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## THE GAP THEORY OF GENESIS 1:2

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The gap theory attempts to resolve the apparent conflict between Scripture and modern geology by inserting a gap of unknown time between the first two verses of Genesis 1. The gap theory doesn't just insert a gap of time in order to give room for geological eras; it also theorizes that because of Satan's fall, the original creation became ruined and devastated, which supposedly explains the evidence of mass animal death before the fall as seen in the fossil record. Genesis 1:2 is describing not merely that the earth was formless and void but also that it was in a state of ruin and destruction, an accursed state under God's judgment. The gap theory suggests that verse 1 describes God's original work of creation, verse 2 describes the result of the original creation's destruction, and verse 3 and following describe its restoration or re-creation. For this reason, the theory has also been called the ruin-restoration theory.

Although advocates of the theory claim to have precedent in earlier writers, the view makes its modern appearance in the work of Scottish theologian Thomas Chalmers, who proposed it in 1814. His view was popularized by the Plymouth Brethren writer G. H. Pember in his book *Earth's Earliest Ages* in 1876. Pember wrote, "It is thus clear that the second verse of Genesis describes the earth as a ruin; but there is no hint of the time which elapsed between creation and this ruin. Age after age may have rolled away, and it was probably during their course that the strata of the earth's crust were gradually developed" (Kregel edition; p. 32).

**Desolation.** All of this is read into the Hebrew phrase *tōhū vābohū* (Gen. 1:2), which many English Bibles render "without form and void" (ESV, RSV, KJV, NKJV). But Pember thinks the first word, *tōhū*, means "ruin" or "desolation," and he translates the verse as a whole: "And the earth *became* desolate and void." He goes on to argue that this happened as a result of Satan's fall from heaven as outlined in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28. Then, starting in verse 3, God begins to remake the ruined earth into a habitable place for man. Pember calls the six days of Genesis 1 not the six days of "creation" but the six days of "restoration." Pember argues that this distinction between "creation" and "restoration" is even implied in the different verbs used: in Genesis 1:1, God "created" (*bārā*) the heavens and the earth, but in Genesis 1:3ff, God "made" (*'āšā*) or

refashioned the already existing earth. Having granted geology all the time it needs in verse 2, the six days of “restoration” can now be interpreted as six literal days.

After Pember, the gap theory made its way into the *Scofield Reference Bible* (first published in 1909) and became entrenched as orthodoxy in fundamentalist circles. It was not until the rise of the flood-based, six-day creationism of Henry Morris in the 1960s that the gap theory was dislodged. However, in 1970 the gap theory was revived by Arthur C. Custance and given its best exegetical articulation in his book *Without Form and Void*, although it is not clear how much of an impact his self-published book made.

There are many arguments against the gap or ruin-restoration theory, but I will give three. First, the details of the Hebrew words and grammar in Genesis 1:2 do not support the gap theory. (A) The noun *tōhū* here does not mean “ruin” or “desolation” in the sense of necessarily implying the ruin of an original pristine state. (B) There is little basis for rendering the verb *hāyā* in Genesis 1:2 “became” (Pember) or “had become” (Custance). (C) Pember’s absolute distinction between *bārā* and *‘āśā* is not sustainable on lexical grounds. Both verbs are used in the Old Testament to denote creation in the absolute sense.

Second, because the gap theory wants to take the six days of creation literally, it necessarily places Genesis 1:1–2 outside of the creation week. But the immediate context and subsequent scriptural allusions to Genesis 1 make clear that the initial creation of the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1) marks the starting point of the creation week. This is clear from the context, when we come to the concluding statement: “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them” (Gen. 2:1). Subsequent scriptural allusions to Genesis 1 are just as emphatic, for example, the statement in the Decalogue that “in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them” (Exod. 20:11; cf. 31:17). Because the gap theory wants to take the six days of “re-creation” as literal days, while making room for long geological eras prior to verse 3, the theory requires that the creation week begin at verse 3 rather than at verse 1. Yet Scripture itself views the first verse of Genesis 1 as narrating the beginning of the creation week.

Third, there is no biblical evidence that God created plants and animals in an original creation, which was then destroyed under God’s judgment prior to Adam’s fall. The gap theory’s appeal to Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 is tenuous at best. To begin with, biblical scholars are not sure that these passages are in fact referring to Satan’s fall. At a surface level, they seem to be about the fall of human kings (the kings of Babylon and Tyre). But even if these passages have a second-order reference to Satan’s fall, does his being cast down from heaven look back to an event in the primeval past or forward to Satan’s defeat by Christ and his ultimate punishment (Rev. 12:9; 20:10)? And is the image of Satan being cast to earth to be taken literally and physically, like the massive meteor that scientists think caused the extinction of the dinosaurs?

Furthermore, there is nothing in those passages about an original creation of plants and animals, or about Satan being cast down to the earth and causing geological catastrophe, mass extinctions, death, chaos, and ruin as indicated in the fossil record.

These additional details of the theory have to be manufactured by imagination and speculation. And once manufactured they must then be inserted into the Genesis 1 account. There are too many uncertainties surrounding Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 to warrant linking them with the description of the earth given in Genesis 1:2.

**Flawed Exegesis.** The gap theory's fundamental error is that it rests on a flawed hermeneutic. The Scripture itself nowhere teaches the gap theory. The gap theory does not rest on internal exegesis of the text of Genesis 1 interpreted in the light of the subsequent Scriptures that allude to and comment on it. Rather, it rests on postulating, presumably somewhere in Genesis 1:1, the creation of plants and animals in a primeval creation before the re-creation of the plants and animals of days 3, 5, and 6. Then it requires one to take two uncertain passages from Isaiah and Ezekiel and fit them into the white space between the first two verses of Genesis 1 without any clear biblical-theological warrant internal to the logic of Scripture. The ruin-restoration motif is totally foreign to the Genesis creation account and is forced into that account in a manner that completely disrespects and disrupts the narrative integrity of the creation account. One gets the distinct impression that the motivation for this interpretation is not anything internal to the Genesis creation account itself, but the desire to maintain a literal reading of the six days of creation while satisfying geology's demand for long ages of time.

**Geology versus Gap Theory.** Ironically, the gap theory fails to accomplish its own intended goal. To satisfy modern geology, one needs not only long ages but gradual processes of change in the Earth's crust over those long ages. Geologists look at the Earth's crust and see evidence of physical processes that took millions, even billions, of years. Take the Grand Canyon as an example. The various layers that one sees in the walls of the Grand Canyon (e.g., the Kaibab Limestone layer, the Redwall Limestone layer, etc.) were laid down by sedimentary processes that took hundreds of millions of years. Add to this the fact that in each distinct layer we find correspondingly distinct fossils that, whether viewed as the product of biological evolution or of progressive creation, clearly represent a great passage of time. Then, more recently, the Colorado River had to cut through those sedimentary layers by another geological process called erosion. Erosion is frequently a much "faster" process than sedimentation, and yet Grand Canyon geologists think it still took at least five million years! Geologists would laugh at the suggestion that these sorts of geological formations were produced by a single catastrophic event such as a meteor impact, much less by Satan's being cast down to Earth.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, not only does the gap theory fail to satisfy the requirements of geology, it is internally incoherent. On the one hand, it theorizes a catastrophe of such magnitude that the Earth became "desolate and void," requiring God to "re-create" the Earth's atmosphere (day 2), crust, and oceans (day 3). On the other hand, the gap theory claims it is trying to explain the existence of the fossils that we now see. It suggests that the fossils are the result of a mass extinction of all life caused by Satan's being cast down to

Earth. But if the Earth's atmosphere and crust were completely "re-created" and made new so that God could call it "good," surely the fossils and any trace of the catastrophe would have been completely wiped away by God's re-creative activity. But the fossils were not wiped away. The "ruin" part of the ruin-restoration theory may explain where the fossils came from, but the "restoration" part of the theory calls into question their present existence. The theory is self-refuting.

What lessons can be learned with regard to hermeneutics? Clever, seemingly simple solutions such as the gap theory are almost never correct. One must synthesize everything the Bible teaches, not just look at specific verses taken out of context. The solution to the apparent conflict between the Bible and geology is not to fit certain things in the white spaces between verses but to interpret the creation "week" figuratively, since it is characterized by a high degree of literary structuring.<sup>2</sup> — *Lee Irons*

**Lee Irons, Ph.D.**, contributed to a book titled *The Genesis Debate: Three Views on the Days of Creation* (ed. David G. Hagopian; Crux Press, 2001). He maintains a website of biblical and theological studies at [www.upper-register.com](http://www.upper-register.com).

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#### NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Dr. R. Joel Duff (University of Akron) for fact-checking my statements about geology.
- 2 See my article, "The Framework Interpretation of the Days of Creation," *Christian Research Journal* 35, 1 (January 2012): 8-9.