

Institute for Christian Teaching  
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

**EXPLORING THE WATERS OF GENESIS 1:2 –  
AN OLD TEXT, A NEW STORY**

by

**Nehemiah M. Nyaundi**  
University of Eastern Africa  
Baraton, Kenya

**700-12 Institute for Christian Teaching  
12501 Old Columbia Pike  
Silver Spring, MD 20904 USA**

Prepared for the  
38<sup>th</sup> International Faith and Learning Seminar  
Held at  
Loma Linda University  
July 2008

# EXPLORING THE WATERS OF GENESIS 1:2. -

## AN OLD TEXT, A NEW STORY

**Nehemiah M. Nyaundi**

### **Introduction: Some views about Genesis 1:1-2**

The content of Genesis 1:1-2 is both interesting and fascinating.<sup>1</sup> The question about the age of the earth has occupied the thinking of great, and the not-so-great thinkers. Answers to the question have been volunteered by devout Christians and scientists of repute. That notwithstanding, the question continues to engage debate, at times to the extent of bringing tempers to a flare, indicating the emotive nature of the subject.

Genesis 1:1-2 is a familiar text to many Bible readers. One can say that the text is popular and that it is one of the passages that many Christians can easily recite with minimum effort. Be that as it may, Genesis 1:1-2 is a controversial passage of Scripture, starting with its authorship.<sup>2</sup> The passage has been interpreted in many ways, with a vast amount of literature which attempts to decipher its meaning.<sup>3</sup> The issues which come to the fore are many; they are historical, theological, philosophical, geological, linguistic, literary, among others.

In an attempt to unravel the meaning that may be drawn from Gen 1:1-2, there are a number of insights which immediately come to the fore. At the start, one gets the

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay contributes to the "*Christianity and Science in Biblical Perspective*" seminar held at the Geoscience Research Institute at Loma Linda University, California, United States of America. The overall aim of the seminar is to cultivate the art of integrating Christian faith and learning. This essay addresses learning of knowledge dealing with the interface between Christianity and Science.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Record: A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1976, pp.22-26. See also Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*. Grand Rapids Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982

<sup>3</sup> An example may be the old publication by Harold W. Clark, *The Battle over Genesis*. Washington D.C: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1977.

impression that the aspect of “when” of the beginning is not so much in dispute as what actually happened at that moment, and how it happened. The thrust of the debate is hinged on whether that beginning was the result of a deliberate and planned action, or whether it was an accidental and unplanned occurrence. In addition to that, there is also debate as to whether that occurrence took a short moment as in a flash, or that it took a long time such as is proposed in the evolution theory.<sup>4</sup>

There are a number of ways of interpreting Gen 1:1-2. One opinion holds that the passage describes the creator originating everything, namely the universe and the life forms in the universe. The second opinion holds that the passage refers to the creation of the universe at some unidentified time in the past, whereupon the creation week which is described in Gen 1:3-31 occurs at a later time. Hence, Gen 1:1-2 refers to the creation activity which occurred before the six days of creation which start in Gen 1:3-31. This means that the six days of creation, according to the Genesis account, which put life on earth start in verse 3, implying that the six days of creation start when the structures of the earth are already there.<sup>5</sup> At the point of starting to put life on earth, the earth is unformed, void and dark, a reason why God finds it needful to call forth the light of verse 3. In other words, the creator originated life on a universe whose structural supports were already in existence. Further, that would infer that water and the ocean floor was in existence before creation week.

---

<sup>4</sup> Leonard Brand and David C. Jarnes, *Beginnings. Are Science and Scripture Partners in the Search for Origins?* Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2006, pp.12-13. The concept of *Abiogenesis* is the case in point, pp34-35. See also the concept of *Panspermia*. p.43.

<sup>5</sup> Ariel Roth, *Origins. Linking Science and Scripture*, Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1998. Roth presents a long discussion which surveys a number of opinions about Gen 1:1-2.

Interpreters of the Genesis narrative usually use an overriding assumption. The assumption is either that the narrative is literal, or non-literal. Even within the two options, there are variants as to how the literal or the non-literal options are to be understood.<sup>6</sup> Any one of the options imparts a distinctive shift to the way the passage is understood. There are many scholars who have attempted to resolve the difficulty found in the passage. We shall return to this below.

It is possible that the passage may be understood differently if the two verses are read together without the pause that is caused by the sub-division into verse one and two. Reading the passage as one block seems to imply no break in the flow of the story. It is the interruption in the reading that implies a difference between verse 1 and verse 2.

Further, it is possible that the problem of interpretation starts with interpreters who force the text to say what they themselves want the text to say, this is called eisegesis, rather than allowing the text to lead the way, what is called exegesis. It is not uncommon that interpreters go to the text looking for what may agree or may be made to agree with the frame of their thinking.

A crucial question whose answer would be highly informative is whether the author of Genesis, traditionally believed to Moses,<sup>7</sup> was the first person to narrate the creation event, or whether the narrative was freely available since Adam. If the narrative was available before the writing of Genesis, then the weight which is commonly accorded to earlier mythological narratives such as the Babylonian *Enuma Elish Epic*,<sup>8</sup> is in fact neither here nor there. This is to say that if the Genesis narrative was unknown before

---

<sup>6</sup> Richard M. Davidson, "In the Beginning: How to Interpret Genesis 1." College and University Dialogue,

<sup>7</sup> Morris, p.25.

<sup>8</sup> Commonly known as *Enuma Elish Epic* is a supposedly mythological account of how humanity came into being.

Moses, then a viable explanation is needed in order to explain the undeniable similarity with older myths of origins.

It is therefore not farfetched to say that Gen 1:1-2 describe an earth which could not sustain life. Earth was created in order to sustain life by including an environment crucial to sustaining of life. Consider the fact that of the planets, only earth is so far known to have life-supporting systems.

### **The scope and limitation of the essay**

The scope and limitation of this essay is the examination of Genesis 1:2, "*and the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.*" The specific focus lies in what seems to be an apparent fact that water existed before creation of life on earth, and indeed, even before creation of the heavens and the earth. The essay looks into what insights may be contained in the text with particular reference to water, and thereby what implication that may have to the question about the age of the earth. The essay is not poised to undertake an exhaustive discussion of the question of the age of the earth per se, but to raise perceptions which may contribute towards finding an answer to the perennial question. I move from the premise that Gen 1:2 has a key to unlock the door into the possible answer concerning the question of the age of the earth.

I do not undertake to provide any calculations or determined dates. I intend to provide a thought-provoking opportunity to fellow believers who uphold the primacy of the Genesis narrative. There are many who are found where I am, namely those who believe in a recent creation event, implying an earth which had its origin a few thousand years ago. The reader is directed to the fact that Genesis starts off with a geological situation that entrusts the task of interpretation to the geologist. With that in mind, I

concede that the debate is better tackled by a person with a working knowledge of geology or the related sciences. But I contend that the debate is undoubtedly fascinating, so that it is obviously one of attraction to the expert and the layman alike.

The questions which this essay seeks to tackle are among others: Does the Bible provide an answer to questions regarding time, especially about the age of the Earth? Does science have an answer to questions regarding time, particularly life on earth? How are the views originating from the Bible and from science regarding time, and the age of the earth to be harmonized? Answers to these questions are crucial to understanding of Christian cosmogony and eschatology. Furthermore, interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2 is decisive because it influences understanding of the rest of the Bible and the subsequent view of human destiny.

### **Genesis 1:1 “in the beginning”**

*“In the beginning ....”* These are the first three words of the book of Genesis in many Bible translations. The popular *King James Version* and its equally popular successor, the *Revised Standard Version* use this phrase. The *Torah*, which is the Jewish version of the book of Genesis, does not use the phrase. The reading of the *Torah* is, *“When God begun to create the heaven and the earth ... ”*<sup>9</sup>

The Hebrew original can be rendered into two alternative translations which bring out two variants as follows; a.) the first act of creation was heaven and earth, b.) heaven and earth already existed, but they were formless and void. The expression indicates the paramount role of God in initiating the origins. Derek Kidner emphasizes God’s creative

---

<sup>9</sup> *The Torah: The Five Books of Moses. New Translation of the Holy Scripture According to the Traditional Hebrew Text.* Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 1973.

power as, “until God spoke, nothing existed.”<sup>10</sup> Kidner thinks that the point that the word *bara*, (created), may among other meanings point to “the initial moment of bringing into existence,” something that was not there.<sup>11</sup> The word is used in verse 21, 27 and 2:3-4. If one takes the option of “when God began to create,” what comes out explicitly is that something already existed before. This is what is known as the exclusive power of God, also known as God’s “*fiat*.”

According to Lawrence Turner, Gen 1:1 is a summary of what is to follow. The passage is not meant to be read independently of the rest of the chapter. Says Turner, “what follows simply fills in the details of this summary.”<sup>12</sup> The expression, “in the beginning” takes our attention to a period which Turner calls the “limits of time”<sup>13</sup> That moment is the point in time when we can not go back any further. This view may be deemed to be credible because looking at Gen 2:1, 3:1, 4:1 and 5:1, one notices that the chapters start with an overriding introduction which is then followed by details. This aspect may be an authorial characteristic, or the literary custom of the time.

Both Genesis and science agree that life on earth had a beginning.<sup>14</sup> However, the two sources disagree promptly in respect to when and how that beginning occurred. To many readers of the book of Genesis, the statement in Gen 1:1 seems self-evident and unassailable. But apparently not so to science which has proceeded to call for proof to validate the Genesis claim. Those who believe in the accuracy of the Genesis narrative

---

<sup>10</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis. An Introduction and Commentary*. Leicester, Uk: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967, p.43.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.44.

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Turner, *Back to the Present: Encountering Genesis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Grantham, England: Autumn House, 2004, p.10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 2004, p.18.

<sup>14</sup> For the scientific version of the origin of life, a good source of information would be Leonard Brand, *Faith, Reason and Earth History*. Berrien Springs Michigan: Andrews University Press, 1997. See chapter 7 where the author deals with the question of the origin of life. See also Ariel Roth’s *Origins* in chapter 21. Roth calls the Bible and Science the “two respected sources of information,” p.339.

have tried to find evidence, but the burden of providing the evidence has not been easily forthcoming.

Traditional Christian belief holds that the book of Genesis is the undisputed record of “beginnings.” The belief holds that a supernatural God prepared the earth to receive and sustain life before he deliberately and with conscious plan created life, a process which all together took six twenty-four hour days.<sup>15</sup> This position is commonly held alongside the belief that the creation event took place some few thousand years ago.

Many scholars have attempted to interpret Gen 1:1. Out of the attempts, two major assumptions have emerged. The first assumption states that the narrative is a literal history while the second one contends that the narrative is non-literal history. The explanations, whether taking the literal or non-literal stance are themselves done in various versions. For the purpose of this essay, I shall take the explanation offered by Richard M. Davidson which was published in *Dialogue* whose title was, “*How to interpret Genesis 1.*”<sup>16</sup>

According to Davidson, three variants can be picked out of the view which promotes the literal interpretation of Genesis 1:1. The first variant is the *Active-gap view* (also known as the “ruin-restoration theory.”)<sup>17</sup> The theory states that Gen 1:1 is a description of an originally perfect creation some unknown time in the past (which is to the tune of millions or even billions of years ago). Satan was the ruler of this dispensation. At a certain point, Satan and God had a skirmish which “ruined” the

---

<sup>15</sup> A case in point here is the ancient concept of the *Hexameron* (derived from the Greek *hexa* [six] and *hemera* [day], which hold that the universe was created in six days. St Basil (330-379), the Cappadocian monk is believed to be the one who coined up the idea. The concept is found in the works of St Ambrose of Millan.

<sup>16</sup> Davidson, p.1. This view may be regarded as self-destroying because the character of Satan is not known to preside over order. but over chaos.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

hitherto perfect universe, resulting into the chaotic state described in Gen 1:2, where the earth is “formless and void.”<sup>18</sup>

Davidson observes that interpreters who hold this view say that the account of creation which put life on earth starts at the point where there was an old universe but which was lifeless. This variant has two significant points. The first one states that Gen 1:1-2 is to be considered as a block of information which is separate from the account which starts at Gen 1:3. This means that Gen 1:1-2 refers to an earth totally different from the second earth which is life-bearing whose account starts at verse 3. The second point is that according to this variant, the geologic column which may be likened to the structural design of the earth is part of the earth of Gen 1:1-2 and so that is the reason why rocks are commonly dated as being in millions or billions of years old.

The second variant is the *Pre-creation view*.<sup>19</sup> This variant states that Gen 1:1 describes the state of the earth at the point of the creation moment. The view can also be understood in two ways. The first way views Gen 1:1 as a dependent statement which is meant to amplify the message of Gen 1:2 which then proposes that the translation of the text should read, “*when God begun to create the heaven and the earth,*” a phrase which should be connected to Gen 1:2 directly in order to read, “when God begun to create the heaven and the earth” ... then Gen 1:2 should pick the statement without a pause in order to read, “*when God begun to create the heaven and the earth ... the earth being formless and void. ...*” The second way is to view Gen 1:1 as an independent statement which should be seen as a formal introduction in summary form, or as a title of the chapter. In

---

<sup>18</sup> See also Morris, pp46-47.

<sup>19</sup> Davidson., p.1.

this manner, Gen 1:2 is a circumstantial clause which should connect with Gen 1:3 in order to read “the earth was formless and void, ...” And God said, Let there be light ...”

The third variant is the *Initial “unformed-unfilled” view*.<sup>20</sup> This is the traditional Judeo-Christian view of cosmogony whereby Gen 1:1 is the absolute beginning of heaven and earth (*ex nihilo*), that all matter was originated at that point because nothing existed before then. According to this view, Gen 1:2 is a clarification as to how earth was when it was first created and that Gen 1:3 is the day by day narrative outlining how life was formed to fill an earth which was formless and void at the start.

Literature on Genesis is awash with views about the non-literal nature of the narrative. There is a sizeable cluster of scholarship which proposes this view.<sup>21</sup> This category considers the account as mythological, poetry and as allegorical. This definitively rejects the Judeo-Christian view which believes Genesis is a literal and historical account of the origin of life on earth.

#### **Genesis 1:2 “and the spirit of God was moving over the water” (GNB)**

The rendering of Gen 1:2 is similar in many translations, almost to the use of the same words. When I read the *King James Version* (KJV), *Revised Standard Version* (RSV), *English Standard Version* (ESV) and the *New International Version* (NIV), the reading is nearly the same. The translation which cuts new ground is the *Good News Bible* (GNB). Notice the variance between the KJV and the GNB, and contrast the two with the version of the *Torah*.

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

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

<sup>21</sup> See a survey of the subject in Ariel Roth, p.316-319. See also Morris p.42-43.

*"The earth was formless and desolate, the raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in the total darkness, and the spirit of God was moving over the water." GNB*

*"the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water." Torah, verse 2*

There are two things which are held in common among the three narratives. The first one is that the earth was without form and was void. This means that the creation event starts with what the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary calls a "state of wasteness and emptiness."<sup>22</sup> The second one is the mention that there was darkness. The third is that there was water which was in a state of unrest, which is referred to as "raging water" and "roaring waves." Upon this "restless" water, the spirit of God was hovering.

"Waters" is mentioned many times in the chapter. All of the times, "waters" is linked to creation, as in verse 2,6,7,9,10,20,21, and 22 (RSV). Water appears to be a distinctive phenomenon in Genesis. Notice that days one, two and three are all about water. Much of the activities of these days deal with water.

There are 30 references to water in the book of Genesis. All references appear to refer to water in liquid form. My survey of the references in the *New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 1990,<sup>23</sup> shows that the "water" is in liquid form, not in vapor, cloud or in the form of ice. This means that when used as in Gen 1:2, water is assumed to be lying on a firm base which herein I call the seabed. It is important for this fact to be clearly established because there is a possibility of arguing that the water of Gen 1:2 could have been in vapor form, in which case the thought of a seabed would not arise.

---

<sup>22</sup> *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary Vol. 1*. Washington D.C: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1978, p.209. See also Speiser, who refers to the state as "formless waste" p.5.

<sup>23</sup> *New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 1990.

The idea of a seabed is crucial to my formulation because it is from that inference that I wish to make my point.

The existence of water at that point of the creation moment is markedly significant because it leads into a number of inferences. I will identify one inference which I think directs us to a spectacular glimpse. The insight is the inference that the existence of water seems to have preceded the moment of “in the beginning.” According to the narrative, water already existed before God starts to create. This implies that water is older than the Genesis account of creation of life. This fact may have a bearing since water is a vital component in the chemistry of life. The water in this case must be understood to have been in liquid form. This inference takes us to an even more momentous insight, namely if the water of verse two was in liquid form, then it follows that the water was lying on solid ground, which we call the seabed.

This is the point where an interesting glimpse pops up. It is the question regarding the period of time the seabed and the water had been in existence before the “beginning” of the Genesis account.

The idea of the seabed is significant in this line of thinking because of what it implies. If it is confirmed that water and the ocean floor ante-date the creation week, then that fact prepares the way for a view which is likely to be new to a considerable section of Christians. The new view is the realization that it may be possible to accommodate the idea of an old geological age and, possibly thereby a short-age for life on earth. This is the consideration which gave the title to this essay, which is *“Exploring the Waters of Genesis 1:2- An Old Text, A New Story.”*

The view of a young earth is held widely. Francis S. Collins discusses the view and points out that the opinion is held by believers of the literal meaning of the Genesis account.<sup>24</sup> The account is understood as locating the beginning of the universe and life on earth at a time not in the too distant past. This is referred to as the young earth creationism, an opinion which considers the six days of Genesis as literal 24-hour days, implying that the earth is therefore young.

Gen 1:2 refers to a physical watery ocean which therefore needed a seabed. Robert Ouro thinks that the text is a “description of the earth as it was without vegetation and uninhabited by animals and humans.”<sup>25</sup> This may imply that the structures of the earth were in place before God starts to create in v3. It does not seem like there is any suggestion towards a chaotic state which may have been proposed by those who think that there may have been a struggle between God and Satan just preceding the creation moment. The verse describes the change from what Ouro calls an “abiotic state to a biotic state.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Some biblical references about creation and time**

I have mentioned elsewhere that the best way to interpret Genesis is to allow the text to glow out with its own meaning. This is what should be the case with Genesis 1:2. While this is the case, I none the less find that various utterances elsewhere in the Bible may have a bearing on the way we are to understand the text.

We remember that one of the criteria that was used to validate the canonicity of individual books of the Bible was the requirement for harmony of the message of one

---

<sup>24</sup> Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God. A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*. New York: Free Press, 2006, p.172.

<sup>25</sup> This idea is discussed by Robert Ouro , *The Earth of Genesis 1:2: Abiotic or Chaotic? Part 3*. Andrews University Seminary Studies 38 (2000):38:66.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.67.

book when held in juxtaposition with the rest of the canon. That is to say that the message of one book of the Bible should in principle agree with another and not contradict the spirit of the rest of the book. It is often said among biblical scholars that the Bible is its own interpreter. This means that while we put significance to internal consistency of the document, we do well to look over the shoulder in order to take cognizance of other utterances elsewhere in the Bible, whether in the same book, or in other books. In the following pages, I raise awareness regarding biblical statements that may not necessarily influence how we interpret Genesis, but which contributes to the body of knowledge relevant to the interpretation of the text.

One aspect which is pertinent at this point concerns the amount of significance that we attach to the narratives and themes in Genesis which were current at the time of writing of Genesis but to which subsequent canonical writers had something to say.

I will not conduct any exegesis on the texts. The objective is to allow the reader to take a glimpse into this genre of biblical texts which may influence the interpretation of Genesis. In some circles, the texts are touted as being in favour of existence of matter before the events of creation week. One may not invest immense significance in the texts which seem to imply existence of the universe and humans before Gen 1:1. However what some of the texts imply is unequivocal.<sup>27</sup> This cluster of texts is big and is strewn throughout the books of the Bible, as follows;

1. **Job 38:3-4**

Brace yourself like a man; I will ask you, and you shall answer me. v.4 Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me if you understand.

---

<sup>27</sup> An example is Job 38:1ff where there is a scenario of God asking Job to brace himself "like a man." What follows (v.4-12) is almost a re-enactment of the creation event in Genesis. Of special note is v.7 "and all the sons of God shouted for joy." The shouting followed a completed creation. Who were the sons of God? Were the sons of God celebrating creation in heaven or on earth?

2. **Psalm 104:5-6**  
He set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved. You covered it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains.
3. **Isaiah 14:12**  
How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! v.15 But you are brought down to the grave, to the depths of the pit.
4. **John 17:5**  
Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. v.24 the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.
5. **Ephesians 1:1**  
For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.
6. **2 Timothy 1:9**  
This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.
7. **Titus 1:2**  
Faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time.
8. **1 Peter 1:20**  
He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.
9. **2 Peter 3:5**  
But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of the water and by water. v.8 But do not forget this one thing, dear friend: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.
10. **Revelation 12:7**  
And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. v.8 But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven.

Some of the texts imply that history started before Gen 1:1. This is interesting because the implication begs the question: When did earth history begin? Does Gen 1:1-2 imply a two stage creation moment? The message of the texts is undoubtedly thought-provoking, but the answers are not easily forthcoming.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Jim Gibson of the Geoscience Research Institute presented an exciting lecture, "An Adventist Approach to Origins" at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Faith and Learning Seminar at the University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, November 22-4 December, 1998, which tries to show how the Bible may be brought to bear in this issue.

## **Ellen G. White's views about time**

One of the leading founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church was Ellen G. White. In her writings, there are references which are commonly used to infer that she had unequivocal views about the age of the earth. I am not sure whether there are divergent views about the subject which conflict with Ellen White among Adventists. There could possibly be. The reader is drawn to a cluster of statements which may not be related but which excite thinking nonetheless.<sup>29</sup> The following are some of the views expressed by Ellen G. White.

1. "All true sciences is but an interpretation of the handwriting of God in the material world." **CE 66**
2. "Infidel geologists claim that the world is very much older than the Bible record makes it. They reject the Bible record, because of those things which are to them evidences from the earth itself, that the world has existed tens of thousands of years." **3SG 91, 92**
3. "The Bible recognizes no long ages in which the earth was slowly evolved from chaos." **PP 112**
4. "I was shown that the first week, in which God performed the work of creation in six days and rested on the seventh day, was just like every other week." **3SG 90**
5. "I have been shown that without Bible history, geology can prove nothing." **3AG p93**
6. "The world is now only about six thousand years old" **3SG p91**

## **Implications of Genesis 1:1-2 to the Age of the earth debate**

The question concerning the age of the earth is an old query. It does appear like Gen 1:1-2 has a bearing to how the debate is to be conducted, and possibly concluded. There is a vast amount of views which contribute to what is now a perennial quest. The Genesis record and indeed the entire Bible do not specify the question of the age of the earth. The Genesis narrative does not address the question of time directly. And there

---

<sup>29</sup> I got access to an unpublished article written by Gerard Pfandl which I find interesting. Titled "Ellen G. White and Earth Science" the paper was presented at the Faith and Science Conference on August 23-29, 2002.

were no human witnesses to the occurrence. Scholars in the fields of theology, geology, archaeology, among others have tried to provide an answer, but little consensus has emerged. There are two major perspectives which are used to tackle the question. The first perspective is the biblical perspective which uses the chronologies in Genesis, with specific reference to Chapter Five and Eleven. The second perspective is the scientific one which uses among others, the radio-metric time clocks.

The Jewish Rabbi Hillel who lived before the birth of Christ believed that from Adam to his time, the world was 5761 years old, Julius Africanus, a celebrated orator during the days of Roman Emperor Nero put it at 5531 years, Philo of Alexandria proposed the period to be 5169 years, Irish Archbishop James Ussher (1581-1656) taught that creation day was October 4004 BCE.<sup>30</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430) widely touted as “Christianity’s absolute thinking machine” believed that the earth was a relatively young planet. During his time, it was held that Christ’s return would be in AD 500. The thinking at the time was that human history was less than six thousand years. Popular opinion held that the time between Adam and Christ was 5500 years. The reasoning was that creation took six days and therefore the time of Christ’s absence from earth would be six thousand years, by use of the Year-Day Principle found in Ps 90:4 and 2Peter 3:8. Using this principle, the Early Church supposed that the earth would exist for six thousand years. Augustine believed that the events of Gen 1:1-2 are not part of the six days of creation.

Reformation theologians held the view that the days of Genesis were literal, with Luther contending that the earth was less than six thousand years old at his time. John Calvin is known to have written “the present world is drawing to a close before it has

---

<sup>30</sup> Morris discusses the subject, pp.42-45.

completed its six thousandth year.”<sup>31</sup>

The question to be answered concerns how the search for the age of the earth is to be handled?<sup>32</sup> Geologists have come up with a way of explaining the search. They talk of short-age and long-age geologic column. Discussing the question, Brand and Jarnes<sup>33</sup> observe that the two views differ most strikingly in respect to when the geological column was formed and also how long it took the formation to be accomplished. Geologists who embrace what is known as the short-age geology hold that it took relatively a short time for the geological column to be formed, and that formation event occurred a few thousand years ago. In contrast, long-age geology contends that formation of the geologic column is a process which started many millions of years ago.<sup>34</sup>

The questions which come to the fore are such as, is it possible that there is biblical truth and scientific truth. Are the two, one and the same thing, or are they strange bed-fellows? Furthermore, is it possible that there is a biblical age of the earth, and a scientific age of the earth?

In addition to these questions, one other aspect that is commonly brought to question is the reliability of the dating method. We often ask the question: Can it be that radiometric dating methods are actually not the correct way to measure time? Would it be that use of radioactivity that is found in organic fossils is an erroneous way of measuring

---

<sup>31</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1957 edition, p,141.

<sup>32</sup> We assume all planets were created at the same time. It should be interesting to know how old planet Mars is because the NASA Shuttle Phoenix is expected to come back with materials which could be dated, presumably using radiometric dating methods.

<sup>33</sup> Brand, p.93-94 and p.101.

<sup>34</sup> If this thinking were to be acceptable, then there would be no problem because the Christian faith would not be under threat of any kind. But there is no guarantee that this could be the case.

time in respect to earth history?<sup>35</sup> These and similar questions will remain as long as there is no way of telling which way is the correct one.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Genesis 1:1-2 may sound as a free-flowing narrative, but the passage is fraught with difficulty of interpretation and controversy. One option which seems readily available is to conclude that the issues over Genesis need more than imaginative homilies that have so far been the source of competing views.

The seeming conclusion is that the seabed, presumably held in place by solid rocks, is older than life which was created in six consecutive days. This observation is only tentative in as much as I can not produce hard evidence to facilitate use of emphatic statements. Be that as it may, the citing of water in the manner it does presents a persuasive case for a seabed older than the Genesis moment of origin of life on the earth. The traditional Christian position supports a short-age earth history. But there is indication that this may be so only in respect to life on earth. This means that the geologic column which holds the structure of earth in place may be older than life on earth.

It is evident that Christian scholars are widely casting aspersions to the traditional view. Among Seventh-day Adventists, there is a seeming tendency indicating reluctance to upholding the traditional view. A reading of excerpts from the writings of Ellen G. White does not make the matter any easier. As an Adventist, I am left at a loss as to what to make of the growing tendency among fellow Adventist scholars. The fact that an increasing size of Adventist scholarship is embracing contemporary interpretation of

---

<sup>35</sup> Clyde L. Webster Jr. *Genesis and Time: What Radiometric Dating Tells Us*, presents a credible pedagogy about the subject. The reader who may wish to pursue the idea can turn to Dialogue 5:1-1993 pp.5-8.

Genesis is a loud wake-up call to Adventist scholarship. One wonders whether that increasing size is meant to legitimize a new and non-traditional interpretation of Genesis. Furthermore, one wonders whether that increase is not adding to the confusion that is already bad enough. The Adventist position is obviously influenced by the wider picture of Adventist cosmology. This theological framework would be irreparably shattered if the traditional understanding of Genesis is revised.

As it is now, Adventists may have to look to studies coming from the Geoscience Research Institute which is an arm of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventists in order to find direction in regard to matters of earth history. Already there is an impressive crop of ideas which is coming out of the Institute.<sup>36</sup> While it is of course correct that the organization can not expect all the answers to come from the few men and women who are conducting research at the GRI, it is the Institute's onerous task to ask the questions which are relevant to Adventist theology and to seek to supply answers which tarry with the Adventist cosmogony and eschatology. Non-Adventists can not be expected to do this.

---

<sup>36</sup> There are a number of publications originating from GRI. Some of them are such as the work by Jim Gibson, "Problems in Intermediate Models of Origins" in Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, ed. *Here We Stand. Evaluating New Trends in the Church*. Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Graphics, 2005:299-325, Benjamin Clausen, "A Biblical Approach to the Sciences" in *Christ in the Classroom* vol. 20:409-420, and Leonard Brand, Faith and Science: Can they Co-exist? In *Christ in the Classroom* vol. 33:417-420, among other works.