

Genesis 1:1-3: Creation or Re-Creation?

Part 1 (of 2 parts):

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An issue that has taunted mankind through the ages is the question of origins. Since ancient times people have been keenly interested in understanding and explaining their provenance. The ancient creation mythologies of Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, India, Iran, Japan, or Mexico,¹ or a child's question to his parents about who made the world shows that this concern is intrinsic to human nature.

The Bible clearly portrays God as the Creator of all that exists. In fact this issue is so important in the biblical revelation that it is the first issue addressed, for it is mentioned in the opening lines of Scripture. However, these opening verses have not been understood unilaterally in the history of interpretation. In his book *Creation and Chaos*, Waltke, after thoroughly investigating existing views, argues that there are three principal interpretations of Genesis 1:1-3 open to evangelicals. He designates these as the restitution theory, the initial chaos theory, and the precreation chaos theory.² Of primary importance in distinguishing these views is the relationship of Genesis 1:2 to the original creation: "And the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters." As Waltke stated, "According to the first mode of thought, chaos occurred after the original creation; according to the second mode of thought, chaos

¹ For discussion of creation myths in different ancient civilizations see Samuel Noah Kramer, *Mythologies of the Ancient World* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 36, 95, 120-21, 281-89, 382-85, 415-21, 449-54.

² Bruce K. Waltke, *Creation and Chaos* (Portland, OR: Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1974), 18.

occurred in connection with the original creation; and in the third mode of thought, chaos occurred before the original creation."³ This article examines the theory of a period of chaos after creation (often called the gap theory) and the initial chaos theory, and the second article in the series analyzes the precreation chaos theory, the view endorsed by Waltke and other recent commentators on Genesis.⁴

The Gap Theory

The restitution theory, or gap theory, has been held by many and is the view taken by the editors of *The New Scofield Reference Bible*.⁵ This view states Genesis 1:1 refers to the original creation of the universe, and sometime after this original creation Satan rebelled against God and was cast from heaven to the earth.⁶ As a result of Satan's making his habitation on the earth, the earth was judged. God's original creation was then placed under judgment, and the result of this judgment is the state described in Genesis 1:2: The earth was "formless and void" (תָּהוּ וָבֶהוּ). Isaiah 34:11 and Jeremiah 4:23, which include the only other occurrences of the phrase תָּהוּ וָבֶהוּ, are cited as passages that substantiate the understanding of "formless and void" in Genesis 1:2 in a negative sense, because these words occur in both passages in the context of judgment oracles.

Waltke points out that this view conflicts with a proper understanding of the syntactical function of the *waw* conjunction in the phrase וְהָאָרֶץ, "and the earth" (Gen. 1:2). The construction of *waw* plus a noun does not convey sequence but rather introduces a disjunctive clause. The clause thus must be circumstantial to verse 1 or 3. It cannot be viewed as an independent clause ("And the earth became")⁷ as held by the supporters of the gap theory.

Furthermore Waltke rejects the proposal that the occurrence of "formless and void" in Jeremiah 4:23 and Isaiah 34:11 proves that Genesis 1:2 is the result of God's judgment. Scripture nowhere states that God judged the world when Satan fell.⁸

³ Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 19.

⁴ See especially Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 106-7, 723; and Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 117.

⁵ *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 1, n. 5, and 752-3, n. 2. For an extensive defense of the gap theory see Arthur C. Custance, *Without Form and Void* (Brockville, Ontario, N.p., 1970).

⁶ Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 are often cited as biblical support for this teaching.

⁷ Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 19. Also see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 15.

⁸ Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 24.

In view of these objections, the gap theory should no longer be considered a viable option in explaining the meaning of Genesis 1:1-3. The view is grammatically suspect, and Scripture is silent on the idea that the earth was judged when Satan fell. Waltke's critique of the gap theory is devastating.⁹

The Initial Chaos Theory

Proponents of the initial chaos theory maintain that Genesis 1:1 refers to the original creation, with verse 2 providing a description of this original creation mentioned in verse 1 by the use of three disjunctive clauses. This is the traditional view held by Luther and Calvin, and it is the position mentioned in the renowned Gesenius-Kautzsch-Cowley Hebrew grammar.¹⁰

Waltke argues that this view is unacceptable because it requires that the phrases "the heavens and the earth" in verse 1 and "without form and void" in verse 2 be understood differently from their usual meaning in the Old Testament.¹¹ In the initial chaos theory "the heavens and the earth"¹² in verse 1 were created without form and void. However, as Waltke observes, this "demands that we place a different value on 'heaven and earth' than anywhere else in Scripture. . . Childs concluded that the compound never has the meaning of disorderly chaos but always of an orderly world."¹³

A second objection proceeds from the first. If verse 2 describes the condition of the earth when it was created, then the phrase "without form and void," which otherwise appears to refer to an orderless chaos, must be understood as referring to what God pro-

⁹ For a comprehensive refutation of the gap theory see Weston W. Fields, *Unformed and Unfilled: A Critique of the Gap Theory of Genesis 1:1, 2* (Winona Lake, IN: Light and Life Press, 1973).

¹⁰ Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 25. This traditional view is also reflected in the popular Hartom and Cassuto biblical commentary series in Israel. See A. S. Hartom and M. D. Cassuto, "Genesis," in *Torah, Prophets, and Writings* (Jerusalem: Yavneh, 1977), 14 (in Hebrew).

¹¹ Westermann offers the same objection to this position (Claus Westermann, *Genesis. 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion [London: SPCK, 1984], 95).

¹² It is generally accepted that the phrase constitutes a merism and thus refers to all things, that is, the universe (Westermann, *Genesis. 1-11: A Commentary*, 101; Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The JPS Torah Commentary* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989], 5; Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 106; John H. Sailhamer, "Genesis," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990], 23; Harry M. Orlinsky, "The Plain Meaning of Genesis 1:1-3," *Biblical Archaeologist* [1983]: 208; and Waltke, *Creation and Cosmos*, 26). Similar expressions to denote the universe occur in Egyptian, Akkadian, and Ugaritic literature (Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 15).

¹³ Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 25-26. Similarly, see John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910), 14; and Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17*, 105.

duced along with the darkness and the deep, which likewise have negative connotations.¹⁴ But this would not be possible in a perfect cosmos. As Waltke argues, "Logic will not allow us to entertain the contradictory notions: God created the organized heaven and earth; the earth was unorganized."¹⁵ It is also argued that Isaiah 45:18 states explicitly that God did not create a תִּהְיֶה.

The remainder of this article discusses these objections to the initial chaos theory.

THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH

In reference to Waltke's objection concerning the use of the phrase "the heavens and the earth" in Genesis 1:1 one may ask, Must the expression "the heavens and the earth" have the same meaning throughout the canon, especially if the contextual evidence explicitly refers to its formulation? It is a valid question to ask whether the initial reference to the expression in question would have the meaning it did in subsequent verses *after* the universe had been completed. It should be emphasized that this is the first use of the phrase and one could naturally ask how else the initial stage of the universe might be described. The phrase here could merely refer to the *first stage* of creation. This idea that Genesis 1:1 refers to the first stage in God's creative activity might be supported by the context, which clearly reveals that God intended to create the universe in progressive stages. Furthermore early Jewish sources attest that the heavens and the earth were created on the first day of God's creative activity.¹⁶ Wenham nicely articulates this position in addition to replying to the objection raised by Waltke and others:

Here it suffices to observe that if the creation of the world was a unique event, the terms used here may have a slightly different value from elsewhere....Commentators often insist that the phrase "heaven and earth" denotes the completely ordered cosmos. Though this is usually the case, totality rather than organization is its chief thrust here. It is therefore quite feasible for a mention of an initial act of creation of the whole universe (v. 1) to be followed by an account of the ordering of different parts of the universe (vv. 2-31).¹⁷

¹⁴ Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 24. Waltke and others maintain that Genesis 1:2 refers to something negative. This will be dealt with in the subsequent article, which will analyze the precreation chaos theory more critically.

¹⁵ Ibid., 26. Similarly, Skinner wrote, "A created chaos is perhaps a contradiction" (Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 13).

¹⁶ Second Esdras 6:38 and *b. Hag.* 12a. Sailhamer also maintains that Genesis 1:1 was part of the first day of creation. This is the reason the author referred to יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, "day one" (Gen. 1:5) instead of the expected יוֹם רִאשׁוֹן, "first day" ("Genesis," 26, 28).

¹⁷ Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 12-13, 15. Also see Eduard König, *Die Genesis* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1925), 136.

This is also Luther's understanding of the meaning of the phrase in Genesis 1:1: "Moses calls 'heaven and earth,' not those elements which now are; but the original rude and unformed substances."¹⁸

If the phrase "the heavens and the earth" does not refer to the completed and organized universe known to subsequent biblical writers, the premise on which Waltke rejects the initial chaos theory is seriously undermined.

FORMLESS AND VOID

As previously mentioned the words **תָּהוּ** and **בְּהוּ** occur together in only three passages in the Old Testament. The word **בְּהוּ** occurs only in combination with **תָּהוּ**, while **תָּהוּ** may occur by itself. The most current and comprehensive discussion of the phrase in reference to cognate Semitic languages as well as biblical usage is given by Tsumura:

Hebrew *tōhū* is based on a Semitic root **thw* and means "desert." The term *bōhū* is also a Semitic term based on the root **bhw*, "to be empty." . . . The Hebrew term *bōhū* means (1) "desert," (2) "a desert-like place," i.e. "a desolate or empty place" or "an uninhabited place" or (3) "emptiness." The phrase *tōhū wābōhū* refers to a state of "aridness or unproductiveness" (Jer. 4:23) or "desolation" (Isa. 34:11) and to a state of "unproductiveness and emptiness" in Genesis 1:2.¹⁹

Thus both the etymological history and contextual usage of the phrase fail to support Waltke's view that the situation described in Genesis 1:2 is that of a chaotic, unorganized universe. He overstates the force of the phrase "formless and void."

But what about the evidence from Isaiah 45:18? Does not this imply that God was not responsible for creating the state described in Genesis 1:2? The text reads, "For thus says the Lord, who created the heavens (He is the God who formed the earth and made it, He established it and did not create it a waste place [**תָּהוּ**], but formed it to be inhabited)." Does not this passage explicitly state that God

¹⁸ Martin Luther, *The Creation: A Commentary on the First Five Chapters of the Book of Genesis*, trans. Henry Cole (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1858), 27. See also C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, "Genesis," in *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 1:48; Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Record* (San Diego: Creation-Life, 1976), 40-41; Sailhamer, "Genesis," 26. This was also the view of Origen, Philo, and Gregory of Nyssa. See Custance, *Without Form and Void*, 18; and J. C. M. van Winden, "The Early Christian Exegesis of 'Heaven and Earth' in Genesis 1,1," in *Romanitas et Christianitas*, ed. W. den Boer, P. G. van der Nat, C. M. J. Sicking, and J. C. M. van Winden (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1973), 373-74.

¹⁹ David Toshio Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis I and 2: A Linguistic Investigation*, JSOT Supplement Series 83 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 155-56. See also "תָּהוּ וְבְהוּ," in *Encyclopedia Migrat*, 8:436 (in Hebrew); and Johann Fischer, *Das Buch Isaias. II. Teil: Kapitel 40-66, Die Heilige Schrift des Alten Testaments* (Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1939), 83. The understanding of **בְּהוּ** as "empty" is reinforced by the Aramaic Targum rendering of the word as **רִיקְנִיא**. The New International Version renders the phrase "formless and empty."

did not create a תֹהוֹ? Waltke and others argue that this parallel passage substantiates the claim that God did not bring about the state described in Genesis 1:2 by His creative powers.²⁰ The answer to this objection appears to be found in the purpose of God's creation as seen in the context of Isaiah 45:18. It could be argued from the context that God created the earth to be inhabited,²¹ not to leave it in a desolate תֹהוֹ condition. Rather than contradicting the initial chaos theory, Isaiah 45:18 actually helps clarify the meaning of תֹהוֹ in Genesis 1:2. Since תֹהוֹ is contrasted with לְשָׁכַת, "to inhabit,"²² one should conclude that תֹהוֹ is an antonym of "inhabiting."²³ The earth, immediately after God's initial creative act was in a condition that was not habitable for mankind.²⁴ Tsumura nicely summarizes the contribution of Isaiah 45:18 to the understanding of Genesis 1:2:

tōhū here is contrasted with *lasebet* in the parallelism and seems to refer rather to a place which has no habitation, like the term *semamah* "desolation" (cf. Jer. 4:27; Isa. 24:12), *hareb* "waste, desolate" and *'azubah* "deserted." There is nothing in this passage that would suggest a chaotic state of the earth "which is opposed to and precedes creation." Thus, the term *tōhū* here too signifies "a desert-like place" and refers to "an uninhabited place."... It should be noted that *lō-tōhū* here is a resultative object, referring to the purpose of God's creative action. In other words, this verse explains that God did not create the earth so that it may stay desert-like, but to be inhabited. So, this verse does not contradict Gen 1:2, where God created the earth to be productive and inhabited though it "was" still *tōhū wāb-ōhū* in the initial state.²⁵

²⁰ Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 27. Also see Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 106, 722.

²¹ John Peter Lange, "Genesis," in *Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 499; Edward J. Young, "The Interpretation of Genesis 1:2," *Westminster Theological Journal* 23 (1960-61): 154; R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66*, New Century Bible (Greenwood, SC: Attic, 1975), 110-11; Fields, *Unformed and Unfilled: A Critique of the Gap Theory of Genesis 1:1, 2*, 123-24. This text thus corresponds to the account in Genesis 1, which indicates that God did not leave the earth in this state. Thus John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, 4 vols., trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947), 3:418; Delitzsch, "Genesis," 227; and John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 83. Waltke's contention that Isaiah 45:18 refers to the completed creation at the end of the six days does not undermine this view that Isaiah 45:18 is concerned with the purpose of creation. For Waltke's view, see "The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3. Part II: The Restitution Theory," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132 (1975): 144.

²² J. Skinner, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Chapters XL-LXVI* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898), 65; and Sailhamer, "Genesis," 24-25.

²³ For discussion of the use of antonyms or binary opposites in delimiting and clarifying the meaning of terms in context see John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 460-70; and John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 109-12.

²⁴ Young, "The Interpretation of Genesis 1:2," 170; s.v. "תֹהוֹ וְבֹהוֹ," *Encyclopedia Miqrait*, :436.

²⁵ Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis I and 2*, 33-34. This would also pertain to the phrase in Isaiah 34:11. The threat would be that the land would become a

The early Jewish Aramaic translation Neophyti I provides an early attestation to this understanding in its expansive translation of תְּהוֹ וְרֵקָה: "desolate without human beings or beast and void of all cultivation of plants and of trees."²⁶ Tsumura writes, "In conclusion, both the biblical context and extra-biblical parallels suggest that the phrase *tōhû wāb_ōhû* in Gen 1:2 has nothing to do with 'chaos' and simply means 'emptiness' and refers to the earth which is an empty place, i.e.. 'an unproductive and uninhabited place.'"²⁷ This understanding of verse 2 fits well with the overall thrust and structure of Genesis 1:1-2:3.

As the discourse analysis of this section indicates, the author in v. 2 focuses not on the "heavens" but on the "earth" where the reader/audience stands, and presents the "earth" as "still" not being the earth which they all are familiar with. The earth which they are familiar with is "the earth" with vegetation, animals and man. Therefore, in a few verses, the author will mention their coming into existence through God's creation: vegetation on the third day and animals and man on the sixth day. Both the third and the sixth day are set as climaxes in the framework of this creation story and grand climax is the creation of man on the sixth day. . . . The story of creation in Gen 1:1-2:3 thus tells us that it is God who created mankind "in his image" and provided for him an inhabitable and productive earth.²⁸

The structure of Genesis 1 shows that God in His creative work was making the earth habitable for man. He did not leave the earth in the initial תְּהוֹ וְרֵקָה state. This is seen clearly from the following table, which shows the six days of creation can be divided into two parallel groups with four creative acts each. The last day in each group, days three and six, have two creative acts each with the second creative act on these days functioning as the climax of each. This intentional arrangement shows that making the earth habitable for man is the purpose of the account by improving on the earth's initial status as desolate and empty.²⁹

desolation and waste and thus unfit for inhabitants (E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah II*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969], 438).

²⁶ See Sailhamer, "Genesis," 27.

²⁷ Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2*, 156. For a similar understanding in postbiblical Jewish literature, see Jacob Newman, *The Commentary of Nahmanides on Genesis Chapters 1-6* (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 33.

²⁸ Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2*, 42-43. Also see Sailhamer, "Genesis," 24-25.

²⁹ Many commentators have observed this general structure (e.g., U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, trans. Israel Abrahams [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961], 17; Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 104; and Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*). The present chart most closely resembles Sarna, *Genesis: JPS Torah Commentary*, 4.

The Six Days of Creation

<i>Waste</i>	<i>Empty</i>
Day	Day
1 Light	4 Luminaries
2 Sky	5 Fish and fowl
3 Dry land	6 Land creatures
Vegetation	Humankind
(Lowest form of organic life)	(Highest form of organic life)

This supports the claim that **תְּהוֹוָה** is restricted to the earth's unlivable and empty condition before these six days. God converted the uninhabitable land into a land fit for man. He was not seeking to reverse it from a chaotic state. This is the point Isaiah 45:18 supports by presenting habitation as the reverse of **תְּהוֹוָה**. The sequence in Isaiah 45:18 parallels that of Genesis 1. There is movement from an earth unfit to live in (Gen. 1:2 = Isa. 45:18a) to the finished product, to be inhabited by man (Gen. 1:3-31 Isa. 45:18b).

However, what of Waltke's objection that a perfect God would not make a world that was "formless and void." This charge loses its force when one considers the creation account itself. For one could also ask why God did not make the universe perfect with one command. He surely could have done so. And yet there was a progression, for He spent six days changing the state described in Genesis 1:2 into the world as it is now known. As Sarna has stated, "That God should create disorganized matter, only to reduce it to order, presents no more of a problem than does His taking six days to complete creation instead of instantaneously producing a perfected universe."³⁰

Conclusion

This article has analyzed Waltke's treatment of two principal evangelical interpretations of Genesis 1:1-3—the gap theory and the initial chaos theory. Waltke's criticism of the gap theory is legitimate, as this theory conflicts with principles of Hebrew grammar. On the other hand Waltke objected to the initial chaos theory based on his understanding of the phrases "the heavens and the earth" and "formless and void." However, as has been shown, these phrases can be understood differently from the way Waltke understands them, so that the so-called initial chaos theory should not be dismissed on the basis of Waltke's objections to it. The subsequent article will critique the increasingly popular position advocated by Waltke and others, the precreation chaos theory.

³⁰ Sarna, *Genesis: The JPS Torah Commentary*, 6. Also see Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1978), 1:80; and Fields, *Unformed and Unfilled: A Critique of the Gap Theory of Genesis 1:1, 2*, 123-24.

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