

Creation Ex Nihilo Is Not Biblical: A Latter-day Saint Defense

LDS Apologetics Research

ABSTRACT

1. Introduction

Critics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints frequently charge that the LDS belief in eternal matter and intelligence contradicts the clear biblical teaching that God created everything from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). This doctrine — that before creation there was only God, and that everything else (matter, energy, time, space) was brought into existence by divine fiat from absolute nothingness — is treated as a nonnegotiable of Christian orthodoxy. But the historical and scriptural evidence tells a different story. *Creatio ex nihilo* is not a biblical doctrine. It is a philosophical development of the second century, shaped by engagement with Greek philosophy, and it was unknown to the biblical writers. The Latter-day Saint teaching that God organized eternal matter rather than creating from nothing is closer to the biblical text than the traditional doctrine it is accused of departing from.

2. The Criticism (Steelmanned)

The strongest version of the *ex nihilo* argument is as follows: Genesis 1:1 declares, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." The Hebrew word *bara* (to create) is used exclusively of divine activity and implies bringing into existence what did not previously exist. Hebrews 11:3 states, "Things which are seen were not made of things which do appear." Romans 4:17 describes God as one who "calleth those things which be not as though they were." Colossians 1:16 says, "By him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth." If God did not create from nothing, then matter is co-eternal with God, which diminishes His sovereignty and makes Him a craftsman working with pre-existing materials rather than the absolute Creator. The LDS position makes God less than God.

This is a serious theological argument. It also rests on assumptions that do not survive careful examination.

3. Biblical Response

Genesis 1 Does Not Teach Creation from Nothing

The Hebrew text of Genesis 1:1-2 reads: "In the beginning God created (*bara*) the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void (*tohu wabohu*); and darkness was upon the face of the deep (*tehom*)."

Several features of this text undermine *ex nihilo*:

1. **The "deep" (*tehom*) pre-exists God's creative activity.** Before God speaks in verse 3, there is already a watery deep, darkness, and formlessness. God's creative acts (days 1-6) involve organizing, separating, and ordering this pre-existing chaos — not conjuring it from nothing.
2. **The word *bara* does not mean "create from nothing."** Old Testament scholars widely acknowledge that *bara* means to shape, fashion, or assign function. It is used in Isaiah 43:7 ("I have created him, I have formed him") in parallel with *yatsar* (to form/fashion from existing material) and *asah* (to make). In Isaiah 65:18, God says He will "create Jerusalem a rejoicing" — not from nothing, but by transforming what exists.
3. **Genesis 1:2 describes pre-existing conditions.** The *tohu wabohu* (formless void) and the *tehom* (deep) are present before God begins to speak. If everything was created from absolute nothing, there should be nothing before verse 3. But there is: darkness, deep, waters.
4. **The broader Ancient Near Eastern context.** Every creation account in the ancient world — Babylonian (*Enuma Elish*), Egyptian, Canaanite — describes creation as the ordering of pre-existing chaos. Israel's account shares this pattern. The idea of absolute creation from nothing was foreign to ancient Israelite thought.

Old Testament scholar Jon Levenson (Harvard) writes: "The notion that creation necessarily entails absolute origination is not native to the Hebrew Bible but is a product of later philosophical and theological speculation" (*Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. 5).

Hebrews 11:3 Does Not Teach Ex Nihilo

"Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear" (Hebrews 11:3).

The Greek word *katartizo* (translated "framed") means to fit together, arrange, or put in order — not to create from nothing. The passage says visible things were not made from visible things — that is, the material world was organized from something invisible or imperceptible. This is consistent with the LDS teaching that God organized matter that was already present but not in visible, structured form.

Romans 4:17 Is About Resurrection, Not Cosmology

"God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were" (Romans 4:17).

In context, Paul is discussing Abraham's faith that God could give life to his "dead" body and Sarah's barren womb. The "things which be not" are the descendants God promised but which did not yet exist. This is about God's power to fulfill promises and raise the dead — not a metaphysical statement about cosmic origins.

Colossians 1:16 Affirms Christ as Creator but Not the Method

"By him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible." This affirms that Christ was the agent of creation. It does not specify the method. Latter-day Saints affirm

that Christ created all organized things under the Father's direction. The question of whether He created from nothing or from pre-existing matter is not addressed by this verse.

Other Biblical Evidence for Pre-Existing Matter

- **Psalm 33:6-7** — "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made... He gathereth the waters of the sea together as an heap: he layeth up the depth in storehouses." Gathering and laying up imply organizing what exists.
- **Psalm 104:5-6** — "Who laid the foundations of the earth... Thou coveredst it with the deep as with a garment." The deep is a garment covering the earth — imagery of fashioning, not conjuring.
- **Proverbs 8:22-30** — Wisdom (Christ) was "set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was... when he appointed the foundations of the earth." The language is of appointment and establishment, not origination from void.
- **2 Peter 3:5** — "By the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water." The earth stands *out of* water — organized from aqueous chaos, not from nothing.
- **Job 38:4-7** — "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?... When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" Beings existed before the earth was organized — they witnessed it.

4. Early Christian Evidence

Ex Nihilo Was Not the Original Christian Teaching

The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is absent from the earliest Christian literature and entered Christian theology in the late second century.

The Shepherd of Hermas (c. 100-150 AD) contains the earliest apparent reference to creation from nothing (Mandate 1.1: "God, who created all things out of nothing"), but scholars debate whether this reflects *ex nihilo* in the later technical sense or simply means God is the ultimate source of all things.

Justin Martyr (c. 150 AD) explicitly taught that God created the world from pre-existing matter: "We have been taught that He in the beginning did of His goodness, for man's sake, create all things out of unformed matter" (*First Apology*, 10; cf. *First Apology*, 59, where he compares Moses' account to Plato's *Timaeus*). Justin — one of the earliest Christian apologists — did not hold *ex nihilo*.

Clement of Alexandria (c. 200 AD) also acknowledged creation from pre-existing matter, drawing on Platonic cosmology.

Theophilus of Antioch (c. 180 AD) and **Tatian (c. 170 AD)** are among the first to clearly articulate *ex nihilo*, and they did so in explicit contrast to Greek philosophical positions (particularly Platonic and Stoic cosmology). Their motivation was polemical: to establish God's absolute sovereignty against the Greek notion of eternal matter. The doctrine was shaped by the debate, not derived from scripture.

Irenaeus (c. 180 AD) championed *ex nihilo* against Gnostic emanation theology. For Irenaeus, the Gnostic idea that the material world emanated from a divine pleroma was the target. *Ex nihilo* was the counter-argument — a theological weapon forged in a specific controversy.

By the early third century, *ex nihilo* became the consensus — but the first 150 years of Christian theology operated without it, and some of the most respected early apologists (Justin Martyr) explicitly rejected it.

The Philosophical Motivation

The adoption of *ex nihilo* was driven by philosophical concerns:

1. **Anti-Gnostic polemic:** Gnostics taught that matter was evil and that the material world was created by an inferior deity (the Demiurge). *Ex nihilo* asserted that the one true God created matter directly, making it inherently good.
2. **Greek philosophical influence:** Paradoxically, while *ex nihilo* was partly formulated against Greek philosophy, it also absorbed Greek assumptions — particularly the absolute ontological distinction between Creator and creature, which owes more to Neoplatonic metaphysics than to Hebrew thought.
3. **Sovereignty maximization:** The desire to make God absolutely sovereign — dependent on nothing, limited by nothing — led to the conclusion that even matter must owe its existence entirely to God. But this goes beyond what the biblical text claims.

As historian Gerhard May concluded in his landmark study: "*Creatio ex nihilo* appeared as a specifically philosophical and theological creation in the second century... It is not found in the Bible" (*Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought*, p. 179).

5. LDS Doctrinal Position

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches:

1. **God organized the world from pre-existing matter.** "The elements are eternal" (D&C 93:33). "There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure" (D&C 131:7).
2. **Intelligence is co-eternal with God.** "Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be" (D&C 93:29). Abraham 3:18: "If there be two spirits, and one shall be more intelligent than the other... these two spirits... have no beginning; they existed before, they shall have no end."
3. **God's creative work is organization, not origination from void.** Abraham 4:1: "They went down at the beginning, and they, that is the Gods, organized and formed the heavens and the earth." The Book of Abraham consistently uses "organize" and "form" rather than "create from nothing."
4. **This does not diminish God's sovereignty.** God's power, knowledge, glory, and authority are infinite. His creative genius lies in His ability to organize, order, beautify, and give life to eternal elements — not in a philosophical abstraction about conjuring matter from nothingness.

5. **The LDS position aligns with the biblical text more closely than *ex nihilo*.** Genesis 1 describes ordering chaos, not conjuring from void. Job 38 describes pre-existing witnesses. Proverbs 8 describes Wisdom present before creation.

6. Key Scriptures

- **Genesis 1:1-2** — Pre-existing chaos (*tohu wabohu, tehom*) before God's creative acts
- **Genesis 1:6-7** — God divides waters — organizing, not originating
- **Job 38:4-7** — "Sons of God" witnessed creation — pre-existing beings
- **Proverbs 8:22-30** — Wisdom present before earth's foundation
- **2 Peter 3:5** — Earth formed "out of the water and in the water"
- **Psalms 33:6-7** — God gathers waters, lays up the deep — organizing language
- **Hebrews 11:3** — Worlds "framed" (*katartizo* = arranged/fitted together)
- **Isaiah 43:7** — *Bara* paralleled with *yatsar* (form) and *asah* (make)
- **Abraham 3:18** — Intelligences "have no beginning... they existed before"
- **Abraham 4:1** — "The Gods organized and formed the heavens and the earth"
- **D&C 93:29** — Intelligence "was not created or made, neither indeed can be"
- **D&C 93:33** — "The elements are eternal"
- **D&C 131:7** — "All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure"

7. Responses to Common Objections

"If matter is eternal, God is not sovereign — He is limited by pre-existing material."

A master architect working with the finest materials is not diminished because he did not create the atoms in the marble. God's sovereignty is demonstrated in His infinite power, knowledge, love, and creative genius — not in a metaphysical claim about conjuring matter from logical impossibility. The biblical God is praised for His creative work (Psalm 19, Psalm 104), not for creating the substance of matter itself. See [FairLatterdaySaints: Creation](#).

"Bara means 'create from nothing' — it's only used of God."

Bara is only used with God as the subject, but this does not prove the method is *ex nihilo*. It means God alone has the authority and power to bring about these creative acts. The parallel with *yatsar* (to form from existing material) in Isaiah 43:7 and 45:7 shows that *bara* describes divine creative authority, not a metaphysical method.

"Hebrews 11:3 clearly says things were made from what doesn't appear — that's nothing."

"Not made of things which do appear" means made from things that are *invisible*, not from *nothing*. The verse distinguishes visible from invisible, not existent from nonexistent. This is consistent with

creation from imperceptible, unorganized matter — exactly the LDS position. See [Church of Jesus Christ: Creation](#).

"Every Christian tradition teaches *ex nihilo* — the LDS position is novel."

Justin Martyr, one of the earliest and most respected Christian apologists, explicitly taught creation from pre-existing matter (*First Apology*, 10). The doctrine of *ex nihilo* did not become consensus until the late second century. The LDS position is not novel — it is a recovery of the earlier understanding.

"If intelligence is eternal, then God did not create us — we are self-existent."

Intelligence in its unorganized state is not a person. God organized intelligence into spirit beings and eventually into mortal bodies. The creative work of God is real and essential — without it, intelligence would remain unorganized and purposeless. Creation as organization is no less creative than creation from nothing. A sculptor who brings form and beauty to marble has truly created, even though the marble existed before.

8. Conclusion

The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not taught in the Bible. It was developed in the second century as a response to Gnostic theology and Greek philosophy, and it became entrenched through centuries of repetition. The biblical text — Genesis 1, Job 38, Proverbs 8, 2 Peter 3, Hebrews 11:3 — consistently describes creation as the organizing and ordering of pre-existing material. The Latter-day Saint teaching that God organized eternal matter is not a departure from biblical Christianity. It is a return to the original cosmology of the Hebrew Bible, confirmed by modern revelation through the Prophet Joseph Smith. God's glory is not diminished by this understanding. It is enhanced: the God who brings order from chaos, life from inert matter, and beauty from formlessness is a God whose creative power is displayed in every organized thing.