The Cumaean Sibyl as the Revelation-bearer in the Shepherd of Hermas

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And it was revealed to me, brothers, while I was sleeping, by a most beautiful young man speaking to me, “The old lady, from whom you have received the book, who do you think she is?” I replied, “The Sibyl.” “You are wrong,” he said, “she is not.” “Then, who is she?” I asked. He replied, “She is the Church.”

Shepherd of Hermas, Vis II.iv.1

The above dialogue includes the first explicit reference to the pagan Sibyl figure in any extant Christian work (circa C.E. 148). She is mentioned only once in the whole of the Shepherd and even then, as we see here, is seemingly dealt short shrift. Yet, it was the beginning of a trend. Many Apologists in succeeding generations made extensive use of the pagan Sibyl as the author of Christian prophecies.1 Typically, the Christianized Sibyl in these later works is a voice rather than a figure. It is the content of her “prophecies” which the Church Fathers stress more than her character.2

The exception to the idea that the Sibyl is a voice rather than a figure in Christian literature is the Shepherd of Hermas. It is generally conceded that even though the appellation “Sibyl” is used only once, there are

1. For a list of Patristic references to the Sibyl and the Sibylline Oracles, see B. Thompson, “Patristic Use of Sibylline Oracles,” Review of Religion 16 (1952): 115–36.

2. The themes often attributed to the Sibyl in the Christian Sibyllina and other patristic literature include monotheism, Christology, condemnation of idolatry, and creation.

several allusions to the Cumaean Sibyl in the preceding passages. Thus, Martin Dibelius, expressing the consensus of many scholars, does not grant that the Shepherd makes use of any of her prophecies, rather,

Hermas has employed the Sibyl-figure (Sibyllenstatth) only as a model, what she conveyed has nothing to do with the Sibylline verses; only her exterior is Sibyl-demeanored (sibyllenartig)—and Hermas himself indicates this clearly enough in V. 11.iv.1.

Naturally, with such a position being assumed by many scholars, there has been no genuine attempt as yet to explore Hermas' theological agenda for using the Sibyl figure and whether indeed she plays a more significant role than hitherto considered.

This article is an attempt to investigate the role of the Cumaean Sibyl as the revelation-bearer in the Shepherd. In so doing, I will attempt to refute Dibelius' position stated above and demonstrate that the intention of the Shepherd is to authenticate, through the use of the figure and the voice of the pagan Sibyl, the then novel, theological conception of creation, creatio ex nihilum, the idea that God created matter from absolutely nothing. We shall see that the Shepherd's adoption of creatio ex nihilum implies a discrete a quo and a discrete ad quem of that which is created, namely, the world and all that is in it. The transitoriness of the age then provides the foils for the Shepherd's depiction of the Church as pre-existent which, again by implication, will transcend the coming destruction of the world. In this way, the Shepherd provides ecclesiological remedia for the general lack of expectancy for the Parousia, for the attendant, ever-approaching tribulation, and for the pressing problem of his congregation's openness to the teaching of the Gnostic false prophets.

1. CREATION IN THE SHEPHERD

The question of whether the author of the Shepherd actually intended to depict the creation view ex nihilum is a debated issue. Several scholars deny this possibility and suggest that it was the later apologists, Tatian, Theophilus or Irenaeus, who were to become the first Christian endorsers of the creatio ex nihilo concept. Other scholars seem quite convinced of the Shepherd's deliberate intention, yet are emphatic that Hermas merely depends upon earlier Jewish and Christian literature as possible allusions. Both camps, however, have given scarcely anything more than a cursory explanation for the Shepherd's respective use of creatio ex nihilum type of language and certainly no modern-day scholar credits the author of the Shepherd with any theological development in the area of cosmological thoughts. Yet, it is my position that this creatio ex nihilum concept forms the hypothetical basis for the modus operandi of Hermas' proof that the world is destructible. It is also the presupposition for one of the central themes of the Shepherd, namely, the hypostatization of the Church.

The texts in question are Vision I.ii.6:

God who dwells in heaven and created (creavit) that which is out of that which is not (ex  Voida  hoc  est  quod  est  nescius) . . . for the sake of his Holy Church . . .

and Mandate I.1:

First of all believe that God is one, who created (creavit) all things and perfected them, and made (constituens) all things to be out of that which was not (ex Voida), and contains all things, and is himself alone uncontained.

It must be pointed out that the assertion that God made the world "out of nothing" or the "non-existent," need not necessarily imply the thesis that matter is created. G. May assumes that Hermas merely furnishes an "unreflected presentation of creation out of nothing," which is based on a "strongly characteristic Jewish tradition." He gives two objections for associating the Shepherd with the creatio ex nihilo concept. First, the

3. Cfr., for example, the explicit references to Cuma (Vis I.ii.; I.1); the old age of the woman (Vis II.4.1); the fact that the old woman bears a message from God in writing (Vis I.2) which needed the services of an interpreter (sagitta) (Vis II.4) and other possible allusions to Aenas' encounter with the Cumaean Sibyl as depicted in Virgil's Aeneid, chapter 6.


7. Although several early Christian Fathers certainly did credit Hermas with the theological development of creatio ex nihilum, see infra.

8. May, Creatio Ex Nihilo, 152. For example, Justin Martyr (First Apology, 59.3), a generation after Hermas, maintained that God created the world from unformed matter (ἀνεφόρως; Tatian, Disc. c. 6.

9. May, Creatio ex Nihilo, 152.
relationship between God's creating activity and the order of nature and the cosmos is not considered. Second, creation in the Shepherd is never isolated from God’s salvation-activity.  

This latter objection is, I consider, somewhat inconsistent. May posits that the early Christian theologian, Irenaeus, employed the no longer extant work of Theophilus against Marcion, which, he maintains, “undoubtedly” represented the creatio ex nihilo dogma.

Obviously, the anti-heretical writings of Theophilus played a decisive role in the break-through of the doctrine of Creatio ex Nihilo in Catholic theology which occurred as the second century drew to close.

Yet, in the anti-heretical writings of Theophilus, in the instances which May is satisfied that they affirm creatio ex nihilo, the concept of creation is by no means separated from God’s salvation-activity. It would be virtually unthinkable that Theophilus, Irenaeus, or for that matter, Hermas, would separate the two themes of creation and God’s salvation-activity, precisely on account of the interconnectedness between these two themes in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Thus, the link between the creation and God’s salvation-activity should not per se preclude the notion of creatio ex nihilo.

To refute May’s assertion that Hermas merely furnishes an “unreflected presentation of creation out of nothing,” I shall attempt to demonstrate the following. First, the prepositional phrase δέκα μή δεντος employed in the Shepherd twice in the above passages is actually a technical term associated with mainstream Greek philosophical discussions on creatio ex nihilo.

Second, I shall attempt to demonstrate that Hermas is, in his use of this technical term for creatio ex nihilo, consistent with the philosophical implications involved in this doctrine. Thereby, he affirms the non-identity of matter, and, thus, the inevitable destruction of the world. In this particular regard, reflecting back to May’s first objection, the relationship between God’s creating activity and the order of nature and the cosmos is certainly considered.

The Contemporary Graeco-Roman View of Creation

The classical Greek view of creation was set forth by Plato in the Timaeus. 14 Timaeus’ basic tenant is that the world is made in the image of God, “He [the All, τὸ ἄλλο] desired that all things should be as like unto himself as possible” (29C15). The astronomer, in his discussion with Socrates, argues for the eternity of matter for two reasons: 1) the goodness of the Master-craftsman (βασιλικός), and 2) the fairness of the universe (28C4). The goodness of God (δόξα) is reflected in that He brought all that is visible “from its disorder into order, thinking that this was a better state than the other” (30A2). The ultimate fairness of the universe is reflected by the argument that “no work that is without reason will ever be fairer than that which has reason” (30A6). Timaeus then argues that since the universe has reason, because of its visible orderliness, then the universe must have a soul, since “without a soul, reason cannot dwell in anything” (30A9).

Thus, this panetheistic notion of the inseparable immannence of God with his creation became associated with being reasonable. 15 Galen was to adopt Plato’s cosmogony to argue the unreasonableness of the Christian idea of God’s transcendence from his creation. 16 Wilken shows that Galen had two main problems with the Christian God. First, He seemed to be an arbitrary figure since He creates by His will without any thought of the consequences of his creating; in contrast to the Demiurge who fashions from chaos to order, and 2) the Mosaic creation account seems to be unreasonable because it does not reflect the eternal attribute of its creator (i.e., the universe does not have a soul).

Perhaps no other Greek philosopher in the pre-Christian era states the case for and against the creation, and hence, the eternity of the cosmos, more clearly than did Aristotle. 17 In De caelo, Chapter X, Aristotle posits the theories of the philosophers who agree that the world had a

11. May, Creatio ex Nihilo, 159.
12. E.g., Theophilus, Apostol. 1.4, “God made everything out of what did not exist, bringing it into existence so that his greatness might be known and apprehended through his works.” The bodily resurrection of believers and God's creating activity of humans from what did not exist is implied in Apostol. 1.8.
13. This last condition was precisely the one adopted by Lactantius, Inst. 2.9.
15. Lucetius, De rerum natura 1.160 “Nothing can ever be created by divine power out of nothing.”
16. One should remember that by the time of Galen’s writing (ca. c.e. 170), i.e., at least 20 years after the Shepherd of Hermas, the Christian idea of creatio ex nihilo was becoming widely adopted within the Church. Tertullian would put it into credal form in c.e. 200.
17. Wilken, Christians as the Romans Saw Them, 88.
18. Although some philosophers preceding Aristotle also determined that matter had to be eternal: Anaxagoras (600–540 B.C.E.) asks “how is something able to come into being from nothing (δὲκα μὴ δεντος) or to be destroyed (φθαρεῖν) into non-being (κα τὸ δεντος)?” (Arist. GC 1.314a).
 beginning: (a) that it is indestructible (Orpheus, Hesiod, Plato), (b) that it is destructible (the atomists), (c) that it is subject to an everlasting alternation between existence and non-existence (Empedocles of Acraga and Heracleides of Ephesus). In his refutation of these positions, Aristotle demonstrates that in reality there is nothing that can be called generation and destruction, but only change of shape or arrangement. In order to demonstrate his point, Aristotle defines the word "generated" (γεγονός) as (a) of something which once was not (μηδενω) and later is. (b) It is used of something which is capable of generation. (c) It is used of "anything which is subject to a process of coming to be (ἔγενος) out of non-existence (ἐκ τοῦ μηδενοῦ) into existence (τῷ δόξῳ)." Basically, a thing is "destructible" (σφακτός) if having once existed it does not exist later. Aristotle concludes that the terms "generated" and "destructible" imply each other, though are philosophically untenable. He then goes on to show that the terms "ungenerated" and "indestructible" also imply each other. Aristotle finally concludes that the world is ungenerated (δενομένος) and indestructible (σφακτός).

However, it would be wrong to suggest that the concept of creatio ex nihilo (or the Greek equivalent ἐκ τοῦ μηδενοῦ) was totally offensive to Greco-Roman thought. Aristotle's more definite opponents were the Skeptics. Basically, the Skeptics, who denied the Law of Contradiction in that nothing is true, as opposed to false, but all things are false and, therefore, inapprehensible, were the first to posit the creatio ex nihilo concept. Protagoras held the view that man is the measure of all things, by which he meant simply "that each individual's impressions are positively true." The second-century philosopher, Sextus Empiricus, charges Protagoras with proclaiming that, Of all things the measure is man, of existing things that they exist and of non-existing things that they exist not.

As part of his refutation, Aristotle quotes the common teaching of his Skeptic contemporaries that "nothing comes from what is not (ἐκ μηδενοῦ) but everything from what is (ἐκ δόξος)." Sextus Empiricus also mentions one Xeniates of Corinth, who is mentioned by Democritus, inasmuch as he asserts that all things are false, and that every impression and opinion is false, and that all that becomes becomes out of the non-existent (ἐκ τοῦ μηδενοῦ), and all that perishes perishes into the non-existent (μηδενω). However, it was the positivism of these Skeptics which shelved rather than helped the problem of μηδενω and removed it from the field of natural philosophy.

It seems evident that in the centuries following Aristotle the pagan doctrine of creatio ex nihilo gained some considerable ground. Plutarch, for example, continues the debate into the first century of the Christian era. It is better, then, to be persuaded by Plato and, chanting "for it is the fairest of things that have come to be and he is the best of causes" (Timaeus 25A-5), to assert that the universe has been brought into being by god whereas the substance (σώματος) or matter (ὕλη) out of which it has come into being did not come to be but was always available to the artificer (δημιουργός) to whom it submitted itself for disposing and ordering and being made as like to him as was possible, for the source of generation is not what is non-existent (ἐκ τοῦ μηδενοῦ) but what is good and sufficient.

Marcus Aurelius, Emperor of Rome (161-180 A.D.) and convert to Stoicism, demonstrates the Aristotelian dependency between the eternity of matter and the fact that it can never be destroyed;

19. Hesiod and some of the earlier philosophers held the view that "nothing is ungenerated (δενομένος), but everything comes to be once in being, some things last for ever, others perish again" (Cael. 298b.26). Cf. Med. 975a.11ff. "So Hesiod says "first of all there was created Chaos, then the broad-bosomed earth... and then Love which belongs to all the immortals." All the rest of the universe he says grew out of these, but these out of nothing... some at any rate believe that things come into existence from what does not exist (ἐκ ὑπονέουν)."

20. Arist. Cael. 279b.17. This was to be a distinguishing feature of the Stoics.


22. Arist. Cael. 280b.15; see also GA 741b.23; Metaph. 1009a.35, 1062b.31, 1075b.15; Ph. 187a.29, 225a.15, 235b.14; Xen. 979b.32.


26. Sextus Empiricus, Against the Logicians 1.54.


28. Sextus Empiricus, Against the Logicians 1.61.


30. Sextus Empiricus, Against the Logicians 1.53.


33. Plutarch, De animae procreatione in Timaeo 1014B and 1015B-C, Moralia XIII, part 1. See also De vita et moribus Socrates, Moralia X; Plut. Quest. 1003A, Moralia VI, part 1; De communibus 1076D, Moralia VI, part 2; Fragmenta 179, Moralia VII.
I am made up of the Causal (εικόνιδος) and the Material (διάκος), and neither of these disappear into nothing (εἰς τὸν μὴ ὄντας), just as neither did it come into existence out of nothing (ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντας).

Three points can be summarized here which are pertinent to our discussion. First, the notion that matter, hence, the world, is destructible (from being to non-being), commonly considered philosophically implausible, was posed by the pyrrhotistic element of Greek thought. Second, the notion that matter can be destroyed ad nihilum necessitated in Greek thinking that matter must be created ex nihilo. In other words, creation (γένεσις), in the Aristotelian sense, and destruction (φθορά) are inseparable. Third, the prepositional phrase ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος (from the non-existent) most likely should be understood as a technical phrase of Greek philosophy, as an extension of μὴ ὄν (non-being). This final point is important for our understanding of Hermas’ use of the same technical phrase in Vis 1:1.6 and Mand 1.1.

II. THE SHEPHERD’S UNDERSTANDING OF ΕΚ ΤΟΥ ΜΗ ΟΝΤΟΣ

Having raised the possibility of the Shepherd’s borrowing of the term ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος from Greek philosophical discourse, the question we have to ask is, what does the author understand by using it within his work? After all, it is quite possible to use a term out of context irrespective of where it originates. However, there are three arguments which demonstrate the author’s consistent use of the term ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος in the Aristotelian sense.

First, as Aristotelian logic demands that anything generated from non-being (ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος) necessitates the eventual destruction of that thing to non-existence (μὴ ὄν) so the Shepherd too expects the destruction of the world through his use of the term ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος. One major concern for the author of the Shepherd is the coming of the tribulation (βασιλεία) which is the central theme of Vision IV. Yet, as R. Bauckham correctly points out, the great tribulation is not “simply a period of persecution,” but rather it is the destruction of this age.

The great tribulation is therefore the means of transition from this age to another (and to this extent its function is therefore exactly parallel to that of the period of tribulation, cosmic upheaval, or ‘Messianic woes’) frequently described in Jewish apocalypticism.

Also the placement of the two instances of the phrase “created from nothing” (τιτόνος ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος) warrant mention. Both times they are located in the first creation stanza of the Vision section and Mandate section of the Shepherd respectively (Vision II.6 and Mandate I.1). Whereas the Vision section is concerned with the coming tribulation and the destruction of this world and age, the Mandate section is concerned with the preservation and destruction of individuals depending on whether they repent and keep the commandments. Thus, it can be reasonably inferred that when the Shepherd uses the term ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος, the total destruction of this age and all that is in it is implied. It is noteworthy, at this stage, that Hermas, as with, Theophilus, Irenaeus, Lactantius, and, indeed, the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, does not separate creation from God’s salvific activity.

Second, the obvious hymnic or didactic structure of the phrases which contain the term ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος in the Shepherd show a definite development in complexity in cosmogony over the more primitive Christian hymns. Key to this appreciation is the constant of the words in the Shepherd to the extent fragments containing the apocalyptic Preaching

35. Aristotle uses the expression ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος nine times in his extant works in connection with the philosophically pregnant μὴ ὄν (Cael. 280b.18; GA 741b.23; Metaph. 1009a.33; 1062b.32; 1075b.15; Ph. 187a.29; 225a.15; 233b.14; Xen. 979b.32). Aristotle also quotes Anaxagoras three times using the same (Ph. 4.203a; GC A1.31a).
36. A. Frank, Studien zur Ekklesiologie des Hirten, II Klemens, der Didascha und der Ignatiusbriefe unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Idee einer Präexistenz Kirche, Doctoral Dissertation (Munich: University of Munich, 1975), 53, agrees that this formula denotes creatio ex nihilo and stems from Hellenistic philosophy. However, Frank does not draw out the implications of this cosmology in the Shepherd.

39. Note the promise that the one who obeys the mandate “shall live to God” (Mand I.2) Cf. Mand III.5; VII.4; VII.5; VII.10; VIII.4; VIII.6. 11, 12; IX.11; by refraining from the luxuries of this world one may “live to God” (XII.2, also XII.3, 10). On the other hand, note the references to the “wickedness that destroys the life of men” (Mand II.1); the man who commits fornication “works death for himself” (IV.2); the ill-tempered man has “destroyed” all his hopes (VII.2); “it destroys the servants of God by its working” (VIII.1); those who do not obey God’s commands “cannot live to God.” (VIII.4); wicked desire “destroys men greatly in its cruelty” and if a “servant of God fall into it . . . he is terribly destroyed by it. But it destroys such as have not the good desire as a covering, but are mixed with this world; then it delivers to death” (XII.2–3).
of Peter (better known as the Kerygma Petri), dating from the first quarter of the second century. There seems to be a dependency between the two works, although it is difficult to determine whether the Shepherd borrowed from the Preaching of Peter, or they both were derived from a common source.

In the following table, we see that the Shepherd (Mand. 1.1c) uses the more philosophical saying:

καὶ ποιήσας ἐκ τοῦ μὴ όντος εἰς τὸ εἶναι τὰ κάντα,

“and made all things to be out of which was not,”

in place of the more primitive saying from the Preaching of Peter,

δύναμις ύποπήγησαν καὶ τέλος ἐξουσίων ἔχων,

“who made the beginning of all things and who has the power to set an end.”

Now, if we are correct in our previous judgment, that is, that the Shepherd’s use of the phrase ποιήσας ἐκ τοῦ μὴ όντος also implies the destruction of the world, we could postulate that the statement καὶ ποιήσας ἐκ τοῦ μὴ όντος εἰς τὸ εἶναι τὰ κάντα of Mandate 1.1c represents both the creation and destruction assertions of the statement δύναμις ύποπήγησαν καὶ τέλος ἐξουσίων ἔχων from the Preaching of Peter.

Comparison between the Preaching of Peter and Mand. 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preaching of Peter</th>
<th>Shepherd of Hermas Mandate 1.1</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recognize now that there is one God</td>
<td>1a. First of all believe that God is one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Γνώσομαι οὖν δι’ εἰς θεός εἰσίν</td>
<td>Πρῶτον πάντων πίστευον, δι’ εἰς θεός εἰσίν</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who made the beginning of all things and who has the power to set an end</td>
<td>1c. and made all things to be out of which was not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>δύναμις ύποπήγησαν καὶ τέλος ἐξουσίων ἔχων</td>
<td>ποιήσας ἐκ τοῦ μὴ όντος εἰς τὸ εἶναι τὰ κάντα</td>
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41. It is quite possible that the extant fragments of the Preaching of Peter is a fuller explication or commentary of the Shepherd’s Mandate 1.1. However, it is more improbable to go from a very specific saying of “creation from nothing” (in the Shepherd) to a less specific “creation of beginnings” (in the Preaching of Peter).

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the invisible who sees all things
incapable of being contained,
who contains all things
ἀγώνης, ὅτι τὰ πάντα χωρὶς
need, and whom all things need, and by whom they are
incoprehensible, everlasting, unmade
who made all things by the
“Word of His power,”
牒 τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο λόγος
that is according to the Gnostic

The mutual dependency between the two works is further evinced by the use of the adjective ἀγώνης (uncontainted) which is actually a Christian construction. There are no extant pre-Christian uses of this adjective. Nor is it found in the New Testament. The earliest recorded uses of the word are found in the Preaching of Peter and the Shepherd. It is quite possible that the adjective was originally a corrective to Stoicism which depicted god in a “closed box,” so to speak, where he is merely the principal part of the universe, impotent and subject to the law of the Fates. In any case, Mandate 1.1 uses ἀγώνης as a characteristic of the transcendence of God from His creation, together with the verb ἐγένετο “to contain,” which demonstrates His Providence. It is exactly these two attributes, the Transcendence and Providence of God, which the creatio ex nihilo type language of Mandate 1.1c is intended to affirm. ἀγώνης would become a common way for the Early Church fathers to portray the Transcendence of God. Athanasius, would later quote the Shepherd’s version of Mandate 1.1c twice in his Doctrina ad Antiochenum ducens, whilst Clement of Alexandria would quote from the Preaching of Peter. The Council of Ephesus in 431 refers to the uncontainted God (ὁ λόγος ὁ ἄγώνης) some five times.

Third, some of the early apologists affirm that the Shepherd was indeed utilizing creatio ex nihilo terminology. Athanasius quotes Vision
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The Jewish apocalyptic background to this statement is unmistakable. The phrase “the God of the Powers” (ο θεός των δυνάμεων) is more commonly referred to in the LXX in the expanded form of “the Lord God of the Powers” (κύριος ο θεός των δυνάμεων).46 The idea that the earth is founded upon the waters was certainly present in Greek antiquity,47 and it is also to be found in Jewish apocalyptic.48 The cosmic disturbances in the second part of the Sibyl's discourse in Vis I.ii-iii.4 are an inversion of Isaiah 40.3-5 whereby a royal highway was to be prepared at the end of the Babylonian exile for Yahweh to enter again the city of Jerusalem. In our Hermas text, the highway is not for Yahweh but for "His chosen ones." The highway in this case is the cosmic disturbances which are meant to characterize the end of this age and all that is in it. The total destruction of this age must take place before the "chosen ones" can receive the "promise." So we see here that, as in our Rhoda passage, there are also two themes intricately linked together, creation and destruction. Thus, we can be satisfied that the Sibyl is recapitulating the same message, albeit in a less philosophically technical way, as the heavenly Rhoda.

As we noted before, M. Dibelius maintains that the Sibyl figure is only a model and the message that she conveyed has nothing to do with the Sibylline verses. Granted, the Sibyl figure does not convey ipissima verba the contents of our extant Sibyllina. However, we maintain that the contents of the above Sibyl passage are fully consonant with what we know about the Jewish Sibylline Oracles extant in the time of Hermas. We do know that creation was one of the central themes of the ancient pagan oracles attributed to the Sibyl.49 The Jewish Sibyllinists continued this emphasis on creation and most likely adapted the pagan accounts to reconcile it with monotheism.50

One early Christian apologist, in the generation after the Shepherd, was Theophilus of Antioch who attributes the creatio ex nihilo concept

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46. 1 Kgs 17.1; II Kgs 19.20; Ps 47.9; 79.5, 8, 20; 83.9; 88.9; Is 42.13.
48. E.g., II Enoch, "The Lord placed foundations in the unknown, and spread forth both visible and invisible heavens. He fixed the earth upon the waters." Cf. also II Peter 3.5-7 where the heavens and earth were created out of water by the word of God and were destroyed by the same word in the deluge and the existing heavens and earth will be destroyed also by the same word. The author's point, asserts R. Bauckham, Jude, 2 Peter, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 50 (Texas: Word Books 1983), 299, is that "since the world was created by God's word and has already been destroyed once by God's word, we can confidently expect the future judgment which has also been decreed by his word."
49. Lucan, Civil War 5.179ff.
directly to the Greek Sibyl. Theophilus equates the inspiration of the Hebrew prophets with the inspiration of the Sibyl among the Greeks. This inspiration was particularly evident in the Sibyl’s espousal of *createio ex nihilo*:

And first, they [i.e., the Hebrew prophets and the Greek Sibyl] taught us with one consent that God made all things out of nothing (οὐκ ἔφερε τὰ ράβδα έκ τοῦ κόσμου); for nothing was coeval with God: but He being His own place, and wanting nothing, and existing before the ages, willed to make man by whom He might be known; for him, therefore, He prepared the world. 51

However, it is most probable that Theophilus was building upon the Jewish *Sibyllina* which supported both God’s providence in being the sole creator 52 and the related theme of the certain imminent destruction of the world. 53 As a polemic against the pagan notion of gods as created beings, Theophilus quotes the Sibyl:

> For if the gods begat, and each remains Immortal, then the race of gods must be more numerous than mortals, and the throne so great that mortals find no room to stand. 54

And the transcendence of God is evinced with nothing else coeval with Him prior to creation,

> There is only one uncreated God, Who reigns alone, all powerful, great . . . Worship Him, then, the self-existent God, The unbegotten Ruler of the world, Who only was from everlasting time, And shall to everlasting still abide. . . . 55

51. Theophilus, Autol. 2.10. It is clear that Theophilus understood Genesis 1.1 as a proof text for the doctrine *createio ex nihilo*, albeit, with dubious reasoning. In the LXX version of Genesis 1.1 “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” the word “created” stands before “God.” Theophilus emphasizes the fact that the word “God” comes after “beginning” and “created” in order to demonstrate “that the living God might be known by His works and that [it might be known that] by His Word God created the heavens and the earth and all that is therein.” This idea is also found in later rabbinic midrash (GenR I.12).

52. Theophilus, Autol. 2.10.

53. Theophilus, Autol. 2.30; Justin Martyr, Apol. 1.20, “Indeed, Sibyl and Hesiods foretold that all corruptible things are to be destroyed by fire”; Lact. Inst. 2.9. Compare the ancient woman explaining that the world will be destroyed by blood and fire in Vit IViii.3 and Sib. Orac. III.287 where “the heavenly God will send a king and will judge each man in blood and the gleam of fire.”

54. Theophilus, Autol. 2.3.

55. Theophilus, Autol. 2.36.

Lactantius in his refutation of Tully, who denied that God created matter and hence the world, also appealed to the “verses of the Sibyls, who make the same announcement [that the world was made by divine Providence].” 56 As a result, the Arians’ implications of the world being made are explained in the same passage,

> . . . matter cannot always have existed, for if it had existed it would be incapable of change. For that which always was, does not always cease to be; and that which had a beginning must of necessity be without an end. Moreover, it is easier for that which had a beginning to be without an end, than for that which had no beginning to have an end. Therefore, if matter was not made, nothing can be made from it. But if nothing can be made from it, then matter can have no existence. For matter is that out of which something is made. But everything out of which anything is made, inasmuch as it has received the hand of the artificer, is destroyed (destructus), and begins to be some other thing. Therefore, since matter had an end, at the time when the world was made out of it, it also had a beginning . . . from whom could that beginning have been, except from God?

Therefore, against Dibelius, there is evidence, found amongst the early Apologists, which links the message of the Sibyl with the Providence and Transcendence of God in His acts of creating and destroying the world, which is precisely the message being conveyed by the Sibyl in Vision Iii.4. There is nothing non-Sibylline about this passage.

IV. HERMAS’ THEOLOGICAL AND ECCLESIOLOGICAL AGENDA FOR THE USE OF THE SIBYLLO-CREATEIO EX NIHILO MOTIF

It is probable that Hermas employed the *Sibyllo-createio ex nihilo* motif with Roman converts in mind. Obviously, the Roman converts would be very familiar with the Cumae Sibyl figure and hold her in high esteem. 57 Hermas’ intention is to redirect these Roman converts from what he considers their compromise to the vacuity of this age and their susceptibility to the roving false teachers, to the hope in the substantiality of the coming age. He uses the *Sibyllo-createio ex nihilo* motif to demonstrate first the Christian conception of God’s Transcendence (i.e., His eternal attribute) and Providence over the affairs of mankind and the certainty of the destruction of this age. Having built on this theological foundation,
the author of the Shepherd then progresses to hyperbolize the church into an object of faith and instrument of salvation, thereby providing a concrete focal point for the faithful to cling to during the imminent tribulation which must take place in order to usher in the new age.

**The Problems in the Church Addressed by Hermas**

The problems with Hermas' church largely stemmed from contentment with this age and unbelief, which we shall argue is the main intent with the Shepherd's lavish use of the word for double-mindedness (διώκοντες). This unbelief or διώκοντες centered upon the lack of expectancy and enthusiasm for "the good things to come" in the next age (Vis I.1.8; III.4; II.i.6; III.iv.3; Sim IV.7) which would be ushered in with the parousia of the Master and the completion of the building of the Tower (Vis III.viii.9; Sim IX.x.2).

The brunt of Hermas' attack is on the wealthier members of his church. He charges them with being attached to this world (Mand XII.i.1–2; Sim I.1). Since they are totally engrossed in their businesses, the rich serve their Lord in nothing (Sim IV.5). They do not cleave to the saints (Sim VIII.viii.1; ix.1), and so the poorer members of the church go through undue suffering which their riches could well alleviate (Vis III.ix.6). Even though they might remain in the faith, the rich do not do the works of the faith (Sim VIII.ix.1; IX.xx.1–2). Because of their wealth and business they are prone to deny their Lord (Vis III.vi.5; Sim VIII.viii.2) and so are in danger of eternal destruction (Sim VII.i.4). According to C. Osiel, wealth and business are joined with the "overriding ethical concern of Hermas, διώκοντες, which at least in this context seems to mean the inability to decide and act one way or the other, for or against the Lord" (Sim VIII.viii and IX.ix). Another group of double-minded people (οἱ διώκοντες) are those who are "weakened by the occupations of this life and have given themselves up to worry and have not cast their cares upon the Lord" (Vis III.xi.3). Thus, they have no power (δυνάμεις) from their weaknesses (Vis III.xi.2). These double-minded tend to be schismatic (Vis III.xii.3; Sim VII.viii.1) and under the duress of persecution also waiver between denying or confessing the Lord (Sim IX.xxviii.4). In general, they are withered in their faith (Sim IX.xxviii.2) and Hermas is concerned about their ability to endure the coming tribulation.

Some leaders of Hermas' church are also schismatic (Vis III.ix.7–10; Sim VIII.vi.2), quarreling over being in first place or even over the question of reputation (Sim VIII.vi.6). Could it be possible that these double-minded leaders were attempting to usurp Hermas' authority (Sim VII.6)? Invariably, these ministers who have "ministered amiss" by taking advantage of the widows and orphans (Sim IX.xxvi.2) do not cleave to the servants of God.

The external forces assailing Hermas' church also prey on the double-minded. The false prophets of Mandate XI corrupt the minds of the double-minded by practicing soothsaying to those who come asking about the future. Others, most likely with elements of Gnosticism, introduce "strange doctrines" and corrupt the servants of God, abrogating the need for repentance, "but persuading them with their foolish doctrines" (Sim VIII.vi.5). As Leclercq observes:

An extreme trait which has its chronological value and which must be raised with care, is the indication of Gnosticism which Hermas has not named, but which he denounces when he combats the opinion that the resurrection of the body is a myth and that the sins of the body are without importance. Hermas devotes Similitude VI as a corrective to the Gnostic tendency to divide flesh and spirit by insisting upon purity of life now, and on the hope of a resurrection of the flesh hereafter.

**The Necessity for Tribulation and the Destruction of this Age**

We have discussed previously the philosophical implication that the world would inevitably be destroyed through Hermas' intentional use of a creatio ex nihilo type of language. The question we are attempting to examine now is Hermas' theological, or as we shall see more aptly, his ecclesiological, reason for the destruction of this age.

Hermas' concern is that the double-minded Christians be strengthened in order to endure "an impending persecution which he understands as part of a larger eschatological event, 'the Great Tribulation'". In the "little apocalypse" of Vision IV, Hermas on his travels on the Via Campania comes across an immense, eschatological Leviathan, with fiery...

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38. The nominal and verbal root of διώκοντες is used over 50 times in the Shepherds; 13 times in Mandate xi–x. Used only twice in the NT: James 1:8; 4:8.


40. H. Leclercq, "Hermas (Le Pasteur d')," Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie, 6(2) [1936]: 2282.

41. Bauckham, Great Tribulation, 30.
loquists coming out of its mouth, rushing towards him. Hermas escapes by not being double-minded but rather casting his cares upon God (Vis IV.17; ii.4).

It is clear that the apocalyptic beast denotes not the power of Rome, but the figure of the great tribulation which is to come (Vis IV.ii.5). This great tribulation is no less than the destruction of this world as evinced by the explanations given for the different colors on the beast's head: black which signifies this world; the colour of fire and blood which means that this world must be destroyed (ἵνα τὸν κόσμον τοῦτον . . . ἀπολέσαται) by blood and fire; gold which is the color for those who have fled from this world and been proven; and white which signifies the world to come, in which the elect will live (Vis IV.iii).

Hermas affirms two very interesting facts relating to the world and the Church. First, the creation of the world was for the Church (Vis I.i.6; II.iv.1). This is particularly evident in the Shepherd's understanding of the function of the first created angels in the building of the Tower (Vis III.iv.1) and recapitulated in the parable of the vineyard (Sim V.). The function of the angels is the eschatological realization of the Church, as well as the building up and ordaining over creation. As Pernveden comments:

Creation in its widest sense could not be said to have happened for the sake of the Church if the history of the Church was not also the history of creation. When therefore the angels rule over creation, in so doing they are bringing the Church to realization. To rule over creation is to build up the Church. 

Second, the destruction of the world is also for the Church (Vis I.i.4). Thus, in the above apocalypse, the function of the great tribulation is double-edged: to purify those who remain and who pass through the flames without denying their Lord and to send scourgings on the double-minded (Vis IV.ii.6).

In this way, the great tribulation is necessary as a purgatorial agent to make the saints useful for the building of the Tower (Vis IV.ii.4). With particular reference to the wealthy faithful, the great tribulation causes their wealth to be cut away (Sim IX.xxx.5) through government sanctioned confiscation of their properties (Sim I.1–5). Hence, Hermas uses the popular Christian exhortation that the faithful live as strangers in the world (Sim I.1). It is when the Church is fully purified that the Master returns and the new age is ushered in (Sim IX.v.6; xviii).

The Divine Source of the Church

Hermas' strategy to divert the double-minded Christians' compromise with this age and to immunize them from external false teachers was to hypostatize the Church, to portray the Church as a transcendent reality in contrast with the transitoriness of the world. This first step was to demonstrate the Divine source of the Church. The second step was to demonstrate the Providence of God over His Church. After the vision of the building of the Tower, the ancient lady asserts that "the tower has been founded by the utterance of the almighty and glorious Name, and is maintained by the unseen power of the Master" (Vis III.i.iii.5).

As we have seen in our survey of Greek philosophical thought, the creatio ex nihilo concept necessitates a beginning and an end to this age. Therefore, it also delineates, or puts boundaries on, the beginning and end of this age. With this in mind, the author of the Shepherd hypostatizes the Church by asserting that She was created before the world (Vis II.iv.1) and for this reason, the world was created on Her behalf (Vis III.i.6; III.i.4). As in Col 1.16–17 with the pre-existent Christ, the temporal nuance, as well as the primacy of the Church is implied here, through this use of creatio ex nihilo language. Indeed, the author, I contend, intends to demonstrate the primacy of the Church through his insistence on its temporal pre-existence.

This concept of pre-creation and primacy in creation was a common Jewish method of exalting a desired figure's status and importance. In the Pesika Rabbati, the king Messiah existed in God's thought even before the world was created. In the Haggadah, in the beginning, two thousand years before the Heaven and the earth, seven things were created: the Torah . . . the Divine Throne . . . Paradise.

63. Bauckham notes that the allusion to Daniel in the Lion's den (the source of the image in Vis IV.ii.4) prefigures the spiritual, not the physical, safety of Christians in the great tribulation (Great Tribulation, 32).
65. The world to come is summer for the righteous, but winter for the sinners (Sim IV.2). Sinners shall be burnt because they did not repent and the heathen because they did not know the one who created them.

66. Cf. 2 Ebr 13:14; 1 Peter 1:3; Martyrdom of Polycarp, Didache.
67. In response to Hermas' question why the Sibyl/Church was created old, the young man replies, "Because she was created the first of all things. For this reason she is old; and for her sake the world was established."
68. PesR. XXXVIII.
... Hell ... the Celestial Sanctuary ... the Name of the Messiah, and a Voice that cries aloud, "Return, you children of men."

The probably Jewish Prayer of Joseph, whose parallels to both Hellenistic and Aramaic materials would suggest a first-century date, mentions the pre-creation of the patriarchs. Jacob asserts that he is "the firstborn (πρωτόγονος) of every living thing to whom God gives life." This assertion is explicated when, having wrestled with Uriel, he replies to the angel, "Am I not Israel, the first minister before the face of God?" Thus, we see here that the claim to pre-creation is the implication of one's closeness to God. Thus, according to the Jewish conception of pre-creation, the fact that the Church was created first (πρώτη), should be understood as an absolute attribute of the Church: it is the first, it is spiritual. Of course, we also see this in the New Testament, i.e., in Col 1.18, where Christ is "the πρωτότοκος of the dead in order that he may be made first (πρωτότοκος) in all things."

The Shepherd of Hermas is the first Christian work which conveys the concept of the pre-created Church. This ecclesiological extension of the pre-creation of the Church is also found in 2 Clement, which is another document which probably represents Roman Christianity in the mid-second century. In 14.1 the author states:

... if we do the will of our Father, God, we shall belong to the first Church, the spiritual one which was created (ἐκείνην θεότητα) before the sun and the moon.

R. Grant maintains that the author of 2 Clement "seems to have been more subject to Gnostic, or semi-Gnostic, thought than Hermas had been." However, as I have attempted to demonstrate, the church in Rome at the time of the Shepherd's composition was also subject to Gnostic infiltration. The fact that both authors employ the unique ecclesiological extension of the first-creation of the Church within such a small span of time and the same location seems to warrant the same cause, namely, some form of Gnosticism.

Pernveden makes the observation, in light of these references to pre-creation, that Hermas understands the Church as something more than a community of associates:

He [Hermas] has a speculative conception of the Church which makes it appear as a transcendent heavenly reality, the relation of which to the group of believers is as follows: this group forms the Church, at the same time as the Church is the object of faith for the group. It is precisely the intention of the author of the Shepherd to make the Church the object of faith for the Roman community. This is evident from what Pernveden calls the "cosmogenic element" of the Church. The Church in the Shepherd does not have its origin from Christ's death and resurrection as in Eph 1.22, but rather "it stretches back under a hidden form far beyond His act of salvation." In contrast to Pernveden (p. 22), the Shepherd's use of the term ἐν τῷ ἔθους διάκονος in Vis II.6 and Mand I.1, does indeed warrant a chronology of creation; the Church was created first, and then the world (Vis II.iv.1).

The main implication for the Church becoming an object of faith is that it becomes instrumental in salvation, on the basis that She was pre-created (Vis II.iv.1) and hence, spiritual, and thereby, shall surely transcend the coming great tribulation. In this way, only when one chooses to cleave to the Church, can one be certain of one's salvation. This latter element is evident in the Shepherd with the building of the tower where one's salvation was inextricably linked to being incorporated into the tower, which is the Church (Vis III.iii.3). The Church's instrumentality in salvation is possibly also present in 2 Clement 14:1, where the author exhorts his readers:

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69. So Origen, Commentary on John.
73. Various other rabbinic traditions at various times also held that the Torah was created before the rest of creation (e.g., GenR I.1; LF VIII.2; ExodR XXXIX.9; LevR XIX.1; CantR V.11; b. Nid 39b; b. Pes. 56a; SijfreDeut 37; Tanm Dake Elidu). I thank G. K. Beale for this point.
74. Pernveden, Concept of the Church, 28.
75. PesR VI.6 gives the following interpretation of Kings 7.51: "Thus all the work ... was finished," which is the completion of the Temple as the completion of God's six days of creation.
77. See also Sim VIII 6.5: "For they were hypocrites, and introduced strange doctrines and corrupted the servants of God, and especially those who have sinned, not suffering them to repent, but persuading them with their foolish doctrines."
78. Pernveden, Concept of the Church, 19.
79. Pernveden, Concept of the Church, 20.
80. Pernveden, Concept of the Church, 20.
81. Joly, Hermas, Le Pasteur, 29, quotes Peschmann, "elle [the Church] est une condition nécessaire au pardon divin."
Therefore, let us choose to belong to the Church of life, that we may win salvation.\(^{[2]}\)

Thus, it seems that it is Hermas’ and Clement’s intention to highlight the Church’s instrumentality in salvation as a counter to Gnosticism.\(^{[3]}\)

**The Divine Providence over the Church**

“If one were to single out one idea that captured the religious sense of the Romans it would be divine providence, the notion that the gods exercised influence over the affairs of men and events of history.”\(^{[4]}\) Hermas uses the *Sibylla-creation ex nihilo* motif to demonstrate the eternity and hence, the Transcendence of God and the Son, who is the Spirit from His creation.\(^{[5]}\) However, there is a paramount distinction between the concept of pre-existence and that of first-creation. There is no trace of the Spirit or the Son being created. “The Spirit simply pre-exists (τὸ πρῶτον). In contrast, the Church and the angels were first-created (οἱ πρώτοι κριστιλευκοί). God’s Providence over the affairs of men is thereby demonstrated in *Similitude Vviii* by the rigid hierarchical relationship between God who created the people (in the Church) and gave them over to the Son who in turn appointed the angels over them to keep them.”\(^{[6]}\) The Providence of the Son of God is evinced in that since He supports the whole world and the Church, He can support those who bear His Name and undergo the great tribulation (*Sim IX.xiv.5*).

82. The subject of 2 Clement 14.2 (δανεισμοὶ & εἰς τῆς ιστορίας τῶν θρησκειῶν, ἐν ὧν ἡ κόσμος ἀδελφόν) is ambiguous. The two possibilities include a masculine subject (i.e., Jesus), which is grammatically less probable than with a female subject (i.e., Church) but more in line with the context and the history of doctrine. However, the nearest antecedent to *δανεισμοὶ* favors the latter option. If so, then 2 Clement 14.2 would also support the above point “but she [i.e., the Church] was made manifest in the last days that she (the Church) might save us.”


84. Wilken, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 58.

85. God’s providence and transcendency is evinced in the *ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ* - *ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ* pair of Mandate 1.1 where Hermas is commanded to believe that God is one, “who made [τέκνοι] all things and perfected [ἐκτείνοντα] them, and made all things to be out of that which was not (ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ τὰ πάντα ἐκτείνοντα).” This *ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ* - *ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ* pair is extant also in *Similitude V.5.2* where the providence of God is demonstrated by His giving strength to all creation, “He who created [τέκνοι] everything and perfected [ἐκτείνοντα] it and gave it strength [δυναμοῦ]...”

86. The significance of Providence for this first-creation idea is observed in Vision III when the six first-created angels are pronounced greater than the other angels involved with bringing stones to the tower in *Vis III.4.2*. It is their responsibility to oversee the building of the tower which is the Church (*Vis III.4.1*).

**CONCLUSION**

Several prominent Apostolic and early Church Fathers regarded the pagan Sibyl as a pre-Christian witness to the truth of Christian prophecy. In their incorporation of the Sibyl figure, these doctors of the Church held that two modes of divine inspiration operated before the advent of Christianity, the prophets for the Hebrews and the Sibyl for the Greeks.

The *Shepherd of Hermas* was the first Christian work to utilize the pagan Sibyl figure. It seems quite reasonable to contend, as a result of this research, that the author of the *Shepherd* held a similar theory of divine inspiration as these early Church Fathers. The evidence that the old woman, who is depicted as a divinely inspired prophetess several times in the Vision section of the *Shepherd*, is intended to represent the Sibyl figure seems to be conclusive.

We have seen that the *Shepherd* incorporates both the figure of the pagan Sibyl, and, consonant with the use of the pagan prophetesses in later Christian Apologetic works, it seems very likely that the voice of the Sibyl is also employed.

The evidence for the presence of the *voice* in the *Shepherd* can be summarized as follows:

The Pagan and Jewish Sibylline Oracles exist in the time of the author of the *Shepherd* had significant emphasis on the *creation* of the world and its *destruction*. These two emphases, on the creation and destruction of the world, are also paramount, we contend, in the *Shepherd*. First, the apocalyptic beast of Vision IV denotes, not the power of Rome, but the figure of the great tribulation which is to come. This coming great tribulation forecast in the *Shepherd* is no less than the total destruction of this age.

Second, the *Shepherd* utilizes a technical term from Greek philosophy, creation from non-existence (ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ἐν τῷ), up to this point not used by any Christian writer, to emphasize an intricate link between *creation* and *destruction*. Mainstream Greek philosophy held that creation and destruction were inseparable, albeit philosophically untenable. The author of the *Shepherd* employs this term twice in strategic places within the composition of the book; in the first creation statement in the Vision section (*Vis I.6*) and the first creation statement in the Mandates section (*Mand. I.1*). The evidence seems to indicate that the author of the *Shepherd* systematized to a certain extent a novel view of cosmogony, namely *creation ex nihilo*. Thus is demonstrated the *modus ponens* of Hermas’ argument. Anything that is created must inevitably be destroyed, but the world was created, hence it must one day be destroyed.
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The thesis of this essay is the historical development of the concept of the Church as a corporate body in Christian thought. The essay explores how the concept of the Church has evolved over time and how it has been shaped by various theological and cultural factors. The essay argues that the concept of the Church as a corporate body has been influenced by the development of political and social structures, as well as by the changing understandings of the relationship between the Church and the state. The essay concludes by examining the implications of this development for our understanding of the Church today.