

Excursus on Creation of Life and Biological Diversity

2. The Gap Interpretation

Last time we looked at the literal interpretation of Genesis chapter 1. Today we want to turn to a quite different interpretation which has been called the “gap interpretation.” This is a view that was popularized by the old *Scofield Reference Bible*. It holds that there is a gap of time between verses 1 and 2 of Genesis chapter 1, and that all of the evidence of fossil life, extinct life forms, and so forth were from an ancient world that existed prior to the state described in Genesis 1:2 and which came under God's judgment and was destroyed. What is described in verses 2 and following then is God's re-creation (in effect) of the world after a long gap. So this view would say that all of the evidence that we have in contemporary science of ancient geological periods, prehistoric life, and the antiquity of man is from that pre-gap world.

What might we say by way of assessment of this theory? I think that there could well be a gap of time between verses 1 and 2 in Genesis chapter 1. Verse 1 describes, as we have seen, God's creation of the universe, or “the heavens and the Earth.” Then in verse 2 the focus radically narrows to God's activity upon the Earth – “and the Earth was without form and void” – and God's transformation of the Earth from an uninhabitable waste to a place which is fit for human habitation. So I think there could well be a gap of time between the creation of the universe in verse 1 and the transformation of the surface of the Earth into a biosphere suitable for human habitation.

Some young earth creationists, eager to maintain God's creation of the universe in six consecutive 24-hour days, have insisted that there cannot be a gap between verses 1 and 2. Rather, God's creation of the heavens and the Earth in verse 1 must be comprised within the six days of creation. The issue that they are raising here is in effect: when did day 1 begin? Did day 1 begin with the creation of light in verse 3, or did day 1 begin with God's creation of the heavens and the Earth in verse 1? In support of the view that day 1 begins in verse 1 these interpreters appeal to the grammatical form of verse 2. They argue, as I have previously in our discussion of *creatio ex nihilo* that the first verse should not be thought of as a title for the entire creation account because it is linked to the second verse by the Hebrew word *waw* or “and” – “and the Earth was without form and void,” etc. So the first verse is not simply a title but is joined by this Hebrew conjunction to the second verse. But these scholars would point out that the grammatical structure of verse 2 is not the typical form in Hebrew of a sequential narrative, which would be the conjunction *waw* plus a verb in the imperfect tense plus a subject of the sentence. This form is known as the “*waw*-consecutive,” and that is not the form that verse 2 takes grammatically. Rather, it is *waw* plus immediately the subject of the sentence – “and the Earth” – followed by the verb in the perfect tense. So this is not a *waw*-consecutive and therefore does not describe the state of affairs in verse 2 to follow chronologically on the state described in verse 1. These two states, then, are not temporally sequential, and therefore there cannot be a gap between them. Moreover these interpreters appeal once again to the Pentateuchal author’s comment in Exodus 20:11, “In six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them.” And

Exodus 31:17, “for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested.” That comprises in the six days the events of Genesis 1:1, which says that in the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth. In [Exodus] 20:11 and 31:17 it says, “in six days” the Lord made the heavens and the Earth. So the events of verse 1 must be included in day 1, since they are part of the six days of creation. So day 1 begins with God's creation of the heavens and the Earth in the beginning, and it ends with the morning of the second day.

I, myself, do not find these arguments convincing. I think that the most natural interpretation of the passage is that day 1 begins with God's creation of the light. Genesis 1:3-5 says,

And God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.

What could be more obvious? The author says, “God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.” It seems to me that the most natural understanding of this is that this marks the creation of the first day.

Notice that when the author says “there was evening and there was morning, one day,” the evening refers to the fading of the daylight that God had created, and the morning refers to the morning of the next day. The evening doesn't refer to the primordial darkness and the morning to the creation of daylight, for then there would be no morning for the second day. Evening refers to the evening of or the

ending of the daylight of day 1, not to the primordial darkness. So day 1 begins with God's creation of light.

I think that support for this view comes from the pattern of the other five days. Each day is marked by the phrase “there was evening and there was morning” and then which day it is. Each day begins with a new morning after the evening of the previous day. There's no reason to make day 1 an exception to this pattern that is exhibited by all the other days.

As for the grammatical argument, it is correct that what follows chronologically on verse 1 is the state of affairs described in verse 3 – “and God said, ‘Let there be light.’” What we have in verse 2 is a circumstantial clause giving background information to verse 3. This is called a “*waw*-disjunctive” construction. We can translate verse 2 as follows: *Now the Earth was without form and void*. It is a circumstantial clause describing the situation that obtained when God in verse 3 began his creative work. I don't think there's anything that would preclude a gap of time between the state described in verse 1 and the beginning of God's activity described in verse 3 when he acts to bring about an end to the state of primordial darkness and desolation.

As for Exodus 20:11 and 31:17, I think that the six-day creationist is pressing these verses too hard to make them say things that were not in the mind of the author. The author is thinking back on Genesis chapter 1, and he's referring to these six creative days related there. I doubt that it even entered his mind as to whether the first day began with verse 1 or verse 3. His statement is just a sort of general summary statement that doesn't intend to address the question of when the first day began. Notice if we do press these

verses with a wooden literalness then it actually backfires on the six-day creationist. Exodus 31:17 says, “in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested.” But in Genesis 1 God made the heavens and the earth in one day on this interpretation – the first day. God made the heavens and the Earth, according to Genesis 1:1, on what they would count as the first day, in contradiction to Exodus 31.17 that it took six days. Now, that would be a ridiculously literal interpretation of Exodus 31:17. But if we interpret the verse in a more natural way, then when day 1 began just doesn’t come into view. It's not the author's interest. So it seems to me that there could well have been a gap of time between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:3.

Having said that, however, the idea that there was a prior life world before God's creative activity in verse 3 is utterly foreign to the text. The text to all appearances is describing God's initial creation of the biosphere, and on each occasion it pronounces the goodness of God's creative work. The idea that this is just all a repeat of something that's gone on before has absolutely no warrant in the text. Remember, this is supposed to be a pre-flood recreation. This isn't a recreation of the world after the flood. This is prior to Noah, and there's simply nothing in the text that would support a view like the gap theory.

Indeed, the gap interpretation seems to be an example of concordism at its very worst. Under the pressure of the evidence of prehistoric life and geological time and the vast age of the universe, one reads things into the text like a prior world and a gap that were not at all intended by the author. So this is guilty, I think, of this flawed hermeneutic in terms of how we interpret Genesis 1.

3. Day Gap Interpretation

Let's go on to the next interpretation which is the day-gap interpretation. We already looked at the gap interpretation; now we want to look at the day-gap interpretation. The day-gap interpretation holds that what we have described in Genesis 1 is six 24-hour *non-consecutive* days. There are long gaps of time in between God's creative acts. So, on day 3 God miraculously creates, for example, the land and vegetation. And then there's a long period of time. And then he intervenes again on another creative day and miraculously creates, for example, birds and aquatic animals and allows them to propagate for a long period of time before he intervenes again and creates terrestrial animals and man. So you have six 24-hour days, but these days are separated by long intervals of time during which time the things that God has created may develop and evolve.

What might we say by way of assessment of this interpretation? Again, I think one has to say that there's nothing in the text that would suggest the day-gap interpretation. On the contrary, each morning is the morning of the consecutive day. Each day ends with the evening of that day, and then with the morning of the following day the new day begins. Given that we're talking about the evening of a day and then the morning of the next day, there isn't any room for a gap. One day follows immediately upon the heels of the other. So I don't think that there's anything in the text that would indicate that there are gaps of time between these six days. Indeed, that seems to be ruled out by the pattern of evening and morning.

The motivation behind this view seems to be once again a desire to reconcile the text with geological time and limited evolutionary

development of life forms by reading gaps into the text in order to extend the past and allow for limited evolution during the gaps. Insofar as this view tends to be motivated by an attempt to reconcile Genesis 1 with modern science, it again represents the flawed hermeneutic of concordism.

Ironically, it doesn't even do a very good job at that! Because modern science indicates that the animals, for example, were not created in just a 24-hour period of time, but rather over hundreds of millions of years. The idea that all aquatic life, for example, was created in 24 hours and that there was then a period of non-creative development and then another 24 hour period millions of years later when all terrestrial life was created just flies in the face of the fossil record, which indicates overlapping development. So insofar as the day-gap interpretation is an attempt motivated by the desire to find concord with modern science, it really doesn't do a very good job.

But all of that is beside the point because at this stage you'll remember we're not asking about what the right scientific view is of the origin of life or biological complexity. We're simply asking the hermeneutical question: what does this ancient text teach? The day-gap interpretation doesn't really find any support in the text. There isn't a clue that this ancient text is intended to teach that there were long gaps of time in between the days. Indeed, quite the contrary. This is a view that's read into the text, and I think even contrary to the text because of its pattern of "evening and morning, one day."