely new understanding of the material cosmos and its dependence upon God in Tatian's work. His new vision was seized upon almost immediately by other Christian writers and soon became the new orthodoxy.<sup>122</sup>

So far as we can see, Tatian never considered the alternative of simply rejecting the Stoic view of eternal recurrence as a necessary property of matter. He could easily have done so without adopting an entirely new doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.

Theophilus is the second person in history to adopt expressly the view of *creatio ex nihilo*. He wrote shortly after Tatian, around 180 A.D.. However, Theophilus's reasons for adopting this new dogma went beyond Tatian. Rather than addressing the Stoics as Tatian had done, Theophilus argued directly against the Middle-Platonists. His argument accepted the basic premises of the Middle-Platonists about matter and then attempted to reduce them to absurdity by showing that they led to an anthropomorphic view of God – which Middle Platonists rejected. Thus, it is clear that both Theophilus and the Middle Platonists had a common non-anthropomorphic concept of God; they differed over the concept of matter which they believed was entailed by a view of God as absolutely immutable in the Platonic sense. Whereas the biblical authors had thought of God as unchanging in character and commitment to justice, the Middle Platonists and Theophilus thought of God as unchanging in a metaphysical sense. Theophilus argued:

Plato and those of his school agree that God is ungenerated and the father and maker of all. Then, they suppose matter is divine and ungenerated and they say that it was flourishing with God. If God is ungenerated and all matter is ungenerated, no longer is God the maker of all as the Platonists say, neither is the sovereignty of God shown, by their own account. Further, just as God is changeless because he is ungenerated, so also matter is also ungenerated, it is also changeless and equal to God. For that which is generated is mutable and changeable. The ungenerated is immutable and unchangeable.

For how is it great, if God made the cosmos from subject matter? For even the human artisan when he receives matter from someone, can make what he wants from it. The power of God is made manifest in this, that he made what he wanted from the non-existent (*ex ouk onton*).<sup>123</sup>

Theophilus's use of the expression *ex ouk onton* expresses rejection of the notion that matter is in any sense eternal. It is a clear expression of *creatio ex nihilo*. Theophilus thought that the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* was necessary to adopt for three reasons. First, if God were limited to creating by organizing matter in the same way as humans, then the way in which God manifests his power would not be unique. Such a view of creation was contrary to a principle adopted by Middle Platonists themselves that God is *not* anthropomorphic. The Middle Platonist had adopted a program of ridiculing the common anthropomorphic view of God expressed in the poetic and popular writings of the Greeks.<sup>124</sup> Theophilus argues that the common view of God that both he and the Middle Platonist adopted entails the view that God cannot create in the same manner as mere humans by organizing already existing matter; rather, God's mode of creation must be utterly different and unique.<sup>125</sup> Theophilus had thoroughly imbibed the Middle Platonic view of God, for he argued that God is: "ineffable ... inexpressible ... uncontainable ... incomprehensible ... inconceivable ... incomparable ... unteachable ... immutable ... inexpressible

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<sup>122</sup> Hubler, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, 121.

<sup>123</sup> *Ad Autolycum*, 2.4. Text and translation by Robert M. Grant, *Theophilus of Antioch* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 26.

<sup>124</sup> Celsus, writing about 177 A.D., and Porphyry, writing a century later, were among the leading antagonists to ridicule Christian views of God and resurrection. Origen, *Contra Celsum*, Henry Chadwick, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965). See *Contra Celsum*, 5.14.

<sup>125</sup> See, Apuleius, *de Platone et eius Dogmate*, 45.

... without beginning because he was uncreated, immutable because he is immortal.”<sup>126</sup> Theophilus backed this argument for *creatio ex nihilo* with another common argument adopted by the Middle Platonists that God must be self-sufficient:

And first they [the prophets] taught us in harmony that he made all things from non-being (*ex ouk onton ta panta epoiesen*), for nothing is as ancient as God, but he is his own locus and without need and existing before the ages, he wished to make the human so that would be known by him. For he prepared the cosmos. For the generated is needy, the ungenerated needs nothing.<sup>127</sup>

Second, Theophilus argued that God would not be the creator of all things if some things remained uncreated. Yet if God were not creator of all, then the divine monarchy (*monarchia*) would not be preserved. Thus, God’s omnipotence required creation out of absolute nothing. Given the Middle Platonist view of matter as something evil and recalcitrant, it was unthinkable that God’s power could be so limited. I have argued elsewhere that such a position is not necessary to all views of God’s relation to eternal matter, for the Mormon concept of uncreated matter in particular does not adopt either the view that matter is inherently evil or that it is recalcitrant; rather, matter on the Mormon view is entirely subject to God for any expression of its causal and law-like properties.<sup>128</sup> Of course, such a view of uncreated matter wholly subject to God was quite foreign to Theophilus and Middle Platonists.

Third, Theophilus argued that matter cannot be eternal because what is eternal must be immutable in the Platonic sense, and matter is subject to change. In the Platonic view, what is real and eternal is absolute and unchanging in every respect and those things that change are real only to the extent they participate in these unchanging Ideas or Forms. In effect, Theophilus’s reasons for adopting the new doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is based on his adoption of the Middle Platonic view of God that is also a radical innovation in Christianity – a God who is seen as immutable, self-sufficient and utterly unlike humans in every respect. Platonists, both Middle and Neo, assumed as given the view that humans inhabit the lowest realm of reality, furthest from the one ground of real Being. Only God inhabited this ideal realm of actual Being. Thus, anything embodied was not pure and real. Christians had been repeatedly attacked by Platonists for their adoption of a childish view of God who could be embodied and change in this realm of crass matter so far removed from the pure realm of being. As Hubler concluded:

Theophilus used the Platonic doctrine of God not only to attack their view of matter but to develop a new view. In choosing the Middle-Platonist doctrine of God over their view of nature, he left nature entirely subject to God. As a result, although his doctrine is Middle-Platonist in its expression, it is steadfastly non-Middle-Platonic in its outcome, both in its monism and in the radical dependence of nature on God. Theophilus foreshadows the coming of monism to Platonist philosophy in the next century in the work of Plotinus.<sup>129</sup>

Of course, Theophilus’s resolution of the problems for Middle-Platonic philosophy created additional problems for Christian theology. By reinterpreting the biblical concept of creation within the scope of a Middle-Platonic view of God, the new concept of God generated all kinds of new problems about God as described in the biblical documents – but that was an issue that was not addressed by Theophilus and had to wait for Origen and Augustine who created a thoroughly neo-Platonic view of God within the Christian tradition.<sup>130</sup> As Gerhard May concluded:

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<sup>126</sup> *Ad Autolyicum*, 1.3-4.

<sup>127</sup> *Ad Autolyicum* 2.10, in Grant, p. 38.

<sup>128</sup> See Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* (SLC: Greg Kofford Books, 2001), ch. 4.

<sup>129</sup> Hubler, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, 124.

<sup>130</sup> See, Gerhard May, *Creation Ex Nihilo*, 160-63.



Theophilus did not of course fully realise (sic) what a radical break with the theological tradition the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* constituted. He can even himself still speak of creation out of nothing in the older undifferentiated sense: as a proof of the possibility of the resurrection he points out that god created man out of nothing, in that he formed him from a tiny drop of seed which did not exist before. Theophilus takes no account of the question of whether in that case one can talk of a *creatio ex nihilo* in the real sense at all. He simply wants to exalt the miraculous factor in the process of begetting and developing human beings, while in his statements about the creation of the world out of nothing the decisive factor is the idea of absolute unconditionality.<sup>131</sup>

The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* found its most developed formulation among early Christians of the late second century in the writings of Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon. Irenaeus battled the gnostic myths which had infiltrated Christianity almost since its beginning. However, Irenaeus himself had been influenced by the very philosophies he battled. As Gerhard May noted: “Irenaeus is a clear thinker and by no means uneducated. His concept of God is, like that of the Apologists, marked with popular philosophical ideas. God is unoriginate, eternal, needs nothing, is self sufficient, and confers existence on everything that is.... As the Unoriginate he stands over against every originate being.”<sup>132</sup> Irenaeus also taught that God is simple in the sense one cannot divide his being into a series of effects which proceed from another – a doctrine that marked the simplicity of God in the then emerging neo-Platonism.<sup>133</sup> As Irenaeus stated:

For He is Himself uncreated, both without beginning and end, and lacking nothing. He is Himself sufficient for Himself; and still further, He grants to all others this very thing, existence, but the things which have been made by him received a beginning. But whatsoever thing had a beginning, and are liable to dissolution, and are subject to and stand in need of Him who made them, must necessarily in all respects have a different term [applied to them]... so that 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 the appellation which belongs to the Creator.<sup>134</sup>

Elsewhere Irenaeus stated: “While men, indeed, cannot make anything out of nothing, but only out of matter already existing, yet God is in this point preeminently superior to men, that He Himself called into being the substance of His creation, when previously it had no existence.”<sup>135</sup> The same argument, claiming that God’s mode of creation must be unique and utterly unlike human modes of creation, had been used by Theophilus. However, this doctrine created problems for Irenaeus’s soteriology (theory of salvation), for Irenaeus taught that salvation consisted in persons becoming perfect like God and indeed gods: “For we cast blame upon Him, because we have not been made gods from the beginning, but at first merely men, then at length gods.”<sup>136</sup> He explained that, “God had power at the beginning to grant perfection to man; but as the latter was only recently created, he could not possibly have received it, or even if he had received it, could have contained it, or containing it, could he have retained it.”<sup>137</sup> But it then appears that God cannot after all create persons perfect and must be responsible for having created something imperfect. However, Irenaeus argued that even though God can create man perfect;

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>132</sup> May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, 165.

<sup>133</sup> *Adversus Haereses*, II, 13, 5; 28, 5.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 10 4.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 38, 4.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 38, 2.

nevertheless, he cannot create man capable of accepting perfection because man is only recently created: “For the very fact of these things having been created, [it follows] that they are not uncreated; but by continuing through in being throughout a long course of ages, they shall receive a faculty of the Uncreated, through the gratuitous bestowal of eternal existence upon them by God.”<sup>138</sup> Irenaeus thus claims that God will bestow the “faculty of the Uncreated” on humans even though they are created. Yet Irenaeus’s claim here seems simply incoherent, for God cannot give the status of being uncreated to created things. Nor can God create man with the capacity for perfection and deification if what he creates is incapable of receiving perfection when it is given because of man’s status as a contingent creature.

Of course, the tension between the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and the view that human nature must be created became the central issue only later in the Arian dispute. Arius held that Christ, as a begotten son, must have been a created being and thus ontologically contingent in his being; whereas the Father was uncreated or ontologically necessary. Thus, the divide between creator and creature became so pronounced that it is logically impossible that they both be found in the same person, Christ. I have argued elsewhere that the attempt to resolve this basic logical contradiction at the very center of creedal beliefs is not resolved by the two nature theory of christology adopted at Chalcedon in 421 A.D.<sup>139</sup> This central dispute also divides creedalists from Latter-day Saints, for it is precisely this ontological gulf between creator and created that makes it impossible for creedalists to accept the early Christian doctrine that we, mere humans, can nevertheless “partake of the divine nature” as 2 Peter 1:4 affirms. It is the central conundrum which plagued Irenaeus’s theology which also shows why the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is pivotal to theological and philosophical issues dividing Mormons from creedalists like C&C.

The Apologists of the late second century adopted *creatio ex nihilo* primarily because it was required by the Middle Platonic view of God which they had also adopted. They were quite correct to point out that God, conceived as the Middle Platonists did, required a God who is completely independent of the world and stands over against it. But this is not a Christian view of God that they are defending. Rather, it is the adoption of the God of Greek philosophy which required them to modify also the biblical doctrine of creation so radically. As the eminent historian Robert Wilken noted:

[S]ince the time of the Apologists first began to offer a reasoned and philosophical presentation of Christianity to pagan intellectuals, Christian thinkers had claimed to worship the same God honored by the Greeks and Romans, in other words, the deity adored by other reasonable men and women. Indeed, Christians adopted precisely the same language to describe God as did pagan intellectuals. The Christian apologist Theophilus of Antioch described God as ‘ineffable ... inexpressible ...uncontainable ... incomprehensible ... inconceivable ... incomparable ... unteachable ... immutable ... without beginning because he was uncreated, immutable because he is immortal.’ This view, that God was an immaterial, timeless, and impassible divine being, who was known through the mind alone, became the keystone of Christian apologetics, for it served to establish a decisive link to the Greek spiritual and intellectual tradition.<sup>140</sup>

The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* followed from the adoption of the Middle Platonic view of God’s transcendence of the created order. It was the doctrine of God that, above all, heralded the shift from the biblical view of God who persons encounter in sacred experience to the God of the philosophers who is grasped by reason alone. Edwin Hatch summarized the difference between the transcendent God of the Middle Platonists and the God of faith:

From the earliest Christian teaching, indeed, the conception of the transcendence of God is absent. God is near to men and speaks to them: He is angry with them and punishes them: He is merciful to them and pardons them. He does all this through his angels and prophets, and

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, II,38, 3.

<sup>139</sup> See, Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, ch. 13.

<sup>140</sup> Robert L. Wilken, *The Christian as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 151.

last of all through His Son. But he needs such mediators rather because a heavenly Being is invisible, than because He is transcendent.... There was no taste for metaphysical discussion: there was possibly no appreciation of metaphysical conceptions.<sup>141</sup>

Tertullian, writing near the beginning of the third century, also adopted the dogma of *creatio ex nihilo*. Tertullian employed an argument that was later adopted by Augustine and later by Aquinas, albeit in a different form. Tertullian argued that the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* followed from God's unconditioned power:

He cannot be known as God and be called Almighty, save that He is no longer almighty, if His might did not also extend to this also – to produce all things out of nothing! .... He cannot say that it was as its Lord that God made use of matter for the work of creating the world, for He could not be Lord of a substance which was coequal with Himself.<sup>142</sup>

It was this argument that won the day for *creatio ex nihilo* more than anything else. I think that the earliest Christians would not have been open to the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* if it had not captured at least a flavor of the biblical doctrine of creation and God's power. This new doctrine embodied the sense that God was completely sovereign in every respect. Nothing could oppose him. There is no threat of a primeval chaos rushing into God's creation from above the vault or firmament that God had created as appeared in Genesis 1:6-8. There is no sense that God consulted with other divine beings in the creation as in Genesis 1:26-27 and Psalm 82. There is no sense that God might confront a real evil that he could not simply wipe out at will anytime he wanted. Yet even this sense of unconditioned power gave rise to philosophical questions regarding the compatibility of the existence of such a god with the reality of evil – questions that would not be addressed until the time of Origen and that remain unresolved within the creedal tradition even today. If God can wipe out any real evil at will, then anything we take to be evil is in reality all for the greater good. Evil cannot be real. For this reason, Augustine argued that what we take to be evil is not real being, it is merely the privation or lack of being. Whatever truly exists is good and thus evil is a mere privation of being in what is in fact good. Thus, the appearance of evil in this life is like everything we experience within the Platonic tradition, a mere appearance and not really real.

In addition to the problem of evil which this doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* renders so stark and unfathomable, there is the question whether God must create out of nothing to be considered almighty. I have argued elsewhere that this argument from God's omnipotent power is not sound.<sup>143</sup> The reason the argument is not sound is that God need not be able to alter the past to be considered omnipotent. Once a given state of affairs SA1 occurs, all states of affairs inconsistent or non-compossible with SA1 are logically precluded as possibilities. There is therefore a distinction between the logically possible and the actually possible. Though a state of affairs is possible in a broadly logical sense, it may be excluded as an actual possibility on the ground that another logically possible state of affairs has already obtained. Thus, if SA1 is a logically possible state of affairs, then it is possible that SA1 never actually occur, but once SA1 has occurred, it is no longer possible for SA1 to never occur. If physical realities have always existed in some form or another, a state of affairs SA2, then what is actually possible for God to bring about is logically limited to states of affairs compossible with SA2. It seems that any coherent idea of omnipotence must take into account what has occurred in the actual world at any given time. Thus, it follows that a coherent account of divine omnipotence must inquire whether material states have always existed to determine what is within God's power. It follows that one cannot argue, as Tertullian did, from the definition of omnipotence to rule out the possibility that matter is eternal in the sense that it has always existed.

**7.0 Conclusion.** I believe that we can conclude quite confidently that C&C have seriously misunderstood the evidence which they take to support creation *ex nihilo*. I believe that the following conclusions are warranted based upon the evidence that I have reviewed:

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<sup>141</sup> Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity*, 252-52.

<sup>142</sup> J. H. Wascnik, trans., *Tertullian: The Treatise Against Hermogenes* (London: Longmans & Green, 1956), 37; Latin text in J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Latinae*, 221 vols. (Paris: n.p., 1877-90), II: 227. Augustine's argument to the same effect is in *De Civitate Dei*, 5, 10.

<sup>143</sup> Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, ch. 4.

1. The Old Testament adopts the ancient Near Eastern view of creation out of a preexisting chaos or waste. This conclusion is supported by linguistic evidence of the meaning of *beresit*, by the structure of Genesis 1, by the textual, semantic and conceptual similarities between Genesis 1 and other creation accounts, and by the entire structure of the creation narrative. The word *bara* does not mean creation *ex nihilo* nor does it imply it. Rather, the word *bara* addresses creation by dividing and separating already existing realities and thereby creating something new that has never before existed.

2. The New Testament does not teach creation *ex nihilo*. To the contrary, 2 Peter 3:5 expressly teaches that God created out of the already existing chaotic waters, Hebrews 11:3 expressly teaches that God created the visible world from the already existing invisible world, and Romans 4:17 teaches that God created from an already existing substrate.

3. The claim made by C&C that the dogma of *creatio ex nihilo* was already well-established in the Jewish texts about the time of Christ is simply false. None of the texts they cite for this conclusion address the doctrine of creation out of nothing. Indeed, some of the Jewish texts which they take to teach *creatio ex nihilo*, such as *Second Enoch* and *Joseph and Aseneth* expressly teach that God created the world by making visible those things which already existed as invisible. In addition, none of the Christian texts cited by C&C such as *The Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Odes of Solomon* actually teach *creatio ex nihilo*. Indeed, these texts are better explained by the doctrine of *creatio ex materia*. Further, it is clear that several Jewish texts from around the time of Christ, such as Philo Judeaus the *Wisdom of Solomon*, and several early Christian writers like Clement, Justin Martyr and Athenagoras, expressly teach the doctrine of *creatio ex materia*.

4. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* appeared suddenly about 180 A.D. in the writings of Tatian and Theophilus in their arguments with Stoics and Middle Platonists. It is fairly clear that the doctrine arises as a philosophical consequence of their adoption of a Middle Platonic concept of God. What we see in all texts from about 165 A.D. and after is that Platonic philosophy, both Middle and Neo, have infiltrated Christian thought and become a basis for major innovations in doctrine. From the Mormon perspective, we see the apostasy in action in living color. The personal God of the Bible known through revelation and personal encounter is suddenly too far removed from the human sphere of existence to be involved in such things with humans. The notion that humans are created in the image and likeness of God must be reinterpreted to fit the Platonic view that God is utterly unique and entirely unlike humans. God's mode of creation, therefore, must be completely different than any human mode of creation. The Middle Platonic assumption that only the absolutely immutable can be eternal is used as a background assumption to argue that matter cannot in any sense be eternal because it is subject to change. The Middle Platonic view that sees matter as necessarily entailing an eternal cycle of recurrence leads to adopting a view of God transcending altogether the material sphere. If one accepts the assumptions from which the Christian apologists of the late second century begin, then *creatio ex nihilo* becomes the only logical conclusion. It apparently never occurred to them to reject these Platonist assumptions.

The adoption of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* had other far reaching implications for the history and form of "Christian" theology even to our own day. The doctrine of creation out of nothing led inevitably to Chalcedon where Christ was described as one person having two natures, consubstantial with the Father in his deity. This two nature theory of Christology assured that the Platonic view of natures and substance would be essential to make "sense" of the doctrine of God within the creedal tradition. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* also gives rise to arguments that everything that occurs must be caused by God, for if he didn't cause each substance to exist anew in each moment, it would cease to exist. Thus, a very strong form of divine determinism and predestination seems to be entailed by the doctrine – though a thorough discussion of these issues would take me far afield from the purpose of this essay.

It seems to me that C&C have therefore overstated their case in a grand way. They speak in their essay as if anyone who disagreed with them is simply in error and ignorant of the facts. They give a false impression of the evidence and fail to even note the necessary distinctions between potential being and real existence that are necessary to make sense of the texts in the post-biblical era. All in all, their scriptural argument for *creatio ex nihilo* simply will not withstand scrutiny.