

In our last session we addressed the first of two elephants in the room: the authorship of Genesis and the rest of the Pentateuch. It is now time to address the second elephant in the room.

During our wilderness years, back in the mid-90s, Linda and I studied together Paul's epistle to the Romans, using as our primary extra-biblical resource Donald Grey Barnhouse's classic (full title) *Romans: Exposition of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*.

It was during this study that we were first introduced to the topic I begin with in this session as we consider Genesis 1:2. Here is what Barnhouse wrote (and said during his regular radio broadcast in the 1940s and early fifties).

Barnhouse: "In the beginning God created the (first) Heaven and the (first) earth" (Gen. 1:1). It was perfect, and mirrored the perfect creation which inhabited it. Then sin entered and God blasted the universe. "The earth was without form and void," or, as it would be more correctly translated, "The world became a wreck and a ruin." The RSV correctly translates Isaiah 45:18 to say, "He created it not a chaos." How long the world existed in that wrecked condition we do not know. There are evidences from geology that it may have been for several million years. Continents rose and fell, glaciers crept down toward the equator and receded again, leaving the tell-tale scars of their passage written deep in the skin of the earth. Giant beasts roamed the earth, and the descendants of the beings that followed Lucifer in his fall left their trail across the crust of earth. Then, suddenly, God brought light into the dark of that sinister creation and in a few brief days brought a covering of perfection to His creation. Like snow that covers a garbage dump and makes all things clean for a moment, so Adam's world was beautiful for the moments of his walk with God. Then with the rebellion of man came the words of condemning judgment, "Cursed be the ground for thy sake... thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee" (Gen. 3:17, 18). This is the earth on which we live. The scars of the past are beneath our feet, and the death of judgment is all around us.

At the time, I had never heard of this so called "two- or three-earth" position—also referred to as the "Gap Theory"—that Barnhouse so casually stated as gospel truth. The first time I read this my response was, not surprisingly, "Where did *this* come from? What in the world are you talking about?"

I ran into it again while doing my research for *Last Things*. Like Barnhouse, Clarence Larkin in his well-known series of charts published in 1919 and Buel Liming in 1970, posit *three* earths: the original earth of Genesis 1:1; the chaotic earth of 1:2; followed by the restored earth of 1:3ff. ❏

Creation was a process; Chapter One alone of Genesis makes this clear. In the beginning, the very, *very* beginning moments of God's creating, the earth looked nothing like it does today. But was this, as Barnhouse and others claim, a *first* pristine earth that would eventually be replaced or reformed as a *second* or *third* earth? Or was it simply the natal shape of the earth before it was, as part of the process of Creation, refined?

Barnhouse does not shy away from the temptation to use this interpretation to resolve those nagging conflicts that arise between old-earth and new-earth proponents. Rock strata scientifically dated to an age multiple millions of years into the past? Erosion claimed to have required billions of years to occur? Giant dinosaurs roaming the earth before even the first man? No problem: all this occurred, according to Barnhouse and others, during the period of the second chaotic (and, assumed) sinful earth. As he says, "How long the world existed in that wrecked condition we do not know. There are evidences from geology that it may have been for several million years."

David Guzik rebuts this with one simple, biblical fact:

Guzik: Whatever merit the gap theory may have, it cannot explain the extinction and fossilization of ancient animals. The Bible says plainly death came by Adam (Romans 5:12), and since fossils are the result of death, they could not have happened before Adam's time.

Now let's read our text.

Read Genesis 1:1-2.

The original Hebrew begins v2 with "And," which is removed by the ESV, NKJV, and NASB95 (but *not* the original NASB); the NIVs replace "and" with "now," which works just fine. ❏ The point being that in the original text, verse two does not speak of a different earth, but continues to flesh out the description of the *same* earth in v1: the conjunction "and" makes this clear. Again, Creation was a process; it was a jigsaw puzzle put together a piece at a time, over time, until all of it was "very good" (1:31).

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Sidebar

At this point I need to revert to a bit of counsel I mentioned at the beginning of the previous class on the *Last Things*. While I will propound (by God's grace), a convincing specific position regarding this, there are well regarded biblical scholars that subscribe to *different* positions—indeed, some of those different positions (for example, as voiced by Barnhouse) include some attractive aspects that make them at least worth consideration. Ultimately, we must decide upon just one. But that does not mean that those holding to other interpretations are deserving of our scorn. Worthy arguments can be made for most of them. Thus I will not quarrel with anyone choosing an alternate interpretation.

"Now..."

Leupold's paraphrase: "And now, as far as the earth was concerned, it was waste and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was hovering upon the face of the waters."

Note

In precisely the same way, in v1 God creates "the heavens" but not until later (piece by piece) does he add the moon and sun ("lights in the expanse of the heavens" [1:14]), as well as the the stars (1:16).

What *really* lights the fire of the proponents of the “Gap Theory” are the next two words that describe this newly formed earth: “formless” and “void.” They take this to mean that the original earth—the pristine earth—has now “been laid waste by some catastrophe,” typically interpreted to mean by sin and corruption through the fallen angel, Satan—that is, they interpret this verse as saying, “the earth *became* formless and void.”

But the Hebrew *tohu*—without form, emptiness, waste—can also mean “*not yet* put into shape.” The second part, *wabohu* (“and void”), can mean “to be empty, emptiness, without inhabitants of any kind.” Used together these express a picture of “an unformed and unshaped mass,” and point the reader toward the conclusion that this “newly created world will undergo further changes: first it must be shaped and formed into definite molds; second, it must be peopled with all kinds of inhabitants and beings” (Leupold).

Speaking against the “Gap Theory,” the venerable *Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* reads v2 as “And the earth was (not became) waste and void.”

Think of it this way: Every exquisite pot begins as a shapeless (“formless”) lump of clay. What it will eventually become lies not within the clay itself, but in the hands of its maker. As a potter will take in hand a large ball of amorphous clay and slap it down onto the wheel to begin the process, just so the Lord God spoke into existence a formless lump of earth devoid of any character or personality—and most certainly devoid of any beauty—and slapped it down in its place in the nothingness that would soon be a universe of planets and stars.

Then—and only then—did He begin the process of shaping it into something we might eventually recognize. ❏

What did this shapeless mass look like? What was its composition? We are tempted to imagine in our mind the most desolate, lifeless expanse of desert waste, and that is indeed how the same word is used later in Deuteronomy:

Read Deuteronomy 32:9-10. (we will return here)

But the rest of v2 dissuades us from that conclusion.

...and darkness was over the surface of the deep,

Only later in the narrative (v9) is dry land created:

Then God said, “Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear”; and it was so.

Thus what we have in v2 is a shapeless earth with surging water covering its entire surface. Whether there is land lying beneath the waves or not, we cannot say with any certainty.

Additional Resource

I will not take time in class to itemize all the various evangelical interpretations and theories for the Creation epic—specifically, how it compares to so-called scientific theories such as evolution, etc. If you are interested in this, I have included a link in this session's handout for an excellent, but succinct summary of the various interpretations. I have also printed a few copies for those who do not use the internet.

Moses paints a picture that any Israelite would recognize; the “deep” (or “abyss”) is the Hebrew *tehom*, and often refers to the primal ocean, the deep—even the underworld, the realm of the dead—rendering the ocean depths representing a fearful place to Israel. On top of that, this “deep” is wreathed in utter blackness; there is no light yet created to pierce its mysteries. The word *tehom* is from the root *hum*, which means “to resound,” thus revealing that this is no placid pond, but endless, surging, even raging primeval waters (Leupold)—and all in utter darkness. A fearful place indeed. ❏

...and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.

At this point in the Creation process we have a shapeless—i.e., in transition—earth, dark, with its surface consisting solely of roiling waters. And now a new element is introduced into the narrative: the “Spirit of God.”

As in the Greek (*pneuma*), the Hebrew for “spirit” (*ruach*) can be proper or no; that is, it can be either “spirit” or “Spirit.” It can also be rendered wind, breeze, or breath, and some do like to paint this picture in v2 as a wind blowing over the waters. Thus one interpretation of this is of a wind associated with the churning waters—in other words, an *element* of the creation itself: water and wind.

Others, especially some older translations, choose different verbs to describe what this wind or spirit is doing; for example, *YLT* has the Spirit of God “fluttering on the face of the waters.” Others prefer translating *rachaph* “brooding,” rather than the more common “hovering” or “moving” (as in most of our versions) which the Hebrew seems to require. ❏ A mother bird “broods” over her *eggs*, but not her young (Leupold). The earth in this moment is young, but not waiting to be hatched. The text signifies an active, vibrant moving, a protective hovering—as we see back in the Deuteronomy passage.

Read Deuteronomy 32:11. (same word)

So it is clear that whatever is moving over the waters is there in more than just an *elemental* role, but is actively playing a role in the creative process itself. But is it wind or spirit? If spirit, is it “spirit” or “Spirit”? In Deuteronomy 32:11 it is Yahweh hovering over His people like an eagle; here it is the Holy Spirit, third member of the Godhead, hovering over the earliest moments of Creation. But what is His role? ❏

Sidebar

Have you ever noticed the utter silence in your house when the power goes out. We may think our home is quiet, but there are always ambient sounds that we have come to ignore: the hum of the refrigerator or freezer, the purr of the desktop computer, even the barely audible buzz of florescent lights. Suddenly all those are gone and the silence is deafening.

In the same way we are almost continually surrounded by light from one source or another; even what we call “dark” is rarely utterly black. There is invariably some ambient light from somewhere. But I have been out in the middle of the desert on a cloud-covered night, with no artificial light from city or houses, no moon or stars in the sky, when I literally could not see my hand held in front of my face. Utter blackness. This is the state of the earth at this point of Creation.

The Message (v2)

Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God's Spirit **brooded** like a bird above the watery abyss.

Holy Spirit

Here we have one of those special moments I so enjoy—where we can discover the profound richness lying beneath the surface of the printed text of God's word.

If we say that the Spirit is here depicted in an active, creative role, are we forcing the text to say something it isn't? Does it make sense for the Holy Spirit—"the Spirit of God"—to be involved in Creation? Yes indeed, and we see it paralleled in the account of the creation of the tabernacle, where He—the Spirit—was a necessary component.

Read Exodus 31:1-5.

Sailhamer: As God did His "work" of creation by means of the "Spirit of God," so Israel was to do their "work" by means of the "Spirit of God."

The psalmist states it explicitly.

Read Psalm 33:6-9. (breath: same word [*ruach*])

And here is the delightful insight that adds depth and texture to the simple "and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters."

Leupold: This "hovering" was not a single and instantaneous act. It rather describes a continued process... From all other activities that are elsewhere ascribed to the Holy Spirit we conclude that His work in this case must have been anticipatory of the creative work that followed, a kind of impregnation with divine potentialities. The germs of all that is created were placed into dead matter by Him. His was the preparatory work for leading over from the inorganic to the organic.

The venerable Keil and Delitzsch agree—in fact, surely it was their commentary that inspired Leupold in some of his remarks.

K&D: In such a way as this the Spirit of God moved upon the deep, which had received at its creation the germs of all life, to fill them with vital energy by His breath of life. The three statements in our verse are parallel. All three describe the condition of the earth immediately after the creation of the universe. This suffices to prove that the theosophic speculation of those who "make a gap between the first two verses, and fill it with a wild horde of evil spirits and their demoniacal works, is an arbitrary interpolation" (Ziegler). ❏

By this interpretation we see the Spirit of God literally breathing life into the dark, "formless and void" earth. And as the narrative proceeds, even all the way to the end, in Revelation, we see the Spirit active and vital on and in the earth.

The Life-breathing Spirit

Are we pushing this too far? No, for it will happen again in just the same manner in Chapter Two:

Then Yahweh God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and so the man became a living being.
Genesis 2:7

SESSION 5

A Black Emptiness Genesis 1:2

The Gap Theory

The so-called “Gap Theory” of multiple earths is not upheld by Scripture. Creation was a *process*; the “formless and void” of the first—and only—earth was simply its initial form. Creation was a process; it was a jigsaw puzzle put together a piece at a time, over time, until all of it was “very good” (**Genesis 1:31**).

Think of it this way: Every exquisite pot begins as a shapeless (“formless”) lump of clay. What it will eventually become lies not within the clay itself, but in the hands of its maker. As a potter will take in hand a large ball of amorphous clay and slap it down onto the wheel to begin the process, just so the Lord God spoke into existence a formless lump of earth devoid of any character or personality—and most certainly devoid of any beauty—and slapped it down in its place in the nothingness that would soon be a universe of planets and stars.

Then—and only then—did He begin the process of shaping it into something we might eventually recognize.

The initial earth was shapeless, with roiling water over its surface, and in total darkness. Dry land would not appear until **Genesis 1:9**.

The Life-breathing Spirit

God’s Spirit—the Holy Spirit—hovered over the earth’s watery surface as a *protective* spirit, but also in an active, *essential role in Creation itself* (**Deuteronomy 32:11; Exodus 31:1-5; Psalm 33:6-9**).

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Evangelical Interpretations of Genesis 1-2, by Vern Poythress

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/evangelical-interpretations-genesis-1-2/>

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