

The Three Views of the Creation of Genesis 1:1-2

by
Garland H. Shinn

Masoretic Text - בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ: ¹
וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתְּהָ תֵהוֹ וְבָהוּ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם: ²

Septuagint - ¹ ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν. ² ἡ δὲ γῆ ἦν ἀόρατος καὶ ἀκατασκαεύαστος καὶ σκοτός ἐπάνω τῆς ἀβύσσου καὶ πνεῦμα θεοῦ ἐπεφέρετο ἐπάνω τοῦ ὕδατος

¹ In [the] beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² And the earth was formless and empty, and darkness was on the face of the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.

Three approaches have been taken by conservative scholars to the statement in Genesis 1:1-2 concerning the creation of the heavens and the earth. They are as follows:

- 1. The Precreation Chaos View** - According to the precreation chaos view, Genesis 1:1 is **not** the original creation, but a subsequent act of God after the original creation. The spirit beings were created in the original creation prior to Genesis 1:1, Satan fell prior to Genesis 1:1, resulting in the chaos on earth stated in Genesis 1:2. Like the restitution view below, the Precreation Chaos View states that Genesis 1:3 begins the restoration of earth as home for mankind and animals.
- 2. The Initial Chaos View** - According to the initial chaos view, the chaotic condition of the earth mentioned in Genesis 1:2 is *part of the initial creation plan*. In other words, the earth was created in a chaotic condition. Satan's creation took place in Genesis 1:1, along with all material and the rest of the spirit beings. The fall of Satan took place sometime later, and no certain time frame can be identified. Genesis 1:3ff. indicate the original organization of the undeveloped earth as it was created. This view is held by Keil and Delitzsch.
- 3. The Restitution View** (so-called gap theory) – This view says that the chaotic condition of the earth mentioned in Genesis 1:2 is the result of a judgment on the original creation of Genesis 1:1. God created spirit beings in Genesis 1:1, and Satan fell between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. Starting with Genesis 1:3 the earth is being restored as home for mankind and animals.

Genesis 1:1-2

1 In [the] beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 And the earth was formless and empty, and darkness was on the face of the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.¹

One must ask some serious interpretive questions concerning the above verses. Few conservative scholars believe in the initial chaos theory, Number 2 above. We will only say that the argument against that view has to do with God's nature and the language of judgment. Could God create an imperfect creation? Furthermore, the words "formless and empty" are clearly the language of judgment. For instance, concerning the judgment of the land of Israel during the Babylonian incursion, Jeremiah 4:23 says, "I beheld the earth, and indeed it was without formless and empty; And the heavens, they had no light." The words also occur in Isaiah 34:11, which deals with the devastation of Edom. These are the only other places where the words occur, and both reflect Genesis 1:2, being applied to a situation that was not original, but which came into existence through evil happenings brought on by judgment.

¹ All Scripture quotes are by the author unless otherwise noted.

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The question is actually between which of the two gap views are presented. For the Precreation Chaos View is actually a “gap theory,” though it is not often called that. It realizes that Genesis 1:2 presents an earth under judgment. But in an attempt to disallow evolution, some reject the view that Genesis 1:1 presents a creation from nothing. Allan P. Ross in the *Bible Knowledge Commentary*² presents this view:

It is more likely that Gen 1:1 refers to a relative beginning rather than the absolute beginning....The chapter would then be accounting for the Creation of the universe as man knows it, not the beginning of everything, and Gen 1:1-2 would provide the introduction to it. The fall of Satan and entrance of sin into God’s original Creation would precede this.³

Others, such as Merrill Unger and Charles Ryrie, have held this view.

There is a major problem, however. Simply stated, in order to hold such a view one must abandon *normal interpretive procedure*. One of the basics for normal interpretation is that the writer intended for his readers to understand his communication to them. Furthermore, since we are dealing with the word of God, the presumption is that God Himself must have intended for the prophet and his audience to understand the communication. Otherwise, why bother making it in the first place?

Even the language in which the precreation view is expressed is confusing. Ross says “The chapter would then be accounting for the Creation of the universe as *man* knows it, not *the* beginning of everything....”

Just exactly what does he mean? Does he mean that God intended for Moses and his readers to understand Genesis 1:1 as some kind of intermediate creation?⁴ He seems to be implying that God revealed something to Moses that was designed for the man to misunderstand! In fact, there is no basis for such an assumption, and to read it into the text means that ***Moses could not have understood what he was writing, nor could his original readers***. It would have been meaningless to them, and no value, as Moses was establishing the theocratic idea that God was the ruler of the creation. The people had come out of Egypt and were heading for the promised land, to fulfill the promised land covenant. They were to be dependent on the creator God. The Precreation Chaos View makes such dependence an impossibility, for, according to it, He is not being presented as the creator God at all!

² This commentary was produced by the faculty of Dallas Theological Seminary.

³ Allen P. Ross, *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, “Genesis,” Electronic Edition – e-Sword.

⁴ Some, such as Merrill Unger (an able scholar who has much to commend him) argue that the sentences after Genesis 1:1 are grammatically linked to that first sentence so that they must indicate events going on at the same time as the original creation of Genesis 1:1.

Dr. Unger makes the bold statement, “For example, if Genesis 1:1 refers to the original creation of the universe out of nothing, Genesis 1:2 must either be construed to be the original chaotic state in which the earth was created or to be the result of a subsequent judgment (the gap theory). But the first interpretation is contradicted by both Scripture and theology. 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 forth perfect from the Creator’s hand, as described by Job (Job 38:4–7). The second interpretation, while it avoids the Scriptural and theological difficulties of the first, 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.”

One wonders if Moses would share in the certainty concerning the “three circumstantial clauses” which Dr. Unger expresses. Certainly many competent and fluent Hebrew scholars do not agree with Dr. Unger. Dr. Bernard Northrup, my Old Testament Professor who was a fluent Hebrew speaker, did not!

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However, normal interpretation demands that God is presenting Himself as the God who creates out of nothing, the God who is bringing Israel into the land of promise based on that inherent power of creation. For such *is* the normal meaning of Genesis 1:1. And for centuries it was so believed. Of course, that is not to say that people could not have misunderstood it for all those centuries, for they certainly could have. But did they? We think not, for it is the natural reading of the text. Those conservatives who believe otherwise are accusing God of telling a falsehood.

A view such as the Precreation Chaos View is an absurdity, and it is actually an accusation that God misled the original receivers of the revelation. According to this arrogant view, the correct understanding of Genesis 1:1 is left for people with more insight, more acumen, more ability. Like Dr. Ross, perhaps.

Rather, Moses and his readers would have understood that Genesis 1:1 was the original creation out of nothing. Also that Genesis 1:2 presents the truth that something happened to cause the pristine creation to fall into chaos. Oddly, Ross, Unger, and others recognize the problem here. So what they do is quite strange. They shift the gap to prior to Genesis 1:1! They say that there was a creation prior to Genesis 1:1; then they state that there was a gap of time before Genesis 1:1, and during this period of unknown, unrevealed time, Satan fell, bringing about chaos. There was then a new act of creation (Genesis 1:1), which signaled the restitution presented in the rest of the Genesis 1.

The Precreation Chaos View solves nothing, it only complicates matters. It certainly does nothing to curtail the rabid evolutionary view of so-called scientists. Those who hold this false view, instead of removing the possibility of placing the “geological ages” in the gap between Genesis 1:1 and 2, have made a place for them before Genesis 1:1! Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, who did not hold to the Precreation Chaos View, says this about evolutionists:

Therefore, being unable to believe the Genesis account of creation and not having any ability to believe that there is a God who created all things, they have devised the best theory that they can, but still with great inconsistency. As avowedly scientific men, they must refuse to accept anything which is unproved; yet in this theory of evolution they accept every word of testimony regardless of a lack of proof, and of course no effectual line of proof has been constructed or discovered. Such men in their unregenerate limitation are to be pitied. No Spirit-taught person will have trouble with the Genesis account of creation.⁵

It seems that not only evolutionists have trouble believing the Genesis account of creation. The fact is, the meaning of the text of Genesis 1:1 is clearly understood to be, as Dr. Chafer phrases it, the Genesis account of creation.” Hear Keil and Delitzch, Old Testament scholars:

Heaven and earth have not existed from all eternity, but had a beginning; nor did they arise by emanation from an absolute substance, but were created by God. This sentence (Genesis 1:1), which stands at the head of the records of revelation, is not a mere heading, nor a summary of the history of the creation, but a declaration of the primeval act of God, by which the universe was called into being.⁶

The normal meaning of the text is clear. Vs. 1 stands alone as a statement of absolute creation from nothing. Later Keil and Delitzch state,

⁵ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, “Evolution,” Electronic Edition, e-Sword.

⁶ Carl F. Keil & Franz Delitzch, *Genesis*, Electronic Edition, e-Sword.

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In this verse, however, the existence of any primeval material is precluded by the object created: “the heaven and the earth.” This expression is frequently employed to denote the world, or universe, for which there was no single word in the Hebrew language; the universe consisting of a two-fold whole, and the distinction between heaven and earth being essentially connected with the notion of the world, the fundamental condition of its historical development.

Likewise, Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown (JFB) in their comments on Genesis 1 make their view crystal clear:

created — not formed from any pre-existing materials, but made out of nothing.

the heaven and the earth — the universe. This first verse is a general introduction to the inspired volume, declaring the great and important truth that all things had a beginning; that nothing throughout the wide extent of nature existed from eternity, originated by chance, or from the skill of any inferior agent; but that the whole universe was produced by the creative power of God (Act 17:24; Rom 11:36).⁷

Using normal interpretive procedure, the fact that a specific thing was created, the heavens and the earth, removes all doubt. Nothing could have existed prior, for the phrase “the heavens and the earth” stand in Hebrew for the entire creation, for there is no single word for such in the Hebrew language of the period during which Moses wrote. We must insist that this is the meaning that Moses and his readers would have understood.

Now, Keil and Delitzch held, unlike JFB, not to the gap view, but to the Initial Chaos View, supposing that God created the universe in chaos. Nevertheless, their understanding of verse 1 is correct. It speaks to creation out of nothing, not some “re-creation” from preexisting material.

Some have attempted to argue from the grammar of Genesis 1:2 either for or against the gap between it and Genesis 1:1. Such arguments are futile, for the grammar is not the issue, but the actual wording of the text.

It is true that the word translated “was” can mean both “existed in a state” or “came to be.” Neither view is eliminated by the word, however. Nor can the word “and” that begins verse 2 be taken as an absolute indicator. It *does support* the idea that the second sentence is not a continuation of the thought of the first sentence in verse 1,⁸ but that is as far as one can take it. Other than the wording of verse 2, one cannot determine why verse 2 is being distinguished from verse 1. So while the grammar *allows* for a gap between the two statements, it does not require one. But neither does it eliminate one, as Dr. Unger seemed to think.

However, there is another Scripture which gives evidence concerning the issue of the creation in Genesis one. Peter, in dealing with unbelief and the tendency of uniformitarian thought, makes an interesting statement.

2 Peter 3:3-8

...knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, ⁴ and saying, Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they

⁷ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown. *A Commentary on the Old and New Testaments*, Genesis 1:1, Electronic Edition, e-Sword.

⁸ This is so because the “and” beginning verse 2 is associated with the noun “earth” and not with the verb “was.” Had it been associated with the verb, one might argue for a consecutive meaning, and that verse 2 is dependent on verse 1. This is exactly what happened in verse 3, where the word “and” is associated with the verb “said.” The idea seems to be that God proceeded to say something in verse 3 because of the statement in verse 2. Therefore, we can say that the act of making light visible from the earth in verse 3 was a direct consequence of the earth being without form and void in verse 2.

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were from the beginning of creation. ⁵ For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water; ⁶ by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water. ⁷ But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. ⁸ But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. (NKJV)

Uniformitarian philosophy is the thinking behind evolution, as well as other false philosophies. It seems man tends to that kind of thinking, as it is also the basis for amillennial and post-millennial views. But in his statement Peter is viewing the problem from the perspective of those who no longer believe the Lord is coming. Look, they say, “all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” (vs. 4).

In so saying, they greatly err, says Peter. They do not understand that the creation also rejects the uniformitarian way of thinking. The opposite of uniformitarian philosophy is chaos philosophy. By chaos, we mean that things change, and tend toward chaos. They do not get better nor stay the same. The creation itself proves that chaos, not uniformitarianism, is the correct view. Uniformitarians are “willfully” forgetting something. That is, that the original earth “standing out of water, and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water.” Peter is speaking of the condition of the earth in Genesis 1:2.⁹ The earth was covered with water. There was no dry land. And this was the result, Peter says, of the fact that it “perished.” And it perished, “being flooded with water.” That last statement is indicating how it perished, that is, by means of a flood. Clearly Peter understood that something happened to the original creation. And his wording makes it clear that he is referring to Genesis 1:1-2 and following, not to some event or series of events before Genesis 1:1.

Now, this is not talking about Noah’s flood. Some have so stated, but the context does not allow that view. Peter clearly indicates that he is referring to the creation with the words, “For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old...” He is not referring to that later flood, but to the time when the heavens were created, for such is the only meaning that can be attached to the verb “were.” To jump forward in time to Noah’s day is unwarranted, since in Genesis 1 there is a perfectly good flood to which Peter is referring. And it was clearly a universal flood because it was not until the third day that dry land appeared.

The verb “perished” has been an occasion of misunderstanding. Some say that the word “world” (*kosmos*) cannot refer to the physical earth, but to the population of the earth, thus moving Peter’s reference forward in time to the flood of Noah’s day. After all, they say, the physical earth was not destroyed. It did not perish.

But the solution to this problem is easy to understand. First, the word *world* was used in New Testament times of the physical earth. Note John 1:10, “He was in the world.” This clearly means that Christ was on earth as opposed to being in heaven, as is clear from the next clause, “and the world was made by Him.” See also Acts 17:24 which states that “God...made the world and everything in it,” another clear use of *kosmos* referring to the physical earth.

One wonders why someone would say that the word “perished” must refer to the people, and not the physical earth. For such is the statement of Kenneth O. Gangel when he says, “The world (*kosmos*) refers to inhabitants, since the earth itself was not destroyed in the Flood.” Pardon me? In an effort to make this refer to Noah’s flood Mr. Gangel states a falsehood. In both the original flood of Genesis, and the later Noahic flood in the same book, the earth was indeed destroyed. It

⁹ This is clearly not the flood of Noah, though many assume so. The issue with Peter was “the beginning of creation,” and the condition of chaos immediately following it.

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did perish. And it was not just the people. Gangel assumes the word *perish* means “to kill” or “to eliminate” in some fashion.

The word “perish” or “destroy” does not necessarily mean “to do away with” or “kill” as Gangel and others suppose. Rather, it often means *to render useless*. Jesus used it when referring to cutting off a part of the body that offends (Matthew 5:29, 30). The body part still exists, it is just useless for the body, being disconnected. Later in the same Gospel the word means “to be broken” as when a wine skin bursts (Matthew 9:17), and is rendered useless for its intended purpose. Indeed, throughout the Gospels this word is used of the lost, those who are already in a state of having perished because they are without the truth of Christ as Messiah. But they haven’t died, nor ceased to exist. Even so, they are useless from God’s perspective because they are no longer capable of fulfilling His initial creative purpose for mankind.

In the epistles, it is possible for a weak brother to perish (1 Corinthians 8:11) but it does not mean that he will die physically, only that he will cease to function usefully as a believer in a certain area.

Indeed, the earth did perish. It was rendered useless in both floods of Genesis, and had to be made useful again. And in similar ways. In Genesis 1 the dry land had to appear. In Noah’s time, the waters had to recede so that dry land could appear. There is nothing more useless to mankind that flooded land, except as a reservoir for water!

Peter taught that there was an obvious break between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 where the earth that “then was” perished. He did so to show that the creation narrative of Genesis 1 proved that all things did not continue as they were from the creation. That the earth, even during that early period, perished because it was flooded. That is, it was rendered useless for some reason. He does not state the reason, but there are indications that between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 Satan inhabited the earth. However, we must save that discussion for another time.

The Precreation Chaos View does not stand up under scrutiny. There are no direct statements in Scripture to support the view, and the view itself is attempting to present idea that is based on false interpretive procedures. It assumes a doctrine of a pre-creation creation, a clear absurdity. It rejects the obvious and normal meaning of the verb “created” in Genesis 1:1.

According to the Precreation Chaos View, the concept of creation from nothing in Genesis 1:1 has no reason to exist. The Israelites of Moses day, coming out of Egypt and wandering in the wilderness, *could not have understood Moses to mean such a thing*. This false doctrine certainly does nothing to help the Christian today who attempts to interpret Scripture using normal methods and who needs a strong view of God as the One Who created the universe (heaven and earth) out of nothing.

Therefore, we unequivocally reject any view that does not recognize that Genesis 1:1 is a statement of original “out-of-nothing” creation, and that Genesis 1:2 indicates a perishing of the original created earth because of a judgment by God. There is a time gap, one of unknown length, between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2.