

TOHU WABOHU IN GENESIS 1, 2. KABBALISTIC, PATRISTIC AND MODERN EXEGESIS

GRIGORE DINU MOȘ*

(BHS) וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ
אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:

ABSTRACT. The study presents the views of some important representatives of the Jewish, patristic and contemporary exegesis of the *tohu wabohu* (Genesis 1, 2). The exegesis of the expression is important because it raises, in the context of the first two verses of Genesis, the question of the way in which God created the world: from nothing or from a pre-existing chaos. I found many translations and interpretations of *tohu wabohu*: chaos (Jeremiah's understanding, Jer 4: 23-26), balance between the infinite creativity of God and the limited receptivity of the pure space (Kabbalistic view), invisible and unformed (LXX and the Greek Fathers), waste, void, desert, chaos, nothingness, formless, empty (most of the contemporary exegetes). The various interpretations of the concept were usually determined by the more general view of Genesis 1: the descriptive view; the chronological view, the gap theory, the framework view or the dynamic ontological view; the liturgical, poetic and spiritual view. I found Westermann's and Brueggemann's hermeneutical positions accurate, honest and convincing: we do not need to choose between creation from nothing and creation from a pre-existing chaos, because the Hebrew text is in fact richer if we ignore or overlook this conceptual limitation. Based on its apophatic vision, Orthodox theology can accept these hermeneutics, because the conceptual "antinomy" can be a way to overcome the limits of human reason. Ontologically speaking, the primordial nothingness or abyss could be understood as the infinite "kenosis" of the absolute and infinite Logos. This can be the ultimate antinomy, the last limit of thought, because when we affirm the infinite "kenosis" of the divine Logos, we must affirm the absolutely affirmative and "enstatic" character of God, who admits no negation and no change within Him. I also appreciated the interpretations which accepted the idea of a primordial chaos created by God, because these interpretations allow a dialogue between the biblical cosmology and the scientific cosmology; at the same time, they offer many possibilities for application in the

* Lecturer, Babes-Bolyai University, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Cluj-Napoca. E-mail: grigoredinumos@yahoo.com.

spiritual life and for improving faith. Why did God create the world in this way? Because only in a world that has degrees of indeterminacy in its inner structure can a real freedom be possible for human beings.

Keywords: *tohu wabohu*, waste, void, formless, chaos, creation, indeterminacy

Introduction

“*Tohu wabohu* (תהו ובהו) is a Biblical Hebrew phrase found in the Book of Genesis 1:2 that describes the condition of the earth before God said “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3). A precise translation of the phrase is difficult, since it is a Hebrew wordplay. [...] It is usually translated as “waste and void,” “formless and empty,” or “chaos and desolation”¹.

Numerous interpretations of this phrase were made from different linguistic sources, with diverse cultural backgrounds and different theological implications. In particular, the exegesis of this phrase in the context of the first two verses of Genesis raises the question of the way in which God created the world. Did He create the world from nothing or from a pre-existing chaotic matter? Was this formless matter created as a first step to the creation of the cosmos? If so, why did He need this stage of creation? Or does Genesis 1, 2 simply convey a literary image, a pure conceptual contrast, an anticipative non-ontological correlation that highlights the creative power of God and its final purpose, and, therefore, has no meaning within itself, but only in connection with the following verses in which God reveals the cosmos in its plenitude and perfection? The aim of this study is to present the views of some important authors who are representative of Kabbalistic, patristic and modern exegesis, and to discover possible answers to the questions above.

(BHS) וְהָאָרֶץ הִיתָה תְהוֹ וְבִהוּ וַחֲשֵׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:

BHT: wəhāʾāreš hāyṯā^h ṭōhū wābōhū wəḥōšek ʿal-pənē ṭəhōm wərū^h ʿēlōhīm mərəḥēpēt ʿal-pənē hammāyim

ἢ δὲ γῆ ἦν ἀόρατος καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος καὶ σκοτός ἐπάνω τῆς ἀβύσσου καὶ πνεῦμα θεοῦ ἐπεφέρετο ἐπάνω τοῦ ὕδατος (LXX)

¹ “Tohu Wa-Bohu,” *Wikipedia*, December 10, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Tohu_wa-bohu&oldid=754036145.

Terra autem erat inanis et vacua et tenebrae super faciem abyssi et spiritus Dei ferebatur super aquas (Vulgata)

Various English translations:

“And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” (KJV)

“The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” (ESV)

“And the earth was waste and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” (ASV)

“Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness covered the surface of the watery depths, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.” (HCSB)

“The Earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water” (Jewish Publication Society)

“Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God’s Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.” (MSG)

1. Jewish/Kabbalistic Exegesis

1.1. *The View of Prophet Jeremiah*

Jaques van Ruiten finds that the clearest similarity between Jer 4: 23-26 and Genesis 1, 2 is in the words *tohu wabohu*: ‘waste and void’. This juxtaposition occurs only here and in Gen 1:2. (In Isaiah 34:11, the syntactical construction is different.) For Jeremiah, the meaning of this expression is “complete chaos, a destruction of creation. And because of the use of these two words, it is likely that the text is alluding to the creation story in Genesis 1.”² Of course, Jeremiah “does not seem to be describing a *literary* return to the chaotic primary condition before creation. The comparison is being used as an image. The judgment on Israel is *as a* return to the original chaos. [...] The author seems to have made use of the story of the creation to interpret the chaos after the destruction. The events should thus

² Jaques T.A.G.M van Ruiten, “Back to Chaos: The Relationship between Jeremiah 4: 23-26 and Genesis 1,” in *The Creation of Heaven and Earth. Re-Interpretations of Genesis I in the Context of Judaism, Ancient Philosophy, Christianity and Modern Physics*, ed. George H. van Kooten, Themes in Biblical Narrative. Jewish and Christian Traditions, VIII (Leiden, Boston: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2005), 28.

be understood as a doom coming from YHWH.”³ Therefore, Jeremiah seems to consider that *tohu wabohu* in Genesis 1, 2 was a real chaos.

1.2. The Kabbalistic View

The Kabbalistic interpretation of *tohu wabohu* is very profound and very precisely conceptualized. According to David Smith, this expression is unique and does not have an exact English translation. *Tohu* is usually translated as “unformed”, “inconceivable”, or “chaos”, and it suggests the totality of creative dynamism that overwhelms the human perception and concepts.⁴ “To the human mind the power of B’reshit becomes *tohu*. *The power of tohu* that overwhelms the meager human sense of order is kept in balance by the power of *bohu*. *Bohu* is the empty receptivity of space that is inherently contextual. Its context allows the potency of *tohu* to continually adapt to ever-changing needs.”⁵ The kabbalist Aryeh Kaplan states that *bohu* is emptiness and it can be read as two words *bo hu*, which means “in it”.⁶ “*Tohu* and *bohu* represent a primordial purity which is completely beyond time and ungraspable by human intellectual standards.”⁷ *Tohu* indicates that chaos (in the form of entropy) is in the very nature of things and that this is a peril to human psychological stability. At the same time, it can be used against our attachments and addictions. A balance between *tohu* and *bohu* is needed for a good function of our mind, for working with effective power and without agitation and confusion. “*Bohu* reveals *tohu*” in the deepest nature of the mind, which is at the same time “our greatest love and our greatest fear.”⁸

2. Patristic Exegesis

According to Ed Noort, “LXX ἡ δὲ γῆ ἦν ἀόρατος introduces a logic for *invisible* and *visible* which is absent from MT. Here, the translator realized that the earth becomes *visible* in v. 9, which means that it had to be invisible in

³ Ibid., 30.

⁴ David Chaim Smith, *The Kabbalistic Mirror of Genesis. Commentary on Genesis 1-3* (Glasgow: Daat Press, 2010), 20.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁸ Ibid., 20.

v. 2.”⁹ The Greek Fathers used the Septuagint in their exegesis; in this version, however, the opening verses of the book of Genesis encourage a rather Platonic interpretation of the true light: “It was the Septuagint which translated the very first words of *Genesis* as follows: ‘In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth. But the earth was invisible and unformed: ἡ δὲ γῆ ἦν ἀόρατος καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος (1:1– 2a). The notable difference from the Hebrew is that there the earth is not called ‘invisible and unformed,’ but *tohu wa-bohu*: formlessness and voidness. [...] In this way, Philo and John understood the light which was created in the beginning, when there was an invisible earth, as the true, intelligible light.”¹⁰

This would also support the association made by George van Kooten between the prologue to the Gospel of John and the prologue to the opening of the book of Genesis: “Reading about the invisibility of the earth in the Septuagint translation of *Genesis* 1:2 (ἡ δὲ γῆ ἦν ἀόρατος καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος), it seems plausible that John—like Philo and Clement before and after him—took the invisibility of this earth to allude to the non-visible, noetic paradigm which was subsequently implemented in the visible world at its creation. For that reason, John also took the reference to the light in *Genesis* 1:3 as a reference to the invisible, true, real light which preceded the creation of the world’s physical light.”¹¹

The Fathers of the Church have very different interpretations on Genesis 1,2. Void, invisible, formless, shapeless, darkness, abyss, chaos – all these concepts are interconnected and used frequently by the Fathers in their discourse about the first moments of time and creation.

One of the very first theologians who tried to understand and interpret the meaning of Genesis 1, 2 was Origen. In his Homilies on Genesis, he sees the earth as being “invisible and unformed” before God created the light, the firmament, and all the rest. However, his discourse on the deep is in a slightly different register: “What is «the abyss»? That place, of course, where «the devil and his

⁹ Ed Noort, “The Creation of Light in Genesis 1: 1-5. Remarks on the Function of Light and Darkness in the Opening Verses of the Hebrew Bible,” in *The Creation of Heaven and Earth. Re-Interpretations of Genesis I in the Context of Judaism, Ancient Philosophy, Christianity and Modern Physics*, ed. George H. van Kooten, Themes in Biblical Narrative. Jewish and Christian Traditions, VIII (Leiden, Boston: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2005), 10.

¹⁰ George H. van Kooten, “The ‘True Light Which Enlightens Everyone’ (John 1: 9): John, Genesis, The Platonic Notion of the ‘True, Noetic Light’, and the Allegory of The Cave in Plato’s Republic,” in *The Creation of Heaven and Earth. Re-Interpretations of Genesis I in the Context of Judaism, Ancient Philosophy, Christianity and Modern Physics*, ed. George H. van Kooten, Themes in Biblical Narrative. Jewish and Christian Traditions, VIII (Leiden, Boston: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2005), 155.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

angels» will be. This indeed is most clearly designated in the Gospel when it is said of the Savior: «And the demons, which he was casting out that he not commands them to go into the abyss».”¹²

Then, Saint John Chrysostom explored the reasons behind the invisibility of the earth, attributing them to the craftsmanship of God. However, its formlessness suits a slightly different purpose: “The earth, you know, is our mother and provider; to it we owe our beginning and our growth; this is homeland and grave for us all alike; to the earth we come back in the end, and through it we lay hold of countless benefits. So, in case human beings might through the pressure of necessity treat the earth with a respect beyond its due, he shows it to you formless and imperfect so the you would not attribute the earth’s gifts to it but to the one who brought it into existence from nothing. For this reason the text reads: «The earth was invisible and lacking of all shape».”¹³

In calling the earth “invisible and unfinished”, Saint Basil the Great argues that nature had not blossomed entirely and that either there was no one to enjoy it or it was not to be seen. “Surely, the perfect condition of the earth consists in its state of abundance: the budding of all sorts of plants, the putting forth of the lofty trees, both fruitful and barren, the freshness and fragrance of the flowers, and whatever things appeared on the earth a little later by the command of God to adorn their mother. Since as yet there was nothing of this, the Scripture reasonably spoke of it as incomplete. [...] Scripture called the earth invisible for two reasons: because man, the spectator of it, did not yet exist, or because, being submerged under the water which overflowed its surface, it could not be seen.”¹⁴ .

In the second part of the same homily, Basil the Great argued in favor of creation *ex nihilo* against any pre-existing matter¹⁵. He is against those who “explain the darkness, not as some unlighted air, as is natural, or a place overshadowed by the interposition of a body, or, in short, a place deprived by the light through any cause whatsoever, but, they explain the darkness as an evil power, or rather as evil itself, having its beginning from itself, resisting and opposing the goodness of God”¹⁶. In fact, for him, darkness and depth have a strictly natural meaning and refer to the physical impossibility of seeing the earth in the absence of light: “[...] we know that many bodies frequently are

¹² Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine, The Fathers of the Church, Volume 71 (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 47–48.

¹³ Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis, 1–17*, The Fathers of the Church, Volume 74 (CUA Press, 1999), 36.

¹⁴ Saint Basil, *Exegetic Homilies*, The Fathers of the Church, Volume 46 (CUA Press, 2010), 21–22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22–24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

seen through rather shallow and translucent water. How, then, did no part of all the earth show through the water? Because the air flowing above it was still unlighted and in darkness. A ray of the sun penetrating through the waters does not often reveal pebbles on the bottom, but in the depth of night, in no way may anyone perceive objects under the water. Thus, the statement that ‘the deep overspread it and was itself in darkness’ is capable of establishing the fact that the earth was invisible. The deep, then, is not a mass of opposing powers, as some have imagined, nor is darkness some sovereign and wicked force let loose against good”¹⁷.

St. Ambrose, in his interpretation, associates God to an architect, pointing out that the act of creation preceded the act of putting everything into place. “The good architect lays the foundation first and afterward, when the foundation has been laid, plots the various parts of the building, one after the other, and then adds to it the ornamentation.”¹⁸

Lastly, Joseph Torchia presents Augustine’s vision of formlessness as an existing potentiality that hasn’t yet come to fruition. “From this standpoint, the creation of heaven and earth entails the making of the ‘seed’ or raw material of what will become the visible heaven and earth. For Augustine, however, such formless matter is not expressed by heaven and earth alone. It also emerges in three other phrases: (1) *the earth invisible and without order*; (2) *the abyss with darkness*; and (3) *the water over which was borne the Spirit of God*.”¹⁹ He sees “water” as a better definition for the matter without form that was to be arranged by God and explains that formlessness is suggested by all these words from Genesis 1, 2, “so that we might grasp the meaning by degrees, for we are unable to think cognitively about an absolute privation of form that still does not go as far as nothing.”²⁰

3. Modern and Contemporary Exegesis

For Luther, *tohu wabohu* means “empty” because there was nothing on the earth. The earth was “unfinished”, “mixed with water”, without any “distinctive

¹⁷ Ibid., 27.

¹⁸ Apud Andrew Louth, ed., *Genesis 1-11*, vol. Old Testament I, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 1 (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 5.

¹⁹ Joseph Torchia, *Creatio Ex Nihilo and the Theology of St. Augustine: The Anti-Manichaeon Polemic and Beyond*, vol. 205, American University Studies Series 7: Theology and Religion (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999), 101.

²⁰ Apud Louth, *Genesis 1-11*, Old Testament I:5.

marks.”²¹ Heaven was unformed like the earth, because it had not been separated from the earth and from the water. Luther disagrees with the opinion that matter in Genesis 1: 1-2 is a pure potentiality or almost nothing. For him, the matter is a genuine substance. “Water and abyss and heaven are used in this passage for the same thing, namely, for the dark and unformed mass”²². Luther interprets 2 Peter 3: 5-6 where St. Peter seems to refer to the fact that the earth was brought forth in the water and out of the water.²³ He concludes in a characteristic way: “Let this be enough on the subject of matter; for I think that if anyone were to argue with greater subtlety, he would not do so with profit”.²⁴

In contemporary hermeneutical literature, this expression is analysed in great detail.

According to Wenham, *tohu wabohu* means “total chaos” as an example of hendiadys, literally “waste and void”. Tohu, “waste”, “has two main meanings – either “nothingness” (e.g., Isa 29: 21) or, as here, “chaos, disorder”, most frequently of the untracked desert where a man can lose his way and die (Deut 32: 10; Job 6: 18). This frightening disorganization is the antithesis to the order that characterized the work of creation when it was complete. Here and in Isa 34: 11 and Jer 4: 23, *tohu* is coupled with *bohu*, “void”, where, as the context shows, the dreadfulness of the situation before the divine word brought order out of chaos is underlined.”²⁵ The next part, “darkness covered the deep” is another powerful description of the “black chaos”, “the terrible primeval waste”, but it could indicate “the hidden presence of God waiting to reveal himself.”²⁶

Brody considers that “the creation process begins with something like a formless waste: *tōhû bōhû*. The first word, *tōhû*, suggests something shapeless, formless, uninhabitable; and it may also be related etymologically to *tēhôm*, “the deep”. *Bōhû*, in rhyming with *tōhû*—forming an assonant hendiadys—it simply reinforces its effect.”²⁷

For Hamilton, the translation “without form and void” gives the impression that the words *tohu* and *bohu* are adjectives. But these words are nouns, which means that the correct translation of the first clause from Genesis 1, 2 is “And the

²¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Work. Lectures on Genesis. Chapters 1-5*, vol. 1 (Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 7.

²² *Ibid.*, 1:9.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1:8–9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:9.

²⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, vol. 1, World Biblical Commentary (Colombia: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 15–16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:16, 17.

²⁷ Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue. A Literary, Historical and Theological Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 133.

earth – it was a desert and a wasteland”.²⁸ The rhyme in *tohu wabohu* could indicate that the verse is poetry rather than prose. No certain Semitic equivalent for *bohu* has been discovered so far, but *tohu* may be paralleled with Ugar. Thw, “desert.”²⁹ *Bohu* appears only three times in the Old Testament and always in conjunction with *tohu*: “the line of confusion [*tohu*] and the plummet of chaos [*bohu*]” (Isa 34: 11), “the earth, and lo it was waste [*tohu*] and void [*bohu*]” (Jer 4: 23). *Tohu* appears twenty times in the Old Testament; it may stand alone (without *bohu*) and it means “desert.” Figuratively, *tohu* describes something without substance, reality or ground, like the idols.³⁰ But the meaning of *tohu* is made more clearly by “the words with which it appears in parallel: desert, wilderness, wind, nothing, vanity”³¹. For the interpretation of Genesis 1, 2, it is very interesting whether we read Isa 45: 18 “Yahweh did not create the earth a chaos” or “Yahweh did not create the earth to be a chaos”.³²

Westermann said that *tohu wabohu* means desert, waste, devastation, nothingness, and for the Israelites it was something more “ominous”, “gruesome” and “fearful” than for us.³³ The translation “formlessness” is not quite accurate; it induces the Greek idea of chaos. An older and more elementary idea of chaos seems to be behind the LXX translation of *tohu wabohu*: “invisible and not yet order”; we can observe in this translation a rationalizing tendency and even a Platonic influence. Westermann considers that the Aquila’s translation: “a waste and a nothing” and the Theodotion’s translation: “a nothing and an emptiness” are closer to the Hebrew text than is the LXX.³⁴ Also, he observes that “the course of the debate about the mythical explanation of *tohu wabohu* indicates clearly that the arguments for a mythical background are becoming weaker and weaker. The discussion can now be considered closed.”³⁵

In a *chronological* view of Genesis, *tohu-wabohu* is an element of chaos (together with the darkness and the depth), very characteristic for the first stage of the creation. Apparently, we have only two exegetical options: 1. the chaos was from eternity and God was only a Demiurge, or 2. God created the chaos and then

²⁸ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 1-17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 108.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11. A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Minneapolis, London: Augsburg Publishing House, SPCK, 1990), 103.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:104.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:103.

He ordered, divided and arranged this undifferentiated matter and chaotic energy. But, as Westermann explains, “the alternatives which this question raises come from a causal way of thinking which does not belong to Gen 1. The fact that the verb בָּרָא (bārāʾ) is not used with any preposition meaning “out of” indicates that such a question was irrelevant. What is peculiar to biblical talk about the creation of the world is that it looks wholly and solely to the creator: God has created the world; and so everything that one can say has been said. If one wants to know more, one must move outside this framework. The sentence “God created the world out of nothing” does not say more, but rather less than the sentence “God created the world.” The question “is it creation ex nihilo or not?” is not relevant to the text.”³⁶ The idea of an abstract and neutral primordial matter is clearly a very Greek way of thinking. The term matter passed from Greek philosophy into language and thought of creation theology, with the Wisdom of Solomon (see v 11: 17).³⁷ The expression “formless matter” was taken up by Augustine from Aristotelian physics and through him passed over into Western theology. In the context of Neo-Platonism, “it was a pyramid of existence with a matterless form at the summit and formless matter at the base” (D. Rischl, “Die Last des augustinischen Erbes”, *Parrhesia, K. Barth zum 80. Geburtstag*, 1965, 470-490, p. 475)³⁸ Also, it is not accidental that the idea of *creation ex nihilo* occurs first with the passage from 2 Macc 7: 28 (Septuagint), under the influence of Greek thought.³⁹ I have two observations regarding Westermann’s interpretations: 1. Orthodox theology can accept these hermeneutics based on its apophatic vision, because indetermination and antinomy can be a way of overcoming the limits of human thinking. 2. This interpretation rediscovers the original meaning of the Hebrew text and the genuine thinking of the author and has a great ecumenical value, because it makes clear the cultural and confessional backgrounds of each doctrinal positions and offers a common hermeneutical space for honest dialog and convergence.

In a *gap* view, there was an initial perfect creation (Genesis 1:1), a catastrophe (Genesis 1:2), and a re-creation of the world (Genesis 1:3-31). This catastrophe might be Satan’s fall from heaven; the extent of this gap between the first and second creation cannot be determined. But the syntax of the entire verse, as Hamilton demonstrates, is not in favor of this interpretation⁴⁰, that it remains pure speculation. Gerhard von Rad considers this hypothesis “parfaitement impossible...”

³⁶ Ibid., 1:108-9.

³⁷ Ibid., 1:109.

³⁸ Ibid., 1:109-10.

³⁹ Ibid., 1:110.

⁴⁰ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 1-17*, 115-16.

du point de vue du langage et des faits objectifs”⁴¹. For Hamilton, verse 2 describes the situation prior to the detailed creation, in a *pattern of movement from generalization to particularization*.⁴²

A variant of this *pattern of generalization – particularization* is the *framework* view: “the six days form a logical framework for describing actual historical events, but with events arranged *topically* instead of *chronologically*. Genesis 1:2 describes the earth as “formless and empty,” so there are *two problems*. The *two solutions* are to produce form and to fill them. The first 3 days produce **form** (by separations, in time or space, that produce day and night, sky and sea, and land with plants) and the second 3 days **fill** these forms (with sun for day and moon for night, birds for sky and fish for sea, and land animals that eat plants):

	separate to make form		create to fill each form
1	separating <i>day</i> and <i>night</i>	4	sun for <i>day</i> , moon for <i>night</i>
2	separating <i>sky</i> and <i>sea</i>	5	<i>sky</i> animals, <i>sea</i> animals
3	separating <i>land</i> and sea, land <i>plants</i> are created	6	<i>land</i> animals and humans, <i>plants</i> are used for food

(<http://www.asa3.org/ASA/education/origins/agetheology.htm#fw>)

The “form and fill” structure describes two related aspects of creation in Days 1 and 4 (for light), 2 and 5 (for sea and sky), 3 and 6 (for land), in a logical framework for the history of creation. The days could be logical *and* chronological, but non-chronological days produce a better match between what we see in the Bible and in nature.”⁴³

In a *dynamic* view, “the process of God’s creation in all of its forms and aspects continues” and the actions of ordering and “controlling the chaotic forces” can be consider as the “renewal, preservation and completion of creation”⁴⁴. In this view, the chaos from Genesis 1, 2 seems to be a condition of a continuous creation, which implies a progress from imperfection to perfection (cf. Rom 8: 19-23).⁴⁵ I appreciate that the last two approaches are very useful in the dialogue

⁴¹ Gerhard von Rad, *La Genèse*, trans. Etienne de Peyer (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1968).

⁴² Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 1-17*, 117.

⁴³ Craig Rusbult, “An Overview-FAQ for the ‘big Picture’ of Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design,” accessed January 4, 2017, <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/education/origins/agetheology.htm#fw>.

⁴⁴ Thomas M.M., *In the Beginning God (Genesis 1-12,4)*, trans. Philip T.M., CSS Books, vol. 1, Contextual Theological Bible Commentary (Tiruvalla, 2003), 53.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:54.

between theology and science. The evolutionary model of cosmology, geology and biology, the quantum mechanics, the fractals, the chaos theory, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and Gödel's incompleteness theorems etc. are very compatible with the idea of a primordial chaos created by God as the first step in the creation of the universe, because in scientific cosmology at the different levels there is an implicit concept of indetermination. Why did God create the world in this way? Because only in a world that in its inner structure has degrees of indeterminacy, a real freedom is possible for human beings.

According to Gerard von Rad, the notion of a created chaos is contradictory in itself, but it must be said that the text deals with questions which are beyond the capacities of human representation.⁴⁶ Without speaking about chaos, we cannot tackle creation in a satisfactory manner. Gerard von Rad considers that "tohouwabohou signifie l'informe"⁴⁷ and Genesis 1, 2 contains an exigence of faith. Le chaos is a possibility that can always be recurrent.⁴⁸ "Derrière tout ce qui est créé subsiste l'abîme de l'informe, qu'en somme le chaos constitue la perpétuelle menace pour toute créature, voilà une expérience primordiale de l'homme, une perpétuelle pierre d'achoppement pour sa foi. C'est à cette expérience que devait répondre la foi en la création. Ainsi, le v. 2 enseigne le miracle de la création en partant de sa négation, il parle d'abord de l'informe et de l'insondable d'où la volonté de Dieu a tiré la création et au-dessus duquel elle la maintient constamment. Car le cosmos a continuellement besoin de cette volonté créatrice qui le supporte. Nous voyons ici que la pensée théologique de Gen. 1 se meut non dans l'opposition néant—créé, mais dans la polarité chaos – cosmos."⁴⁹

In a *pure descriptive* view, "there are no specific indications within the setting itself that the idiom *tohu wabohu* means chaos in this text."⁵⁰ The textual evidence suggests that *tohu wabohu* is a primordial absence of form and fertility. Clearly, *Erets* (earth) exists, but not yet in its final shape and function and not yet filled with life forms. This transformation takes place during the narration of the days of creation.⁵¹

For Tsumara, "the term *tohu* means (1) "desert," (2) "a desert-like place," i.e. "a desolate or empty place" or "an uninhabited place" or (3) "emptiness"; the phrase *tohu wabohu* has a similar meaning and refers to a state of "aridness or

⁴⁶ von Rad, *La Genèse*, 44–45.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Norman Habel, *The Birth, the Curse and the Greening of Earth. An Ecological Reading of Genesis 1-11*, The Earth Bible Commentary Series, 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), 29.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

unproductiveness” (Jer 4:23) or “desolation” (Isa 34:11).⁵² Tohu wabohu in Gen 1:2 describes a state of “unproductiveness and emptiness”, “the earth in a “bare” state, without vegetation and animals as well as without man.”⁵³ This interpretation of *tohu wabohu* fits the literary structure of the entire chapter⁵⁴, as we have already seen in the framework pattern. And “it is by God’s fiat that the “unproductive and empty/ uninhabited” earth becomes productive with vegetation and inhabited by animals and man.”⁵⁵ According to Tsumara’s conclusion, “both the biblical context and extra-biblical parallels suggest that the phrase *tohu wabohu* in Gen 1:2 has nothing to do with “chaos” and simply means “emptiness” and refers to the earth which is an empty place, i.e. “an unproductive and uninhabited place.” Thus, the main reason for the author’s mentioning the earth as *tohu wabohu* in this setting is to inform the audience that the earth is “not yet” the earth as it was known to them.”⁵⁶

Other authors develop a *liturgical* view and /or an *application* view.

According to Bonhoeffer “not the work, no, it is the Creator who is to be glorified. The earth is without form and void, but he is the Lord, who performs the totally new, strange, unfathomable work of his dominion and love. The earth was without form and void, nevertheless it was our earth, which has proceeded from God’s hand and now lies ready for him, submissive to him in holy worship. God is worshiped first by the earth which was without form and void. He does not need us men to prepare his glory; he creates worship himself from the silent world which slumbers, resting mute and formless in his will”.⁵⁷

For Brueggemann, God’s movement toward creation is an act of perpetual generosity and the response of the creation is an unceasing doxology.⁵⁸ Verse 1 suggests God created out of nothing, but verse 2 seems to deny this, speaking about an already existing chaos. Brueggemann thinks that “the historical experience of exile may be the “formless and void” from which God works his creative purpose.”⁵⁹ Even if the New Testament and the Christian theology affirm that

⁵² David Toshio Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2. A Linguistic Investigation*, ed. David J. Clines and Philip R. Davies, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 83 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 41.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall. A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1-3*, trans. John C. Fletcher (SCM Press LTD, 1959), 17.

⁵⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 28.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

God created *ex nihilo* (Rom 4: 17; Heb 11: 3), “we should not lose sight of the experiential factor in the notion of creation from chaos”, because “the lives of many people are chaotic (cf. Mark 1: 32-34)” and “the chaos of our historical life can be claimed by God for his grand purposes”.⁶⁰ In conclusion, “the very ambiguity of creation from nothing and creation from chaos is a rich expository possibility. We need not choose between them.”⁶¹ In terms of application, both offer important theological affirmations: the absolute power of God and the indispensable value of human freedom in the work of salvation and new creation.

Conclusions

I have found the exegesis of *tohu wabohu* (Genesis 1, 2) very challenging and very rich in nuances and implications. I appreciated the interpretations which accept the idea of a primordial chaos created by God, because these interpretations allow for a dialogue between biblical cosmology and scientific cosmology; at the same time, they also offer many possibilities for application in spiritual life and for improving faith. Why has God created the world in this way? Because only in a world that in its inner structure has degrees of indeterminacy can a real freedom be possible for human beings.

I consider the positions of Westermann and Brueggemann accurate, authentic, honest and convincing: we do not need to choose between the creation from nothing and the creation from a pre-existing chaos, because the Hebrew text says more ignoring and overlooking this conceptual limitation. Based on its apophatic vision, Orthodox theology can accept these hermeneutics, because the conceptual “antinomy” can be a way to overcome the limits of human thinking. Ontologically speaking, the primordial nothingness or abyss could be understood as the infinite “kenosis” of the absolute and infinite Logos. This can be the ultimate antinomy, the last limit of thought, because at the same time as we affirm the infinite “kenosis” of the divine Logos, we must affirm the absolutely affirmative and “enstatic” character of God, who admits no negation within Him.

These interpretations rediscover the original meaning of the Hebrew text and the genuine thinking of the author and have a great ecumenical value, because they make clear the cultural and confessional backgrounds of each doctrinal position and offer a common hermeneutical space for honest dialogue, for convergence and for wide and profound spiritual application.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

REFERENCES

- Basil, Saint. *Exegetic Homilies*. The Fathers of the Church, Volume 46. CUA Press, 2010.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Creation and Fall. A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1-3*. Translated by John C. Fletcher. SCM Press LTD, 1959.
- Brodie, Thomas L. *Genesis as Dialogue. A Literary, Historical and Theological Commentary*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *Genesis Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982.
- Chrysostom, Saint John. *Homilies on Genesis, 1-17*. The Fathers of the Church, Volume 74. CUA Press, 1999.
- Habel, Norman. *The Birth, the Curse and the Greening of Earth. An Ecological Reading of Genesis 1-11*. The Earth Bible Commentary Series, 1. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011.
- Hamilton, Victor P. *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 1-17*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990.
- Kooten, George H. van. "The 'True Light Which Enlightens Everyone' (John 1: 9): John, Genesis, The Platonic Notion of the 'True, Noetic Light', and the Allegory of The Cave in Plato's Republic." In *The Creation of Heaven and Earth. Re-Interpretations of Genesis I in the Context of Judaism, Ancient Philosophy, Christianity and Modern Physics*, edited by George H. van Kooten, 149-94. Themes in Biblical Narrative. Jewish and Christian Traditions, VIII. Leiden, Boston: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2005.
- Louth, Andrew, ed. *Genesis 1-11*. Vol. Old Testament I. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 1. Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001.
- M.M., Thomas. *In the Beginning God (Genesis 1-12,4)*. Translated by Philip T.M. CSS Books. Vol. 1. Contextual Theological Bible Commentary. Tiruvalla, 2003.
- Noort, Ed. "The Creation of Light in Genesis 1: 1-5. Remarks on the Function of Light and Darkness in the Opening Verses of the Hebrew Bible." In *The Creation of Heaven and Earth. Re-Interpretations of Genesis I in the Context of Judaism, Ancient Philosophy, Christianity and Modern Physics*, edited by George H. van Kooten, 3-20. Themes in Biblical Narrative. Jewish and Christian Traditions, VIII. Leiden, Boston: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2005.
- Origen. *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*. Translated by Ronald E. Heine. The Fathers of the Church, v. 71. Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 1982.
- Pelikan, Jaroslav, ed. *Luther's Work. Lectures on Genesis. Chapters 1-5*. Vol. 1. Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1958.
- Rad, Gerhard von. *La Genèse*. Translated by Etienne de Peyer. Genève: Labor et Fides, 1968.
- Ruiten, Jaques T.A.G.M van. "Back to Chaos: The Relationship between Jeremiah 4: 23-26 and Genesis 1." In *The Creation of Heaven and Earth. Re-Interpretations of Genesis I in the Context of Judaism, Ancient Philosophy, Christianity and Modern Physics*, edited by George H. van Kooten, 21-30. Themes in Biblical Narrative. Jewish and Christian Traditions, VIII. Leiden, Boston: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2005.

- Rusbult, Craig. "An Overview-FAQ for The 'big Picture' of Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design." Accessed January 4, 2017. <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/education/origins/ageology.htm#fw>.
- Smith, David Chaim. *The Kabbalistic Mirror of Genesis. Commentary on Genesis 1-3*. Glasgow: Daat Press, 2010.
- "Tohu Wa-Bohu." *Wikipedia*, December 10, 2016. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Tohu_wa-bohu&oldid=754036145.
- Torchia, Joseph. *Creatio Ex Nihilo and the Theology of St. Augustine: The Anti-Manichaeon Polemic and Beyond*. Vol. 205. American University Studies Series 7: Theology and Religion. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999.
- Tsumura, David Toshio. *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2. A Linguistic Investigation*. Edited by David J. Clines and Philip R. Davies. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 83. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989.
- Wenham, Gordon J. *Genesis 1-15*. Vol. 1. World Biblical Commentary. Colombia: Thomas Nelson, 1987.
- Westermann, Claus. *Genesis 1-11. A Commentary*. Translated by John J. Scullion. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. 2 vols. Minneapolis, London: Augsburg Publishing House, SPCK, 1990.