

SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES TO SESSION FOUR

EVANGELICAL APPROACHES TO THE CREATION ACCOUNT

Genesis 1:1-3

I. THE UNIQUENESS OF THE BIBLICAL ACCOUNT

To appreciate the forcefulness of the biblical account of creation, one needs to view it in contrast to Egyptian and Mesopotamian cosmogonies. [It would be helpful at this point for the student to consult *ISBE* 4:101; and Noah Kramer, *Mythologies of the Ancient World* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961)]. "The belief in God as Creator separate and above His creation 'was the essential feature of the Mosaic faith' and 'distinguished Israel's faith from all other religions.'"¹

II. INTRODUCTION

Numerous theories have been set forth to explain the origin of man and our universe. Even among Christians, there is debate as to how to understand the Genesis account. In these notes, I purpose to identify and evaluate three primary options that have been taken by conservative evangelicals. These are:

1. The Restitution Theory (= Gap Theory)
2. The Initial Chaos Theory (the traditional view)
3. The Precreation Chaos Theory

III. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE THEORIES

A. The Restitution Theory (often called the "gap theory")

1. Description

Genesis 1:1 presents an account of an originally perfect creation. Satan was ruler of this world, but because of his rebellion described in Isaiah 14:12-17, sin entered the universe. As a consequence, God judged the world and reduced it to the chaotic state described in Genesis 1:2. Later, God recreated it according to the description given in Genesis 1:3-31. Thus there is a time gap of unknown length between verses one and two.

2. Proponents of this view: Merrill Unger, *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (1967 ed.), Arthur C. Custance²

¹Bruce K. Waltke, *Creation and Chaos*; cited in Mark Rooker, "Creation or Re-Creation?" *BibSac* 149:596 (Oct-Dec 1992): 414.

²Custance, *Without Form and Void* (Brockville, Ontario: n.p., 1970).

3. Support Offered:
 - a. Logically satisfying

Since "the heavens and the earth" in vs 1 means "the organized universe," and vs 2 speaks of the earth in chaos, and verses 3-31 speak of the organization of the universe again, it is plausible that vv 1-3 describe three successive stages in the history of the earth.
 - b. The verb *hāyāh* (הָיָה) in vs 2 (normally "was") can mean "become" (cf. Gen 3:20).

The idea here is that the universe was created originally according to vs 1, and then subsequently "became" chaotic.
 - c. The phrase "waste and void" is used elsewhere (Jer 4:23 and Isa 34:11) in connection with the idea of God's judgment.
 - d. This view clarifies the career of Satan who suddenly appears in Gen 3 without introduction.³

B. The Initial Chaos Theory (the traditional view)

1. Description

This view interprets Gen 1:1 as a declaration that God created the original mass called heaven and earth out of nothing, and vs 2 as a clarification that when it came from the Creator's hand, the mass was originally unformed and unfilled. Hence, vs 2 looks at the original material from which God began to create the orderly elements described in vv 3-31, not necessarily bad or evil, but simply incomplete.
2. Proponents of this view: Luther, Calvin, Kiel, Cassuto, Leupold, Young, Ryrie, Mark Rooker⁴
3. Support Offered:
 - a. This has been the traditional view among Christians.
 - b. This has the support of *Gesenius-Kautzsch-Cowley* Hebrew grammar (paragraph 142c).
 - c. Theologically satisfying. This view affirms that God existed before all, and then He created matter with its potential for life.
 - d. The terminology in vs 2 does not have to imply evil, nor is it necessarily indicative of judgment.

Note: other support will be set forth in the discussion to follow.

C. The Precreation Chaos Theory

1. Description: This view takes Gen 1:1 as a summary statement, or formal introduction, which is expegeted in the rest of the narrative (not a first step but a summation of all of chapter one).

³The weakness to this argument is that Scripture is silent on the idea that the earth was judged when Satan fell.

⁴Mark Rooker has done some of the best research in defense of the traditional view and presented a fine counter-argument to the Precreation Chaos Theory advanced by Waltke. See Rooker, "Genesis 1:1-3: Creation or Re-Creation? Part 1," *BibSac* 149:595 (Jul-Sep 1992): 316-23; and Part 2 in *BibSac* 149:596 (Oct-Dec 1992): 411-27.

Vs 2 represents a chaotic state already existing before God's creative work described in ch 1, and the actual creation does not begin until vs 3.

2. Proponents of this view: Bruce K. Waltke,⁵ Allen Ross⁶
3. Support Offered:
 - a. Gen 1:1 constitutes a summary statement.
 - b. The Hebrew verb בָּרָא (*bārā'*, "create") in Gen 1:1 should not be understood as creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*).
 - c. Gen 1:2 describes something that is not good but evil (so some claim).

IV. EVALUATION OF CREATION THEORIES

A. The "heavens and the earth" (vs 1)

Waltke claims that Gen 1:1 describes neither the original creation (i.e., a creation prior to that in 1:3ff.) nor a first step in creation. Rather, he argues that 1:1 is a summary statement of all the creation activity described in 1:3-31.⁷ These two words form a merism, a statement of opposites to indicate the totality (compare Ps 139:2). As a merism, the phrase is not a reference to one aspect of creation but to the whole creation. For support, Waltke appeals to the use of the same phrase in Gen 2:1 which looks back to all the activity of chapter one. Furthermore, that the phrase "the heavens and the earth" refers to the work of all six days (and not simply the first stage) is substantiated by Ex 31:17, ". . . for in six days, the LORD made the heavens and the earth." In response, however, one could point out that Gen 2:1 is not exactly the same: "Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts."

According to Waltke, the expression "the heavens and the earth" indicates the organized universe, i.e., the cosmos, that which resulted from God's six days of work. He points out that in Wisdom of Solomon 11:17, the Greek words ὁ κόσμος are used to refer to Gen 1:1. In response, however, the LXX does not translate Gen 1:1 by ὁ κόσμος.

If Waltke is correct that Gen 1:1 is a summation of the whole chapter (rather than a stage in the creative activity), this would have negative implications for the other two views: (1) vs 1 could not be an original creation as the Restitution Theory suggests and (2) vs 1 could not be the first stage in the creative process as the traditional view (i.e., the initial chaos view) has suggested. This would not mean that the traditional view is therefore impossible, but it would need modification. It would have to admit that "the earth" mentioned in vs 2 is suddenly brought into the picture without any explicit reference to its creation (i.e., the creation of original matter prior to Gen 1:3 would have to

⁵Waltke has done the most among evangelicals to establish this view. See *Creation and Chaos* (Portland, OR: Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1974); and a series of four articles in *BibSac* 132:525-528 (1975) entitled "The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3." More recently, Waltke, "The Literary Genre of Genesis, Chapter One," *Crux* 27 (1991).

⁶Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988).

⁷The notion that Gen 1:1 is a summary statement has been widely held among other scholars. See Gerhard F. Hasel, "Recent Translations of Genesis 1:1: A Critical Look," *The Bible Translator* 22 (1971), 164.

be assumed). However, the case for a "summary statement" is not as convincing as Waltke has made it out to be (see technical discussion in the section to follow).⁸

If the traditional view is correct that Gen 1:1 represents the first stage in the creation process, then the expression "heavens and the earth" would imply a disorderly chaos (in light of vs 2). Waltke would contend, however, that the phrase means a completely ordered cosmos, not a disorderly chaos. In response to Waltke, however, it could be pointed out that this is a unique event, and could be seen as the first stage of creation.

B. The Relationship of Verses 1-3 of Genesis 1

Considerable discussion has developed concerning the exact syntactical relationship of the first three verses of Genesis. The "gap theory" rests on the view that vs 2 is a sequential clause after vs 1, and the "initial chaos" theory takes vs 2 as a circumstantial clause with the independent clause of vs 1. The "Precreation chaos theory" takes vs 2 as a circumstantial clause in regard to vs 3.

From a grammatical point of view, vs 2 cannot be a sequential clause after vs 1. The "gap theory" assumes that the "and" introducing verses 2 and 3 are identical in meaning, and that both have the idea of sequence ("and then"). However, the "and" (*waw*) of vs 2 is a *waw*-disjunctive, and does not introduce an independent sequential clause. Vs 2 is a circumstantial clause (it may be circumstantial to vs 1 or to vs 3). The *waw* of vs 3 is *waw*-consecutive. This makes the "gap theory" highly unlikely.

The "gap theory" suffers from another weakness, namely, the attempt to translate הָיָה as "had become" (pluperfect).⁹ This is done in an attempt to alleviate the difficulty mentioned above. This suggestion, although possible, is very unlikely: (1) the parallel circumstantial clauses in 2:5 and 3:1 have the stative sense ("was"); and (2) no ancient or modern versions understand the verb in the sense "had become."

Hence, from a grammatical standpoint, the other two views are more plausible. Both of these admit that vs 2 is a circumstantial clause. The traditional view (the initial chaos theory) takes vs 2 as circumstantial to vs 1, while the precreation chaos theory takes it as circumstantial to vs 3. Both views are grammatically possible. Dr. Waltke (the precreation theory) prefers to take vs 2 as a circumstantial clause to be connected with vs 3 instead of vs 1. He offers the following reasons:

1. The phrase "the heavens and the earth" as a reference to the completed organized cosmos would be illogical (to have the whole created before the part). Of course, this point is valid only if vs 1 is regarded as a merism (see above).
2. The statement that God did not create the earth תְּהוֹהוּ (*tōhû*; Isa 45:18) argues against taking vs 2 as a circumstantial clause with vs 1 (but see comments below regarding Isa 45:18 for an alternate opinion).

⁸For a case against the "summary statement" view, see Anton Pearson, "An Exegetical Study of Genesis 1:1-3," *Bethel Seminary Quarterly* 2 (1953), 14-33.

⁹For another case of *waw* disjunctive and הָיָה (circum. clause = ו + subj. + הָיָה), see Gen 29:17 where it means "was," not "had become."

3. The view taking vs 1 as an introductory summary statement, and vs 2 as a circumstantial clause connected to vs 3 finds a parallel in Gen 2:4-7 where we have the same structure:

- 2:4 summary statement
- 2:5-6 circumstantial clause
- 2:7 main clause

Furthermore, Young cites many examples where the circumstantial clause precedes the main verb.¹⁰

Rooker (representing the traditional view) responds to these claims of Waltke by pointing out that although these two passages have a *similar* structure, they are not exactly the same. Furthermore, you cannot settle the issue just on the basis that both passages have a circumstantial clause. Rooker points out that none of the examples cited by Young have the same structure as Gen 1:2-3, i.e., a *waw* disjunctive clause followed by *waw* consecutive prefixed form. Not only that, but Judges 8:11 and Jonah 3:3 have situations more parallel to Gen 1:1-3 than Gen 2:4-7. Rooker states,

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 וַיִּבְרָא. 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.¹¹

C. The Implications of the Situation Described in Gen 1:2

1. One of the chief concerns is how we are to understand the state of the earth as described in 1:2. Is it simply an initial step in God's creative activity (the trad. view), or is it a negative chaotic state (judgment?/Satan?) not attributable directly to God's work in creation?
2. The Terminology
 - a. Now the earth was תְּהוֹ וְרֵבְוּ (*tōhû wābōhû*).

This is the phrase translated "without form and void" by the *KJV*. The terms are quite rare, but the same phrase is used elsewhere in Jer 4:23 and Isa 34:11.

¹⁰E. J. Young, *Studies in Genesis One* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), 9 (note 15).

¹¹Mark Rooker, "Genesis 1:1-3: Creation or Re-Creation?" *BibSac* 149:596 (Oct-Dec): 416.

1) Jer 4:23

The Jeremiah passage is not only a counterpart to Gen 1, but is a reversal of the cosmos back to chaos. "The point is that the judgment to come on the land takes the form of dismantling or undoing the creation. But it obviously does not follow that the precreative state itself is the result of God's fury."¹² Jer 4:23 cannot be used to prove that Gen 1:2 is the result of God's fury and judgment (as suggested by the "gap theory").

2) Isa 34:11

In this case, God's judgment results in the return of the object of His wrath to its original state prior to its creation, i.e., nothing or an unformed state.

3) Isa 45:18

The term tōhû is used in Isa 45:18 where it is stated that the LORD did not create the earth tōhû, i.e., He did not create it a formless mass.¹³

On the basis of Isa 45:18, Waltke says that the state of the earth as described in Gen 1:2 could not be attributable to God, whether tōhû be understood as meaning chaos or as simply meaning unformed (i.e., incomplete). Those holding the traditional view would reply that Isa 45:18 was not meant to be taken as an absolute statement. Rather, it is the purpose in view: God did not create the earth for the purpose of it being tōhû, but rather that it might be inhabited. Waltke does not feel that this is the best option grammatically (i.e., the double accusative after verbs of making normally do not have the sense of purpose). However, in defense of the traditional view, two things should be pointed out:

- a) The second accusative is preceded by the negative which may change the situation.
- b) The following phrase (the contrast to tōhû) is a purpose clause. Notice the *NIV* translation: "He did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited." Hence, Isa 45:18 does not really assert whether or not God created the tōhû of Gen 1:2; it simply makes the point that God did something about it, i.e., He created the earth to be inhabited, not to leave it in a desolate tōhû condition.

4) Conclusions about tōhû wābōhû

It must be admitted that the lexical meaning of the terms tōhû and bōhû is very difficult to ascertain. Since biblical usage of the terms is scarce and there are no

¹²Waltke, *BibSac* 526, 141.

¹³See *BibSac* No. 527, 220 for Waltke's handling of the response from the traditional view.

certain cognates in other languages, we have little evidence on which to stand. Some would understand the terms to mean "chaos," a very negative state, and hence not what would come from the hand of God. Others would simply see the terms as implying a more neutral state of being unformed. David Tsumura, in his thorough investigation, contends that the phrase means a state of "unproductiveness and emptiness."¹⁴

Speaking for those who take the terms in a very negative sense, Jacob concludes, "Where it *tōhû wābōhû* is met (Is. 34:11; Jer. 4:23), it denotes the contrary of creation and not merely an inferior stage of creation."¹⁵ The phrase denotes a state of material devoid of order, or without being shaped or formed into something. But it is not the creative work of God (Isa 45:18).

We also observe that the text never attributes this state described in vs 2 to the Creator. We find no statement that God called forth the state in vs 2 by His Word ("and God said, 'Let there be . . ."). In response, however, if vv 1-5 all represent the first day, the pronouncement of "good" need not be expected until the completion of all the activity for the day.

b. תְּהוֹמֹת (*t^hôm*) - "the deep"

The salt water or deep is not conducive to life and represents the abyss. In the new and perfect cosmos, there will be no sea (Rev 21:1).

c. חֹשֶׁךְ (*hōšek*) - "darkness"

In the Bible, darkness is symbolic of evil, and portrays that sphere where light has not entered to illumine. It is often used in a sense involving "curse" or "judgment" (Job 3:4; Ps 35:6; Isa 47:5; 59:9).

As an opposite to light, it may be considered "evil" (Isa 5:20). Darkness is often associated with God's judgment as in the Day of the Lord (Isa 13:10; Joel 2:31) and the death of Christ (Matt 27:45). In the NT, John uses darkness to represent that which is opposite of God and fellowship with Him (1 Jn 1:5,6). Finally, we see that darkness will be done away with in the eternal state (Rev 21:25; 22:5). Biblically, darkness is not a neutral term but that which is alien to God's holiness.

These observations would tend to support Waltke's position of the "precreation chaos theory." However, Rooker has sounded a note of caution:

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

¹⁴David Toshio Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2: A Linguistic Investigation*, JSOT Supplement Series 83 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 155-56.

¹⁵Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. Arthur W. Heathcote and Philip A. Allcock (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958): 144 (note 2).

symbolized. It is like saying yeast is evil because it came to represent spiritual evil.¹⁶

Furthermore, elsewhere God takes the responsibility for the creation of "darkness": "The One forming light and creating darkness (וַיְבַרֵא אֱלֹהִים), . . . I am the LORD who does all these" (Isa 45:7).

3. Conclusion on Verse 2

When we come to vs 2, we suddenly have thrust upon us a very puzzling situation. We wonder how such a situation could have come from the hand of God, since all that God does is perfect. There is no pronouncement that God said "Let there be" (cf. Heb 11:3) nor His affirmation that it was "good." Possibly the terms *tōhû* and *bōhû* reflect a negative chaotic state, something not the result of God's creative work (so Waltke). On the other hand, these terms could simply refer to a state not yet finished. The terminology of "darkness" and "sea" are used elsewhere in Scripture in an evil sense, but this offers no conclusive proof as to how they should be understood in Gen 1:2 (seeing that the terms are also used in Scripture in a neutral way). Rooker's comments about biblical symbols (see above) and the fact that God is said to have created "darkness" (Isa 45:7) are apt reasons not to read too much into Gen 1:2.

D. Concluding Comments

In my opinion, the "gap theory" has several weaknesses that rule this option out.¹⁷ Grammatically, the "initial chaos" theory (traditional view) and the "precreation chaos" theory are both possible. While it is certainly possible that Gen 1:1 is a summary verse for vv 3-31 (so Waltke), this cannot be proven beyond doubt. Theoretically, it is possible that Gen 1:1 is a summary verse while at the same time implying with vs 2 that the "earth" was in an initial stage of God's creative work. On the other hand, the traditional view that Gen 1:1-2 reflects the initial stage of God's personal creation is quite legitimate. Objections based on Gen 1:2 cannot be sustained (see comments above).

When all is said, however, I would be inclined to tilt slightly in favor of the traditional view rather than the "precreation chaos" theory. The "precreation chaos" theory (as advocated by Waltke and Ross) implies that there was some form of creation present already before the particular creation described in Gen 1:3-31. When one reads John 1:1-5, he gets the impression that John is making an evident play upon Genesis 1:1 when he says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." We notice that John begins his gospel with the words 'Εν ἀρχῇ ("in the beginning"), just as the LXX translation began Genesis 1:1 with 'Εν ἀρχῇ. His point seems to be that the Word (Jesus Christ) existed before all creation, and that creation is directly from Him. The "precreation chaos" theory would diminish the significance of this truth by suggesting that a form of creation existed before the Genesis creation. John wants to tell his readers that "All things came into being through Him; and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being," and to make this statement with Gen 1:1 in mind.

¹⁶Rooker, Part 2, 422.

¹⁷Cf. 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).