

GENESIS 1:2

"AND THE EARTH WAS..."

OR

"BUT THE EARTH BECAME..."

By Arlen L. Chirwood

It would go without saying that there has been a great deal of controversy over the years among theologians and Christians in general concerning exactly how the opening two chapters of Genesis should be understood. And it would also go without saying that, resultingly, confusion has reigned supreme in Christian circles concerning not only these chapters but the general tenor of the remainder of Scripture as well.

There are generally two major schools of thought surrounding these two opening chapters, though there are a number of variations within that held by those in each school.

Those in one school (probably the position held by the majority today) view *the six days in the first chapter as time revealing God's creative activity from verse one*, and those in the other school view *these six days as time revealing God's restoration of a ruined creation seen in verse two*.

Then there is a somewhat popular third school of thought which views Gen. 1:1 as other than an absolute beginning. Most of those holding this view see *verse one as an opening statement dealing with restoration, not creation*. That is, they see the verse dealing, not with God's creation of the heavens and the earth in an absolute sense (as most view the verse), but with the beginning of God's restoration (reforming, remolding, refashioning) of a previously perfect creation which had been reduced to a ruin.

Much of the controversy surrounding these different views is centered in the linguistics of verse two. Grammarians go back to the Hebrew text and deal with two areas:

- 1) The relationship to verse one of the three circumstantial clauses making up verse two.
- 2) The meaning of the Hebrew word *hayah* in verse two, translated "was."

And good Hebrew grammarians reach different conclusions in both realms.

THE THREE CIRCUMSTANTIAL CLAUSES

The three circumstantial clauses in Gen. 1:2 are simply the three clauses which form the verse:

- 1) "And the earth was without form, and void."
- 2) "And darkness was upon the face of the deep."
- 3) "And the Spirit of God moved..."

In the Hebrew text there is what is called a "waw" beginning verse two (a conjunctive or disjunctive particle, translated "And" in most English texts). Some grammarians view this particle in a *conjunctive* sense (showing a connection between v. 1 and v. 2), and others view it in a *disjunctive* sense (showing a separation between v. 1 and v. 2). Normally the context determines how the particle is to be understood.

(The Hebrew text of the Old Testament uses the "waw" more frequently in a conjunctive [and] rather than a disjunctive [but] sense. Of the approximately 28,000 usages of this particle, some 25,000 appear to be conjunctive and some 3,000 disjunctive.)

Those viewing the "waw" beginning Gen. 1:2 in a conjunctive sense would normally see the three circumstantial clauses as inseparably connected with verse one, and those viewing the "waw" in a disjunctive sense would, instead, see a separation between these two verses.

If there is an inseparable connection of the clauses in verse two with verse one, and verse one describes an absolute beginning in relation to the heavens and the earth (God's actual creation of the heavens and the earth in the beginning), then verse two would have to describe how God created the earth in the beginning (*i.e.*, "without form, and void"). Understanding the structure of the Hebrew text after this fashion would necessitate viewing that which is described at the beginning of verse two as the condition of the earth at the time of the action described in verse one. Then the six subsequent days would have to be looked upon as time in which God, step by step, performed and completed His work of creation, introduced in verse one.

The preceding view of the structure of the Hebrew text is the reason for the position held by some that Gen. 1:1 actually describes the beginning of God's restorative

work rather than an absolute beginning. Those holding this view see the three circumstantial clauses in verse two as inseparably connected with verse one, but they also see that Scripture teaches a subsequent ruin of the creation following God's creation of the heavens and the earth in the beginning.

(E.g., *cf.* Gen. 1:2 and Isa. 45:18. The Heb. word *tohu*, translated "without form" in Gen. 1:2 is translated "in vain" in Isa. 45:18; and this verse in Isaiah specifically states that God did not create the earth *tohu*, *i.e.*, after the fashion in which it is seen in Gen. 1:2.)

Thus, those who see God's perfect creation undergoing a subsequent ruin but also view the three circumstantial clauses in verse two as inseparably connected with verse one are forced into a particular position concerning the interpretation of the opening verses of Genesis. They are forced into the position of seeing the actual creation of the heavens and the earth, and also the ruin of the heavens and the earth, as occurring at a time prior to Gen. 1:1, events which they would see as not being dealt with *per se* in the opening verses of Scripture at all.

Then there are those grammarians who see the "waw" beginning verse two as disjunctive (similar to the Greek "*de*," which is used both ways in the New Testament [*cf.* Matt. 1:2-16; 25:31, ASV]; also the Septuagint [Greek translation of the O.T.] uses "*de*" in a disjunctive sense beginning Gen. 1:2 [evident from the use of the conjunctive *kai* to begin the other two clauses]). And, viewing the matter after this fashion, verse two would not be inseparably connected with verse one. Rather, a separation would exist instead. Within this view, one would normally see verse one revealing an absolute beginning, with verse two (along with the verses following) revealing events occurring at later points in time.

(Most holding this linguistic view see verse two as a description of God's perfect creation [from verse one] being brought into a ruined state, separated from verse one by an unrevealed period of time; and they would, accordingly, see God's activity during the six days as activity surrounding the restoration of this ruined creation.)

Some holding this linguistic view though still see the six days as time revealing God's creative activity. They view verse one as describing a "grand summary declaration that God created the universe in the beginning." Then they view God's activity during the six days as a revelation concerning how God, relative to the earth, accomplished that which He had previously stated in verse one.)

THE HEBREW WORD “HAYAH”

Hayah is the Hebrew word translated “was” in most English versions of Gen. 1:2 (“And the earth *was*...”). The word is found numerous times throughout chapter one and about 3,570 times in the entire Old Testament.

The etymology of *hayah* is somewhat questionable (most look at the probable, primary meaning of the word as “falling” or “to fall”). Hebrew scholars though see this word used over and over in the Old Testament in the sense of “to be,” “to become,” or “to come to pass.” And through attempts to trace the etymology of the word, comparing the Hebrew with the Arabic (a related Semitic language), and seeing how the word is used in the Old Testament, many scholars have come to look upon the word in the sense of *a verb of being* (“to be”).

Hayah is translated different ways in English versions — e.g., “was” or “were” (Gen. 1:2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 13, etc.), “be” (Gen. 1:3, 6, 14, 29, etc.), “became [or, ‘to become’]” (Gen. 2:7, 10; 3:22, etc.). But that’s in English versions. In the Latin Vulgate there are thirteen instances where *hayah* has been translated in the sense of “became” in Genesis chapter one alone (the word appears twenty-seven times in this chapter); and in the Septuagint there are twenty-two such instances in this one chapter.

The first use of *hayah* in Scripture is in Gen. 1:2 — the verse under consideration in this study. But going beyond this verse for a moment, note how the word is used elsewhere in chapter one.

Hayah appears twice in verse three, translated “be” and “was.” And translating in the sense of, “Let light *be* [or ‘become’]: and light *became*,” would actually best convey the thought of that which occurred.

Then note verses 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31. The word *hayah* appears two times in the latter part of each verse (both translated in the English text by one word, “were”). Translating literally from the Hebrew, using “was” in the translation, the text would read, “...And there *was* evening and there *was* morning, [comprising] the first day...the second day...the third day,” etc.

Actually though, “became” would really better convey the thought surrounding that which occurred, for evening and morning *came to pass*, “became,” comprising each of the six different days.

Leupold (a Hebrew grammarian) appears to capture the overall thought quite well in his commentary by trans-

lating, “...Then came evening, then came morning” — the first day...the second day...the third day, etc.

Then note the words, “...and it *was* so,” at the end of verses 7, 9, 11, 15, 24, 30. “Was” in each reference is a translation of the word *hayah*, and it is easy to see that “became” rather than “was” would really provide a better description of that which occurred in each instance, translating, “...and it became so” (cf. “Let there *be* [a translation of *hayah*]...” [vv. 3, 6, 14]).

Though *hayah* has been translated “was,” “were,” or “be” throughout the first chapter of Genesis, the word is actually used mainly throughout this chapter in the sense of “be,” “became,” or “had become.” Attention is called to this fact because numerous individuals look upon the translation “became [or ‘had become’]” as so rare in the Old Testament that, within their thinking, serious consideration should not be given to the thought of translating Gen. 1:2, “And [or ‘But’] the earth became [or ‘had become’]...”

But the rarity of this type understanding of *hayah* in the verse lies in the English translations, not in a literal Hebrew rendering or in certain other translations (e.g., in the KJV there are only 17 instances in all of Genesis where *hayah* has been translated “became [or, ‘...become’]” [2:7, 10; 3:22; 9:15; 18:18; 19:26; 20:12; 21:20; 24:67; 32:10; 34:16; 37:20; 47:20, 26; 48:19]; but in the Septuagint there are at least 146 instances [and some 1,500 in the entire O.T.]).

THE HEBREW TEXT ALONE

Can linguistic questions surrounding the first two verses of Genesis be resolved from the Hebrew text alone? Some Hebrew scholars would answer in the affirmative, but, among these scholars, varying views can still be seen.

However, there is another way to approach the matter; and that other way is to see how the whole of Scripture deals with the issue at hand. If the whole of Scripture can be shown to support one view alone — which it can — then the correct linguistic understanding of Gen. 1:2 and the corresponding correct interpretation of chapter one can easily and unquestionably be demonstrated.

This though is not to say that Gen. 1:2 or the first chapter of Genesis as a whole cannot be understood correctly apart from first going to the remainder of Scripture, for that cannot be the case. God would not have begun His revelation to man after a fashion which man could not

have understood apart from subsequent revelation (requiring approximately 1,500 years to complete).

But this is to say that the correct linguistic position for Gen. 1:2 and the correct corresponding interpretation of the entire chapter — which can be shown by going to the remainder of Scripture — is a position which *God would have expected man to see as evident* when he began reading at Gen. 1:1, though man, more often than not, understands these opening verses differently.

(Also note that the Hebrew words translated “without form and void” [*tohu wavohu*] in Gen. 1:2a are used together only two other places throughout all of the Old Testament — in Isa. 34:11 relative to Edom, and in Jer. 4:23 relative to Israel. Both were about to become *tohu wavohu*. Both passages present *a ruin of that previously seen existing in an orderly state*. And, with Israel, the whole of the matter is related to both *sin* and *that which occurred back in Gen. 1:2a*.)

Thus, if *tohu wavohu* in Gen. 1:2a is to be understood in the light of related Scripture bearing on the subject, *there can be only one possible interpretation — the ruin of a prior existing creation [from v. 1], because of sin.*

The whole of subsequent Scripture will support only one interpretative position in the opening verses of Genesis:

Creation (an absolute beginning, with its corresponding creation [v. 1]).

A Ruin of the creation (which means that the “waw” beginning v. 2 must be understood in a disjunctive sense [‘But’], and the Hebrew word *hayah* must be understood in the sense of “became [or ‘had become’]” [v. 2a]).

A Restoration of the ruined creation (performed entirely through Divine intervention, over six days [vv. 2b-25]).

And *Rest* (a day of rest following six days of restorative work [2:1-3]).

(For related material, see the author’s pamphlets, *The Foundation*, and *Septenary Structure of Scripture*.)

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