

A Biblical Theology of Creation

by

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Introduction

A biblical theology of Creation is summarized in the four basics of reality contained in Genesis 1:1:

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|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| I. "In the beginning" | —the "when" of creation |
| II. "God" | —the "Who" of creation |
| III. "created" | —the "how" of creation |
| IV. "the heavens and the earth" | —the "what" of creation |

I. The "When": "In the beginning"

- A. An Absolute Beginning?—Two major translations/interpretations
1. Independent clause—"In the beginning God created. . ." (KJV, RSV, NIV)
 2. Dependent clause—"When God began to create. . ." (NJV, NAB, NEB, Anchor Bible)
 3. Implications of these two views:

Independent

Dependent

- a. *creatio ex nihilo*
(creation out of nothing)
- b. God before matter
- c. God creates heaven,
earth, darkness, deep,
water
- d. absolute beginning of
time for this cosmos

- a. no *creatio ex nihilo* mentioned
- b. nothing about this
- c. these already exist at
beginning of creative
activity
- d. no absolute beginning mentioned

4. Evidence for the traditional view (independent clause)
 - a. Hebrew Bible accents (disjunctive accent *tiphe*)
 - b. All ancient versions (LXX, Vg, Symm, Aq, Theod., Targ., Sam.)
 - c. Grammar and syntax—natural Hebrew reading (no article in Hebrew with prep. + word "beginning," cf. Prov 8:23; Isa 46:10)
 - d. Short stylistic structure of Gen 1 (versus Gen 2)
 - e. Theological thrust—transcendent God
 - f. Parallel with John 1:1 "In the beginning" (*En archē*—no article but clearly an independent clause)
5. Evidence for the new view (dependent clause)
 - a. Based mainly on ancient Near Eastern parallel creation stories which all start with dependent clause. E.g., "enuma elish" "When on high..." (ca. 1000 B.C., found in Nineveh in Ashurbanipal's library; see Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951]).

- b. But—no ancient Near Eastern creation stories start with a word like "beginning"—the Biblical account is unique!
- c. ancient Near Eastern parallels cannot be the norm for interpreting scripture
- 6. Detailed discussion: *Bible Translator* 22 (1971): 154-168; *Ministry*, January 1976, 21-24.
- 7. Conclusion: an absolute beginning
 - a. In contrast to the cyclical view of reality in the ancient Near East
 - b. In contrast to the ancient Near Eastern view that matter is eternal
- B. A *Literal* Beginning? or nonliteral/symbol/myth/poetry?
 - 1. Importance:
 - a. Without a literal beginning (protology), there is no literal end (eschatology)
 - b. Doctrines of man, sin, salvation, judgment, Sabbath, etc., all hinge upon a literal interpretation of creation
 - 2. The literary genre (or type) indicates the intended literal nature of the account
 - a. Genesis is structured by the word "generations" (*toledôth*) in connection with each section of the book (13x)
 - b. This is a word used in the setting of genealogies concerned with the accurate account of time and history.
 - c. The use of *toledôth* in Gen 2:4 shows that the author intends the account of creation to be just as literal as the rest of the Genesis narratives.
 - d. See Jacques Doukhan, *The Genesis Creation Story: Its Literary Structure* (Andrews University Press, 1978) for details.
 - 3. In Hebrew thought, the historicity of an account is often *underscored* by its poetic nature, and historical accounts are pregnant with theology which builds upon their historicity. For further discussion, see R. M. Davidson, "In the Beginning: How to Interpret Genesis 1," *Dialogue* 6/3 (1994):9-11.
 - 4. Evidence for seven literal days in creation
 - a. "evening and morning"
 - b. The word "day" may mean an extended period (e.g., Gen 2:4b) but with an ordinal number (first, second, etc.) it always is a literal 24 hour day; also when plural, always literal
 - c. Visionary days do not fit context or syntax
 - d. Exod 20:8-11
 - e. Other Biblical evidence for literal creation (all New Testament writers refer affirmatively to Gen 1-11 as literal history: Matt 19:4, 5; 24:37-39; Mark 10:6; Luke 3:38; 17:26, 27; Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 6:16; 11:8, 9, 12; 15:21, 22, 45; 2 Cor 11:3; Eph 5:31; 1 Tim 2:13, 14; Heb 11:7; 1 Pet 3:20; 2 Pet 2:5; 3:4-6; Jas 3:9; 1 John 3:12; Jude 11, 14; Rev 14:7)
 - f. For further discussion, see Gerhard F. Hasel, "The 'Days' of Creation in Genesis 1: Literal 'Days' or Figurative 'Periods/Epochs' of time?," *Origins* 21/1 (1994): 5-38; reprint, *Creation, Catastrophe, and Calvary*, ed. John T. Baldwin (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 40-68.
- C. Relation of Gen 1:1 to vss. 2ff.
 - 1. Modern "Active Gap" theory: (Arthur Custance, Weston Fields, Scofield Bible, etc.)
 - a. Vs. 1 is previous creation ("In the beginning God created . . .")
 - b. Vs. 2 is civilization corrupted (by Satan?) and destroyed ("And the earth *became* without form and void")
 - c. Vs. 3ff. is a second act of creation ("And God said, Let there be . . .")
 - d. Evidence against this theory: vs. 2 contains three circumstantial noun clauses which describe a *state* and not a *sequence*; must be translated throughout as "was" and not "became" (see Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, p. 454, par. 141i)
 - 2. Flow of thought in Gen 1:1-3
 - a. God is before all creation (vs. 1)

- b. There is an absolute beginning of time with regard to this world and its surrounding heavenly spheres (vs. 1)
 - c. If “heaven and earth” refers to the whole universe (see below), this “beginning” (at least for part of the “heavens”) must have been *before* the first day of earth’s creation week, since the “sons of God” were already created and sing for joy when the foundations of the earth are laid (Job 38:7).
 - d. The text leaves open when the absolute beginning was for this earth; either at the commencement of the seven days of creation (= “no gap”) or sometime before (= “passive gap”). Cf. Prov 8:22-23 for hint of “passive gap.”
 - e. God creates the heavens and the earth (vs. 1) but (at least) the earth is at first different than now; it is “unformed” and “unfilled” (*tohû* and *bohû*) (vs. 2)
 - f. On the first day of creation, God begins to form and fill (vs. 3ff.)
 - g. While matter could have been created before the creation week (a possibility in light of vs. 1), the activities beginning with verses 3ff., including the creation of all life on this earth, occurred during the 7 literal days of creation.
 - h. For further discussion, see Richard M. Davidson, “In the Beginning: How to Interpret Genesis 1,” *Dialogue* 6/3 (1994): 9-12.
- D. A Recent Beginning (at least for life on this earth)
- 1. The Chronogenealogies of Genesis 5 and 11
 - a. These are unique, with no parallel among the other genealogies of the Bible and the ancient Near Eastern literature (for other biblical genealogies, see especially Gen 4:16-24; 22:20-24; 25:1-4, 12-18; 29:31 - 30:24; 35:16-20, 22-26; 39:9-14, 40-43; 46:8-12; 1 Sam 14:50-51; 1 Chronicles 1-9; Ruth 4:18-22; Mt 1:1-17; Lk 3:23-28).
 - b. Unlike the other genealogies which may contain gaps, the “chronogenealogies” of Genesis 5 and 11 have unique interlocking features which indicate a specific focus on chronological time and reveal an intention to make clear that there are no gaps between the individual patriarchs mentioned: a patriarch lived *x* years, begat a son; after he begat this son, he lived *y* more years, and begat more sons and daughters; and all the years of this patriarch were *z* years. These tight interlocking features make it virtually impossible to argue that there are significant generational gaps. Rather, they purport to present the complete time sequence from father to direct biological son throughout the genealogical sequence from Adam to Abraham.
 - c. To further substantiate the absence of gaps in the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11, the Hebrew grammatical form of the verb “begat” (*yalad* in the *Hifil*) used throughout this chapter is the special causative form that always elsewhere in the OT refers to actual direct physical offspring, i.e. biological father-son relationship (Gen 6:10; Judg 11:1; 1 Chron 8:9; 14:3; 2 Chron 11:21; 13:21; 24:3). This is in contrast to the use of *yalad* in the simple *Qal* in many of the other biblical genealogies in which cases it can refer to other than direct physical fathering of immediately succeeding offspring.
 - d. There is clearly a concern for completeness, accuracy, and precise length of time in Genesis 5 and 11.
 - e. There are several different textual versions of the chronological data in these two chapters: MT (Hebrew text) LXX (Greek translation), and Samaritan Pentateuch. The scholarly consensus is that the MT has preserved the original figures in their purest form, while the LXX and Samaritan versions have intentionally schematized the figures for theological reasons. But regardless of which text is chosen, it only represents a difference of about a 1000 years or so. If following the MT, the period of history from Adam to the Flood is about a millennium and a half (1656 years to be exact) and from the Flood to Abraham about another several hundred years (352 to be exact), for a total of about 2000 years (2008 to be exact). (For the LXX, the total from Adam to Abraham is 3184 years, and for the Samaritan Pentateuch the total is 2249 years.)

- f. For discussion, see especially Gerhard Hasel, "Genesis 5 and 11: Chronogenealogies in the Biblical History of Beginnings," *Origins* 7 (1980): 23-37; "The Meaning of the Chronogenealogies of Genesis 5 and 11," *Origins* 7 (1980): 53-70; and "The Genealogies of Gen 5 and 11 and their Alleged Babylonian Background," *AUSS* 16 (1978):361-374.
2. The Chronology from Abraham to the Present
 - a. There is disagreement among Bible-believing scholars whether the Israelite sojourn in Egypt was 215 years or 430 years, and thus whether to put Abraham in the early second millennium or the late third millennium BC; but other than this minor difference, the basic chronology from Abraham to the present is clear from Scripture, and the total is only some 4000 (+/- 200) years. See *SDABC* vol 1 (1953 ed.), "The Chronology of Early Bible History," 174-196.
3. Thus the Bible presents a relatively recent creation (of life on this earth) a few thousands years ago, not tens of thousands or millions/billions. While minor ambiguities do not allow us to pin down the exact date, according to Scripture the six-day creation week unambiguously occurred *recently*. This recent creation becomes significant in light of the character of God, the next point in our outline. God is not a God who would allow pain and suffering to continue any longer than necessary to make clear the issues in the Great Controversy.

II. The "Who": "In the beginning God"

- A. Creation accounts emphasize the character of God
 1. Gen 1: Elohim—generic name, universal God, cosmic, all-powerful, self-existent, mighty transcendent Being, the Infinite God
 2. Gen 2: Yahweh—the covenant God, personal, enters into personal relationship with creatures, bending down, immanent
 3. Only the Judeo-Christian God is both Infinite and Personal to meet man's need of an infinite reference point and personal relationship
- B. No proof of God, but bold assertion of His existence
- C. The ultimate foundation: *Ed* 134,—"'In the beginning God.' Here alone can the mind in its eager questioning, fleeing as the dove to the ark, find rest."
- D. Polemic against the polytheism of the ancient Near East
 1. Many gods
 2. Moral decadence like man
 3. Rivalry and struggle
 4. Mortality
 5. Pantheistic—part of the uncreated world-matter
- E. Intimations of the Trinity in Creation
 1. Gen 1:2—the "Spirit of God" (*rūah ʿelohim*)—elsewhere in Scripture always refers to "Spirit of God," not "mighty wind"; *meraḥpet* "hovering," cf. Deut 32:11
 2. Gen 1:26—"Let us . . ." a plural of fullness—"within the divine being a distinctness of personalities, a plurality within the unanimity of intention and plan; germinal idea of intra-divine deliberation among persons within the divine Being." See Gerhard Hasel, "The Meaning of 'Let Us' in Gen 1:26," *AUSS* 13 (1975): 58-66; Derek Kidner, TOTC, *Genesis*, 33.
 3. Elohim—plural of majesty or fullness?
 4. Compare the "angel of the Lord" passages later in Genesis: Gen 16:7-13; 18:1-2 & 19:1; Gen 31:11-13; 32:24, 30; Hosea 12:3-6; 48:15-16 (see Kidner, *Genesis*, 33).
- F. Perhaps the greatest reason to reject (theistic) evolution is that it maligns the character of God, making Him responsible for millions of years of death/suffering, natural selection, survival of the fittest, even *before* sin.

III. The "How": "In the beginning God Created"

- A. By divine *bārā* (= "create")
1. Exclusively God's action
 2. Never with accusative of matter; something totally new
 3. Vs. creation by sexual procreation
 4. Vs. pantheism, emanation, or immanence
- B. By divine fiat—"Let there be" / "and God said" (Ps 33:6, 9): cf. Gen 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26.
1. Universe not self-existent, random, struggled for
 2. Word of God = concrete, power
 3. Blessing—empowering to fulfill intended function
- C. Portrayed as polemic against mythological struggle with chaos monster
1. Tiamat vs. *ʾhôm* in Gen 1:2 (unmythologized masculine rather than mythological feminine sea monster)
 2. No name for sun and moon (vss. 14-19) = polytheistic names
 3. *Tannînim* ("sea monsters", vss. 21-22; name for mythological creatures and natural sea creatures/serpents); the strongest term *bārā* (implying something totally new, no struggle) is employed here for the second time in Gen 1, to dispel any thought of a rival god
- D. Dramatically and aesthetically and joyfully/playfully
1. Prov 8; Eccl 3:11 (note the use of the word meaning "play/sport/rejoice" in Prov 8:30-31!)
 2. Poetic structure in creation (synthetic parallelism)

Introduction (Gen 1:1)

(Gen 1:2)	<i>tohû</i> ("unformed")	<i>bohû</i> ("unfilled")
Gen 1:3ff.:	Forming	Filling
	a. light	a'. luminaries
	b. sky and waters separated	b'. inhabitants of sky and water
	c. dry land and vegetation	c'. inhabitants of land, animals and man

(Gen 2:2-3) Conclusion:
The Sabbath—A Palace in Time!
 (See my book *A Love Song for the Sabbath*.)

E. Terminology:

1. *bārā* (Gen 1:1, 21, 27; 2:4a), "to create"
2. *ʾāśah* (Gen 1:7, 16, 25, 26; 2:2, 4b), "to make/do"
3. *yāsar* (Gen 2:7, 19) "to form" (like a potter)
4. *bānah* (Gen 2:22) "to architecturally design/build"

IV. The "What": "In the beginning God created *the heavens and the earth*"

- A. "Heavens and earth" equal the globe (earth) and the surrounding heavenly spheres, (possibly only the atmosphere and solar system, but more probably includes the whole material universe; cf. the precise parallel to John 1:1-3).

1. Compound phrase, 41x "heavens and earth" in Scripture; ca. 180x with "heavens" and "earth" paired in close proximity in the biblical text.
 2. Context of Gen 1 defines what is created (but note that in Gen 1:1 "the heavens" has the article, while in Gen 1:8 it does not).
 3. According to the Hebrew syntax of Gen 1:14, the "greater" and "lesser" lights, as well as the stars could have been created "in the beginning," and not on the fourth day. On the fourth day they were given a purpose, "to separate the day from the night" and "to mark seasons and days and years." See John Sailhamer, "Genesis," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:33-34. Alternatively, Colin House has argued that the "stars" are presupposed as already in existence before creation week. Hebrew construction: Gen 1:16—"the lesser light to rule the night *together with the stars*." See Colin House, "Some Notes on Translating וְאֵת הַכּוֹכָבִים [w' *et hakôkabîm*] in Gen 1:16," *AUSS* 25 (1987): 241-248. This latter view is theoretically possible, but has some major syntactical obstacles.
 4. The "light" of Gen 1:3-5 clarified in Ps 104:1-4—see Doukhan, *Genesis Creation Story*, for day-by-day parallels between Ps 104 and Gen 1; the Light Source on Day 1 is God Himself, "who covers Himself with light as with a garment" (Ps 104:2). Alternatively, the light is the sun and moon, which have already been created, but now are further formed from their *tohu* state (cf. vs. 1) or brought directly into view and given a purpose (see point 3 above).
- B. Gen 1 and 2 are complementary accounts, not contradictory
1. Gen 1—creation as such; general view
 2. Gen 2—creation centered on man's personal needs
 3. Problem verses in Gen 2:
 - a. Vs. 5—no plant/herb = what man was to till (see Gen 3:18) (See discussion in U. Cassuto's Commentary on Genesis.)
 - b. Vs. 19—translate as "had formed" as in NIV (pluperfect)
 4. See Randy Younker, "Genesis 2: A Second Creation Account?" *Creation, Catastrophe, and Calvary*, ed. John T. Baldwin (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 69-78.
- C. Nature of Creation—Good, very good
1. Matter is good (vs. platonic dualism, asceticism, etc.)
 2. Matter corresponds to the divine intent and is empowered to fulfill the divinely intended function
- D. Humankind in the image of God—see Davidson, *AUSS* 26 (1988): 5-24
1. Outward form and inward character—holistic—PP 45
 2. Equality of man and woman (Gen 1:26-27)
 3. Role of woman vis a vis man in Gen 2—architecturally designed!
 4. Theology of marriage (leave, cleave, one flesh)—see Davidson, *AUSS* 26 (1988): 5-24.
 5. Function of humans vis a vis their environment—Gen 2:15 literally "to serve" (*'abad*) and "to guard" (*šāmar*)
- E. The Sabbath as a holy institution rooted in Creation (see Davidson, *A Love Song for the Sabbath*)
- V. **Appendix: Ancient Near Eastern Parallels to Biblical Creation Story —3 main accounts:**
- A. *Enuma Elish* (= "when on high," the first words of the creation story)
 - found at Nineveh in Ashurbanipal's library; dates originally from ca. 1000 B.C.
 - source for translation: Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963, c1951).
 - B. *Atrahasis Epic* (Old Babylonian version of creation and flood, ca. 1600 B.C.)
 - source: W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atrahasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: University Press, 1969).
 - C. *Eridu Genesis* (fragmentary Sumerian creation-flood story, ca. 1600 B.C.)
 - source: Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Eridu Genesis," *JBL* 100 (1981): 513-529.

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”

— *Genesis 1:1*

With such beauty, majesty, and simplicity begins the Genesis account of Creation. Yet an analysis of Genesis chapter 1 is not as simple and straightforward as a casual reading of the biblical text may suggest. Modern interpretation of biblical cosmogony (understanding of origins) in Genesis 1 is extremely complicated, divided between the non-literal and the literal. We will briefly describe seven such interpretations, and evaluate each in the light of the biblical data.

Major interpretations of Genesis 1

Non-literal interpretations

Scholars who hold a non-literal interpretation of Genesis approach the issue in different ways. Some see Genesis 1 as mythology¹; others view it as poetry²; some consider it as theology³; still others regard it as symbolism.⁴ Common to all these *non-literal* views is the assumption that the Genesis Creation account is not a literal, straightforward historical account of Creation.

Literal interpretations

Those who accept a *literal* reading of the Creation account also differ in their approaches to biblical cosmogony of Genesis 1. We may note three such views.

Active-gap view. This view is also known as “ruin-restoration” theory. According to this view,⁵ Genesis 1:1 describes an originally perfect creation some unknown time ago (millions or billions of years ago). Satan was ruler of this world, but because of his rebellion (Isaiah 14:12-17), sin entered the universe. God judged the rebellion and reduced it to the ruined, chaotic state described in Genesis 1:2. Those holding this view translate Genesis 1:2 as “the earth *became* without form and void.”

Genesis 1:3 and the following verses then present an account of a later creation in which God restored what had been ruined. The geological column is usually fitted into the period of time of

the first creation (Genesis 1:1) and the succeeding chaos, and not in connection with the biblical Flood.

Precreation “unformed-unfilled” view. According to this interpretation, the Hebrew terms *tohu* (“unformed”) and *bohu* (“unfilled”) in Genesis 1:2 describe the “unformed-unfilled” state of the earth. The text refers to a state prior to the creation spoken of in the Bible. This

In the Beginning: How to Interpret Genesis 1

by
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view has two main variations based on two different grammatical analyses.

The first variation sees Genesis 1:1 as a dependent clause, paralleling the extra-biblical ancient Near Eastern creation accounts.⁶ So the translation proposed: “*When* God began to create the heaven and earth.” Therefore Genesis 1:2 equals a parenthesis, describing the *state* of the earth when God began to create (“the earth being . . .”) and Genesis 1:3 on describe the actual work of creation (“And God said . . .”).

The other major variation takes Genesis 1:1 as an independent clause, and as a summary statement or formal introduction or title which is then elaborated in the rest of the narrative.⁷

Genesis 1:2 is seen as a circumstantial clause connected with verse 3: "Now the earth was unformed and unfilled And God said, 'Let there be light.'"

In the pre-Creation unformed-unfilled view, supported by either grammatical analysis mentioned above, Genesis does not present an absolute beginning of time for the cosmos. Creation out of nothing is not implied, and there is no indication of God's existence before matter. Nothing is said of the creation of original matter described in verse 2. The darkness, deep, and water of Genesis 1:2 already existed at the beginning of God's creative activity.

We might note in passing another pre-Creation view; it takes verse 2 as a dependent clause "when . . .," but it differs from the first variant in interpreting the words *tohu* and *bohu*, and the terms for "darkness" and "deep"—all as signifying "nothingness." So verse 1 is seen as a summary; verse 2 says that initially there was "nothingness," and verse 3 describes the beginning of the creative process.⁸

Initial "unformed-unfilled" view. A third literal interpretation of biblical cosmogony is the initial "unformed-unfilled" view. This is the traditional

view, having the support of the majority of Jewish and Christian interpreters through history.⁹ According to this understanding, Genesis 1:1 declares that God created out of nothing the original matter called heaven and earth at the point of their absolute beginning. Verse 2 clarifies that when the earth was first created it was in a state of *tohu* and *bohu*—unformed and unfilled. Verse 3 and those following then describe the divine process of forming the unformed and filling the unfilled.

This interpretation has two variations. Some see all of verses 1 and 2 as part of the first day of the seven-day Creation week. We may call this the "no-gap" interpretation.¹⁰ Others see verses 1-2 as a chronological unity separated by a gap in time from the first day of Creation described in verse 3. This view is usually termed the "passive gap."¹¹

Evaluation

Space does not permit a detailed evaluation of all the pros and cons of each view we have summarized, but we will present the basic contours of the biblical data as they pertain to the theories on the origin of matter and life and their early existence.

Non-literal interpretations

In considering all the non-literal, nonhistorical interpretations, we must take into account two significant biblical facts:

1. The *literary genre* of Genesis chapters 1-11 indicates the intended literal nature of the account.¹² The book of Genesis is structured by the word "generations" (Hebrew *toledoth*) in connection with each section of the book (13 times). This is a word used elsewhere in the setting of genealogies concerned with the accurate account of time and history. The use of *toledoth* in Genesis 2:4 shows that the author intended the account of Creation to be just as literal as the rest of the Genesis narratives.¹³ Other biblical writers take Genesis chapters 1-11 as literal. In fact, all New Testament writers refer affirmatively to Genesis 1-11 as literal history.¹⁴

2. *Internal evidence* also indicates that the Creation account is not to be taken symbolically as seven long ages conforming to the evolutionary model—as suggested by many both critical and evangelical scholars. The terms "evening and morning" signify a literal 24-hour day. Elsewhere in Scripture, the word *day* with an ordinal number is always literal. If Creation days are symbolic, Exodus 20:8-11 commemorating a literal Sabbath does not make sense. References to the function of the sun and moon for signs, seasons, days, and years (Genesis 1:14), also indicate literal time, not symbolic. Therefore, we must conclude that Genesis 1:1-2:4a indicates seven literal, successive, 24-hour days of creation.¹⁵

While the non-literal interpretations must be rejected in what they deny (namely, the literal, historical nature of the Genesis account), nevertheless they have an element of truth in what they affirm. Genesis 1-2 is concerned with mythology—not to affirm a mythological interpretation, but as a polemic against ancient Near Eastern mythology.¹⁶ Genesis 1:1-2:4 is very likely structured in a way similar to Hebrew poetry (synthetic parallelism),¹⁷ but poetry does not negate historicity (see, for example, Exodus 15, Daniel 7, and some 40 percent of the Old Testament, which is in poetry). Biblical writers often write in poetry to underscore historicity.

Genesis 1-2 does present a profound theology: doctrines of God, Creation,



"HOW CAN THINGS SO PRETTY AND CLEAN COME OUT OF DIRT?"

"DENNIS THE MENACE" used by permission of Hank Ketcham and © by North America Syndicate.

humanity, Sabbath, and so on. But theology in Scripture is not opposed to history. In fact, biblical theology is *rooted* in history. Likewise, there is deep symbolism in Genesis 1. For example, the language of the Garden of Eden and the occupation of Adam and Eve clearly allude to sanctuary imagery and the work of the Levites (see Exodus 25-40).¹⁸ Thus the sanctuary of Eden is a symbol or type of the heavenly sanctuary. But because it points beyond itself does not detract from its own literal reality.

Gerhard von Rad, a critical scholar who refuses to accept what Genesis 1 asserts, still honestly confesses, "What is said here [Genesis 1] is intended to hold true entirely and exactly as it stands."¹⁹

We therefore affirm the literal, historical nature of the Genesis account. But which literal interpretation is correct?

Literal interpretations

First, we must immediately reject the *ruin-restoration* or *active gap* theory purely on grammatical grounds. Genesis 1:2 clearly contains three noun clauses and the fundamental meaning of noun clauses in Hebrew is something fixed, a state,²⁰ not a sequence or action. According to laws of Hebrew grammar, we must translate "the earth *was* unformed and unfilled," not "the earth *became* unformed and unfilled." Thus Hebrew grammar leaves no room for the active gap theory.

What about the *pre-Creation unformed-unfilled* interpretation in which the *tohu-bohu* state of Genesis 1:2 comes before divine creation? Some support this by translating verse 1 as a dependent clause. But major lines of evidence favor the traditional reading of Genesis 1:1 as an independent clause: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth." This includes the evidence from Hebrew accent marks, all ancient versions, lexical/grammatical, syntactical and stylistic considerations, and contrasts with ancient Near Eastern stories.²¹ The weight of evidence leads me to retain the traditional reading.

Others support the *pre-Creation unformed-unfilled* view by interpreting Genesis 1:1 as a summary of the whole chapter (the actual creation starting only in verse 3). But if Genesis 1 begins with only a title or summary, then verse 2 contradicts verse 1. God creates the earth

(verse 1), but the earth preexists creation (verse 2). This interpretation simply cannot explain the reference to the existence of the earth already in verse 2. It breaks the continuity between verse 1 and verse 2 in the use of the term *earth*.²² Therefore I conclude that Genesis 1:1 is not simply a summary or title of the whole chapter.

Against the suggestion that all the words in Genesis 1:2 simply imply "nothingness," it must be observed that verses 3 and following do not describe the creation of water, but assume its prior existence. The word *tehom* "deep," combined with *tohu* and *bohu* together (as in Jeremiah 4:34) do not seem to refer to nothingness, but rather to the earth in an unformed-unfilled state covered by water.

This leads us to the *initial unformed-unfilled* position. A straightforward reading of the flow of thought in Genesis 1:1-3 has led the majority of Christian and Jewish interpreters in the history of interpretation to this position, hence this is called the traditional view.

The natural flow of Genesis 1-2

I concur with this view, because I find that only this interpretation cohesively follows the natural flow of these verses, without contradiction or omission of any element of the text.

The flow of thought in Genesis 1-2 is as follows:

- a. God is before all creation (verse 1).
- b. There is an absolute beginning of time with regard to this world and its surrounding heavenly spheres (verse 1).
- c. God creates the heavens and earth (verse 1), but they are at first different than now, they are "unformed" and "unfilled" (*tohu* and *bohu*; verse 2).
- d. On the first day of the seven-day Creation week, God begins to form and fill the *tohu* and *bohu* (verses 3 and following).
- e. The "forming and filling" creative activity of God is accomplished in six successive literal 24-hour days.

- f. At the end of creation week, the heavens and earth are finally finished (Genesis 2:1). What God began in verse 1 is now completed.
- g. God rests on the seventh day, blessing and sanctifying it as a memorial of creation (2:1-4).

The ambiguity of when

The above points stand clear in the flow of thought of Genesis 1-2. However, there is one crucial aspect in this creation process which the text leaves open and ambiguous: When did the absolute beginning of the heavens and earth in verse 1 occur? Was it at the commencement of the seven days of Creation or sometime before? It is possible that the "raw materials" of the heavens and earth in their unformed-unfilled state were created long before the seven days of creation week. This is the "passive gap" theory. It is also possible that the "raw materials" described in Genesis 1:1, 2 are included in the first day of the seven-day Creation week. This is called the "no gap" theory.

This ambiguity in the Hebrew text has implications for interpreting the Precambrian of the geological column, if one roughly equates the Precambrian with the "raw materials" described in Genesis 1:1-2 (of course this equation is debatable). There is a possibility of a young Precambrian, created as part of the seven-day Creation week (perhaps with the appearance of old age). There is also the possibility of the "raw materials" being created at a time of absolute beginning of this earth and its surrounding heavenly spheres, perhaps millions or billions of years ago. This initial unformed-unfilled state is described in verse 2. Verses 3 and following then describe the process of forming and filling during the seven-day Creation week.

I conclude that the biblical text of Genesis 1 leaves room for either (a) a

young Precambrian (created as part of the seven days of Creation), or (b) much older pre-fossil earth rocks, with a long interval between the creation of the inanimate "raw materials" on earth described in Genesis 1:1, 2 and the seven days of Creation week described in Genesis 1:3 and following. But in either case, the biblical text calls for a *short* chronology for *life* on earth. There is no room for any gap of time in the creation of life on this earth: it came during the third through the sixth literal, successive 24-hour days of Creation week. □

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