

Theories of creation in Judaism

The problem of creation in religion and philosophy

The nature of creation has been one of the major issues in the borderland where the domains of religion and philosophy meet. Religion has usually asserted that world has been created by a creator with will and purpose. With the development of theology, a doctrine of creation out of nothing was formulated, mainly to emphasise the utmost freedom of God relative to everything outside Him. Whereas religion is dependent on divine revelation, philosophy is based on human reason. The domains of religion and philosophy did not remain separated, as inquisitive minds sought to reconcile reason with revelation and belief. This was not always an easy task. The Hellenistic schools of philosophy either considered the world eternal, or at least having been formed out of pre-existent matter. Furthermore, for them the God was the first cause of all, either as the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle or as the Neo-Platonian One, out of which everything was emanated by necessity.

Whereas theological and philosophical investigation has been an occupation for an intellectual elite, the popular religion has often tended to look for myths as a source of inspiration. It is given though, that the biblical account of creation in Gen. 1 is widely different from creation myths of the ancient Near Eastern world. The first verse is totally devoid of myth, stating the simple fact that God has created the heaven and the earth. The second verse is, surprisingly enough, perhaps the most mythical in the whole creation account. A number of primeval elements are introduced: *tohu* and *bohu*, usually translated as unformed and void; darkness; water; wind or spirit of God; an abyss. The indefinite character of these elements as well as their temporal and causal relation to creation has likewise been a rich source for speculation; be it of exegetical, homiletic, philosophical or mystical kind.

Between the poles of reason and revelation, as well as those of theology and myth, a large variety of views have been expressed within Judaism, as will be shown in this article. Even if the Bible is relatively free of myth, traces of ancient myths are dispersed on its pages. Talmudic Judaism polemises against heretical views, but develops myths of its own. The Midrash seeks to explain the inherent meanings in each verse, word or even letter in the biblical account of creation, by means of allegory, allusion or as a starting point for a homily. Later on the Jewish philosophers, usually following the example of their Muslim colleagues, seek to unite their creed with their reason, giving rise to various theories on creation. Literal exegesis begins rather late in the Middle Ages, and even the great Jewish commentators on the Bible combine Midrashic material, philosophy, even mystical elements in their exegesis. Last, but not least, the Kabbalah attempts to provide explanations to the questions not yet satisfactorily answered, at times leading to very striking results.

Creation in Talmud and Midrash

During the Talmudic era, creation was a popular topic as is attested by the Talmudic and Midrashic literature¹. However, this topic should not according to the Mishna² be taught in public³. Urbach describes in his detailed study⁴ how treatment of creation by the rabbis becomes more open after the Tannaitic era, i.e. about 200 CE, especially due to the pressure to be able to argue against the arguments of heretics. However, not all Midrashic statements on creation can be explained by this need. The usual Midrashic method of seeking for multiple meanings in the Scripture is applied to the account of creation, producing at times actual insight into creation, whilst at times a mythical view of creation is displayed. Quite often, however, the Midrash uses creation only as a starting point, immediately to stray into homilies on widely different topics.

There is no definitive doctrine of creation in either of the Talmuds or in the Midrash literature. Theologically, however, everything is subordinated under the foremost doctrine of Talmudic Judaism, i.e. the absolute sovereignty of God and his ruling over the world. The contemporary world hosted several contending views. Gnosticism saw the world as produced by a minor god, the Demiurge, who had rebelled and created the world. The world, as such, was viewed as evil. Iranian dualism saw the world as a battlefield of two gods. The Greek philosophy regarded the world, or at least matter, as having existed eternally. For the neo-Platonists, everything emanated out of God, more out of necessity than as an act of will. For Aristotle, God was the first cause, an unmoved mover, but nothing else.

In a well-known passage in Bereshit Rabba⁵, a philosopher makes use of the mythical character of Gen. 1:2 and tells Rabban Gamaliel: “Your God is a great artist, but he did have good materials: ‘tohu, bohu, darkness, air, water, abyss’”. Rabban Gamaliel denies this right away and supplies biblical verses to prove that all these elements were created. The passage is often quoted as referring to belief in creation out of nothing. This doctrine, which is to become so important in the theology of all three major monotheistic religions, is otherwise still missing from the Talmud⁶. In any case, we see here how the need to be able to argue with heretics provides a substratum for the growth of a theology.

Confrontation with heretics is by far not the only material on creation in this literature. The creation account is often used as a starting-point to illustrate a point such as the greatness of God. God is, for instance, compared to a human king, to a builder or an

¹ The main primary sources employed here are the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud, Midrash Rabbah, Midrash Tanhumah and Pirkei de-rabbi Eliezer.

² mHagiga 2:1: “It is not permitted...to teach matters of creation to two students.” “Whoever looks into these four topics, it would have been better that he would not have come to the world: what is above, what is above, what is before and what is after”.

³ Other topics are Merkavah mysticism based on Ezekiel 1 and sexual matters (arayot).

⁴ Urbach, E. E.: Sages, their concepts and beliefs (1975), pp. 184-213

⁵ Bereshit Rabba 1:9, Midrash Tanhuma Bereshit ch. 5

⁶ Winston (1986) p. 91 says that there is prima facie evidence that belief in ex nihilo was not commonly accepted. He cites Mekilta Shirta 8 which gives 10 examples to describe God’s uniqueness as compared to man, but the best example, creatio ex nihilo, is not included.

On the question of appearance of the creatio ex nihilo idea in Judaism, see also Scholem (1970) pp. 60-66.

architect⁷. Sometimes an analogy to human behaviour is used to illustrate the ways of God, sometimes a difference is emphasised to stress the supernatural character of the act of creation.

Discussions concerning the order in which the various elements were created are typical of the teachings recorded in the names of the Tannaim. Whichever was created first, heaven or earth⁸, world or light, light or darkness⁹? Opinions are stated, but the issues usually remain unsettled. Quite often the element of water¹⁰ is given a major role in the process of creation, which is in accordance with the general Near Eastern myth of a primal watery chaos¹¹.

The typical Midrashic way of looking for multiple meanings in the Torah can be seen in how the Midrash approaches the first verse in the Torah: each word, even the individual letters are filled with meanings beyond compare. Why does the Torah start with the letter *beth*? One explanation is based on the double role of the Hebrew letters as numerals: to teach that there are two worlds, this one and the world to come¹². Another explanation is based on the form of the letter: ב, which is open on the front but closed on all other sides. This teaches us, that we may only investigate what is ahead, not what was before (the creation), nor what is above or what is below¹³. The Midrash also asks, why does the Torah begin with *beth*, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, instead of *aleph* which is the first¹⁴. The answer given is that *beth* is the language of *berachah* (blessing), whereas *aleph* is the language of *arirah* (curse). It was necessary to start the Torah with *beth*, to counter the Gnostic heretics according to whom the creation is evil.

The Hebrew word *bereshit*, literally ‘in the beginning’, is likewise a source for multiple interpretations. The prefix *be-* can, besides the usual meaning ‘in’, also be read as ‘by’ or ‘for the sake of’. *Reshit* has, on the other hand, been interpreted allegorically to mean either wisdom, Torah or Israel. This allows Midrash to read the text as ‘by wisdom’¹⁵, ‘with the Torah’, ‘for the sake of the Torah’¹⁶ or ‘for the sake of Israel’¹⁷. The view that the world has been created for the Jewish people to fulfil the Torah, is quite common¹⁸. It is even said that the permanence of the world is

⁷ Bereshit Rabba 1:1, 1:3, 12:1, 12:12; Shmot Rabba 15:22

⁸ bTamid 32a; Bereshit Rabba 1:15; bHagiga 12a; Talmud Yerushalmi 2:1 ????

⁹ Bereshit Rabba 3:1

¹⁰ yHagiga 2; bBaba Batra 74b; Shemot Rabba 15:22; Ibid. 50:1; Midrash Tanchuma VaYikahel 6;

¹¹ Graves and Patai (1989) p. 25 links Mesopotamian creation myth with primal, watery chaos with the first creation account of Gen. 1, and Canaanite myth of primal dry earth with the second account contained in Gen. 2.

¹² Bereshit Rabba 1:10, Midrash Tanhuma Bereshit ch. 5

¹³ Compare with mHagiga 2:1

¹⁴ Bereshit Rabba 1:10

¹⁵ Association of creation with wisdom is based on the book of Proverbs. “The Lord has based the world on Wisdom” (Prov. 3:19). “The beginning is wisdom, acquire wisdom!” (Prov. 4:7). This association seems to have been taken for granted by the Talmudic literature. Also, the Targum Yerushalmi translates Gen. 1:1 as follows: “With wisdom created God...”. See Midrash Rabba (Margalioth) VaYikro 11:1. See also Midrash Tehillim 40:1.

¹⁶ Bereshit Rabba 1:4; Vayikro Rabba 23:3; Bamidbar Rabba 13:15; Ibid. 14:11. Midrash Rabba (Margalioth) VaYikro 23:3; Midrash Tanchuma Yitro 14;

¹⁷ Shemot Rabba 38:4; Shir ha-Shirim Rabba 2:6; Ibid. 7:8; Midrash Tanchuma (Buber) Bereshit 3.

¹⁸ VaYikro Rabba 23:3

dependent on the Jews' acceptance of the Law¹⁹. Various phases or elements of Creation are also explained as an allegory for the history of the Jewish people²⁰.

The interpretation 'with the Torah' is, however, the most interesting. The Torah becomes either an instrument of creation or a blueprint for it. God is said to have spent two thousand years before the creation with the Torah²¹, and having consulted the Torah when creating the world²². As the Torah could not exist in a material form before creation, it is explained to have been written with black fire on white fire, tied to God's arm.²³ The status of the Torah is clearly much higher than that of the angels, of whom it is said that they were not created before the second day, and thus could not have participated in the creation²⁴. Pre-existence of angels would have provided support to Gnostic heresies, whereas a pre-existent Torah proves the authenticity of the Jewish tradition. The pre-existence of the Torah bears a similarity to the status of Koran in Islam²⁵, but whereas the Muslim concept is a pre-existent, uncreated Koran, the Torah is clearly understood to have been created.²⁶

Torah is not the only thing that is to have been created before the creation of the world. Also the Throne of God, Garden of Eden, space of Hell, the name of Messiah, the Temple and repentance are enumerated as pre-existent items²⁷. It is quite evident, thus, time is assumed to have existed before the creation. The existence of worlds before this one is also mentioned: God is told to have created worlds and destroyed them²⁸. The theme of destroyed worlds appears also in a developed form: a world based on Judgement alone would not endure; it is only after God creates the world with Repentance that the world can last²⁹.

Although alien myths are discouraged, there is otherwise no lack of creation myth in Midrash. Before the creation, God is confronted by the Prince of the Darkness who opposes creation³⁰. God tells the Prince of the Sea to swallow the water that conceals the world, so that the world can come to being.³¹ A similar theme involves the removal of *tohu* and *bohu*, in order for the world to appear, which is compared to how things immersed in water appear as the water is drained off³². Several passages

¹⁹ bShabbat 88a, b Avodah Zara 3a, 5a

²⁰ Bereshit Rabba 2:4; Ibid. 3:5

²¹ Midrash Tanchuma Vayeshev 4; VaYikro Rabba 19:1

²² Midrash Tanhuma Bereshit ch. 1; Bereshit Rabba 8:2; Avot de-rabbi Nathan 31; Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer ch. 3 even comments that a king without advisers is no king. Bereshit Rabba 1:3 however comments that God, unlike a human king, is not in need for counselors. The difference is, of course, that in the first case the role of the Torah is emphasised, in the latter case the independence of God is emphasised. Bereshit Rabba 1:1 compares God to a king wishing to build a palace by employing an architect, who then builds the palace according to plans and drawings.;

²³ Midrash Tehillim 90:12

²⁴ Bereshit Rabba 1:3; 3:8

²⁵ The Midrashic material dates partly from pre-Islamic times, but later Midrashim overlap in time with Islam.

²⁶ Pesikta de-rav Kahana 12:24; Midrash Tanchuma (Buber) Yitro 16

²⁷ bPesachim 54a, Midrash Tehillim 90:12; Bereshit Rabba 1:4; Pirkei d'rabbi Eliezer ch. 3.

²⁸ Bereshit Rabba 3:7, 9:2; Kohelet rabba 3:11

²⁹ Bereshit Rabba 12:15

³⁰ Pesikta Rabbati 95a

³¹ bBava Batra 74b

³² Midrash Bereshit 10:2

describe how God wraps himself in a garment of light in order to create³³; likewise he takes snow from beneath His Throne and creates the earth³⁴. Having been created, the world continues to grow, until God says: Enough!³⁵ In another passage God takes fire and water, kneads them together, and in this manner are the heavens made.³⁶

Much of this mythical material is attributed to a single rabbi, Abba Arikha, also known as Rav. According to Urbach's extensive study on rabbinic thought, myths which were unacceptable from Jewish point of view (e.g. of gnostic or dualistic nature) were so common, that it was necessary to distribute myths which were in accordance to the idea of one, omnipotent God.

This leads us to the main theological point of view contained in the ancient rabbinic literature: God is viewed as the sole creator and almighty ruler of the universe. This doctrine overshadows everything else. Time is held to have existed before the creation of the universe, and various things, most notably the Torah, were created before the world. The creation itself is often described in way of legend, not to say myth. It is proper to note, however, that the views and legends that we have examined here belong to the world of Midrash, which does not constitute a binding system of beliefs. We can of course assume that popular Midrashim represent popular beliefs, but no more. Anyway, we cannot find strong and explicit evidence in favour of any major theological or philosophical doctrine. Such issues were evidently were not considered important, other than in order to counter arguments of heretics. In the polemical context, though, we can see the beginning of the process of theological self-definition, which fully emerged only centuries later.

To some extent, Talmudic and Midrashic material has been interpreted to reflect the main doctrines: creation out of nothing, creation out of pre-existent matter and creation by emanation. Rabban Gamaliel's discussion with the philosopher is often quoted as evidence to support creation out of nothing³⁷, but explicit support for the notion is otherwise missing. The discussions between the rabbis about the order in which various things were created could be interpreted to mean taking stand against and in favour of pre-existent matter, although this interpretation is by no means indisputable³⁸. Belief in the doctrine of emanation, which was current in the Neoplatonic thought contemporaneous to the rabbis of Talmud, is according to A. Altmann visible in the Midrashic concept of God wearing a mantle of light³⁹.

³³ Bereshit Rabba 3:4; Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer ch. 3

³⁴ Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer ch. 3

³⁵ bHagiga 12a

³⁶ Bereshit Rabba 4:7. This is supported by a popular etymology: fire=*esh* and water=*mayim* make heaven=*shamayim*.

³⁷ A. Cohen, Everyman's Talmud (1971) p. 29; E.E. Urbach, The Sages (1975) p. 188; J. Goldstein, "The Origin of the Doctrine of Creation Ex Nihilo" JJS 35 (1984) pp. 127..135. See also reply of D.Winston in JJS 37 (1986) pp. 88..91 and of Goldstein in JJS 38 (1987) pp. 187..194. Even Goldstein, who insists that Rabban Gamaliel propounds here the doctrine of creation ex nihilo, admits that this view is otherwise missing from the rabbinical literature until Saadya (see JJS 38 p.188). See also Scholem(1970) pp. 61-62.

³⁸ Urbach (1975), pp.

³⁹ A. Altmann, A Note in Rabbinical Doctrine of Creation, in Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism (1969), pp. 128..139.

Sefer Yetsira

An overview of the Talmudic era would not be complete without Sefer Yetsira, the Book of Creation. This is a small tract quite different both in form and content from the Midrash. The text is short, anonymous, and the language is clipped, obscure, often deliberately mysterious.

According to Sefer Yetsira, God created the world by means of 32 mysterious ways of Wisdom. Ten of the ways are called '*eser sefirot belimah*', ten sefirot without anything⁴⁰, and the rest are identified with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The sefirot were transformed in the medieval Kabbalah into divine forces, but in Sefer Yetsira they are usually interpreted to represent numbers. That these represent more than mere numbers is however evident from the following:

“Ten sefirot without anything,
one is Spirit of the living God,
and wind from the spirit, water from the wind, fire from the water,
up and down, east and west, north and south”.⁴¹

The linking of Hebrew letters to creation appears already in the Midrash. God is said to have created the universe either with the letter *beth*, which is the first letter in the Torah, or with the letters *he* and *yod*⁴². Sefer Yetsira however does not ascribe creation to specific letters only, but emphasises how letters can be combined to produce words, almost endlessly. It is quite natural to assume, that after seeing how letters and numbers can be used to describe everything in the world, the process has been reversed and letters and numbers can be seen as the tools of creation.

Despite the obscure and mysterious garb, the book teaches a surprisingly well structured view of the universe. The creation is seen as five dimensional; the first four are the three spatial dimensions and the time. The fifth dimension is the axis between good and evil. Each dimension has two extremes, set and sealed by God, and the ten sefirot correspond to these. The twenty-two letters are grouped to three mothers, seven doubles and twelve normal letters. The creation consists of the universe, time and man, and each letter corresponds to a specific part in each level of creation.

The book contains an excerpt which is held to be one of the earliest literal references to creation out of nothing in Jewish writings. God is said to have

⁴⁰ Meaning of the word '*belimah*' is actually most uncertain. The word occurs first in Job 26:7. where it seems to mean 'nothingness' in 'He has hung the world over nothingness'. Commentators of Sefer Yetsira explained it either to mean 'without anything' (בלי מה), or as derived from the word בלום 'to bridle', signifying the closedness or incomprehensibility of the sefirot.

⁴¹ Sefer Yetsira 1:14

אלו עשר ספירות בלימה אחת רוח אלוהים חיים ורוח מרוח ומים מרוח ואש ממים
ורום מעלה ותחת מזרח ומערב וצפון ודרום.

⁴² These letters constitute the shortened form of the Tetragrammaton, the ineffable name of God.

See BR 12:10, where Midrash reads the Biblical words כי ביה ה' צור עולמים (Is. 26:4) 'For Lord is an everlasting Rock' to mean "The Lord formed worlds with yod and he".

“formed reality from chaos (*tohu*),
made that what is not to be (*as’ah eyno yeshno*),
carved huge pillars out of inconceivable air”⁴³.

The words used here are very close to *yesh me-ayin*, which is the usual Hebrew expression for ‘out of nothing’⁴⁴. The expression used here however does not make clear that absolute nothingness is implied⁴⁵. The context juxtaposes ‘what is not’ with chaos and with ‘inconceivable air’, rather than sheer nothingness, as is illustrated by the following list:

Chaos	→ Reality
What is not	→ What is
Inconceivable air	→ Huge pillars

Sefer Yetsira is actually mentioned in the Talmud, which relates how certain rabbis used the book to create a calf, even a kind of human being⁴⁶. How this was achieved cannot be deduced from the contents of the book itself, but in the Middle Ages legends of this kind, as well as theories concerning the method, were proliferating⁴⁷. Aside from the legends, the book was also very influential on Medieval Jewish thought and a large number of commentaries⁴⁸ were written to it, ranging from cosmology and philosophy to mysticism. During the centuries, Sefer Yetsira was to become a core text for Jewish mysticism.

Philosophy

It is quite common to attribute Platonic influences to certain ideas within Talmudic Judaism. Viewing the Torah to be a blueprint of creation, for example, has been interpreted to be a Jewish version of the Platonic world of ideas⁴⁹. The correspondence of letters to various levels of creation in Sefer Yetsira has been explained likewise⁵⁰. The pre-existent Torah of the Midrash is however very much a material Torah. Bereshit Rabba compares Torah to the drawings that an architect uses for the building of a house.⁵¹ To contrast, the Jewish platonist Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C - 40 A.D.) presents also a parable⁵² of an architect in charge of building a city, but carefully refrains from mentioning any drawings. Philo’s architect plans the whole city in detail in his mind and then builds it, using the patterns in his memory as a model.

Philo produced an impressive synthesis of Judaism and Platonism, but did not leave a lasting impression on Judaism. Curiously enough, his influence is felt much more in

⁴³ Sefer Yetsira 2:6

יצר מתהו ממש ועשה אינו ישנו וחצב עמודים גדולים מאויר שאינו נתפש.

⁴⁴ The expression *yesh me-ayin* appears first in the 11th century. See Matt (1995) note 17 p. 70.

⁴⁵ Matt (1995) p. 70. Scholem (1970) pp. 62-63.

⁴⁶ bSanhedrin 65b

⁴⁷ See Moshe Idel, *The Golem, Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid* (1990); Gershom Scholem, *The Idea of the Golem, in On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (1969), pp.158..204; Aryeh Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah* (1990)

⁴⁸ For a complete list of commentaries, see Aryeh Kaplan: *Sefer Yetzirah* (1990), pp. 325-334

⁴⁹ E E Urbach, *Sages, their concepts and beliefs* (1975), pp. ???

⁵⁰ Epstein (1959) p. 228

⁵¹ Bereshit Rabba 1:1

⁵² Philo: *De Opificio Mundi* 17-18

the development of Neoplatonic philosophy in general and Christian theology in particular.

The Jewish philosophy actually emerges in the 9th century in the wake of Islamic philosophy. Following the Muslim Kalam theologians, Saadya Gaon (882..942) sets out to reconcile revelation and reason in Judaism. His approach, contained in his work Book of Beliefs and Opinions⁵³ (*Emunot ve-deot*), is to prove first that the world has been created, from which it will follow that it has a creator. From the existence of creator will then follow the other principles of faith. For Saadya, the creation out of nothing⁵⁴ is already a principle of faith, “as it is written in the writings”⁵⁵. It is not enough for him, however, to state this fact, his mission is to prove it by means of human reason.

The proofs that he presents for creation are typical for Kalam.

Universe is limited in size, therefore it contains only limited power and thus cannot have existed forever.

It is impossible to traverse an infinite; if world were eternal, the past would have been infinite and therefore time could not possibly have reached this day. We exist, however, therefore world must have had a beginning in time.

Everything that is composite must have been put together by something. The things in the world are composite, so is the world itself. A thing cannot create itself, therefore the world must have been created.

That creation is out of nothing, is proved by Saadya as follows. Assume that world would have been created out of pre-existent matter. If this materia prima were eternal, it would equal to God in power, and God couldn't form the world out of it. If the materia prima were not eternal, it would have been formed out of something. This leads to a contradiction, and therefore world must, according to Saadya, have been created out of nothing.

These proofs are not original, as is quite often the case in medieval philosophy. The bulk of Saadya's argument is typical for Kalam theologians, who in turn are in debt to John Philoponus (d. 574), a Christian thinker who delivered the first serious attack against the Aristotelian theory of an eternal universe. Anyway, Saadya is not satisfied at presenting proof for the theory of creation out of nothing. He proceeds to present no less than twelve unapproved theories and give arguments against each of these⁵⁶.

It is perhaps not at all surprising that Saadya feels compelled to prove the validity of Jewish beliefs through reason. In his time, Judaism was split into two branches, Rabbanites and Karaites. Karaites denied the validity of talmudic tradition,

⁵³ Saadya's commentary on Sefer Yetsira contains also philosophically interesting material, especially in the Introduction, where he lists nine theories on the material basis for creation.

⁵⁴ With Saadya there is no doubt that creation out of nothing is really meant. He uses the Arabic expression *la min shay*, which was translated into Hebrew as *lo midavar* (not from a thing) by Jehudah ibn Tibbon. Furthermore, Saadya's list of unapproved theories clearly shuts out other interpretations.

⁵⁵ *Emunot ve-deot*, Part 1 Ch. 2

⁵⁶ See H.A.Wolfson: *Repercussions of the Kalam in Jewish Philosophy* (1979), pp.124..162

acknowledged only the authority of Biblical commandments and thus presented a serious threat to Talmudic Judaism. Saadya was the main spokesman of Rabbanites against Karaites. In addition, his works display strong polemics against outright free-thinking as well as Christian and Moslem beliefs.

It is worth to note the huge difference between the world of Midrash and the thought of Saadya, whilst the time difference between them is only a few centuries. However, it is not correct to think of a complete shift in the way of thinking between the talmudic times and Saadya. The production of midrashes continued during his lifetime and throughout the Middle Ages. It is only that during his lifetime, though not only by his effort⁵⁷, did a new, rational mode of thinking emerge within Judaism.

Whilst Saadya operated very much within the patterns of thought current in Kalam, he did not subscribe to Kalam's atomism and occasionalism, however. For Kalam, it was typical to understand the universe as composed of atoms, which are continuously re-created by God in new arrangements. These atoms, in addition to being the smallest divisible particles of matter, occupied only the shortest possible period of time, after which they were destroyed and replaced by newly created atoms. This doctrine, even if it did explain why there is change in the universe, and emphasized the utmost freedom of God, totally denied causality along with other laws of nature. It is especially because of this that Kalam views were criticised by latter philosophers, most notably by Maimonides.

Saadya, as well as the rabbis of Talmud certainly held creation to be a voluntary divine act. Neo-Platonism, one of the major philosophical streams of the Middle Ages, considered the emanation of the world out of God to be a necessary process. Shlomo Ibn Gabirol, an original Jewish neo-Platonist, produced a modified neo-Platonic scheme by positing a divine will between the God and the emanative process. This bears resemblance to the role of *Keter*, the first sefira, in Kabbalah, which acts as a will between the transcendent God and sefirot, the world of divine forces. Incidentally, Ibn Gabirol's philosophical work was almost lost in the Jewish circles, and lived on only in Latin translation among the Scholastics until its true author was rediscovered in the 19th century⁵⁸. Ibn Gabirol is also well known for his poetry, especially for the long liturgical poem *Keter Malchut* (Crown of the Kingdom) which also touches the topic of creation.

The latter period of Jewish medieval philosophy is dominated by Aristotelianism, which is more or less equal to the scientific thinking of the time. Aristotle himself had taught eternity of the universe, and therefore the question of creation was certainly a problem for the Jewish philosophers who were attracted to Aristotelianism because of its logic and rigorous method of demonstration. Abraham ibn Daud (1100..1180), the first Jewish Aristotelian whose work has survived to our days, carefully avoids

⁵⁷ Other important thinkers of the same period are David Al-Mukammis and Isaac Israeli. Both are actually older than Saadya and it is probable that Saadya is indebted to both of them. However, Saadya's work has been more influential and commonly accessible.

⁵⁸ What is really Ibn Gabirol's work "Fountain of Wisdom" was known to the Scholastics as *Fons Vitae* by Avicenna, whom they considered to be either a Christian or Moslem writing in Arabic. This was possible because the work is free from explicitly Jewish content. A single partial translation of this work into Hebrew ("Mekor Haim") survived in Paris, and was discovered by S. Munk in the middle of the 19th century. He was then able to demonstrate the true authorship of *Fons Vitae*.

juxtaposing the Aristotelian doctrine of eternity of the world with the Jewish belief in creation. This does not mean that he keeps completely silent on the topic of creation, though. In his *Exalted Faith*, when presenting the philosophical concepts of matter and form, he explains that God has created the prime matter, which by receiving the appropriate forms becomes the four elements: fire, air, water and earth. Anyway, he does not attempt to present a proof for this, and even in discussing other topics he steers clear of the question of eternity of the world.

Maimonides⁵⁹ (1135..1204), the major Jewish Aristotelian, covers the issue of creation versus eternity extensively in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, disagreeing with Aristotle in this issue. In his main philosophical opus, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides examines extensively the Kalam arguments for creation on the one hand, and Aristotle's argument for eternity of the other hand. Although Maimonides eventually leans to the same idea that Kalam represents, i.e. that the world is created out of nothing, his attitude towards Kalam is a strong disapproval for its method of argument. Aristotelianism signifies for Maimonides a rigorous, logical system of thought and demonstration. An unconvincing argument, such as of the Kalamists, is likely to do more harm than good, because when the argument is found to be faulty, belief even in a true doctrine is shaken.

Maimonides considers three doctrines: creation out of nothing which he ascribes to Moses, creation from pre-existent matter ascribed to Plato, and Aristotle's doctrine of eternity of the universe. In a lengthy treatment of Aristotle's theory, he comes to the conclusion that neither eternity nor creation has been proved. Eternity of the world, he says, can be proved if time is assumed to be eternal, but not otherwise⁶⁰. Maimonides goes as far as to suggest that even Aristotle had not considered his own demonstration of eternity to be conclusive. On the other hand, there is nothing in the doctrine of creation that stands against the reason. Thus, both eternity and creation of the universe are admissible possibilities, and Maimonides selects his standpoint from a religiously practical point of view. For him, eternity of the world would shake the foundations of the faith, especially because he regards the belief in the revelation to rest on miracles. In Aristotle's eternal world there is no room for miracles, for providence, for reward and punishment either, and thus the basis of religion is totally shattered. The Platonic theory of formation out of pre-existent matter is not unacceptable from the religious point of view, but Maimonides nevertheless dismisses it as lacking sound rational foundation. What remains, for Maimonides, is then the theory of creation out of nothing.

Maimonides takes great pains, however, to emphasize that he does not deviate from the supremacy of reason here. There is but one truth, and what the Torah teaches must necessarily be identical with the truth obtained through rational inquiry. If the theory of eternity were proven, says he, it would not be difficult to interpret the Biblical passages about creation figuratively, just as he does with the anthropomorphisms contained in the Bible.

⁵⁹ Maimonides is also known by his Hebrew name, Moshe ben Maimon, abbreviated as Rambam.

⁶⁰ More Nevukhim II:13

Maimonides is a scientist and subscribes to the Aristotelian system so far as it relates to the sublunar world⁶¹. However, for him the superlunar spheres are beyond human understanding, and Aristotelian physics cannot therefore apply to them. By ascribing creation to the generation of the superlunar spheres, Maimonides can assert creation out of nothing, while maintaining the validity of Aristotelian physics in the sublunar world.

Many scholars have been unhappy with what looks like a rationalist's surrender to religion. Occupied with Maimonides' own comments in the introduction of his Guide about the use of contradictions to teach deeper truths, they have gone to great pains to dig out Maimonides' real, hidden views. Almost all possible views have thus been ascribed to him, most notably the pure Aristotelian position of eternity of the universe. Others have read Maimonides in a more straightforward manner, compatible to the issues current in the Islam philosophy of his time⁶².

Maimonides, anyhow, left the issue of creation unsolved as far as rational inquiry is concerned. Gersonides⁶³ (1288..1344) is in many ways a successor to Maimonides, and in his philosophy he concentrates on the issues that he felt were left open his great predecessor. Both philosophers share an Aristotelian background, as well as the conviction that there exists but one truth, which is contained in the Torah but which must also by definition be compatible with reason.

Gersonides' work is contained in his philosophical work Wars of the Lord (*Milchamot ha-Shem*) as well as his commentaries on both the Bible and on the works of Averroes, a Moslem Aristotelian. Issue of creation is covered in the sixth, final section of the Wars of the Lord, where he refutes the Aristotelian position as well as the view that there have existed, or do exist, multiple worlds. He does not, however, propound *creatio ex nihilo* either, which he considers an impossibility⁶⁴. As opposed to Maimonides, Gersonides does not admit a connection between the creation out of nothing and possibility of miracles. He also asserts that the superlunar world is not totally outside the scope of human knowledge.

Gersonides' theory of creation is in a way based on the eternity of matter. At the creation, God forms the world out of a formless substance⁶⁵. In Gersonides' view such utterly powerless, featureless matter presents no challenge for the sovereignty of God. Ontologically, this formless matter of Gersonides is somewhere between something and nothing.⁶⁶ Furthermore, time is generated along with the world; therefore the past

⁶¹ The classical world-view current in medieval times was that the universe consisted of concentric spheres. The planets, including the moon and the sun, were attached to each its own sphere. The stars were attached to one sphere, and yet another outer sphere provided motion to all other spheres. Time was likewise establishment by the movement of the outer sphere. The earth was contained within the innermost sphere, to which moon was attached. What was contained within this sphere is called sublunar, whereas the universe beyond it is called superlunar.

⁶² The account given here conforms to the straightforward reading. See also Leaman (1990) p. 17, pp. 65-84; Fox (1990) pp. 251-296, especially pp. 257-258

⁶³ Also known by his Hebrew name Levi ben Gershon, abbreviated Ralbag.

⁶⁴ Staub (1982) p. 75.

⁶⁵ Gersonides' specific Hebrew term for this is *geshem bilti shomer temunato*, literally 'body which does not preserve its shape'. It should be noted that he specifically avoids using the word *tsurah*, which carries the meaning of form in the Platonic and Aristotelian meaning.

⁶⁶ Staub (1982) p. 96.

is finite. Although the world is created, it does not necessarily follow that it will be destroyed. Therefore, for Gersonides, the past is finite whereas the future is not. Gersonides touches here a main problem in the Aristotelian theory, which on the other hand denies the actual existence of an infinite, but on the other hand asserts that the universe has already existed eternally. Although the Aristotelians have ways to circumvent the problem, it has, ever since Philoponus, been a source for strong arguments against the theory of eternity. As Aristoteles affirmed the existence of a potential infinite, while denying the possibility of an actual infinite, Gersonides is actually very well in line with the Aristotelian premises⁶⁷.

Gersonides' thought is perhaps the finest and most rigorous example of Jewish medieval philosophy. His influence to the Jewish religious thought has not been strong, however, even when compared with other philosophers, and it is clear that Gersonides was foremost a philosopher and not a religious thinker.

In general, the medieval philosophy left a lasting mark on Judaism. Even the mystical thinkers adopted concepts and terminology from the philosophy, even if they often re-interpreted them. And it is not at all uncommon to find a kabbalistic author quoting Maimonides, sometimes arguing and disagreeing with him, but also often seeking to prove that they both actually share a common view.

Medieval Torah commentaries

Literal exegesis of the Torah does not begin until relatively late in the Middle Ages. The medieval commentaries are not purely literal, however, but consist of a combination of literal exegesis and Midrash, sometimes also philosophical or mystical ideas. The first major commentator is Rashi⁶⁸ (1040..1105) from northern France. He is specially concerned about the first word of the creation account: *bereshit*. This is not, as the Midrash had already noted, the usual expression that one would have expected to be used for 'the beginning'. Rashi pays attention to that this word does not appear alone in the Scriptures, but rather as a construct case supporting another noun, i.e. 'in the beginning of'. Therefore the meaning of the verse cannot be 'as the first thing', and Rashi reads the first verses together to mean: 'In the beginning of God's creating the heaven and the earth, the earth was without form and void,...'. Therefore, says Rashi, one cannot deduce from the Bible the order in which things were created on the first day. Rashbam⁶⁹, Rashi's grandson, goes further and explains, that the creation account is only a partial account and does not describe the whole of creation. The account of creation takes off at a time when the heavens and earth have already been created⁷⁰.

Abraham ibn Ezra (1089..1164), having a special interest in grammar, disagrees with Rashi and points out that there are actually cases where *reshit* is not used in a construct case. More remarkable is his treatment with the word '*bara*' (created). The

⁶⁷ The future is only potentially infinite, because when time passes, the past is continuously added to, but it does at any moment remain finite.

⁶⁸ Abbr. for Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitschak

⁶⁹ Abbr. for Samuel ben Meir

⁷⁰ Sarah Kamin, Rashbam's conception of the creation in light of the intellectual currents of his time, in *Studies in the Bible* (1986), *Scripta Hierosolymitana* Vol. XXXI

word had been said to mean exclusively 'to create out of nothing', but, he continues, in certain Biblical verses the word is actually used to mean 'to form something out of something',⁷¹. Then he moves on to draw a connection between the word ברא (to create) and ברה (to cut into form; to set a limit). This resembles the Midrashic theme of an expanding world to which the God sets a limit. Likewise Sefer Jetsira describes the sefirot as seals used by God to seal the extremes of the universe.

Moshe ben Nahman (1194..1270), also known as Nahmanides and Ramban, first gives attention to why is it at all necessary to include a description of creation in the Torah. This question had already been raised by Rashi, who had answered by quoting Midrash: to teach that God has created the world and can do with it as He pleases. Ramban probes deeper; he questions why was it necessary to raise the question. The question is legitimate because a description of creation is not necessary to teach us that God is the Creator, this is taught in several places in the Scriptures. For Ramban, creation is anyhow such a deep mystery as can never be fully understood by the human mind.

As to the meaning of *bereshit*, Ramban quotes opinions equating *reshit* with Torah and Israel and gives other Midrashic similes. He is not content with these explanations, though, and he introduces the new mystical symbolism of Kabbalah into his exegesis⁷². *Bereshit* teaches us that the world was created by means of ten sefirot, now understood in the meaning of divine powers, with *reshit* being a symbol for the sefira *Hokhma* (wisdom). He refrains however from giving a longer exposition of this doctrine.

After describing Rashi's and Ibn Ezra's positions on the literal meaning of the first verses, Ramban goes on to give his literal explanation:

"The Holy One, blessed be He, created everything out of complete nothingness. There is no other word in the Holy Language for bringing existence out of non-existence than *bara*. And there is nothing under the sun or above it to generate a beginning out of nothingness. He alone brought into being, out of complete and absolute nothingness, a very fine substance which is not corporeal but has power to become, to assume form, to proceed from potentiality into actuality, the first matter which the Greeks call *hyle*. After creating *hyle* He did not create anything, but formed and made, because from *hyle* he makes everything, by giving it forms and arranging them."⁷³

⁷¹ Gen 1:21, Gen 1:27, Isaiah 45:7

⁷² Ramban belonged to the early Kabbalistic school of Gerona, although he for the most part refrained from expounding Kabbalistic doctrine in his commentary on the Torah.

⁷³ Ramban, Commentary on the Torah, Gen 1: 1.

הקב"ה ברא כל הנבראים מאפיסה מוחלטת. ואין אצלנו בלשון הקדש בהוצאת יש מאין אלא לשון ברא. ואין כל הנעשה תחת השמש או למעלה, הווה מן האין התחלה ראשונה. אבל הוציא מן האפס הגמור המוחלט יסוד דק מאד, אין בו ממש, אבל הוא כוח ממציא, מוכן לקבל הצורה, ולצאת מן הכח אל הפועל, והוא החומר הראשון, נקרא ליונים היולי. ואחר ההיולי לא ברא דבר, אבל יצר ועשה, כי ממנו המציא הכל והלביש הצורות ותקן אותן.

This short text is very remarkable. It is not only a very strong statement in favour of creation out of nothing, it also manages to transform the Greek idea of uncreated first matter into a first created matter, consonant with Jewish theology. The language he uses is suffused by Aristotelian terminology: matter and form, potentiality and actuality. Ramban's commentary is remarkable as in it meet the many currents: theology, Midrash, Kabbalah and philosophy.

In Ramban's commentary one also encounters the idea of equating *tohu* and *bohu* with the form and matter of Greek philosophy, which had in a short time become a standard part of Jewish thought. The idea first appears in the philosophical work of Abraham bar Hiyya (d. 1136), as well as in the earliest Kabbalistic work, *Bahir*⁷⁴.

The genre of Torah commentary remains popular for centuries, and new commentaries are written or compiled, often building on earlier material so that in the end commentaries become rich antologies of material. The typical tone in this genre is that of midrash, sometimes bordering on the mystical, although Gersonides expounds his philosophical views in his Torah commentary, and Obadja Sforno's commentary also displays a rational vein.

Kabbalah

Kabbalah, which emerges on the 12th century, i.e. in the aftermath of Maimonidean philosophy, shows a clear mistrust in philosophy of the Aristotelian style. The issue is not so much the question of creation than that of the nature of God, most specifically the question of the knowledge of God. Even if the Jewish Aristotelians attempt to reconcile the God of revelation with the Unmoved Mover of the philosophy, at the end of the path was still a God very remote from his creation, hardly if at all conscious of the details of His creation.

The God of Bible and Midrash is a personal God, also present in this world, while theology and especially philosophy tend to emphasize a transcendent God. Kabbalah solves the problem between immanency and transcendency by differentiating between the transcendent God, *Ein Sof*⁷⁵, and *sefirot*, divine forces which correspond to his actions in this world. The concept of sefirot is, of course, taken from the *Sefer Yetsira*, but totally transformed.

A kabbalistic interpretation of creation as described in Gen. 1 obtains a new meaning. Behind the description of the creation of this universe lies what could even be called a theogony: a portrayal of the emanation of the sefirot out of the endless, inconceivable *Ein-Sof*. The creation of the material world loses in significance when overshadowed

⁷⁴ *Bahir*, section 2. The book *Bahir* is dated by G. Scholem to the second half of 12th century. See G. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (1987), pp. 62..63. See also J. Dan, *Gershom Scholem and the Mystical Dimension of Jewish History* (1988), pp. 130..131.

⁷⁵ *Ein Sof* literally means 'no end'. While it has come to mean 'Endless' especially in this technical meaning, it was not originally used as a noun; the term may have been extracted from a phrase such as *s 'ad ein sof* (endlessly).

by this cosmic drama: unfolding of layer after layer of divine forces, spiritual universes, a process at the very far end of which lies our universe.

The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* also undergoes a total transformation. The ‘nothing’, out of which the creation proceeds, is equated with nothing less than the transcendent God itself! The idea is not actually indigenous to Kabbalah. During a thousand years’ time until awakening of Kabbalah, Christian, Islamic and Jewish theologians had been formulating ideas of a negative theology to emphasize the utmost difference of God compared to the creation, His absolute independence. Negative theology means, in simple terms, denial of any attributes about God: God is not anything we can state about Him.

One step beyond the mere negative theology, which is about describing God, was taken in the 7th-8th centuries. Because God is beyond all human understanding, all human attributes either positive or negative, He is Nothing, the Nothing out of which the world is created. In Judaism, such ideas are presented by the neo-Platonist Isaac Israeli, and in Christianity by John Scotus Erigena, likewise a neo-Platonist. Now, *creatio ex nihilo* becomes *creatio ex Deo*, creation out of God. To rephrase Scholem, a full circle is closed: the theologians introduced the doctrine of *ex nihilo* to emphasize the total separation between God and the creation. Creation out of Nothing which is God himself then signifies a return to a more unified view of universe⁷⁶.

Technically, Kabbalah achieves this reinterpretation through a symbolic reading of the Scriptures, a process that Scholem has called ‘creative misunderstanding’⁷⁷. For instance, in Kabbalah the divine Nothing is called *Ayin*. The typical Hebrew expression for *creatio ex nihilo* is ‘*yesh me’ayin*’⁷⁸ (something out of nothing). We have already noted that ‘*reshit*’, beginning, is in the Jewish tradition equated with ‘*hokhma*’, wisdom. Kabbalistic exegesis takes a verse from the book of Job: “From where will you find wisdom?” and re-reads it “From *Ayin* will you find *Hokhma*”⁷⁹. *Ayin* is the hidden, inexplicable source of emanation, whereas *Hokhma* is the beginning of emanation, unfolding of the creative processes.

There are in total ten sefirot. The three highest sefirot are usually considered to form a triad, which represents the beginning of creation: the introduction of a will (Keter), the awakening of an overall idea (Hokhma) and its development into a detailed understanding (Binah). The remaining seven sefirot correspond to the seven days of creation, or actually the seven days of creation are the seven sefirot.

In the Zohar, the relation between the Ein-Sof and the upper sefirot is given special emphasis. The ‘beginning’ is compared to a point, through which the light of the Ein-Sof breaks through and through a process of emanation produces first the world of the divine forces, and finally the lower, material world.

⁷⁶ Scholem (1970) pp. 66-67.

⁷⁷ Scholem (1970), pp. 67-68; Scholem (1969) p. 102.

⁷⁸ It is instructive to note, however, that the medieval philosophical texts for the most part avoid the use of this expression, favoring expressions such as ‘*achar hahe’eder hagamur*’ (‘after a complete nonexistence’, see Samuel ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew translation of Guide of the Perplexed II:13) or ‘*lo midavar*’ (‘not from a thing’, see Yehuda ibn Tibbon’s translation of Saadya’s Emunot ve-deot, part 1, ch. 2).

⁷⁹ The Hebrew *me-ayin* can be read in two ways: ‘from where’ or ‘from *Ayin*’ (Nothing).

In the beginning of King's command, He made markings in the highest purity. A spark of darkness emerged from the most hidden of hidden, from the head of the endless, attached to the formless, tied as a circle, not white, not black, not red, not green, nor any color at all. Only when it received dimensions, did it shine with colour. Within the spark, a spring gushed forth, poured downwards in colours. Most hidden of hidden of the mystery of the endless, burst out, yet did not burst, the air from beyond comprehension, until a single point was shining, hidden and elevated. Beyond this point nothing is known, and therefore it is called reshit, the first command.⁸⁰

The Zohar is to a large extent a mystical midrash, which interprets Scripture in terms of the Kabbalistic symbolism. It does not, however, do this directly, and very seldom does it employ outright Kabbalistic terminology, such as the names of the sefirot, or the term 'sefira' itself. Instead, it introduces a symbolism of its own, where points, sparks, dark flames, springs, rivers and seas are used to describe the structure of the divine world.

Bereshit, said Rabbi Yodai, what does it mean? Bereshit means *behokhmah* (with Wisdom). This is the Wisdom that the world is sustained by, the entrance into highest hidden mysteries. Six immense, elevated extremities are engraved in it. Everything is generated out of it, out of it six sources, six rivers were made, to enter into the immense sea. Therefore בראשית (in the beginning) is to be read ברא שית (he created six), because the six were created from it, by the One that is not mentioned, who is hidden and unknown⁸¹.

Here, the Zohar starts off from the already familiar equation of 'beginning' with 'wisdom'. What it then implies is that within the sefirah of Hokhma, sources of the further creation are contained, in what is then emanated as the six sefirot of construction. To support this interpretation, the first word of the Torah is broken in two. Similarly the Hebrew words for 'in the beginning created God' ('*bereshit bara elohim*') are re-read to mean 'with wisdom He created *elohim*'. Wisdom is the symbol for Hokhma, the second sefira, whereas Elohim is associated with Bina, the third sefira.

The Zohar operates more on mythical images than theories of creation, although emanation seems to be the predominant view⁸². This view is not without problems, as the post-Zoharic kabbalistic literature attests. The theory of emanation does not allow the issue of creation to remain separated from other major theological questions. In the Kabbalah, therefore, creation becomes linked to the question of pantheism. If the sefirot are emanated out of God, are they actually of God's substance, or are they his instruments? Does the emanation really represent God's substance, outpouring from his hiddenness, or is it his created potencies that overflow in emanation? The idea of creation out of nothing which is within the Godhead is not without its problems, as the following excerpt from a 14th century Kabbalistic work indicates:

⁸⁰ Zohar I 15a

⁸¹ Zohar I 3b

⁸² I. Tishby: *Mishnat Ha-Zohar* I (1971), pp. 381..386

“And when someone says that they were not generated out of nothing, but a thing from a thing like it, or come to deny our holy and pure opinion that the world is created, or say that there was a primeval matter from which the upper world was generated, or that there was no such matter at all, but the cause of the causes alone,

if we answer him that there existed a primeval matter, we admit that something was co-eternal with God, which is denial of our faith,

and if we answer that there was but God alone who created all the worlds from his own essence, this would mean that his essence became matter, which is a denial of our faith likewise,

so what shall we answer to these questions, but say like God said to Job, ‘where were you when I formed the earth’...”⁸³

Much of the post-Zoharic Kabbalah is connected to this difficulty. The world is created by dynamic forces emanating from God, but still it cannot be accepted that the essence of God would become matter. One formulation of the problem is to ask whether Kabbalah is panteistic. Although one finds random formulae which would point to pantheism, Kabbalah in general is not pantheistic, though it can to some extent be labelled panenteistic. In other words, the idea that the world is in fact the God is clearly heretic, but one might say that the world is at least in a remote way contained within God.

Isaac Luria’s teachings in the 16th century brought about a revolution within Kabbalah. If God fills everything, it is not possible for anything else to exist. For the world to come to exist, God must have created an empty place. He did this by withdrawing Himself away from a central point, leaving a perfectly circular empty space. This process is called *tsimtsum*, withdrawal, and constitutes once again a re-interpretation of an older concept.

By the concept of withdrawal Luria could have avoided the pitfalls of pantheism. The empty space is a real nothing, in which the world can be created. He does not completely follow this way, however. From the endless divinity a ray of light proceeds into the empty space, producing circles of light, worlds upon worlds of luminous sefirot. Somewhere during the process a fault occurs. The sefirot acting as vessels to contain the flow of light are unable to hold the light and break. The husks of the vessels are hurled into the empty space, becoming the source of evil. Sparks of light remain, attached to the husks. An incomplete world is created, waiting to be repaired.

This short and oversimplified account hardly does justice to the complexities of the Lurianic Kabbalah. What we can see here, anyway, is a resurgence of myth. Parts of the myth are derived from the midrash, such as the concept of a world which is unable to endure, and yet other parts have their points of departure in the Zohar. The totality is new however. Despite its complexity, Lurianic Kabbalah grew immensely popular, and in this popularity we can see a triumph of mythical over the analytical.

⁸³ Sefer Ha-Peliah 62a

The post-Lurianic Kabbalah gradually finds its way back to more sober interpretations. This process is especially supported by the disaster caused by the failed Messiah Sabbatai Zvi in the mid-17th century. Radical theories are discouraged, and latter Kabbalists are careful to interpret *tsimtsum* metaphorically. The contraction did not happen, they say, in space as we know, because God is not material and does not occupy space⁸⁴. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, at the beginning of 18th century, discusses God's will instead of His nature⁸⁵. *Ein Sof* represents God's unlimited will, the totality of all possibilities. Within this unlimitedness, limited creatures are unable to exist. To create this world, God had to limit His will, and the sefirot are His limited will.

Likewise, with Luria and his latter day interpreters, the idea of *creatio ex Deo* becomes diluted. It is not acceptable that matter could be emanated out of a spirit. In the chain of emanation, there has to be a break, which is, once again, the *creatio ex nihilo* of theistic theology.

Throughout the Kabbalah, the sefirot are not only instruments of creation, they are also channels through which God sustains and governs the universe. In this way the universe becomes directly dependent on God's power, and the act of creation can be considered to be continuous. This idea is already present in the Talmud: "and (He) renews every day the work of creation"⁸⁶. In Kabbalah, the continuous existence is considered dependent on the continuous flow of emanation into or through the sefirot. If God would remove His power from the sefirot for but an instance, it is stated, they and the universe with them would cease to exist. In Habad Hasidism, whose doctrine is based on Kabbalah, the idea of continuous creation is very prominent⁸⁷.

Final remarks

We have in this article followed the historical development of views of creation in Judaism from the Talmudic times to the beginning of modern era. During this time period, a significant variety of views has been expressed, and it must be emphasized that these views have, at least in their time, been representative of mainstream Judaism, and generally left a lasting mark on subsequent Jewish thought.

In the development we have met a dialectic between myth and theology, as well as between revelation and reason. Theology has, at least to a large part, emerged out of a development based to some part on external influence but especially on external pressure. By external pressure I mean the need to be able to argue with heretics, already so common in Talmudic times, as it is taught: "(You should) know what to answer to an *apikoros* (unbeliever)"⁸⁸. In those times, there was a need to counter Gnostics, Zoroastrians and Hellenistic philosophers. In Saadya's time, the challenge was self-definition vis-a-vis Moslem and Christian theology. These processes provided Judaism with a rich mythology on the one hand and the beginnings of

⁸⁴ Joseph Ergas: Shomer Emunim part 2:34-43

⁸⁵ See for instance his Hoker u-Mekubal.

⁸⁶ bHagiga 12b; also Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer 50. The verse occurs also in a slightly extended form in the weekday morning prayer.

⁸⁷ See for instance Tanya, Sha'ar Ha-Yichud ch 2; Igeret Ha-Kodesh 11.

⁸⁸ mAvot 2:14

rational theology and philosophy on the other hand. Later development was spanned between these poles.

Although belief in creation out of nothing has, at least after Talmudic times, been dominant, there is no such thing as the normative Jewish doctrine. Halakha obliges one to believe in the existence of a Creator, and one can argue that this implies belief in actuality of the act of creation as well. Much room is then, however, left to the character of creation, whether it be *ex nihilo*, *ex Deo* or *ex materia prima*, to name the most prominent theories. Whereas Maimonides considered that pre-existent matter is unacceptable because it would mean that God is not all-powerful, Gersonides did not have this difficulty. The ideas of continuous creation and the existence of multiple, successive worlds have also been taught, especially within the Kabbalah. Jehudah Halevi states that it is not against the Torah to believe either in creation out of a hylic matter, or in a succession of created worlds⁸⁹. Maimonides does not include belief in creation as one of his famous Thirteen Principles of Faith, though some others do in their attempts to formulate Jewish dogma⁹⁰.

⁸⁹ Jehudah Halevi: Kuzari 1:67

⁹⁰ Kellner (1986) p. 213-217

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