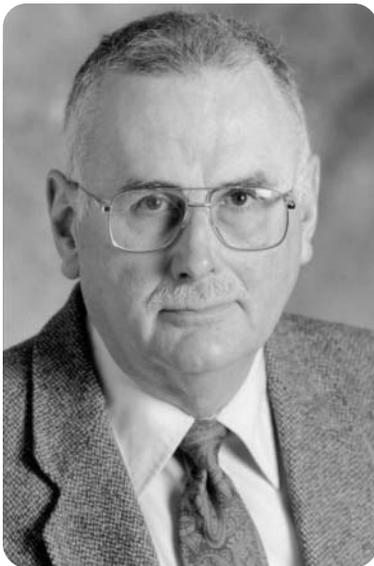




## Creation Old and New



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Children are natural cosmogonists, for which one of them has never asked, “How did the world begin?” That question is addressed at the very beginning of the Tenakh: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). The uniform teaching of the Scriptures is that God alone creates. The verb used in the first verse of the Bible, *bara*, is always predicated of God alone, who also formed man from the dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7).

How did God create the world? The ancients had various answers. The Babylonians, in their national epic poem *Enuma Elish*, said that the earth and the firmament were made from the corpse of the slain goddess Tiamat. Later Greek philosophers and theologians theorized about eternal matter from which the world was

fashioned, or about emanations from the pure light of God that became dark as they moved farther from God and eventually turned into matter—a regrettable degradation. An obscure work by Plato gave rise to the idea that the material world was fashioned by a Demiurge, a craftsman inferior to God.

But the biblical view was distinct from all these views. God created simply by His word of command: “God said, ‘Let there be light’ . . .” and all the rest (Genesis 1:3). “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth” (Psalm 33:6).<sup>1</sup> The Word by which the Lord created was felt to be His special Agent.<sup>2</sup>

God is distinct from His creation, and He was before His creation. It is true that the first statement that God created the universe out of nothing (*creatio ex*

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*nihilo*) does not appear until the first century B.C.E. in 2 Maccabees 7:28, but that concept is implied by Isaiah 44:24, “I am the Lord, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who by myself spread out the earth,” and by Psalm 102:25-27, which says the Lord “laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands,” but they are perishable while the Lord is eternal.

God took pleasure in His creation. “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). But it did not remain good. The human race, to whom dominion over the earth was granted, turned out to be bad stewards of it, and by the time of the prophets the people of Israel began to long for repair and renewal. In Isaiah 65:17 the Lord says, “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth” which will stand eternally (Isaiah 66:22). This expectation grew in intensity, and about two hundred years before the Common Era the apocalyptic book of Enoch declared that at the end of time there will be a great Judgment, and after that “the first heaven will vanish and pass away, and a new heaven will appear,” and there will be no more sin (1 Enoch 91:16, 17).<sup>3</sup>

In the first century C.E. and the early rabbinic period there was a great deal of discussion about

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creation. Was it really from nothing? Which was created first, the heavens or the earth? How much effort did it take? There was fairly general agreement that it was from nothing, that the Lord achieved it instantaneously by a word, and that it required of Him no toil at all. As to some of the other questions, it was felt best not to speculate about mysteries that must remain inscrutable.

We need to notice one more in-

teresting development, the belief in the complete efficacy of repentance to get rid of past sins. Rabbinic literature is quoted as saying that

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when one repents between Rosh ha Shanah and Yom Kippur the Lord says, “I impute it to you as if you were created a new creation.”<sup>4</sup>

When we come to early Christianity we find all these ideas accepted and developed further.

God created all things (Ephesians 3:9; Acts 4:24; Revelation 4:11; 10:6), and Revelation 14:7 urges, “Worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.” He created them from nothing: “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible” (Hebrews 11:3). The Lord is “the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come” (Revelation 1:8). Alpha and Omega were the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, so this declares that there was nothing before God and there will be nothing after Him. It was He who laid the foundation of the world at the beginning of time (Mark 10:6; Romans 1:20; 2 Peter 3:4).

In the New Testament there is a lively hope in the renewal of all things, a new heavens and a new earth. In the spirit of the last chapters of Isaiah, the book of Revelation says, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more” (Revelation 21:1).

What is new is that the creative Word is identified with the Messiah (in Greek, the *Christos*, from which comes the English word Christ). The Gospel of John begins with these words: “In the be-

ginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him,

and without Him not one thing came into being” (John 1:1-3). Speaking of the Messiah, Colossians 1:16 declares, “In him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, . . . all things have been created through him and for him.”

In the New Testament repentance involves believing in the Messiah and following Him, so the Apostle Paul wrote: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Indeed, that is the message of the Christian scriptures: newness of life, effected by the new Adam, who has made an atonement for sin. New heavens and new earth, new birth, new creation—everything wiped clean and made over. Once again, the creation can be “very good.”

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<sup>1</sup>From here on biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version. It is true that the apocryphal book known as the Wisdom of Solomon (11:17) says that God created the universe out of formless matter, but this book often reflects Greek philosophical ideas.

<sup>2</sup>See my article, “The God of Our Fathers,” *Shabbat Shalom* 46, No. 2 (Autumn 1999/5760): 13-15.

<sup>3</sup>The translation, by M. A. Knibb, appears in H. F. D. Sparks, ed., *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 293.

<sup>4</sup>*Yerushalmi Rosh ha-Shanah* 59c; *Leviticus Rabbah* 29 (end); *Pesikta Rabbati* 169a.