

The Age of the Earth and Genesis 1:1-2

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INTRODUCTION

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Genesis 1:1-2¹

These two verses of the Tanakh are at the center of the intersection between the uniformitarian principles accepted by modern science and Christian thought. If the uniformitarian ideas underlying science are correct it may appear impossible to treat the Creation account given in the Tanakh as a literal record; on the other hand, if we treat the Creation account in Genesis literally, it's impossible to accept the uniformitarian theory of science.

Everything within the Genesis record points to it being a literal account. For instance, the arrangement of the text does not fit any literary genre than a historical narrative; the days cannot be fit into a poetic framework, despite many attempts over hundreds of years.² Further, the account given in the first chapter of the Tanakh appears to be specifically targeted at countering common creation myths; there are five areas where the Creation account specifically attacks rival cosmologies.³

Because of these and many other arguments, this paper assumes the Creation account recorded in Genesis is a literal account of events that really occurred in history. Each day, beginning in Genesis 1:2, is a literal 24 hour day. The focus of this paper is on the proper reading of Genesis 1:1 and 1:2; the question addressed here is whether or not there is a gap between these two verses.

The following approach is taken in this paper: Three different readings of Genesis 1:1-2 are reviewed first; objections to a gap are considered throughout. The next two sections examine

1. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

2. Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002).

3. *ibid*

possible applications of a gap in Ezekiel 28, and how a possible gap could relate to scientific views of the age of Universe. The thesis of this paper is that while a gap cannot be dogmatically proven between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, a narrowly defined gap is possible within the grammar and context, and can resolve some problems in the Scriptural record.

Genesis 1:1 as an Introduction

The first view translates Genesis 1:1-2a, “*When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void...*” In this view, Genesis 1:1 is an introductory summary, or perhaps a title for the creation account. The grammatical evidence marshaled for this view is that the first word in the Hebrew, בְּרֵאשִׁית, is constructed in a form that doesn’t imply an absolute beginning, but rather a beginning from something else. The *New American Commentary* provides insight into the problem.

“Create,” however, does not necessarily mean an altogether new thing. For example, Ps 51:10a [12a] reads, “Create [bārā’] within me a new heart”; this line parallels “renew [hādaš] within me an upright spirit” (v. 10b), indicating here that “create” has the nuance of restoration.⁴

Which of the two readings is correct? Waltke states there are two methods by which the correct reading can be determined.

An initial question to consider is whether בְּרֵאשִׁית is in the construct or absolute state. If the form is construct, then verse 1 must be understood as a dependent clause. If it is in the absolute state, the traditional rendering will stand. Two arguments have been advanced to show that the first word of the Bible is in the construct state: (a) a lexical statistical analysis of its usage; and (b) the absence of the article.⁵

Virtually every ancient and modern translation has rejected this grammatical view of the first two verses of Genesis based on these two standards.⁶ In virtually every case where בְּרֵאשִׁית

4. K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, electronic ed. Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001).

5. Bruce K. Waltke, “The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132, no. 527 (1975), 222.

6. Mathews.

is used without an article, the noun is taken to be an absolute; the beginning described is an absolute beginning, rather than a relative one.

This view falls, however, even without the grammatical and lexical points. Reading Genesis 1:1 as, “*When God began to create...*” implies there was something in existence when God began to create. If Genesis 1:1 only provides an introduction, then the conditions described in Genesis 1:2 must have already existed before the beginning of this account. Reymond represents this view.

The emphasis of Genesis 1 itself appears to be not so much on God’s power to create—this is assumed and everywhere displayed—but on his creative ability as an Architect to “build” from originally created material, supplemented with subsequently created material, a beautiful world capable of sustaining created life.⁷

This view has difficulty with the merism in Genesis 1:1; if God did not create everything, but is rather simply reforming something which already exists at this point, then why use the merism at all? The focus could have remained on the Earth, alone, rather than using the merism to include all that exists.

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 twofold whole, and the distinction between heaven and earth being essentially connected with the notion of the world, the fundamental condition of its historical development (vid., Gen. 14:19, 22; Ex. 31:17).⁸

This view also has difficulty with the overarching theological thrust of the Genesis account. While it is possible to build the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* from other accounts in the Scriptures, it would make no sense for Moses, writing a history of the world for Israel in the desert, to begin with something other than the beginning. If God created from something which

7. Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1998), 390.

8. Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 1:29.

already existed, how is he so far different from the other gods who did the same? Calvin makes this specific point when he states:

Therefore his meaning is, that the world was made out of nothing. Hence the folly of those is refuted who imagine that unformed matter existed from eternity; and who gather nothing else from the narration of Moses than that the world was furnished with new ornaments, and received a form of which it was before destitute.⁹

Genesis 1:1 as Part of the First Day

A second common reading of Genesis 1:1 is to treat it as part of the first day of Creation. Everything contained in Genesis 1:1-5 is a single day, the first day of creation. This view is not supported by the grammar, however; the Hebrew word translated “the” in this phrase has a notation indicating it is a disjunctive, as Fruchtenbaum explains.

The *Masoretic Text* has a notation called *rebhia*, indicating that this is a *vav* disjunctive, which could be translated by the word *now* to read: “Now the earth,” rather than a *vav* conjunctive which would read: “And the earth.” What this grammatical point shows is that verse 2 is not sequential to verse 1, and so it is not *and then*. It shows that verse 2 is not a result or development of verse 1, but the background to verse 3.¹⁰

A second problem with this view is that the context doesn’t appear to allow for an incomplete creation. Matthews states, “. . . ‘created’ (bārā’) always designates a completed product. . .”,¹¹ and Sarna, working from a Rabbinical perspective, makes the same point.

The Hebrew stem b-r-’ is used in the Bible exclusively of divine creativity. It signifies that the product is absolutely novel and unexampled, depends solely on God for its coming into existence, and is beyond the human capacity to reproduce. The verb always refers to the completed product, never to the material of which it is made.¹²

9. John Calvin and John King, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems,, 2010), 69.

10. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Ariel's Bible Commentary: The Book of Genesis*, 1st ed. (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2008), 36.

11. Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, 140.

12. Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 5.

Finally, this view doesn't seem to be consistent with other Scriptures discussing the creation in detail. Unger points out the creation account in Isaiah 45:18 does not match the creation of an Earth that is formless and void, as described in Genesis 1:2.¹³

For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it empty, he formed it to be inhabited!)...¹⁴

A Gap Between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2

A third possible reading of Genesis 1:1-2 is that there is a gap of some undetermined amount of time between the events described in these two verses. This section discusses some various supports for this proposed gap, some of the objections to this proposed gap, and, finally, what such a gap might contain.

Support for a Gap

The evidence for a gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 begins with the observation that Genesis 1:1 is an independent clause in the absolute state containing the merism “heaven and earth,” which means this verse is describing the absolute beginning of the universe. The second point is the observation that the first word of the second verse is a disjunctive, and that the second verse is constructed, in the Hebrew, in a way that indicates a new subject is in view.

Genesis 1:2 also begins a new subject. In Hebrew, the first word is *ve-ha-aretz*, meaning “and the world.” In Hebrew grammar, when the subject comes before the predicate, the emphasis is on the subject, to state something new about it. In this case, the subject does come before the predicate, meaning the author wants to say something new about the subject, which is the earth.¹⁵

The grammatical support, then, relies on these three pieces of evidence.

13. Merrill F. Unger, “The Creation Account in Genesis; Rethinking the Genesis Account of Creation 1:1-3 Part III,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 115, no. 457 (1958): 27.

14. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

15. Fruchtenbaum, *Ariel's Bible Commentary: The Book of Genesis*, 36.

The primary textual evidence is the phrase, “without form and void,” which is found within Genesis 1:2. God is not described as creating the universe in way that is “without form and void.” If the universe was created in an ordered state –the implication of 1:1– and the Earth is without form and void in 1:2, there must be some event between the two verses.

If this understanding, based on its extensive and unambiguous usage in the creation account itself and elsewhere is allowed, then Genesis 1:2 cannot be construed as a circumstantial clause. Logic will not allow us to entertain the contradictory notions: God created the organized heavens and earth; the earth was unorganized. Plessis rightly asked, “If the heavens and earth signified the organized universe how, then, can it denote heaven and earth in a formless state?”¹⁶

If there is an *event* between these two verses, then there must also be a *gap in time* between them as well. The case for a gap is made stronger by the implications in the text of some form of judgment, discussed in *What a Gap Might Contain*, below.

What a Gap Cannot Contain

A critical part of the discussion surrounding a gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 is what could be contained in such a gap. While Grudem is not an advocate of there being a gap in the Genesis account, he doesn’t see a problem with placing long ages of history before the creation of Adam and Eve.

There are millions of apparently ancient fossils in the earth. Might they have come from animals who lived and died for long ages before Adam and Eve were created? Might God have created an animal kingdom that was subject to death from the moment of creation? This is quite possible. There was no doubt death in the plant world, if Adam and Eve were to eat plants; and if God had made an original creation in which animals would reproduce and also live forever, the earth would soon be overcrowded with no hope of relief. The warning to Adam in Genesis 2:17 was only that he would die if he ate of the forbidden fruit, not that animals would also begin to die.¹⁷

16. Waltke, “The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3, 218.

17. Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 1994), 292.

That Adam's sin isn't explicitly tied to death for *all* animals in the Genesis account can be supported from the actual grammar of the account, but there are implicit ties in the larger context. God's listing of the consequences of Adam's sin in Genesis 3:17-19 contains elements indicating the changes to the universe were much greater than Adam's eventual physical death.

Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread...¹⁸

Paul, writing in Romans 8:10-22, also indicates the consequences of Adam's sin impacted all of creation, and not just man.

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.¹⁹

The first conclusion, then, is that any such gap could not contain any sort of life as God created it in the narrative starting in Genesis 1:2.

What a Gap Could Contain

If life, as created beginning in Genesis 1:2, cannot be in a gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, what could be placed here? What are the theological implications of a gap without life, specifically? *Judgment*. McGee makes this point in his commentary on Genesis:

"Without form, and void" is a very interesting expression. "Without form" is the Hebrew word *tohu*, meaning a ruin, vacancy; "void" is the Hebrew word *bohu*, meaning emptiness. Notice this statement in the prophecy of Isaiah: "For thus saith the LORD that created the heavens; God himself that formed the earth and made it; he hath established it, he created it not in vain, he formed it to be inhabited: I am the LORD; and there is none else" (Isa. 45:18). Here God says that He did not create the earth "in vain," and the

18. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

19. *Ibid.*

Hebrew word is *tohu*, which is the same word we found in Genesis 1:2. God did not create the earth without form and void.²⁰

Fruchtenbaum²¹ and Gordon agree with this assessment, marking out this specific phrase as a sign of judgment. Isaiah 34:11 uses the same pair of words in the context of God's judgment, reinforcing the point contextually.

But the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it, the owl and the raven shall dwell in it. He shall stretch the line of confusion over it, and the plumb line of emptiness.²²

The second indicator of judgment within the Genesis narrative is the phrase "...and darkness was over the face of the deep." Wenham says of this phrase:

If light symbolizes God, darkness evokes everything that is anti-God: the wicked (Prov 2:13), judgment (Exod 10:21), death (Ps 88:13). Salvation is described as bringing light to those in darkness (Isa 9:1, etc.). But whereas darkness is opaque to man, it is transparent to God (Ps 139:12). Indeed God can veil himself in darkness at moments of great revelation (Deut 4:11; 5:23; Ps 18:12). There is therefore an ambiguity in this reference to darkness covering the deep. *Prima facie*, it is just another description of the terrible primeval waste, but it could hint at the hidden presence of God waiting to reveal himself.²³

One final contextual clue indicating judgment may fall within the gap is the presences of "the deep," in Genesis 1:2. The word here means "the salty abyss," indicating the sea was, at this point in creation, a salt sea. This salty sea is associated with the serpent Leviathan, and hence with evil, in several places throughout the Scriptures Isaiah 27:1 is one such example

In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea.²⁴

In Revelation 21:1, John sees that the new universe does not contain a sea.

20. J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary*, electronic ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 13.

21. Fruchtenbaum, *Ariel's Bible Commentary: The Book of Genesis*, 36.

22. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

23. Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15*, 16.

24. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.²⁵

If all these things combined paint a picture of judgment, it is only natural to ask what this judgment is the result of. The most likely judgment that could fit into such a gap is the fall of Satan. In Ezekiel 28:13-14, in the midst of a prophecy against the King of Tyre, the Prophet moves beyond the King to the powers behind the King.

You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle; and crafted in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created they were prepared. You were an anointed guardian cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked.²⁶

While there has been a great deal of discussion through Church history about the meaning of these verses, it is clear they cannot relate to the actual King of Tyre. Chafer, in his *Systematic Theology*, identifies this passage with Satan directly.²⁷ Given this passage describes Satan, the description of the Garden in which he is placed creates a problem. The Garden of Eden, as described in the Creation account in Genesis, does not have “stones of fire” as a feature. There are two possible solutions to this problem.

The first is to place these two Gardens in two different places –for instance, to place one of the two Gardens in Heaven, and the other on the Earth. This is difficult because of the description of the Garden as being on the Mount of God, as well as Satan’s claim that he will rise up to the Heavens; if the Garden being described is already in heaven, then how can Satan rise there?

The second is to place these two Gardens at two different times. In this case, the Garden of Eden describes a specific place on the face of the Earth, no matter what its physical

25. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

26. *Ibid.*

27. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993), Vol2, 39.

characteristics at any given moment in time. Ezekiel describes the state of the Garden at the initial creation in Genesis 1:1, while the remainder of the Genesis creation account describes the remaking of the Garden after some form of judgment resulting from Satan's fall.

Placing the Garden described in Ezekiel within a gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 can resolve some theological problems; the description of Satan's fall in Ezekiel would fit seamlessly into the story of the serpent in the Garden.

Science and the Gap

Strong, in his *Systematic Theology*, states one reason there can be no gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 is because there is no indication in the geographic record of such a gap.²⁸

Erickson states the days in the Genesis creation narrative are actually ages, in order to correlate knowledge gained through science with the Scriptural record.²⁹

The relationship between science and the Scriptures is a difficult one. First of all, it is important to determine which of the two systems should have priority: science, or the Scriptures. To say they should be treated as equally valid sources of information is to miss the point of the question. Disagreement between two normally trustworthy sources normally means we simply don't have all the information available. When two normally trusted sources of information come into conflict, one of the two must be presumed correct until proven otherwise, and the other presumed suspicious until some way is found to bring the two sources into harmony. Within the Christian world, the Scriptures *must* be treated as the primary source, while science forms a useful, but secondary source. This is similar to the difference between the Scriptures and natural revelation as sources of information about the nature of God; the Scriptures are a direct source of information, and natural revelation as a subsidiary source. The purpose in examining this issue,

28. Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Bellingham, Wa.: Logos Research Systems, 2004), Vol2, 394.

29. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1998), 408.

then, is not how we can correlate the Scriptures to science, but how science might respond to any proposed gap in the Genesis chronology.

If there is no life, as we would know it, in the proposed gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, there can be no fossils, either. If the face of the Earth was covered by the seas after some initial creation, as described in Genesis 1:2, then the current geology of the world may not relate in any way to the original creation. If these two statements are true, then it doesn't appear any such gap would interact with science, no matter what its theological implications might be.

There are two areas, however, where such a gap might help correlate science to the Scriptures. The first is in the apparent age of the universe. The universe, from a scientific standpoint, appears to be billions of years old. If the universe as a whole was created roughly between six and ten thousand years ago, there must be some way to correlate the two proposed ages. A gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 would provide a way for the universe itself to appear very old without doing violence to the literal meaning of the Creation account. The stars and planets could, indeed, have come into their current condition over billions of years.

The second area might be the age of the rocks specifically. We often assume that rock is formed where we find it lying, but there is plenty of evidence otherwise. It is possible that some portion of the rocks we find today are billions of years old, and they were simply moved through the processes God used at the Creation and the Flood to where we see them today. While this might explain all rock ages, it might provide a point where the Scriptures and science can agree.

Conclusion

While there are many possible ways to read the account of creation, this paper has examined three readings. An examination of the grammatical and contextual issues with each reading have been undertaken to determine which of those three views best fits the available evidence. The result of this study is that it is not possible to treat Genesis 1:1 as a title or

introductory phrase, and it is possible to treat Genesis 1:1 as part of a single unit of text ending at Genesis 1:5.

Of the three readings, placing a gap of undetermined length between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 appears to have the most grammatical and contextual support. While there can be no created life within this gap, it could account for the fall of Satan and the varying descriptions of the Garden of Eden found in the Scriptures. A gap in the Genesis creation account can also be used to build some points of contact with current scientific thinking, although not as many as some Christians or scientist might like.

While it's not possible to be dogmatic about the existence, or nonexistence, of a gap in the creation narrative, it is a valid and plausible variant reading of the text.

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