

Creation from Chaos

Traditional Christianity teaches that God created the universe *ex nihilo*, or “out of nothing.” As explained by one scholar, “the most widely accepted theistic explanation of initial creation is the theory that God created the universe from absolutely nothing. . . . Most major theologians in Christian history—for example, Irenaeus, Augustine, Catherine of Sienna, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, Karl Barth, and Paul Tilich—believed that God initially created the universe from absolutely nothing. . . . Many influential Christians throughout history have affirmed the theory.”¹

By contrast, Joseph Smith taught that God created the universe *ex materia*, or out of preexisting matter. “The learned men who are preaching salvation say, that God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing,” the Prophet acknowledged in a sermon on April 7, 1844. However, he maintained, the word *bārā* in Genesis 1:1 actually “means to organize” in the similar sense that “a man would organize a ship.” Accordingly, the Prophet reasoned that “God had materials to organize the world out of chaos; chaotic matter, which is element, and in which dwells all the glory.”²

1. Thomas Jay Oord, “Creatio Ex Nihilo: An Introduction,” in *Theologies of Creation: Creatio Ex Nihilo and Its New Rivals*, ed. Thomas Jay Oord (New York: Routledge, 2015), 2.

2. “Conference Minutes,” *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 15 (August 15, 1844): 615. This portion of the amalgamated version of the sermon appears to derive from Thomas Bullock’s audit, which is substantively similar to the published version. See “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Thomas Bullock,” 18, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 9, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-thomas-bullock/5>. The relevant portion of the Bullock audit reads, “The learned me[n] who are preach[ing] Salⁿ. say that God created the Heavens & the Earth out of nothing & the reason is that they are unlearned & I know more than all the world put tog^r. & if the H. G. in me com[prehends]; more than all the world I will associate with it— what does Boro mean it means to organize same as you wo^d. organize a Ship— God

This teaching is also found in the Book of Abraham,³ and the Prophet's later teachings about Creation may well indeed have been influenced by his translation of Abraham's record and his study of Hebrew related thereto (although without the ability to check against an original Abrahamic manuscript, we should be careful not to assume too much about the nature of the Hebrew terminology in the text).⁴

According to the Book of Abraham, there was one in the premortal council "like unto God," who proclaimed: "We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell" (Abr. 3:24).⁵ In the next chapter, the text says that the Gods (the members of the heavenly council) "organized and formed the heavens and the earth" as opposed to *creating* them (Abr. 4:1).⁶ The verbs *organize* and *form* are used throughout the Book of Abraham's Creation account instead of *create*, clearly indicating some kind of divine activity or fashioning of material as opposed to creating all matter *ex nihilo*.

Scholars now recognize that the ancient cultures of Egypt, Syria-Canaan, and Mesopotamia did not seem to countenance ideas of creation *ex nihilo* but rather envisioned creation as the emergence of an ordered cosmos out of preexisting chaos. This preordered chaos is often personified as a primordial cosmic ocean or as a primeval cosmic combat

himself had materials to org[anize] the world out of chaos which is Element & in which dwells all the glory"

3. See the overview in Stephen O. Smoot, "Council, Chaos, and Creation in the Book of Abraham," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 28–39.

4. Joseph Smith's study of Hebrew appears very likely to have influenced his translation of the Book of Abraham, including the decision to render the verbs of activity in the text's Creation account as *organize* and *form*. The lexicon utilized by Joseph as he studied Hebrew in Kirtland defines the verb *bārā* as "to form, make, create," although not "organize." Josiah W. Gibbs, *Manual Hebrew and English Lexicon* (New Haven, Conn.: Hezekiah Howe, 1832), 36. As recognized by one scholar, however, it is "doubtful" that Joseph got his teaching of creation *ex materia* from his study of Hebrew alone. Louis C. Zucker, "Joseph Smith as a Student of Hebrew," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1968): 52. The extent to which Joseph's study of Hebrew influenced his later teachings and translations thus remains open to discussion. For a recent perspective, see Matthew J. Grey, "'The Word of the Lord in the Original': Joseph Smith's Study of Hebrew in Kirtland," in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 249–302.

5. See "The Son of Man," 159–62 herein.

6. See "The Divine Council," 150–54 herein.

between gods in ancient Near Eastern creation myths.⁷ For instance, in ancient Egyptian mythology, the earth first emerged as a primeval hill-ock, springing out of a preexisting, chaotic, and unorganized primordial ocean called Nun.⁸ In the Mesopotamian myth known as *Enuma Elish* (from the opening lines of the text meaning “when on high” in ancient Akkadian), the evil goddess Tiamat is defeated in battle by the god Marduk, and her body is split in half to form the cosmos.⁹

Although not obvious from reading the King James translation, Creation is similarly imagined in the Bible as order emerging from a state of disorder. As the biblical scholar Marc Zvi Brettler has noted, “The opposite of structure is chaos, and it is thus appropriate that [Genesis] 1:1–2 describe primeval chaos—a world that is ‘unformed and void,’ containing darkness and a mysterious wind. This story does not describe creation out of nothing (Latin: *creatio ex nihilo*). Primeval stuff already exists in verses 1–2, and the text shows no concern for how it originated. Rather, it is a[n account] about how God alone structured primordial matter into a highly organized world.”¹⁰

7. For representative scholarly overviews of this topic, consult Robert A. Oden Jr., “Cosmology, Cosmology,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:1162–71, esp. 1164–65; Shalom M. Paul, “Creation and Cosmogony in the Bible,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2007), 5:273–75; and Abraham Winitzer, “Chaos. I. Ancient Near East,” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, ed. Constance M. Furey and others, vol. 4, *Birsha—Chariot of Fire* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 1158–59. See also generally John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006), 179–95; and John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011), esp. 23–121.

8. Günter Burkard, “Vorstellungen vom Kosmos—Die Weltgebäude,” in *Ägypten: Die Welt der Pharaonen*, ed. Regine Schulz and Matthias Seidel (Germany: Könnemann, 1997), 447. See also Geraldine Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 172–73; and Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 117–18.

9. “The Epic of Creation,” in *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*, rev. ed., trans. Stephanie Dalley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 228–77; Joshua J. Mark, “Enuma Elish—the Babylonian Epic of Creation—Full Text,” May 4, 2018, World History Encyclopedia, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/225/enuma-elish---the-babylonian-epic-of-creation---full-text/>; Thorkild Jacobsen, “The Battle between Marduk and Tiamat,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88, no. 1 (1968): 104–8; Mary K. Wakeman, *God’s Battle with the Monster: A Study in Biblical Imagery* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 1973), 16–24.

10. Marc Zvi Brettler, *How to Read the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005), 41. See also the comment by Hermann Spieckermann, “Creation: God and

This may hold significance for the Book of Abraham's depiction of the Gods "ordering" the elements of the cosmos, which "obey" when so commanded (Abr. 4:7, 9–12, 18, 21, 25). This language ultimately "con-jures [imagery] typical of the Near Eastern creation mythology . . . of kingly dominion establishing order over a previously chaotic cosmos."¹¹ So while the Book of Abraham's teachings about Creation might be out of place in the typical Christian thinking of Joseph Smith's day, they are not out of place in the world of the ancient Near East.

Further Reading

- Ball, Terry B. "Creation." In *Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, edited by Dennis L. Largey, 93–97. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017.
- Barney, Kevin. "Examining Six Key Concepts in Joseph Smith's Understanding of Genesis 1:1." *BYU Studies* 39, no. 3 (2000): 107–24.
- Gee, John. "The Creation." In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 129–42. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017.
- Smoot, Stephen O. "Council, Chaos, and Creation in the Book of Abraham." *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 28–39.

World," in *The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Companion*, ed. John Barton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 275. "God's creation as described at the beginning of the Bible is not a creative act out of nothing. The conception of *creatio ex nihilo* first came to the fore in Hellenistic Judaism (2 Macc. 7:28). After the heading of Gen. 1:1 comes a description of the world before God's first deed, the generation of light. Three elements characterize the world at this time: *tôhû wābôhû* (formless and void), *hōšek* (darkness), and *têhôm* (the deep). Present in Mesopotamian myths and even Old Testament texts, this triad alludes to Chaos. The term *têhôm* betrays an inherent conception of Chaos."

11. Smoot, "Council, Chaos, and Creation in the Book of Abraham," 34.