Genesis - Commentaries by Stanley Bruce Anstey

The Gap of Genesis 1: Is It A Theory?, Gap in Genesis 1, The

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Is It a Theory?

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:1-2).

The Issue

Over the last couple of hundred years, the position that most Christian teachers and expositors have taken on Genesis 1:1-2 is that it refers to an original creation of God wherein, after some kind of judgment, the earth passed into a state of chaos and ruin. Then, in Genesis 1:3-31, in six literal days, God engaged in a reconstruction of the earth, with the creation of animal life and mankind being added to the reconstruction (vss. 21, 27). Bible teachers have concluded, therefore, that there is a period of undisclosed time between the creation of the earth (vss. 1-2) and its reconstruction (vss. 3-31). They do not attempt to calculate how long this gap was because Scripture is silent about it, but simply to note that it is there. Some have speculated that the gap might have been millions of years, and this perhaps explains the presence of the fossils in the geologic layers of the earth’s crust, which were once creatures that were part of the earth's original creation.

This interpretation has been the belief of virtually every respected Bible scholar of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century—from J. N. Darby, G. V. Wigram, W. Kelly, C. H. Mackintosh, F. W. Grant, W. Scott, A. J. Pollock — to C. I. Scofield, R. A. Torrey, E. Schuyler English, A. C. Gaebelien, H. A. Ironside, M. F. Unger, etc. The headings in "The Scofield Reference Bible" on Genesis 1 reflect this interpretation. It says: Verse 1—"The Original Creation;" verse 2—"The Earth Made Waste and Empty by Judgment;" and verses 3-31—"A New Beginning—the First Day, etc."

In spite of this generally accepted interpretation, most evangelical Christians today believe that these scholars are mistaken in their view of Genesis 1—mostly because certain things have been discovered in science and geology in the last 50 or 60 years. "Young Earth Creationists" (as they are commonly so-called) are Christians who reject the idea that there was an original earth created by God prior to the reconstructed one on which we live today. In their way of interpreting Genesis 1, they see verses 1-2 as part of God's work in the six days in verses 3-31. (This is essentially a re-emergence of Reformation teaching on Genesis 1—i.e. Martin Luther, John Calvin, Matthew Henry, etc.) To Young Earth Creationists, Genesis 1 is all one continuous explanation of creation. They conclude, therefore, that the Genesis record indicates that the earth is relatively young—about 6000 years old—because (they say) the six days in Genesis 1 wherein time begins mark God's creative beginning. They have gone to great lengths to try to convince the Christian world of this—using science, the fossil records, and misinterpretations of Scripture. The question is, “Which of these two beliefs is correct?" And, "Is it important?”

Those who hold the view of there being a gap do not see this issue as being vital (for it does not touch upon the Person of Christ or the work of Christ in atonement), but Young Earth Creationists believe that it is very important. They strenuously insist that the earth is young, and the main reason for this is that it is a useful tool in debunking the erroneous theories of Evolution, which require long periods of time for things to slowly evolve. To hold that there is a gap in Genesis 1—which Young Earth Creationists call “the Gap Theory”—is, in their minds, a terrible compromise with the false notions of Evolution. These men believe that the idea of a gap accommodates Evolution, and thus, undermines the gospel message. They think that it is a serious error and counterproductive to the whole purpose for which Christians have been placed in this world, which is to spread the gospel.

On the other hand, “Gapists” or "Gapsters"—as Young Earth Creationists call those who hold that there is a gap—predominantly, if not exclusively, use the Word of God to support their beliefs on creation, and leave science out of the picture. They do not believe that holding what Scripture says on this subject (or on any other subject) could possibly weaken the gospel message to the world, because God does not teach things in His Word that tear down truth stated elsewhere in His Word. "Gapists" understand that the ultimate cause for a person’s belief in the gospel is a result of God’s quickening power in souls (Eph. 2:5), and that atheists will not be convinced that their beliefs on Evolution are wrong by clever arguments from science. “Gapists” see from Scripture that Christians have not been called to reason with infidels, and thus, they have no business trying to convince lost men of the existence of God and His creation. They are content to leave the results of the gospel to God who alone has the power to bring men to repentance and to belief on the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, "Gapists" see the premise of the Young Earth Creationist’s beliefs as being on a wrong footing—besides being unscriptural.

The Bible—the Ultimate Authority for the Answer

An authoritative answer to this difference of opinion will not be found by turning to science or to the fossil records, or to human reason, but by turning to the Word of God. It is our ultimate authority for what we believe. Our inquiry, therefore, must begin with, "What does God's Word say about this question?" An examination of Genesis 1 indicates that there was indeed an original creation of "the heavens and the earth," and that the earth passed into a chaotic state which was "without form [waste] and void [empty]," where "darkness" prevailed over the whole scene. How long it lay in that chaotic condition we are not told, but we are told that there came a point in which God acted and "made" (a work of reconstruction) a new earth and heavens (Ex. 20:11; 31:17; Psa. 33:6). This has led many sound and respected Bible teachers to conclude that there is a gap in the account between these two works of God. Young Earth Creationists accuse these Bible teachers of adding a gap to Scripture, when really, they are simply observing the fact that God has not disclosed to us when He began His creative work in the dateless past and how long it laid in a fallen state before He undertook His work of reconstruction. These respected teachers believe that it would be a mistake to say that Genesis 1:1-2 is the same work as Genesis 1:3-31 in the light of the evidences from Scripture which we are about to consider.

In the creation account, it is important to note that the Word of God uses three different words—"made," "created," and "formed" (Gen. 2:4-7)—to describe God's work:

- "Created" ("bara") has to do with bringing something into existence that has never existed before, using no pre-existing material (Gen. 1:1, 21, 27).

- "Made" ("asa") has to do with using material that has been previously created and making it into something new and different (Gen. 1:31; 2:3-4).

- "Formed" ("yasar") has to do with taking something that has been made and reshaping it into a new form for a particular purpose (Gen. 2:7-8).

Isaiah 43:7 mentions all three terms in one verse. "Even every one that is called by My name: for I have created him for My glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him." (See also Isaiah 45:18.) Thus, on the first four days of the reconstruction God was making only; on the fifth day He was making and creating; and on the sixth day He was making, creating, and forming; on the seventh day He did none of the above.

Those who advocate a young earth say that these terms are used interchangeably in Scripture and that they all refer to the same thing: However, a careful look at the account of creation will show that they are not used interchangeably. For example, Genesis 2:3 says, "And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it He had rested from all His work which God created and made." If created and made are identical terms, this would be a redundant and senseless statement. As a rule, God does not use terms interchangeably in His Word. If a different word appears in the text, it is because there is a different meaning or aspect in view in the subject in discussion. This is consistent throughout Scripture, and "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35).

Young Earth Creationists will point to Genesis 1:26-27 to support their idea that God uses terms interchangeably. These verses say, "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in His image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them." However, these words are referring different parts of man’s tri-part being. Genesis 1:26 is emphasizing the natural and physical side of Man, which God made, and Genesis 1:27 refers to the spiritual side of man's being which God created when He made man (Gen. 2:7).

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