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Abstract Review of "Craftsman or Creator? An Examination of the Mormon Doctrine of Creation and a Defense of *Creatio ex nihilo*" (2002), and *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (2004), by Paul Copan and William Lane Craig.

Out of Nothing: A History of Creation *ex Nihilo* in Early Christian Thought

Blake T. Ostler

In their contribution to *The New Mormon Challenge* entitled "Craftsman or Creator? An Examination of the Mormon Doctrine of Creation and a Defense of *Creatio ex nihilo,*" Paul Copan and William Lane Craig assert, among other things, that the notion of creation *ex nihilo*—creation out of nothing—is biblical.[1] For good

1. The first section of their essay, 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,* n.s., 17 (1996): 77–93. Stephen D. Ricks deals with creation *ex nihilo* in "Ancient Views of Creation and the Doctrine of Creation *ex Nihilo,*" in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen,* ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 319–37. See Daniel C. Peterson, "Does the Qur'an Teach Creation *Ex Nihilo?*" in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 584–610, since at several points his argument is analogous to mine.

Review of Paul Copan and William Lane Craig. "Craftsman or Creator? An Examination of the Mormon Doctrine of Creation and a Defense of *Creatio ex nihilo.*" In *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement,* ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen, 95–152. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002. 535 pp., with glossary and indexes. $21.99.

Review of Paul Copan and William Lane Craig. *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004. 280 pp., with glossary and indexes. $19.99.

measure, they also assert that this doctrine was not an invention of the philosophers but has always been the well-established "Christian" belief. In so doing, they argue against the vast majority of biblical and classical scholars. I contend that their arguments on these points are seriously flawed, that there are compelling reasons to support the view of the majority of biblical scholars that the Bible teaches creation out of a preexisting chaos, that Copan and Craig have seriously misrepresented the biblical data to read into it their doctrine of absolutist creation, and 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 present good reasons why the vast majority of scholars agree that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was first formulated around AD 200 in arguments with the Gnostics, Stoics, and Middle Platonists.

In both publications being reviewed here, Copan and Craig deal with texts from the Old Testament, philosophical arguments from the supposed impossibility of the actual infinite, and evidence from big bang cosmology that they argue supports creation out of nothing. In this review I will focus only on the New Testament and the rise of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in first- and second-century Christianity. I will review their article in *The New Mormon Challenge,* as well as their recently published book *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration,* which expands upon their article. I have chosen to review the book together with the article for two reasons. First, the book plugs many gaping holes that exist in the article, and it does no good to respond to a weaker argument when a stronger argument has been made. Second, I believe that dialogue among Latter-day Saints and evangelicals calls for charity—even when the evangelicals do not reciprocate that charity.

There is a central problem with these works by Copan and Craig. They make no bones about the fact that they are *not* engaging in an attempt to provide a balanced exegesis of the scriptures and documents that they discuss. Rather, their article and book are like a lawyer's

defense brief for the view that the scriptures teach *creatio ex nihilo.*[2] A careful reading reveals that they are presenting their case as if they were debaters with no interest in giving a balanced assessment of the evidence. Such a debater's stance is easily discerned in their defensive position that "even if" the evidence did not support creation out of nothing, still their position dictates that we should read the texts as teaching that doctrine. To defend their position, they explicitly adopt a prior theological commitment that determines what the evidence must show: "And even if, as many of [the Jewish and Christian writers] believed, God did create out of primordial matter, these Jewish and Christian thinkers held that this matter itself was *first* created by God and then at a later stage shaped by him into an orderly cosmos. They uniformly held that God alone is unbegotten and uncreated; everything else is begotten and creaturely" (*Creation out of Nothing [CON],* p. 27, emphasis in original). This passage displays clearly the two key assumptions that dictate the outcome of discussion by Copan and Craig: (1) the word *create* is assumed to mean creation *ex nihilo;* and (2) even if a text says that God created by organizing unorganized matter, we must still see the text as teaching *creatio ex nihilo* because implicitly it adopts the view that God first "created" everything out of nothing. While I doubt that there is such a thing as a presuppositionless or "objective" stance in reading texts, nevertheless, their attempt to defend the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is vitiated by the fact that the texts do not support their view unless these two assumptions are adopted. Yet these very assumptions are themselves what is at issue. Thus the basic premise of their discussion begs the question in their favor and often causes them to ignore more convincing readings of the

2. They say: "In *defending* the doctrine of creation out of nothing, we do not delve into many of its theological implications and ramifications. . . . This book offers reasons for claiming that creation out of nothing is a *biblical* concept. The biblical data are not ambiguous, as some contend; indeed, creation *ex nihilo* is the most reasonable inference to make in light of biblical texts. Even if the doctrine of creation out of nothing is not explicitly stated, it is an obvious inference from the fact that God created everything distinct from himself. 'Implicit' should not be watered down to 'ambiguous'" (*CON,* pp. 26–27, first emphasis added). Their view that they are engaging in some debate in which there are winners and losers is expressly stated: "The view proposing creation from preexistent matter would not win even if the Bible were silent on the matter" (*CON,* p. 91).

key texts. They cite several texts that do not discuss *how* God created, but merely that he did, and Copan and Craig argue that the text *must* mean creation out of nothing even though they admit that the text doesn't expressly address the issue as to *how* God created because it is supposedly "implicit" in the text.

Creation as Described in the New Testament

Copan and Craig contend that Joseph Smith's reading of Genesis 1—that it expressly teaches creation from a prior chaos—is contrary to the biblical text. However, it is Joseph Smith's interpretation that enjoys the support of the majority of biblical scholars.[3] Copan and Craig also assert that several passages of the New Testament expressly teach *creatio ex nihilo.* In so arguing they once again swim against the tide of contrary conclusions reached by the vast majority of scholars who have treated this issue.

2 Peter 3:5–6. Several New Testament passages are cited by Copan and Craig that supposedly support creation out of nothing. Their treatment of 2 Peter 3:5 is typical of the way they force the text with assumptions contrary to the text throughout their book (see *The New Mormon Challenge [NMC],* p. 427 n. 136, and *CON,* pp. 87–91). Second Peter 3:5–6 presents a New Testament text that clearly refers back to an Old Testament teaching that God created the heaven and the earth by organizing preexistent chaos. Genesis 1:1–2 states: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth, and the earth was without form, and void; and *darkness was upon the face of the deep.* And the Spirit of God moved *upon the face of the waters*" (Genesis 1:2 King James Version [KJV]). The waters represented the primordial chaos already present when God created the earth in Genesis 1:2 (and there

3. See for example, Shalom M. Paul, "Creation and Cosmogony: In the Bible," in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), 5:1059–63; David Winston, "The Book of Wisdom's Theory of Cosmogony," *History of Religions* 11/2 (1971): 187–91; Frances 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, *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation Out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought,* trans. A. S. Worrall (Edinburgh: Clark, 1994); Keith Norman, "*Ex Nihilo:* The Development of the Doctrines of God and Creation in Early Christianity," *BYU Studies* 17/3 (1977): 291–318.

is no indication in the text that the waters are ever created). In fact, the scripture in 2 Peter seems to have been directed to people like Copan and Craig: "They [sarcastic scoffers] 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 flood-waters" (2 Peter 3:5–6 New Jerusalem Bible [NJB]). This text rather clearly teaches the creation of heaven and earth by verbal fiat out of waters that existed *before* the heavens and the earth and that this pre-existing chaos eventually 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.[4]

There are five crucial points in 2 Peter 3:5 that support the view that the author of this scriptural passage believed that everything was organized from a preexisting chaos. First, the text addresses the formation of "heaven and earth," or all that is said to be created by God in Genesis 1:1–2. Indeed, the parallel with Genesis 1:1 is unmistakable and clearly signifies that 2 Peter speaks of the same creation spoken of there. Second, the heaven and earth are said in 2 Peter 3:5 to be formed ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ δι' ὕδατος (*ex hydatos kai di hydatos*), both "out of water" and also "through water." The double reference to water as the material substrate used in creation "out of" and "from" which the heaven and earth are formed appears to be an intentional emphasis. Third, the fact that we are dealing with the entire scope of creation is indicated by reference to God's Word as the power by which the heaven and earth are formed from water—τῷ τοῦ θεοῦ λόγῳ (*tō tou theou logō*). The text is referring to Genesis 1:1–2, which states that God spoke and heaven and earth were created, and also to John 1:1, which mentions that God creates all that there is by the power of his Word. Fourth, the heaven and earth are formed from water, which is recognized in the very next verse as the principle of chaos causing the flood or the deep in Genesis 1:2. The earth was created from water,

4. See Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Waco: Word, 1983), 297–302. Bauckham is an evangelical who admits that 2 Peter draws upon the worldview of the ancient Near East and Genesis to form a concept of creation of the world out of water.

and it was destroyed by water through the flood because water represents the unformed and chaotic—the deep that is never said to be created in the Genesis account of creation but is presented as already present at the time God undertakes to create the heaven and the earth. Fifth, the verb used in 2 Peter 3:5, συνεστῶσα (*synestōsa*), is a form of the verb συνίστημι (*synistēmi*), meaning to organize by combining together and not by creating out of nothing.[5]

In an endnote to their article, Copan and Craig claim that in 2 Peter 3:5 there is a "two-step" creation, with an initial creation *ex nihilo* and a second creation from chaotic water. They claim that 2 Peter 3:5 "focuses on the second stage" dealing with creation by chaos (*NMC,* p. 427 n. 136). However, their *ad hoc* explanation consists of imposing an assumption on the text for which there is no textual support at all. Second Peter 3:5 gives no indication of any prior creation *ex nihilo.* This interpretation is a good example of how Copan and Craig are willing to gerrymander texts and read into them their own theological demands in a way that is contrary to the text. They admit that many biblical scholars, such as J. N. D. Kelly and evangical Richard Bauckham, interpret this text to teach precisely that water is the "sole original existent" and the "elemental stuff out of which the universe was formed" as the Greek philosopher Thales had taught (and as Genesis 1 presupposes in equating the "deep" or the waters with the uncreated chaos).[6] This is where their prior theological assumption supposedly comes to their rescue. The fact that the text says absolutely nothing about some prior creation of water from nothing doesn't deter Copan and Craig from seeing this belief as the key to interpreting the text. In their book they assert:

> This would imply a two-step creation process (already noted in the previous chapter) involving God's creating the universe and its elements. This is supported by the fact that the verb "formed [*synestōsa*]" is used rather than the verb

5. See "συνίστημι," in Joseph H. Thayer, trans., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), 605.

6. J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and of Jude* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 358, 359.

> *ktizein* (create). In Proverbs 8:24, we read that "the deep" did not always exist. God creates the waters and then uses them in the process of creation. Thus, water is the *material* from which the sky is created and *instrument* (*dia*) to create the sky. (*CON,* p. 88, brackets and emphasis in original)

So Copan and Craig suggest that the statement in 2 Peter 3:5 that God created "the heaven and earth" by "forming" them out of water really means that God first created water out of nothing and that he then used that water to create the "heavens and the earth." They cite Proverbs 8:24 as a supposed instance of such creation of water out of nothing and then using that water to create the earth. Their eisegesis of Proverbs, however, is no more convincing than their attempt to read creation out of nothing into a text that teaches creation out of chaos. Proverbs doesn't teach that God created the waters or "deep" out of nothing; rather, it expressly states that before God created the earth and thus before there was water anywhere on earth, God "prepared the heavens" and he organized the waters *not* by "creating" them, but by setting "a compass upon the face of the depth"—and this *before* he created the earth (Proverbs 8:26–27). "While as yet he had not made the earth. . . . When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth" (עד־לא עשה ארץ וחוצות . . . בהכינו שמים שם אני בחקו חוג על־פני תהום).

Thus, the waters are never said to be created in Proverbs 8 (or anywhere else in the Old Testament for that matter), contrary to the assertion by Copan and Craig. Rather, God prepares the already existent waters by organizing them through the process of measuring them and plumbing their depths. The verb used in Proverbs 16:12 and translated as "prepared," יכון (*yikkôn*), indicates a preparation and establishing of something already existent and mirrors the statement in 2 Peter that "the heavens and earth were *formed* out of water" (author's translation).

Hebrews 11:3. Copan and Craig next turn to 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." According to another translation

of the same passage: "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" (NJB). What this text says is that God created visible things literally "from" invisible things (εἰς τὸ μὴ ἐκ φαινομένων τὸ βλεπόμενον). But the invisible things are not nothing; they already exist. Copan and Craig wrongly assume that invisible things can be equated with absolute nothing. They cite Paul Ellingworth in arguing that creation of the world by the "word" of God "would 'conflict' with any idea that the visible world was made out of materials in the invisible world" (*NMC,* p. 116).[7] However, 2 Peter 3:5–6 teaches that God created *from the waters* by his word or command. The notion that creation by God's command or word must assume creation *ex nihilo* is simply false. Moreover, Hebrews 11:3 states that the worlds were "framed by the word of God," not that they were created out of nothing. The verb used here, καταρτίζω (*katartizō*) refers to organizing, framing, or putting together what is not yet organized or to mend, repair, or put in order something that has become disorganized.[8]

Citing William Lane, Copan and Craig also argue that the reference to those "things which are not seen" teaches *creatio ex nihilo* because it "denies that the creative universe originated from primal material or anything observable" (*NMC,* p. 116).[9] Yet this is simply argument by assertion without any evidence or reasoning to back it up. Moreover, it is demonstrably wrong. For example, Copan and Craig also cite *2 Enoch* (a document very likely dating to about AD 70–100 and thus contemporaneous with New Testament texts such as Hebrews and probably the Gospel of Matthew),[10] which uses very similar language about God's command and things visible created from the invisible. Arguing that this text too "reflects the doctrine of

7. Paul Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 569.

8. See "καταρτίζω," in Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon,* 336, and "καταρτίζω," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 1:476.

9. Quoted from William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 332.

10. This date is debated by some scholars but is supported by F. I. Andersen in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha,* ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 1:94–97.

creation out of nothing" in a couple of places, they cite *2 Enoch* 25:1–2 as follows: "I commanded . . . that visible things should come down from invisible" (*NMC,* pp. 123–24). However, the entire relevant text reads: "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."[11]

It is also well known that the Septuagint (LXX) translates the text of Genesis 1:2 referring to the "desolate and empty" (תהו ובהו) world in its precreation state as ἀόρατος καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος—which means "invisible and unformed." This same word *invisible* is similar to Hebrews 11:3 μὴ ἐκ φαινομένων *(mē ek phainomenōn*), meaning "out of unseen things" the world was created. However, just as in LXX Genesis the unformed and lifeless world that is invisible or unseen is not "nothing at all" but, rather, chaotic and unformed matter that cannot be seen because it does not yet have form impressed upon it by God.[12]

In the context of *2 Enoch*, it is clear that the "invisible things" are not absolute nothing; rather, they are things that are not visible to mortal eyes. That these invisible things already exist in some sense is demonstrated by the fact that God moves among them. The translator F. I. Andersen explains: "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 coexisted 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."[13] Not only does this text not teach *creatio ex nihilo,*

11. *2 Enoch* 2–4, from F. I. Andersen's translation in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha,* 1:142.

12. Lane, *Hebrews 9–11,* 332; Arnold Ehrhardt, "*Creatio Ex Nihilo,*" *Studia Theologica* 4 (1951–52): 27–33; and P. E. Hughes, "The Doctrine of Creation in Hebrews 11:3," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 2 (1972): 64–77.

13. *2 Enoch,* in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha,* 1:142 n. f. Copan and Craig point out that, later in the text, it states that God "created" both the visible and the invisible. However, they fundamentally misconstrue *2 Enoch*. See below.

but it teaches the very opposite. This reading of "invisible things" as already existing realities is also very strongly supported by Romans 1:19–20 KJV: "Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed 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 and can be seen through the power of God. This scripture fits well with the Latter-day Saint view that before God created the earth out of matter that 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 that are not visible or are unseen are still things that already exist. As James N. Hubler observes in his excellent doctoral dissertation on the emergence of the idea of *creatio ex nihilo:* "the notion of creation μὴ ἐκ φαινομένων was comfortable for Platonic dualists or Stoics, because it lacked all qualities."[14] In other words, both the Platonic dualists and the Stoics could easily see the reference to "things invisible" as a type of formless matter that lacks any qualities of individuation but is matter nonetheless.

The view that the "invisible things" are not absolute nothing is also supported by Colossians 1:16–17:

> 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. (NJB)

In this scripture it seems fairly evident that the "everything invisible" includes things that already exist in heaven, such as thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers. Further, the invisible things are also created by God; yet the fact that they are invisible means only that they are not seen by mortal eyes, not that they do not exist. The

14. James N. Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo: Matter, Creation, and the Body in Classical and Christian Philosophy through Aquinas" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1995), 108.

reference to invisible things does not address whether they were made out of preexisting matter. However, 2 Corinthians 4:18 states that "the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (KJV). It is not difficult to see that Hebrews 11:3 neither expressly mentions creation out of nothing nor implicitly assumes it. The argument that the text must somehow implicitly assume creation of out nothing misinterprets the text and forces it with assumptions that are contrary to the meaning of "invisible things." If anything, Hebrews 11:3 implicitly assumes creation of the earth out of a preexisting substrate not visible to us.

Romans 4:17. Copan and Craig next cite Romans 4:17 KJV: "even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were (καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα)." There are two possible translations of Romans 4:17. The majority translation does not entail creation out of nothing: "[Abraham] is our father in the presence of God whom he believed—the God who makes the dead alive and summons the things that do not yet exist as though they already do."[15] Another translation indicates that God "calls into existence the things which do not exist" (New American Bible, NAB). The first translation is preferred for several reasons. First, Keith Norman has pointed out that it is contradictory for God to call to that which does not exist.[16] Second, as Moo stated, "this interpretation fits the *immediate* context better than a reference to God's creative power, for it explains the assurance with which God can speak of the 'many nations' that will be descended from Abraham."[17] Thus, the preferred

15. Author's translation; Douglas J. Moo, trans., *The Epistle to the Romans,* rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 279, translated the passage: "Even as it is written, 'I have appointed you as the father of many nations' before the God in whom he believed, the one who gives life to the dead and calls those things that are not as though they were."

16. Norman, "Ex Nihilo," 291–318.

17. Moo, *Epistle to the Romans,* 282, emphasis in original; so also William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1977), 113. Further, this view is in line with a Pauline idiom—namely, verb followed by ὡς plus participle (of the same verb or, in certain contexts, its antonym) to compare present reality with what is not a present reality (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:7; 5:3; 7:29, 30 [three times], 31; Colossians 2:20 [similarly, 2 Corinthians 6:9, 10]).

translation merely states that God summons the future reality of the resurrection as if it already existed. This seems to me to be a far better fit with the context.

Third, as Hubler comments: "The verse's 'non-existent' need not be understood in an absolute sense of non-being. μὴ ὄντα (*mē 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."[18] In other words, the Greek text suggests the view that God has brought about a thing that did not exist *as that thing* before it was so created. For example, this use of μὴ ὄντα is logically consistent with the proposition that "God called forth the earth when before that the earth did not exist." However, the fact that the earth did not exist *as the earth* before it was so created does not address the type of material that was used to make it.

Note also that Romans 4:17 uses the negative μή, which refers to merely relative nonbeing 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 and the distinction between relative nonbeing (Greek μὴ ὄντα) and absolute nothing (Greek οὐκ ὄντως). Platonic philosophy—both Neoplatonism and Middle Platonism—posited the existence of an eternal substratum that was material but was nevertheless so removed from the One Ground of Being that it was often said to not have "real" existence. As Jonathan Goldstein observes: "Platonists called pre-existent matter 'the non-existent.'"[19] This relative nonexistence is indicated by the Greek negative μή, meaning "not" or "non-," in conjunction with the word for existence or being.[20] 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 ουκ, meaning "not in any way or mode." As Henry Chadwick explained the usage in Clement's *Stromata*: "In each case the phrase

18. Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 109.

19. Jonathan A. Goldstein, "The Origins of the Doctrine of Creation Ex Nihilo," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 35/2 (1984): 127.

20. Young, "Christian Doctrine of Creation," 146.

he employs is *ek me ontos* not *ex ouk ontos*; that is to say, it is made not 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."[21] Edwin Hatch explained that, for Platonists, "God was regarded as being outside the world. The world was in its origin only potential being (το μὴ ὄν)."[22] He explains 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.[23]

Aristotle wrote that: "For generation is from non-existence (ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος) into being, and corruption from being back into non-existence (εἰς τὸ μὴ ὄν)."[24] Generation is the act of a new animal being derived from an existing one, or a plant deriving from an existing plant. It is new life from life. He used the phrase *from non-existence* in a sense of relative nonbeing, where "things" do not yet exist and there is only a formless substratum that has the potential or capacity to receive definite form. This substratum is not absolutely nothing but is not yet a thing. It is "no-thing." Thus, to say that God called

21. Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 46–47. See Norman, "Ex Nihilo," 300–308.

22. Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity* (Gloucester, MA: Smith, 1970), 178.

23. Hatch, *Influence of Greek Ideas,* 194–95.

24. Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium* B5, 741 b 22f, ed. H. J. Drossaart Lulofs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), 74f.

to existence that which does not exist, as in Romans 4:17, actually assumes a preexisting substrate that God, by impressing form upon it, organizes into a thing that exists. Copan and Craig simply fail to note this important distinction, and thus their exegesis is critically flawed.

In their book, Copan and Craig cite a number of evangelical scholars who share their theological presuppositions and who opine that this verse refers to creation out of nothing (*CON,* pp. 75–78). Yet none of these authors provide any analysis or exegesis beyond asserting that the "non-existent" must mean that which does not exist in any sense. For example, Copan and Craig quote James Dunn's commentary on Romans 4:17, which reads in the 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'" (*NMC,* p. 117).[25] However, it is easy to see that the scriptural analogy of God bringing the dead to life in the same way that he creates "things which 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 that are reorganized through resurrection. Just as God does not create persons for the first time when he restores them to life through resurrection, so God does not create out of absolute nonbeing.

Moreover, note that Romans 4:17 doesn't expressly address whether things are created out of nothing or from some material substrate. It simply says that God "calls" things into existence that are not. Moreover, such a statement in no way entails or requires creation out of nothing implicitly. If I create a table then I create a table that did not exist before I created it, but it doesn't mean that I create it out of nothing. In this text, the word *create* is not even used. Rather, what God does is to "call forth" the non-existent. The verb καλέω means

25. Quoted from James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (Dallas: Word, 1988), 237, omitting emphasis added by Copan and Craig.

to call out loud to something, or to invite.[26] It presupposes something there to be called to or invited. God calls out to the non-existent by his Word, an act described by a verb used elsewhere in Paul's writings (Romans 9:11; 1 Corinthians 12:3; Galatians 5:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:24). Thus, the most natural reading of this text is that the "non-existent" or μὴ ὄντα refers to a preexisting reality that does not yet exist as God calls it to be. Such a reading has nothing to do with creation out of absolute nothing.

John 1:3. Copan and Craig also argue that John 1:3 supports the idea of creation out of nothing (here given in KJV): "All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made" (πάντα δι᾽ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἕν ὃ γέγονεν). Copan and Craig assert of this verse: "The implication is that all things (which would include preexistent matter, if that were applicable to the creative process) exist through God's agent, who is the originator of everything" (pp. 117–18). But this verse says nothing about the creation of "preexistent matter." One must assume beforehand that the word *create* must mean to create *ex nihilo* in order to arrive at this conclusion, for this verse says only that if something was made, then it was made through the Word. It does not address anything that may not have been made. More important, it does not address *how* those things were made, its point being *through whom* the creation was made. Anything that was made was made by Christ. 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."[27] The question in this case is whether the final phrase *which came about* is part of this verse or the beginning of the next verse. Hubler explains:

> 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. Proponents of *creatio ex nihilo* could place a period

26. See "καλέω," in Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon,* 321.
27. Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 108.

> after "not one thing came about" and leave "which came about" to the next sentence. The absence of a determinate tradition of punctuation in New Testament [Greek] texts 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.[28]

Of course, the reality of this text is that it does not consciously address the issue of creation *ex nihilo* at all. It states *who* accomplished the creation, not how it was done.[29] A person who accepts creation from chaos can easily say that no "thing" came about that is not a result of the Word's bringing it about but agree that there is a chaos in which no "things" exist prior to their creation as such. Copan and Craig hang

28. Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 108.

29. There is a major punctuation problem here: Should the relative clause "that was made" go with verse 3 or verse 4? The earliest manuscripts have no punctuation (𝔓$^{66, 75*}$ ℵ* A B D and others). Many of the later manuscripts that do have punctuation place it before the phrase, thus putting it with verse 4 (𝔓^{75c} C D L W^{s} 050* and a few others). Nestlé-Aland placed the phrase in verse 3 and moved the words to the beginning of verse 4. In a detailed article, K. Aland defended the change. K. Aland, "Eine Untersuchung zu Johannes 1, 3–4: Über die Bedeutung eines Punktes," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 59 (1968): 174–209. He sought to prove that the attribution of ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἕν ὃ γέγονεν to verse 3 began to be carried out in the fourth century in the Greek church. This came out of the Arian controversy and was intended as a safeguard for doctrine. The change was unknown in the West. Aland is probably correct in affirming that the phrase was attached to verse 4 by the Gnostics and the Eastern Church. It was only after the Arians began to use the phrase that it became attached to verse 3. But this does not rule out the possibility that, by moving the words from verse 4 to verse 3, one is restoring the original reading. Understanding the words as part of verse 3 is natural and adds to the emphasis which is built up there, while it also gives a terse, forceful statement in verse 4. On the other hand, taking the phrase ὃ γέγονεν with verse 4 gives a complicated expression. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John,* 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1978), 157, says that both ways of understanding verse 4 with ὃ γέγονεν included "are almost impossibly clumsy": "That which came into being—in it the Word was life; That which came into being—in the Word was its life." The following points should be noted in the solution of this problem: (1) John frequently starts sentences with ἐν as verse 4 begins; (2) he repeats frequently ("nothing was created that has been created"); (3) 5:26 and 6:53 both give a sense similar to verse 4 if it is understood without the phrase; (4) it makes far better Johannine sense to say that in the Word was life than to say that the created universe (what was made, ὃ γέγονεν) was life in him. In conclusion, the phrase is best taken with verse 3.

their hat on the connotations of the word πάντα, meaning "all" in an inclusive sense. They argue that because "all" things that come about are brought about by the Word, there is no possibility of an uncreated reality that has not been brought about by God. However, the final phrase, ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἕν ὃ γέγονεν, translated "nothing made that was made," limits the scope of the creative power to the order of the created and implies that whatever is not made was not made by him. If it is created, he created it; if it is not, then it is not within the scope of "what is made."

Assessing New Testament Statements about Creation

Copan and Craig end their treatment of those New Testament texts that, in their opinion, 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 postbiblical phenomenon, as some Mormon apologists have done. *Where in the relevant scholarly references to which LDS scholars point is there rigorous exegetical treatment of the relevant biblical passages on creation*? The silence is deafening. (*NMC,* p. 118, emphasis in original)

Such an assertion by Copan and Craig seems to be mere bravado. Keith Norman and Stephen Ricks have provided at least an initial start to such an exegesis, which I take up here.[30] Even so, there is really no need for Latter-day Saints to provide such an analysis at all because it has already been provided by non-Mormon Christians who believe that there is more justification for belief in a creation *ex materia*—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.[31] Hubler's dissertation engages in a fairly rigorous exegesis of the relevant biblical passages. He reaches a conclusion radically different from that of Copan and Craig:

30. Norman, "Ex Nihilo," 294–301; Ricks, "Ancient Views of Creation," 319–37.

31. Frances Young and Bruce Waltke are excellent examples of such brave traditional Christians.

> 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 by accepted by a proponent of *creatio ex materia.*[32]

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 in with the statements of Hellenistic Judaism . . . about the 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.[33]

May explains that *creatio ex nihilo* is a metaphysical doctrine that requires conscious formulation, and that such an approach was completely foreign to any of the biblical writers: "The biblical presentation of the Almighty God who created the world . . . possessed 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."[34]

Hubler and May feel that a "rigorous" exegesis is not needed to show that these biblical passages do not address the issue of *creatio*

32. Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 107–8.
33. May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo,* 27.
34. May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo,* 29–30.

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.* Asserting that a view is "implicit" in the text without explaining why the implication is necessary to the text amounts to simply reading one's own view into the text. I believe that is precisely what Copan and Craig have done. An approach that resists reading *creatio ex nihilo* into the text unless it is expressly formulated is especially appropriate because, as we shall see, the earliest Christian philosophers assumed that the doctrine of creation from preexisting chaos was *the* Christian view. The issue 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.

Copan and Craig also assert that Latter-day Saints have 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 extrabiblical 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 to the possibility of finding clear 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 the biblical writers took no position on this issue, the LDS view would not win by default. . . . On the one hand, Mormons have neglected to interact with biblical scholarship on this subject; on the other, they have put forth no significant positive exegetical evidence for their own position. (*NMC,* p. 119)

Well, I can't speak for other Latter-day Saint scholars, but what I would like to see as "unambiguous evidence" in scripture of *creatio ex nihilo* is evidence that truly *is* unambiguous and is not better explained as teaching the contrary doctrine of *creatio ex materia*. I would like to see a text that directly addresses the issue of *creatio ex nihilo* in a conscious way and not a reading of the text that merely assumes the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. I would like to see a discussion of the biblical text that does not ignore the background assumptions of the world out of which the text arises.

If a text is truly taking a polemical position, then it should make clear that it is rejecting one position and espousing another. To see the New Testament text as teaching *creatio ex nihilo* when it comes out of a religious and cultural context that, up to that time, had universally accepted *creatio ex materia* requires that it actually formulate, discuss, probe, and evaluate the kinds of philosophical distinctions that underlie the doctrines in the first place. Not only do the New Testament texts not make such distinctions consciously, but they in fact show every evidence of maintaining the position prevalent within their historical context.

So intent are Copan and Craig on reading *creatio ex nihilo* into any text that says that God "created that which is from that which is not" that they have blinded themselves to the many and genuinely convincing textual and historical evidences for *creatio ex materia*. They ignore the arguments in favor of seeing Genesis 1 and 2 Peter 3:5–6 as texts teaching creation out of chaos. They ignore the fact that in the ancient world "invisible things" are still things that are simply not seen. And finally, they ignore the work of fellow evangelicals, such as Bruce K. Waltke and William R. Lane, who have already done a fine job of arguing the very position that Latter-day Saints assert.[35] These

35. Bruce K. Waltke, *Creation and Chaos* (Portland, OR: Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1974); Bruce K. Waltke, "The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1–3. Pt. III: The Initial Chaos Theory and the Precreation Chaos Theory," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132/527 (1975): 222–28. See also William 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 Re-creation?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149/595–596 (1992): 316–23, 411–27.

omissions have serious implications for the strength of the arguments Copan and Craig propose.

Creation as Described in Extrabiblical Texts

The Dead Sea Scrolls. Copan and Craig suggest that texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls, produced around the time of Christ, assume creation out of nothing (*CON,* pp. 105–7). For example, they quote the *Rule of the Congregation* (1QSa) 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."[36] They also quote 1QS XI, 11:

> By his knowledge everything shall come into being,
> and all that does exist
> he establishes with his calculations
> and nothing is done outside of him. (*NMC,* p. 122)

They assert that in these texts they see an *ex nihilo* understanding of creation during this period (pp. 122–23). Such a reading forces the text with assumptions that simply are not addressed in it. These texts do not address whether God used prior material or how God created the earth. All the texts from the scrolls cited by Copan and Craig address only the fact that God has predestined the course of the world and has knowledge of all things before they occur. Nothing happens without God having a knowledge before it happens or "comes to be." The mere assertions that God knew of something before he brought it about and that he brought it about through his power are not inconsistent with *creatio ex materia.* Latter-day Saints believe that before God created the earth he knew its whole design, that by his knowledge he created all things that came into existence, and yet that he created them by organizing a chaos. In other words, there is nothing asserted in these texts that is inconsistent with what Latter-day Saints believe

36. Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), 75.

(except that they reject the all-pervasive predestination that the Dead Sea covenanters believed in).

Rabbi Gamaliel. Copan and Craig 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 Gamaliel replied, "May the breath go forth from this man. It is written concerning each of these. Concerning the creation of 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).[37]

However, Gamaliel does not adopt the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo.* David Winston and Hubler both argue that Gameliel denies that any of these cosmic forces aided God in creation. He does not deny that there was a passive material, merely that there was any material that aided God in the construction of the cosmos.[38] Hubler places this text in the context of other rabbinic texts that 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, that he refuses to go beyond that principle and speculate about what might have existed before the creation.[39]

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37. *Bereshit Rabbah* 1.9, in Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 100, emphasis deleted.

38. See David Winston, "Creation Ex Nihilo Revisited: A Reply to Jonathan Goldstein," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 37/1 (1986): 88–91; Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 101.

39. 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

2 Enoch. Copan and Craig also argue that *2 Enoch* (Slavonic, probably dating from the first century) teaches creation out of nothing. In their book, they correct a critical mistake in their understanding of *2 Enoch* in the article, where they argued that the assertion that God made "the visible from the invisible" teaches creation out of nothing. There they argue that what is invisible (as in Hebrews 10:3) is "nothing" and that *2 Enoch* teaches that "visible things are created from invisible things" (see *NMC,* p. 124). In their book, however, they recognize that it is clear that the invisible things are not "nothing" but rather are things that exist, though unseen. Nevertheless, they extend their argument to insist that *2 Enoch* teaches a two-stage creation: first the invisible things are created from nothing and then the visible things are created from the invisible things (*CON,* pp. 100–102). *Second Enoch* 24:2 asserts: "Before anything at all existed, from the very beginning, whatever exists I created from the non-existent, and from the invisible the visible." Thus, Copan and Craig claim that *2 Enoch* teaches creation out of nothing.[40]

However, Copan and Craig miss the schema of creation presented in *2 Enoch*. First, the assertion in *2 Enoch* that God created all that exists "from non-being" (recension A) or "from the non-existent" (recension J) appears to use the term "non-being" as a reference to the underlying, formless substrate. It is clear that the invisible from which the visible things are created is not absolutely nothing, because "before any visible things had come into existence, I, the ONE, moved around in the invisible things" (*2 Enoch* 24:4). God cannot move around in what does not exist in any way. Moreover, *2 Enoch* says that God himself is invisible among the invisible things (*2 Enoch* 24:4 [A]).

> The Lord is the one who *laid the foundations upon the unknown things,* and he is the one who spread out the heavens

an express adoption of creation *ex nihilo.* See Jonathan A. Goldstein, "Creation Ex Nihilo: Recantations and Restatements," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 38/2 (1987): 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 they are not helpers to God any more than the clay is a helper to the potter.

40. See *2 Enoch* 24, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha,* 1:140–43.

> above the visible and the invisible things. And the earth he solidified above the waters, and waters he based upon the unfixed things; and he (alone) created the uncountable creatures. . . . From the invisible things and the visible he created all the visible things; */and/ he himself is invisible*. (*2 Enoch* 47:3–5 [J]; 48:5, emphasis added)

This passage makes it clear that the invisible things are indeed things and that the uncreated God is counted among the invisible things. Moreover, in creating, God sets the foundations for the creation (the first thing used in creating) upon the already existent "unknown things." Copan and Craig point out in their book that *2 Enoch* asserts that God created the invisible things as well as the visible. *Second Enoch* 65:1[J] states: "Before ever anything existed, and before ever any created thing was created, the Lord created the whole of his creation, visible and invisible." They take this passage to teach creation *ex nihilo* (*CON,* p. 102). However, it is clear that God did not create *all* the invisible things out of nothing because the text expressly states that God is uncreated (*2 Enoch* 33–25)—and God is also one of the invisible things. Moreover, the language used is very precise: "before ever *any created thing was created*." The text carefully limits the scope of God's creation to what is created, implying that there is something uncreated. Moreover, the text expressly speaks of the "light" as the uncreated reality. As F. I. Andersen noted: "Out of the original invisible things, God calls two beings: Adoil, from whom is born the great light, and Arukhas, from whom comes the darkness. Water is made by thickening a mixture of light and darkness. But light, if anything, is the great elemental substance."[41]

Copan and Craig are correct indeed that a multistage creation is presented in *2 Enoch,* but *2 Enoch* does not accept creation *ex nihilo.* Several Jewish texts and Romans 4:17 state that God creates by calling to or giving commands to "non-being." *Second Enoch* explains what it is that God calls to: he calls to the light and the darkness as if they were two sentient beings—Adoil, from whom light issues, and

41. *2 Enoch* 24, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha,* 1:142 n. g.

Arukhas, from whom darkness issues (*2 Enoch* 25:1–5). As Andersen affirms: "The dualism of light and darkness arises from two primal beings, Adoil and Ar(u)khas. 2En does not say that God created them, but they are clearly under his control."[42] From these two invisible things the rest of creation is created. *Second Enoch* thus expressly teaches creation from a preexisting substrate of invisible things that do not have form and thus are referred to as "non-being." The process of creation, according to *2 Enoch,* is (1) God commands "the lowest things" (or the most fundamental)—Adoil (to disintegrate into light) and Arukhas (to disintegrate into darkness); (2) light solidifies into the upper foundation (25:4) and the darkness solidifies into the lower foundation (26:2); and (3) water is created from the mixture of light and darkness (27:2). In any event, Copan and Craig have misconstrued *2 Enoch* and once again taken a text that teaches creation from preexisting realities as if it were evidence of creation out of nothing. Second Enoch is also a crucial example of the use of the term *create* to refer to commanding already existing realities and organizing a cosmos out of formless light.

The Shepherd of Hermas. Copan and Craig next cite the Shepherd of Hermas, a Christian text from the middle of the second century (about AD 140). They begin by citing a text from the Mandates: "First, one must believe that God is one and that he has created and organized and made them from the non-existence into existence, and contains all, but alone is uncontained" (πρῶτον πάντων πίστευσον ὅτι εἷς ἐστὶν ὁ θεός, ὁ τὰ πάντα κτίσας καὶ καταρτίσας, καὶ ποιήσας ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος εἰς τὸ εἶναι τὰ πάντα, καὶ πάντα χωρῶν, μόνος δὲ ἀχώρητος ὤν).[43] Copan and Craig take this passage to be a clear reference to creation out of nothing because God alone is uncontained whereas matter is contained (*CON,* p. 128). But such language only means that the scope of God's power is not limited to or contained by his physical presence, whereas matter is so contained. This text carefully uses language that indicates relative non-being, the ἐκ τοῦ

42. *2 Enoch* 26, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha,* 1:144–45 n. d. The name *Adoil* probably refers to either the light or the sun (which is never said to be created in *2 Enoch* and is assumed to be uncreated).

43. Shepherd of Hermas, Mandates, 1.1.1, in PG 2:913, author's translation.

μὴ ὄντος (*ek tou mē ontos*), rather than absolute negation. Georg Schuttermayr has presented a very detailed study of the use of οὐκ ἐκ ὄντων in early Christian authors and Philo and concluded that one must be careful not to read the notion of creation out of nothing from such language.[44] As Hubler commented,

> Once again, ἐκ μὴ ὄντος alone cannot be taken as an absolute denial of material substrate. By itself this phrase is insufficient to carry the burden of a decisive and well-defined position both because ἐκ and ὄν are notoriously equivocal. Ἐκ does not necessarily designate material cause, but it can be used temporally. Ὄν 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 claim to the presence or absence of material and provides no discussion of the position.[45]

Copan and Craig also cite the Visions: "God, who dwells in heaven, and created that which is out of non-existence (κτίσας ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος)."[46] Once again, the technical phrase for relative non-being is used: ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος. As we have seen, Aristotle used the phrase ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος (*ek tou mē ontos*) to refer to relative non-being generating new life from parents already existing. Incidentally, it is extremely significant that the first "scriptural" arguments in history to support the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*—formulated by Irenaeus (about AD 185) and Origen (AD 220)—did not cite scriptures from the canon accepted by evangelicals and Latter-day Saints. Rather, Irenaeus and Origen cited the Shepherd of Hermas and 2 Maccabees 7:28.[47] The reason they cited these texts is obvious—these writers did not know

44. Georg Schuttermayr, "'Schopfung aus dem Nichts' in 2 Makk. 7,28?" *Biblische Zeitschrift* 17 (1973): 203–28.

45. Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 110.

46. Shepherd of Hermas, Visions, 1.1.6, author's translation; cited by Copan and Craig as "1.6" (*NMC*, p. 429 n. 166) and corrected as 1.1.6 (in *CON*, p. 127).

47. See Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 4.20.2; and Origen, *De Principiis* 1.3.3 for references to the Shepherd of Hermas.

of any scriptures within the canon that 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 the Shepherd of Hermas adopted the technical language for creation from the term that describes relative nonbeing—ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος—which makes it fairly clear that God created what is from potential being, not from absolute nothing, or *ex nihilo.*[48]

Joseph and Aseneth. Copan and Craig next cite the Jewish pseudepigraphical book *Joseph and Aseneth,* written sometime between the second century BC and the second century AD: "Lord God of the 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" (p. 123).[49] However, once again Copan and Craig do not note that God's "making to appear those things which are invisible" (cf. Hebrews 11:3) actually imputes an existing status to those things that are not seen. Just as in *2 Enoch* and Colossians, the assertion that God made visible things "from the non-appearing and non-being" simply refers to the already existing, invisible substrate out of which God created visible things. Invisible things are still things; they simply have not been made visible by God. Indeed, this view is strongly supported by the fact that the phrase "he brought the invisible (things) out into light" relies on the Septuagint, Genesis 1:2, and thus refers to bringing light out of the already existing darkness of the abyss. The same thought is expressed again in 8:10, which also relies on the Septuagint text of Genesis 1:2: "Lord God of my father Israel, the Most High, the Powerful One of Jacob, who gave life to all (things) and called (them) from the darkness into the light" (author's translation). The statement that God calls forth invisible things into the light to be seen posits the invisible things as already existing in the darkness of unformed matter.

Odes of Solomon. Copan and Craig also cite the *Odes of Solomon,* which were probably composed about AD 100:

48. See Hatch, *Influence of Greek Ideas,* 197.
49. *Joseph and Aseneth* 12:1–3.

> 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. (*NMC,* p. 124)[50]

Again they read the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* into a text that 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. Copan and Craig do not note that, earlier in this same Ode, God is said to investigate "that which is invisible," and it thus posits an already existing reality prior to God's creation. Before the creation of the world, God began his creative activity by investigation of the substrate of 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 ear hears his thought.
> It is he who spread out the earth,
> and placed the waters in the sea. (*Odes of Solomon* 16:8–10)

As Mario Erbetta notes 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 yet exist, but it still unveils the divine thought. This thought is nothing other than the divine plan before being realized in being."[51] 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 to bring about the thought that gives rise to God's plan to create. The Lord investigates "that which is invisible," and thus, once again, the "invisible things" are not absolute nothing

50. *Odes of Solomon* 16:18–19, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha,* 2:749. Copan and Craig did not quote the relevant text regarding God's being among the invisible things, just as they did not acknowledge similar language in *2 Enoch.*

51. Mario Erbetta, *Gli Apocrifi del Nuovo Testamento* (Turin: Marietti, 1975), 634.

but potential existence ready to have form impressed upon it by God. What does not exist in any sense could not have such creative causal powers. As such, the invisible things from which God creates the visible things already exist as a potentiality. This passage is actually contrary to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo.*

Second Baruch. Copan and Craig next cite *2 Baruch* 21:4 as evidence for *creation 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.*"[52] However, this text 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 Joseph Smith's expression in the *Lectures on Faith:* "God spake, chaos heard, and worlds came into order by reason of the faith there was in him."[53] This text is an especially poignant reminder that the phrase *that which did not exist* refers to something that 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.

Aristides of Athens. Copan and Craig also assert that perhaps the earliest philosophical apologist for Christianity, Aristides of Athens, expressly taught the doctrine of creation out of nothing. Their analysis is seriously flawed and, indeed, borders on being irresponsible. Aristides reportedly delivered an apology to the Roman emperor Hadrian about ad 130. Copan and Craig fail to inform the reader that the textual sources vary and are quite questionable.[54] There are three recencions of Aristides' *Apology*: a shorter Greek version, a

52. A. F. J. Klijn, trans., "2 (Syriac Apocalypse of) Baruch," in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha,* 1:628, emphasis added. Copan and Craig did not quote the relevant text regarding not-being obeying God's word.

53. Lecture 1:22, in Joseph Smith, *Lectures on Faith Delivered to the School of the Prophets in Kirtland, Ohio 1834–35* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 5.

54. For the textual history and recent discovery of the Syriac text and the very late textual evidence for the Greek recension, see Edgar Hennecke, ed., *Die Apologie des Aristides* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1893); and J. Rendel Harris, ed. and trans., *The Apology of Aristides on Behalf of the Christians* (Cambridge: University Press, 1891).

much longer Syriac version, and Armenian translations of the Syriac. Aristides reportedly stated:

> Let us come now, O king, also to the history of the Jews and let us see what sort of opinion they have concerning God. The Jews then say that God is one, Creator of all and almighty: and that it is not proper for us that anything else should be worshipped, but this God only: and in this they appear to be much nearer to the truth than all the peoples, in that they worship God more exceedingly and not His works.[55]

They also cite a passage found only in the shorter Greek recension: "O King, let us proceed to the elements themselves that we may show in regard to them that they are not gods, but perishable and mutable, produced out of that which did not exist (ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος) at the command of the true God, who is indestructible and immutable and invisible, yet he sees all things and, as He wills, modifies and changes things."[56] Copan and Craig argue that these statements imply creation out of nothing because Aristides claims that God is both "Artificer and Creator." They thus claim that the text asserts: (1) "there is an ontological distinction between Creator and creature . . . ; and (2) God created in stages, first bringing into being the elements and then shaping them into a cosmos" (*CON,* p. 131).

Neither of these assertions is supported by the text. There is not a word about a two-stage creation in Aristides' *Apology*. There is a distinction between creator and creature, but it is not an ontological distinction as claimed by Copan and Craig. Rather, the text merely states that God is incorruptible and unchangeable, whereas "the elements" (not "matter") are subject to decay and change. The elements were always seen as created from a preexisting substrate that the Greeks called the τοῦ μὴ ὄντος (*tou mē ontos*) or "non-being." Those who believed in creation *ex materia* never claimed that matter should be worshipped or that it is somehow equal with God. It was lifeless and

55. Aristides, *Apologia* 14, in Harris, *Apology of Aristides,* 48.

56. Aristides, *Apology* 4 (Greek), in Harris, *Apology of Aristides,* 101, author's translation.

liable to fall into chaos, whereas God is the source of life and order. Moreover, those who accept creation from preexisting matter also saw a distinction between the creator who organizes everything that is created and the created, which would be no-thing, completely devoid of order and form, in the absence of God's creative activity. Thus, merely recognizing that God is creator and that he created all that is created does not imply or logically require creation out of nothing.

More important, this analysis shows very clearly that Copan and Craig have failed to grasp the essential distinction between relative non-being, which refers to a material substrate without form, and absolute nothing in these texts. Aristides (if he said it at all) uses the exact phrase used by Aristotle to refer to generation of life "out of non-being" ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος. The technical language used shows that this text actually refers to the creation from the preexisting material substrate of relative non-being without form. Thus, May concludes quite accurately that: "Aristides means that the elements are created by God; but it does not appear from his book that he consciously distanced himself from the philosophical model of world-formation and . . . creation."[57]

Second Maccabees. 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 Latter-day Saints or Protestants. Copan and Craig assert that it "states clearly the traditional doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*" (*NMC,* p. 122). It reads: "I pray you son, look to heaven and earth and seeing everything in them, know that God made them from non-being [οὐκ ἐξ ὄντων ἐποίησεν αὐτα], *and the human race began in the same way* [καὶ τὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων γένος οὕτω γίνεται]."[58] This text is quite unclear, however, as to whether creation from absoute nothing is intended. Many scholars believe that 2 Maccabees teaches creation *ex nihilo* because it uses the phrase οὐκ ἐξ ὄντων (*ouk ex ontōn*), which in the much later Christian apologetic of the late second century was a technical term of art signifying

57. May, *Creatio ex Nihilo,* 119–20.
58. Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 90, emphasis added.

creatio ex nihilo. In this context, however, 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 nonbeing in the sense that "an artist who, by impressing form on matter, causes things to exist which did not exist before."[59] An artist creates something completely new by using preexisting materials. Werner Foerster quotes Scharbau, who maintains that in 2 Maccabees "the non-existent is not absolute nothing but . . . the metaphysical substance . . . in an uncrystallized state."[60] May continues:

> The best known text, 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 here no theoretical disquisition on the nature of the creation process, but a parenthetic reference to God's creative power: . . . A position on the problem of matter is clearly not to be expected in this context. The text implies no more than the conception that the world came into existence through the sovereign creative act of God, and that it previously was not there.[61]

Thus, May suggests that the words οὐκ ἐξ ὄντων in 2 Maccabees should be translated "not out of things being, i.e. already existent individual things."[62] Hubler is in agreement: "Non-being [in 2 Maccabees] refers to the non-existence of the heavens and earth before God's creative act. It does not express absolute non-existence, only the prior non-existence of the heavens and earth. They were made to exist after not existing."[63] More important, the text of 2 Maccabees 7:28 immediately

59. Hatch, *Influence of Greek Ideas,* 197 n. 3.

60. Werner Foerster, "Ktizo," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:1001 n. 6.

61. May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo,* 6, 7.

62. May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo,* 7 n. 27.

63. Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 90.

follows the assertion that God created the world "out of non-being" by saying that "the human race began the same way." This phrase suggests that creation of humanity is parallel to creation of the heavens and earth. Yet "mankind" was not created from nothing but by organizing the dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7). Verse 7 of 2 Maccabees 28 is a mother's expression of faith that since God created the world in the first place, he can bring her dead son back to life. Thus, the context suggests very strongly that she is speaking of re-creating what has been. The mother is not making a claim about creation out of nothing, but about God's ability to reorganize what had previously existed in the same way that he had originally organized it. She sees that God can bring back her son because he created all things in the first place. Yet the act of bringing a person back to life certainly does not require creation where there was absolutely nothing before. Further, we have already seen that Aristotle also stated that generation of life is from relative non-existence (τοῦ μὴ ὄντος)—and it is probable that 2 Maccabees has in mind the same notion of relative nonbeing as a preexisting substrate.[64]

In their book, Copan and Craig attempt to counter the assertion that God created man "in the same way" that he created the world. They retreat once again to their two-stage theory of creation: first out of nothing and then from the chaotic materials to an organized creation. They admit that it is true that humans were not created out of nothing in the biblical text, but since humans are created from the dust of the earth, and the earth is created (they claim out of nothing), they claim that it is the same in 2 Maccabees where reference to creating man refers to a two-stage creation out of nothing (*CON*, p. 98). Yet there is absolutely no evidence of a two-stage creation theory in 2 Maccabees. Their *ad hoc* two-stage theory of creation is imposed

64. Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium* B5, 741, b 22f. J. C. O'Neill, "How Early Is the Doctrine of *Creatio ex Nihilo*?" *Journal of Theological Studies,* n.s., 53/2 (2002): 449–53, argues that 2 Maccabees reflects a well-established Jewish view of creation *ex nihilo.* However, he fails to note the parallel use of Aristotle's phrase, which shows that "non-being" used in the context of generation means relative non-being from an already existing substrate. Almost all of O'Neill's arguments are anticipated by Craig and Copan—and my response to them also answers O'Neill.

on the text as a maneuver to rescue their interpretation from what the text expressly states. Moreover, just a few verses earlier, the text states: "It is the creator of the universe who moulds man (πλάσας ἀνθρώπου) at his birth and plans the origin of all things (γένεσιν καὶ πάντων). Therefore, he, in his mercy, will give you back life and breath again" (2 Maccabees 7:23). The text expressly states that in creating man, God "moulds" or shapes man in his creation (πλάσας), in the sense of shaping a pre-existing clay or matter (see Romans 9:20; 1 Timothy 2:13). Thus, when 2 Maccabees 7:28 affirms that the heavens and earth are created "in the same way" that God moulded man, the text presupposes formation from a preexisting matter.

Jewish and Christian Texts Teaching *Creatio ex Materia*

As demonstrated, it is quite certain that several Jewish texts expressly teach the doctrine of creation out of preexisting matter or a substrate of potential matter (potential matter is sometimes called "non-being" or "that which does not exist"—τὸ μὴ ὄν). As shown, *2 Enoch* and *Joseph and Aseneth* taught that God created visible things from already existing invisible things.[65] Similarly, 2 Peter 3:5 teaches that God created the world from the already existing waters, and Hebrews 11:3, written by a Jew expressly to Jews, teaches creation from invisible things.

The Wisdom of Solomon. To these texts can be added the Wisdom of Solomon, a Jewish work dated by David Winston to AD 37–41,[66] which expressly teaches the doctrine of creation from matter: "For not without means was your almighty hand, that had fashioned the universe from formless matter" (Οὐ γὰρ ἠπόρει ἡ παντοδύναμός σου χεὶρ καὶ κτίσασα τὸν κόσμον ἐξ ἀμόρφου ὕλης) (Wisdom of Solomon 11:17 NAB). Amazingly, Copan and Craig ignore this text altogether in their article but cite it in their book as a possible example of creation out of nothing! They assert:

65. *2 Enoch* 25:1–2 and *Joseph and Aseneth* 12:1–3.

66. David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 3.

> At first glance, the apocryphal book of Wisdom of Solomon (11:17) appears to posit a formless archmatter: God created "out of formless matter [*ex amorphou hylēs*]" (NRSV). This may be true, but even here, we should proceed with caution. In Wisdom 1:14, there could be in view a two-stage creation: "he created all things [*ektisen . . . ta panta*] that they might have being [*to einei*]" (NEB). . . . It is plausible to argue that the *hylē* (primal matter) out of which the cosmos was made was the uninhabited "earth [*gē*]," which was already created in Genesis 1:1. God shaped the world out of material he previously created. (*CON,* p. 97)

Hubler appropriately expresses his contempt for such reading into the text of one's own preconceived theology. He claims of that argument that "*Wisdom of Solomon* must have tacitly held that a *creatio ex nihilo* occurred before the stated *creatio ex materia* because the author could not have accepted the Greek notion of eternal, formless matter. At best this begs the question. At worst it ignores the evidence of *creatio ex materia* found in Midrash and Philo."[67] In fact, the text of the Wisdom of Solomon makes clear that creation out of unformed matter was seen by Jewish authors as consistent with assertions that God is all-powerful (παντοδύναμος) (11:17), that he creates the entire cosmos or universe (κτίσασα τὸν κόσμον) (11:17), and that he creates "the all" or the entirety of all there is (ἔκτισεν . . . τὰ πάντα) (1:14) out of unformed matter (ἐξ ἀμόρφου ὕλης) (11:17). Thus, this text undercuts all of Copan and Craig's exegetic arguments. They continually argue that if God is all-powerful and creates all there is, then creation out of nothing must be the conclusion (see, for example, *CON,* pp. 43, 74–75, 84–87, 105–6, 127–28). These terms are all used in Wisdom of Solomon, however, which expressly teaches creation out of formless matter.

To assert, as Copan and Craig do, that this text must have a two-stage creation in view, where the creation of the cosmos out of formless matter must be preceded by creation out of nothing, imposes on

67. Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 89–90 n. 25.

the text a notion that not only does not appear there but is expressly contrary to what it does state. In light of their eisegesis of the Wisdom of Solomon, we have to ask: *What kind of evidence would be sufficient to show creation out of formless matter if a text that expressly states that God created the entire cosmos using unformed matter and says absolutely nothing about a creation out of nothing doesn't suffice?* Copan and Craig finally retreat to their debater's stance and a weak concession:

> For the sake of argument, however, let us assume that Wisdom holds to this Greek hylomorphism (i.e., an eternally preexistent substrate is given form) and that a two-stage *ex nihilo* creation is completely excluded. We can still make a contrast here in that "the Palestinian [perspective] (II Mac. vii. 28) insists that all was made by God 'out of nothing.'" (*CON*, p. 97)

Their claim that the Hellenistic Jews believed in creation out of preexisting material, whereas Palestinian Jews believed in creation out of nothing, is based upon a very questionable reading of 2 Maccabees 7:28, as we have seen.

Philo Judaeus. These texts also offer some understanding of the context of the writings of Philo Judaeus, the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher, and the Christian writers contemporary with him who referred to the creation in their works. Writing in the first century, Philo expressly taught that God created from already existing matter: "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."[68] Elsewhere, Philo stated that "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."[69] Philo also asserted that, in the creation of the world, God

68. Philo, *De Plantatione* 2.6.

69. Philo, *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; and May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo,* 10–21.

> summoned what had previously no being into existence, creating order out of disorder, and distinctive qualities out of things which had no such qualities, and similarities out of things dissimilar, and identity out of things which were different, and intercommunion and harmony out of things which had previously no communication nor agreement, and equality out of inequality, and light out of darkness; for he is always anxious to exert his beneficent powers in order to change whatever is disorderly from its present evil condition, and to transform it so as to bring it into a better state.[70]

Philo's statement that God "summons what previously had no being into existence" must be seen as asserting only that the underlying chaos did not have existence in the form of an ordered reality such as God creates of it by impressing form onto the formless. Copan and Craig suggest that in Philo's writings perhaps the matter organized by God was itself created at a prior instant *ex nihilo.* Frances Young has demonstrated why such a reading of Philo's texts forces an unstated and contrary assumption into the text, attributing to it something that it does not address at all.[71] Copan and Craig rely heavily on the 1966 study of Harry Wolfson in which he argued that Philo ultimately teaches that the chaotic and unformed matter referred to in Genesis 1:2 is created and that the chaos relies on Platonic ideas for its form and creation.[72] They also rely on the 1970 study by Ronald Williamson to argue that Philo's view of creation diverged from Plato's view of an eternal preexistent substratum of existence from which all else was created by the Demiurge imposing Form upon it.[73] However, they virtually misrepresent the much more complete and

70. Philo, *De Specialibus Legibus* 4.187, in *The Works of Philo,* trans. C. D. Yonge (n.p.: Hendrickson, 1995), 634.

71. Young, "Christian Doctrine of Creation," 139–51.

72. Harry A. Wolfson, "Plato's Pre-existent Matter in Patristic Philosophy," in *The Classical Tradition,* ed. Luitpold Wallach (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, University Press, 1966), 414–16. See also Henry A. Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 1:172.

73. Ronald Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 374–76.

better-reasoned studies of David T. Runia. They cite Runia in support of the view that Philo taught creation out of nothing (*CON,* p. 110). But Runia expressly rejects their two-stage theory of creation from nothing. Rather, he asserts that, in Philo's writings, "God the creator bears a definite resemblance to the Platonic Demiurge, who creates order out of an already existing chaos. Philo nowhere explicitly indicates that God himself first created the primordial matter, as would later be formulated in the classic doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*."[74] Runia (whose dissertation addressed the relation between the thought of Philo and Plato) corrects the mistakes made by Wolfson and Williamson. As Runia observed:

> Although in the *Timaeus* Plato explicitly declines to elaborate on the ultimate principles of reality, the cosmological dialogue was extensively used in order to formulate precisely such a doctrine. The influence of such attempts can be strongly felt in the Jewish exegete and philosopher Philo and the early Christian thinkers Justin and Clement. All three appear to espouse what one might call a "monarchic dualism." There is but one first cause or principle, but beside it a shadowy passive or negative matter is assumed, which is given form in the act of creation. This line of thinking is abandoned by Tatian, Theophilus of Antioch and Irenaeus, who for the first time develop a reasonably clear doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.[75]

Copan and Craig make a fundamental assumption about Philo that turns out to be critically erroneous: they assume that if Philo believed that God creates the Ideas or Forms, and these in turn give form to the chaotic matter, then it follows that God also creates the chaotic matter out of nothing. Philo, however, held that God in fact eternally creates the Forms and (unlike Plato) that these Forms reside within God or his Logos rather than independently of God. Still, it

74. David T. Runia, *Exegesis and Philosophy: Studies on Philo of Alexandria* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1990), 8.

75. Web abstract of David T. Runia, "Plato's *Timaeus,* First Principle(s), and Creation in Philo and Early Christian Thought," in *Plato's* Timaeus *as Cultural Icon,* ed. Gretchen J. Reydams-Schils (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 133–51.

does not follow, if the Forms are eternally created and they give form to the chaotic substrate, that the underlying chaos is itself created. All that follows is that the Forms give form to an underlying preexisting chaos—which was Philo's view. As Philo famously stated:

> But Moses, who had early reached the very summits of philosophy . . . , was well aware that it is indispensable that in all existing things there must be an active cause, and a passive subject; and that the active cause is the intellect of the universe, thoroughly unadulterated and thoroughly unmixed, superior to virtue and superior to science, superior even to abstract good or abstract beauty; *while the passive subject is something inanimate and incapable of motion by any intrinsic power of its own, but having been set in motion, and fashioned, and endowed with life by the intellect, became transformed into that most perfect work, this world.*[76]

In this passage we see clearly the distinction between God's intellect as the active cause of creation and the "passive subject" (τὸ δὲ παθητὸν) that is given form in the act of creation. This passive substrate already exists to receive form from the divine intellect. Philo also expressly denies that anything can come into being from absolute non-being or, having once existed, pass into non-being.[77] Moreover, Philo is very clear that unformed matter is not among the realities created by God:

> But there is no material which has any value in the eyes of God, because he has given all materials an equal share of his skill. In reference to which it is said in the sacred scriptures, "God saw all that he had made, and, behold, it was very Good." [Gen. 1:31.] But the things which receive an equal degree of praise, are by all means held in equal estimation by him who confers the praise; *and what God praised was not the materials which he had worked up into creation, destitute*

76. Philo, *De opificio mundi* 2.8–9, in *Works of Philo,* trans. Yonge, 3.
77. Philo, *De aeternitate mundi* 2.5, in *Works of Philo,* trans. Yonge, 707.

> *of life and melody, and easily dissolved, and moreover in their own intrinsic nature perishable, and out of all proportion and full of iniquity,* but rather his own skillful work, completed according to one equal and well-proportioned power and knowledge always alike and identical. In reference to which all things were also accounted equal and similar by all the rules of proportion, according to the principles of art and knowledge.[78]

Thus Philo could not allow God to be involved in the creation of matter because it is evil and Philo is crystal clear that God does not bring about anything that is evil. It is true that Philo believed that time had a beginning when God ordered the world and the heavenly bodies began their revolutions.[79] But it appears that Philo believed that the eternal material substrate was perfectly inactive and passive, and thus it would have existed as motionless and outside of a time unmeasured by movement.[80] It seems to me that Philo's view is best seen in light of his view of creation proceeding from the dividing of opposites. God begins by dividing "the essence of the universe," from which he organizes the four essential elements of earth, air, water and fire. This "essence of the universe" is a formless and motionless substrate that is capable of receiving form from the divine Ideas through the action of the Logos. Philo stated:

> For as the Creator divided our soul and our limbs in the middle, so also, in the same manner, did he divide the essence of the universe when he made the world; for, having taken it, he began to divide it thus: in the first instance, he made two divisions, the heavy and the light, separating that which was thick from that which was more subtle. After that, he again made a second division of each, dividing the subtle part into air and fire, and the denser portion into water and earth; and,

78. Philo, *Quis rerum divinarum heres* 32.159–60, in *Works of Philo,* trans. Yonge, 289, emphasis added. See also, David Winston, "Philo's Theory of Cosmogony," in *Religious Syncretism in Antiquity,* ed. Birger A. Pearson (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1975), 157–71.

79. Philo, *De aeternitate mundi* 10.52, in *Works of Philo,* trans. Yonge, 712.

80. Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 92–93.

> first of all, he laid down those elements, which are perceptible by the outward senses, to be, as it were, the foundations of the world which is perceptible by the outward senses.[81]

Thus, the order of creation according to Philo seems to be: (1) God eternally generates the ideas that constitute forms perceptible only to the mind or invisible things (the κόσμος νοητός); (2) God imposes order upon a passive and motionless, eternally preexisting substrate by impressing form upon it and dividing it into equal opposites; (3) God first creates water, air, earth, and fire; (4) from these four elements God creates the remainder of the creation; (5) the world or cosmos thus has a beginning because it is created from "what is not" and time begins with the creation of the cosmos.

1 Clement. Clement, bishop of Rome, shared the same worldview as Philo of an eternal fabric or constitution of the world from which the world was created. Clement stated: "Thou . . . didst make manifest the everlasting fabric of the world. Thou, Lord, didst create the earth." The terms used here by Clement are significant. He asserts that God did "make manifest" (ἐφανεροποίησας) the "everlasting fabric of the world" (Σὺ τὴν ἀέναον τοῦ κόσμου σύστασιν).[82] He is referring to an eternal substrate that underlies God's creative activity. Clement is important because he is at the very center of the Christian church as it was then developing. His view assumed that God had created from an eternally existing substrate, creating 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 maintaining a generally accepted one. However, the fact that such a view was assumed is even more significant than if Clement had argued for it. If he had presented an argument for this view, then we could assume that it was either a

81. Philo, *Quis rerum divinarum heres* 27.133–34, in *Works of Philo,* trans. Yonge, 287.

82. *1 Clement* 60, in J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers,* ed. J. R. Harmer (1891; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book, 1956), 1:176. Lightfoot translates this text as: "Thou through Thine operations didst make manifest the everlasting fabric of the world" (1:303). See Oscar de Gebhardt and Adolphus Harnack, *Patrium Apostolicorum Opera: Clementis Romani* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1876), 1:100.

contested doctrine or a new view. But because he acknowledged it as obvious, it appears to have been a generally accepted belief in the early Christian church.

Justin Martyr. There are at least four late second-century Christian philosophers who believed that creation out of matter was the established Christian doctrine. It must be noticed that as we pass from the biblical texts into the patristic writings of the late second century, the scope of discourse passes from a nontechnical 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. The importance of these philosophers, however, is not found in their arguments or philosophies but in 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 AD 165, taught that Plato had received his doctrine of creation from Moses's 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 above shown, was the first prophet, and of greater antiquity than the Greek writers; and through whom the Spirit of prophecy, *signifying how and from what materials God at first formed the world* (ἐδημιούργησεν ὁ Θεὸς τὸν κόσμον), 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 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* (Ωστε λόγῳ Θεου ἐκ τῶν

ὑποκειμένων . . . γεγενῆσθαι τὸν πάντα κόσμον) *spoken of before* by Moses.[83]

Like Philo, Justin Martyr thought that there was no problem in interpreting Genesis in Platonistic terms—God had created by organizing matter. Yet Justin's statement that this is a doctrine "we . . . have learned" gives pause, for he is speaking to Greeks who agree with Plato. He is claiming that he has learned in the Christian tradition that via his Word, God created all things by organizing matter and that this view is older than Plato's. The verb used by Justin to indicate that God created by "altering matter" is στρέψαντα (*strepsanta*), meaning "rotating or turning." Such language echoes Plato's view, taught in the *Timaeus,* that the Demiurge created the cosmos by setting the world soul in rotation and that by the same act matter is ordered.[84] Further, Justin uses the Platonic term for creation, ἐδημιούργησεν (*edēmiourgēsen*), "to fashion or form." Note also that it is the entire world—τὸν πάντα κόσμον (*ton panta kosmon*)—that is formed out of the amorphous matter. Moreover, Justin gives this explanation in light of the statement in Genesis 1:1 that "In the beginning, God created the world." What God did in Genesis 1:1, according to Justin, was to give form and shape to the underlying material substrate through the action of his Word.

Earlier in his *First Apology,* Justin declared: "God, in the beginning, in His goodness made (δημιουργῆσαι) everything out of shapeless matter (ἐξ ἀμόρφου ὕλης) for the sake of men."[85] Again, Justin signals that he is referring to the opening statement in the Genesis creation account, "in the beginning God made" (Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίσεν ὁ Θεὸς). Justin is quoting the Septuagint text of Genesis 1:1. Moreover, the scope of what God organized from shapeless matter is "everything" (τὰ πάντα). Once again he uses the Platonic term for creation,

83. Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 59.1–5, in *The Writings of Justin Martyr and Athenagoras,* trans. Marcus Dods, George Reight, and B. P. Pratten (Edinburgh: Clark, 1867), 57.

84. Plato, *Timaeus* 34a–b, 36e. Copan and Craig claim that Justin believed in a prior creation *ex nihilo* that is not mentioned in the text—but if it isn't mentioned in the text then there is no evidence to support their view.

85. Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 10.

demiurgesai, the act of the Demiurge in Plato's thought. These statements leave little doubt that Justin has embraced Middle Platonism and that he views everything created as having been fashioned out of a material substrate and that this mode of creation is the meaning of the Genesis creation account.

Nevertheless, Copan and Craig once again insist that Justin adopts a two-stage creation in which Justin believed that the formless matter was first created *ex nihilo* (*CON,* pp. 131–34).[86] Their primary argument is that God is referred to by Justin as the only "unbegotten" (ἀγεννήτος) and "incorruptible" (ἄφθαρτος) (*CON,* pp. 132–34).[87] They equate being unbegotten and incorruptible with being uncreated, and being begotten and corruptible with being created out of nothing. Yet it is an equation that is not found in Justin's writings. He never connects these terms with creation at all. Their argument will not bear the weight they place on it in light of Justin's explicit statements to the contrary. Once again, we see Copan and Craig forcing their preconceived view onto the text even against explicit and clear statements to the contrary. It seems to me that Copan and Craig have highlighted a problem that begins to manifest itself in Justin's works. The notion of God adopted by Middle Platonists was not consistent with the earlier Christian views and was inconsistent with Justin's views about creation. His adoption of Middle Platonic terms to describe God placed a gulf between the created and God just as it did for Philo. It is no mistake that Justin also adopts the Logos as halfway between God and creation. He did not realize this inconsistency, of course. Justin continued to hold to the view that God created out of a preexisting substrate that was not created by God. He states clearly that "everything" is created by giving order to this unformed matter. He is crystal clear that he is referring to the entire creation recounted in Genesis 1. It is only with Tatian and Theophilus that we first see a

86. They rely heavily on the conclusions of Eric Osborn, *Justin Martyr* (Tubingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1973); and Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Osborn takes issue with Gerhard May's conclusion that Justin Martyr did not teach creation out of nothing but expressly adopted creation out of unformed matter.

87. Citing Justin Martyr, *2 Apology* 13, in PG 6:465; and *Dialogue* 5, in PG 6:488.

clearly articulated statement as to why the Middle Platonic view of God that they all adopted was inconsistent with creation out of a preexisting, material substrate.

Athenagoras of Athens. Athenagoras of Athens, writing about AD 170, also taught that God created by crystallizing an already existing substrate: the *Logos,* or Word, "came forth to be the idea and energizing power of all material things, which lay like a nature without attributes, and an inactive earth, the grosser particles being mixed up with the lighter."[88] However, Copan and Craig believe that Athenagoras adopted a two-stage creation where the "inactive earth" from which all things were created was itself created *ex nihilo.* Athenagoras, of course, never says that there is a two-stage creation, but Copan and Craig maintain that Athenagoras implicitly adopted creation out of nothing in the following passage:

> But to us, who distinguish God from matter, and teach that matter is one thing and God another, and that they are separated by a wide interval (for that the Deity is uncreated and eternal, to be beheld by the understanding and reason alone, while matter is created and perishable), is it not absurd to apply the name of atheism?. . . But, since our doctrine acknowledges one God, the Maker of this universe, who is Himself uncreated (for that which is does not come to be, but that which is not) but has made all things by the Logos which is from Him. (*CON,* p. 134)[89]

Copan and Craig assert that "unquestionably," Athenagoras teaches creation out of nothing here (*CON,* p. 144). Here they seriously misrepresent Athenagoras's teachings. Once again we have a text that explicitly and repeatedly states that God creates by organizing an underlying material substrate, and yet Copan and Craig wrest the text in an attempt to make it conform to their two-stage

88. Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis* 10, trans. B. P. Pratten, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (hereafter *ANF*), ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 2:133.

89. Quoting Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis* 4 (*ANF* 2:131).

theory of creation *ex nihilo.* It is undeniable that here Athenagoras *does not assert* that all things are created "out of nothing," but merely that, unlike God, they are "created." Copan and Craig assume that if Athenagoras says that everything is created, that means they are created *ex nihilo.* However, Athenagoras did not use the word *create* to mean creation out nothing. His statement is consistent with the view that God organized the material substratum in creating and that all things are therefore created whereas God is not organized by himself. So I agree that Athenoragoras distinguishes between creator and the created, but it is not the ontological distinction between the absolutely non-existent and self-existent, but between what can fall apart and perish because it has been organized and given form and that which is eternal and imperishable.[90]

Indeed, Copan and Craig cite another passage (p. 135) that they believe supports creation out nothing; but in reality it supports the view that Athenagoras thinks of creation as organized unformed matter:

> Because the multitude, who cannot distinguish between matter and God, or see how great is the interval which lies between them, pray to idols made of matter, are we therefore, who do distinguish and separate the uncreated and the created, that which is [τὸ ὂν] and that which is not [τὸ οὐκ ὄν], that which is apprehended by the understanding and that which is perceived by the senses . . .[91]

It is clear that Athenagoras distinguishes between the creator and the created, yet Copan and Craig fail to acknowledge that this assertion is followed by an explanation that undercuts their entire argument. First, the phrase τὸ οὐκ ὄν refers to the underlying material substrate and not to absolute nothing.[92] More important, and decisively, Athenagoras is explicit that his view of creation is organization

90. Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis* 8 (*ANF* 2:132–33).
91. Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis* 15 (*ANF* 2:135).
92. May, *Creation Ex Nihilo,* 163.

and framing and that God is like an artist who stands in relation to the matter he has created as a potter stands to the clay:

> But if they [God and matter] are at the greatest possible remove from one another—as far asunder as the artist and the materials of his art—why are we called to account? For as is the potter and the clay (matter being the clay, and the artist the potter), so is God, the Framer of the world, and matter, which is subservient to Him for the purposes of His art. But as the clay cannot become vessels of itself without art, so neither did matter, which is capable of taking all forms, receive, apart from God the Framer, distinction and shape and order. And as we do not hold the pottery of more worth than him who made it, nor the vessels or glass and gold than him who wrought them; but if there is anything about them elegant in art we praise the artificer, and it is he who reaps the glory of the vessels: even so with matter and God—the glory and honour of the orderly arrangement of the world belongs of right not to matter, but to God, the Framer of matter. So that, if we were to regard the various forms of matter as gods, we should seem to be without any sense of the true God, because we should be putting the things which are dissoluble and perishable on a level with that which is eternal.[93]

So God is one who organizes matter in the same way that a potter forms the clay—and such an analogy certainly is inconsistent with creation *ex nihilo*.[94] In fact, Athenagoras is explicit that his view of creation is the same as Plato's, who also says that God creates all things:

93. Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis* 15 (*ANF* 2:135).

94. This view of God as artist and artificer because he creates by molding matter is further expressed in Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis* 16: "Whether, then, as Plato says, the world be a product of divine art, I admire its beauty, and adore the Artificer; or whether it be His essence and body, as the Peripatetics affirm, we do not neglect to adore God, who is the cause of the motion of the body, and descend 'to the poor and weak elements,' adoring in the impassible air (as they term it), passible matter; or, if any one apprehends the several parts of the world to be powers of God, we do not approach and do homage to the powers, but their Maker and Lord. I do not ask of matter what it has not to give, nor passing God by do I pay homage to the elements, which can do nothing more

> But, inasmuch as it is impossible to demonstrate without the citation of names that we are not alone in confining the notion of God to unity, I have ventured on an enumeration of opinions. Plato, then, says, "To find out the Maker and Father of this universe is difficult; and, when found, it is impossible to declare Him to all," conceiving of one uncreated and eternal God. And if he recognises others as well, such as the sun, moon, and stars, yet he recognises them as created: "gods, offspring of gods, of whom I am the Maker, and the Father of works which are indissoluble apart from my will; but whatever is compounded can be dissolved." If, therefore, Plato is not an atheist for conceiving of one uncreated God, the Framer of the universe, neither are we atheists who acknowledge and firmly hold that He is God who has framed all things by the Logos, and holds them in being by His Spirit.[95]

It is transparent that Athenagoras believed that his views of God as the uncreated creator were the same as Plato's. He states that, just as Plato believed that one God framed the universe, so Christians also believe that God framed all things through the Logos or Word of God. He expressly states that Plato makes the same distinction between creator and created that Christians do. Yet it is clear that Plato believed that the universe had been created by organizing a preexisting material substrate. Thus, Copan and Craig have failed to read Athenagoras within the context of his own statements about the creator/creature dichotomy and have imposed their own theological agenda on him. Athenagoras is very clear that when he refers to "created things" he means those things that have forms or "patterns": "for created things

than what they were bidden; for, although they are beautiful to look upon, by reason of the art of their Framer, yet they still have the nature of matter. And to this view Plato also bears testimony; 'for,' says he, 'that which is called heaven and earth has received many blessings from the Father, but yet partakes of body; hence it cannot possibly be free from change.' If, therefore, while I admire the heavens and the elements in respect of their art, I do not worship them as gods, knowing that the law of dissolution is upon them, how can I call those objects gods of which I know the makers to be men?" (*ANF* 2:136).

95. Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis* 6 (*ANF* 2:131–32).

are like their patterns; but the uncreated are unlike, being neither produced from any one, nor formed after the pattern of any one."

It must be recognized that Athenagoras's doctrine is thoroughly Platonic, notwithstanding the fact that he seeks to defend Christian doctrine. He posits a vast chasm between the created and the creator such that an intermediary is necessary for God to have contact with the world. He presents a thoroughly Middle Platonic view of God. His view of the *Logos,* in particular, is derived from Stoicism and Platonism. The Logos is the energizing instrument of God through whom the underlying substrate of matter is given form from the Ideas of God:

> But if, in your surpassing intelligence, it occurs to you to inquire what is meant by the Son, I will state briefly that He is the first product of the Father, not as having been brought into existence (for from the beginning, God, who is the eternal mind [νοῦς], had the Logos in Himself, being from eternity instinct with Logos [λογικός]); but inasmuch as He came forth to be the idea and energizing power of all material things, which lay like a nature without attributes, and an inactive earth, the grosser particles being mixed up with the lighter.[96]

Hermogenes. The writings of Tertullian tell of Hermogenes, another Christian philosopher writing around the end of the second century who believed in creation *ex materia.* Hermogenes wrote after Tatian and Theophilus had formulated the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo.* By this time, all parties discussing the issue were working 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,

96. Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis* 10 (*ANF* 2:133, brackets in original).

> 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.[97]

Clement of Alexandria. Finally, Clement of Alexandria, writing about AD 220, also adopted the view that matter is eternal and that God created by organizing a chaotic substratum. Indeed, Clement used the phrase made *out of nothing* three times in the *Stromata,* but each time he used the technical term ἐκ μὴ ὄντος, which shows that he was discussing creation from relative nonbeing rather than *creatio ex nihilo.*[98] 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.[99]

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

> (i) the sparsity of reference to the doctrine in Jewish texts, and indeed in the earliest Christian material, and the problem of interpreting those references that do exist . . . ;
>
> (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

97. Tertullian, *Adversus Hermogenes* 2.5.
98. Norman, "Ex Nihilo," 308.
99. Clement, *The Instructor* 3.12, as quoted in Norman, "Ex Nihilo," 308.

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 *ex ouk ontōn* 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![100]

The Creation out of Nothing of the Doctrine of Creation *ex Nihilo*

The significance of these texts for Latter-day Saints is not that they teach a Latter-day Saint view of matter and of God—they do not. Rather, they show that the view that God created *ex nihilo* was an innovation that occurred around the end of the second century AD. They show that a wholesale adoption of Middle Platonist views had overrun the Christian apologists. As Hubler puts 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 a 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 to his purpose. The religious claims

100. Young, "Christian Doctrine of Creation," 141.

> of the Christian apologists signaled a major philosophical change.[101]

It must be noted, however, 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 because each of them had espoused a thoroughly Middle Platonic view of God. The early Christians had been accused of being atheists (much the same way Latter-day Saints are now accused of not being Christian) because they did not accept the Greek view of the gods. Instead of responding by defending the Christian view of a 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*.[102]

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 Platonist view of God, creation out of nothing became a logical extension of God's otherness and transcendence.

Copan and Craig argue that *creatio ex nihilo* did not develop in the late second century as a result of the interaction between Greek philosophy and Christian philosophers, that the doctrine was already well established prior to that time. Once again, though, in taking this position, Copan and Craig are departing from virtually every other

101. Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," v.
102. Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis* 10.

scholar who has carefully treated the issue—except the group of conservative, evangelical writers that they rely on in their book—and thus they arrive at a contrary conclusion.[103] In the extensive investigation regarding the origin of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in his 1995 doctoral dissertation, Hubler concludes:

> *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 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 in Biblical texts or the Early Jewish interpretation of them. As we will also see it was not a position attested in the New Testament doctrine or even sub-apostolic writings. It was a position taken by the apologists of the late second century, Tatian and Theophilus, and developed by various ecclesiastical writers thereafter, by 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.[104]

Hubler explores at length why the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* suddenly appears at the end of the second century. The answer is that Christian philosophers accepted two key Middle Platonist doctrines that made *creatio ex nihilo* the only acceptable position to them. First, they confronted the Middle Platonic view that "matter imposed the natural necessity of corruption upon the body."[105] The doctrine of bodily resurrection seemed offensive to the Greeks because it implied

103. See May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo;* Winston, "Philo's Theory of Cosmogony," 157–71; Winston, *Wisdom of Solomon,* 3, 38–40; Ian G. Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 144–46; Young, "Christian Doctrine of Creation"; Goldstein, "Recantations and Restatements," 187–94. Goldstein argues that Rabban Gamaliel II taught the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* but admits that no Jewish text adopted it before or after his time until about the mid-ninth to mid-tenth centuries. However, Young and Hubler disagree with Goldstein and hold that not even Gamaliel taught *creatio ex nihilo.*

104. Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 102.

105. Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," v.

that persons would be eternally embodied in corruptible material forms. 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.[106] 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 that matter cannot be immutable, it followed that matter must be created *ex nihilo*.[107] May reaches a similar conclusion in his extensive study:

> If one reviews only the orthodox line of the development that leads 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-proposition, which as early as the beginning of the third century is regarded as a fundamental tenet of Christian theology.[108]

106. See Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 117–21, referring to Tatian's writings.
107. Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 121–22, quoting Theophilus, *Ad Autolycum* 2.4.
108. May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo,* 179.

Thus, it is not just Latter-day Saints who argue that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is essentially a philosophical innovation dating from the end of the second century AD that was not contained in scripture—it is the accepted view of virtually every scholar who has reviewed the evidence at length, except Copan and Craig.

Though Tatian was a pupil of Justin, his views were quite different from those of his teacher. He began by defining a new view of God: "Our God has no origin in time, since he alone is without beginning and himself is the beginning of all things."[109] 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. Apparently, Tatian is the first person in history to expressly teach the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo.*[110] 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 purpose. When the ages are once completed for us at the

109. Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* 4.2, in Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos and Fragments,* ed. and trans. Molly Whittaker (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 9.

110. May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo,* ch. 3, argues that Basilides, a Gnostic writing about AD 160, was the first person to develop a notion of *creatio ex nihilo.* 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." Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Things* 7.20.2. While I am open to this view, I tend to agree with Young and Hubler that Basilides is not expressing the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* but speaking of the limits of language regarding nonbeing. See Young, "Christian Doctrine of Creation," 147–50.

> end, there will be a resurrection of humans alone for ever for the purpose of judgement.[111]

Tatian adopted the notion of the necessity of creation of matter to address two problems: first, he sought to avoid the theory of eternal cycles of matter taught by the Stoics; and second, he sought to establish the concept of God transcending a world caught in such an eternal cycle of material necessity. Tatian argued that matter is not an ultimate principle (ἄναρχον)—it is not uncaused—countering the Stoic view that a personal resurrection makes no sense because everything is bound by the necessity of an eternal recurrence in a never-ending cycle (ἐκπύρωσις). Tatian's rejection of eternal matter as an ἀρχή, or uncaused principle, like God, removed matter from the eternal cycle of never-ending recurrence and the necessity of ἐκπύρωσις.[112] Tatian also argued that it is not impossible for God to restore the dead to life through resurrection because he can create individuals out of nothing initially: "God the regent (μοναρχία), when he wills, will completely restore the substance which is visible alone to him to its original state."[113] For Tatian, matter is the sensible expression of the rational *Logos,* derived from the Middle Platonic doctrine of internal reason that gives form to matter through verbal expression.[114] As Hubler concludes in his section on Tatian:

> The coincidence of μοναρχία, 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.[115]

So far as we can see, Tatian never considered the alternative of simply rejecting the Stoic view of eternal recurrence as a necessary prop-

111. Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* 5–6, in Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 118–19.
112. Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 119.
113. Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* 6, in Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 119.
114. Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* 5, in Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 120.
115. Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 121.

erty of matter. Yet he could easily have done so without adopting an entirely new doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo.*

Theophilus was the second person in history to expressly adopt the view of *creatio ex nihilo.* He wrote shortly after Tatian, around AD 180. However, Theophilus's reasons for adopting this new dogma went beyond Tatian's. 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 nonanthropomorphic concept of God; they differed over a concept of matter that they believed was necessitated 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, if matter is also ungenerated, it is also changeless and equal to God. For that which is generated is mutable and changeable. The unregenerated 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 (ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων).[116]

Theophilus's use of the expression ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων expressed rejection of the idea 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 Platonists had adopted a program of ridiculing the common anthropomorphic view of God expressed in the poetic and popular writings of the Greeks.[117] Theophilus argued that the common view of God that both he and the Middle Platonists adopted entailed 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.[118] 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 . . . without beginning because he was uncreated, immutable because he is immortal."[119] 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 [ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων τὰ πάντα ἐποίησεν], for nothing is as ancient as God, but he is his own

116. Theophilus, *Ad Autolycum* 2.4, in Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 121–22.

117. Celsus, writing about AD 177, and Porphry, writing a century later, were among the leading antagonists to ridicule Christian views of God and resurrection; see Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 115–17. For a sample of the Christian philosophical response, see Origen, *Contra Celsum* 5.14, ed. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

118. See Apuleius, *De Platone et Eius Dogmate* 45.

119. Theophilus, *Ad Autolycum* 1.3–4, quoted in Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 151.

> locus and without need and existing before the ages, he wished to make the human so that he would be known by him. For him he prepared the cosmos. For the generated is needy, the ungenerated needs nothing.[120]

Second, Theophilus argued that God would not be the creator of all things if some things existed without God's having created them. Yet if God were not creator of all, then the divine monarchy (μοναρχία) 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 as to require matter from which to create. I have argued elsewhere that such a position is not necessary to all views of God's relation to eternal matter, for the Latter-day Saint concept of uncreated matter in particular does not adopt the view that matter is either inherently evil or recalcitrant; rather, in the Latter-day Saint view, matter is entirely subject to God for any expression of its causal and lawlike properties.[121] Of course, such a view of uncreated matter wholly subject to God was quite foreign to Theophilus and the 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 that they participate in these unchanging ideas or forms. In effect, Theophilus's reasons for adopting the new doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* were based on his adoption of the Middle Platonic view of God, which was 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 a given fact the view that humans inhabit the lowest realm of reality, furthest from the one ground of actual being. Only God inhabited this ideal realm. Thus, anything embodied was not pure and real.

120. Theophilus, *Ad Autolycum* 2.10, in Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 123.

121. See Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* (Salt Lake City: Kofford, 2001), 105–35.

Christians had been repeatedly attacked by Platonists for their childish view of a God who could be embodied and could change in this realm of crass matter, so far removed from the pure realm of being. Hubler concludes his discussion of Theophilus by writing:

> Theophilus used the Platonist 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 upon God. Theophilus foreshadows the coming of monism to Platonist philosophy in the next century in the work of Plotinus.[122]

Of course, Theophilus's resolution of the problems posed by Middle Platonic philosophy created additional problems for Christian theology. Because it reinterpreted the biblical concept of creation within the scope of a Middle Platonic view of God, the new concept generated all kinds of new problems about how God was described in the biblical documents—but that issue was not addressed by Theophilus and had to wait for Origen and Augustine, who created a thoroughly Neoplatonic view of God within the Christian tradition.[123] As May concludes:

> Theophilus did not of course fully realise what a radical break with the theological tradition the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* constituted. He can even himself still talk 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 whether in that case one can talk of a *creatio ex nihilo* in the real sense at all. He simply wants to exalt the

122. Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo," 124.
123. See May, *Creation Ex Nihilo,* 160–63.

> 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.[124]

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 that had infiltrated Christianity almost since its beginning. However, Irenaeus himself had been influenced by the very philosophies he battled. May describes the situation: "Irenaeus is a clear thinker and by no means uneducated. His concept of God is, like that of the Apologists, strongly 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."[125] Irenaeus also taught that God is simple in the sense that one cannot divide his being into a series of effects that proceed from another—a doctrine that marked the simplicity of God in the then-emerging precepts of Neoplatonism:

> 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 have received a beginning. But whatsoever things 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 that appellation which belongs to the Creator.[126]

124. May, *Creation Ex Nihilo,* 163.
125. May, *Creation Ex Nihilo,* 165.
126. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3.8.3 (*ANF* 1:422).

Elsewhere, Irenaeus claimed: "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."[127] 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. This doctrine created problems for Irenaeus's soteriology (theory of salvation), which taught that salvation consisted in persons becoming perfect like God and, indeed, gods themselves: "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."[128] 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 he have contained it, or containing it, could he have retained it."[129] 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; he nevertheless cannot create man capable of accepting perfection because man is only recently created: "For from the very fact of these things having been created, [it follows] that they are not uncreated; but by their continuing 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."[130] 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. In the end,

127. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 2.10.4 (*ANF* 1:370).
128. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 4.38.4 (*ANF* 1:522).
129. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 4.38.2 (*ANF* 1:521).
130. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 4.38.3 (*ANF* 1:521).

being gods and divine means nothing more for Ireneaus than becoming immortal through resurrection.

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, during 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 AD 421.[131] 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 "be partakers of the divine nature," as 2 Peter 1:4 KJV affirms. It is the central conundrum that plagued Irenaeus's theology, which also shows why the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is pivotal to theological and philosophical issues dividing Latter-day Saints from conservative Protestants like Copan and Craig.

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, as conceived by the Middle Platonists, had to be completely independent of the world and stand 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 that required them to modify the biblical doctrine of creation so radically. The eminent historian Robert Wilken notes:

> Since the time when the Apologists first began to offer a reasoned and philosophical presentation of Christianity to pagan intellectuals, Christian thinkers had claimed that they

131. See Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought,* 409–50.

> worshipped 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 . . . inexpressible . . . without beginning because he was uncreated, immutable because he is immortal." This view, that God was an immaterial, timeless, and impassible divine being, who is known through the mind alone, became a keystone of Christian apologetics, for it served to establish a decisive link to the Greek spiritual and intellectual tradition.[132]

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, whom persons may encounter in sacred experience, to the God of the philosophers, who is grasped by reason alone. 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 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.[133]

Tertullian, writing near the beginning of the third century, also adopted the dogma of *creatio ex nihilo.* Employing an argument that

132. Wilken, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them,* 151.
133. Hatch, *Influence of Greek Ideas,* 251–52.

was later adopted by Augustine and still later by Aquinas, albeit in a different form, Tertullian reasoned 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 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."[134]

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, at any time 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 because whatever truly exists is good. Evil, then, 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. Thus 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 that this doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* renders so stark and unfathomable, there is the question of

134. Tertullian, *The Treatise against Hermogenes* 8.2 and 9.1, trans. J. H. Wasznik (New York: Newman, 1956), 37; Latin text in *Patrologiae Latinae,* ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris: n.p., 1878), 2:227. Augustine's argument to the same effect is in *De civitate dei* 5.10.

whether God must create out of nothing to be considered almighty. I have contended elsewhere that this argument based on God's omnipotent power is not sound, for the reason that God need not be able to alter the past to be considered omnipotent.[135] One cannot reasonably argue, as Tertullian tried to do, from the definition of omnipotence to rule out the possibility that matter is eternal in the sense that it has always existed.

Conclusion

I believe that we can conclude quite confidently that Copan and Craig have seriously misunderstood the evidence that they present in support of creation *ex nihilo.* Based on the evidence that I have reviewed, the following conclusions seem warranted:

1. The New Testament does not teach creation *ex nihilo.* On the contrary, 2 Peter 3:5–6 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.

2. The claim made by Copan and Craig 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 addresses the doctrine of creation out of nothing. Indeed, some of the Jewish texts that they claim teach *creatio ex nihilo,* such

135. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought,* 105–35. Once a given state of affairs (SA1) occurs, all states of affairs inconsistent or noncompossible 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 grounds that another logically possible state of affairs has already come to pass. Thus, if SA1 is a logically possible state of affairs, then it is possible for SA1 never to actually occur; but once SA1 has occurred, it is no longer possible for SA1 never to occur. If physical realities have always existed in some form or another—a state of affairs SA2—then what it 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.

as *2 Enoch* and *Joseph and Aseneth,* expressly teach that God created the world by making visible those invisible things that already existed. In addition, none of the Christian texts cited by Copan and Craig, such as the Shepherd of Hermas and the *Odes of Solomon,* actually teach *creatio ex nihilo.* Indeed, these texts better exemplify the doctrine of *creatio ex materia.* Further, it is clear that several Jewish texts from around the time of Christ, such as the writings of Philo Judaeus and the Wisdom of Solomon, as well as several early Christian writers such as Clement, Justin Martyr, and Athenagoras, expressly teach the doctrine of *creatio ex materia.*

3. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* seems to appear rather suddenly about AD 180 in the writings of Tatian and Theophilus in their arguments with Stoics and Middle Platonists. It is fairly clear that it arose as a philosophical consequence of their adoption of a Middle Platonic concept of God. What we see in all texts from about AD 165 and after is that Platonic philosophy, both Middle and Neo-, had infiltrated Christian thought and become a basis for major innovations in doctrine. Latter-day Saints see this as 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 as interactions 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 from 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 matter necessarily entails an eternal cycle of recurrence leads to adopting a view of God that altogether transcends 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, extending even to our own day. The doctrine of creation out of nothing led inevitably to the Council of Chalcedon, in which 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 gave rise, and continues to give rise, to arguments that everything that occurs must be caused by God, for if he did not 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, therefore, that Copan and Craig have overstated their case. They speak in their essay and book as if anyone who disagrees with them is simply in error and ignorant of the facts, heedless of the overwhelming number of respected scholars who do in fact disagree. They give a false impression of the evidence and fail even to note the necessary distinctions between absolute negation of existence and relative non-being that are necessary to make sense of the texts in the postbiblical era. All in all, their argument for *creatio ex nihilo* as the universally accepted doctrine of early Christians simply does not withstand scrutiny.