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to the
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**Pentateuchal Traditions in the
Late Second Temple Period**

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THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION *EX NIHILO*
AND THE TRANSLATION OF *TÔHÛ WÂBÔHÛ*

David Toshio Tsumura

A. *Is creatio ex nihilo a Biblical Concept?*

1. *Doctrine of creatio ex nihilo*

The Christian church has long held the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (“creation out of nothing”), though the phrase itself does not appear in the Bible. For example, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) asserts that “It pleased God ... in the beginning, to create or make of nothing the world, and all things therein” (IV.1). Augustine, in his *Confessions* 12.7, held that God “created heaven and earth out of nothing (de nihilo).”¹

This doctrine, as G. May explains, holds “the absolutely unconditioned nature of the creation” and “specifies God’s omnipotence as its sole ground.”² Hence, *creatio ex nihilo* generally implies that all things are ontologically dependent upon God and that the universe had a beginning.

Thus, the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* holds that God created the universe without preexisting materials. “This counteracts the pantheistic implication that matter is eternal, as well as the dualistic implication that another kind of power stands eternally over against God.”³

According to G. May, this doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* “emerges only as the result of the church’s struggle with Platonism and its extreme form, Gnosticism.”⁴ This early Christian anti-Gnostic controversy reached its peak during the second half of the 2nd century AD when Irenaeus was refuting the Gnostic philosophical teachings. He says:

¹ C.E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Edinburgh Studies in Constructive Theology; Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1998), 73–86.

² G. May, *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of ‘Creation out of Nothing’ in Early Christian Thought* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), xi.

³ T.C. Oden, *Systematic Theology*. Volume One: *The Living God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 227.

⁴ May, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, 164–178. See Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, 15, n. 2.

But the things established are distinct from Him who has established them, and what [things] have been made from Him who has made them. For He is Himself uncreated, both without beginning and end, and lacking nothing. He is Himself sufficient for this very thing, existence; but the things which have been made by Him have received a beginning ... He indeed who made all things can alone, together with His Word, properly be termed God and Lord; but the things which have been made cannot have this term applied to them, neither should they justly assume that appellation which belongs to the Creator.⁵

Thus, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was well established during his time and it was clearly asserted that the world was not coeternal with the God of the Bible.

2. Biblical Basis of *creatio ex nihilo*

The New Testament passages such as Eph. 3:8–9, Rev. 4:11 and Col. 1:16 explain God as the “Creator of all things.” This idea is already in the Old Testament, especially in Isa. 40 ff. in expressions such as Isa 44:24,

I am the LORD, who made all things (לַעֲשֹׂה כָל),

and in Jer 10:16 (= Jer 51:19)

for he is the one who formed all things (כִּי־יוֹצֵר הַכֹּל הוּא), (REB: “the creator of the universe”).

However, it has been asserted that the view of God as the “Creator of all things” itself does not prove that God created all things “out of nothing.”

Some scholars, including May,⁶ claim that, strictly speaking, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not supported even by Heb. 11:3,

Πίστει νοοῦμεν κατηρτίσθαι τοὺς αἰῶνας ῥήματι θεοῦ,
εἰς τὸ μὴ ἐκ φαινομένων τὸ βλέπομενον γεγενῆσθαι.

By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. (ESV)

and Rom. 4:17,

καθὼς γέγραπται ὅτι πατέρα πολλῶν ἐθνῶν τέθεικά σε, κατέναντι οὗ ἐπίστευσεν θεοῦ τοῦ ζωοποιούντος τοὺς νεκροὺς καὶ καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα.

as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. (RSV)

⁵ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* [= *Refutation and Overthrow of Knowledge falsely so-called*] 3.10.3; cf. 2.10.4. See Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, 52–56.

⁶ May, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, 27.

3. Hellenistic Judaism

However, recently, J.C. O'Neill argued that “there is evidence that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was already formulated as a credal statement by the time of the New Testament. If so, that would explain why there is nothing in the New Testament to contradict *creatio ex nihilo*.”⁷

According to O'Neill, in 2 Mac. 7:28 the mother of the seven sons alluded to a credal formulation.⁸ It reads:

ἄξιῶ σε τέκνον ἀναβλέψαντα εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς πάντα ἰδόντα γινώσκειν ὅτι οὐκ ἐξ ὄντων ἐποίησεν αὐτὰ ὁ θεός καὶ τὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων γένος οὕτω γίνεται

I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed (οὐκ ἐξ ὄντων). And in the same way the human race came into being. (NRSV)

Though there is no phrase such as “*creatio ex nihilo*” here, it can be argued that the virtually same idea is expressed.

One of the DSS, the “Rule of the Community” scroll (1QS) III, 15–16 says:

15) ... From the God of knowledge (אל הדעות) stems all there is and all there shall be. Before they existed he established their entire design. 16) And when they have come into being, at their appointed time, they will execute all their works according to his glorious design, without altering anything ...⁹

Here we find neither dualism nor the doctrine of the eternity of matter as in the Greek philosophy. What is expressed here is virtually same as the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.

4. Not a Biblical Concept?

However, in the modern era, especially during the past 100 years, it has been claimed that “Creation ‘out of nothing’ is not a biblical concept.”¹⁰ For example, process theologians deny that God created out of *absolute* nothingness but affirm instead a doctrine of creation out of “eternal” chaos to be the biblical concept. They assert that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*

⁷ J.C. O'Neill, “How Early is the Doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*?” *JTS* 53 (2002): 462.

⁸ O'Neill, “How Early is the Doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*?” 463.

⁹ F. García Martínez and E.J.C. Tigchelaar, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Study Edition*. Volume One: 1Q1–4Q273 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 74–75.

¹⁰ I. Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science* (The Gifford Lectures 1989/1991, vol. 1; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 144.

conflicts with Genesis creation stories, and that the texts often quoted in support of the doctrine such as Rom 4:17, Heb 11:3, 2 Macc 7:28 “can hardly be seen as clear evidence for creation *ex nihilo*, because they fit equally well with creation from initial chaos.”¹¹

So, the real issue now is whether the Genesis creation stories conflict with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* or not. We would like to deal with this problem by asking two specific questions: (1) Does Hebrew *t’hôm* “ocean” in Gen 1:2 represent chaos? (2) Does the phrase *tôhû wābôhû* in Gen. 1:2 refer to a chaotic state of the earth? Certainly, these questions are not the only relevant ones with regard to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* but scholars seem to rely on positive answers to these questions when they deny *creatio ex nihilo* in the Genesis account.

B. Does *t’hôm* in Gen 1:2 Represent Chaos?

1. “Order out of Chaos”

The standard Hebrew-English lexicon, *HALOT*, explains the term *t’hôm* “ocean” in Gen 1:2 as referring to the *primaeva* ocean as “one of the prominent elements in creation” with the additional comment “no *creatio ex nihilo*.”

Similarly, leading theologians, both dogmatic and biblical, deny that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is found in the Genesis accounts and, instead, assert that the creation was “out of chaos.” K. Barth treats this problem under the topic of “das Nichtige,” i.e. “Nothingness,” in his *Church Dogmatics*, where he says: “In Gen. 1:2 ... there is a reference to the chaos which the Creator has already rejected, negated, passed over and abandoned even before He utters His first creative Word ... Chaos is the unwilled and uncreated reality which constitutes as it were the periphery of His creation and creature.”¹²

B.S. Childs, a pupil of Barth, explains Gen 1:2 as describing “the mystery of a primordial threat against creation, uncreated without form and void, which God strove to overcome.”¹³ In another work, he holds that “the Old

¹¹ S.L. Bonting, “Chaos Theology: A New Approach to the Science-Theology Dialogue,” *Zygon* 34 (1999): 324. His way of quoting Westermann’s view is, however, inaccurate and misleading.

¹² K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. III: *The Doctrine of Creation*, Part 3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 289–368 (§ 50), esp. 352; also Vol. II, 134–147.

¹³ B.S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London: SCM, 1985), 223f.

Testament writer struggles to contrast the creation, not with a background of empty neutrality, but with an active chaos standing in opposition to the will of God ... The chaos is a reality rejected by God.”¹⁴

According to G. von Rad, “In Gen. I the Creation moves on from chaos to cosmos by the driving back of the waters.”¹⁵

B.W. Anderson, who has written several major works on creation and chaos,¹⁶ asserts that “God created out of chaos (not *ex nihilo*), as shown by the prefatory verse that portrays the earth as once being a chaotic waste: stygian darkness, turbulent waters, utter disorder.”¹⁷

These theologians all base their interpretation of Gen 1:2 on H. Gunkel, who saw in Gen 1:2 a precreation condition of waterly chaos as in the Babylonian creation myth *Enuma elish*. According to Gunkel, the biblical *t’hôm* is the mythological remnant from the chaotic sea goddess Tiamat against whom the creator storm god Marduk had to battle before the creation of cosmos.¹⁸

However, Gunkel’s view, which has been so influential among biblical scholars, is now under close scrutiny and needs to be drastically revised. While it is true that there is a linguistic relation between Hebrew *t’hôm* and Babylonian Tiamat, that is far from proving that the Babylonian myth was “transferred” to Israel and then “completely Judaized” in Gen 1, as Gunkel proposed.¹⁹

¹⁴ B.S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1960), 42.

¹⁵ G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*. Vol. I: *The Theology of Israel’s Historical Traditions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962 [orig. 1957]), 148; see also 144.

¹⁶ B.W. Anderson, *Creation versus Chaos: The Reinterpretation of Mythical Symbolism in the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987 [repr. of orig. 1967]).

¹⁷ B.W. Anderson, “Mythopoetic and Theological Dimensions of Biblical Creation Faith,” in B.W. Anderson (ed.), *Creation in the Old Testament* (Issues in Religion and Theology 6; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 15. Also see his *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1994.

¹⁸ H. Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006 [Ger. orig. 1895]); idem, *Genesis: Translated and Interpreted* (3d ed.; Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 1997 [orig. 1910³; 1901]).

¹⁹ Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos*, 82, summarizes the “Religio-historical sequence” as follows:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Marduk-myth ... | 1. The Babylonian myth is transferred to Israel; |
| 2. Poetic recension of the YHWH myth; ... | 2. There it loses many of its mythological elements and nearly all of its polytheistic elements; |
| 3. Genesis 1 ... | 3. In Genesis 1 it is, as far as it was possible, completely Judaized. |

2. Reappraisal of H. Gunkel's Hypothesis

The intellectual situation has changed greatly since Gunkel's time, some one hundred years ago. *Enuma elish* was not the only creation myth in Mesopotamia, and we have now dozens of cosmological myths available from the ancient Mesopotamia for comparison. S. Dalley says:

We cannot speak of "the Mesopotamian view of creation" as a single, specific tradition, and this in turn shows the futility of claiming a direct connection between genesis as described in the Old Testament and any one Mesopotamian account of creation.²⁰

I have worked on this topic in detail elsewhere;²¹ hence I only summarize my conclusions, mostly based on linguistic arguments. The followings are the results:

a. Hebrew *t'hôm* could not have come from Akkadian Tiamat.

The consonants of the Hebrew word are t-h-m; those of the Akkadian word are t-m-t (the second t is a feminine ending). Normally in linguistic change h drops, rather than being inserted. If the divine name Tiamat had been borrowed and transformed to become a Hebrew term, the form would have been something like *t'ômāh*, not *t'hôm*.

b. Both *t'hôm* and Tiamat go back to the proto-Semitic term *tihām-, as we can see by the following words:

Akkadian *tiāmtum* or *tāmtum*, Mari Akkadian *Tēmtu*

Arabic *tihāmat*

Eblaite *ti-'a-ma-tum*/tihām(a)tum/

Ugaritic *thm* cf. *ta-a-ma-tu*, /tahāmatu/ (*Ug* V 137:III:34): *thmt*

Thus, the Hebrew *t'hôm*, like Ugaritic *thm*, is simply a term for "ocean" or "many waters." Since the motif of a primeval ocean is common in the ancient Near East, it is no longer tenable to explain the similarity between *t'hôm* and *Tiamat* as due to cultural borrowing.

c. In *Enuma elish*, a common noun for "sea" was developed into a proper name through personification and deification.

In Mesopotamia as well as in Canaan, the term *tihām- had been used as a common noun since before the time of composition of *Enuma elish* (c. 2nd half of the 2nd millen. BC).

1. Old Akkadian: 3rd millen. BC

Lagaš^{ki} *atima tiāmtim in'ar* (SAG.GIŠ.RA)

kakkī (^{giš}TUKUL-gi)-su in *tiāmtim imassī*

"He vanquished Lagaš as far as the sea.

He washed his weapons in the sea."

2. Eblaite: 3rd millen. BC

a-bar-rí-iš ti-'à-ma-dīm /'abāriš tihām(a)tum/

"beyond the sea"

3. Ugaritic: mid-2nd millen. BC.

] *gp . ym* " . . . the shore of the sea

wyšgd . gp . thm And roams the shore of the ocean."

In these texts, the terms *tiāmtim* (Akk.), *tihām(a)tum* (Ebla), and *thm* (Ug.) are used for referring to a huge amount of water, i.e. "ocean." In *Enuma elish*, the Akkadian term is personified and is used as the name of the ocean goddess *Tiamat*. However, while the term *Tiamat* refers to the salted "sea" water in *Enuma elish*, its Canaanite cognates (Ug. *thm* and Heb. *t'hôm*[*ôt*]) refer to the subterranean water. In Northwest Semitic, the "sea" is normally referred to by the term *ym*, not *thm*.

d. The motif of conflict between storm and sea was originated in the Mediterranean coast.

This motif was not native to Mesopotamia, as T. Jacobsen²² pointed out; rather it originated along the Canaanite Mediterranean coast and moved eastward.

e. The motif of a primordial ocean does not necessarily go with the conflict motif.

To cite one example from ancient Mesopotamia, in a bilingual version of the *Creation of the World by Marduk*, the initial state of the earth is described thus: "All the lands were sea." And then, without any motif of conflict, the "creation" of the world is described.²³

²⁰ S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh and Others: A New Translation* (World's Classics; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 278.

²¹ D.T. Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005), Chapter 2 ("Waters in Genesis 1").

²² T. Jacobsen, "The Battle between Marduk and Tiamat," *JAOS* 88 (1968): 107.

²³ See Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction*, 71–72.

3. Reappraisal of J. Day's Hypothesis

Since the motif of conflict between storm and sea seems to have originated in Canaan, J. Day proposes a Canaanite background for the Genesis creation account, instead of a Mesopotamian one.²⁴ However, since in Canaan, as illustrated by the Ugaritic myths, the sea god is represented by Yam, not Tehom, if Gen 1:2 had its origin in a Canaanite conflict myth, one would certainly expect *yām*, not *t'hôm*, to appear. In fact, the "seas" (*yammîm*, pl. of *yām*) appear for the first time in v. 10 in Gen 1.

The motif of conflict between the storm-god and the sea-god has been attested in various parts of the Ancient Near East. But, it is noteworthy that the conflict motif and the creation motif usually do not coexist in the myths and never in the Ugaritic mythology. For example, the passage KTU1.2 [UT 68]:IV:4–30 describes the conflict of the storm god Baal with the sea god Yam, but the conflict is described as one-to-one combat, not as a meteorological phenomenon. Baal uses neither wind nor lightening to fight with Yam; he simply uses two war clubs fashioned by Koshar-and-Hasis, the god of art and wisdom.

The most important thing to note, however, is that Baal had nothing to do with creation, since he was not a creator god proper. In Ugaritic myths, it is the god El who created creatures, who has the title "creator of creatures," the "father of mankind," etc. El is the one who begat the Good Gods of fertility as well as Shahr-and-Shalim (KTU 1.23). On the other hand, Baal never created anything, though he did repair the wings of eagles in the Aqhat epic.²⁵

In KTU 1.3 [UT 'nt] III 37–IV 3, Anat, the Baal's consort, refers to her ancient combats with her, hence Baal's, enemies such as Yam. Again, there is no creation motif in this conflict myth.

Thus, in the Ugaritic mythology, the conflict myth between Baal and Yam has nothing to do with creation. In fact, it should be noted, the Babylonian creation myth *Enuma elish* is the only clear example in the ancient Near East of a myth which has motifs both of conflict and of creation. It is highly speculative to treat the single myth *Enuma elish* as if it were the typical creation myth of the entire ancient Mesopotamia.²⁶

²⁴ J. Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

²⁵ Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction*, 53–57.

²⁶ See D.T. Tsumura, "The 'Chaoskampf' Motif in Ugaritic and Hebrew Literatures," in *Le Royaume d'Ougarit de la Crète à l'Euphrate: Nouveaux axes de Recherche* (ed. J.-M. Michaud; Proche-Orient et Littérature Ougaritique 2; Sherbrooke: GGC, 2007), 473–499.

Our conclusions are:

1. Only *Enuma elish* has both conflict and creation;
2. Baal myths have only conflict without creation;
3. Gen. 1 has only creation without conflict.

R.A. Watson²⁷ in her most recent study (2005) deals thoroughly with the poetic texts relating to the "chaos" motif, such as Pss 18, 24, 29, 68, 74, 77, 89, 114, etc. and some passages in Isaiah and Job.²⁸ She convincingly argues that there is no intrinsic connection between "*Chaoskampf*" and creation in the extant Israelite texts. She concludes that "the term 'chaos' should be abandoned in respect of the Old Testament, since this literary collection does not seem to possess a clear expression of the idea that Yahweh engaged in combat with the sea or a sea monster in primordial times."²⁹

C. Does *tōhû wābōhû* Refer to a Chaotic State of the Earth?

It has been shown that the term *t'hôm* in Gen 1:2 has nothing to do with the chaos motif. I should now like to clarify the meaning of the phrase *tōhû wābōhû* in Gen. 1:2 and sort out various translations of the phrase in the early history of biblical interpretation, especially during the Hellenistic period.

1. Various Translations

In the English speaking world, some typical translations are:

"void and empty" (Tyndale); "without form, and void" (KJV); "waste and void" (ASV); "without form and void" (RSV; NEB) or "formless and empty" (NIV); "a formless void" (NRSV) and "a vast waste" (REB).³⁰

These translations can be classified into the following three categories:

[A]. "void and empty": ← *inanis et vacua* (Vulg.)

"vain within and void" (Wycliff 1388), "eitel und leere" (Koburger Bible 1483), "void and empty" (Tyndale 1530)

²⁷ R.A. Watson, *Chaos Uncreated: A Reassessment of the Theme of "Chaos" in the Hebrew Bible* (BZAW 341; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005).

²⁸ I too dealt with the *Chaoskampf* motif in some poetic texts of the Old Testament in the Part 2 of *Creation and Destruction*, 143–195.

²⁹ Watson, *Chaos Uncreated*, 397.

³⁰ As far as I know, the phrase *tōhû wābōhû* has been translated as "chaos" in a standard translation only in the Chinese *Union version* (混沌) and the Japanese *Shin-Kyodo-yaku* (混沌).

[B]. “formless and empty”: ← ἀόρατος καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος “invisible and unformed” (LXX)

“without form and void” (KJV 1611); “without form and void” (RSV 1952, 1971²; NEB 1970; ESV 2001) or “formless and empty” (NIV 1978); “unformed and void” (JPS 1962, 1985), etc., “formless and void” (NASB 1971), “a formless void” (NJB 1985, NRSV 1989)

[C]. “waste and empty”

“wüst und leer” (Luther 1535, 1957–1984), “waste and void” (ASV 1901), “a vast waste” (REB 1989)

The group [B] is obviously influenced by LXX, as seen below. However, those translations in the group [A], which are pre-KJV, seem to have a different translation tradition, probably that of the Vulgata, which is traceable back to the original Hebrew Bible.

The LXX was translated in Alexandria during the Hellenistic period (2nd Century BC) under the deep influence of Greek philosophical thinking. It translates *tōhû wābōhû* as ἀόρατος καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος “invisible and unformed”. The second term, a hapaxlegomenon of LXX, which Liddell & Scott explain as “*unwrought, unformed*,”³¹ also appears in 1 Enoch 21:1–2,

1) I traveled to where it was chaotic (τῆς ἀκατασκεύαστου). And there I saw a terrible thing; 2) I saw neither heaven above, nor firmly founded earth, but a chaotic and terrible place.³²

This LXX phrase was probably influenced, though indirectly, by such phrases as “invisible and unshaped” (ἀνόρατον ... ἄμορφον) of Plato’s *Timaeus*, 50–51.³³

LXX’s influence on Augustine can be seen in the following expressions:

The earth was invisible and unorganized (terra autem invisibilis erat et incomposita), and darkness was over the abyss. Formlessness is suggested by these words, ...³⁴ (Confessions 12.22.)

In sum, first of all God creates ‘a kind of intellectual creature’ and only then the manifestly inferior material world. (12.9)

For the latter quotation, C.E. Gunton detects “a real echo of the *Timaeus*” in Augustine’s remark.³⁵ He says: “Augustine continued to be marked by the scars of the Manichaeism ...”³⁶ In the English speaking world, this influence of LXX persisted especially after KJV adopted the translation “without form and void” in 1611.

In the later history of the Greek translations, or recensions, of the Old Testament during the 2nd century AD, Aquila and Theodotion made translations closer to the Hebrew text than LXX is. Thus, Aquila’s κένωμα καὶ οὐθέν “an emptiness (or “empty space”) and a nothing” (AD 2nd Century) is a translation based on extreme literalism. A few decades later, we find Theodotion’s θὲν καὶ οὐθέν “a nothing and a nothing.” On the other hand, Symmachus made a fresh translation, emphasizing on the literary value of Greek, and translating rather freely. Thus, (ἐγένετο) ἀργὸν καὶ ἀδιάκριτον “(became) unworked and indistinguishable.”³⁷

Jerome, who made the Vulgata with the help of a rabbi at Bethlehem, followed the tradition of Aquila and Theodotion, translating directly from the Hebrew original. Group [A] among the English translations seems to have followed the Vulgata’s translation “inanis et vacua.” As for Group [C], they seem to stick to the original meaning of the Hebrew term *tōhû* more than any other group, as discussed below.

2. Meanings and Usages of *tōhû*

In my 1989 monograph,³⁸ I classified the meanings of the term *tōhû* into three groups, by revising Westermann’s classification³⁹ as follows:

[1]. “desert” (4 times)

Deut 32:10, Job 6:18, Job 12:24, Ps 107:40

This group of texts certainly describes *tōhû*, which is synonymous with *midbār* “a desert land” (Deut 32:10), as a “wasteland” where caravans perish (Job 6:18) and as a “trackless waste” where people wander (Job 12:24, Ps

³¹ H.G. Liddell, R. Scott, H.S. Jones, and R. McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9th ed. with a revised supplement; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 48.

³² G.W.E. Nickelsburg and K. Baltzer, *1 Enoch: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), on 21:1; also see R.H. Charles, *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2004 [orig. 1913]).

³³ See R.G. Bury (Loeb Classical Library 234; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929), 119. On Plato’s influence on the cosmological understanding of Philo, see D. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the ‘Timaeus’ of Plato* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986), 524–527; cited by M. Endo, *The Johanne Prologue in the Light of Early Jewish Creation Accounts (ca. 2nd. Century BCE to 1st Century CE)* (Ph.D. diss., St. Andrews University, 2000).

³⁴ See A. Louth, ed., *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament 1*; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 4.

³⁵ See Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, 78.

³⁶ Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, 79.

³⁷ J.W. Wevers, *Septuaginta: Genesis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), 75.

³⁸ D.T. Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2* (JSOTSS 83; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 30–41.

³⁹ C. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984 [orig. 1974]), 102–103.

107:40). Thus, the term refers to an actual desert as “a waste land,” which Westermann explains as “the grim desert waste that brings destruction.” This meaning is supported by Ugaritic *thw* “desert” or “wasteland,”⁴⁰ and the term goes back to the Common Semitic *tuhw-.

[2]. “desert-like state” (7 times)

In all of the passages belonging to this group (according to Westermann including Gen 1:2), the term *tôhû* is used for describing the situation or condition of places such as earth, land or city. Westermann explains *tôhû* in Isa 24:10, 34:11, 40:23, Jer 4:23 as “a desert or devastation that is threatened,” while that in Gen 1:2, Isa 45:18 and Job 26:7 as “the state which is opposed to and precedes creation.” His explanation for the latter group is deeply influenced by his “chaos” theory. I will provide here my own translations of the passages (except Gen 1:2), which I discussed in detail elsewhere.⁴¹

1. Isa 24:10

nišb^erâh qiryat-tôhû The city is broken down into desolation,⁴²
suggar kol-bayit mibbô[’] every house is shut up so none can enter.

2. Job 26:7

nôṭeh šāpôn ‘al- t’ôhû He stretches out the high mountains over an
empty place,
tôleh ‘ereš ‘al-b’lî-māh He suspends the earth over a place where
there is nothing.

3. Isa 45:18

lô[’]-tôhû b’rā’āh He created it not to be a desert-like place;
lāšebet y^ešārāh he formed it to be inhabited.

4. Isa 45:19⁴³

lô[’] bassēter dibbartî I did not speak in secret,
bimqôm ‘ereš hōšek in a land of darkness,
lô[’] ‘āmartî l’zera’ ya’āqōb I did not say to Jacob’s descendants
tôhû baqq^ešūnî (in a land of) desolation,⁴⁴ ‘Seek me!’

5. Jer 4:23

²³*rā’itti ‘et-hā’āreš* I looked on the earth,
w^ehinnēh- tôhû wābôhû and lo, it was waste and void;

⁴⁰ D. Pardee, “The Ba’alu Myth,” in *The Context of Scripture*, Vol. I (ed. W.W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 265.

⁴¹ See Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction*, 24–32.

⁴² Here, the term *tôhû* is taken to be an objective genitive (for result) of the construct chain *qiryat-tôhû*, which has been translated “the city of desolation” or the like.

⁴³ Westermann classified it as [3], but it clearly should be classified as [2].

⁴⁴ Or “(in) a desolate place.”

w^eel-haššāmāyim and to the heavens,⁴⁵
w^eên ‘ôrām and they had no light.

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²⁷*kî-kôh ‘āmar YHWH* For thus says the Lord:
š^emāmāh tihyeh The whole land shall be a desolation;
kol-hā’āreš
w^ekālāh lô[’] ‘e’ēseh yet I will not make a full end.
²⁸*‘al-zô’t te’ēbal hā’āreš* Because of this the earth shall mourn,
w^eqād^erû haššāmāyim and the heavens above grow black;
mimmā’al
‘al kî-dibbartî zammôti for I have spoken, I have purposed;
w^elô[’] nihamti I have not relented
w^elô[’]-’āšûb mimmennāh nor will I turn back. (NRSV)

6. Isa 34:11

w^enāṭāh ‘ālêhā qaw-tôhû And He shall stretch over it the line of
desolation
w^eabnê-bôhû And the plumb line of emptiness. (NASB)

[3]. “emptiness” (8 times)

1 Sam 12:21, Isa 29:21, Isa 40:17, Isa 40:23,⁴⁶ Isa 41:29, Isa 44:9, Isa 49:4,⁴⁷ Isa 59:4

In this group, the term *tôhû* refers to a situation which lacks something abstract that should be there, such as worth, purpose, truth, profit and integrity. Thus, it is better understood as referring to “a lack” or “emptiness” rather than as “nothingness.” This abstract use of *tôhû* seems to be typical of Isaiah and the only other usage in this sense is 1 Sam 12:21, which refers to idols in a fashion similar to Isa 44:9. Significantly, the term *tôhû* in this sense is never used with nouns such as “earth” (*‘ereš*) and “city” (*‘ir*).

Having re-classified the meanings and usages of the Hebrew term *tôhû* in the Old Testament except in Gen 1:2, it is interesting to note how this term is translated in the LXX, as well as in Aramaic Targumim, in the relevant passages.

⁴⁵ For this parallel structure (a-b-x // B’-x’) with a “vertical grammar,” see D.T. Tsumura, “Vertical Grammar: The Grammar of Parallelism in Biblical Hebrew” in *Hamlet on a Hill: Semitic and Greek Studies Presented to Professor T. Muraoka on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (ed. M.F.J. Baasten and W.Th. van Peursen; Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 487–497; “Vertical Grammar of Parallelism in Hebrew Poetry,” *JBL* 128 (2009): 167–181.

⁴⁶ Westermann classified it as [2], but it clearly should be with 40:17.

⁴⁷ Not in Westermann’s English translation, but in the German original.

3. LXX Translation of *tōhû**tōhû wābōhû*

Gen 1:2	ἀόρατος (invisible) καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος (unformed)
Jer 4:23	οὐθέν (= <i>tōhû wābōhû</i>)
Isa 34:11	καὶ ἐπιβληθήσεται ἐπ' αὐτὴν σπαρτίον γεωμετρίας ἐρήμου (desert ← <i>tōhû</i>) καὶ ὀνοκένταυροι οἰκήσουσιν ἐν αὐτῇ

tōhû

(1) Deut 32:10	αὐτάρκησεν αὐτὸν ἐν γῇ ἐρήμῳ (land of wilderness) ἐν δίψει (thirst) καύματος (of heat) ἐν ἀνύδρῳ (desert)
Job 6:18	δὲ καὶ ἔξοικος (houseless) ἐγενόμην
Job 12:24	διαλλάσσω καρδίας ἀρχόντων γῆς ἐπλάνησεν δὲ αὐτοὺς ὁδῶ ἣ οὐκ ᾔδεισαν ([the road] which they didn't know)
Ps 107:40	καὶ ἐπλάνησεν αὐτοὺς ἐν ἀβάτῳ (waste land, desert) καὶ οὐκ ὁδῶ
(2) Isa 24:10	ἡρημώθη (became desolate) πᾶσα πόλις κλείσει οἰκίαν τοῦ μὴ εἰσελθεῖν
Isa 45:18	οὐκ εἰς κενὸν (empty) ... ἀλλὰ κατοικεῖσθαι (to be inhabited)
Isa 45:19	μάταιον (vain, nothing) ζητήσατε
Job 26:7	ἐπ' οὐδὲν (nothing) ... ἐπὶ οὐδενός (nothing)
(3) 1 Sam 12:21	καὶ μὴ παραβῆτε ὀπίσω τῶν μηθὲν ὄντων οἱ οὐ περανοῦσιν οὐθέν καὶ οἱ οὐκ ἐξελοῦνται ὅτι οὐθέν εἰσιν
Isa 29:21	καὶ ἐπλαγίασαν ἐν ἀδίκοις δίκαιον
Isa 40:17	ὥς οὐδὲν ... καὶ εἰς οὐθέν (nothing) ἐλογίσθησαν
Isa 40:23	ὁ διδοὺς ἄρχοντας εἰς οὐδὲν ἄρχειν τὴν δὲ γῆν ὥς οὐδὲν ἐποίησεν
Isa 41:29	καὶ μάτην (in vain) οἱ πλανῶντες ὑμᾶς
Isa 44:9	οἱ πλάσσουντες καὶ γλύφοντες πάντες μάταιοι (vain, nothing) οἱ ποιοῦντες τὰ καταθύμια αὐτῶν ἃ οὐκ ὠφελήσει αὐτοὺς ἀλλὰ αἰσχυνθήσονται
Isa 49:4	εἰς μάταιον (vain) καὶ εἰς οὐδὲν (nothing)
Isa 59:4	ἐπὶ ματαίῳς

4. Aramaic Translation of *tōhû**tōhû wābōhû*

Gen 1:2	<i>šdy' wrwqny'</i> "desolate and empty" (Onqelos) <i>thy' wbhy'</i> (Neofiti) <i>thy' wbhy'</i> (Pseudo Jonathan)
Jer 4:23	<i>šdy' wrwqny'</i> "desolate and empty" (Jonathan)
Isa 34:11	<i>hrbn'</i> "destruction" (Jonathan)

tōhû

(1) Deut 32:10	<i>byt šhwn'</i> "the house of thirst" (Onq) <i>wbšllth</i> "in the noise" (<i>wbšdywth</i>) (Neofiti) <i>bšdywyt</i> (PsJo)
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Job 6:18	(they go up) <i>lm'</i> "to nothing" (and perish)
Job 12:24	<i>blm' dlyt 'wrh'</i> "in nothing where is no path"
Ps 107:40	<i>blm' (dl' 'wrh')</i> "in nothing (without path)"
(2) Isa 24:10	<i>šdy't</i> "be a desert"
Isa 45:18	<i>bryqnw</i> "for naught" ... <i>l'sg'h</i> "to increase (on it)"
Isa 45:19	<i>qbl</i> "darkness" ... <i>bryqnw</i> "for naught"
Job 26:7	<i>l'mh</i> "on nothing" ... <i>lwy my' mdlyt md'm</i> "upon water from which nothing supports"
(3) 1 Sam 12:21	<i>lm'</i> "nothingness" ... <i>lm'</i> (Jo)
Isa 29:21	<i>šqr</i> "lie"
Isa 40:17	<i>lm'</i> "nothingness" ... <i>gmyr'</i> "destruction"
Isa 40:23	<i>hwls'</i> "faintness, weariness" ... <i>lm'</i> "nothingness"
Isa 41:29	<i>lm'</i> "nothingness" ... <i>l' md'm</i> "no something" ... <i>tbr'</i> "fracture, gap"
Isa 44:9	<i>lm'</i> "nothingness" ... <i>l' yhnwn</i> "do not profit"
Isa 49:4	<i>bryqnw</i> "for naught" ... <i>lm'</i> "for nothingness"
Isa 59:4	<i>lm'</i> "nothingness" ... <i>šqr</i> "lie"

In these lists, we can observe that the Hebrew term *tōhû* is more or less consistently translated into Greek and Aramaic when the word has the meaning of the first [1] ("desert") and the third [3] ("emptiness") groups. As for the second group [2], the majority of translations in both languages seem to convey the "desert-like situation" of a concrete location, as we have observed in the Hebrew texts.

As for Isa. 34:11, where the term *tōhû* appears in parallel with the term *bōhû*, *tōhû* is interpreted as belonging to the second group ("desert-like state"), as LXX's translation ἐρήμου ("desert") and Targum Jonathan's *hrbn'* "desolation" show.

5. *tōhû wābōhû* in LXX and Aramaic Targumim

Now, we come to the point where we compare LXX and Targumim to note the difference in translating the phrase *tōhû wābōhû* in Gen 1:2 and Jer 4:23.

Gen 1:2	ἀόρατος (invisible) καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος (unformed)
Gen 1:2	<i>šdy' wrwqny'</i> "desolate and empty" (Onq); <i>thy' wbhy'</i> (Neofiti); <i>thy' wbhy'</i> (PsJo)
Jer 4:23	οὐθέν (= <i>tōhû wābōhû</i>)
Jer 4:23	<i>šdy' wrwqny'</i> "desolate and empty" (Jo)

Targumim are consistent in interpreting the phrase *tōhû wābōhû* in both passages as having the sense of "desolation;" thus they either translate *šdy'*

wrwqny’ (“desolate and empty”) as in Targ Onq and Targ Jo, or leave the Hebrew phrase untranslated (*thy’wbhy*’ or *thyy’wbhy*’) as in Targ Ne and Targ PsJo.

On the other hand, LXX translates the phrase quite differently in two passages. In Jer 4:23, *tôhû wābôhû* is translated by one word οὐθέν “nothing,” which is used as a translation for the term *tôhû* in 1Sam 12:21 and Isa 40:17, where the meaning (“emptiness”) of the group [3] was applied in the Hebrew text. Thus, LXX Gen 1:2 is the sole example which translates the phrase as ἀόρατος (invisible) καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος (unformed), in a completely different way from the other cases. Such a translation must have been made possible because the translator was influenced by Greek cosmology represented by Plato’s *Timaeus*.

There appears to be one serious problem when we compare LXX and Targumim, that is the chronology. Though the Jewish tradition ascribes the first Targum to Ezra, it is not clear when the first Targumim were produced. However, taking into consideration that some Targ. fragments were found in Qumran (4QtgLev, 4QtgJob, 11QtgJob), it would not be unreasonable to hold that the origin of Targum such as Targum Onqelos possibly goes back in the oral formulation even to the Hellenistic era.⁴⁸

If this is the case, it may be reasonable to assume that there were two basic streams of traditions in the Bible translation in the Hellenistic period, i.e. one is the Greek tradition which started with LXX at Alexandria, the other, the Aramaic tradition in Palestine. These two streams of traditions still remain influential as recognizable in the two English translations of Hebrew *tôhû wābôhû*, as “formless and empty” or “waste and empty.” The former was accepted by Augustine and Calvin, while the latter is represented by Luther’s “wüste.” Two new English translations published in 1989 are also divided into these two traditions: “a formless void” (NRSV; but “waste and void” for Jer 4:23) and “a vast waste” (REB).

Knowing that the translation “formless” is a Greek idea and not based on the original Hebrew meaning, the most natural sense of *tôhû* as a Semitic term, i.e. “waste” or “desolate” should be respected and adopted. It should be noted in particular that χάος does not appear as a translation of *tôhû* in the Hellenistic period.⁴⁹

D. Interpretation of *tôhû wābôhû* in Its Genesis Context

1. The Earth-Waters Relationship in Gen 1

It is crucial for the correct interpretation of Gen 1:1–2 to understand the earth-waters relationship properly. As discussed elsewhere,⁵⁰ the author of Genesis expresses the entire universe in terms of a merismatic pair, “the heavens and the earth” (v. 1). In other words, he explains the cosmos by a bi-partite expression (as in Ps 148, Prov 3:19), not a tri-partite one.

The Bible often use a tri-partite expression to describe the total universe; for example, “heaven—earth—sea” (Exod 20:11, Ps 146:6, Hag 2:6, etc). However, in such cases, the “sea” is described by the Hebrew term *yām* (or plural *yammîm*), not *t’hôm*. Hence, there is no place in Gen 1:2 for the interpretation that God created only “heaven and earth,” but not “sea,” for the author uses the phrase “heaven and earth” merismatically for the entire universe.

Moreover, Gen 1:2 uses *t’hôm*, which refers to water normally under the earth; hence semantically the term *t’hôm* is hyponymous to the term *’ereš*. In other words, the thing which the term *t’hôm* refers to is included in the thing which the term *’ereš* “the earth” refers to. Hence, the author assumes that the *t’hôm*-water was also created by God. Thus, the two terms are hyponymous to each other. But, the earth-water relation described in v. 2 is somewhat unusual, for the underground water is then flooding all over the earth, which will only come out on the third day of God’s creation. Such an earth, though called “earth,” is “desolate and empty,” and not yet a normal earth as it is without plants, animals or human beings on it.

Now, in v. 2, the focus of the narrator shifts from the entire universe (“heavens and earth”) to the earth, setting aside the heaven. Discourse structurally, here is where the shifting of focus, or the narrowing down of the scope occurs. So, v. 2 says: “As for the earth, it was desolate and empty,” i.e. “unproductive and uninhabited.”

The reason why the author explains the earth in terms of *tôhû wābôhû*, however, is not to describe positively how the earth was at that moment; rather, *tôhû wābôhû* is a negative, but not destructive, expression. That means, the phrase reminds the audience, who lives on an earth, already inhabited with plants and animals, of the situation of the earth as “not yet” the normal one they know by experience. The narrator thus prepares the

⁴⁸ E. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 149–150.

⁴⁹ The term χάος appears twice (Mic 1:6, Zech 14:4) in the LXX translation of Old Testament with the meaning “gaping abyss, chasm,” corresponding to “valley” (נַחֲלָה, נַחֲלָה).

⁵⁰ Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2*, 72–77, which is revised in Chapter 3 of *Creation and Destruction* (2005), 63–69.

audience for the subsequent announcement that it was by God's fiat that the current earth became productive and inhabited.

Hence, the "breath" (or "spirit") of God was preparing (i.e. "hovering") to utter the first word, "Let there be light!" This interpretation seems to be supported by Heb 11:3, which says: "the universe was created by the word of God," not by God's "logos" (λόγος), but by God's utterance (ῥήματι θεοῦ), as in Gen 1:3 ff. The other term "darkness" simply denotes the situation that there was no light yet, rather than a situation where something called "darkness" existed at the beginning.

2. Discourse Structure of Gen 1:1–3

Such understanding is well supported by the Hebrew discourse structure in the first verses in Gen. 1.

v.1—Summary statement

v.2—SETTING

v.3—EVENT

V. 1 is simply a summary statement that God created everything in the beginning. V. 2 is not explaining what happened at that moment; rather, it provides the background information (SETTING) for the first EVENT, which begins in v. 3 where the narrative "tense" *wayqtl* (*waw consecutive* + impf.) appears for the first time in this narrative. V. 2 describes the stage setting where neither dramati persona was on the stage yet nor any action began yet. Hence, the first act of God's creation occurs in v. 3 and the first creature was "light," not "water," even though *t'hôm* is mentioned in v. 2.

E. Concluding Remarks: Relationship between Doctrine and the Bible

Thus, before establishing any doctrine, we need to do exegesis, not eisgesis, of any particular text in its immediate context, then in the context of the entire Bible. In the Hellenistic time, the Jews in Alexandria read Greek philosophical thinking into the Hebrew text, while in the modern era, Gunkel and his followers have read the Babylonian chaos myth into Gen 1:2. Now, in the 21st century, we make the same mistake in the Biblical interpretation when we read the modern "chaos theory" into the Genesis creation accounts as process theologians do.

We can say that even the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* can be dangerous, if we simply pursue the abstract meaning of the term *nihilo* ("nothing") itself without seeking the concrete historical setting in which the doctrine

was intended and established. The same is true, for example, in the case of contemporary interpretations of the theological term "Trinity." Therefore, when translating *tôhû wābōhû* into a modern language (English, Japanese, Chinese, etc), one should be extra careful not to introduce non-biblical ideas such as "chaos."