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In the Beginning: How to Interpret Genesis 1

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“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

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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

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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?”

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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