

The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3

Part II: The Restitution Theory

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INTRODUCTION

Three views on the cosmogony of Genesis 1:1-3 have found broad acceptance in the literature on this subject: (1) the restitution theory of cosmogony, which contends that the chaos of Genesis 1:2 occurred after God had created an originally perfect universe; (2) the initially chaotic theory of cosmogony, which insists that the chaos of 1:2 occurred in connection with the original creation; and (3) the precreation chaos theory of cosmogony, which holds that the chaos of verse 2 existed *before* the creation mentioned in the Bible.

According to the first mode of thought, chaos occurred after the original creation; according to the second mode of thought, chaos occurred in connection with the original creation; and in the third mode of thought, chaos existed before the original creation.

NEED FOR THIS STUDY

This issue is important for both apologetic and theological reasons. In order to meet the challenge of science against the first chapter of Genesis, the apologist must have a clear understanding of the biblical cosmogony. D. F. Payne said, "Biblical exegesis is paramount . . . when the scientific challenge is under considera-

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tion.”¹ Moreover, how we understand the syntax of Genesis 1:1-3 has a significant effect on our theology. Von Rad noted, “The sequence of particular declarations in vv. 1-3 comprises a wealth of reference whose fullness is scarcely to be comprehended.”²

METHOD

To construct a proper model of cosmogony special attention must be given to Genesis 1. The reason is that this text is written in precise prose, whereas other biblical passages bearing on cosmogony are poetic, imaginative, evocative, and not didactic. Concerning the style of Genesis, von Rad observed:

Nothing is here by chance; everything must be considered carefully, deliberately, and precisely Nowhere at all is the text only allusive, symbolic, or figuratively poetic. Actually, the exposition must painstakingly free this bundled and rather esoteric doctrine sentence by sentence, indeed, word by word.³

Here, then, is a challenge to the exegete to prove himself an accurate workman in handling God’s Word.

The procedure in exegeting this crucial passage will be to present each of the three views mentioned, evaluate them, and conclude by validating one of them.

THE RESTITUTION THEORY

By two contrasting grammatical analyses of Genesis 1:1-2, this model is constructed. The majority of expositors advocating this mode of thought regard verse 2 as a sequential clause after verse 1, but Merrill F. Unger, while holding this model, thinks that verse 2 is a circumstantial clause with verse 1.⁴

THE VIEW THAT VERSE 2 IS A SEQUENTIAL CLAUSE AFTER VERSE 1

According to the majority contending for this understanding of biblical cosmogony, Genesis 1:1 presents an account of an originally perfect creation. Satan was ruler of this world, but because of his rebellion described in Isaiah 14:12-17, sin entered the universe. As a consequence, God judged the world and reduced it to the chaotic

1 D. F. Payne, *Genesis One Reconsidered* (London: Tyndale Press, 1964), p. 8.

2 Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 46.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

4 Merrill F. Unger, “Rethinking the Genesis Account of Creation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 115 (January-March 1958): 27-35.

state described in Genesis 1:2. Later God recreated it according to the description given in Genesis 1:3-31. Thus there is a time gap of unknown length between verses 1 and 2. This theory is traditionally referred to as the "gap theory." The view gained wide acceptance through *The Scofield Reference Bible* notes. Regarding the word *create* in Genesis 1, Scofield wrote, "It refers to the dateless past, and gives scope to all the geological ages"; and concerning the words *without form* he continued:

Jeremiah 4:23-26; Isaiah 24:1 and 45:18, clearly indicate that the earth had undergone a cataclysmic change as the result of the divine judgment. The earth bears everywhere the marks of such a catastrophe. There are not wanting intimations which connect it with a previous testing and fall of angels. See Ezekiel 28:12-15 and Isaiah 14:9-14, which certainly go beyond the kings of Tyre and Babylon.⁵

The proponents of this view translate the opening words of Genesis 1 in this way: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and then the earth became"

Support. It should be noted that this view was not dreamed up merely to meet the scientific challenge. D. F. Payne stated: "The 'gap' theory itself, as a matter of exegesis, antedated the scientific challenge, but the latter gave it a new impetus."⁶ Arthur Custance, in his book *Without Form and Void*, attempts to show that this interpretation has its roots in early Jewish tradition and throughout the history of the church.⁷ Unfortunately, this book, which is filled with much helpful information, is marred by egregious errors.

5 *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), p. 3.

6 Payne, *Genesis One Reconsidered*, p. 7, n. 1.

7 Arthur C. Custance, *Without Form and Void* (Brockville, Canada: Custance, 1970). Weston W. Fields replies to Custance in *Unformed and Unfilled: A Critique of the Gap Theory of Genesis 1:1, 2* (Winona Lake, IN: Light and Life Press, 1973). Custance presents the most thorough defense for the "gap theory." In his first chapter he traces the antiquity of this interpretation. He then presents an extensive discussion to prove that הָיָה can mean "to become," supported by ten appendixes. But in his third chapter entitled "The Pluperfect in Hebrew" he disproves his thesis. Here in an excellent discussion of Hebrew clauses he rightly argues that because of the structure *waw* + noun + verb, the *waw* should be construed as a disjunctive *waw* and the verb הָיָה if taken in its active sense rather than its stative sense should be understood as a pluperfect. Accordingly, he would translate the verse thus: "but the earth had become a desolation" (p. 41). But if הָיָה is construed as a pluperfect, then the action occurred before the principal verb "created" of v. 1, and not after it. In spite of this fact he concluded,

Defenders of this view also appeal to logic, philology, and theology. Since “the heavens and the earth” in verse 1 means “the organized universe,” and verse 2 speaks of the earth in chaos, and verses 3-31 speak of the organization of the universe again, it is plausible to suppose that verses 1-3 describe three successive stages in the history of the earth.

Furthermore, it can be demonstrated that simple הִיָּה can mean “to become” as in Genesis 3:20 which reads: “For she *became* [הִיָּה without ם] the mother of all the living.”

Moreover, in Jeremiah 4:23 and Isaiah 34:11, the only other two passages beside Genesis 1:2 where “waste and void” (תֹּהוּ וּבִהוּ) occur together, the rhyming compound describes a state effected by God’s judgment. It is argued, therefore, that since in these passages the expression is used in connection with God’s judgment, the same inference must be drawn in the case of Genesis 1:2.

Finally, this interpretation enables us to make sense of the career of Satan which is otherwise fraught with mystery. Commenting on Isaiah’s vision, “How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground” (Isa. 14:12, AV), Scofield said, “This tremendous passage marks the beginning of sin in the universe.”⁸ In the record of the “fall of man” in Genesis 3, Satan appears without introduction; the chapter assumes that he is already here on earth. Where did he come from? Is it not probable, these expositors suggest, that his fall mentioned by Isaiah should be connected with the judgment of the earth implied in Genesis 1:2? By systematic thought and with the help of Genesis 1:2, the career of Satan is thus filled in.

Objections. But this understanding has not been accepted by the overwhelming majority of exegetes because it cannot stand the

“If the heavens and the earth were created a Cosmos, and if the earth subsequently became a Chaos, we have just such a situation as demands the construction that appears in the Hebrew of verse 2.” This conclusion obviously does not follow if הִיָּה is construed as a pluperfect. Moreover, it is unlikely that a biblical author would begin his work with a pluperfect; a situation so unlikely that no authorized translation has ever construed the verb in this way in verse 2. See also the parallel structure with הִיָּה in 3:1. It is therefore this writer’s conclusion that the הִיָּה is best construed in its stative sense after the *waw* disjunctive.

8 *The Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 726.

test of close grammatical analysis. For example, the theory assumes that the “and” which introduces verses 2 and 3 are identical in meaning and that both have the idea of sequence, “and then.” However, the conjunctions introducing verses 2 and 3 are different in the original text. The *waw* introducing verse 3 does in fact denote sequence and is called by grammarians the “*waw* consecutive.” But the *waw* introducing verse 2 is different in both form and function; grammarians refer to this *waw* as the “*waw* conjunctive.” The *waw* conjunctive may introduce various types of clauses (to be discussed below) but it does not introduce an independent sequential clause. It is inconceivable that Moses would have used a construction which does not indicate sequence in contrast to other constructions open to him, if this had been his intent.

Now let us critically reappraise the argument that תהו ובהו in verse 2 came about through God’s judgment because elsewhere God’s wrath effected it.

These Hebrew words also appear in Jeremiah 4:23. Anderson says of Jeremiah 4:23-26: “This moving portrayal of threatening chaos is undoubtedly one of the finest pieces in the literature of ancient Israelite prophecy and, for that matter, in world literature as a whole.”⁹

Jeremiah’s dire vision is as follows:

I looked on the earth, and behold, it was formless and void [תהו ובהו]; and to the heavens, and they had no light.

I looked on the mountains, and behold, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro.

I looked, and behold, there was no man, and all the birds of the heavens had fled.

I looked, and behold, the fruitful land was a wilderness, and all its cities were pulled down before the LORD before His fierce anger.

Scholars have not failed to notice that these verses serve as a counterpart to the first chapter of Genesis. Fishbane noted the following parallels between the two texts:¹⁰

9 Bernhard W. Anderson, *Creation versus Chaos* (New York: Association Press, 1967), p. 12.

10 Michael Fishbane, “Jeremiah IV 23-26 and Job III 3:13: A Recovered Use of the Creation Pattern,” *Vetus Testamentum* 21 (April 1971): 152.

| | <i>Gen. 1:1-2:4a</i> | <i>Jer. 4:23-26</i> |
|--------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Pre-creation | תהו ובהו | תהו ובהו |
| First day | Light | Light |
| Second day | Heavens | Heavens |
| Third day | Dry land | Mountains and hills |
| Fourth day | Luminaries | Light |
| Fifth day | Birds | Birds |
| Sixth day | Man | Man |
| Seventh day | Sabbath | Fierce wrath |

But in almost unbearable words, Jeremiah sees the Creator undoing His work. Note the *bouleversement*, the reversal, of the cosmos back to chaos.

| | |
|---------------|--|
| Earth | תהו ובהו |
| Heavens | No light |
| Mountains | Shaking (a technical term for final shaking of the world at the return of chaos) ¹¹ |
| Man | No man |
| Birds | Fled |
| Fruitful land | A wilderness |
| Cities | Dismantled |

Whether the vision is intended as a metaphor of Judah's return to her precreative state,¹² or an apocalyptic portrayal of cosmic destruction at the end time,¹³ need not be decided for our purposes. The point is that the judgment to come on the land takes the form of dismantling or undoing the creation. But it obviously does not follow that the precreative state itself is the result of God's fury.

The fallaciousness of the reasoning used by the proponents of the "gap theory" may be illustrated as follows. Let us suppose that a child is given a new tinker-toy set. After taking the pieces out of the manufacturer's box, he constructs a derrick. But after

11 Brevard S. Childs, "The Enemy from the North and the Chaos Tradition," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 78 (1959): 197.

12 Anderson, *Creation versus Chaos*, p. 13.

13 Childs, "The Enemy from the North," p. 197.

a while he becomes frustrated with the derrick and so, in anger, he dismantles his production and replaces the sticks and spools into their container. Now, would anyone wish to conclude that because the child dismantled the set in fury and replaced it into its original container, that therefore the manufacturer had also originally dismantled the set in fury and put the pieces into the box? Of course, we would have to admit that this is a possibility, but it certainly could not be proved by the action of the child.

We must draw the conclusion, therefore, that the use of the Jeremiah 4:23-26 passage to prove that Genesis 1:2 is the result of God's fury and judgment is logically fallacious. The conclusion is a non sequitur.

The same argument applies to the passage in Isaiah in which *תהו* and *בהו* are used. In the immediate context of 34:11, Isaiah sees the destruction of Edom. As part of his evocative imagery, he implicitly likens Edom's destruction to the dismantling of a house to its precreated state. He predicts God's destruction on Edom: "And He shall stretch over it the line of desolation (*תהו*, formlessness") and the stones of emptiness (*בהו*)." The line and stones (plummets) of the builder are employed here not for erecting a building but for dismantling it. Once again God's judgment results in the return of the object of His wrath to its original state prior to its creation, namely, nothing or an unformed state. And again, it does not follow that the precreative, unformed state is itself the result of judgment.

Here, however, we should pause and note the meaning of *תהו ובהו* as clarified by these two passages. We may deduce that the compound rhyming expression indicates a state of material prior to its creation. The Septuagint renders the compound in Jeremiah 4:23 appropriately by *οὐθέν*, "nothing." Indeed this appears to be essentially its meaning; not in the sense that material does not exist, but rather in the sense that an orderly arrangement, a creating, a cosmos, has not as yet taken place. The meaning "formlessness" for *תהו* finds support when used apart from *בהו* (which, by contrast, never occurs without *תהו*). Kidner summarized the meaning and use of *תהו* thus:

Tohu (without form) is used elsewhere to mean, in physical terms, a trackless waste (e.g., Dt. 32:10; Jb. 6:18), emptiness (Jb. 26:7), chaos (Is. 24:10; 34:11; 45:18); and metaphorically, what is baseless or futile (e.g., 1 Sa. 12:21; Is. 29:21).¹⁴

14 Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), p. 44.

Jacob concluded, "Where it [תהו ובהו] is met (Is. 34:11; Jer. 4:23), [it] denotes the contrary of creation and not merely an inferior stage of creation."¹⁵

We conclude, therefore, that תהו ובהו denotes a state of material devoid of order, or without being shaped or formed into something.

Finally, we turn to reappraise critically the theological argument, namely, that Isaiah and Ezekiel instruct us that God destroyed the earth as part of His judgment on Satan when he rebelled against God. In the author's opinion, it is unlikely that Lucifer, the king of Babylon, in Isaiah 14 has reference to Satan. Since space does not permit exploring this question here, it is necessary to settle for stating this view without supporting it. Seth Erlandsson¹⁶ and Robert Alden¹⁷ also believe that Lucifer is not Satan. However, in the case of the king of Tyre in Ezekiel 28, it is likely that Satan is in view. But whether Satan is or is not in view in these highly poetic and imaginative passages is beside the point of this article.

The point is that neither passage contains any explicit statement that God judged the universe when these kings rose up in hubris against His reign. In fact, nowhere in Scripture do we find an explicit statement to such an incident. In 2 Peter 3:5-7, we might expect to find a statement that God had destroyed a once perfect creation prior to Genesis 1 because in this passage Peter is speaking about God's destruction of the heavens and the earth. But he mentions only two judgments of the universe: (1) when God destroyed it by a flood in the past, and (2) when God will destroy it by fire in the future. Now should someone wish to argue that the destruction by a flood refers to the waters of Genesis 1:2, the reply may be given that it seems far more probable that he refers to Noah's flood. Noah's flood is explicitly referred to elsewhere in Scripture while Lucifer's flood is not explicitly mentioned.

We conclude, then, that this popular interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2 is impossible on both philological and theological grounds.¹⁸

15 E. Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1958), p. 144, n. 2.

16 Seth Erlandsson, *The Burden of Babylon: A Study of Isaiah 13:2—14:23* (Lund, Sweden: CWK Gleerup, 1970).

17 Robert J. Alden, "Lucifer, Who or What?" *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 11 (Winter 1968): 35-39.

18 Also see the debate between P. W. Heward and F. F. Bruce in *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 78 (1946): 13-37. For a broader critique of the "gap theory" see Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), pp. 134-44.

THE VIEW THAT VERSE 2 IS A CIRCUMSTANTIAL
CLAUSE WITH VERSE 1

Let us look briefly now at Unger's view. According to his interpretation, the restitution theory cannot be supported grammatically from Genesis 1:1-2. He wrote:

[This] interpretation . . . runs into grammatical and etymological problems. In the original language, Genesis 1:2 consists of three circumstantial clauses, all describing conditions or circumstances existing *at the time of* the principal action indicated in verse 1, or giving a reason for that action.¹⁹

He finds support for his view in Isaiah 45:18 and Job 38:4-7. He wrote:

Why should a perfect Creator create an original imperfect and chaotic earth? the fact of which is expressly denied by revealed truth recorded in Isaiah 45:18 and completely at variance with the ecstatically joyous dedication of the primeval earth when it came perfect from the Creator's hand, as described by Job (Job 38:4-7).²⁰

This thesis cannot stand for at least these three reasons: (1) Verse 2 cannot be construed as a circumstantial clause with verse 1, a point to be proved in the next article. (2) Isaiah 45:18 has reference to the completed creation at the end of six days, a point also to be considered in connection with the "initial chaos theory." (3) The creation of the "earth" described in Job 38:4-7 can be harmonized best with the creation of the dry land called "Earth" on the third day as described in Genesis 1:9-10, rather than with the statement about the earth's condition given in Genesis 1:2.

19 Unger, "Rethinking the Genesis Account of Creation," pp. 115-28.

20 Ibid.



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