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May 1st, 2006
Middler Dogmatics
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God's Not in This Gap: A Study of The Gap Theory in Light of Genesis One and Two

The Gap Theory's origin is not surprising. It arose in 1814 at the same time geologists began demanding periods of millions of years to explain the world's geological formations. It arose from the mind of Dr. Thomas Chalmers, the chair of Old Testament Studies at the University of Edinburgh, who fully admitted that he felt he needed the theory in order to form a compromise between the assertions of those non-biblical geologists and the record of God's creation in Genesis chapters one and two. Dr. Chalmers' theory was gradually fine-tuned and promoted by several other scholars and made its loudest bang when The Schofield Reference Bible of 1917 used the theory in its footnote on Genesis 1:1-2.

But when the bright light of the grammar and syntax of Genesis one and two shines on the Gap Theory, it exposes the theory as a fanciful idea. The Gap Theory shows itself to be an ugly, unbiblical compromise to increase the earth's age and bring the creation account in line with modern, secular science.

The Gap Theory's Claims

There are a few variations of the Gap Theory, but its main tenets are consistent in all of its forms. In short, the Gap Theory insists that a period of hundreds of millions or billions of years hangs in a gap between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:2. According to the theory, Genesis 1:1 describes God's original creation of the universe; this creation was *ex*

nihilo. Some time during the billions of years before the second verse of the Bible, Satan rebelled and brought evil into the universe. This caused God to curse and smash his original creation and recreate a perfect universe, renovating the conditions described in Genesis 1:2. God reused the raw materials from the first universe in this recreation. The remainder of Genesis chapter one, then, is the story of how God reorganized the materials from his first, fallen creation, and turned them into the perfectly renovated universe and world where God was to create Adam and Eve. Although “primitive” human beings may have been a part of God’s first creation, it was not until his creation of the second universe that God created man in his own image, as the crown of his creation.

The Gap Theory uses this argument to account for the existence of fossils and geological formations whose appearances seem to beg for an earth that is hundreds of millions of years old: the theory maintains that the earth is, in fact, hundreds of millions of years old. The theory is also used to explain why light from stars billions of light years away is visible on earth: the universe is, in fact, billions of years old.

The Gap Theory’s Basis

Proponents of the Gap Theory use the grammar of Genesis 1:1-2 and the context of all of Genesis one and two to support their theory. First, gap theorists draw an extremely sharp distinction between the Hebrew verbs *asah* and *bara*. They hold that *bara* refers exclusively to an *ex nihilo* creation, while *asah* most exactly means “to make over” or “recreate.” “The Hebrew word *asah*, does not, we are told, mean ‘to create,’ or even ‘to make,’ but instead means ‘to recreate’ or ‘to make over.’ Therefore we are told

that the original creation was ‘created’ (*bara*); the creation of the six days was ‘made over,’ not created” (Thompson 172).

Next, gap theorists manipulate the grammar of Genesis 1:2 to produce a translation that leaves the door open for a destroyed, original creation prior to God’s six-day creation as described in Genesis 1:3ff. This theory manipulates both the *vav* and the *hayetha* of verse two in order to produce a convenient, gap-friendly translation.

The final major argument used by gap theorists is that the Hebrew words *tohu vabohu* of Genesis 1:2 can refer only to something once in perfect condition, but now destroyed. Gap theorists use this reading of the Hebrew phrase, combined with a fanciful interpretation of Isaiah 45:18, to “prove” that God did not originally create the world *tohu vabohu*, and that this phrase can only refer to the fallen world before God began its renovation.

All three of these arguments deserve to be examined closely and critically. When they are, the shadiness of the Gap Theory is exposed by the clear light of God’s Word.

The Gap Theory Refuted: *asah* and *bara*

Gap theorists are compelled to draw as sharp a distinction as possible between these two verbs used in reference to God’s act of creation. Before an in-depth examination of how these verbs are manipulated by gap theorists, a brief lexicographical study is useful.

Bara, when used in the *qal*, as it is in Genesis one and two

is used rather of a new production of a thing, than of the shaping or elaboration of the existing material. That the first verse of Genesis teaches that the original creation of the world in its rude, chaotic state was from nothing, while

the remainder of the chapter, the elaboration and distribution of matter thus created is taught, the connection of the whole section shows sufficiently clearly (Barr 236).

Also, *bara* “is only applied to a divine creation, the production of that which had no existence before. It is never joined with an accusative of material, although it does not exclude a pre-existent material unconditionally” (Keil and Delitzsch 47).

As for *asah*, Brown, Driver, and Briggs list two general sets of meanings in the *qal*. The second general meaning is “make.” This meaning is given several sub-definitions. Two are pertinent to God’s creative act in Genesis one and two: “often of God’s making (creating)” and “to make something out of (accusative of matter)” (793-95). Simply stated, *bara* is used for God’s creation of something out of nothing or out of unsuitable material, while *asah* is used for making something out of pre-existing, suitable material.

Gap theorists need to make all they can of the distinction between these two words. They must claim that the two words have nothing in common besides their subject, “God.” They have to draw such a distinction because “if one is to have a gap of any sort whatever...during which the earth...was subsequently destroyed, then Genesis 1:2 and following must refer to a recreation, a remaking, and a refurnishing.” (Fields 57). Gap theorists point out that, at times, *asah* can mean “put in order” or “reorder.” (Brown, Driver, Briggs 795). Thus, gap theorists insist that when *bara* is used in Genesis 1:1 it refers to God’s original *ex nihilo* creation before the big gap, and lean on an infrequent usage of *asah* to argue that this word refers to God’s reordering and restoration of his fallen universe in Genesis 1:2 ff.

By using this argument, gap theorists also maneuver around Exodus 20:11, which teaches that God completed his creation in six days. They insist that because Exodus 20:11 uses the verb *asah*, it refers only to God's six-day restoration of his fallen creation, and not to Genesis 1:1 or the gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2.

The Gap Theory, however, runs into a brick wall when it attempts to account for the usages of *bara* outside of Genesis 1:1. Genesis 1:21 refers to God's creation (*bara*) of sea creatures, while Genesis 1:27 states that God both made (*asah*) and created (*bara*) man. Perhaps most devastating to the Gap Theory is that Genesis 2:4 uses the words *asah* and *bara* in the same thought when referring to the creative work that God had done *during the six days of creation*.

Watching gap theorists attempt exegetical gymnastics to get around these issues is both sad and, in a way, amusing. For all their efforts, they are unable to account for the use of *bara* within the six days of God's mere "restoration" and not "creation" of the universe. The fact that in Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 2:4 the two verbs are used nearly interchangeably is also insurmountable evidence that dismisses the theory.

In their zeal to dismiss the Gap Theory, many students of Genesis one and two have gone overboard in their arguments regarding these two words. No doubt their hearts are in the right place; they seek to confine God's entire creative work to the six days of creation. But in the interest of dismissing a dangerous teaching, they are in danger of being unfaithful to the nuances of the creation account. These defenders against the Gap Theory claim that there is no difference whatsoever between *bara* and *asah*; they are entirely interchangeable:

Both *asah* and *bara* must be regarded as interchangeable, particularly when describing the general creative action of

God. When applied to Exodus 20...this conclusion limits the creation of the universe and everything in it to the chronological framework of the six days of creation described in Genesis 1:1-2:25. (Fields 72).

But is it not possible to maintain the distinctive flavors of these two verbs as laid out lexicographically and still be faithful to the Genesis' account of creation? When the distinctive meanings are maintained, the following understanding of Genesis one and two can be used without caving in to the Gap Theory: In Genesis 1:1, God created (*bara*) all of the raw materials for the universe *ex nihilo* on day one, along with light. In the verses that follow, God uses the raw materials to make (*asah*) the individual elements of his creation. Thus, God first created (*bara*) all the materials from nothing, then fashioned them (*asah*) into his final creation in a no less amazing show of power. The difference is that the creation of the raw materials on day one was *ex nihilo*, while the making on the following day uses an accusative of material, the raw materials created on day one.

Using this understanding, the fact that Genesis 2:3, in summarizing God's work of creation, uses both words in the same breath does not present a problem. In fact, this verse supports such an understanding. The verse is simply referring to God's *ex nihilo* creation on day one and his fashioning of the raw materials on each day thereafter in the same verse.

The use of *bara* Genesis 1:27 might create a bit more of a problem. But in this verse it may be concluded that *bara* is used instead of *asah* because in these acts God used materials that were especially unsuitable for what he was making. This concept of God forming a new creation from unsuitable materials is also an accepted use for *bara*. In Genesis 1:27 Moses uses the word *bara* three times to describe God's creation of man. God used dust to create a being in God's own holy image. If ever there was an instance of

wholly unsuitable material being used to form a new creation, this is it. *Bara* now sheds new light on this verse: God's creation of man as the crown of his creation is made even more stunning by the use of *bara*. (It is also possible that God's creation of man was *ex nihilo*. Genesis 2:7, clarifying 1:27, says only that God "formed man – dust from the ground." Whether this verse means God *used* dust, or made man into essentially the same material as dust, or both, is difficult to say on the basis of the Hebrew.) As far as God creating (*bara*) the creatures of the sea in verse 21, little can be said, except that perhaps in this creative action God did not use the pre-created material of day one to form the creatures, or that in this case, again, God may have used especially unsuitable material.

Again, maintaining the distinctive meaning of the two words does nothing to support the Gap Theory. In context, both words are confined to God's six days of creation: *bara* is used multiple times *after* the supposed gap between 1:1 and 1:2. Thus, the gap theorists' argument that *bara* can refer only to God's creation of 1:1 while *asah* refers to his reordering of creation during the six days of 1:2-2:25 falls flat. At the same time, negating the different shadings of these definitions is harmful to a complete, rounded understanding of the creation account.

There are still two further grammatical arguments that gap theorists must make in order for their theory to stand, and neither can withstand close scrutiny.

The Gap Theory Refuted: *hayetha* and *vav*

One of the remaining major Gap Theory arguments centers on the grammar of Genesis 1:2. Gap theorists attempt to turn Genesis 1:2 into a verbal clause that reads, "Then the earth became formless and void..." With this translation, the phrase

supposedly becomes a reference to God's destroying of his first creation and transitions into God's supposed recreation of his universe during the six day creation.

This translation, however, is nigh unto impossible. The fact that the clause contains a verb, *hayetha*, does not automatically make it a verbal clause. According to the strict rules of Hebrew grammar, the clause could still be taken as a nominal copulative. Proponents of the theory argue that where the Hebraist intended to indicate a genuine copula, the verb *hayah* is not included at all. Only if some other sense were intended (like "became" or "had become") would the verb be inserted. But this is not always the case. *Hayah* is used copulatively when the tense is past and the situation referred to no longer exists:

We are not on the other hand justified in removing *hayah* altogether from the sphere of what is relevant to the English "is" and making it equivalent to "become." For example, a statement like "the earth is waste" will have the nominal sentence, and no verb; but if we put it in the past and say "the earth was waste (and is no longer so)," then the verb *hayah* is used, as in Genesis 1:2 (Barr 59).

Also, this clause follows directly the statement that God created the heavens and the earth. Therefore, the most natural understanding in context is "that of the earth taking on a certain initial aspect in response to the creative fiat of God" (Morris 32). Finally, if Moses had intended the sense of the word to be "become," he could very easily have used the most common Hebrew word for "become," *haphak*.

Besides their translation of *hayethah*, gap theorists lean hard on the *vav* that begins verse two. They argue that the *vav* should be translated consecutively, expressing a sequence of events. Translated this way, the beginning of the verse would read, "Then the earth..." But this translation is impossible. The *vav* must be copulative (also known

as disjunctive or conjunctive). This is the case because the *vav* is not connected to a verb, but instead to the noun *haaretz*. This type of *vav* does not relate a sequence of events, but only adds details to information already given (Weingreen 91). Thus, verse two is introduced by a copulative *vav* that gives further information on what was stated in verse one. It does not add a second, further, creative act on God's part, whether one minute or five billion years later.

Therefore, both grammatical arguments in verse two made by proponents of the Gap Theory cannot stand. *Hayetha* means "was" not "became," and the *vav* must mean "and" or "now" not "then." Thus, the Gap Theory's translation of Genesis 1:2, "then the earth became ..." is grammatically invalid.

The Gap Theory Refuted: *tohu vabohu*

The Gap Theory's last gasp, then, comes in the form of an illegitimate word study on the Hebrew phrase *tohu vabohu* in Genesis 1:2. Dr. Wilder-Smith summarizes the Gap Theory's position:

It is argued that the creation could not have come originally from the Creator's hand in a condition of voidness [sic] and waste. Everything that comes from his hand must be perfect. What is void, waste, dark, or empty...cannot have come as such from his hand. Thus according to the Gap Theory, if the creation could be described at any time as dark, void, or waste, it must have **become** thus (45-6, emphasis his).

To strengthen their stand, gap theorists appeal to Isaiah 45:18, which reads, "For this is what the LORD says, he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty (*tohu*), but formed it to be inhabited..." Based on this verse, gap theorists claim that Genesis 1:2 could not refer to

God's original, perfect creation, but must refer to a fallen creation about to be renovated in the following verses.

But the Gap Theory's interpretation of the words *tohu vabohu* is off base. The line of reasoning is very thin because it seeks to found a theory of a great sin and judgment on these words, without any other mention of it in Scripture. It is far better to consider these words as a reference to earth after God's creation of the raw materials before God made them into their final form. "Consider these words as referring to the unformed nature of the earth before God impressed his will on it. A marble block and a crumbled statue are both formless. The former is in a state which awaits a form and from that formlessness emerges the image" (Ramm 139). *Tohu vabohu* literally means "empty and formless." This does not mean that the earth was chaotic, under a curse, or in any other way imperfect. It only means that the act of creation was not yet complete. The phrase *tohu vabohu* is followed by two chapters relating how God formed his *ex nihilo* creation into a perfect formation. There is nothing in Scripture that supports the idea that *tohu vabohu* refers to a corrupted universe in need of renovation.

In fact, the one passage mentioned to support that interpretation is pulled violently from its context. Isaiah 45:18 does say that God did not create the world to be empty (*tohu*). But the verses before and after 45:18 indicate that the subject at hand is Israel, as well as God's purposes and promises to his people. That is, just as the Lord had a purpose in creating the earth, he also has a purpose for Israel. In support of this promise, God reminds the Israelites of his creation, which was not without purpose. He formed the world to be inhabited, and accomplished that purpose. In the same way, he will achieve

his purpose for his people Israel. The context of Isaiah 45 deals with Israel, not a pre-six day creation curse and cataclysm.

All of the Gap Theory's arguments fall apart upon close examination. The Theory was invented as a compromise between the truths of God's Word and modern, secular science. Some, intimidated by scientism, felt the need to force billions of years into the creation account. Predictably, they wound up with a theory that abuses and manipulates the Hebrew and the clear message of the creation account. Sadly, the illegitimate compromise has led many to lose sight of the message of the creation account: God created the world once, and he created it perfectly. Confronted with evil in his creation, God did not respond with a renovation. He responded with his plan of salvation.

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