

“And the Earth was Without Form and Void.” An Enquiry into the Exact Meaning of Genesis 1, 2.

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The first three verses of Genesis run as follows in Hebrew:—

(1) *Be-reshith bara Elohim eth ha-shamayim we-eth ha-arets*: (2) *we-ha-arets hayethah tohu wa-bohu we-choshekh al-pnê tehôm we-rûach Elohim merachepheth al-pnê ha-mayim*: (3) *wayyômer Elohim “yehi ôr” wa-yehi ôr*.

The question before us is whether (a) “ver. 2 implies the occurrence of some change of catastrophic order subsequent to creation, and that the earth had become ‘without form and void,’” or (b) “ver. 2 merely defines the condition of the earth at its creation.” The terms of reference prescribe a strictly linguistic discussion, excluding all considerations of the relation between these verses and theological or natural science.

If, as the former alternative maintains, ver. 2 indicated an event subsequent to the creation of ver. 1, we might have expected a text differing from the actual one in two respects: (1) “*waw* consecutive” with the imperfect tense instead of “*waw* copulative” with the perfect (i.e., *wattehi ha-arets* instead of *we-ha-arets hayethah*), and (2) the preposition *le* before *tohu wa-bohu*, if the verb in this clause really has the meaning “became,” as some hold. *Wattehi ha-arets le-tohu wa-bohu* would certainly mean that, after the creation of ver. 1, “the earth became waste and emptiness”; but the construction which we do find implies more naturally something quite different, namely, alternative (b).

The construction of ver. 1 must itself be examined. “The verse gives a summary of the description which follows, stating the broad general fact of the creation of the universe; the details of the process then form the subject of the rest of the chapter.” So writes S. R. Driver in his volume on Genesis in the Westminster Commentaries, but he mentions in a footnote that many modern scholars, following the Jewish scholars Rashi (1040-1105) and Ibn Ezra (1092-1167), make ver. 1 a note of

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time relating to what follows. Robert Young,¹ following Ibn Ezra and Grotius, makes ver. 1 subordinate to ver. 2, thus: “In the beginning of God’s preparing the heavens and the earth, the earth then has existed waste and void...”; but Dillmann and most modern scholars who thus subordinate ver. 1, following Rashi, make ver. 2 a parenthesis and ver. 3 the principal clause, thus: “In the beginning of God’s creating the heaven and the earth (now the earth was waste and emptiness, and darkness on the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God hovering on the face of the water), God² said ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” This perfectly legitimate way of taking these verses is powerfully supported by the fact that the noun *reshith*

¹ *Concise Commentary on the Holy Bible*, p. 1 ; cf. his *Literal Translation of the Bible*, p. 1.

² The “*waw* consecutive” in *wayyômer* (and-said) after the time-note in ver. 1 is necessarily left untranslated in English; cf. Gen. xxii, 4, lit., “On the third day and Abraham lifted-up his eyes”; Isa. vi, 1, lit., “In the year of King Uzziah’s death and I saw the Lord” (cf. Davidson, *Hebrew Syntax*, §50).

(“beginning”) is regularly in the construct state, i.e., the state which a noun assumes when it is followed by a genitive. The present writer is almost persuaded that this is the true construction here, after conversations on the matter with his colleague Dr. S. Rawidowicz, Lecturer in Hebrew in Leeds University and Editor of *Metsudah*. Rashi reads the verb in ver. 1 as *berô* (infinitive) instead of *bara* (perfect), but this is unnecessary, for there are several OT passages where a noun in the construct state is followed by a clause as its genitive (*cf.* A. B. Davidson, *Hebrew Syntax* § 25, where some 35 instances are referred to). J. Skinner (International Critical Commentary, *ad loc.*) is favourable to Rashi’s construction, though he does not reject the view that ver. 1 is an introductory statement summarizing the creative work described in fuller detail in the rest of the chapter: “a decision is difficult,” he says, and “it is necessary to leave the alternative open.”³

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Ver. 2 is what is called a “circumstantial clause,” expressing the circumstances concomitant to the principal statement. As for the particular kind of circumstantial clause which we have here, “the noun-clause connected by *waw copulative* to a verbal-clause, or its equivalent, always describes a state *contemporaneous* with the principal action” (Gesenius-Kautzsch, *Hebrew Grammar*, Eng. tr., §141 e). Such a clause need not have the verb “to be” expressed, but sometimes it has, as here (*hayethah*); another instance is Jonah iii, 3b: *we-Ninweh hayethah it gedolah l’Elohim* (lit., “and Nineveh was a city great to God”). This clause is obviously not one of a succession of incidents; it describes the circumstances under which the principal action—Jonah’s rising and going to Nineveh—took place. It is grammatically on all fours with Gen. i, 2, and if Gen. i, 2, means that the earth became waste and emptiness *after* God created it, then Jonah iii, 3b, should mean that Nineveh *became* an exceeding great city after Jonah went to it.

The words *tohu wa-bohu* require further consideration. From the occurrence of *tohu* in Isa. xlv, 18, it is frequently inferred that if God did not create the earth *tohu*, then its appearance in this condition in Gen. i, 2 must be later than its creation in Gen. i, 1. This would follow only if *tohu* had the same meaning in both places. But the context in Isa. xlv, 18 shows that here *tohu* is an adverbial accusative (“in vain”, “for nothing”); it was not to no purpose (*tohu*) that God created the earth, but with a definite aim in view—namely, to be inhabited. The same adverbial force of *tohu* re-appears in the next verse: “I said not unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye Me in vain.” The meaning of *tohu* in Gen. i, 2 does not fit the context of these two verses in Isa. xlv. More relevant to Gen. i, 2 are the two other places in OT where *tohu* and *bohu* occur together, Isa xxxiv, 11, and Jer. iv, 23. The former passage predicts the desolation of the land of Edom, a desolation comparable with the state of the earth described in Gen. i, 2; while in the latter Jeremiah has a vision of the earth reverting to its pristine condition of waste and emptiness. So Skinner (*loc. cit.*) speaks of “Jeremiah’s vision of Chaos-come-again..., which is simply that of a darkened and devastated earth, from which life and order have fled “ (this last clause, of course, is intended by Skinner to apply only to Jeremiah’s Chaos-come-again, and not to Gen. i, 2). The idea in Gen. i, 2, he continues, “is probably similar, with this

³ Skinner adds in a footnote on p. 14: “The view that ver 1. describes an earlier creation of heaven and earth, which were reduced to chaos and then re-fashioned, needs no refutation “—an excessively cavalier dismissal of a view which (improbable as it is in my view) has been supported by men of the calibre of E. B. Pusey (*Lectures on Daniel*, 3rd ed., pp. xviii-xxi), H. P. Liddon (*Explanatory Analysis of Romans*, p. 103), W. Kelly (*In the Beginning*, 1894, pp. 5-23), and G. H. Pember (*Earth’s Earliest Ages*, 15th ed., pp. 27-33). It received more fitting respect from Franz Delitzsch, whose arguments against it are given in his *New Commentary on Genesis*, Eng. tr, pp. 79 f.

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difference, that the distinction of land and sea is effaced, and the earth, which is the subject of the sentence, must be understood as the amorphous water mass in which the elements of the future land and sea were commingled" (p. 17).

In fine, whether we regard ver. 1 as an independent statement or as a subordinate clause of time, the meaning of ver. 2 is that when God began to make the universe, the world was in an unorganized state. In other words, the raw material was first brought into being, and the rest of the chapter tells how the raw material was organized into the ordered world so aptly denoted by the Greek word *kosmos*. The reference thus far is only to the universe of matter; for the later production of living beings to populate the earth fresh acts of creation were necessary (*cf.* Gen. i, 21, 27).

[Written communications omitted]

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AUTHOR'S REPLY

Mr. F.F. Bruce: The correspondence on the interpretation of Gen. i, 2, has been interesting and helpful.

Of the relation between Natural Science and the narrative of Gen. i, I am, to my loss, quite incompetent to say anything ; but this relation is, by the terms of reference, excluded from the present discussion. So also is the theological bearing of this scripture, but (as the correspondence makes very plain) it is difficult to keep the Queen of Sciences out of any discussion, especially one conducted under the auspices of the VICTORIA INSTITUTE!

I am fully conscious of the theological attractiveness of the gap theory. It fits in so well with the viewpoint expressed in our day by Stephen Hobhouse and Arthur Hopkinson—a viewpoint going back through William Law and Jacob Boehme to the Early Fathers, especially Origen—which postulates a Creation and Fall (the Fall of the Angels) anterior to the Creation and Fall of Gen. i–iii. This “myth” (in the strictly technical sense of the word) of a prior Creation and Fall contains features of instructiveness and value, and can be suggestively correlated with the doctrine of a cosmic fall as propounded by N. P. Williams and Peter Green; but we

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must not read it into the second verse of Genesis unless we find that the plain grammatical sense of that verse implies it. We must not interpret Scripture so as to make it fit in with our *theologoumena*, but base our *theologoumena* in the grammatico-historical exegesis of Scripture. Incidentally, many of our commonest *theologoumena* with regard to the Creation and Fall are unconsciously, but potently, influenced by Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and in thinking about these subjects we must make allowance for this influence, the effects of which have not been uniformly happy.

Whatever be the truth in the views referred to, we must make an effort (as, indeed, I myself have found it necessary to do) to lay aside theological preferences and examine the grammatical sense of our Hebrew text. As a philologist, I see no reason, after reading the contributions to our discussion, to modify my earlier statement. What the Germans call *Sprachgefühl* is an important consideration in an argument of this kind; and I am encouraged in my opinion by my colleague already referred to, probably the greatest living Hebrew stylist, who assures me that the interpretation which I have undertaken to support accords with the natural sense of the wording, as it appeals to the ear of a native Hebrew speaker, even when one makes allowance for the differences between Biblical and Modern Hebrew.

But, to particularize, I may be permitted to add the following notes:—

(1) I do not press the interpretation of *reshith* as construct. This is not essential to the main argument. But as some 45 out of the 50 occurrences of *reshith* in the Old Testament govern a genitive, its use in the absolute state is the exception rather than the rule.

(2) To be sure, the preposition *le* may be omitted after the verb *hayah* when the sense "become" is obviously demanded by the context, in Gen. xix, 26, Ex. vii, 19. But this sense is not obviously demanded in Gen. i, 2, so that here we should expect the addition of *le* if the meaning of *hayethah* were indeed "became[.]"

(3) As the Greek verb "to be" (*eimi*) has no aorist of its own, the defect is frequently supplied by the use of the aorist of *ginomai*,

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which accordingly we sometimes find in the Septuagint and New Testament in the sense "was" rather than "became."

(4) It is no argument against the interpretation I have suggested for Is. xlv, 18, to say that it necessitates taking a noun in an adverbial sense. Most adverbs in Hebrew (and in Greek, Latin, and some other languages as well) are primarily nouns. We may, if we please, translate *tohu* in this verse by the one adverbial phrase as worthlessness "instead of by the other adverbial phrase "in vain"; but the following words "He formed it to be inhabited," show in what sense we are to understand either the one adverbial phrase or the other, whichever we prefer as a rendering of *tohu* here.

(5) That the quotation from Gesenius-Kautzsch cannot apply where an entirely new section is introduced by *waw* copulative (as in 1 Kings i, 1, x, 1, xx, 1, etc.) should go without saying. The quotation is no half-truth; the words, "connected by *waw* copulative to a verbal-clause, or its equivalent," cannot apply to the first clause in a section, but they apply most appropriately when the noun-clause in question is the second clause in a section, as is the case with the clause we are considering.

(6) This brings us to the parallel in Jonah iii, 3b. That this clause is linked in subject-matter with what follows is as obvious as that Gen. i, 2a is linked in subject-matter with what follows. But this is not the point. *Grammatically* Jonah iii, 3b, bears the same relation to what precedes as Gen. i, 2a bears to what precedes. I said nothing about Nineveh's greatness being or not being due to Jonah's visit, just as I said nothing about *tohu wa-bohu* being or not being *due* to the event of Gen. i, 1. My question was one of *post hoc*, not of *propter hoc*. Jonah iii,

3b, let me repeat, "is grammatically on all fours with Gen. i, 2, and if Gen. i, 2, means that the earth became waste and emptiness after God created it then Jonah iii, 3b should mean that Nineveh became an exceeding great city after Jonah went to it."

(7) The grammatical structure of Gen. i, 2, is independent of the interpretation of Job xxxviii, 4-7. The latter is in the grand poetic

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style, and highly metaphorical; the former (I judge) is prose, even if it be stately, schematic and pictographic prose. The morning stars, we may infer from the parallelism with "sons of God," were not the material stars but their angels, who discerned in the raw material of creation the shape of things to come. If we wish to take the words literally, however, the morning stars may well have shone while the earth had not yet emerged from the condition described in Gen. i, 2. Gen. i, 16-18 need not relate the creation of the stars. There is the further consideration that, in the Septuagint, Job. xxxviii, 7, reads: "When the stars came into being, all my angels praised me with a loud voice." But I do not think that this has much bearing on the subject of our discussion.

(8) As Heb. xi, 3 has been mentioned in the course of the discussion, I may say that I take the plural of aims in this verse and in Heb. i, 2, to denote comprehensively the universe of space and time, so that these verses give but little guidance in interpreting the details of Gen. i, 2 ff.

In conclusion, I wish to express my personal gratitude to the contributors to the discussion, and not least to the protagonist for the other view. I trust I shall not be considered lacking in modesty for hoping that he and his supporters have learned as much from the case which I have been invited to conduct as I have learned from theirs. And it is certain that readers of the discussion will derive more help from the juxtaposition of the two cases than they would from the uncontested exposition of the one or the other alone.