Chapter 2

Creation ex nihilo (Out of Nothing)

The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* or "creation out of nothing" provides a suitable starting point for our study. Not only did it prove to be important in distinguishing the Biblical from pagan concepts of origins, but it also illustrates a crucial principle in the study of church history - the development of doctrine. Three factors are usually identified as the catalysts for the development of Christian doctrine:(1)

- **The needs of Apologetics.** The early church was commanded to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15). This involved countering the attacks of pagan religions but, more importantly, it required that the Message be made understandable to a variety of peoples and cultures. The writings of the second century provide many examples of literature that attempted to achieve this end. Justin Martyr's *Dialogue With Trypho, A Jew* represented a Christian response to a Jewish audience, while Justin's *Apology* was directed at the Roman emperor and the Senate.

- **The attacks of heretics.** The early church was charged not only with proclaiming its message to the world, but also with the need to defend it against attacks from those who claimed to belong to its ranks. The controversies sparked by such men as Marcion and Arius can be seen as being beneficial in the sense that they stimulated the teachers of the church to define what they believed more clearly. They were then able not just to say that their opponents were wrong, but explain exactly *why* they were wrong. Works like Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* and Tertullian's *Against Marcion* fall into this category.

- **The need for a comprehensive world view.** As head of the Catechetical School in Alexandria Origen felt free to speculate concerning those matters not clearly defined in the Bible.(2) Although later writers often criticised him and rejected many of his conclusions this process of speculation and exploration proved essential to the process of doctrinal formulation. It is important to note the tension that this process created between the need to formulate a culturally relevant conceptual framework whilst at the same time doing full justice to the teachings of Scripture. The biblical narrative had to be made relevant to those who lived outside of Israel and expressed in terms that they could understand. This process can be described in terms of a "hermeneutical spiral" in which a particular writer formulated what he believed to be a biblical framework of doctrine, which was then modified by himself and later writers by referring back to the Bible. The results of this reformulation were tested by later writers and so on.(3)

The Bible, it is often pointed out, is not a scientific text book, but neither is it a work of systematic theology. Rather it is the *source* of systematic theology which is born out of a process of harmonising the biblical evidence to form a coherent world view. Paul's letters, for example, contain theology directed to specific people and situations - *task theology* as it is

often known.(4) The Bible's teachings are quite complex in places, as even the New Testament writers themselves admitted (2 Peter 3:16) and often required unpacking before they could formulated into a doctrine. For example, nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus actually explicitly claim to be God. However, by accepting the titles and prerogatives of deity (e.g. John 8:58; Matthew 14:33; John 9:38): Jesus made that a claim implicitly.

As we will see below this process of formulation took time. The priority assigned to the systematisation and definition of particular doctrines was often determined by external factors, particularly periods of persecution, that diverted attention away from the finer points of theological debate. This is evidenced by the rise of the Arian controversy shortly after Constantine ended State persecution of the church in 313 AD. This issue of the relationship of the members of the Godhead had been brewing for some time, but it was the new freedom that allowed it to be argued openly. It is important to realise that just because it took time to make explicit what was implicitly taught in Scripture does not make the doctrine itself unbiblical or unimportant.

The explicit formulation of an implicit biblical doctrine appears to go through three distinct stages:

1. A period of uncertainly and vagueness during which the doctrine is unclear and not the centre of theological debate.

2. This is followed by a period of (often intense) debate and argument during which alternative explanations are discussed and rejected.

3. The final stage is reached when a explicit statement of the doctrine is arrived at. Typically this formula defines the doctrine and excludes the alternatives discussed during the previous stage.

The three stage process described above can be seen clearly in the development of such doctrines as the Trinity and justification. Like creation *ex nihilo* both of these doctrines have also been challenged as being unbiblical later additions to Christianity and continue to be challenged as such in some quarters. However it can easily be shown that centuries before the fourth century Christians "lived Trinitarianly," referring to Christ as God(5) and baptising their converts in the threefold name.(6) As Alister McGrath notes:

> If you examine the doctrine of the early church during the first two and a half centuries or so, you find that the doctrine of the Trinity was yet to be developed. The theologians of the period are well on the way to developing the doctrine, but it hasn't yet appeared in its definitive form. That development took place in the third or fourth centuries. And so, argue critics of the doctrine, this proves that it's not an essential element of Christianity.

> Our response to this argument is quite simple. As we have seen, the doctrine of the Trinity is basically an attempt to bring together the incredible richness of the Christian understanding of God. It is the distillation of the kaleidoscopic Christian experience of God in the light of its scriptural foundations. The scriptural witness to and Christian experience of God came first, and reflection on it came later. In view of the complexity of the experience, it is little wonder that it took so long for the theologians of the church to wrestle with the implications of faith, and find the best way of describing the God whom they knew in so rich and diverse a fashion.(7)

Similarly with the doctrine of justification, which took an extremely long time before an

adequate definition was arrived at.(8) When these doctrines are viewed as the products of the historical process of the definition of biblical doctrines such charges of "novelty" can be easily shown to be false.

It is generally agreed that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* - that God created all things out of nothing - is taught implicitly rather than explicitly in Scripture. Genesis 1:1 tells us that it was God who created the world in the beginning. The question of what the cosmos was made from is not one that this verse was intended to answer.(9) However, at least one prominent modern Old Testament scholar has argued persuasively that the verse speaks of an absolute beginning and therefore creation *ex nihilo*.(10)

The first clear reference to the doctrine is found in the non-canonical Jewish work 2 Maccabees:

> I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognise that God did not make them out of things that existed. And in the same way the human race came into being. (2 Macc. 7:28 *NRSV*)

It is also found in the teachings of Essenes of Qumran. *The Community Rule* (1QS 3.15) reads as follows:

> 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 came into being, it is in accord with His glorious design that they accomplish their task with change.(11)

Scholars disagree as to whether Philo of Alexandria believed in creation out of pre-existing matter or simply stating that through God's creative act the world which had not existed previously came into being - a statement vague and woolly enough to cause no problems for either Jews or Platonists.(12) Several other pseudepigraphical and apocryphal works also make explicit references to creation out of nothing, a fact that demonstrates that the doctrine was not foreign to Jewish thinking on the subject of creation.(13)

Although the New Testament does not state creation out of nothing in so many words, as Paul Copan has pointed out, the language used has "an all-embracing nature to it."(14) Although Romans 4:17(15) and Hebrews 11:3(16) strongly imply creation *ex nihilo* they could still be - and sometimes were - taken in a vaguer sense.(17) The fact that such clear evidence can be misinterpreted proves little, except that you can be a Christian and still have a very bad theology.

Earlier it was mentioned that external influences often formed the catalyst for the process of formulation of definition of a doctrine. In the case of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* the stimulus was provided by the interaction of Christianity with Gnosticism and Platonism. It appears that prior to this interaction in the second century the subject was given little attention.(18) The majority of Gnostics and Platonists considered matter to be evil and were forced to explain how God could be good and yet create something that was evil. The most common solution to this problem among pagan writers was to assign the physical creation to an inferior deity, called the *demiurge*.(19) The exception to this general rule is the Gnostic Basilides (2nd century), who made an explicit reference to creation out of nothing, but it is not certain whether he based his belief on an older tradition or formulated it himself.(20) On other points, however, Basilides' doctrine of creation differed radically from that of later

Christian writers.(21)

The stages in the interaction of Christianity with Gnosticism and Platonism that led to the acceptance of creation *ex nihilo* can be traced in the writings of the early church. Hermas, the first Christian writer to the doctrine explicit, wrote: "First of all, believe, that there is one God who created and finished all things, and made all things out of nothing."(22) Later in the second century Justin Martyr, steeped as he was in Platonistic philosophy, apparently failed to recognise the contradiction involved in an omnipotent God being forced to utilise pre-existing matter in His purposes.(23) Tatian's contribution - "the proposition that matter was produced by God"(24) - marked a significant step towards creation *ex nihilo*, which was finally established as part of the Rule of Faith by Irenaeus of Lyons and Theophilus of Antioch.(25) After them only Clement of Alexandria (again deeply influenced by Platonism) dared to reject creation *ex nihilo*. Table 2.1 will help to illustrate the historical development of the doctrine. The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* was not an invention of the church of the second century as some recent writers have claimed.(26) It is a doctrine which has a firm biblical foundation. The Christian writers of the second century having formulated what they had come to recognise as a biblical doctrine, pointed to Hermas to prove that the earliest Christians had also believed it.(27)

Table 2.1: Creation *Ex Nihilo* in the First Four Centuries AD

Writer	Date	Source of Creation		Reference
		Ex nihilo	Pre-existing matter	
Unknown		X		2 Maccabees 7:28
Essenes of Qumran		X		*Community Rule* (1QS 3.15)
Philo (Jewish writer)	c.20 BC-c.50 AD		?	*Creation*, 7-10
Hermas	c.90-c.150	X		*Shepherd*, Mandate 1.1
Justin Martyr	c.100-c.165		X	1 *Apology* 59.
Tatian	110-180	X		*Address* 5:1-
Irenaeus of Lyons	c.115-202	X		*Heresies* 2.10.4
Clement of Alexandria	c.150-c.215.		X	*Miscellanies 5.89.5-6*
Theophilus of Antioch	c.180	X		*Autolycus*, 2.4

Tertullian	c.160-225	**X**		*Hermogenes*, 1-2
Origen	185-253	**X**		*Principles*, 1.7.1 - 2.2.
Lactantius	240-320	**X**		*Divine Institutes* 1.3
Victorinus of Pettau	d. c. 304	**X**		*Creation*
Athanasius	300-373	**X**		*Incarnation* 3:1-2
Ephrem the Syrian	306-373	**X**		*Commentary on Genesis* 1.2
Ambrose of Milan	339-397	**X**		*Hexameron* 1.16; 4.31
John Chrysostom	347-419/420	**X**		*Homily on Genesis* 2.5, 10-11
Augustine of Hippo	354-430	**X**		*Confessions* 12.7

KEY: X indicates acceptance of this view

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References

(1) This subject is discussed at some length by Maurice Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine: A Study in the Principles of Early Christian Development*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 18-40.

(2) Origen, *Principles*, Preface 10; (*ANF*, Vol. 4, 241).

(3) Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism*. (Vancouver, British Columbia / Grand Rapids, Michigan: Regent College Publishing / Eerdmans, 1997), 61.

(4) Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How To Read The Bible For All It's Worth: A Guide to Understanding The Bible*, 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 48.

(5) *2 Clement* 1.1: "Brethren, it is fitting that you should think of Jesus Christ as of God,--as the Judge of the living and the dead. And it does not become us to think lightly of our salvation; for if we think little of Him, we shall also hope but to obtain little [from Him]." *ANF*, Vol. 10, 248).

(6) H.E.W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth: A Study in the Relations between Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Early Church*. (London: A.R. Mowbray & Co., Ltd, 1954), 27-28.

(7) Alister E. McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 116-117.

(8) For a detailed discussion of the history of the doctrine of justification see: Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification. The Beginnings to the Reformation*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). On a more popular level see: Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), 437-449.

(9) Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1 - 11: A Continental Commentary*. John J Scullion, translator. (London: SPCK, 1994), 108-109.

(10) Walther Eichrodt, "In the Beginning: A Contribution to the Interpretation of the First Word of the Bible," Bernard W. Anderson, ed. *Creation in the Old Testament*. (London: SPCK, 1984), 72-73.

(11) Translator G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls In English*, 3rd edn. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), 64.

(12) Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, trans. A.S. Worrall. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 17-18.

(13) Paul Copan, "Is Creatio Ex Nihilo A Post-Biblical Invention? An Examination of Gerhard May's Proposal," *TJ*, Vol. 17 ns. (1996); 84-87.

(14) Copan, 90.

(15) Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*. (Leicester: IVP, 1988), 209: "Paul is speaking of God as creating something out of nothing by his call. This applies to the physical creation, though that does not seem to be particularly in mind here."

(16) F.F. Bruce, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," *NICNT*, rev. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 279-280: "Greek speculation about the formation of the ordered world out of formless matter had influenced Jewish thinkers like Philo and the author of the book of Wisdom, the writer to the Hebrews is more biblical in his reasoning and affirms the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo, a doctrine uncongenial to Greek thought. The faith by which he accepts it is faith in the divine revelation; the first chapter of Genesis is probably uppermost in his mind, since he is about to trace seven living examples of faith from the subsequent chapters of that book."

(17) For an helpful discussion of Hebrews 11:3 see further: William L. Lane, "Hebrews 9-13," *WBC*, Vol. 47b. (Waco: Word Books, 1991), 331-333. Also Bruce, "Hebrews," 280, n. 24.

(18) May, 35-38.

(19) May, 39-41.

(20) May, 76-77.

(21) May, 80.

(22) Hermas, *Shepherd*, Book 1, Commandment 1 (*ANF*, Vol. 2, 20).

(23) Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 59 (*ANF*, Vol. 1, 182). May, 132-133.

(24) May, 150.

(25) May, 177-178.

(26) Notably May, but also Frances Young, "'Creatio Ex Nihilo': A Context For The Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation," *SJT*, Vol. 44 (1991): 139-151;

(27) Irenaeus, *Heresies* 4.20.2 (*ANF*, Vol. 1, 488).