

# The Athenian Mercury:

Saturday, October 10. 1691.

Quest. 1. **W**Hether the Answers of the Oracles of old, were given to their Supplicants by God, or by some Evil Demon? and whether in those dayes of Ignorance God might not be pleas'd to reveal himself according to their Simplicity, because to the best of their Understanding and Education they Worshipped with as much (if not more) Devotion as many of our Modern Christians?

Ans. 'Twas certainly the Information of the Devils, as Sacred Writ assures us: The manner of delivering their Answers was sometimes by *Night Visions*, and sometimes by an *Express Voice*. Of the first sort, that of *Amphiaraus* is remarkable; after the accustomed Expiations, those who came to Consult with him laid themselves down upon the ground, upon the Skins of such Rams as had been Sacrificed; the same Ceremonies were used by the *Egyptians* and *Greeks* in the Temples of *Serapis* and *Esculapius* --- of the latter sort, viz. an *Express Voice* was perform'd either by *Whispering* out of certain Grotts, or by the *Mouths of the Statues*, or by the *Priests* and *Sylls*, who being seiz'd by an *Enthusiastick Fury*, pronounc'd the Oracles with an impetuous Voice and wrested Countenances. Or Lastly, by the *Mouths of brute Beasts*; thus the *Egyptians*; if their *Ox Apis* receiv'd his Fodder chearfully, 'twas a good Omen; if not, the contrary. The *Tenadians* observe the same Ceremony towards a *Cow*; the *Indians* (a People of *Aethiopia*) to a *Dog*; the *Persians* to a *Cock*. But amongst all Oracles, that of *Jupiter Ammon* in the Countrey of *Garamantes*, was the very fam'd, yet not less ridiculous than others, being grounded on a simple Motion of the Body, as a bow of the Head, a Wink of the Eye, &c. *Jupiter Ammon* had another famous Temple in the City of *Dodona* in *Epirus*, where he took the Pains to pronounce his Oracles sometimes with his own Mouth, sometimes by using two *Virgins*, whereof one was called *Peristera*; which by the way signifying a *Dove*, might give Occasion to that Fable, which reports that in the Temple of *Jupiter* at *Dodona* there were *Doves* that spoke, as well as *Oaks*, which had a great Number of *Brass Kettles* fastened to their Branches, and when the Winds blew hard, they made a great Noise, in the Sound whereof Oracles were deliver'd. *Jupiter* had another Temple at *Delos*, where the Altar was built of *Horns* taken from the right side of *Sacrific'd Animals*, neatly laid upon one another; here he gave his Answers in humane shape, as he did in *Licia* under the Shape of a *Wolf*: But his Temple at *Delphi* was the most fam'd place in all the World for Oracles; sometimes he spoke here through the Throat of a *Dragon*, in which Form he was Worshipped; sometimes by his *Priests* upon certain dayes, who deliver'd their Answers sometimes in Prose, and sometimes in Verse. At *Argos* the Blood of a *Lamb* was to be drunk, and at *Aegira* the Blood of a *Bull*, ere the Oracles wou'd Answer: Amongst the *Thebanes* the *Priests* were clad in White, and descended through the hole of a Cave, where they offered Cakes to *Spirits* which inhabited it. There were many ridiculous Absurdities, and what was given forth was so dubious, that it might usually bear two several senses; such as these,

*Aio te Æacidem, Romanos vincere posse.*  
*Ibis redibis nunquam per Bella peribis.*

Where a changing of the Point alters the Sense, and makes it either backward or forward. Just as we have some in our Age, who because they can't see how our Saviour could be in Hell and in Paradise at the same time, alter the Point in these Words --- *Verily I say unto thee this day, thou shalt be with me in Paradise*, instead of *Verily I say unto thee, this day thou shalt be with me in Paradise*.

In short, we have all the reason in the World to

conclude, that this Management by Oracles was purely by the assistance of the Devil, who was altogether silenc'd at our Saviour's coming, who could not always tell Truth, but guess'd at what was most probable; who commonly equivocated; who sometimes requir'd humane Sacrifices, sometimes a Common Prostitution of Maids and Matrons, who (in short) acted so as is inconsistent with the Injunctions of a Divine Being; for God himself requires nothing from his Creatures as their Duty, but what is infinitely best for 'em, and most agreeing to their Interest and Happiness.

Quest 2. Whether the word *ברא*, which we Translate Created, in the first of Genesis, signifies to give Essence to the Subject, e.g. Matter, or only Existence to such and such Modifications of it as in all particular material Beings? If it signify Both, whence and how? The Author of the Query is very much Concerned to know, because perhaps his Religion depends upon't.

Ans. We shall endeavour to prove that by that Word *ברא* here used, is signify'd principally and originally --- to give Essence to the Subject, or the Creation of first Matter out of pure nothing: And that this is the Sense thereof in this place, --- First, By the Testimonies of those who are most Learned in the Hebrew Language. Secondly, By comparing several following Words with it, that signify the same thing, and some Translations with the Original. Thirdly, We shall prove that were there no such revelation, Reason might teach us the same Truth; at least that supposing the Creation of Matter out of nothing shou'd seem an Absurdity, yet what must be admitted if we don't grant it is a much greater; nay, that there is no manner of impossibility in such a Creation. Which if we perform, we hope the Gentleman will still keep his Religion.

First, Then, to prove that *ברא* signifies primarily and originally to give Essence to the Subject, or the Creation of the first Matter out of pure nothing, and that this is here the genuine Sense of the Word. We say this is its primary and original Signification, thereby granting that it has sometimes another, but then this other 'tis only borrowed and Analogous. Thus *ברא* is sometimes taken for the forming of any thing extraordinary, great, or excellent, made by God's own Hand, tho' out of *Præexistent Matter*; tho' this by Analogy to the other Sense of the Word. Thus it is said, God Created great Whales, and God Created Man, but that this is only in an Analogical Sense, we prove from the very Text: The Whales God Created out of the Waters --- Let the Waters bring forth abundantly every moving Creature that hath Life, --- and God Created Man out of the Dust of the ground --- but for Heaven and Earth, or the first Matter, we find nothing out of which it was made, tho' made it was by God's Word --- who in the beginning Created it, before any thing else was made to make it out of. That it signifies Primarily and Originally to give Essence to the Subject, and that 'tis so to be taken in this place, we prove, 1. From the Testimony of those who have been most Learned in the Hebrew Language, and that not Strangers, but Native Jews --- and who but such are proper Judges of the Sense of the Word? For Example in a parallel Case --- none ever Disputes the Sense and Derivation of the Word *Religio*, the Etymology of which *Tully* gives us, he being a Judge in that Language: Nor ought we any more of the Word *ברא*, which the Rabbies assure us answers the Notion we have fix'd thereon. Thus *Rabby Nachman* in his Commentary on Genesis, *Non extat nobis in Lingua Sancta Vocabulum quo productionem alicujus ex nihilo significamus nisi ברא*. But *Rab. David Kimchi* yet more fully and unexceptionably, *Omnis Interpretatio ברא, [Creationis] est Innovatio rei & egressio ejus a non esse ad esse* --- that is --- All the Interpretation of the Word *ברא*, which signifies Creation, [all the true and proper Interpretation both of Noun and Adverb, or perhaps the Noun is never used



used in any other Sence, not so much as *Analogical*, tho' the Verb may ] is the *Beginning of any thing*, or its *Egress* out of *not-being* into *Being*. Hence the Hebrews distinguish between these three Words, *עשה* and *יצר*, *creavit, formavit, fecit*: The first they say signifies to *make something out of nothing*; the second to give the *Form* to a *Created Being*; the third to make, mould or *fashion* the several Parts or Members, as in a Man, &c. Thus they instance in *Isaiah* — I have *Created* him, *Form'd* him, *Made* him: The first of which R. Kimchi expounds, I have *produc'd* from *Non Esse* to *Esse*, from *Not-being* to *Being*: The second made to *Exist* by the addition of his *Form*: The third *Disposed*, *Fashion'd* or *Order'd* him.

Secondly, We prove that *יצר* signifies the Creation of the first Matter, from the Context or following Words as well as several Translations. By the Context — not to insist much on the Word *Elohim*, a Name of God which signifies his *Strength* and *Power*, and an *Infinite Power* it must needs be which *made the World* — We say, not much to insist hereon, we shall produce such *Testimonies* as are more evident — and the first shall be from those Expressions — *Heaven and Earth* — And use made out of *nothing*, because in the beginning, because before any thing else was made, and because out of this all things were made, as is afterwards described; and that out of which all things were made is undoubtedly the first Matter — which is also plain by the Word *אין* here added, which is not only a Note of the Case, but signifies the substance of a thing produced. Thus *Aben-Ezra*, "The Sense of that little Word *אין*, says he, is both to signify the *very substance* of a thing, and to demonstrate the *Opus operatum*. R. Kimchi has the same, so R. Nachman, deducing the Word *אין* from a Root that signifies *coming* or *proceeding*, very appositely to the signification they all put upon it — as if he shou'd say, "In the beginning God Created the *Celestial* and *Terrestrial Substance* — Nor indeed cou'd that Sence be more plainly express'd than *Moses* has done it.

We prove it further from the Expressions of the second Verse. The *אין* — which we render *without Form* and *void*. Now what is the first Matter, if not that which is *without Form*? and how wou'd Men have clearer Words to describe it? But perhaps they'll say our Translation has not done the Original Justice — perhaps so too, but then 'tis because it does not or cannot come up to the import of the Words. *Tobu* indeed answers exactly to the *אין* of the Greeks, and *Chaos* of the Latins, which signifies first Matter, if any thing does: See *Kimchi* else, who sayes upon the Word *אין*, that it signifies a Thing which has no *Form* nor *Figure*, but so disposed that it may receive any *Figure* or *Form*. The 70 have it — *ἀόρατος ὁ ἀκατασχεύτως* — *Terra erat invisibilis & incomposita* — not much unlike *Ovid's* — *rudis indigestaque moles*. *Aquila's* Version has it *κενὸν καὶ ἄδεν*, *emptiness* and *nothing*, that's nothing form'd, only the vast Wilderness of the first Matter; and *Th. κενόν καὶ ἄδεν* not much unlike him.

We have still a further description of the first Matter in the next Expression — *Darkness* was upon the Face of the Deep; which *Nachman* explains by — *Aquas pulverulentas, five pulvere mixtas, erat enim confusio Elementorum*; Dusty Waters, or Waters mixt with Dust or Dirt, (which is *Mud*) for, says he, there was a *Confusion of the Elements* — and where ever was that to be found, we mean before any *Composition* made, unless in the First Matter.

Thirdly, This Truth may be also fairly inferred from *Natural Reason*, at least, which is tantamount, the absurdity of the contrary Opinion demonstrated. For thus we argue — Either God Created First Matter out of nothing, or 'twas from *Eternity*; if from *Eternity* there must be two *Eternals*, and so two Gods: Besides, *Eternity* being an infinite Perfection, we can't see if we grant Matter that, how we can deny it all others, all the Attributes of what's actually *Infinite*, being reciprocated with each other, and not distinguishable from their *Essence*: At which rate we must in the very first place make Matter active, whereas 'tis of it self a perfect Lump; and infinitely active too, since activity is a Perfection, and what's infinite must act accordingly: But all these

are intollerable Absurdities, and yet as it appears to us, unavoidable Consequences of this ridiculous Supposition. Supposing then, as was above hinted, that it shou'd appear unaccountable to Reason how something shou'd be made out of nothing, 'tis yet as much, nay, far more so, how there shou'd be two *Eternals*, nay, two *Infinities*, and yet one divisible, and therefore finite. Two *immutables*, and yet one in perpetual Flux and Changes — so that at best shou'd we believe Matter not Created, 'tis but by avoiding one Absurdity to plunge into another vastly more deep than the former.

But we believe we can prove there is no Absurdity at all in our Notion of the Creation of Substance. Infinite Power we own is requir'd to perform it, which can do whatever involves no Contradiction, and here is none. It's true, the Common Maxim — *Ex nihilo nihil fit* — of Nothing, nothing comes; holds in Philosophy, but not in Divinity, or rather, not to set those two good Friends at odds, it holds in the present Course of things, or System of Nature, and Order of the Universe — but this it might not do before, all our Notions being fitted to present finite and temporal things, and those which we borrow or fetch before or beyond the World, as eternal, infinite, &c. must needs be as our Knowledge is, very confused and imperfect. They urge here in vain a Contradiction upon us — All Acts, say they, must terminate upon something — Creation is an Act, therefore it can't terminate upon nothing, therefore it can't be the making of a thing out of nothing. To this we might Answer according to what was just advanced, that the Rules of our Logic are too short to reach eternals and infinites — that this Limitation may be true of all lower Action, but not of this infinite Act of Creation — But we need not run to this shelter — We may allow their Maxim, — All Acts have something to terminate on — so has this of Creation, it has the Thing it self Created, it has this first Matter. Creation is undoubtedly an instantaneous Act, (if all others be'to also) now the Act here makes the Object, nor is one a moment before the other — No Creation, no Act; as soon as there is an Act, there is a thing Created to terminate it, even in the very Instant of the Act, and no Act certainly needs any thing to terminate on before it is. And let these things serve, wherein we have been more large than ordinary upon this Noble Question.

The Gentleman that says he sent us some Questions about Vegetables, is desir'd to send 'em again, for we cannot find the receipt of any such amongst all our Papers.

That great Question concerning the Millennium, and Josephus, &c. will speedily be Answer'd.

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