



# Creation in the Old Testament

*Creatio ex nihilo*

## Introduction

The concept of *creatio ex nihilo* has been a traditional way of understanding how the world was created. It means that God used His power to bring everything into existence from nothing. This idea has been widely accepted for a long time and has influenced religious and philosophical beliefs.



## Creatio ex nihilo

The concept of *creatio ex nihilo* stands in contrast to the prevailing views of modern science, which propose that matter has always existed and is eternal in nature. This notion of eternal matter finds its roots in ancient Greek philosophy, particularly in the teachings of Atomists such as Democritus. According to their atomic theory, the universe consists of indestructible particles that have existed for eternity.

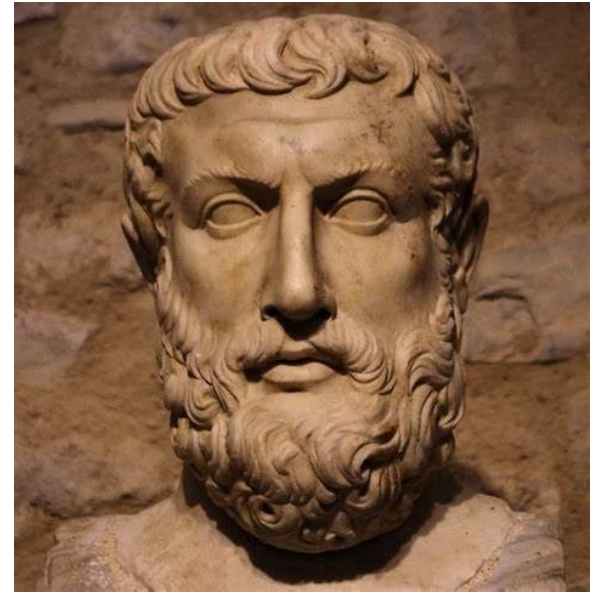
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# Greek philosophy

The famous Greek philosopher Parmenides even formulated a concept that nothing can come out of nothing (*ex nihilo nihil fit*). Such ideas directly challenge the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, which asserts that the world had a definite beginning and was brought into existence by a transcendent force.



## 2 Maccabees (early first century BC)



·It is believed that for the first time the explicit statement that the world was created by God out of nothing is found in 2 Macc 7:28.

·In this passage a mother is speaking to her youngest son, to whom Antiochus promised wealth in exchange for renouncing his beliefs, she says:

·"So I urge you, my child, to look at the sky and the earth. Consider everything you see there, and realize that **God made it all from nothing** (εξ ουκ οντων εποιησεν αυτα ο θεος), just as he made the human race." (2 Mac. 7:28).

## *Joseph and Aseneth* (dated from between 200 BCE and 200 CE)



- Lord God of the ages, who created all (things) and gave life (to them),
- who gave breath of life to your whole creation,
- who brought the invisible (things) out into the light,
- **who made the (things that) are**
- **and the (ones that) have an appearance from the non-appearing and non-being.**

· (Joseph and Aseneth 12:1-20)

## 2 Enoch 24:2 (1-10<sup>th</sup> AD)

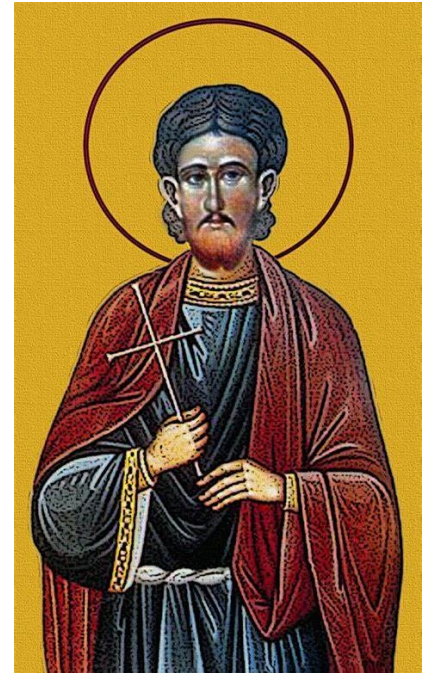
God says to Enoch:  
"Enoch, beloved, all that you see,  
all things that are standing  
finished I tell to you even before  
the very beginning, **all that I  
created from nonbeing, and  
visible things from invisible**"





## Theophilus from Antioch


The first Christian author who clearly articulated the idea of creation out of nothing was Theophilus of Antioch (? – 185). In his work *Apology to Autolyclus* he says, “τα παντα ο θεος εποιεσεν εξ ουκ οντων εις το ειναι” (God made everything out of non-being into being). However, even before Theophilus the idea that God created matter can be found in the works of Tatian (c. 120 – c. 180 AD).







# Criticism of the traditional position



“The sentence, God created the world out of nothing, does not say more but rather less than the sentence, God created the world. The question, “Is it *creatio ex nihilo* or not?” is not relevant to the text.”

Claus Westermann



·“The doctrine of creation ex nihilo appeared suddenly in the second century CE ... It is an innovation in the interpretive traditions of revelation and cannot be explained merely as a continuation of tradition.”

·James Noel Hubner, “Creatio ex Nihilo: Matter, Creation, and the Body in Classical and Christian Philosophy through Aquinas”, 102.



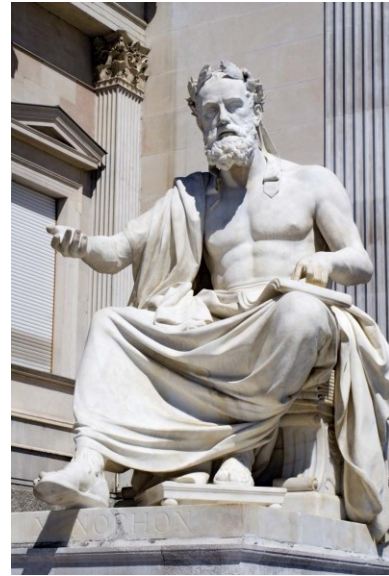
## Main arguments against the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*:



- It is not biblical. There is no explicit verse in the Bible that explicitly says that God created world out of nothing.
- The statement in 2 Macc 7:28 has also been questioned:
  - It is taken from the deuterion-canonical book.
  - The context of the verse is not about the creation (It is just a parenthetical sentence)



The similar phrase “not out of things that existed” is found in the works of Xenophon, *Memorabilia*. He says in one place that parents “bring forth their children out of nonbeing.” Naturally that does not mean that the children come to be out of nothing.



Xenophon

## Arguments against *Creatio ex nihilo*

In Judaism the doctrine of creation out of nothing was widely adopted quite late. In early sources the idea of creation out of nothing existed together with the idea of creation as ordering the existing chaos.



## Arguments against *Creatio ex nihilo*

“...the Jewish tradition on this matter was divided. *Creatio ex nihilo* was one such position; it was most emphatically not the only such option, nor even the dominant. The final commitment of the Jewish tradition to such a doctrine dates from as late as the fifteenth century.”



Alister McGrath

Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2003), 156.

# Arguments against *Creatio ex nihilo*

The widely accepted exposition of how the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* emerged and developed was suggested by Gerhard May in his book published in 1978 (German edition). May opined that the doctrine appeared in the second century AD as a confrontation between the Church Fathers on one hand and Gnostics and Platonic philosophers on the other.







Kevin Smith

# Gerhard May's arguments

# Teaching of Hermogenes



1. Denial of God's absolute power: Hermogenes denied that God had the power to create matter out of nothing. He argued that God formed the world using preexisting material substances.
2. Assertion of eternal matter: Hermogenes believed in the eternal existence of matter, suggesting that matter has always existed alongside God.
3. Rejection of divine providence: Hermogenes rejected the idea that God governs and sustains the created world. He proposed that God simply organized preexisting matter without any ongoing involvement or control.

Hermogenes was an early Christian heretic who held certain Platonic views about creation that were criticized by the early Church Fathers.

Theophilus of Antioch who first among the Church Fathers explicitly formulated the doctrine of creation ex nihilo was involved into the controversy with Hermogenes and even wrote a pamphlet against him that has not survived. Gerhard May believes that the teaching about *creatio ex nihilo* must have been explained in this pamphlet. Later on, Tertullian who also addressed and refuted Hermogenes' teachings in his work "Against Hermogenes" must have used Theophilus work.





Also, Theophilus wrote a work against famous Gnostic teacher Marcion that is also not extant and May assumes that in this work Theophilus also might speak about *creatio ex nihilo*.





# Teaching of Gnosticism



- Gnostics believed that our world is flawed and imperfect, created by a lesser divine being called the Demiurge.
- The Demiurge is seen as a flawed creator, separate from the ultimate God or Divine Source.
- The material world, including our bodies, is considered a prison or realm of suffering and ignorance.
- Gnostics believed that the true spiritual realm lies beyond this material world.
- Salvation is achieved by escaping the confines of matter and reuniting with the ultimate God.

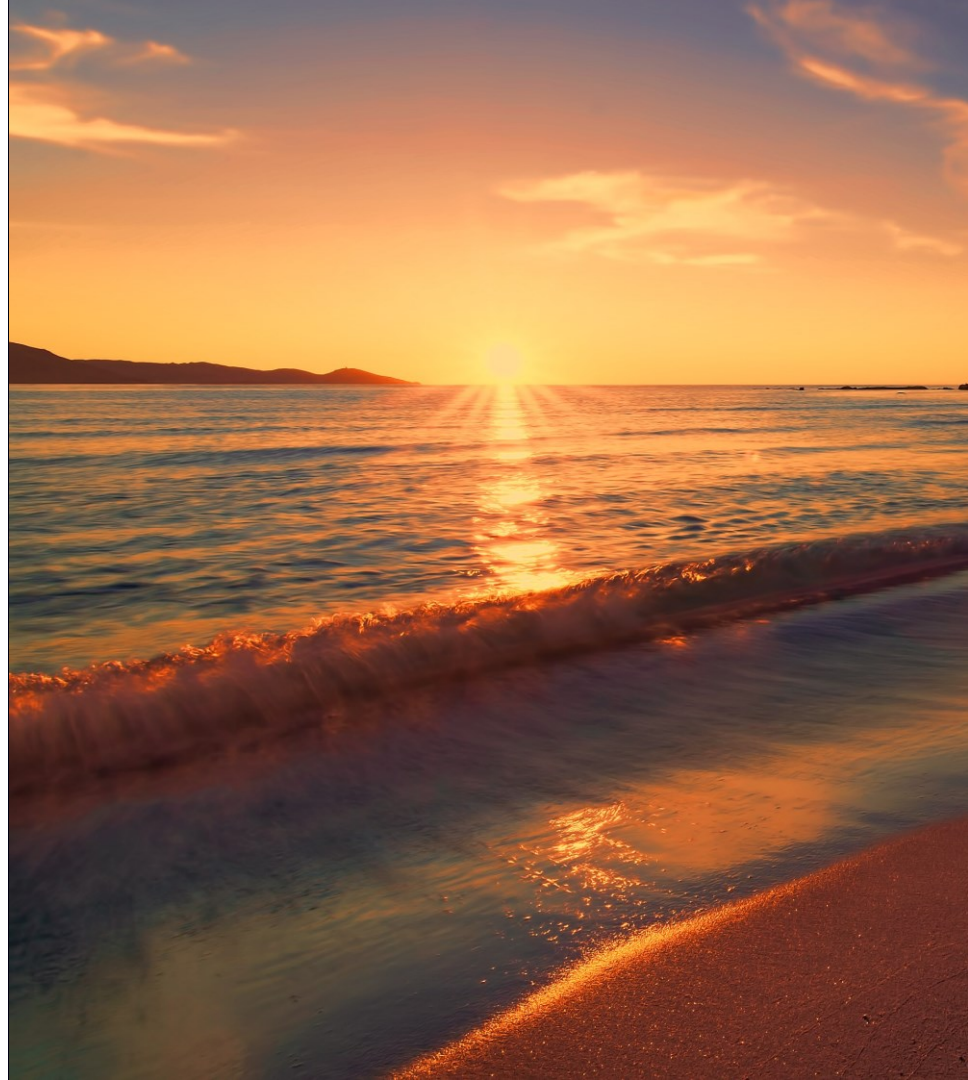
# Teaching of Gnosticism



- Gnostics viewed matter as inherently flawed, corrupt, or evil.
- Matter was seen as a source of entrapment for divine sparks trapped within humans.
- Gnostics sought spiritual liberation and enlightenment through acquiring secret knowledge (gnosis).
- This knowledge would enable individuals to transcend the material world and return to their divine origin.

·Therefore, according to May, the teaching about *creation ex nihilo* is not strictly a biblical teaching but it emerged and developed in the process of controversy against Christian Platonism and Gnosticism.

·May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, 156–63.





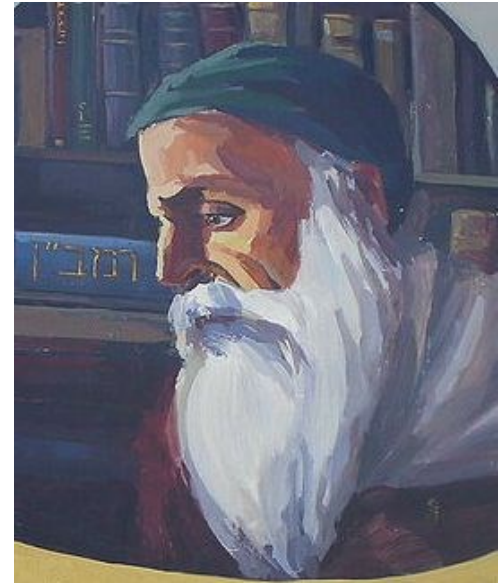
*Creatio ex nihilo* in  
the Old Testament



## Wrong argument

“The Holy One, blessed be He, created all things from absolute non-existence. Now we have no expression in the sacred language for bringing forth something from nothing other than the word bara (created).”

Nachmanides, Commentary on the Torah, vol. 1: Genesis, R. Charles B. Chavel, trans. (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1971), 17.

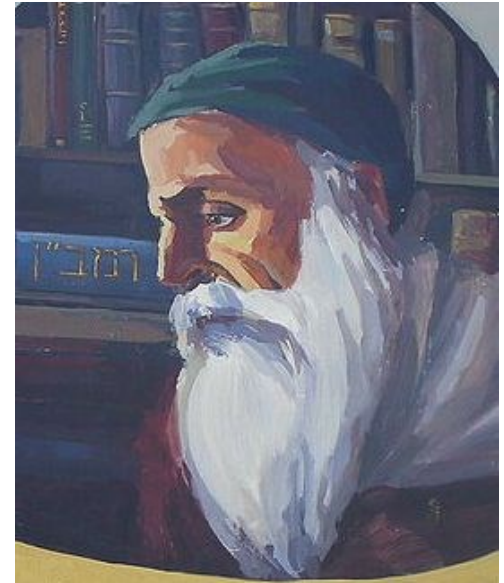


Nachmanides (1194–1270)

## Wrong argument



Ramban asserted that the Hebrew verb “bara” is used only for the initial act of *creatio ex nihilo*.



Nachmanides (1194–1270)

## Wrong argument

“It is therefore clear that **ברא** is not a term exclusively reserved for creation out of nothing. For example, it can be used of the creation of Israel (Isa 43:15). Nevertheless, as with the word “create” in English, there is a stress on the artist’s freedom and power—the more so in the Hebrew as the word is used solely for God’s activity. W. H. Schmidt correctly points out that though **ברא** does not denote *creatio ex nihilo*, it preserves the same idea, namely, “God’s effortless, totally free and unbound creating, his sovereignty. It is never mentioned what God created out of.”





## God is a creator of everything

·“Heaven and earth” – this phrase is a typical merism which implies God created everything.

G. Wenham paraphrased it like that, “In the beginning God created everything.”

·In Hebrew language there is no a term for “cosmos” or “universe.” They tried to express this idea using other means.

·  
Wenham, Genests 1-15, 15.





## God is a creator of everything

Another example of the same merism,

“Then **the heavens and the earth**, and all that is in them, shall sing for joy over Babylon” (Jeremiah 51:48 ESV)



## God is a creator of everything

· **"I am the LORD, who made all things,**

· who alone stretched out the heavens,

· who spread out the earth by myself," (Isaiah 44:24 ESV)

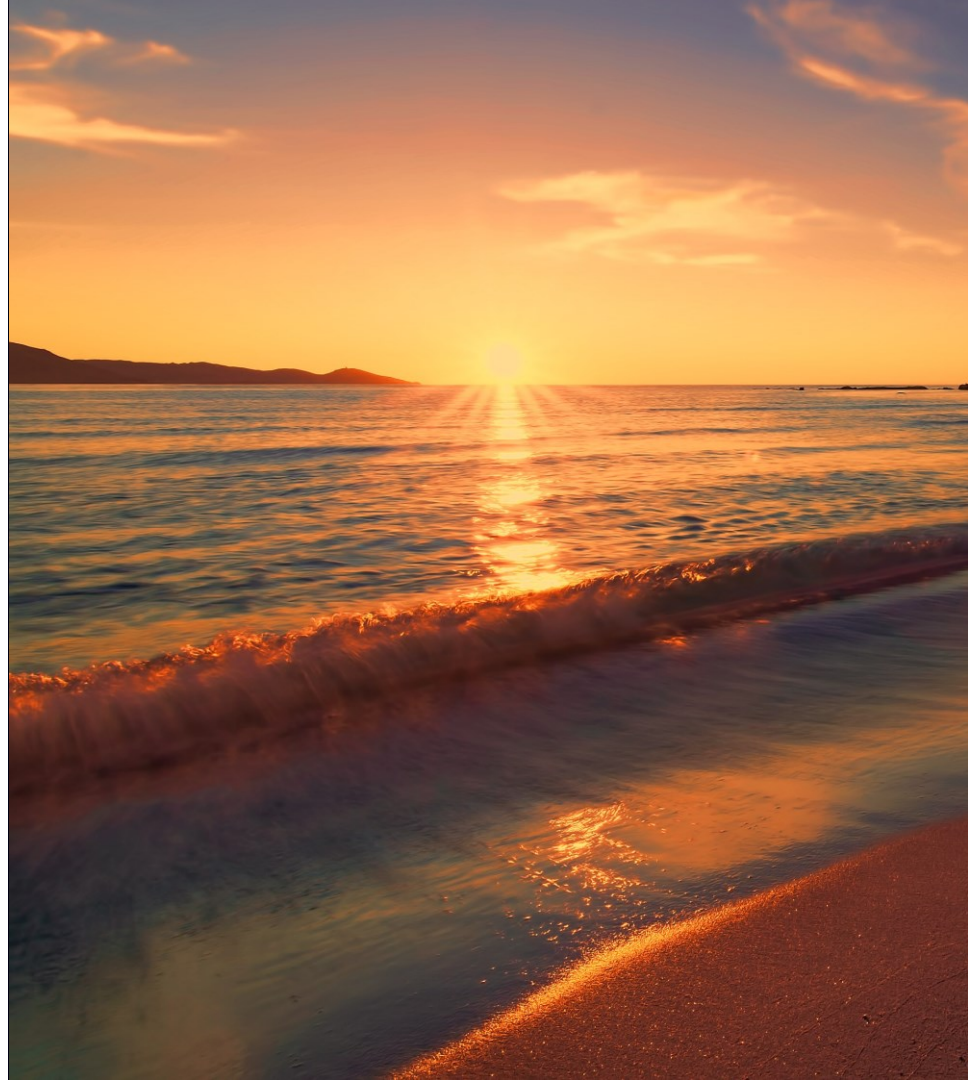
· God is a creator of everything including matter.



## The title of YHWH, “the first and the last”

“Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: **“I am the first and I am the last**; besides me there is no god.” (Isaiah 44:6 ESV)

It implies that he is the ultimate originator and only eternal Being





## The title of YHWH, “the first and the last”

· “Before the mountains were brought forth,  
· or ever you had formed the earth and the world,  
· from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” (Psalm 90:2 ESV)

· **God had existed before anything was created.**





## Divine Wisdom

- “When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water.
- Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth,
- before he had made the earth with its fields, **or the first of the dust of the world.**” (Proverbs 8:24–26 ESV)



# Divine Wisdom



## **Personification of an Attribute:**

Wisdom in Proverbs 8 as a personification of a divine attribute, namely the attribute of wisdom. Wisdom is not a distinct personal entity but a poetic representation of God's wisdom and the virtues associated with it.

**Hypostasis of Divine Wisdom:** Wisdom as a pre-existent divine being or a divine figure who is closely associated with God.

**Messianic Interpretation:** Wisdom as a foreshadowing or prophetic representation of Christ, linking the attributes and characteristics of Wisdom with those ascribed to Jesus in the New Testament.

**Symbolic Representation:** Wisdom in Proverbs 8 is a symbolic representation of various concepts, such as divine order, instruction, or God's guidance for righteous living. This interpretation emphasizes the metaphorical and pedagogical aspects of the passage.

## Divine Wisdom

· Whatever interpretation one chooses, it is clear that Divine Wisdom has existed before the creation of matter (“the first of the dust of the world”)

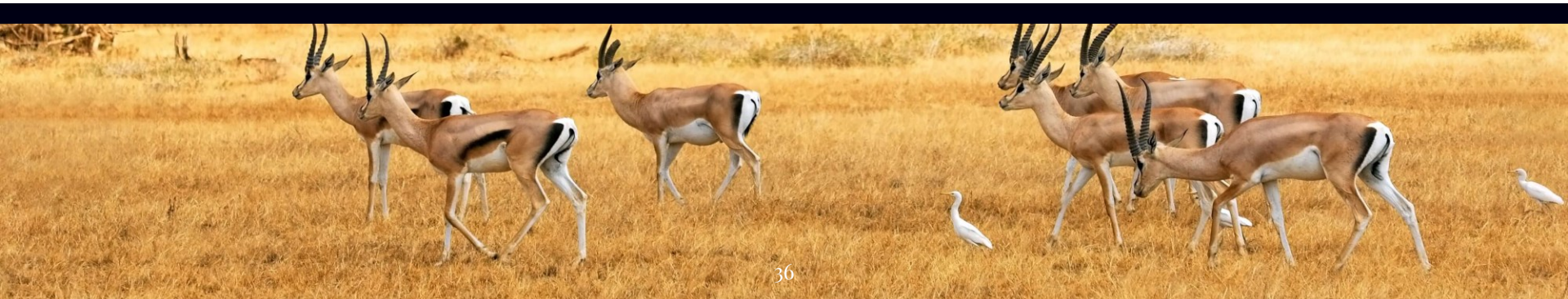




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*[The OT] statements about creation in, e.g., Pss. 104:14–30; 139:13; 147:8f refuse to limit the creative power of God by linking it with preexistent matter. Like the thought of creation by the Word in Gen. 1, they imply the unrestricted freedom of God’s creative action that the phrase “creation out of nothing” would later express.*

*·Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, 2:17*





## Why there is no explicit statement about *creatio ex nihilo* in the OT?



“The ancient Hebrew writers were primarily theologically minded rather than philosophically minded. All of these features fit quite nicely with *creation ex nihilo* but do not fit *creation ex materia*. The assumption behind the OT writings was that creation did not need to be defended; it was not an article of faith because “there was simply no alternative.”

Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Leicester, England: Grand Rapids, Mich: Apollos; Baker Academic, 2004), 69.

## The idea of *creatio ex nihilo* in Jewish writings

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

Bar Kappara said: "ask concerning the first days, before your time, from the day of creation onwards" (Deut 4:32). "From the day onwards" when the days were created, you may inquire, but you may not inquire into what was beforehand. "From one end of the heaven until the other end of heaven" you may inquire and examine, but you may not inquire what was beforehand"



## The idea of *creatio ex nihilo* in Jewish writings



- Rab Huna said in the name of Bar Kappara: if it were not written [in Scripture], it would be impossible to say: "God created heaven and earth" (Gen 1:1)—from where? From: "the earth was *tohu wabohu*" (Gen 1:2).
- God first created *tohu* and *bohu*, and out of these He created the world, But this is not to be taught publicly (Y.T.)

## The idea of *creatio ex nihilo* in Jewish writings

A certain philosopher asked R. Gamaliel, saying to him: 'Your God was indeed a great artist, but surely He found good materials which assisted Him?' 'What are they said he to him?' Tohu, bohu, darkness, water, wind (ruah), and the deep replied he, 'Woe to that man he exclaimed. 'The term "creation" is used by Scripture in connection with all of them.' Tohu and bohu: I make peace and create evil (Isa. XLV, 7); darkness: I form the light, and create darkness (ib.); water : Praise Him., ye heavens of heavens, and ye waters that are above the heavens (Ps. CXLVIII, 4) wherefore For He commanded, and they were created (ib. 5); wind: For, lo, He that formeth the mountains, and createth the wind (Amos IV, 13); the depths: When there were no depths, I was brought forth (Prov. VIII, 24).



## Gerhard May's argument

The argument of Gerhard May is based mostly on the assumptions that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was developed by Theophilus of Antioch in the works that were lost and not available now. It is a very weak argument.

