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Creatio ex Nihilo and Romans 4.17 in Context

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Rom 4.17d is often read as referring to creation, perhaps even *creatio ex nihilo*. Others argue that this doctrine was not yet conceptually available. After exploring what 'nothing' means in similar phrases in Paul's ancient context (2 Macc 7.28 and Philo), the first conclusion is that if Rom 4.17d refers to creation then Paul's 'nothings' most likely do not refer to an absolute *nihil*. However, after exploring Rom 4.17 in the context of Paul's argument, the final conclusion is that in Rom 4.17d Paul does present absolute 'nothings', though in God's speech to Abraham, not at creation. Paul's theology encompasses God's authority and causation *ex nihilo*.

Keywords: creation, *creatio ex nihilo*, Romans 4.17, Philo, 2 Maccabees, Abraham

In Rom 4.17 (RSV) Paul refers to God 'calling into existence the things that do not exist'. Many see *creatio ex nihilo* in this statement. Others deny even the possibility of such a theory within Paul's ancient context. This article addresses how this doctrine and text relate, and the guiding question is this: *What exactly does Paul mean by 'the things that do not exist'?* The answer, in conjunction with a consideration of how Paul presents God's relationship to such 'nothingness', will help us responsibly relate the doctrine to the text.

Scholars have related *creatio ex nihilo* to Rom 4.17 and other early Jewish texts in diametrically opposed ways, so the stage must first be set. Then a careful treatment of 'nothing' in select texts from Paul's ancient Jewish context will help us establish possible and probable interpretations of non-existence without overstepping the evidence. Thirdly, and most importantly, being precise with regard to Paul's own language and logic is crucial for grasping the Pauline 'nothing' and God's relationship to it. This treatment of Rom 4.17 within its religious/historical and epistolary contexts will help us rightly relate the text to *creatio ex nihilo*.

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1. Setting the Scholarly Scene

The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* posits that 'God created the world out of nothing – from no pre-existent matter, no space or time'.[1] Two basic types of creation can be distinguished here: creation *ex nihilo* (from absolute nothingness) and creation *ex materia* (from material, or matter). The latter is clearly exhibited in Paul's scripture: God created the firmament *ex* water (Gen 1) and Adam *ex* dust (Gen 2). God's creation of Adam *ex materia* is important for Paul's anthropology and Christology (1 Cor 15.45–7). Does Paul think God also created the water and the dust *ex nihilo*?

For some, Paul's language in Rom 4.17 demonstrates God's *creatio* in general.[2] Käsemann claims that Paul's wording is 'by no means unclear': it is 'inconceivable' that this text refers to anything other than creation.[3] Many understand 'things that *do not exist*' (τὰ μὴ ὄντα) as a specific reference to creation *ex nihilo*.[4] Cranfield has 'little doubt' that such is the case.[5] Where scholars 'go' with this reading of Rom 4.17 can be very different, of course. Becker recognises Paul's connection between creation and resurrection in 1 Cor 15 and imports his *creatio ex nihilo* reading of Rom 4.17 into Paul's resurrection theology: Paul must espouse *resurrectio ex nihilo*; God does not need 'left-overs' to initiate resurrection; he leaves the corpses – i.e. 'Adam's entourage' – in the grave and crafts new bodies from nothing.[6] Wright agrees that Paul embraces *creatio ex nihilo* in

1 C. Cogliati, 'Introduction', *Creation and the God of Abraham* (ed. D. B. Burrell, C. Cogliati, J. M. Soskice, W. R. Stoeger; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 1.

2 W. Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, vol. i (New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980) 158; cf. S. Chester, *Conversion at Corinth: Perspectives on Conversion in Paul's Theology and the Corinthian Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2003) 77–9; E. Adams, 'Paul's Story of God and Creation: The Story of How God Fulfils His Purposes in Creation', *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (ed. B. W. Longenecker; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 35; B. Witherington, *Paul's Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 233.

3 E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 122–3.

4 So N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, vol. i (London: Fortress, 2013) 640–1; H. Schwarz, *Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 168; P. Haffner, *Mystery of Creation* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1995) 47; B. Byrne, *Romans* (SP 6; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1996) 159–60; P. Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 74; J. Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (NTC; London: SCM, 1989) 132; J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans*, vol. i (WBC 38; Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988) 236–7. For more advocates, see P. Copan and W. L. Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004) 75–8.

5 C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. i (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975) 244.

6 J. Becker, *Die Auferstehung Jesu Christi nach dem Neuen Testament: Ostererfahrung und Osterverständnis im Urchristentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007) 165–8. Becker's method of importing Rom 4 into 1 Cor 15 is unsound and unnecessary. Regardless of what Paul

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Rom 4.17,[7] but he considers *resurrectio ex nihilo* 'simply unthinkable': Paul would not have conceived of graves remaining full at the resurrection.[8]

Scholars rightly root Paul's statement within his religious/historical context. Other Jewish writers used similar language of 'things that do not exist' in cosmogonies. Dunn explains that 'belief that God created *ex nihilo*' is 'distinctively Jewish'.[9] He demonstrates this with 2 Macc 7.28 and 'Philo regularly', among other texts, even suggesting that in Rom 4.17 Paul is echoing Philo's *Spec.* 4.187.[10] There is a notable scholarly pedigree to the notion that Paul's pithy confession of *creatio ex nihilo* nestles naturally among other references to the same idea in a number of ancient Jewish texts – especially 2 Macc 7.28 and Philo's *Spec.* 4.187.[11]

Other scholars caution that such language of 'nothingness' would not have referred to absolute nothingness. In a landmark study (though preceded by

means in Rom 4.17, 1 Cor 15 clearly shows which aspect of God's creative activity Paul means to apply to resurrection: God's intentionality and ability to craft diverse fleshes, bodies and glories. Paul does not refer to 'from what', except Adam's 'from dust'-ness. See J. Worthington, *Creation in Paul and Philo: The Beginning and Before* (WUNT II/317; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011) 180–5, 191–5.

7 N. T. Wright, 'The Letter to the Romans', NIB, vol. X (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002) 498.

8 N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 314, 335.

9 J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 40 n. 59. Byrne, *Romans*, also lists Wis 11.25; *Jos. Asen.* 8.9; Philo, *Op.* 81; *Mig.* 183; *Her.* 36. See also *2 Apoc. Bar.* 21.4; 48.8.

10 Ibid. Cf. Byrne, *Romans*, 154, 159–60.

11 Treatment of 2 Macc 7.28 as *creatio ex nihilo* can be traced to Origen's *In Iohannem* 1.17.103 and *De principiis* 2.1.5 (J. Goldstein, *II Maccabees* (AB 41; Garden City: Doubleday, 1983) 307) and Clement's *Stromata* 5.90.1 (N. Janowitz, '"You Are Gods": Multiple Divine Beings in Late Antique Jewish Theology', *With Letters of Light: Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Early Jewish Apocalypticism, Magic, and Mysticism* (ed. D. V. Arbel and A. A. Orlov; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011) 358 and n. 23). See also J. Soskice, '*Creatio ex nihilo*: Its Jewish and Christian foundations', 24–39 (see 33) and E. McMullin, 'Creation *ex nihilo*: Early History', *Creation and the God of Abraham*, 11–23 (see 16; note his caution); D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 282; K. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture NIV Text* (The New American Commentary 1A; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996) 141 n. 117; J. Polkinghorne, *Reason and Reality* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1991) 72; Ziesler, *Romans*, 132; Cranfield, *Romans*, 245 n. 1; G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. I (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 142; J. Pelikan, 'Creation and Causality in the History of Christian Thought', *Evolution after Darwin*, vol. III: *Issues in Evolution* (ed. S. Tax and C. Callender; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) 34; F. J. Leenhardt, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary* (London: Lutterworth, 1957) 123; J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1910) 15. Copan and Craig, *Creation out of Nothing*, 97–100 list more.

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Barbour),[12] May claims that *creatio ex nihilo* was not even a cognitive option for Jewish and Christian writers, perhaps until the second century CE and in response to Gnostic assertions that matter was contrary to God.[13] Aristotle, following thinkers such as Parmenides, had fixed a philosophical standard: absolute 'non-being' is metaphysically absurd; *nothing* comes from non-being.[14] Regarding Paul's ancient context, therefore, we must carefully distinguish absolute from relative non-existence.[15] Kister, representing a growing majority, concludes like May (though in a more nuanced way) that 'the things are not considered *existent* before they are formed, but this does not necessarily mean that the author believed in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in the strict sense'.[16]

May and others have not gone unchallenged. Copan critiques May's thesis on the grounds that it lacks detailed exegesis of important texts, including Rom 4.17:

> [I]f properly done, sound biblical exegesis refutes the notion that creation out of nothing is a mere theological invention. For instance, Rom 4:17 (where God is

12 I. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 384. Cf. id., *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997) 201.

13 G. May, *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994; original *Schöpfung aus dem Nichts* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1978)); D. Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon* (AB 43; Garden City: Doubleday, 1979) 38–40; Goldstein, *II Maccabees*, 307. Winston (*Wisdom*, 39–40) supports his claim by pointing to Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* 5 and Theophilus, *Ad Autolycum* 2.4, 10 (ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων τὰ πάντα ἐποίησεν … τρόπῳ τινὶ ὕλην γενητήν, ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγονυῖαν).

14 P. Studtmann, 'Aristotle's Categories', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed. E. N. Zalta; Summer 2014), available at http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/aristotle-categories/; J. Palmer, 'Parmenides', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed. E. N. Zalta; Summer 2012), available at http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/parmenides/.

15 H. Wolfson, *Philo*, vol. I (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962) 100–10.

16 M. Kister, '*Tohu wa-Bohu*, Primordial Elements and *Creatio ex Nihilo*', *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 14 (2007) 229–56, at 245 (emphasis original). So also M. Bockmuehl, '*Creatio ex Nihilo* in Palestinian Judaism and Early Christianity', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65.3 (2012) 253–70, at 258; M. Niehoff *et al.*, 'Philo', *Early Judaism: A Comprehensive Overview* (ed. J. J. Collins and D. C. Harlow; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) 270; R. Radice, 'Philo's Theology and Theory of Creation', *The Cambridge Companion to Philo* (ed. A. Kamesar; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 144–5; D. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria: On the Creation of the Cosmos according to Moses. Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Philo of Alexandria Commentary Series 1; Leiden: Brill, 2001) 152–3; D. Fergusson, *The Cosmos and the Creator: An Introduction to the Theology of Creation* (London: SPCK, 1998) 12; R. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and the Bible* (CBQMS 26; Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1994) 141; R. Clifford and J. J. Collins, 'Introduction: The Theology of Creation Traditions', *Creation in the Biblical Traditions* (ed. R. J. Clifford and J. J. Collins; BQMS 24; Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1992) 13; F. Young, 'Creatio ex Nihilo: A Context for the Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44.2 (1991) 147–8; J. Goldstein, 'Creation ex Nihilo: Recantations and Restatements', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 38 (1987) 187 (cf. id., *II Maccabees*, 307).

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> said to call into being things that are not) … May simply writes off as fitting in with other statements of hellenistic Judaism – statements that *seem* to affirm absolute creation out of nothing but are actually only asserting belief in world-formation.[17]

Copan is right in one way: more careful exegesis of Paul's context and language in Rom 4.17 will help discern the proper relationship between *creatio ex nihilo* and 'things that do not exist'. However, the outcome of such an exegesis will not be what either Copan or May have envisioned.

2. 'Nothing' in Paul's Early Jewish Context

'Nothing' in ancient cosmogonies typically conveys something that is present and that will begin 'existing' (i.e. as a beautiful and orderly item or system) when manipulated by God. Below I will demonstrate how 'nothing' in 2 Macc 7 and Philo's *Special Laws* is relative, not absolute. However, as a caution against overreaction I will also establish that an absolute *nihil* was still a cognitive option.

2.1 *2 Macc 7.28*

A Jewish mother pleads with her tortured son: 'look up into heaven and earth and, after seeing all things in them, know that it was *not out of existing things* that God made them' (οὐκ ἐξ ὄντων ἐποίησεν αὐτὰ ὁ θεός).[18] Since 'the race of humans came about in the same manner', she begs him: 'make death welcome so that in the day of mercy I may receive you back' (7.28–9). God's manner of creating 'them' (αὐτά) – i.e. 'all things' within heaven and earth (τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς πάντα), specifically including 'the race of humans' – was 'not out of existing things', and this undergirds her hope in God's power to resurrect a destroyed body.

As with Rom 4.17, it has appeared obvious to many that 2 Macc 7.28a refers to *creatio ex nihilo*.[19] For Soskice this passage 'seems to rule out any notion of the God of Abraham as a demiurge moulding pre-existing matter'.[20] However, it does not do so. If Gen 1 and 2 influenced the author's cosmogonic theory, then not only did earth and water 'produce' some of 'all things within heaven and earth' by God's power (Gen 1), but beasts and humans were specifically

17 P. Copan, 'Is *Creatio Ex Nihilo* a Post-Biblical Invention? An Examination of Gerhard May's Proposal', *Trinity Journal* 17.1 (Spring 1996) 77–93, 87.

18 Some manuscripts invert οὐκ and ἐξ, making this a positive statement ('it was out of not-existing things') rather than a negative one. I have opted for the reading that appears to be more challenging for my own conclusions.

19 See n. 11 above.

20 Soskice, '*Creatio ex nihilo*', 31. Haffner claims, 'This affirmation [from 2 Macc 7.28] is not just an isolated case but rather expresses the climate of thought which was present in Israel even earlier on' (*Mystery*, 46).

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moulded out of earth (Gen 2), not *ex nihilo*. In 2 Macc 7.23 the mother speaks about the God who 'formed' (ὁ πλάσας) 'the genesis of man' (ἀνθρώπου γένεσιν) and gave 'the spirit/breath and life' (τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ τὴν ζωήν).[21] This echoes Gen 2.7, where the man's genesis was in dust that was 'formed' (ἔπλασεν) – *ex materia* – and infused with the 'breath of life' (πνοὴν ζωῆς).

In 7.28 the mother again mentions this 'race of humans', specifying that humanity's genesis was 'in the manner' (οὕτω) of the macro-creation. In this one speech the 'manner' of cosmogenesis was 'not out of existing things' (οὐκ ἐξ ὄντων), the 'manner' of anthropogenesis was to be 'formed' (as in Gen 2.7), and the manners are said to be the same. The micro level mimics the macro. 'From dust' is conceptually parallel to 'not from existing things'. Dust is not yet human, living or formed – it does not yet 'exist'. Even if 2 Macc considers dust to have been created *ex nihilo* before being moulded into humanity (which it never claims), the specific language of 'not existing' is comparable to an ontic something that is not what it will be until divine formation.[22] 2 Macc 7 does not refer to *creatio ex nihilo*.[23]

2.2 Philo's *Special Laws* 4.186–7

In *Special Laws* 4.186–7, which some believe Paul 'echoes' in Rom 4.17,[24] Philo shows the Creator as a model for earthly rulers, explaining:

> [θεῷ] δύναμις μέν ἐστι δρᾶν ἑκάτερα [*sc.* τό τε εὖ καὶ τὸ χεῖρον], βούλεται δὲ μόνα τὰ ἀγαθά. μηνύει δ' ἡ τοῦ κόσμου γένεσίς τε καὶ διοίκησις. τὰ γὰρ μὴ ὄντα ἐκάλεσεν εἰς τὸ εἶναι, τάξιν ἐξ ἀταξίας, καὶ ἐξ ἀποίων ποιότητας, καὶ ἐξ ἀνομοίων ὁμοιότητας, καὶ ἐξ ἑτεροτήτων ταὐτότητας, καὶ ἐξ ἀκοινωνήτων καὶ ἀναρμόστων κοινωνίας καὶ ἁρμονίας, καὶ ἐκ μέν ἀνισότητος ἰσότητα, ἐκ δέ σκότους φῶς ἐργασάμενος. ἀεὶ γάρ ἐστιν ἐπιμελὲς αὐτῷ καὶ ταῖς εὐεργέτισιν αἰτοῦ δυνάμεσι τὸ πλημμελὲς τῆς χείρονος οὐσίας μεταποιεῖν καὶ μεθαρμόζεσθαι πρὸς τὴν ἀμείνω.
>
> [God] has the power to do each [*sc.* either good or evil], but he chooses only the good. The genesis and arrangement of the world shows this, for *the things that do not exist* [τὰ μὴ ὄντα] *he called* [ἐκάλεσεν] *into being* [εἰς τὸ εἶναι]: working order out of disorder, and distinctive qualities out of things which had no distinctive qualities, and similarities out of things dissimilar, and identity out of things which were different, and intercommunion and harmony out of things which had previously no communion and no harmony, and equality out of inequality, and light out of darkness. For he and his beneficent powers are always careful to alter the make of the faultiness of the worse stuff and to correct [it] towards the better.

21 The final clause immediately refers to resurrecting activity, but πάλιν ('again') shows that this was also God's original creative work.

22 Contra Copan and Craig, *Creation from Nothing*, 98, who confuse origin and manner in their discussion of this.

23 So May, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, 6–7; Kister, '*Tohu wa-Bohu*', 245.

24 Dunn, *Theology*, 40 n. 59; Byrne, *Romans*, 154, 159–60.

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As with 2 Macc 7, many assume that Philo's statement, which uses the same wording as Paul in Rom 4.17 (τὰ μὴ ὄντα), shows a stream of *creatio ex nihilo* thought in early Judaism.[25] Philonic scholars have often debated Philo's belief about matter's origin,[26] though Niehoff recently posited: 'Most scholars today recognize that, according to Philo, God's creation of the world was not *ex nihilo*. Living in an age when this notion did not yet exist, Philo rather assumed that God's creation consists in actively shaping the preexistent, passive material.'[27]

In *Spec.* 4.186–7 Philo assumes a correlation between 'non-being' and matter. Weiss observed that here Philo does not *explicitly* claim that 'non-being' is 'matter' – as Plotinus would, a difference that may not be insignificant – but that Philo's 'non-being' is still not absolute.[28] Indeed, Philo's participle 'working' (ἐργασάμενος) elucidates his bald indicative 'called' (ἐκάλεσεν) with seven sets of 'X *out of* non-X', which means that God's kingly 'call' brought 'the things not existing' – e.g. chaos, disharmony, inequality – 'into being' – e.g. order, harmony, equality.[29] Philo summarises this point by relabelling 'things that do not exist' as fault-filled 'worse stuff' (χείρονος οὐσίας) – not absolute *nihil*.

2.3 *A Caution about 'Nothing'*

Even though these 'distinctively Jewish' statements about creation from 'nothing' in *Spec.* 4.186–7 and 2 Macc 7.28 do not entail *creatio ex nihilo*, conclusions about Paul's context must not overreach the data. For example, the language of 'nothing' *could* carry an absolute sense, even for Philo. In *Somn.* 1.63–64 God himself is surrounded by 'nothing' (μηδενός). In *Plant.* 5–7 'emptiness' (κενόν) and 'nothing' (μηδέν) are 'outside' the cosmos after God used 'all material from everywhere' (πᾶσαν τὴν δι᾽ ὅλων ὕλην), not excluding 'even the smallest bit' (μηδὲ τοῦ βραχυτάτου). Philo's cosmogonic theory in *De plantatione* is 'matter'-shaping, but he can also conceive of an absolute lack of matter (ὕλη), calling it 'nothing'.

25 See n. 11 above.

26 See Worthington, *Creation in Paul and Philo*, 101–3 and nn. 110–19; Janowitz, 'Multiple Divine Beings', 358–60; Runia, *On the Creation*, 152; Winston, *Wisdom*, 40; id., 'Philo's Theory of Creation', *Philo of Alexandria: The Contemplative Life, Giants, and Selections* (New York: SPCK, 1981) 7–21; P. Frick, *Divine Providence in Philo of Alexandria* (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 77; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999) 91; P. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy: Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 167.

27 Niehoff *et al.*, 'Philo', 270. In 1981 Winston rejected the idea that Philo advocates creation *ex nihilo* but also suggested there is no need to postulate pre-existing matter: 'God by thinking eternally brings matter into being and simultaneously orders it' ('Philo's Theory', 16–18 and n. 38). See Philo's *Prov.* 6–8.

28 H.-F. Weiss, *Untersuchungen zur Kosmologie des hellenistischen und palästinischen Judentums* (Texte und Untersuchungen 97; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1966) 60–2. Cf. Käsemann, *Romans*, 122.

29 D. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (Philosophia Antiqua 44; Leiden: Brill, 1986) 146.

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Furthermore, a text from Cicero (106–43 BCE) – preserved in Lactantius' *Institutiones divinae* 2.3.2 – provides a glimpse into a relevant debate. According to Cicero,

> it is not probable that the material substance from which all things are derived (*materiam rerum unde orta sunt omnia*) was created by divine providence … As therefore the carpenter when about to build a house does not himself make timber but employs that which has been prepared, and the same with the modeller and his wax, so your divine providence ought to have been supplied with matter not made by itself but given to it ready-made.[30]

Cicero's defence of un-created matter against the alternative suggests it was possible, even 50–100 years before Philo, to envision a creator creating his material before then building with it.[31] Positing that Philo lived 'in an age' when the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* 'did not yet exist'[32] extends beyond the evidence. Absolute *nihil* was a conceptual possibility in Philo's (and Paul's) day, and perhaps even *creatio ex nihilo*.

With this caution registered, it is still the case that God's creation from 'not existing things' is not *creatio ex nihilo* in these samples from Paul's ancient context. If in Rom 4.17 Paul is 'echoing' the Philonic or Maccabean idea about creation, his own wording *probably* refers to creation *ex materia*, not *ex nihilo*. Paul's 'nothing' *could* be absolute, but with no contextual cues to suggest that he means something different from Philo or 2 Maccabees, to argue so would take special pleading. Indeed, Paul uses 'the things not existing' (τὰ μὴ ὄντα) in 1 Cor 1.28 to refer to phenomena that are very much present, even social.[33] Yet before anyone rests secure with the idea of *creatio ex materia* in Rom 4.17, we must note that Paul is not referring to creation – at all.

3. 'Nothing' in the Context of Paul's Scriptural Argument in Rom 4.17

In Rom 4.17 Paul is interpreting Scripture. His text is from Genesis, but not from chapters 1–2. Paul is not referring to creation. Translations obscure this by displaying Paul's wording in a manner more like Philo's than his own:

Spec. 4.187	τὰ μὴ ὄντα ἐκάλεσεν	εἰς	τὸ εἶναι
	the things that do not exist he called	into	existence
Rom 4.17d RSV	calls into existence the things that do not exist		
Rom 4.17d	καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα	ὡς	ὄντα
	calls the things that do not exist	as	existing

30 H. Rackham, *Cicero – De Natura Deorum* (LCL; London, 1967) 385.

31 Janowitz, 'Multiple Divine Beings', 360; Kister, '*Tohu wa-Bohu*', n. 83.

32 Niehoff, 'Philo', 270.

33 'Those lacking existence suffer primarily the non-existence of social exclusion' (Chester, *Conversion*, 79).

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Paul's and Philo's language of 'call' and 'nothingness' may be identical, but they are not saying the same thing. Moo observes:

> There can be no doubt that Paul's language is quite close to this Jewish *creatio ex nihilo* tradition [exemplified in 2 Macc 7.28 and Philo's *Spec.* 4.187] and that an allusion to either God's general creative power or his spiritual creative power would not be out of place in this context. However, if this were Paul's purpose, it is surprising that he speaks of God's calling things '*as though*' they existed; we would have expected him to say 'calling things *into* being.'[34]

While talk of a 'Jewish *creatio ex nihilo* tradition' might be inaccurate, and especially if referencing 2 Macc 7.28 and *Spec.* 4.187, Moo's point is correct: 'as though they existed' (ὡς ὄντα) is unexpected and even confusing if Paul wants to refer to creation.[35]

Cranfield supports a creational reading, admits that ὡς ὄντα poses a problem, but does not think it is 'insuperable': 'The ὡς may perhaps be explained as expressing consequence (see LSJ, s.v., B.III.1)'[36] – i.e. 'so as to' or 'so that': 'calling the things not existing *so as* to exist'. However, since Paul does not use ὡς with the subjunctive, infinitive or optative (LSJ B.ii.1–3, B.iii.1), but rather with a participle, consequential or final meanings are unlikely.[37] Cranfield explains that 'a participle [is] used instead of the infinitive or indicative in order to express vividly the immediacy of the result'.[38] But using ὡς before a participle – and particularly with participles in oblique cases (LSJ C.i.2) as in Rom 4.17 – suggests treating the object comparatively, 'as if' the object is something other than it is. For example, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* 672 'they speak of us *as if* [we are] ruined' (λέγουσιν ἡμᾶς ὡς ὀλωλότας). Paul's syntax is similar to this: 'calling the things that do not exist *as if* [they do] exist' (καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα).

In a footnote Cranfield concedes: 'Otherwise [ὡς] might be explained as comparative', but he quickly adds that 'calling' (καλοῦντος) should 'still [be]

34 Moo, *Romans*, 282 (emphasis added). The creational reading of Rom 4.17 has not gone unchallenged (even though challengers are in the minority): e.g. T. Schreiner, *Romans* (BECNT 6; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998) 237; L. Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 209; J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (NTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 146–7; W. Sanday and A. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1896) 107.

35 Cf. Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, 113.

36 Cranfield, *Romans*, 244. Cf. M. Zerwick and M. Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament: Epistles, Apocalypse* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1979): Paul is 'not speaking of non-existent things as if they existed, but *calling* them *into existence*' (468; emphasis original), followed by Chester, *Conversion*, 78 n. 88.

37 Moo, *Romans*, 282 n. 67, citing BAGD as well as LSJ.

38 Cranfield, *Romans*, 244.

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understood to denote God's creative call'; thus 'God, in *calling into being* what does not exist, addresses His creating word to it, thus in a sense treating it *as though* it already existed'.[39] This would mean that 'into being' is inherent in Paul's word 'calling', which is not the case. Καλέω is general and flexible and must be supplemented with ideas of causation or creativity by context and/or additional phrases. Philo describes the world as 'called into existence' (*Spec.* 4.187; cf. *Jos. Asen.* 8.9), but the context clarifies that Philo means 'call' creatively, and supplementing 'into existence' makes this explicit. Bar 3.34 mentions God's 'call' to light at creation, but the context makes cosmogony obvious. Wis 11.25 considers creation to have been 'called by' God, and the context clarifies this as creational. In Rom 4, however, the context does not suggest a creational sense to 'call'. Context certainly does not rule it out, as we saw Moo had noted, but neither does it demand or suggest it. But Paul's addition 'calling *as though*' does seek to clarify what 'calling' means, and Cranfield's further supplement of 'calling *into existence* as though they existed' inserts more theology into Paul's pithy wording than it can bear. And there is no reason to think that it needs to bear such theology. There is a different interpretation of 4.17 that perfectly fits Paul's precise syntax as well as context.

In terms of context, Paul's phrase relates to God's word not at creation but to Abraham. In 4.17–21 Paul quotes two divine statements to Abraham: God promises, 'In the manner [of the innumerable stars] shall your seed be' (Gen 15.5); God states a fact, 'I have made you father of many nations' (Gen 17.5). God's word to Abraham is on Paul's mind.

In terms of syntax and logic, Paul's 'calls … as existing' unveils God's prerogative to make the seemingly false statement to Abraham in Gen 17.5. Abraham's situation was dire: first, he *could not* have children; second, he *did not* have children. So how could God rightly say, 'I *have* made you father'? In Rom 4.17, immediately after quoting Gen 17.5, Paul mentions two divine qualities that directly answer his understanding of Abraham's situation. First, Abraham had a 'corpsified body' (σῶμα νενεκρωμένον) and Sarah a 'corpse-like womb' (τὴν νέκρωσιν τῆς μήτρας) (Rom 4.19), but God is one who 'makes alive the corpses' (ζῳοποιοῦντος τοὺς νεκρούς) (4.17c). Second, Abraham had no nations existing at the time[40] – not a single child with Sarah,[41] let alone a whole nation or the 'many' that God had perfectively called 'established' (τέθεικα) – but God is also one who 'calls things that do not exist as though they exist' (4.17d).

39 Cranfield, *Romans*, 244 n. 4 (emphasis added).

40 Without specifying this situation explicitly, Paul gives evidence of his knowledge of Abraham's nation-less situation when writing that Abraham trusted that he '*would* become' (εἰς τὸ γενέσθαι) such a father (4.18) – i.e. he was not yet.

41 Abraham had Ishmael already, but Gen 17 asserts *these* 'many nations' will be through Sarah – which Paul assumes by discussing Sarah and not Hagar in Rom 4.

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So what exactly does Paul mean by τὰ μὴ ὄντα? And in what way does it 'not exist'? (Once 'nothing' is defined precisely, adequate sense can be made of how Paul views God's *relationship* to it.) First, τὰ μὴ ὄντα are a plurality. Second, they cannot refer to primordial nothingness since Paul is not referring to creation. Third, someone may suggest that God later begins to enact his promise of 'many nations' by forming Isaac then Jacob/Israel out of the bodies or raw substance of Abraham and Sarah. If this were Paul's intention here, 'things not existing' might refer to Abraham's sperm – an ontic something of relative nothingness. But Rom 4 makes it clear that Paul considers Gentiles to be part of the 'many nations' (πολλῶν ἐθνῶν, neuter plural) that God called 'existing' (ὄντα, neuter plural) at a moment when they were 'not existing' (τὰ μὴ ὄντα, neuter plural). And that is the answer: τὰ μὴ ὄντα are 'many nations'. They are not pre-shaped stuff, as if God manipulated something physical into these many nations. In Rom 4.17 Paul is not even referring to God's activity of causing τὰ μὴ ὄντα to exist, but rather to what God called them when they did not yet exist: established, existing.

The type of 'non-existence' is absolute, not relative. The many nations 'do not exist' in time and space – not a little, not in seed-form. There is no material substance 'out of which' their existence will later come. In Rom 4.17d Paul writes about God relating to an absolute zero, to *nihil* in its full sense.

4. Conclusion

This construal of Rom 4.17 captures Paul's precise language and the immediate context of his argument in a manner sensitive to his religious/historical context. His 'non-existent things' refer to 'many nations'. At that point in Abraham and Sarah's experience it was not that the nations were present but less than what they would become, and therefore relatively 'non-existent'. They were absolutely *nihil*. So what of God's relationship to *that* 'nothingness'? In 4.17 Paul's reference is not to God's *activity* of bringing the many nations into being, but to God's *claim* in Gen 17.5 to have already accomplished it. Thus the first aspect of God's relationship to *nihil* is his ultimate prerogative to speak, call, label and claim regarding it just as he wishes. Moving forward in Paul's argument, however, he *does* refer to God's activity: Abraham trusted that 'God was able *to do* (ποιῆσαι) what he had promised' (4.21). For Paul, what gives God's shocking and seemingly un-true 'call' to Abraham's situation the power, truthfulness and trustworthiness it deserves is that God can and does *cause* what he claims. In this sense Paul believes not only in God's authority *ex nihilo* but also in God's causation *ex nihilo* – in its fullest sense.

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