

What was God doing before He created the Heavens and the Earth?*)

I

Throughout his long life as a Christian thinker and teacher, Augustine often returned to the opening verses of Genesis, more often, and with greater sophistication than any writer before him¹). Some of the passion with which he expounded Genesis surely came from his first recorded encounters with Scripture, when under Manichaean direction the problems of the two genealogies of Christ, the Genesis account of creation, anthropomorphism, and the sinful lives of the patriarchs had diverted him from his search for wisdom and his initial identification of wisdom with the name of Jesus²). The account of his conversion to *philosophia* and his first turning to Scripture in *Confessions* III. 4-5,

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¹) There is a careful account in Aimé SOLIGNAC, "Exégèse et Métaphysique. Genèse 1. 1-3 chez saint Augustin", in *In principio. Interprétations des premiers versets de la Genèse*, Centre d'Etudes des religions du livre (Paris, 1973), 153-171. On Augustine's concern with these verses, see Jacques DE BLIC, "Le processus de création d'après saint Augustin", in *Mélanges offerts au R. P. Ferdinand Cavallera* (Toulouse, 1948), 171-189; William A. CHRISTIAN, "Augustine on the Creation of the World", *Harvard Theological Review* 46 (1953), 1-25; Gilles PELLAND, *Cinq études d'Augustin sur le début de la Genèse* (Toulouse-Montréal, 1972); Joseph MOREAU, "Le temps et la création selon S. Augustin", in MOREAU, *Stoïcisme, Épicurisme, Tradition Hellénique* (Paris, 1979), 167-181; E. P. MEIJERING, *Augustin über Schöpfung, Ewigkeit und Zeit. Das elfte Buch der Bekenntnisse* (Leiden, 1979).

²) These initial stumbling-blocks in Scripture are recorded in *Sermo* 51. iv. 5; *De Gen. contra Man.* I. ii. 3ff, and 1. 17. 27-8; *Conf.* III. 5-7. See the Introduction of A. SOLIGNAC to *Confessions, Livres I-VII*, Bibliothèque Augustinienne, Vol. 13 (Paris, 1962), 128-9. On Augustine's developing knowledge of Scripture, see G. L. BONNER in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed., P. R. ACKROYD and C. F. EVANS (Cambridge, 1970), Vol. I, *From the Beginnings to Jerome*, 541-562, and, on Scripture generally, Peter BROWN, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), 162-3, 180-1, 262-9. On Ambrose, from whom Augustine seems to have received his appreciation of Scripture which had been aborted by the Manichaeans in 373, see Jean PÉPIN, *Théologie cosmique et théologie chrétienne* (Paris, 1964). Eugene TESELLE, *Augustine the Theologian* (New York, 1970), 197-223, ranks Augustine's Genesis theology with that of Philo and Origen.

introduces, not only his discovery of wisdom, but his immature attempts to probe the veiled mysteries of Scripture first on his own initiative, and then at the instigation of the vain and empty words of the Manichaeans³). The history of Augustine's first experience with Scripture, particularly the ease with which he was misled by the Manichaeans, may help to explain his continual return to the text, and particularly his concern over the proper interpretation of the creation story, his sense that these verses were, as they had been for Philo, the key to wisdom⁴). Having rejected them once, Augustine kept returning to them, lest others fall into the errors that had once entrapped him.

Thus, not merely proper exegesis, but improper exegesis as well, characterized Augustine's approach to Scripture in general and Genesis in particular. Much of Book XI of the *Confessions*, the first of the three exegetical books on Genesis that conclude that great work, is framed, in fact, by an example of one of these improper exegetical questions. In XI. 10 Augustine cites the example of some people, *pleni vetustatis suae*, who ask

What was God doing before he created the heavens and the earth? If he was resting, they say, and was not making anything, why not continue to do nothing as he had done in the past?

Augustine repeats the question in XI. 12 at the beginning of the long meditation on eternity and time which occupies the rest of Book XI, repeating the question for the last time at XI. 30. The question, then,

³) St. Augustine's interest specifically in Manichaean interpretations of the opening verses of Genesis is not always noted. See H.-C. PUECH, *Le Manichéisme* (Paris, 1949), 69-72, and esp. 157, n. 281. See also Geo WIDENGREN, "La sagesse dans le Manichéisme", in *Mélanges d'histoire des religions offerts à Henri-Charles Puech* (Paris, 1974), 501-515. Cf. *Conf.* XI. 13 and *De mor. eccl.* 18. 34; *De util. cred.* 1-2. BROWN, *Augustine*, 54. For the Manichaean myth, see François DECRET, *Aspects du Manichéisme dans l'Afrique romaine* (Paris, 1970), 185-252, and idem, *L'Afrique manichéenne (IV-V siècles). Étude historique et doctrinale*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1978), esp. I, 239-352; M. TARDIEU, *Trois mythes gnostiques* (Paris, 1974), 49f; John P. MAHER, "Saint Augustine and Manichean Cosmogony", *Augustinian Studies* 10 (1979), 91-104; idem, *Saint Augustine's Defense of the Hexameron against the Manichaeans* (Rome-St. Meinrad, Ind., 1946).

⁴) PHILO, *De opif. mundi*, 54; cf. Arnold EHRHARDT, *The Beginning: A Study of the Greek Philosophical Approaches to Creation from Anaximander to St. John* (Manchester, 1968), 202; E. R. GOODENOUGH, *By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (New Haven, 1935), 121-126, 326-7, 345-7; H. A. WOLFSON, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Vol. I (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 180, 295-324; Pierre GEOLTRAIN, "Quelques lectures juives et chrétiennes des premiers versets de la Genèse, de Quomran au Nouveau Testament", *In principio*, 47-60, at 51-55.

constitutes something of a leitmotif of Book XI, important in itself and also as an example of the wrong way to approach scripture, this one question standing as synecdoche for all wrong questions.

The answer that Augustine says that others sometimes give, but that he will not give — *alta scrutantibus gehennas parabat* — appealed to John Calvin and has delighted sceptics ever since. Martin Luther, in his characteristically explicit fashion, once cast the answer as: “God was sitting in a birch wood, making rods to beat people who ask impertinent questions”⁵).

Augustine offers two answers to the question: either, that *principium* refers to the *verbum*, Jesus, or that the question is improper because time itself was created and therefore is not predicable of the creator at all. This second answer was probably derived from Plotinus (*Enneads* III. 7), ultimately from Plato’s *Timaeus* (37d-38b) and Parmenides⁶). In its Augustinian-Christian form, the doctrine became the orthodox Christian distinction between eternity and time. It was used by Eriugena to argue against Gottschalk on the possibility of predestination and occupies a prominent place in the *Summa theologiae* of Aquinas (I.q. 14 art. 13) and was echoed by Dante (*Paradiso* xvii. 18). Its philosophical source,

⁵) CHRISTIAN, “Augustine on The Creation of the World”, 5-9, discusses *Conf.* XI. 10-13, citing the later interest of Calvin (*Institutes* I. 14.1; *Commentary on Genesis*) and Kant. See also Richard STAUFFER, “L’Exégèse de Genèse 1. 1-3 chez Luther et Calvin”, in *principio*, 245-256, and E. P. MEIJERING, *Calvin wider die Neugierde* (Nieuwkoop, 1980), esp. 52-56. There is a merry meditation on the question in J. M. ROSS, “Continuation” in CICERO, *On the Nature of the Gods*, trans. H. C. P. MCGREGOR (Harmondsworth, 1972), 246-7, a hypothetical continuation of Velleius’ line of Epicurean argument.

⁶) Augustine’s rejection of *tempus* in favor of an eternal *nunc* for God and his qualitative distinction between succession in infinite time and non-durational eternity were necessary correlates of his other views of creation, particularly those which ran counter to widely-held philosophical doctrines, such as the *deus* (or *demiurgos*) *artifex* (with its corollary of a superior model from which to create), the pre-existence of formless matter (cf. *De div. quaest.* 46. 2), the recurring cycles of creation and destruction, and the problem of an immaterial, immutable being creating a material, mutable cosmos. The relevant materials from classical philosophy are discussed below, n. 14. On *principium* and *Verbum*, see *De Gen. ad. litt.* I. 2. There are extensive discussions in J. GUITTON, *Le temps et l’éternité chez Plotin et saint Augustin* (Paris, 1959); Werner BEIERWALTES, *Plotin über Ewigkeit und Zeit* (Frankfurt, 1967); Ernst H. KANTOROWICZ, *The King’s Two Bodies* (Princeton, 1957), 275-280. The idea of non-durational eternity in earlier Greek thought has been treated by John WHITTAKER, *God Time Being: Two Studies in the Transcendental Tradition in Greek Philosophy*, Symbolae Osloenses Fasc. Supplet. XXIII (Oslo, 1971); PÉPIN, *Théologie cosmique*. Most recently, see G. J. P. O’DALY, “Augustine on the Measurement of Time: Some Comparisons with Aristotelian and Stoic Texts”, in H. J. BLUMENTHAL and R. A. MARKUS, eds., *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought: Essays in Honor of A. H. Armstrong* (London, 1981), 171-179.

although not its doctrine of creation, thus appears to have been Neo-Platonist, and Neo-Platonism marked much of Augustine's thought between his separation from Manicheism and his assumption of the bishopric of Hippo⁷). Neo-Platonist critical techniques seem, as others have noted and as I hope to show elsewhere in connection with Augustine's early uses of the term *curiositas*, to have been an important instrument in Augustine's savaging of the Manichaeans and a principal vehicle of his own intellectual and spiritual return to orthodox Christianity.

Book XI of the *Confessions* was not, however, Augustine's first citation of the "Manichaean" question. The reason that we know that the Manichaeans are those who pose the question in *Confessions* XI is given in a passage in the *De genesi contra Manichaeos* (I. 1. 3)⁸). But even if the Manichaeans used the question, as Augustine implies that they did, they did not invent it, nor were they the first to apply it to Genesis. The same question (and a similar objection to its impropriety) is cited by Irenaeus (*Adversus haereses* II. 28. 4), and its raisers are not Manichaeans, but Gnostics. The role of Manicheism as in some ways the heir of Gnostic approaches to Christianity and Judaism is, of course, generally accepted, and it is understandable that the question might appeal to the former in much the same ways as it had appealed to the latter⁹). Between Irenaeus and Augustine, the question appears once in

⁷) The various specific neo-Platonists, whether Plotinus or Porphyry, have been discussed and considered from THEILER and ALFARIC to HADOT and O'CONNELL; the bibliography is large. In addition, see A. SOLIGNAC, "Doxographies et manuels dans la formation philosophique de saint Augustin", *Recherches Augustiniennes* 1 (1958), 113-148; P. HENRY, *Plotin et l'Occident* (Louvain, 1934), 78-95, and, most recently, Robert RUSSELL, "The Role of Neoplatonism in St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*", in *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought*, 160-170.

⁸) *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* I. 2. 3: *Primum ergo librum Veteris Testamenti qui inscribitur Genesis sic solent Manichaei reprehendere. Quod scriptum est, In Principio fecit Deus caelum et terram, quaerunt, in quo principio, et dicunt: Si in principio aliquo temporis fecit Deus caelum et terram, quid agebat antequam feceret caelum et terram?* As will be seen immediately below, earlier citations of this question occur in Irenaeus and Origen. Was it still being asked, now by Manichaeans, in the late fourth century? Augustine certainly implies that it was. In this text (as in that of Irenaeus, cited below), the critics use the term *quid agebat*; in *Conf.* XI. 10 they ask *quid faciebat*. Thus, there might be a slight variation in meaning between "what was God doing" and "What was God making" between Irenaeus' Gnostics and Augustine's Manichaeans, although this possibility does not alter the significance or form of the question. If the question was in fact being asked by Manichaeans late in the fourth century, might it have been a question that the Manichaeans invited the young Augustine himself to ask about Genesis I. 1.?

⁹) On Manichaeans and Gnostics, see Kurt RUDOLPH, *Die Gnosis* (Göttingen, 1977), 349-365, with further references; W. H. C. Frend, "The Gnostic-Manichaean Tradition in

the writings of Origen, and it may be useful to consider these two earlier Christian usages before searching for the question's ultimate source.

II

Book I of Irenaeus' *Adversus haereses* consists of a series of descriptions of Gnostic beliefs. In Book II Irenaeus then refutes these doctrines one by one, criticizing Gnostic psychology and method as well as Gnostic error. In II. 24 he takes up the problem of Gnostic numerology. Perhaps exasperated by this time over Gnostic methods of explanation, Irenaeus then devotes four chapters (II. 25-28) to the problem of the proper and improper uses of the human intellect in terms of knowing God. Since man is infinitely inferior to God (II. 25, 3.) he therefore lacks the capacity to know all about God. Violating the proper order of human knowledge leads man to rise up against God Himself and fall into madness:

It is better and more useful that men of little or no learning exist and become through charity alone the friends of God than for men to assert that they know much, and much about God, and become blasphemers, makers of another God the Father. Wherefore Paul says (1 Cor. 8. 1) *Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifies* ... because he knew that some people, lifted up by their supposed knowledge, fell away from the love of God ... there is no greater puffing up than to think that one is better or more perfect than his Creator who shaped him and gave the breath of life and granted him the power To Be itself ... It is better, as I said, to know nothing at all, not even one cause of why any of the things that have been made have been

Roman North Africa", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 4 (1953), 13-26; Peter BROWN, "The Diffusion of Manichaeism in the Roman Empire", in BROWN, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (New York, 1972), 94-118. A good recent survey of early Gnosticism is that of Edwin M. YAMAUCHI, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1973), and RUDOLPH, *Die Gnosis*, 291-311. On the Christian encounter with these problems, see the sources cited above, n. 1, and J. C. M. VAN WINDEN, "In the Beginning: Some Observations on the Patristic Interpretations of Genesis 1. 1", *Vigiliae Christianae* 19 (1963), 105-121; idem, "The Early Exegesis of 'Heaven and Earth' in Genesis 1. 1", in *Romanitas und Christianitas. Studio Iano Henrico Waszink* (Amsterdam-London, 1973), 371-382; idem, "Terra autem stupida quadam erat admiratione: Reflexions on a Remarkable Translation of Genesis 1. 2a", in R. VAN DEN BROEK and M. J. VERMASEREN, eds., *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religious Presented to Gilles Quispel* (Leiden, 1981), 458-467; Pierre NAUTIN, "Genèse 1. 1-2, de Justin à Origène", *In principio*, 61-94. The best introduction to the general subject is Gregory T. ARMSTRONG, *Die Genesis in der alten Kirche. Die drei Kirchenväter* (Tübingen, 1962), which considers Justin, Irenaeus, and Tertullian.

made, and rather simply to believe God and to persevere in the love of Him, than to be puffed up by knowledge and to fall from His love, which gives man life. It is better to learn nothing except that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who was crucified for us, rather than by subtle questions and quibbling minutiae to fall into impiety.

Irenaeus then goes on to deal with the proper method of interpreting parables, emphasizing that since God has placed some things squarely within the power of humans to understand (II. 27. 1), it behooves humans to interpret parables rather in accordance with the rest of their knowledge than toward ambiguity. Moreover, ambiguity leads to diversity of opinion, and the example of the pagan philosophers' disagreements ought to caution Christians from their experience. Such a method would lead Christians to a state of always inquiring but never finding (Matt. 7. 7, a key text in early heresiology), and seeking in a manner contrary to the message of creation and revelation — that the two are in harmony (II. 27. 2). Since God has revealed enough of the truth to lead us to salvation (II. 28. 1), it is suitable that we should use the powers He gave us to increase love, rather than divide in disaffection.

We should leave difficult matters to God and dwell instead upon those things that lie "before our feet": Irenaeus here cites a number of examples of earthly mysteries, beginning with the rising of the Nile (II. 28. 2), on which agreement has not yet been reached¹⁰). Some things are to be learned later, in a state of perfection, "so that God should forever teach and man should forever learn".

At this point (II. 28. 4) Irenaeus brings up the question under discussion:

If, for instance, anyone asks, "What was God doing before He made the world?" we reply that the answer to such a question lies with God Himself. For that this world was formed perfect by God, receiving a beginning in time, the Scriptures teach us; but no Scripture reveals to us what God was employed about before this event. The answer, therefore, to that question remains with God, and it is not proper for us to aim at bringing forth foolish, rash, and blasphemous suppositions ...¹¹).

¹⁰) Irenaeus' use here of a philosophical handbook for his list of examples has been discussed by GRANT and SCHOEDEL. The problem is considered extensively in VAN UNNIK, "Theological Speculation and Its Limits" (see next note).

¹¹) *Adv. haer.* II. 28. 4: *Ut puta, si quis interrogat, Antequam mundum faceret Deus, quid agebat? dicimus quoniam ista responsio subiacet Deo. Quoniam autem mundus hic factus est apotelesmaticus a Deo, temporale initium accipiens, Scripturae nos docent: quid autem ante hoc Deus sit operatus, nulla Scriptura manifestat. Subiacet ergo haec responsio Deo.* Arthur

The remainder of II. 28 continues this theme, without, however, bringing up either of the answers that Augustine later offered to the same question.

Origen uses the text in a considerably different manner. Book III Chapter 5 of the *Peri archōn* treats the subject of the beginning of the world in time. III. 5. 1 and 2 deal with the scriptural citations of the world's beginning and end, and III. 5. 3 cites the question:

But they are accustomed to meet us with this objection: "If the world had a beginning in time, what was God doing before the world began?" For it is alike impious and absurd to say that God's nature is to be at ease and never to move, or to suppose that there was a time when goodness did not do good and omnipotence did not exercise its power. They raise this objection when we say that the world began at a definite time and when in accordance with our belief in scripture we also calculate how many years old it is¹²).

Darby NOCK sees in Irenaeus' handling of the question an example of the saint's "robust common sense". See "Gnosticism", in NOCK, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, ed. Zeph STEWART, Vol. II (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), 947-8. 959. William R. SCHOEDEL, "Philosophy and Rhetoric in the *Adversus haereses* of Irenaeus", *Vigiliae Christianae* 13 (1959), 22-32 at 32 suggests that Irenaeus' refusal to answer the question indicates his lack of interest in, and active hostility to, philosophy. W. C. VAN UNNIK, "Theological Speculation and Its Limits", in William R. SCHOEDEL and Robert L. WILKIN, eds., *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition in Honorem Robert L. Grant* (Paris, 1979), 33-44, properly cites this passage as an example of Irenaeus' distinction between things knowable by men and things knowable only to God, who created them. Only things set forth in scripture and things plainly observable in the world of experience deserve consideration. God has reserved the rest to Himself. On this aspect of Irenaeus' thought, see also F.-M. SAGNARD, *La gnose valentinienne et le témoignage de saint Irénée* (Paris, 1947), 278-282; A. BENOÎT, *Saint Irénée. Introduction à l'étude de sa théologie* (Paris, 1960); Norbert BROX, *Offenbarung, Gnosis und gnostischer Mythos bei Irenaeus von Lyon* (Salzburg-Munich, 1966), 196-199; A. ORBE, *Parabolas evangelicas en San Ireneo*, Vol. I (Madrid, 1972), 34-74, à propos Matt. 7. 7; ARMSTRONG, *Die Genesis*, 52-72.

¹²) ORIGÈNE, *Traité des principes (Peri archōn)*, trad. Marguerite HARL, Gilles DORVAL, Alain LE BOULLUEC (Paris, 1976), 198-9; A. LE BOULLUEC, "La place de la polémique antignostique dans le *Peri archōn*", in *Origeniana* (Bari, 1975), 47-61. Since the work of Irenaeus was known very early in Egypt, the question may have been borrowed by Origen from Irenaeus rather than from the actual polemical questions of contemporary third-century Alexandrian Gnostics. LE BOULLUEC makes a strong case for Origen's reading Irenaeus in a later study, "Y a-t-il des traces de la polémique antignostique d'Irénée dans le *Peri archōn* d'Origène?" in Martin KRAUSE, ed., *Gnosis and Gnosticism*, Papers read at the Seventh International Conference of Patristic Studies (Oxford, September 8th-13th, 1975) (Leiden, 1977), 138-147. He does not mention Origen's use of *Adv. Haer.* II. 24. 2, which strengthens his case, but does not solve the problem of the source of Origen's use of the question. See also Marguerite HARL, "Pointes antignostiques d'Origène: le questionnement impie des Écritures", in VAN DEN BROEK and VERMASEREN, *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions presented to Gilles Quispel*, 205-217, who makes a case that Origen is

Unlike Irenaeus, however, Origen undertakes an answer: there were other worlds before this one existed, just as after the destruction of this world there will yet be others. Clearly, although not undertaking the philosophical approaches of Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, Origen is willing (here as elsewhere) to go much further than Irenaeus, for example, would have permitted¹³).

Both Irenaeus and Origen, then, seem to treat a question that Gnostics did in fact ask. Whether Origen took the question from Irenaeus is not clear, although the text in *Peri Archōn* III. 5. 3. could be a criticism that Origen had himself heard from critics.

Besides the problem of the transmission of the question, there is also the question of its source. Assuming that Irenaeus and Augustine, if not Origen, accurately reported contemporary Gnostic and Manichaean polemical criticism of Genesis, one may ask whether or not the Gnostics originated the question. Gnosticism certainly drew upon a wide variety of ancient thought, and in the case of cosmogony, at least, it drew upon elements that reached far back in Greek and Latin philosophical polemic.

responding to earlier polemical arguments from the second half of the second century. In his striking answer to the *quid antequam* question, Origen may have had haggadic traditions in mind. See the work of VAJDA, cited below, n. 32. On the age of the world, see Karl-Heinz SCHWARTE, *Die Vorgeschichte der augustinischen Weltalterlehre* (Bonn, 1966), 65-70, 260-290. The problem of transmission from Irenaeus to Augustine is not clarified by Altaner's important studies of earlier patristic influences on Augustine, particularly those of Philo, Origen, Irenaeus, Eusebius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil. See B. ALTANER, *Kleine patristische Schriften* (Berlin, 1967), 181-334.

¹³) Further discussions of this and similar problems in the thought of the Greek Fathers may be found in Monique ALEXANDRE, "L'Exégèse de Gen. 1. 1-2a dans l'*In Hexaemeron* de Grégoire de Nysse; Deux approches du problème de la matière", in Heinrich DÖRRIE, et al., eds., *Gregor von Nyssa und die Philosophie* (Leiden, 1976), 159-182. In the same volume, see also David BALAS, "Eternity and Time in Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra Eunomium*", 128-155, esp. 143, for a discussion of Eunomius' charge that "God begins to be *Demiurgos* from the time of creation". On 147 Balas argues for Gregory's priority over Augustine as the first Christian thinker to adopt the idea of eternity in its non-durational sense. The continuity of this line of thought in the context of the divine names is noted in Stephen GERSH, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena* (Leiden, 1978), 156-7, and in terms of divine wisdom on 264-282. On the Syrian Fathers, see Abraham LEVENE, *The Early Syrian Fathers on Genesis* (London, 1941); T. HANSMA, "Investigations into the Early Syrian Fathers on Genesis", in B. GEMSER, et al., eds. *Studies in the Book of Genesis* (Oudtestamentische Studien, Deel XII (Leiden, 1958), 69-181, esp. 91-95; Antoine GUILLAUMONT, "Genèse 1. 1-2 selon les commentateurs syriaques", *In principio*, 115-132.

III

Any search for a *terminus post quem* must take into account such problems as the nature of the gods, time, eternity, creation and providence in early Greek thought¹⁴). The roots of such concepts lie in Anaximander's doctrine of the *apeirōn* and his and Melissus of Samos' use of the term *archē*, Xenophanes' de-anthropomorphizing of the gods, and his and Parmenides' idea of the one, with Parmenides' idea of durationless eternity. But these elements were uncombined in dogma and not even systematic in the age of Plato and Aristotle. Greek thinkers, moreover, were never reluctant to criticize their predecessors' and contemporaries' opinions on such subjects, often in the spirit of raillery that would appall all but the most pugnacious modern philosophers. Xenophanes' *silloi* and Heraclitus' cryptic insults are but two examples of early stages of the process. The plays of Epicharmus and Aristophanes often deal very roughly indeed with contemporary philosophical and theological ideas. Yet nowhere in this early polemical literature does there seem to be an example of the question considered here.

Some aspects of early Greek theological polemic do seem to anticipate the question. Xenophanes criticized Hesiod for believing that the gods could have come into existence, and Epicharmus attacks the notion that Chaos should at one time not have existed¹⁵). Diogenes of Apollonia's idea of a purposeful creator, eternal and all-wise, and the general transition from *apeirōn* to *nous* which Jaeger traces through the Hellenistic period all point in a similar direction¹⁶). The appeal of such approaches to Jews and Christians is obvious, and some aspects of Jewish and Christian cosmogonies also seem to have appealed to Greeks. "Longinus", in his discussion of terms that are fitting to be attributed to the gods, praises "the lawgiver of the Jews, no ordinary person, having

¹⁴) The following remarks depend heavily upon EHRHARDT, *The Beginning*, and Werner JAEGER, *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers* (1946: rpt. Westport, CT, 1980). There is a convenient summary of pagan philosophical thought on some of these points in Jaap MANSFELD, "Bad World and Demiurge: A Gnostic Motif from Parmenides and Empedocles to Lucretius and Philo", in VAN DEN BROEK and VERMASEREN, *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions Presented to Gilles Quispel*, 261-314. Some of these questions, of course, need not have originated in theological discussion. SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, *Pros Logikous* I. 68 f discusses ideas of existence and non-existence, eternal versus created things in a purely logical context: I am grateful to Alan KORS for suggesting that I look at Sextus.

¹⁵) JAEGER, *Theology*, 67-8.

¹⁶) Ibid, 204-6, the long note on *tō Theion*.

formed a high conception of the power of the Divine Being, and gave expression to it when at the very beginning of his laws he wrote: 'God said' — what? 'Let there be light, and there was light; let there be land, and there was land'"¹⁷).

Yet the development of Greek theology, the cosmogonic myths of Plato and their criticism in Aristotle's *De caelo* do not seem in their turn to have generated the question. Objections to various theologies continued, of course, to be made, often loudly and vociferously. From Philo to Augustine thinkers who posited the Judaeo-Christian creation narrative had to deal with objections that had become virtually endemic in Greek thought, some dating from the pre-Socratics and some from contemporary Middle-Platonists like Celsus. To the successors of Xenophanes' de-anthropomorphizing of the gods, the story sounded all too bluntly like another tale of Hesiod, a cosmogony achieving only the introduction of one more deity flourishing a *technē* which used the crassest of materials for the most ignoble of purposes, the binding of immaterial spirits into a material universe. To those who had spent nearly as long removing the divine from the space and the purview of man, it revived echoes of the *deus curiosus*, for which the Epicureans had long scolded the Stoics. To the Stoics it imposed a linear story of creation and final judgement by a transcendent deity in place of the organic, cyclical recurrence of life and cosmos alike. To the interlocutors of Minucius Felix' *Octavius*, it offered the paradox of a creating deity at once so interfering and transcendent that it combined the *deus curiosus* of the Stoics with the *deus solitarius et destitutus* of the Jews¹⁸).

Of all theological polemic in the ancient world, the one school which seems most likely to have concerned itself with these problems is that which contended most vigorously with theological *dogmata* of all kinds, that of the Epicureans. Epicurus' dramatic rejection, not merely of divine providence, but of the very possibility of divine creation of the cosmos, is

¹⁷) T. S. DORSCH, trans., *Classical Literary Criticism* (Baltimore, 1965), 110 (LONGINUS, *De Sublimitate*, ix). GALEN once noted that the Jewish conception of a divine creator was more attractive than Epicurus' doctrine of creation by chance in his *On the Parts of the Human Body* 11. 14, but he found it incompatible with the Platonic and Aristotelian Demiurge, who "brings to reality only what reason evinces as being possible, and from all possibilities he always chooses the best one". ALBRECHT DIHLE, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity* (California, 1982), 1f; R. WALZER, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (Oxford, 1949).

¹⁸) *Octavius* X. 5; cf. *De nat. deorum* I. 154.

firm and categorical¹⁹). Epicurean physics rejected the possibility of divine creation since nothing can come into existence from non-existence and since all concepts (including that of a cosmos) derive from evidence of the senses and the mind, and then only when the senses and the mind (here also considered as a sense) are applied to existent objects, an argument similar to Plato's insistence upon patterns of a higher order needed to bring into existence things of a lower order (*Timaeus* 29a). Hence, "if nothing existed, no concept of a world would be found in the minds of the gods"²⁰). In any case, as Lucretius maliciously remarks, if the world had been made by gods it would not have so many things wrong with it — *tanta stat praedita culpa* (*De rer. nat.* V: 199; cf. II; 177-181). Thus, Epicurean physics and theology, both deny not only divine creation, but providence, teleology, and divine retribution. The gods have nothing to do with earth, nor (against Plato, the early Aristotle, and the astral religion of Stoicism and others) with the stars. Happy and untroubled in the *intermundia*, the gods seek for neither more happiness nor trouble in the *cosmos*, and they certainly did not make it.

As unique and idiosyncratic as Epicurus' position was, on the matter of divine creation his position was consistent with what Joseph Moreau has called "la tradition la plus constante de la philosophie grecque, représentée notamment par Aristote, qui professe l'éternité du monde. La doctrine de la création, l'idée d'un commencement du monde, entendue superficiellement, heurte la raison philosophique et suscite des railleries des esprits forts"²¹).

Epicurus and his followers could, of course, and often did adapt existing cosmological arguments whenever they agreed with some position of their own or attacked a position they themselves wished to

¹⁹) The classic study is that of A. J. FESTUGIÈRE, *Epicurus and His Gods*, trans. C. W. CHILTON (Cambridge, Mass., 1956). See also Knut KLEVE, *Gnosis Theou. Die Lehre der natürlichen Gotteserkenntnis in der epikureischen Theologie*, Symbolae Osloenses, Fasc. Supplet. XIX (Oslo, 1963), and, more recently, Dietrich LEMKE, *Die Theologie Epikurs* (Munich, 1973). For the context of Epicurean thought generally, see J. M. RIST, *Epicurus: An Introduction* (Cambridge, 1973). A number of important Epicurean texts on the topic are conveniently gathered in C. J. DE VOGEL, *Greek Philosophy*, Vol. III, 2nd ed. (Leiden, 1964), 23-25. See also PÉPIN, *Théologie cosmique*, 103-124, 173-216. On similar questions in Stoicism, which do not come into this paper, see DE VOGEL, III, 64-85, and Myrto DRAGONA-MONACHOU, *The Stoic Arguments for the Existence and the Providence of the Gods* (Athens, 1976), on arguments from design, 88-96.

²⁰) RIST, *Epicurus*, 148. Cf. MACROBIUS, *Sat.* 7. 16. I am grateful to James J. O'DONNELL for this reference.

²¹) MOREAU, "Le temps et la création", 168.

attack, as they did with Aristotle's criticism of Plato's *Timaeus* (*De caelo* 281b 25 ff). But Epicurus was an articulate and ready polemicist, and the evidence for his original criticism of his predecessors and contemporaries is abundant and persuasive. It may be an accident of reference- and text-transmission as well as a testimony to the religious character of contemporary Greek philosophy that makes Epicurus appear often as the first philosopher to express his doctrines chiefly in polemic and invective, but his successors sustained and kept up to date the master's polemical assaults on other dogmata. Metrodorus, Hermarchus, and the *meretricula* Leontium continued the master's tradition and style, and Colotes preserved the somewhat older literary tradition of satire and polemic that went back to Xenophanes and Epicharmus. Recent studies have shown that new theories were readily taken into account in this post-Epicurean polemic. In spite of some scholarly opinion to the contrary, even Lucretius occupies a prominent place in this, as in other Epicurean traditions²²).

In the first century B.C. the most prominent targets of Epicurean polemic seem to have been Middle Platonic cosmology and the cosmogonical theory of Stoicism, which postulated creation, providence, and recurrence as fundamental cosmological principles. Stoic creation and providence doctrines seemed as wrong-headed to Epicureans as did Aristotle's doctrine of the eternity of the universe. Festugière long ago pointed out how, to Epicurean piety, the new astral religion seemed if anything more dangerous than the older cosmogonies and theogonies²³). It is in this light that we must seek the earliest time our question was likely to have been formulated and the earliest shape it was likely to take.

In Book V of the *De natura rerum*, Lucretius takes up his attack on the doctrines of the eternity and divinity of the material universe. The gods do not live in any part of the cosmos (Epicurus posited the *intermundia* as the home of the gods, a description of which Lucretius promises in V. 155, but does not in fact give), nor do they nor have they ever done anything for the benefit of man: *quidve novi potuit tanto post ante quietos / inlicere ut cuperent vitam mutare priorem*? Indeed, newness is impossible for the gods. Lucretius goes on to ask:

²²) The best recent account of the literature is that of Knut KLEVE, "The Philosophical Polemics in Lucretius. A Study of the History of Epicurean Criticism", in *Lucrece*, Fondation Hardt, Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique, XXIV (Geneva, 1977), 39-76.

²³) FESTUGIÈRE, *Epicurus and His Gods*, 73 f.

exemplum porro gignundis rebus et ipsa
 notities divis hominum unde est insita primum,
 quid vellent facere ut scirent animoque viderent,
 quove modost umquam vis cognita principiorum
 quidque inter sese permutato ordine possent,
 si non ipsa dedit specimen natura creandi?

(V. 181-186)

From whence did the example, pattern, and *notities* (concept, *prolēpsis*) occur to the gods so that they suddenly had the idea of creating, and where did they get the pattern of what it was they were going to create? "Creation" is simply the result of collisions of random atoms in their eternal fall. These lines, which echo other parts of the poem (e.g., II, 167 f; I, 1024-1028), are Lucretius' prime expression of his rejection of the doctrine of creation, as V. 310 f express his rejection of the world's eternity. If we accept the idea that except for the Jews no thinkers before the Stoics held such views in a way that required polemical dismantling by Epicurean critics, we can perhaps locate in these verses of Lucretius the approach that produced the question whose origins we have been seeking. Kleve suggests strongly that "Lucretius' attack on the view that the world is created for the sake of men ... cannot be found in any extant writings from Epicurus and his time"²⁴). They are found, however, in Philodemus and Cicero, and although it is possible that they attack views similar to those held by Plato (Cic. *De natura Deorum* 1. 8) and therefore once attacked by Epicurus, no such text of Epicurus survives, and the topic is not taken up between Epicurus and Lucretius. Kleve further suggests that the whole Epicurean attack upon doctrines of eternity and creation was assembled in parts from Epicurus to Lucretius and his contemporaries, but in any case, "not fully assembled" until Lucretius and Philodemus²⁵).

Lucretius' attack on creation and eternity theories is, on the whole, somewhat more restrained than those of other Epicureans, and far less restrained than some charges of Philodemus. In his discussion of the gods, Philodemus asks whether they have furniture or use the lavatory. If a case has been made in our search for a *terminus post quem*, it is unlikely that our question will have been asked (or, possibly, could have been asked) much before the time of Lucretius. It remains to link Lucretius

²⁴) KLEVE, "The Philosophical Polemics", 66.

²⁵) Ibid. 69. Some of these survived into Neoplatonic works. For PLOTINUS, see *Enn.* II. 9. 8-9.

and Augustine, or, rather, Lucretius and Irenaeus and the Gnostics whom Irenaeus accuses of having asked the question.

One possible connection is, of course, Book I of Cicero's *De natura Deorum*, in which Velleius the Epicurean offers both Epicurean doctrine and Epicurean polemic in generous measure. In Book I, 21 f of *De nat. deorum* Velleius raises the question: why did the makers of the world wake up suddenly after having slept for so many centuries²⁶)? Succeeding sections of the first book deal, in the customary manner of Epicurean polemic, with the opinions of others, from Thales to Diogenes of Babylon, raising such questions as: what is the way of life of the gods and how do they spend their time? These questions, sharing with *De rerum natura* V, 110 ff the general character of Epicurean polemic, are sharper and more dramatic, since they are raised as part of a lively dialogue and thus lack the restraint that Lucretius' somber discourse gives to his own treatment of the question.

Epicurean polemic, then, focuses upon certain aspects of creation and the nature of the divinity that had long been criticized in several major streams of Greek apophatic theology which, in Gnostic, Jewish, and Christian theology took the form of emphasis upon the unknowability, unnameability, and incomprehensibility of the divinity, developed largely as negative theology. Any criticism of anthropomorphism would have appealed to such thinkers without entailing their acceptance of the rest of Epicurus' theology. The syncretistic character of late antique thought in the first and second centuries opened the latter to Platonic influences. Earlier anthropomorphism had to be argued away by Jewish and Christian thinkers alike, allegorized and made suitable to the apophatic approach taken by most serious religious thinkers of the period.

In our consideration of Epicureanism thus far, we have noted that the *cur ante non* form of the argument is indeed Epicurean, and the *quid antequam* form may be, although it is not in Lucretius, other Epicurean polemic, or the *De natura deorum*²⁷). Perhaps the most likely Epicurean

²⁶) For other uses of the image of the sleeping gods, see ORIGEN, *Contra Celsum* VI. 78 (ed. H. CHADWICK, p. 391); EHRHARDT, *The Beginning*, 163, nn. 1-3. The Ciceronian text is annotated in A. S. PEASE, *M. Tulli Ciceronis De natura deorum* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), ad I. 21 (pp. 187-191).

²⁷) MEIJERING, in his extensive annotations to Book XI of the *Confessions* (*Schöpfung, Ewigkeit und Zeit*, 40-45, 105-108) argues unequivocally that "diese Frage ist ursprünglich von den Epikureern aufgeworfen worden, für die sie eine wichtige Rolle in der Polemik gegen die Stoiker spielt ...", citing the *De natura deorum*, *De rerum natura*, and

source for it would be Philodemus, particularly when we consider the tone and character of some of Philodemus' other questions in a similar vein. But Cicero was familiar with the work of Philodemus and would probably have had no hesitation about using the *quid antequam* form if he had found it *apud* Philodemus. Thus, Philodemus himself remains an unlikely source.

Epicurean polemic seems to have been satisfied with its notion of sleeping gods, or, in the polemic of Philodemus and Colotes, of gods using furniture and lavatories. There is really no reason why an Epicurean polemicist would have thought to ask what the gods were doing before they created heaven and earth because Epicureans were perfectly satisfied with the random events that the descent of the stream of atoms produced. Epicureanism approached creation from the point of view of providence and retribution, not cosmogony. The *quid antequam* question, however, seems to indicate not simply another approach to polemic, but a serious interest precisely in the nature of creation itself.

IV

Although Epicurean polemic was certainly known to the Gnostics who asked Irenaeus the *quid antequam* question, there is no certainty that the *quid antequam* form was Epicurean. In order to turn the one into the other (and there is much to suggest that Epicurean polemic shaped the original form of the question, even if it did not transform it), there must have been a scenario of pre-creation activity in whose interest it was to do so. There were, in fact, two scenarios. The first of these was Jewish, the second Gnostic.

The Jewish source was not Philo, since Philo's extensive discussion of Genesis and related topics do not include the *quid antequam* form of

AETIUS, *Placita* in support. However, as we argue here, the Epicurean *cur ante non* form of the question never, in Epicurean polemic becomes the *quid antequam* form. The case for an Epicurean origin of the *type* of question is much more solid. MEIJERING does not note Irenaeus' or Origen's citation of the question. The origin of the *quid antequam* form in gnostic circles seems clear. The question then becomes why did Gnostics modify the Epicurean polemical question? The following pages suggest one possible answer. There are, of course, other aspects of early Genesis-questions that this paper does not discuss. For Augustine and Epicurus, see H. HAGENDAHL, *Augustine and the Latin Classics*, *Studia Graeca et Latina Gothoburgensia*, XX (Göteborg, 1967), with significant additions in JAMES J. O'DONNELL, "Augustine's Classical Readings", *Recherches Augustiniennes* 15 (1980), 144-175, at 161-2.

the question²⁸). But Midrashic testimonies do in fact discuss a pre-creation scenario, not to be sure, a Gnostic type, but one which invited consideration from anyone interested in the creation story. The Midrashic account of creation, based upon Genesis 1. 1, rather prolongs the story, separating the creation of the first seven things — Torah, the divine throne, Paradise, Hell, the name of the Messiah, the celestial sanctuary, and the Voice that cries aloud, “Return, ye children of men” — from the creation of the heavens and the earth two thousand years later. Within this two thousand year period, God took counsel with Torah (identified with the divine Wisdom, although Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean* 16, indicates a Jewish tradition of God’s consulting with angels in order to avoid Trinitarian implications), created several worlds before the present one, was petitioned by the letters of the alphabet to permit each one to be the agent of creation, and tempered justice with mercy in order to permit the world to survive²⁹). In one sense, then, Midrash does offer an account of “what God was doing before He created the heavens and the earth—.” but it is not an account that violates Genesis, rather prolonging and expanding the act of creation itself.

Assuming as seems likely, that the *cur ante non* form of the question was one basis for the *quid antequam* form, and that Midrashic commentary offered a much more prolonged scenario for creation than did

²⁸) Besides the studies listed above, n. 4, see Arnold EHRHARDT, “Creatio ex nihilo”, *Studia Theologica* 4 (1950), 13f, rpt. in EHRHARDT, *The Framework of New Testament Studies* (Manchester, 1964), 200-233; idem, *The Beginning*, 162-171; Gerhard MAY, *Schöpfung aus dem Nichts* (Berlin-New York, 1978); WOLFSON, Philo, I, 204 ff, 303; David WINSTON, “Philo’s Theory of Cosmogony”, in Birger A. PEARSON, ed., *Religious Syncretism in Antiquity: Essays in Conversation with Geo Widengren* (Missoula, Mon., 1975), 157-172. As WINSTON points out (p. 162), PHILO does remark that “time there was not before there was a world”, in *De opif.* 26, 67; *Leg. all.* I. 2; *Sacr.* 65. but Philo is speaking of time, not the deity. See also below nn. 31-32.

²⁹) Louis GINZBERG, *The Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia, 1913), 3-8, and Vol. V (Philadelphia, 1925), 3-5. I am grateful to Judah GOLDIN for this reference. On the background, see John BOWKER, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature: An Introduction to Jewish Interpretations of Scripture* (Cambridge, 1969), 95-109, and Geza VERMES, “Bible and Midrash: Early Old Testament Exegesis”, in VERMES, *Post-Biblical Jewish Studies* (Leiden, 1975), 59-91. For Christian adaptation of some of these Midrashic accounts, see Louis GINZBERG, *Die Haggada bei den Kirchenvätern und in der apokryphischen Literatur* (Berlin, 1900), 2-14. On the continuity of these problems in Judaism, see E. E. URBACH, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 19), Ch. 9, 161-189. I am grateful to Michael PANITZ for this reference. See also Saul LIBERMAN, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York, 1962). I am grateful to Michael Kaplowitz for this reference. See also below, n. 32.

Genesis itself, it becomes possible to ask how, and by whom, did the *cur ante non* form of Lucretius, Velleius, and Philodemus become the *quid antequam* form of Irenaeus' Gnostic and Augustine's Manichaean opponents? How did the Epicurean *deus dormiens* become the *deus* (or *demiurgos curiosus* of the Gnostics)? How would Gnostics look at Genesis 1. 1 in the light of both Epicurean *cur ante non* anti-creation polemic and the Midrashic doctrine of the pre-existence of the seven things³⁰)?

Both Gnostics and Manichaeans knew very well what the divinity and its enemies were doing before the creation. The Gnostic myth of material creation as a final stage in the falling-away of the Archons as described in the *Apocryphon of John* or the untitled tract in the Nag Hammadi collection commonly called "On the Origin of the World" both provided ample scenarios of divine and semi-divine activity which attacked the principle of creation as found in Genesis³¹). To ask the question "What was God doing before He created the heavens and the earth", was to indict Genesis for failing to account, first, for the true nature of God in the "Age Before" and, second, of failing to recognize

³⁰) The best study of Gnostic polemic is now Klaus KOSCHORKE, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum* (Leiden, 1978). Koschorke does not, unfortunately, note the question discussed here. The differences between Epicureanism and Gnosticism are outlined by A. H. ARMSTRONG, "Gnosis and Greek Philosophy", in B. ALAND, ed., *Gnosis. Festschrift für Hans Jonas* (Göttingen, 1978), 91-2. There is some discussion of Gnostic use of Epicurean polemic in MEIJERING, *God Being History*, 31-8. IRENAEUS, much concerned with the philosophical origins of heresy (*Adv. haer.* II. 14. 2-6) did not link our question to Epicurus (or to Anaximander, whom he seems to have mistaken for Epicurus); see R. M. GRANT, "Early Christianity and Pre-Socratic Philosophy", *Harry Austryn Wolfson Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem, 1965), 1, 357-384, at 366. For some Gnostic questions, *ap.* CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, see *Ex. Theodoto* 78. 2. One of the staunchest Christian opponents of Epicureanism seems to have been Dionysius of Alexandria, *ap.* EUSEBIUS, *Praeparatio Evangelica* XIV. 23. Besides such writers as Arnobius and Lactantius, Eusebius seems to have been one of the chief sources for the fourth-century fathers' information concerning ancient philosophy. For cosmological inquiry, see *Pr. Ev.* I. 7-8; XIV. 16-27. On Christian ideas of creation, see VII, ii- XI. 31.

³¹) On Gnostics' finding the Demiurge in Old Testament texts, see Orval WINTERMUTE, "A Study of Gnostic Exegesis of the Old Testament", in James M. EFIRD, ed., *The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays: Studies in Honor of William Franklin Stinespring* (Durham, N. C., 1972), 241-70, citing particularly the untitled "On the Origin of the World", Codex II. 5 of the Nag Hammadi library. On the cosmogonic importance of the same text, see Michel TARDIEU, *Trois mythes gnostiques* (Paris, 1974), 49 ff. See also A. E. SEGAL, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden, 1977) Nils A. DAHL, "The Arrogant Archon and the Lewd Sophia: Jewish Traditions in Gnostic Revolt", in Bentley LAYTON, ed., *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1981), II, 689-712; Ithamar GRUENWALD, "Aspects of the Jewish-Gnostic Controversy", *ibid.* 713-723.

creation as a flaw rather than as a significant and benevolent act. In short, to both Gnostics and Manichaeans Genesis provided an erroneous and misleading account of a history, the accurate understanding of which was crucial to true Gnosis.

The long debate on the relation between Jewish thought and early Gnosticism is not over, nor is there a general consensus on the question of the influence of Gnostic polemic on rabbinic literature in the first three centuries of the common era³²). The variety of rabbinic opinion on such matters as creation *ex nihilo*, the emanation of light, pre-existent matter, Torah, and the angels shows traces both of Gnostic influence and anti-Gnostic polemic. In the light of the history of discussions of gods and creation, Gnostic approaches to the opening verses of Genesis seem, in fact, to be the most likely occasion for the transformation of the Epicurean *cur ante non* polemical question to the later *quid antequam* form. That the question was in fact a Gnostic adaptation of the Epicurean form may be further indicated by the absence of the *quid antequam* question from later Midrashic literature; that is, it was probably not a question that originated within Jewish thought.

Gnostic cosmogonies are well-enough known to scholars so that they do not have to be recounted here. From Marcion on, Gnostic denial that the creator god of the Old Testament was the high god forced Christian thinkers to evaluate and re-evaluate the place of the Old

³²) The argument here is separate from the most vexing question of the Jewish origins of Gnosticism. For the latter, see YAMAUCHI, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 143-162, with references; the most recent case has been made by Birger A. PEARSON, "Jewish Elements in Gnosticism and the Development of Gnostic Self-Definition", in E. P. SANDERS, ed., *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition* (Philadelphia, 1980), 151-160, with further references. Arthur Darby NOCK has linked Gnostic speculation with particular scriptural texts which Jewish thinkers prohibited to those with immature minds, for example, Ezekiel's vision of the chariot and the Genesis account of creation: "Gnosticism" (above, n. 11), 947-8. The Ezekiel text, of course, also got PETER ABELARD into some difficulties many centuries later. In addition to the studies cited here and in note 28, there are important observations in A. ALTMANN, "Gnostic Themes in Rabbinic Cosmology", in I. EPSTEIN, et al., eds., *Essays in Honor of the Very Rev. Dr. J. H. Hertz* (London, 1942), 19-32; idem, "A Note on the Rabbinic Doctrine of Creation", *Journal of Jewish Studies* 7 (1956), 195-206, rpt. in Alexander ALTMANN, *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1969), 128-138. Georges VAJDA, "Notice Sommaire sur l'interprétation de Genèse 1. 1-3 dans le judaïsme post-biblique", *In principio*, 23-35, at 32, has pointed out the function of anterior worlds in the Haggadic anti-gnostic polemic. See also David WINSTON, "The Book of Wisdom's Theory of Cosmogony", *History of Religions* 11 (1971), 185-202, with further citations from rabbinic discussions of *creatio ex nihilo*, and WINSTON, ed., *The Wisdom of Solomon*, The Anchor Bible (New York, 1979), 38-42.

Testament in relation to the New, indeed, to create the New. The texts linked in Genesis 1. 1, Proverbs 8. 22-31, Ps. 110. 3, and Isaiah 53 offered plenty of room for this debate. Marcion and the development of his anti-creationist doctrine became the fundamental targets of later ecclesiastical thinkers analyzing heresy. Such arguments, especially when focused upon the nature of Christ, became the foundation for later Christological heresy as well, and contributed to the *zetēma-quaestio* genre in literature³³).

³³) Some, but not all of these polemical questions seem to have become part of the *zetēma-quaestio* genre in fourth-century Christian literature begun by Eusebius and Acacius of Caesarea and earlier, by Philo, in Jewish exegesis. See G. BARDY, "La littérature patristique des *Quaestiones et responsiones* sur l'Écriture sainte", *Revue biblique* 41 (1932), 210-236, 341-369, 515-537; 42 (1933), 14-30, 211-229, 328-352; cf. esp. Vol. 41, p. 347, citing the *quaestiones* of AMBROSIAS: *Quid opus erat per Moysen, et non antea, exordium mundi et ordinem naturae exponere?* cf. p. 555; for AUGUSTINE's *Quaestiones*, pp. 514-537. In the work of JEROME, the *Quaestiones hebraicae in Genesim*, rabbinic questions enter the genre, and for Augustine's comments on these, see pp. 356-69, 520-1. On the later treatment and conception of these and similar questions, see Bardy's citation of the *Quaestiones* of the fifth-century THEODORET OF CYRRHUS, Vol. 42, p. 220: "Above all, we must realize that not all writers have the same purpose in undertaking their inquiries. Some pose their questions with impiety and seek to argue with Scripture, sometimes by arguing that Scripture does not teach the truth, sometimes insisting that Scripture contains contradictions. Other writers inquire out of love for knowledge and the desire to find what it is they seek. With the grace of God we will shut up the blaspheming mouths of the first, and we will demonstrate the harmony of Holy Scripture and the truth of its teaching. To the second, we will bring, as far as we are able, the solution to their difficulties" (PG 80: 76). The two problems with Bardy's work are his neglect of pagan and heretical polemic on the one hand, and the tradition of rabbinic *quaestiones* on the other. The problem of the relations between earlier polemic, whether pagan, Jewish, or Christian, and the emergence of *zetēmata, quaestiones disputatae*, is complex, involving the *Testimonies* of early Christian literature as well as pagan and Jewish polemic. On the evidence of the *Testimonies* for some of the questions considered here, see, for example, James Rendel HARRIS, *Testimonies*, Vol I (Cambridge, 1916), 71-74, à propos IRENAEUS, *Apostolical Preaching*, c. 43 (ed. Joseph P. SMITH [Westminster, Md., 1952]). See also Jaroslav PELIKAN, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (100-600), Vol I of his *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago, 1971), 78-81, 175-195, and Leo SCHEFFCZYK, *Creation and Providence*, trans. Richard STACHEN (New York-London, 1970), esp. 97-104. Pierre COURCELLE, "Propos antichrétiens rapportés par saint Augustin", *Recherches Augustiniennes* 1 (1958), 148-186; idem, "Critiques exégétiques et arguments antichrétiens rapportés par Ambrosiaster", *Vigiliae Christianae* 13 (1959), 135-169; idem, "Anti-Christian Arguments and Christian Platonism: from Arnobius to St. Ambrose", in A. MOMIGLIANO, ed., *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 1963), 151-192, all with extensive notes and references. In the second of these studies, Courcelle cites a criticism taken up by AMBROSIAS about the date of Moses' writing: (p. 139) *Quaestio* III ... *Quid opus erat per Moysen, et non ante, exordium mundi et ordinem creaturae exponere?* Cf. the parallel question cited in the first study (p. 159 n. 54): *Quare non ante venit Christus?* The *non ante* objection seems related to the *antequam*

For Gnostics, the Old Testament recounted the creating activities of an inept and evil demiurge, a lower form of being than the highest deity, who was transcendent, passive, in fact rather Epicurean. To such a school of thought, such ideas as benevolent creation *ex nihilo*, the pre-existent Logos, and the dignity of material creation itself were anathema.

Thus, unlikely though it may have been for an Epicurean polemicist to ask the *quid antequam* form of the question, there is reason to expect that a Gnostic — probably not Marcion, but possibly Valentinus or Ptolemaeus or one of their followers — would have found that by turning the *cur ante non* Epicurean question into a *quid antequam* form he could indict the Old Testament creation story and the Christian doctrine of Christ as Logos and at the same time imply a secret knowledge of exactly what it was that “God” was doing before he created the heavens and the earth. It would be nice to find such a text in Gnostic literature rather than in Irenaeus, particularly since historians casually designate the question as “hoary” and a “stock” question, but no such text has so far been found. But Irenaeus’ testimony is weighty, and if he cites the question in a Gnostic context, he had perhaps better be believed. And we may only suggest that that was where it originated in the *quid antequam* form.

V

It is readily understandable how the question in such a form might appeal to Manichaeans as readily as it evidently had to Gnostics. The heresiologists of the early church had their complex work cut out for them, and they employed doctrine, piety, rhetoric, and the same tone of satirical invective which they had encountered in their opponents. They also found a quick-witted response to the question. For although Augustine himself did not give the answer, “God was making hell for those who presumptuously scrutinize his secrets”, and if he himself did not invent it, others had, and Augustine could at least remind his readers of that answer. Common sense is one of the least noted, but not one of the least important and appealing qualities of the early Latin fathers.

question dealt with here. Cf. “The Anti-Christian Arguments” p. 172, no. 57; “Ambrosiaster”, p. 136 n. 17; p. 139 n. 31. See also Robert L. WILKEN, “Pagan Criticism of Christianity: Greek Religion and Christian Faith”, in William R. SCHOEDEL and Robert L. WILKEN, eds., *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition: In Honorem Robert M. Grant* (Paris, 1979), 177-132.

Against these scenarios, Augustine later turned the very talents that had once led him astray. Criticizing the Manichaeian term "The Father of the Happy Enlightenment", Augustine disingenuously asked: *Quibus ergo erat ille pater aut cuius erat pater, quem modo patrem nominavit? Si enim nihil genuerat, pater esse non poterat* (*C. Fel.* I. 18. 82). The answers of Felix and Faustus did not stand up to such questioning, which was, in fact, Augustine's skillful turning of a Manichaeian rhetorical and polemical technique against the Manichaeians themselves. Those who depend upon metaphor must be prepared to defend metaphorical language more skillfully than did Augustine's Manichaeian opponents and teachers. In fact, the technique works far better as polemic than as dogmatic assertion, as Augustine realized with increasing certainty and success, when he finally articulated his disillusionment with the once-enchancing myth of Manicheism: *fabula illa est longa et vana*. (*C. Faustum* XIII. 6)³⁴).

The answer which Augustine says that he will not give, although others do — *alta scrutantibus gehennas parabat* — deserves a concluding comment. In Augustine's vocabulary, *altus* generally means either an attribute of God or the improper object of human attention³⁵). In *Confessions* X. 8 (a passage later made famous by Francesco Petrarca) Augustine notes that men look at high mountains (*alta montium*) and forget what is in themselves. In *C. Faustum* XXI. 3, he notes:

Occultum est, altum est; inaccessabili secreto ab humana cogitatione seclusum est, quemadmodum Deus et damnet impium, et justificet impium.

³⁴) Here and elsewhere, Augustine charged the Manichaeians with understanding neither the function of language nor the nature of reality. Thus, his citation of this question as a leitmotif of Book XI is part of what Marcia COLISH has called Augustine's "redemption" of language. COLISH, *The Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge* (New Haven, 1968), 24-82. I am grateful to Ann MATTER for this reference. On Christian polemic, see now Ilona OPELT, *Die Polemik in der christlichen lateinischen Literatur von Tertullian bis Augustin* (Heidelberg, 1980).

³⁵) David LENFANT, *Concordantiae Augustinianae* (Paris, 1666; rpt. Brussels, 1963), sv. *altus*. Several exceptions to this generalization have kindly been pointed out to me by James J. O'DONNELL: *Conf.* VI. 7; IX. 1; IX. 4, but these do not affect the generalization itself.

³⁶) For PETRARCH, the *locus* is *Rerum familiarum* IV. 1. See B. Martinelli, "L'ascensione al Monte Ventoux", *Studi in onore di Alberto Chiari* (Brescia, 1973), 369-377. and John E. WRIGLEY, "Petrarch, Saint Augustine, and the Augustinians", *Augustinian Studies* 8 (1977), 71-90. Interestingly, the Petrarchan text makes it clear that Petrarch opened his copy of the *Confessions* to X. 8. 15 "by chance", another Augustinian touch.

Scrutare (or, perhaps more commonly, *perscrutare*) *alta* was, of course, a classical and hellenistic commonplace, condemning all human intellectual seeking after the unattainable, echoed in Scripture and in patristic literature. It appeared familiarly in Ecclus. 3. 22: *altiora te ne quaesieris*, and Romans 11. 20: *noli altum sapere*. The phrase became attached to the late antique condemnation of one kind of intellectual curiosity and therefore plays a long and interesting role in later intellectual history³⁷).

In Augustine, however, the commonplace had perhaps a second meaning, a more literal one. The Manichees had attracted him in the first place with their claims of explaining *alta*, and, like their Gnostic predecessors, claimed to be higher than other beings themselves, higher indeed than the demiurge of the Old Testament. Augustine here is not criticizing just anyone who scrutinizes the heavens or asks questions about the meaning of Genesis, but specifically those who scrutinize *alta*, those realms from which the eye of the flesh is excluded. For Augustine had discovered the trap into which such delusions might lead, and he knew the dangers they entailed. As he said elsewhere (*Ep.* 89. 9. 2): *Expediit ab imo surgere, quam ex alto cadere*.

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³⁷) There is a large literature on the subject. In the context of *curiositas* alone, see Hans BLUMENBERG, *Der Prozess der theoretischen Neugierde* (Berlin, 1973); Heiko Augustinus OBERMAN, *Contra vanam curiositatem* (Zurich, 1973); Carlo GINZBURG, "High and Low: The Theme of Forbidden Knowledge in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries", *Past and Present* 73 (1976), 28-41, and the work of MEIJERING, *Calvin wider die Neugierde* (Nieuwkoop, 1980). Richard NEWHAUSER and I are presently at work on a more thorough study of the ideas of curiosity and forbidden knowledge; cf. Richard NEWHAUSER, "Towards a History of Human Curiosity: A Prolegomenon to its Medieval Phase", *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift* 56.4 (1982), 559-575; Edward PETERS, "*Libertas inquirendi* and the *vitium curiositatis* in medieval Thought", in George Makdisi, ed., *La notion de la liberté au moyen âge. Islam, Byzance, Occident* (Paris: forthcoming) and idem, "*Aenigma Solomonis*: Manichaean anti-Genesis Polemic and the *Vitium Curiositatis* in *Confessions*, III. 6.", *Augustiniana*: forthcoming. For later medieval interest in some of the questions raised here, see Richard C. DALES, "Discussions of the Eternity of the World during the First Half of the Twelfth Century", *Speculum* 57 (1982), 495-508; M.-D. CHENU, "The Platonisms of the Twelfth Century", in L. K. LITTLE and Jerome TAYLOR, trans., *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century* (Chicago, 1968), with some additional comments in Stephen GERSH, "Platonism — Neo-platonism — Aristotelianism: A Twelfth Century Metaphysical System and Its Sources", in R. L. BENSON and Giles CONSTABLE, eds., *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 512-536. The larger role of creation in twelfth century thought is discussed in G. R. EVANS, *Old Arts and New Theology* (Oxford, 1980), 167-192. Our question is echoed in BEDE's Augustinian commentary on Genesis (*In pentateuchum commentarii* 1: PL 91; 189-190); and Bede may have the final word: *Utique non in principio temporis, Deus enim facit tempora. Et ideo antequam Deus faceret tempora, non erant tempora Non ergo possumus dicere quomodo Deus nondum aliquid fecerat*.