

Genesis 1:1-3: Creation or Re-Creation? *Part 2 (of 2 parts)*

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In the preceding article in this series,¹ two options regarding the interpretation of Genesis 1:1-3--the restitution theory and the initial chaos theory--were examined. The present article examines the precreation chaos theory, which has been extensively argued and advocated by Waltke in his work, *Creation and Chaos*.² The four major theses of the precreation chaos view are these: (1) Genesis 1:1 constitutes a summary statement, (2) the Hebrew verb **בָּרָא** in Genesis 1:1 should not be understood as creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), (3) Genesis 1:2 describes something that is not good, (4) the Israelite view of creation is distinct among the other cosmogonies of the ancient Near East.

Precreation Chaos Theory

The first feature of the precreation chaos view concerns the grammatical understanding of Genesis 1:1-3. The opening statement, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," is viewed as an independent clause³ that functions as a summary statement for

¹ Mark F. Rooker, "Genesis 1:1-3: Creation or Re-Creation? Part 1," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (July-September 1992):316-23.

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

³ The word **בְּרֵאשִׁית** is thus used in the absolute sense, "in the beginning." See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (London: SPCK, 1984), 94-98; Carl Herbert Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1942), 1:42; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 3 vols., Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 1:46-47; Walter Eichrodt, "In the

the narrative that ends in Genesis 2:3.⁴ The first line of evidence Waltke puts forth for this rendering is the parallel structure in the subsequent Genesis narrative, Genesis 2:4-7.⁵ Waltke argues that the narrative account of Genesis 2:4-7 is parallel to the construction of Genesis 1:1-3 in the following way: (1) Introductory summary statement (Gen. 1:1 = 2:4). (2) Circumstantial clause (1:2 = 2:5-6). (3) Main clause (1:3 = 2:7).⁶ In addition, a similar structure is employed in the introduction to *Enuma Elish*, an important cosmological text from Mesopotamia. Waltke concludes, "The evidence therefore, seems overwhelming that we should construe verse 1 as a broad, general, declaration of the fact that God created the cosmos, and that the rest of the chapter explicates this statement. Such a situation reflects normal Semitic thought which first states the general proposition and then specifies the particulars."⁷

A second important tenet for the precreation chaos theory concerns the meaning of the verb **בָּרָא** "to create," in Genesis 1:1. Waltke argues that **בָּרָא** does not necessarily mean "creation out of nothing" and that the ancient versions did not understand this to be the meaning of **בָּרָא**.⁸ Thus Waltke concludes, "From our study of the structure of Rev. [*sic*] 1:1-3 I would also conclude that *bārā'* in verse 1 does not

Beginning," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 3-4, 6; and John H. Sailhamer, "Genesis," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 20-21. This has been the traditional understanding since the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek by the Jews of Alexandria (Harry M. Orlinsky, *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1969], 49). The Greek phrase **Ἐν ἀρχῇ** at the beginning of the Gospel of John reflects the Septuagint's translation of **בָּרָאִישׁוּת** from Genesis 1:1. This usage also reinforces the idea that the absolute beginning is what is in view (Walter Wifall, "God's Accession Year according to P," *Biblica* 62 [1981]: 527; and Marc Girard, "La structure heptaparite du quatrieme evangile," *Recherches de Sciences religieuses* 5/4 [1975-76]: 351).

⁴ See Bruce K. Waltke, "The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3, Part III: The Initial Chaos Theory and the Precreation Chaos Theory," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132 (1975): 221; affirmed more recently by Waltke in "The Literary Genre of Genesis, Chapter One," *Crux* 27 (1991): 3. Similarly see John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910), 14; S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen, 1904), 3; Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning*, trans. David G. Preston (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 63. Brongers, Cassuto, Eichrodt, Gunkel, Procksch, Schmidt, Strack, von Rad, Westermann, and Zimmerli also hold to the summary view according to Hasel (Gerhard F. Hasel, "Recent Translations of Genesis 1:1: A Critical Look," *The Bible Translator* 22 [1971]: 164).

⁵ Waltke also cites the narrative that begins in Genesis 3:1 as having an analogous grammatical structure, though it lacks the initial summary statement (Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 32-33).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 32-34. Wenham holds a similar view (Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco, TX: Word, 1987], 3,15).

⁷ Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

include the bringing of the negative state described in verse 2 into existence. Rather it means that He utilized it as a part of His creation. In this sense He created it."⁹ In addition, "no mention is made anywhere in Scripture that God called the unformed, dark, and watery state of verse 3 [sic] into existence."¹⁰

The third interpretive feature proceeds from and is intrinsically linked with the immediate discussion of the meaning of **אֲרָצָה**. Because Waltke dismisses the possibility of *creatio ex nihilo* in Genesis 1:1, he says God was not responsible for the state of affairs described in verse 2. Waltke argues that verse 2 seems to depict something negative, if not sinister. "The situation of verse 2 is not good, nor is it ever called good. Moreover, that state of darkness, confusion, and lifelessness is contrary to the nature of God in whom there is no darkness. He is called the God of light and life; the God of order."¹¹ A perfectly holy God would not be involved in creating or bringing such a condition into existence. Furthermore other passages such as Psalm 33:6, 9 and Hebrews 11:3 refer to God creating by His word, which in the Genesis narrative does not begin until verse 3. No mention is made in Scripture of God's calling the chaotic state described in Genesis 1:2 into existence.¹² Deep and darkness "represented a state of existence contrary to the character of God."¹³ Moreover, in the eschaton the negative elements of Genesis 1:2, the sea and the darkness, will be removed in the perfect cosmos (Rev. 21:1, 25). This transformation that will occur at the world's consummation substantiates the fact that the darkness and the sea are less than desirable and hence not the result of God's creative activity.¹⁴ The existence of this imperfect state in Genesis 1:2, Waltke says, reinforces the view that verse 2 is subordinate to verse 3 and not to verse 1:

It is concluded therefore, that though it is possible to take verse 2 as a circumstantial clause on syntactical grounds, it is impossible to do so on

⁹ Ibid., 50.

¹⁰ Bruce K. Waltke, "The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3, Part III: The Initial Chaos Theory and the Precreation Chaos Theory," 221.

¹¹ Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 58. Darkness is understood to represent evil and death (ibid., 52; and Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988], 106, 722). Also see P. W. Heward, "And the Earth Was without Form and Void," *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 78 (1946): 16; and John C. L. Gibson, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 29.

¹² Waltke, "The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3, Part III: The Initial Chaos Theory and the Precreation Chaos Theory," 221.

¹³ Bruce K. Waltke, "The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3, Part IV: The Theology of Genesis 1," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132 (1975): 339.

¹⁴ Waltke, "The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3, Part III: The Initial Chaos Theory and the Precreation Chaos Theory," 220-21.

philological grounds, and that it seems unlikely it should be so construed on theological grounds, for it makes God the Creator of disorder, darkness, and deep, a situation not tolerated in the perfect cosmos and never said to have been called into existence by the Word of God.¹⁵

The fourth tenet of the precreation chaos theory concerns the distinctiveness of the Israelite view of creation in contrast with other ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies. While Waltke maintains that there is some similarity between the pagan cosmogonies and the Genesis account of creation, such as the existence of a dark primeval formless state prior to creation,¹⁶ he maintains that the Genesis account is distinctive in three ways: (1) the belief in one God, (2) the absence of myth and ritual to influence the gods, and (3) the concept of God as Creator, which means that the creation is not coexistent and coeternal. This belief in God as Creator separate and above His creation "was the essential feature of the Mosaic faith"¹⁷ and "distinguished Israel's faith from all other religions."¹⁸ Waltke comments on the apologetic need to have a word from Moses about the origin of creation in the ancient Near Eastern setting. "If, then, the essential difference between the Mosaic faith and the pagan faith differed precisely in their conceptualization of the relationship of God to the creation, is it conceivable that Moses should have left the new nation under God without an accurate account of the origin of the creation?"¹⁹

Evaluation of the Precreation Chaos Theory

"GENESIS 1:1 IS A SUMMARY STATEMENT"

In relation to the first line of evidence for viewing Genesis 1:1 as a summary statement, it should be noted that while the correspondence between 1:1-3 and 2:4-7 is indeed similar, it is not exact. Not only is the relationship and correspondence between 2:4b and 2:7 different from the relationship and correspondence between 1:1 and 1:3, but also the lengthy circumstantial clauses in Genesis 2:4b-6 indicate that the styles of the two narratives are distinct.²⁰ Furthermore Waltke argues that beginning a narrative with a summary statement

¹⁵ Ibid., 221.

¹⁶ Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 44.

¹⁷ Ibid., 51.

¹⁸ Ibid., 49.

¹⁹ Ibid., 43.

²⁰ Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 97; Hasel, "Recent Translations of Genesis 1:1: A Critical Look," 161; and Sailhamer, "Genesis," 21.

and then filling in the details is commonplace in Semitic thought. He does not, however, supply references to support this generalization. Beginning a narrative with a summary statement is, in any case, a literary device that is evident in Indo-European literature as well as in literature stemming from Semitic authors.²¹ Pearson summarizes the evidence against the view, that Genesis 1:1 should be taken as a summary.

The first verse of Gen 1 cannot be regarded with Buckland and Chalmers as a mere heading of a whole selection, nor with Dods and Bush as a summary statement, but forms an integral part of the narrative, for: (1) It has the form of narrative, not of superscription. (2) The conjunctive particle connects the second verse with it; which could not be if it were a heading. No historical narrative begins with "and" (vs. 2). The "and" in Ex. 1:1 indicates that the second book of Moses is a continuation of the first. (3) The very next verse speaks of the earth as already in existence, and therefore its creation must be recorded in the first verse. (4) In the first verse the heavens take the precedence of the earth, but in the following verses all things, even sun, moon, and stars seem to be appendages to the earth. Thus if it were a heading it would not correspond with the narrative.... the above evidence supports the view that the first verse forms a part of the narrative. The first verse of Genesis records the creation of the universe in its essential form. In v. 2, the writer describes the earth as it was when God's creative activity had brought its material into being, but this formative activity had not yet begun.²²

In the summary-statement view of Genesis 1:1, grammatical structure is intricately connected to the interpretation of the phrases "heavens and earth" (v. 2) as the completed heavens and earth and "formless and void" as the antithesis of creation. In the previous article²³ these interpretations were shown to be open to serious question. In addition Waltke asserts that the subordination of Genesis 1:2 to verse 3 should not be viewed as an anomaly, arguing that Young listed several illustrations of the circumstantial clause preceding the main verb.²⁴ This evidence is problematic, however, as none of

²¹ Barr's caveat against formulating conclusions about thought patterns based on language structure may be in order here. See James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

²² Anton Pearson, "An Exegetical Study of Genesis 1:1-3," *Bethel Seminary Quarterly* 2 (1953): 20-21. Hasel argues that the *waw* conjunction that begins Genesis 1:2 is an argument against understanding verse 1 as a summary statement. The importance of the copulative *waw* of verse 2a is given its full due by linking verse 1 and verse 2 closer together than is possible with the position which considers verse 1 as merely a summary introduction expressing the fact that God is Creator of heaven and earth (Hasel, "Recent Translations of Genesis 1:1: A Critical Look," 165). Also see Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London: Tyndale; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1967), 44.

²³ Rooker, "Genesis 1:1-3: Creation or Re-Creation? Part 1."

²⁴ Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 33. In this reference and in "The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3, Part III: The Initial Chaos Theory and the Precreation Chaos Theory,"

the examples cited has the same structure as Genesis 2:2-3, that is, a *waw* disjunctive clause followed by *waw* consecutive prefixed form.²⁵ On the other hand it seems that such passages as Judges 8:11 and Jonah 3:3 are more helpful parallels to the grammatical structure reflected in Genesis 1:1-2, where a finite verb is followed by a *waw* disjunctive clause containing the verb **וַיִּהְיֶה**. This clause qualifies a term in the immediately preceding independent clause. The independent clause makes a statement and the following circumstantial clause describes parenthetically an element in the main clause. This would confirm the traditional interpretation that verse 1 contains the main independent clause, with Genesis 1:2 consisting of three subordinate circumstantial clauses describing what the just-mentioned earth looked like after it was created.

“**בָּרָא** IN GENESIS 1:1 IS NOT *CREATIO EX NIHILO*”

The second important feature of the precreation chaos theory is the assertion that the Hebrew root **בָּרָא**, "to create," should not be understood as creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) in Genesis 1:1. This semantic understanding is critical for the precreation chaos theory, since it maintains that what is described in Genesis 1 is not the original creation but rather a re-creation of the raw material that exists in Genesis 1:2.

The cognate of the Hebrew root **בָּרָא** is rare in the Semitic cognate languages, and thus its meaning in the Old Testament must be determined from its usage in the Old Testament corpus.²⁶ Finley has recently provided a thorough examination of the usage and meaning of the term.²⁷

The verb **בָּרָא** is applied to the creation of a nation, to righteousness, to regeneration, and to praise and joy.... Nearly two-thirds of the instances of **בָּרָא** refer to physical creation. . . . God's original creation encompassed all of heaven and earth (Gen. 1:1)... Fully one-third of all the citations of physical creation refer to the creation of man (including Gen. 1:27; 5:1-2; 6:7; Deut. 4:32; Ps. 89:47 [Heb. 48]; Eccles. 12:1; Isa. 45:12.... In the Genesis 1 account of creation **בָּרָא** is used only five times, and of these occurrences three are in a single verse and refer to the creation of man (1:27)... The verb is also used of the creation of the great sea monsters (Gen. 1:21).

227, Waltke erroneously states that the list of examples of this grammatical phenomenon is in E. J. Young, *Studies in Genesis One* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), 15. The references are actually found on page 9, n. 15.

²⁵ The passages Young lists are Genesis 38:25; Numbers 12:14; Joshua 2:18; 1 Samuel 9:11; 1 Kings 14:17; 2 Kings 2:23; 6:5,26; 9:25; Job 1:16; and Isaiah 37:38 (ibid., 9).

²⁶ It may be that the lack of cognates with this root in other Semitic languages confirms the term's uniqueness. Other Hebrew words for "create" have broader cognate evidence.

²⁷ Thomas J. Finley, "Dimensions of the Hebrew Word for 'Create' (**בָּרָא**)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (October-December 1991): 409-23.

Genesis 1:1-3: Creation or Re-Creation? 417

The Israelites greatly feared these creatures, and it was reassuring to know that their God had created them and is Lord over them.²⁸

In the examination of the occurrences of this verb some salient observations emerge. First, the only subject of the verb in the Hebrew Bible is God. Whereas God may be the subject for the semantic synonyms of **בָּרָא**, these synonyms have other subjects (creatures) in addition to God.²⁹ "A number of synonyms, such as 'make,' 'form,' or 'build,' are used of creation by God, but **בָּרָא** is the only term for which God is the only possible subject."³⁰ Usage supports the contention that the Hebrew verb **בָּרָא** is the distinct word for creation.

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.³¹

Furthermore since the verb never occurs with the object of the material, and since the primary emphasis of the word is on the novelty of the created object, "the word lends itself well to the concept of creation *ex nihilo*."³² This idea is reinforced by the fact that even when the context clearly indicates that what is being created involves preexisting material, that material will not be mentioned in the same sentence with **בָּרָא**.³³ Since this Hebrew verb has a semantic

²⁸ Ibid., 411-12. See also Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 725-28, and Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 14.

²⁹ As Ross states, "Humans may make [*asa*], form [*yasar*], or build [*bana*]; to the Hebrew, however, God creates" (*Creation and Blessing*, 105-6).

³⁰ Finley, "Dimensions of the Hebrew Word for 'Create' (**בָּרָא**)," 409.

³¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 5. See also Julian Morgenstern, "The Sources of the Creation Story in Genesis 1:1-2:4," *American Journal of Semitic Languages* 36 (1920): 201; Finley, "Dimensions of the Hebrew Word for 'Create' (**בָּרָא**)," 409; Weston W. Fields, *Unformed and Unfilled* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 54-55; Keil and Delitzsch, "Genesis," 47; Edward J. Young, "The Relation of the First Verse of Genesis One to Verses Two and Three," *Westminster Theological Journal* 21 (1959): 138-39.

³² *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s.v. "**בָּרָא**" by Thomas E. McComiskey, 127.

Hasel lists Aalders, Childs, Henton Davies, Heidel, Kidner, Konig, Maly, Ridderbos, Wellhausen, and Young as those who maintain that Genesis 1:1 refers to *creatio ex nihilo* (Hasel, "Recent Translations of Genesis 1:1: A Critical Look," 163). See also Walter Eichrodt, "In the Beginning," 10; and Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 63. Ross acknowledges that the verb may have this connotation (*Creation and Blessing*, 724). For evidence of early Jewish scholars who subscribed to *creatio ex nihilo*, see Emil G. Hirsch, "Creation," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 12 vols., 4:336; and Frances Young, "'Creatio ex Nihilo': A Context for the Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44 (1991):141 for Gamaliel II's comment in Midrash Genesis Rabbah.

³³ Passages such as Genesis 1:27 and Isaiah 45:7 would be examples of the usage not meaning *creatio ex nihilo*. These were noted by the medieval Hebrew exegete Ibn Ezra. See Pearson, "An Exegetical Study of Genesis 1:1-3," 17.

range, as do most other biblical Hebrew verbs, the context of any particular usage becomes determinative for meaning.³⁴ In Genesis 1 there is no explicit connection of this creative activity with any pre-existing materials.³⁵ As Leupold aptly states, "When no existing material is mentioned as to be worked over, no such material is implied."³⁶ Thus this lexeme is distinct and is the best lexical choice to express the unprecedented concept of *creatio ex nihilo*.³⁷ As the Jewish exegete Nahmanides wrote, "We have in our holy language no other term for 'the bringing forth of something from nothing' but *bara*."³⁸ Waltke's argument that the verb does not inherently mean *creatio ex nihilo* is besides the point, as it is doubtful that any word in any language does.³⁹ The point is that while this is not the inherent meaning of this word or of any word, for that matter, **בָּרָא** would be the best candidate from the semantic pool of Hebrew verbs for expressing a creation that is unprecedented, namely, *creatio ex nihilo*. Sarna nicely summarizes the significance of the use of the verb **בָּרָא** in Genesis 1:1 as meaning *creatio ex nihilo* in the larger cultural context of the ancient Near East.

Precisely because of the indispensable importance of preexisting matter in the pagan cosmologies, the very absence of such mention here is highly significant. This conclusion is reinforced by the idea of creation by divine

³⁴ Both Kidner and Ross specifically mention the importance of context for determining the meaning of **בָּרָא** for an individual passage (Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 44; Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 728).

³⁵ Finley, "Dimensions of the Hebrew Word for 'Create' (**בָּרָא**)," 410. This would be true even if one agreed with Waltke and understood verse 1 to be a summary statement. If the verse functions in this manner, it would be logically separated from its context in that it referred in a general way to the entire process of Genesis 1. In addition in Waltke's view Genesis 1:2 is subordinated to verse 3, leaving verse 1 as an independent clause, which does not contain any reference to materials being used with a **בָּרָא** creation.

³⁶ Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 40-41.

³⁷ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 70. Also see Martin Luther, *The Creation: A Commentary on the First Five Chapters of the Book of Genesis*, trans. Henry Cole (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1858), 31.

³⁸ Jacob Newman, *The Commentary of Nahmanides on Genesis Chapters 1-6* (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 33. Similarly, Young, "The Relation of the First Verse of Genesis One to Verses Two and Three," 139. Winden argues that understanding Genesis 1:1 as referring to *creatio ex nihilo* was considered the orthodox understanding of the verse by the early church fathers (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], 372-73).

³⁹ See George Bush, *Notes on Genesis*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: James & Klock, 1976), 1:26-27. Hence Waltke's objection that the ancient versions did not understand the verb in this way is undermined. Furthermore Waltke's statement that other Hebrew verbs may describe *creatio ex nihilo* does not diminish the fact that **בָּרָא** as *the* distinctive verb for creation, having God as its only subject, also may dearly have this nuance (Waltke, "The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3, Part IV: The Theology of Genesis 1," 336-37).

fiat without reference to any inert matter being present. Also, the repeated biblical emphasis upon God as exclusive Creator would seem to rule out the possibility of preexistent matter. Finally, if *bara'* is used only of God's creation, it must be essentially distinct from human creation. The ultimate distinction would be *creatio ex nihilo*, which has no human parallel and is thus utterly beyond all human comprehension.⁴⁰

Also the contextual joining of the verb בָּרָא, "to create," with the preceding phrase בְּרֵאשִׁית, "in the beginning," in the alliterative phrase בְּרָא בְּרֵאשִׁית (berēš'it bārā') clarifies the connotation of each and thus helps elucidate the meaning of בָּרָא.

The word "beginning" is, of course, a relative term. It must imply the beginning of something. On that account, some say it refers only to the beginning of human history that we see unfolded round about us. But the content of the term is given to us by the word *bara'*, create, and vice versa. This is a beginning that is characterized by creation, and this is a creation that is characterized by the beginning. Here it means "the absolute beginning."... It refers to the absolute beginning, just as John, beginning his Gospel, takes over the phrase "in the beginning" and refers it to the absolute beginning.⁴¹

As noted, Waltke avoids attributing the meaning of *creatio ex nihilo* to בָּרָא in Genesis 1. Thus God's role as Creator in that chapter refers only to His reshaping preexisting matter. And yet if Moses wanted to refer to God as the Reshaper of existing matter, there were better lexical choices at his disposal to convey this idea. It does not seem that he would want to employ the distinctive verb for God's creative activity, the verb בָּרָא. In his attempt to play down the distinctiveness of the verb בָּרָא Waltke mentions that other verbs that are not as distinctive as בָּרָא may refer to creation out of nothing.⁴² It almost seems that what Waltke really wants to say about the distinctiveness of בָּרָא is that it never means creation out of nothing.⁴³ The use of בָּרָא without any mention of preexisting matter in Genesis 1:1 conveys something stronger than Waltke's interpretation of the verse.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Sarna, *Genesis*, 5. *Creatio ex nihilo* was also distinct from Greek philosophy. See especially Plutarch's denial of *creatio ex nihilo* (John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* [London: Duckworth, 1977], 207, cited by Young, "'Creatio Ex Nihilo': A Context for the Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation," 139-40). See also Winden, "The Early Christian Exegesis of 'Heaven and Earth' in Genesis 1,1," 372-73.

⁴¹ Young, *In the Beginning*, 24-25.

⁴² Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 50.

⁴³ Westermann's caveat that "we should be careful of reading too much into the word; nor is it correct to read *creatio ex nihilo* out of the word" may be appropriate here (Westermann, *Genesis* 1-11, 100).

⁴⁴ Hasel, "Recent Translations of Genesis 1:1: A Critical Look," 165. The occurrence of the verb following the phrase "in the beginning" gave rise to the Jewish and Christian traditions of *creatio ex nihilo* (Wifall, "God's Accession Year according to P," 527).

"GENESIS 1:2 IS NEGATIVE"

The precreation chaos theory advocated by Waltke assumes that the chaotic state of Genesis 1:2 was in existence before God began His creative activity in Genesis 1:3.⁴⁵ The contention that the state described in verse 2 is negative and consequently not the result of the activity of God was addressed in the previous article in connection with the phrase *בְּהוֹרֵוֹ וּבְהוֹלֵוֹ* ("formless and empty"). There it was shown that the phrase *בְּהוֹרֵוֹ וּבְהוֹלֵוֹ* need not be understood as an orderless chaos as Waltke proposed but rather that the earth was not yet ready to be inhabited by mankind.⁴⁶ As Tsumura stated, "There is nothing in this passage that would suggest a chaotic state of the earth which is opposed to and precedes creation."⁴⁷

But what of Waltke's objection that the darkness over the face of the deep also suggests the antithesis of creation and thus was not brought into existence by God? The significance of this occurrence of darkness is conveyed more forcefully by Unger.

Of special importance in the seven-day account of creation is the calling forth of light upon the earth about to be renewed. Sin had steeped it in disorder and darkness. God's active movement upon it in recreation involved banishing the disorder and dissipating the darkness.... Only when sin came, darkness resulted. Darkness, therefore, represents sin, that which is contrary to God's glory and holiness (1 John 1:6).⁴⁸

Waltke maintains that the presence of the uncreated state with darkness over the deep in Genesis 1:2 is a mystery, since the "Bible

⁴⁵ Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 19. Similarly, Hershel Shanks, "How the Bible Begins," *Judaism* 21 (1972): 58, n. 2. In reference to this assumption Waltke states that chaos occurred before the original creation. What does he mean by *original* here? If matter is already in existence, then subsequent creation should not be viewed as original. The same applies to his use of the term "creation." He speaks of preexisting matter in existence before God began to work in Genesis 1 and yet he calls the work that of creation. Similarly, in discussing Isaiah 45:18 Waltke states, "The Creator did not leave His job half-finished. He perfected the creation, and then He established it. He did not end up with chaos as Isaiah noted" (*Creation and Chaos*, 60). When Waltke says that God "did not leave His job unfinished," he seems to be arguing that God was involved in bringing the state described in Genesis 1:2 into existence. On the other hand, elsewhere he indicates that the presence of the state described in verse 2 is a mystery, as the Bible never says that God brought the unformed state, the darkness, and the deep into existence by His word (*Creation and Chaos*, p. 52).

⁴⁶ Rooker, "Genesis 1:1-3: Creation or Re-Creation? Part 1," 320-22. To the references cited add John C. Whitcomb, *The Early Earth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 123-24.

⁴⁷ David Toshio Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2: A Linguistic Investigation*, JSOT Supplement Series 83 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), 33-34.

⁴⁸ Merril F. Unger, "Rethinking the Genesis Account of Creation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 115 (1958): 30. Payne suggests that if the author had desired to make a statement about the darkness expressing evil, the stronger word for darkness would be used. The darkness is *חֹשֶׁךְ*, not the stronger synonym *עֲרָפֶל* (D. F. Payne, "Approaches to Genesis 1:2," *Transactions* 23 [1969-70]: 67).

never says that God brought these into existence by His word."⁴⁹

The problems that arise with this view are more numerous and difficult than the theological problem its advocates are attempting to alleviate. First, the immediate question arises, To what should be ascribed the existence of the darkness over the face of the deep?⁵⁰ Who made the darkness and the deep if they were not made by God? The fact is noteworthy that God named the darkness in Genesis 1 without the least indication that there was something undesirable about its existence.

God gives a name to the darkness, just as he does to the light. Both are therefore good and well-pleasing to him; both are created, although the express creation of the darkness, as of the other objects in verse two, is not stated, and both serve his purpose of forming the day.⁵¹

Later in the same article Young addresses the theological tension felt by Waltke.

In the nature of the case darkness is often suited to symbolize affliction and death. Here, however, the darkness is merely one characteristic of the unformed earth. Man cannot live in darkness, and the first requisite step in making the earth habitable is the removal of darkness. This elementary fact must be recognized before we make any attempt to discover the theological significance of darkness. And it is well also to note that darkness is recognized in this chapter as a positive good for man. Whatever be the precise connotation of the עֲרָב of each day, it certainly included darkness, and that darkness was for man's good.⁵²

Waltke states that the darkness and the deep were not brought into existence by God's word, and yet Isaiah 45:7 states that God created the darkness. In this verse חֹשֶׁךְ, the same word used for darkness in Genesis 1:2, is said to have been created (בְּרָא) by God.⁵³

⁴⁹ Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 52.

⁵⁰ Wiseman, as quoted by Bruce, suggests that this position leads to an inevitable comparison with pagan views (F. F. Bruce, "Arid the Earth Was without Form and Void," *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 78 [1946]: 26). Westermann notes that the opposition between darkness and creation is widespread in the cosmogonies and creation stories of the world (Westermann, *Genesis* 1-11, 104). The connection between the *Enuma Elish* account of creation because of the similarity between the Hebrew word xxxxx ("deep") and the name of the goddess Tiamat is not etymologically defensible (see Westermann, *Genesis* 1-11, 105; and Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 107).

⁵¹ Edward J. Young, "The Interpretation of Genesis 1:2," *Westminster Theological Journal* 23 (1960-61):157, n. 114.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 170-71, n. 33. Waltke does acknowledge that the darkness from this context must later be viewed as good. "Though not called 'good' at first, the darkness and deep were called 'good' later when they became part of the cosmos" (Waltke, "The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3, Part IV: The Theology of Genesis 1," 338-39). The explanatory phrase, "became part of the cosmos," is difficult to understand, and it should be admitted there is no explicit support to this effect from the context.

⁵³ Wiseman, "And the Earth Was without Form and Void," 26.

To disassociate the physical darkness mentioned in Genesis 1:2 from God because darkness came to symbolize evil and sin is to confuse the symbol with the thing symbolized. It is like saying yeast is evil because it came to represent spiritual evil.⁵⁴ The fact that a physical reality is used to represent something spiritual does not mean that every time this physical reality is mentioned, it must be representing that spiritual entity. Those who claim that darkness in Genesis 1:2 is evil have confused the spiritual symbol as used elsewhere with the physical reality in this passage.⁵⁵

In addition the syntactical structure of verse 2 would seem to argue against understanding the verse in a negative tone. The three clauses in the verse each begin with a *waw* followed by a noun that functions as the subject of the clause. All the clauses appear to be coordinate. Waltke would not view the last phrase describing the Spirit of God hovering over the waters in a negative sense, and yet he does not offer an explanation for not treating all the clauses in verse 2 as parallel. As Keil and Delitzsch state, "The three statements in our verse are parallel; the substantive and participial construction of the second and third clauses rests upon the *וַיִּהְיֶה* of the first. All three describe the condition of the earth immediately after the creation of the universe."⁵⁶ The presence of darkness illustrates, as does the preceding clause, "formless and empty,"⁵⁷ that the earth was still not ready to be inhabited by man.

As the first word in this clause *וַיִּשְׁכַּח* is emphasized, it stands as a parallel to *וַיְהִי* in the previous clause. There are thus three principal subjects of the verse: the earth, darkness and the Spirit of God. The second clause in reality gives further support to the first. Man could not have lived upon the earth, for it was dark and covered by water.⁵⁸

Waltke's argument that the state in Genesis 1:2 was not created by God because passages like Psalm 33:6, 9 and Hebrews 11:3 state that God created everything by His word is not convincing.⁵⁹ Indeed, it should be observed that these passages do not in any way suggest that the universe was created in two distinct stages, a creation and

⁵⁴ Fields, *Unformed and Unfilled*, 132-33.

⁵⁵ Whitcomb, *The Early Earth*, 125--27.

⁵⁶ Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 1:49. Also see Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 102, 106, and Fields, *Unformed and Unfilled*, 83-84. Since the three clauses are coordinate, Westermann and Schmidt would argue that they should be viewed in the same light, either positively or negatively. See Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 17, and Payne, "Approaches to Genesis i. 2," 66.

⁵⁷ Rooker, "Genesis 1:1-3: Creation or Re-Creation? Part 1," 320-23.

⁵⁸ Young, "The Interpretation of Genesis 1:2," 170.

⁵⁹ Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 27-28.

and a re-creation, as Waltke must maintain.⁶⁰ Furthermore where is the evidence in these passages for the presence of preexisting matter before the re-creation of Genesis 1:3?

Verse 2 should be taken as a positive description, not a negative one.⁶¹ And though the earth was not yet suitable for man to inhabit, "there is no reason, so far as one can tell from reading the first chapter of Genesis, why God might not have pronounced the judgment, 'very good,' over the condition described in the second verse."⁶²

According to the traditional interpretation, as noted in the previous article, however, Genesis 1:2 states the condition of the earth as it was when it was first created until God began to form it into the present world.⁶³

“THE ISRAELITE VIEW OF CREATION IS DISTINCT”

In stressing the importance and significance of creation in Israelite theology Waltke wants to distinguish the Old Testament concept of creation from the creation mythologies of the ancient Near East. Because other accounts explaining the origin of the world were prevalent and would probably have been known to the Israelites, Waltke states that it would have been "inconceivable that Moses should have left the new nation under God without an accurate account of the origin of creation."⁶⁴ The essential difference between the pagan ideas and the Mosaic revelation is in the "conceptualization of the relationship of God to creation."⁶⁵ Numerous scholars have noted, for example, that the other cosmogonies of the ancient Near East have nothing so profound as the opening statement of Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."⁶⁶ But why is this so unique? Part of the answer

⁶⁰ Wiseman, cited in Bruce, "And the Earth Was without Form and Void," 26.

⁶¹ Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 94, 102; Young, "The Interpretation of Genesis 1:2," 170; Sailhamer, "Genesis," 24; and Augustine who along with other ancient scholars understood the darkness in Genesis 1:1 as a reference to heaven (Windén, "The Early Christian Exegesis of 'Heaven and Earth' in Genesis 1,1," 378).

⁶² Young, "The Interpretation of Genesis 1:2," 174. Childs and Hasel suggest that the verse must be viewed in a negative light if one argues that Genesis 1:1 is merely a summary statement (Bervard S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* [Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1960], 39, and Hasel, "Recent Translations of Genesis 1:1: A Critical Look," 165). Childs also hints at the need to play down the significance of **בְּרֵא** if one views Genesis 1:2 as indicating something negative (*ibid.*, 40).

⁶³ Young, "The Relation of the First Verse of Genesis One to Verses Two and Three," 144 and n. 20.

⁶⁴ Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 43.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 31. Also see Hasel, "Recent' Translations of Genesis 1:1: A Critical Look," 162-63, and Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 97.

surely lies in the fact that these mythologies all assume preexisting matter when the god(s) begin to create. In other words the uniqueness of the phrase "in the beginning" is not primarily in its distinctiveness literarily but in the fact that no other creation account in the ancient Near East described the absolute beginning of creation when nothing else existed. Though Waltke would deny the eternality of matter, he opens the door to the idea of preexisting matter in Genesis 1 by saying the creation account in Genesis 1 assumes that physical existence is present at "the beginning."⁶⁷ Since Waltke does not believe that Genesis 1 refers to the initial creation before the existence of matter, his statement about the distinctiveness of Israel's view loses force, even though God as Creator is fundamental to the Israelite faith.⁶⁸

What then is distinctive about the meaning of the Mosaic revelation of creation according to Waltke's interpretation of the passage? According to Waltke the account begins with a watery chaos already in existence, which God overcomes.⁶⁹ This is virtually identical to the sequence of events in the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*.⁷⁰ The

⁶⁷ Waltke, however, does speak of the Creator bringing the universe into existence by His command in Genesis 1 (Waltke, "The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3, Part IV: The Theology of Genesis 1," 338). It is unclear what Waltke means by existence here, since the precreation chaos theory of Genesis 1 describes God's transforming activity of the already existing physical state described in Genesis 1:2. Similarly in contrasting the purpose of Psalm 104 with Genesis 1, he states that Genesis refers to "the origin of the creation" ("The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3, Part V: The Theology of Genesis 1-Continued," 35). Yet Genesis 1 does not refer to the original creation in the same sense as Psalm 33 and Hebrews 11, according to Waltke's interpretation.

⁶⁸ Gabrini has well noted the inevitable conclusions that must be drawn, particularly in regard to the existence of matter, by those who adhere to the translation "in the beginning." He writes, "At this point, the current interpretation of the first sentence of Genesis requires some consideration. When we translate 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,' we meet two difficulties. First of all, we lend the Jewish writer the Christian conception of creation *ex nihilo*: such conception is totally missing among the peoples of the ancient Orient, where creation by gods always displays itself in a shapeless but existing world, so that creation *ex nihilo* in Genesis would appear truly baffling. In the second place, if we admit that God created the world *ex nihilo* (heaven and earth are two complementary parts to indicate the whole), then we are obliged to admit also that the creation took place in two different moments. Firstly, God created the world in the darkness; secondly, he began to create forms" (Giovanni Gabrini, "The Creation of Light in the First Chapter of Genesis," in *Proceedings of the Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, ed. Pinchas Peli (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1969], 1:2).

The existence of matter at the beginning of creation could easily be understood as the principle of evil coexisting with God from eternity, hence denying the Judeo-Christian concept of God (Winden, *The Early Christian Exegesis of 'Heaven and Earth' in Genesis 1,1*," 372-73).

⁶⁹ Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 58. Waltke does maintain that one of the purposes of the Mosaic account is a polemic against the myths of Israel's environment (Waltke, "The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3, Part IV: The Theology of Genesis 1," 328).

⁷⁰ Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 45.

creative activity of God described in Genesis 1 is limited to a sculpturing or reshaping of material that is chaotic and unorganized.

In distinguishing Israel's view of creation from the creation accounts of the ancient Near East, Waltke states, "The faith that God was the Creator of heaven and earth and not coexistent and coeternal with the creation distinguished Israel's faith from all other religions."⁷¹ This theological deduction, however, cannot come from Genesis 1, according to the precreation chaos position. Such a credo could only result from a belief in *creatio ex nihilo*, a doctrine Waltke denies the Israelite consciousness until several hundred years later.

While the degree of distinctiveness should not be a controlling exegetical grid to impose on a passage (the interpreter should objectively investigate what the text is saying in its historical and literary context), it is fair to bring out that the traditional view of creation is more distinctive in the environment of the ancient Near East than is Waltke's precreation chaos theory. The key difference between pagan cosmogonies and Genesis 1 is *creatio ex nihilo* and the absence of preexisting matter.⁷² Waltke can claim neither fact for Genesis 1, though he views Genesis 1 as the most significant text regarding the Israelite theology of creation.⁷³ Jacob brings into focus more clearly the distinctiveness of the Israelite account of creation in Genesis 1.

It is the first great achievement of the Bible to present a divine creation from nothing in contrast to evolution or formation from a material already in existence. Israel's religious genius expresses this idea with monumental brevity. In all other creation epics the world originates from a primeval matter which existed before. No other religion or philosophy dared to take this last step. Through it God is not simply the architect, but the absolute master of the universe. No sentence could be better fitted for the opening of the Book of Books. Only an all pervading conviction of God's absolute power could have produced it.⁷⁴

Conclusion

In this article the four primary features of the precreation chaos theory were examined. It was concluded that these four precepts pose philological as well as theological difficulties. The conclusion

⁷¹ Ibid., 49.

⁷² Furthermore, Fields observes that Waltke had not considered the impact of passages such as Exodus 20:11; 31:17; and Nehemiah 9:6, which fit all that exists in the universe within the six days of creation (*Unformed and Unfilled*, 128, n. 43).

⁷³ Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*, 19.

⁷⁴ Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis, Interpreted by B. Jacob* (New York: KTAV, 1974), 1.

should be drawn, therefore, that the traditional view,⁷⁵ defended in the previous article in this two-part series, is the most satisfactory position regarding the interpretation of Genesis 1:1-3. According to this position, the Bible speaks with one voice about the creation of the universe. Genesis 1:1-3 describes the same events as other passages such as Psalm 33:6, 9; Romans 4:17; and Hebrews 11:3, and they describe *creatio ex nihilo*.⁷⁶ This understanding of Genesis 1:1-3 prevailed among the early Jewish and Christian interpreters.⁷⁷ Genesis 1:2 describes the initial stage of what God created, the state He then transformed (vv. 3-31) to make the earth into a place that could be inhabited by man.

The first article in this series began by acknowledging that the question of origins is a question repeated in history and in human experience. This truth was graphically illustrated after NASA'S Cosmic Background Explorer satellite-COBE-shot back pictures of the most distant objects scientists have ever discovered. These pictures were alleged to reveal evidence of how the universe began.⁷⁸ Ted Koppel of "ABC News Nightline" questioned Robert Kirshner, chairman of Harvard University's department of astronomy on the significance of this discovery by asking a question about origins.

Ted Koppel: The big bang theory, to what limited degree I understand it, calls for something infinitesimally small, so small that it cannot be measured to have exploded into the universe as we now find it, in other words, something tiny exploded into the reality of everything large that exists in the universe today. Now, how does that work?

Robert Kirshner: Well, you're trying to answer the hardest part at the beginning. It might be easier to think about some of the observational facts and see why the big bang is such a simple explanation for them. The thing that we see today is a universe which is expanding,

⁷⁵ Waltke labeled the view as the initial chaos view, but because of the uncertainty of what is meant by chaos this title is not so useful as referring to the position simply as the traditional one. See Young, "The Relation of the First Verse of Genesis One to Verses Two and Three," 145. Indeed, Waltke's recent assertion that Genesis 1:2 depicts an earth that was uninhabitable and uninhabited may indicate a shift in his own thinking about the meaning of the chaos. See "The Literary Genre of Genesis, Chapter One," 4.

⁷⁶ Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 1:40-41; Sarna, *Genesis*, 6; and Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 43.

⁷⁷ For references in apocryphal literature as well as early Jewish interpreters and church fathers, see Wifall, "God's Accession Year according to P," 527; Young, "'Creatio Ex Nihilo': A Context for the Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation," 145; Pearson, "An Exegetical Study of Genesis 1:1-3," 24-26; and Fields, *Unformed and Unfilled*, 26.

⁷⁸ See Michael D. Lemonick, "Echoes of the Big Bang," *Time*, May 4, 1992, 62-63; and "ABC News Nightline," transcript 2850, April 24, 1992, 1.

galaxies getting farther from one another, and if you imagine what that was like in the past, it would be a picture in which the galaxies were getting closer to one another. And if you take that picture far enough back, and we think the time scale is about 15 billion years, far enough back, then you get to a state where the universe is much hotter and denser than it is today. That's the thing we're talking about when we talked about the big bang. The details of exactly the structure of space and time at that-in that setting are a little tricky, but the basic picture is that the universe that we see today is very old, and had come from a state which was very different than we see around us today.⁷⁹

At the conclusion of the program Koppel, unsatisfied with the previous evasion to the essential question, returned the central issue of the origin of the universe:

Ted Koppel: And in the 40 or 50 seconds that we have left, Professor Kirshner, you want to try another crack at that first question, how we get everything out of next to nothing?

Dr. Kirshner: No, I don't think that's the question I really want to answer. That's the one I want to evade....⁸⁰

The question that is asked by both ancient and modern man alike--the question that cannot be ignored--is answered adequately only from the revelation of Scripture. God created all that exists and He created out of nothing.

The Bible is unified on this issue. God is the Creator who existed before all His creation and who brought forth from nothing all that exists. The only biblical event that might rightly be called a re-creation begins with the experience of the new birth and is consummated in the realization of the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21:1-2). This work from beginning to end is brought about by the One who was there "in the beginning," who creates and brings light and life through the redemption victoriously proclaimed on the first day of the week.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁸¹ John 1:1-5; 8:12; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Matthew 28:1. Jesus in this sense inaugurated a "new Genesis." See Girard, "La structure heptaparite du quatrième évangile," 357. For the necessary theological juxtaposition of creation and redemption, see Willem A. VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 86, 226-27, and Young, "'Creatio Ex Nihilo': A Context for the Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation," 140.

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