

## THE RUIN-RECONSTRUCTION THEORY OF GENESIS 1:2

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Students of the Bible have long debated the question of whether the original creation of the heavens and the earth is to be understood as an event within the first "day" of creation, or whether a vast period of time could have elapsed between the original creation of Genesis 1:1 and the "waste and void" condition described in Genesis 1:2. Most theologians who favor a time gap between these two verses believe that the original earth was populated with plants and animals (and perhaps even men), and because of the fall of Satan it was destroyed by God. The vast ages of the geologic time-table are thought to have occurred during this interval, so that the fossil plants and animals which are found in the crust of the earth today are relics of the original world which was destroyed before the six literal days of creation (or, rather, re-creation) recorded in Genesis 1:3-31.

The "ruin-reconstruction theory," or "gap theory," has been widely accepted among Christians who interpret the Book of Genesis in the traditional historical-grammatical method, especially since the early 19th century when Thomas Chalmers of England advocated this interpretation as a means of harmonizing the Genesis account of creation with the vast time periods of earth history demanded by uniformitarian geologists.<sup>1</sup> The differences between the "gap theory" and the traditional view of a recent creation of the earth within six literal days are quite profound, and may be outlined as follows: ( 1 ) The gap theory permits Christians to accept without question the complete validity of the time-table of uniformitarian geologists. (2) The gap theory leaves us with no clear word from God as to the original world — the time involved in its creation, the arrangement of its features, or its pre-judgment history —; for instead of having the entire first chapter on this important subject, we have only the first verse. ( 3 ) Because all the animals of the first world were destroyed and fossilized, they have no relation to the animals of the present world, in spite of the fact that many of them appear to be identical in form to modern types. Likewise, those who would place human fossils into the "gap" are forced to the conclusion that such pre-Adamic "men" did not possess an eternal soul.<sup>2</sup> (4) The gap theory redefines the "very good" of Genesis 1:31 ("God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good"), for Adam would have been placed as a very late arrival into a world that had just been destroyed, so that he was literally walking upon a graveyard of billions of creatures over which he would never

exercise dominion ( 1 :26). Furthermore, the earth would already have become the domain of a fallen and wicked angel who is described elsewhere in Scripture as "the god of this world" (II Cor. 4:4).

Obviously, then, the gap theory is not a minor deviation from the traditional interpretation of the Genesis creation account. For this reason, the Biblical evidences that have been set forth in its defense need to be carefully examined. The four most frequently used evidences are these: (1) The verb translated "was" in Genesis 1:2 (Heb. *hayetha*) can just as well be translated "became," and thus the idea of a profound change in the earth's condition is permitted. (2) The phrase "waste and void" (Heb. *tohu wa-bohu*) appears elsewhere only in Isaiah 34:11 and Jeremiah 4:23, and the context of those passages speaks clearly of judgment and destruction. Furthermore, the word *tohu* by itself frequently has an evil connotation. (3) It is highly improbable that God, the author of light, would have originally created the world in darkness, which is generally used in Scripture as a symbol of evil. (4) There seems to be a definite distinction in the first chapter of Genesis between "created" and "made," thus permitting us to assume that many of the things mentioned in this chapter were simply re-created.

### "WAS" OR "BECAME"?

The first supporting argument for the gap theory is that the Hebrew verb *hayetha* in Genesis 1:2 may be translated "became," thus implying a tremendous transition from perfection to judgment and destruction. It is true that there are six instances in the Pentateuch where this verb is translated "became" (Gen. 3:22, 19:26, 21:20, Exod. 7:19, 8:17, 9:10). In each of these cases, however, the context clearly shows that a change of state has occurred. The same verb appears 258 other times in the Pentateuch and in each case is to be translated "was." Because Genesis 1:2 lacks contextual support for translating this verb "became," no English version of Genesis has ever translated it this way. One graduate student questioned twenty of the leading Hebrew scholars of America concerning the exegetical evidence for a gap in Genesis 1:2. They unanimously replied that there was no such evidence.<sup>3</sup> The clearest way to have conveyed the idea of a change of state would be to follow the verb *hayetha* with the preposition "to" (*lamedh*), as was done in Genesis 2:7 ("and man *became* a living soul") and in twenty-five other verses in the Pentateuch. But this preposition does not appear after the verb in Genesis 1:2.

Furthermore, the sentence structure suggests that.

the earth's condition in verse 2 is just as God created it in verse 1, for we have an exact grammatical parallel in Jonah 3:3 ("Jonah arose, and went into Nineveh . . . Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city"). Obviously, Nineveh did not *become* a great city after Jonah entered it. Dr. F. F. Bruce points out that if verse 2 indicated an event subsequent to the creation of verse 1, we might have expected in verse 2 a "waw consecutive" with the imperfect tense instead of a "waw copulative" with the perfect {i.e., *wattehi ha-arets* instead of *we-ha-arets hayethah*).<sup>4</sup> In the light of this evidence, it appears that the passage is not speaking of a change in the earth's condition due to a catastrophe, but is simply describing the earth as it came into existence through God's creative word.

#### "EMPTY" OR "CHAOTIC"?

This brings us to the second important argument in support of the gap theory. If Genesis 1:2 describes the earth's condition at the time of creation, how do we explain the phrase "waste and void" (*tohu wa-bohu*)? Would an infinitely wise and powerful God have created the earth in such a chaotic condition? The only other places in the Bible where the two words *tohu* and *bohu* appear together (Isa. 34:11 and Jer. 4:23) are passages that speak of divine judgment upon Gentile nations and upon Israel. Does not this indicate that these words must refer to judgment and destruction in Genesis 1:2? Even the word *tohu* (translated "without form" in the K.J.V. and "waste" in the A.S.V. ), in the twenty verses where it appears without *bohu* in the Old Testament, is sometimes used in an evil sense.

This is admittedly an impressive argument, for one of the most dependable ways to ascertain the meaning of Hebrew words and phrases is to compare their usage in other passages. Thus, if *tohu* always refers to something evil when used elsewhere in the Old Testament, it would probably have this connotation in Genesis 1:2. But a careful examination of the usage of this word does not support such a meaning. For example, in Job 26:7 we read that God "stretcheth out the north over *empty space* (*tohu*), and hangeth the earth upon nothing" (ASV). Certainly we are not to find in this verse any suggestion that outer space is basically evil. In some passages the word refers to the wilderness or desert, which is conspicuous for its absence of life (Deut. 32:10, Job 6:18, 12:24, Psa. 107:40). In most of the places where the word appears in Isaiah, it is paralleled with such words as "nothing" and "nought."

Of particular interest in this connection is Isaiah 45:18; which has been used as an important proof text for the gap theory. The verse tells us of "the God that formed the earth and made it, that established it and created it not a waste (*tohu*), that formed it to be inhabited." It has been claimed that the "tohu" condition of the earth in Gen. 1:2

could not have been its original condition, because Isa. 45:18 says it was *not* created a "tohu." Consequently, God must have originally created an earth replete with living things, and later destroyed it, causing it to *become* "tohu." However, such an interpretation overlooks the true significance of the final phrase in this verse: "formed it to be inhabited." The real point of the passage seems to be that God did not ultimately intend that the world should be devoid of life, but rather that it should be filled with living things. Thus, He did not allow it to *remain* in the empty and formless condition in which He first created it, but in six creative days filled it with living things and fashioned it as a beautiful home for man. The verse thus speaks of God's ultimate purpose in creation, and the contrast in this verse between "tohu" and "inhabited" shows clearly that "tohu" means empty or *uninhabited*, rather than judged, destroyed, or chaotic.

To be sure, the only passages besides Genesis 1:2 where *tohu* and *bohu* appear together — Isaiah 34:11 and Jeremiah 4:23 — are placed in contexts which emphasize divine judgment. But even here the basic meaning of *empty* or *uninhabited* fits well. Since God's ultimate purpose for the earth, and particularly the Holy Land, was that it might be *filled with people* (Isa. 45:18, 49:19-20, Zech. 8:5), it would be a clear evidence of His wrath and displeasure for the promised land to become *empty* and *uninhabited* again. The concept of emptiness, therefore, implies divine judgment only when it speaks of the removal of something that is good. On the other hand, when emptiness follows something that is evil, it can be a comparative blessing! An example of this may be found in Christ's work of casting demons out of people (Luke 8 :35; cf. Matt. 12:44— "*empty, swept, and garnished*").

In spite of the fact that the phrase *tohu wa-bohu* appears elsewhere in judgment contexts and thus takes on an evil connotation in those passages, the same phrase may have a very different connotation when it appears in a different context. Even advocates of the gap theory admit that a context of divine judgment seems to be missing in the opening verses of Genesis.<sup>5</sup> It is true that the earth was *empty* as far as living things are concerned, and it was devoid of many of the interesting features it later possessed, such as continents, mountains, rivers, and seas; but it was certainly not chaotic, ruined, or judged. Edward J. Young feels that "it would probably be wise to abandon the term 'chaos' as a designation of the conditions set forth in verse two. The threefold statement of circumstances in itself seems to imply order. The material of which this earth consists was at that time covered with water, and darkness was all about. Over the water, however, brooded God's Spirit."<sup>6</sup>

#### WAS THE DARKNESS EVIL?

The third major argument used in support of

the gap theory concerns the darkness of Genesis 1:2. Since darkness is almost always used as a symbol of sin and judgment in the Scriptures (John 3:19, Jude 13, etc.), and since God did not say that the darkness was “good” (as He did concerning the light — Gen. 1:4), we must assume that God originally created the world in light (Psa. 104:2, I Tim. 6:16) and only later plunged it into darkness because of the sin of angels and Satan.

This, again, is an impressive argument. But all of the Biblical evidences need to be taken into consideration. Psalm 104:19-24, for example, makes it quite clear that *physical* darkness (absence of visible light) is not to be considered as inherently evil or as the effect of divine judgment. Speaking of the wonders of the day-night cycle, the Psalmist states: “The sun knowest his going down. *Thou makest darkness*, and it is night, wherein all the beasts of the forest creep forth. The young lions roar after their prey, and seek their food from God . . . O Jehovah, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches.” If the making of darkness is a revelation of God’s wisdom and riches, how can it be inherently evil?

In discussing the opening verses of Genesis, Dr. Young points out the true significance of the term “darkness.”

“God gives a name to the darkness, just as he does to the light. Both are therefore good and well-pleasing to him; both are created, although the express creation of the darkness, as of other objects in verse two, is not stated, and both serve his purpose of forming the day . . . Darkness is recognized in this chapter as a positive good for man. Whatever the precise connotation of the ‘evening’ of each day, it certainly included darkness, and that darkness was for man’s good. At times, therefore, darkness may typify evil and death; at other times it is to be looked upon as a positive blessing.”<sup>7</sup>

It would seem reasonable to assume that the reason why God did not see that the darkness was good is that darkness is not a specific entity, or a thing, but it is rather an absence of something, namely, light. Perhaps it is for this same reason that God did not see that the “firmament” (expanse) of the second creative day was good. It, too, was a rather negative entity, being the empty space between the upper and lower waters. The fact that physical darkness is not incompatible with the presence and blessing of God is evidenced by the statement that “the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” in the midst of this primeval darkness. In the words of the Psalmist, “Even the darkness hideth not from thee, but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee” (Psa. 139:12).

#### HOW MANY CREATIVE ACTS IN GENESIS ONE?

The fourth major supporting argument for the gap theory is built upon a supposed distinction between the verbs “created” (*bara*) and “made” (*asah*). For example, the second footnote in the Scofield Reference Bible states: “But three *creative* acts of God are recorded in this chapter: (1) the heavens and the earth, v. 1; (2) animal life, v. 21; and (3) human life, vs. 26, 27. The first creative act refers to the dateless past, and gives scope for all the geologic ages.” Thus, the vegetation of Genesis 1:11 was not *created* on the third day, but was simply “brought forth” from the earth again following the catastrophic judgment of Genesis 1:2. Likewise, the sun, moon, and stars of Genesis 1:16 were not actually *created* on the fourth day, but were simply “made to appear” through the thick, dark clouds that covered the earth following its devastation.

It is true that the verb “made” (*asah*) in Genesis 1:16 (“God made the two great lights”) is not the same as the verb “created” in Genesis 1:1. Nevertheless, it seems rather obvious that these two verbs are used synonymously throughout the chapter, for God “created” (*bara*) the great sea-monsters (vs. 21), and He “made” (*asah*) the beasts of the field (vs. 25). Surely we are not to find any significant difference here. The sea-monsters were created supernaturally by God, and so were the beasts of the earth. Likewise, in 1:26 God said, “Let us *make* man in our image.” But in the next verse we read that God “*created* man in his own image.” Once again the verb seems to be used synonymously. Therefore, 1:16 must refer to the *original* creation of the sun, moon, and stars. If God had intended to convey to us the idea that these heavenly bodies were created on the first day, or earlier, but only “appeared” on the fourth day (presumably by a removal of clouds), the verb “to appear” could easily have been used (see vs. 9). Similarly, when we read that God commanded the earth to “put forth” grass, herbs, and fruit trees, we are to understand this as referring to their supernatural creation; even as God’s command to the waters to “swarm with swarms of living creatures” (vs. 20) is explained in the following verse to mean that “God *created* (*bara*) . . . every living creature that moved, wherewith the waters swarmed.” For the sake of variety and fullness of expression, then, different verbs are used to convey the concept of supernatural creation. The context makes it clear that these verbs are used synonymously throughout the chapter, so that not only animal life and human life, but also plant life and the heavenly bodies were created by God in their appropriate days.

#### OTHER ARGUMENTS

In addition to the four major arguments for the

gap theory discussed above, one frequently hears the claim that the phrase “replenish the earth” in Genesis 1:28 implies that the earth was once filled but now had to be filled *again* (re-plenished, or re-filled). But the verb in the Hebrew text (*maleh*) simply means “to fill,” with no suggestion of repetition.

It is also frequently claimed that Ezekiel 28:13-14 demands an originally glorious world before the “waste and void” of Genesis 1:2, for it speaks of Satan as dwelling in “Eden, the garden of God. . . the holy mountain of God” and walking “up and down in the midst of the stones of fire” before his rebellion against God. But it seems clear from a comparison with Daniel 2:45 and Isaiah 14:13 that “the holy mountain of God” must refer to the third heaven of God’s immediate presence and not to an earthly domain. It should be noted that Satan was “cast . . . out of the mountain of God . . . to the ground” (Ezek. 28:16-17; cf. Isa. 14:12). Apparently the Lord Jesus Christ spoke of this event when He said: “I beheld Satan *fallen* as lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18). It should also be noted that “Eden, the garden of God” was not a garden with trees, flowers, and streams. It was composed of precious stones and “stones of fire” (Ezek. 28:13, 14, 16). When we compare this with the description of the Holy City of Revelation 21:10-21, with its various precious stones, we must conclude that Ezekiel’s “garden of God” refers not to an earthly Eden back in Genesis 1:1, but to a heavenly one, from which Satan was cast down to the earth. When God created the “heavens” at the beginning of the first day of creation week, He apparently created all the angelic beings (including the unfallen Satan), who were thus on hand to sing together and shout for joy at the creation of the earth (Job 38:7). Sometime after creation week and before the temptation of Eve, Satan rebelled against his Creator. The visible earthly effect of his fall would thus not have been a catastrophe in Genesis 1:2, but the Edenic Curse of Genesis 3, which God inflicted upon the entire earth because Adam and Eve chose to believe and obey Satan rather than God (Rem. 8:20-23).

#### SIX DAYS OF CREATION

One clear Biblical proof that creation week was *not* preceded by a divine judgment is found in Exodus 20:11. In this fourth commandment, God said to Israel: “Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work . . . for in six days Jehovah made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is.” The gap theory holds that the heavens, the earth, and the sea were created *before* the six days of Genesis 1. But this passage asserts that *everything* was made by God *in six days*. The fact that the verb “made” (*asah*) is used here does not mean that the earth was “refashioned” in six days, for

we have already seen that this verb is synonymous with *bara* when used in a creation context.

We would agree with advocates of the gap theory that “the earth has undergone a cataclysmic change as a result of a divine judgment. The face of the earth bears everywhere the marks of such a catastrophe.”<sup>8</sup> But we would identify this catastrophe with the great universal Flood of Noah’s day, which not only occupies three entire chapters of Genesis, but also is referred to by David (Psa. 29:10), Isaiah (Isa. 54:9), Christ (Matt. 25 :39), and Peter (I Pet. 3:20, II Pet. 2:5, 3:6). It was through the vast and complex current patterns of this year-long deluge that the living creatures of the entire world were buried forever in the great fossil strata that encircle the globe.<sup>9</sup> It is *this* catastrophe that provides for us the God-given answer to the false uniformitarianism of these last days (II Pet. 3:4) and thus effectively foreshadows the final universal destruction of all things by fire at the climax of the day of the Lord.

#### References:

- <sup>1</sup>As early as 1814, Dr. Thomas Chalmers of Edinburgh University was promoting the views of George Cuvier, and became the first great popularizer of the “gap theory.” See *The Works of Thomas Chalmers on Natural Theology*, Glasgow: Wm. Collins & Co., n.d. See also Francis C. Haber, *The Age of the World: Moses to Darwin* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1959), pp. 201-204.
- <sup>2</sup>For a recent defense of the pre-Adamic race view, see Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), pp. 188-189.
- <sup>3</sup>Milford Henkel, “Fundamental Christianity and Evolution” (Th.M. thesis for the Winona Lake School of Theology, 1948), cited by Edwin K. Gedney, “Geology and the Bible,” Chapter III in *Modern Science and Christian Faith*, Wheaton, Ill.: Van Kampen Press, 2nd ed. rev., 1950, p. 49.
- <sup>4</sup>F. F. Bruce, “And the Earth Was Without Form and Void,” *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute*, Vol. 78 (1946), pp. 21-23.
- <sup>5</sup>J. H. Kurtz, *Manual of Sacred History*, 1888, p. xxvi. Cited by Curtis C. Mitchell, “A Biblical and Theological Study of the Gap Theory” (B.D. thesis for Talbot Theological Seminary, 1962), p. 45.
- <sup>6</sup>Edward J. Young, *Studies in Genesis One* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1964), p. 13.
- <sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 21, 35.
- <sup>8</sup>*Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917), Footnote No. 3 on Genesis 1:2.
- <sup>9</sup>For a recent discussion of the implications of the Biblical doctrine of the Flood, see Whitcomb and Morris, *The Genesis Flood* (Nutley, N. J.: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co., 1961). See also John W. Klotz, *Genes, Genesis, and Evolution* (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1955; Paul A. Zimmerman (ed.), *Darwin, Evolution, and Creation* (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1959) ; and Henry M. Morns, *The Twilight of Evolution* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1963).