

# The Barren Earth

GENESIS 1:1-2

Rev. Dr. Richard D. Phillips

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The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters (Gen. 1:2).

In 415 B.C., the Athenian navy descended upon the island of Sicily with an invading army. For over a year, Athens besieged the fortress city of Syracuse, blockading its port and constructing a wall to cut off the city from support. This siege was one of the most decisive events of the ancient world, since victory would have opened the way for an Athenian conquest of Italy and thus the removal of Rome from future world affairs. By 414, the people of Syracuse were so disheartened that they called an assembly to discuss the terms of surrender they might offer to Athens. At this critical moment, however, a small ship was seen evading the blockading squadron and headed towards the harbor. When it arrived, an emissary of Athens' chief rival, Sparta, emerged in the assembly with news that help was on the way in the form of the Spartan general Gylippus. Their drooping spirits energized, the Syracusans resolved to continue the fight and with Sparta's help they defeated the Athenian invaders.<sup>1</sup>

It is not hard to discern the hand of God in these events, especially as they shaped the future of the world into which Jesus would come and in which the gospel would be spread. Moreover, the pattern seen in this scenario is typical of God's working in history. What was needed was an infusion of spiritual energy so that faith would be uplifted. This pattern, so often seen in world history, is even more prominent

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<sup>1</sup> Edward S. Creasy, *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World: From Marathon to Waterloo* (New York Dorset, 1987), 36-56.

in redemption, where the Holy Spirit provides the spiritual power necessary to saving faith. So significant is this pattern of spiritual energizing that its presence is seen even in the very opening phase of God's work of creation. Moses writes that in the primeval state of creation, when all was a deep and dark mass, "the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2). The result was life, energy, and potential for God's creation design.

## Relating Genesis 1:1 and 1:2

As we move from the Bible's first verse toward the narrative of Genesis 1, important questions are raised about how to understand the events in the very beginning. These questions include whether Genesis 1:1 records an event or serves merely as an introduction to the theme, whether Genesis teaches creation *ex nihilo* – creation out of nothing – or merely God's forming of previous creation material, and what exactly was taking place in Genesis 1:2?

The first question can be summed up in a simple question: is Genesis 1:1 a title sentence introducing the creation chapter or does it record the actual creation event? Those who see verse 1 as a chapter title open up the question as to whether Genesis teaches creation *ex nihilo*, that is, creation out of nothing. The issue is that if Genesis 1:1 does not describe an historical event, then the action of creation begins at verse 3, where "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." In this case, creation begins with the already existing matter that is presented in verse 2. Genesis 1 thus presents not true creation but the reforming of the chaotic matter already in the universe.

The great majority of conservative scholars insist that Genesis 1:1 does teach creation *ex nihilo*. John Calvin asserts that the verb used for "created" (Hebrew *bara*) implies original creation.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, while Genesis 1:1 does majestically introduce the chapter, there is no reason to doubt that it does more than serve as a title sentence, the way a good academic paper today always begins with a clear thesis statement. In its own terms, Genesis 1 reports the event of the original creation. Moreover, Hebrews 11:3 plainly states creation *ex*

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Genesis* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1554, reprint 1992), 71.

*nihilo* as the Bible's own interpretation of Genesis 1: "By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible." C. John Collins writes: "Taking Genesis 1:1 as a background event, prior to the main storyline [which begins at verse 3], is the best way to read it. . . . The first verse of Genesis briefly records the creation of the universe in its essential form."<sup>3</sup>

A second question concerns how Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 relate to one another. In the early 1800's, Thomas Chalmers was a noted theologian and also an amateur geologist. At that time, evidence from rock formations was being used to argue for a much older age of the earth than is accounted for in the Bible. Wanting to harmonize Scripture and science, Chalmers proposed what is known as the "Gap Theory." This view argues that between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 there is a large gap of time – perhaps millions of years – after which a cataclysm took place that made a ruin of God's original creation. Under this view, the expression, "The earth was without form and void," describes the result of God's judgment for the rebellion of Satan and his angels.<sup>4</sup> The original creation was thus made into a ruin which had to be repaired. This Gap Theory was included in the Dispensational notes to the influential Schofield Study Bible and in this way became a standard teaching among conservative Christians in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

There are a number of reasons, however, to rule out the Gap Theory. First, like the abyss it describes, the doctrine is created out of a void of biblical data. There is nothing in the text to suggest a massive time gap between verses 1 and 2, or to suppose that it assumes the rebellion of Satan. The Bible assumes the fall of Satan and his angels, but the lack of details regarding this event is not an invitation to insert it in the creation account without any textual basis.

The most conclusive reason to reject the Gap Theory stems from the grammar of Genesis 1:2. The issue has to do with the Hebrew conjunction *waw*, signified by the letter *w*. When attached to the

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<sup>3</sup> C. John Collins, *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 54.

<sup>4</sup> It was widely supposed that this fall of Satan is described in Isaiah 14:12-15, which begins, "How are you fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn!" It is not at all certain, however, that this refers to Satan, since the original context is directed to the Babylonian conqueror Nebuchadnezzar.

beginning of verbs, it notes a sequence of events and is translated as “and.” This would be the case were Genesis 1:2 teaching something like the Gap Theory: first God created and then “the earth was without form and void.” The problem is that verse 2 employs the *waw* not with a verb but a noun, in which case it is *disjunctive* rather than *consecutive*. The *waw disjunctive* does not note a sequence of events but rather gives consequential clauses that relate a condition. Thus Genesis 1:1-2 do not describe two different events separated by a massive gap in time and a cataclysmic rebellion to God. Rather, it records the initial creation and then gives three descriptions of the state of affairs that resulted: “The earth was without form and void,” “darkness was over the face of the deep,” and “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.”

## Formless and Void

We should not be surprised that an event as unique as the original creation is described in provocative and distinctive language. This is precisely the case with the first description of what the original creation was like before God began forming and molding it: “The earth was without form and void” (Gen. 1:2).

This stark language has caused many to suggest that there was an initial chaos, a desolation and abyss to the original creation. The Hebrew words for “formless and void” are *tohu* and *bohu*, and they are found together in Isaiah 34:11 where God had punished Edom with “confusion” (*tohu*) and “emptiness” (*bohu*). Based on this and other biblical comparisons, H. C. Leupold translates them as “wilderness” and “emptiness.”<sup>5</sup> Genesis 1:2 thus describes the original creation as barren and uninhabited: it was a desert and it was deserted.

Although these terms are later used to describe the effects of God’s judgment, in Genesis 1:2 God is not destroying but creating. It thus describes a lack in the original creation, not because God has torn down but rather because he has not yet built it up. John Sailhamer writes: “the expression ‘formless and empty’ ultimately refers to the

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<sup>5</sup> H. C. Leupold, *Genesis*, 46.

condition of the land in its 'not-yet' state – the state it was in before God made it 'good'.<sup>6</sup> The raw material was there, but it had not yet been suitably fashioned. The situation was comparable to when Michelangelo received the great block of marble from which he would sculpt his famous statue of Israel's King David. Michelangelo gazed upon the formless block, imagined the form of David inside it, and then set about the work of bringing forth what his genius had seen. Like Michelangelo, God looked into the primeval mass of creation and saw his intention to create a lush world filled with blessed people.

The creation mass was not yet formed or inhabited, but this wonderful purpose was on the Creator's mind. God looks upon you, as well, with a sense of purpose and with a design for your blessing. Jeremiah 29:11 says, "I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

This pair of terms, *tohu* and *bohu*, barren and uninhabited, sets up the progression that will be fulfilled in the six days of creation that follow. Days 1-3 serve to address the barren state of the creation: the day and night are separated, the land and the sea are distributed, and finally on the third day the earth is made to sprout with vegetation: "plants yielding seeds, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed" (Gen. 1:11). Days 4-6 then address the desertedness of the creation: lights are hung to guide the day and the night, sea creatures fill the waters, flying creatures soar in the air, and beasts creep on the ground. Finally, the pinnacle of God's creation took place on Day 6: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'" (Gen. 1:26). God's plan for creation, then, involved the making of a home and then living occupants.

This same pattern revealed in creation is also seen in God's work of redemption. Genesis 2 shows God creating a lush garden – a land – and placing his image-bearing man and woman into the garden to populate it with children – a people. The fall of man in sin caused the cursing of the land and the expulsion of the people. But starting in Genesis 12, God called Abraham to begin a work of salvation by grace. And what did God offer Abraham but a promised land and

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<sup>6</sup> John Sailhamer, *Genesis*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 volumes (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1990), 2:24.

people: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation” (Gen. 12:1-2). Likewise, when Israel left their bondage in Egypt, they journeyed to the same kind of promise: a promised land and a promised nation.

Christians should realize, then, that Genesis 1:2 structures what God is doing through us and for us today. When you come to Jesus Christ in saving faith, God provides you with an eternal home in which to dwell in glory and an everlasting people with whom to live in blessing. It is in the fulfillment of redemption that God achieves the original architecture of creation. Thus while Genesis 1:2 states, “The earth was without form and void,” that is, barren and deserted, Revelation 22 concludes the Bible with a vision of the eternal city in which flows “the river of the water of life” (Rev. 22:1) and the people “who wash their robes” and “have the right to the tree of life” (Rev. 22:14). God intended from the very beginning to make a glorious home for his beloved people. This is one way in which we see the gospel in the book of Genesis: it is in Christ that God ultimately achieves this aim, making us his holy people in order to live with him forever.

## Darkness on the Deep

The second consequential clause is equally mysterious: “and darkness was on the face of the deep” (Gen. 1:2). Here again, many scholars see an allusion to evil, some comparing this clause to the mythological creation stories of the ancient Near East, where the dragon Tiamat had to be wrestled and destroyed.<sup>7</sup> But, again, there is no evidence of anything here other than what God desired. Science today shows that darkness is simply the absence of light, and likewise Genesis 1:3 shows that it was dark in the primeval mass simply because God had not yet shined his light upon it.

Particularly mysterious is “the face of the deep.” It seems that this refers to the primeval mass which, as the verse continues to say, consisted of “waters.” From a scientific point of view, Andrew

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<sup>7</sup> Gerhard von Rad declares this connection based on similarities to how the words sound in the biblical and mythological accounts; see Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 48. But Leupold counters: “The mere similarity of names does not make the Biblical account a derivative from Babylonian sources” (H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis, Volume 1: Chapters 1-19* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1942), 47).

Kulikovsky suggests that “on the first day God created a three-dimensional space containing a ball of liquid water large enough to contain all the mass of the universe.”<sup>8</sup> An alternative scenario sees the deep as “a massively deep layer of water covering or surrounding the surface of the barren and desolate earth.”<sup>9</sup>

Again, the scenario of the original creation indicates a raw mass of potential on which God had not yet begun his further work of fashioning and blessing. It was not God’s intention for his creation to lie in darkness. Therefore, his first act after creation was to ordain light to shine upon it: “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen. 1:3).

Bible readers will inevitably and rightly look back on the earliest chapters of the Old Testament in light of the later teaching of the prophets. We remember, thus, the promise of Isaiah 9:2: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.” It is God’s will to bring light of every kind into places of darkness. Where there is ignorance, he provides truth. Where there is immorality, he cleanses for holiness. Of course, Christians read further in the Bible and find in the New Testament that Isaiah was himself looking ahead to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Christ was the light who would shine through his gospel on the people living in unbelief, ignorance, and sin. Indeed, taking the first two clauses of Genesis 1:2 together, we see God highlighting an agenda that would be fulfilled through the coming of his Son. God looked on the world as devoid of life – lacking both plants and people – and covered in darkness. John 1:4 declares the ultimate remedy to both in the person of Jesus Christ: “In him was life and the life was the light of men.”

## The Spirit of God Hovering

**T**he first two clauses of Genesis 1:2 may be seen as identifying problems in the original creation. They were problems not in the sense of defects but of unfulfilled potential. In the final clause, we see

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<sup>8</sup> Quoting Russell Humphreys. Andrew S. Kulikovsky, *Creation, Fall, Restoration: A Biblical Theology of Creation* (Ross-Shire, UK, 2009), 124.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

the beginning of the solution in the agent who will provide both life and light to the barren earth: “And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2).

First, we must identify what is being described by the Hebrew phrase *rhuach Elohim*. Many scholars interpret this as “the divine wind” or even “a mighty wind.” This translation is plausible since the Hebrew word for “spirit” is the same word used for “wind.” In this case, Genesis 1:2 concludes with a turbulent force that is stirring the barren and chaotic mass.

There are two main problems with this interpretation. The first is that when *rhuach* is combined with *Elohim*, it always means either the Spirit or the breath of God.<sup>10</sup> In this case, it must mean Spirit, because the context involves not a chaotic stirring but an anticipation of God’s ordering of creation. The second problem is that the verb involves the actions of a person rather than an impersonal force: “And the Spirit of God was hovering.” Deuteronomy 32:11 uses the same verb to describe God as “an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young.” A mother eagle hovers over her nest, knowing how the young birds are to grow and stirring them up to vitality. In the same manner, the Spirit of God fluttered over the waters of the original creation, ready to provide the power and life that would bring the Father’s purpose to fulfillment. Leupold comments that the Spirit’s “work in this case must have been anticipatory of the creative work that followed, a kind of impregnation with divine potentialities.”<sup>11</sup>

It would be an overstatement to say that the original readers of Genesis could see the doctrine of the trinity in Genesis 1:2. But the Christian, reading this verse from the perspective of the whole Bible cannot help but see here the distinct personality and actions of God the Father as Creator and God the Spirit as animator and empowerer. There is one God, but here are two persons. Here we also see the deity of the Spirit, the personality of the Spirit, and the eternity of the Spirit. In short, the Spirit of God possesses all the attributes of deity, co-equal with the Father and the Son.

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<sup>10</sup> See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1987), 17.

<sup>11</sup> Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis, Volume I*, 50.



We have already noted an anticipation of the gospel and God's work of redemption in the way Genesis 1:2 anticipates God's promise to provide and a home and a people. Here we also see anticipated the New Testament emphasis on the Spirit of God and the Word of God in giving salvation life to spiritually fallen souls. Jesus taught that we must be born again by the Spirit (Jn. 3:3-7), and Peter wrote, "you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23). We might note that Genesis 1:2, picturing the Spirit hovering as a bird, is followed by Genesis 1:3, where God employed his Word to begin ordering the creation: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." As Psalm 33:6 states: "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host."

It was the Spirit of God, awaiting the mighty Word of God, that hovered over the creation of God. Moreover, when we remember that the Hebrew word for "Spirit" also means "breath," we are further reminded that it is the Word of God in the power of the Spirit of God that gives life and light to everyone who believes.

### The Spirit Who Makes All the Difference

When the Spartan general Gylippus arrived in Syracuse, his mere presence made all the difference so that certain defeat was reversed into triumphant victory. He brought no troops or war materials, but he lifted their spirits with an infusion of confidence, wisdom, and will. History records episode after episode of the difference that is made by spiritual power and vigor.

This illustrates the blessing presented in Genesis 1:2 by the hovering presence of the greatest of all spirits, the Holy Spirit of the living God. The verse begins shrouded in all that was lacking: a barren, deserted, and dark mass. Reading the first two statements is seems hard to see how such a condition could lead to something so glorious and great. But what a difference the Spirit makes! By the mighty Spirit of God, the creation would therefore move forward with order, power, blessing, and life.

The same condition prevails in the lives of men and women today. How many people, communities, even entire cultures can be

described with the ominous terms of Genesis 1:2 – desolate, empty, and dark. For us, it is the result of judgment because of mankind’s fall into sin. Here is a true darkness, cursed by the just wrath of God as a true *tohu* and *bohu*, with the darkness of evil and sin upon the face of our world. Perhaps you can connect with this kind of situation. Is your life chaotic? Disordered? Empty and vain? Broken and dark? If so, you may feel that all is without hope. But read Genesis 1:2 and remember what a difference the Spirit of God will make! Indeed, here is our true encouragement, that the very Spirit of God who hovered over the primeval dark of the first creation is still fluttering over this world, ready to act in the cause of the Savior whose gospel salvation is available to all who will believe. R. Kent Hughes writes: “Just as the Spirit of God fluttered over the dark waters, so he does over the dark hearts of humanity, preparing them for the word of God that will make them into new creations in Christ.”<sup>12</sup>

This raises the vital question: how can I be made a new? How can I become a new creation bearing the life and light of God? One answer is through prayer. Jesus once said that if even sinners are willing to give good things to each other, “how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Lk. 11:13).

Whether you are not yet a believer or have long trusted in God, ask him for the Spirit and his life-transforming working! But realize that God’s Spirit comes into our lives as we receive God’s Word in faith. Paul wrote: “our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess. 1:5).

How, then, can I know that the Spirit of God is working in me with saving power? Here, we may see an analogy in the sequence of events in Genesis 1:2 and 1:3. First, the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the deep. What was he waiting for? He was waiting for the Word of God to shine light into darkness. Indeed, if the Spirit is fluttering over your barren soul, he bears testimony a message that will make all the difference to you for all eternity, if you will receive it in faith: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16).

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<sup>12</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 22.