

Earth's Age: Does Genesis 1 Indicate a Time Interval?

Evolution or Creation: Does it really matter what you believe?
United Church of God. 2000. p. 29.

We are introduced to the account of the creation of the earth in Genesis 1:1-2: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep."

The original Hebrew wording, compared with other passages of Scripture, has led some to conclude that a considerable time interval is indicated between these two verses. If such an interval is indeed intended, there is no discrepancy between the Bible record and scientific discoveries that indicate that the earth could be much older than a few thousand years. If, on the other hand, there is no such gap, then the earth itself must be only around 6,000 years old-which most scientists consider an impossibility.

Do other passages, as well as history, shed any light on this question?

Some scholars propose that Genesis 1:2 can or should be translated "Now the earth became without form, and void . . ." as opposed to the common rendering "The earth was without form, and void . . ." Others dismiss this idea entirely. They assume the original Hebrew word *hayah* must be translated "was" and then assume the earth was originally created in this disorderly way.

However, as can be seen from many Bible helps, both translations of the term are possible. Only the context of the chapter and book can determine which one is correct. Gleason Archer, professor of biblical languages, comments: "It should be noted in this connection that the verb was in Genesis 1:2 may quite possibly be rendered 'became' and be construed to mean: 'And the earth became formless and void.' Only a cosmic catastrophe could account for the introduction of chaotic confusion into the original perfection of God's creation. This interpretation certainly seems to be exegetically tenable . . ." (A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, Moody Press, Chicago, 1974, p. 184).

In a footnote Archer adds: "Properly speaking, this verb *hayah* never has the meaning of static being like the copular verb 'to be.' Its basic notion is that of becoming or emerging as such and such, or of coming into being . . . Sometimes a distinction is attempted along the following lines: *hayah* means 'become' only when it is followed by the preposition *le*; otherwise there is no explicit idea of becoming. But this distinction will not stand up under analysis. In Gen[esis] 3:20 the proper rendering is: 'And Adam called the name of his wife Eve, because she became the mother of all living.' No *le* follows the verb in this case. So also in Gen[esis] 4:20: 'Jabal became the father of tent dwellers.' Therefore there can be no grammatical objection raised to translating Gen[esis] 1:2: 'And the earth became a wasteness and desolation.'"

Some scholars also argue against translating *hayah* "became" instead of "was" in Genesis 1:2 because they assume this interpretation came about only recently, after geology revealed the strata of the earth to be very old. Thus they consider this explanation a desperate attempt to reconcile the Genesis account with modern geology. The explanation that there existed an indefinite period between the initial beautiful creation described in Genesis 1:1 and the earth becoming waste and void in verse 2 has been called, sometimes disparagingly, "the gap theory."

The idea was attributed to Thomas Chalmers in the 19th century and to Cyrus Scofield in the 20th.

Yet the interpretation that the earth "became" waste and void has been discussed for close to 2,000 years. The earliest known recorded controversy on this point can be attributed to Jewish sages at the beginning of the second century. The Hebrew scholars who wrote the Targum of Onkelos, the earliest of the Aramaic versions of the Old Testament, translated Genesis 1:2 as "and the earth was laid waste." The original language led them to understand that something had occurred that had "laid waste" the earth, and they interpreted this as a destruction.

The early Catholic theologian Origen (186-254), in his commentary *De Principiis*, explains regarding Genesis 1:2 that the original earth had been "cast downwards" (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1917, p. 342).

In the Middle Ages the Flemish scholar Hugo St. Victor (1097-1141) wrote about Genesis 1:2: "Perhaps enough has already been debated about these matters thus far, if we add only this, 'how long did the world remain in this disorder before the regular re-ordering . . . of it was taken in hand?'" (*De Sacramentis Christianae Fidei*, Book 1, Part I, Chapter VI). Other medieval scholars, such as Dionysius Peavius and Pererius, also considered that there was an interval between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2.

According to *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, the Dutch scholar Simon Episcopius (1583-1643) taught that the earth had originally been created before the six days of creation described in Genesis (1952, Vol. 3, p. 302). This was roughly 200 years before geology discovered evidence for the ancient origin of earth.

These numerous examples show us that the idea of an interval between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 has a long history. Any claim that it is of only recent origin—that it was invented simply as a desperate attempt to reconcile the Genesis account with geology—is groundless.

Perhaps the best treatment on both sides of this question is given by the late Arthur Custance in his book *Without Form and Void: A Study of the Meaning of Genesis 1:2*. Dr. Custance states, "To me, this issue is important, and after studying the problem for some thirty years and after reading everything I could lay my hands on pro and con and after accumulating in my own library some 300 commentaries on Genesis, the earliest being dated 1670, I am persuaded that there is, on the basis of the evidence, far more reason to translate Gen. 1:2 as 'But the earth had become a ruin and a desolation, etc.' than there is for any of the conventional translations in our modern versions" (1970, p. 7).