

God, Sky & Land

Chapter Eight

Without Form or Function

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We have already encountered the two-word Hebrew phrase *tohu wabohu*. And, we have noted that the “*bohu*” may well be a made-up word, meaningless in itself but rhyming with and thus emphasizing *tohu* (something like our English “helter skelter”). For most English speakers it is “without form and void,” because this is the language of the King James Version. Too often we do not register the meaning of the words at all; the opening lines of the Bible are so familiar to us that we do not actually *hear* them. The words slide through our consciousness without making any impact other than, “This is how the Bible begins.” Although many Bible readers do not mentally register the opening words, some readers have placed an enormous empirical superstructure on this phrase. It is this superstructure (and its lack of underpinnings!) that we want to examine.

The Hebrew phrase *tohu wabohu* in more modern translations is: “a formless void” (NRSV), “formless and empty” (NIV, NLT), “a vast waste” (REB), “barren, with no form of life” (CEV), “welter and waste” (Alter), “a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness (MSG). In our retrotranslation (OHV) we have translated it as “without form or function”. We have done so primarily because we want to encourage the reader to actually *hear* the English words and, perhaps, even if only momentarily, mentally picture “something.” How closely that “something” matches the “something” that Moshe He’eb pictured on hearing *tohu wabohu* is, we believe, well worth exploring further. This is, after all, an Original Hearers Version (OHV) of Genesis 1.

First, we note that although Gen 1:1 is constructed in the usual Hebrew fashion with the verb (*bara*, “create”) preceding the subject (*Elohim*, “God”), the second sentence—the one we are now examining—is constructed differently, with the subject first and the verb second (as is typical in English). When this occurs in Hebrew it usually means that the sentence is either a very important one or a parenthetical explanation of the preceding sentence. OHV underscores this parenthetical nature with a couple of bracketed additions: “To begin with, God brought into existence the sky and the land. Now [as for] the land, [it] was without form or function; darkness covered the water; and God’s Spirit hovered over the surface of the abyss.”

(It would have been a lot more fun to do what Wycliff did and translate, “Forsooth, the land was without form or function” But we resisted the urge. The Middle English “forsooth” here meant something like “truthfully” or “actually.”)

Creatio ex nihilo

As theists we all believe that the Creator God did not need raw materials—pre-existing elementary matter or energy—in order to create. We believe in *creatio ex nihilo*—creation out of nothing. Our very idea of “God” entails this understanding. Moshe, however, did not think that way. It was not that he disagreed and believed that God did need something (some “thing”) with which to begin the creative process. He was just not interested in this sort of philosophical question. What God needed (or did not need) to begin creating is a question that was not clearly asked and answered until the intertestamental period hundreds of years later. That the Genesis account begins with water and darkness that were already there would not have surprised Moshe at all.

Scientific Demands Imposed on an Ancient Text

But Ian Michael O’Dern wants an answer to that very question. He wants to know what, in a *scientific* sense, was there as the curtain lifted on the creation account. For many Christians in the twenty-first century that pre-existing material has begun to look more and more like a proto-planet with a core of real rocks, covered with real water, circling the sun. The picture has become more distinct because, despite our best efforts, we cannot keep ourselves from imposing scientific demands on an ancient text. That is, Ian Michael insists that what was said theologically *then* has to make scientific sense *now*. He demands that an account composed by and for two-explanacept minds—which lacked an explanacept of Nature—make sense to us who read it now with four-explanacept minds relying (usually without consciously recognizing it) on an explanacept of Nature.



Many problems haunt attempts to impose scientific demands on Genesis 1. First, the concept of a rocky core covered with water and circling the sun would have been unintelligible to Moshe. For him there was no “Planet Earth” in a “solar system,” to say nothing of the “Milky Way galaxy”; there was only “the sky and the land.” And the land *did not move*; what moved was the sun because God had *set* it into the vault of the sky and the vault did move. A land that moved was inconceivable. God had providentially established it and placed it firmly on its foundations so that it would never move. (Ps. 104:5); only God could move it (Job 9:6).

Moshe did not doubt that there were parts of God’s creation that did move. The sun, the moon and the stars, set in the sky-vault, moved in a regular predictable pattern. A few of the stars (the Greeks would later call them “planets”) moved irregularly, in very complicated patterns that could take lifetimes to figure out. The land, however, did not move. It was the very definition, the example *par excellence*, of stability; otherwise God was not God.

For these reasons the idea of a proto-earth circling the sun was for Moshe quite literally impossible. Equally impossible was the idea of the land (*‘erets*) as a wandering “planet.” Nor did Moshe have any way of knowing that our sun—the “greater light” that dominated the day—was of the same scientific nature as those innumerable stars that wheeled slowly and majestically overhead each night.

Moshe’s Questions of Genesis

We must constantly remind ourselves that what Moshe and his contemporaries heard was quite different from what Ian Michael typically wants from Genesis. What Moshe needed to know was that “the sky and the land” and everything in them were the purposeful, free creation of a loving God. That was a different—and far more important truth—than the scientific information that Ian Michael usually looks for in Genesis. And Moshe also needed to know that God had conquered the forces of chaos—the darkness and the water that were already there when God began to create. Those questions—Moshe’s questions—are the ones that Genesis answers. On day one—God conquered the darkness by creating light. On a second day God corralled the waters of chaos by means of a sky-vault (*raqia*). Within that vault was a stable, protected environment where plants (a third day), animal, and human life (a fifth and sixth day) could be brought into existence and subsequently flourish.



The answers to Ian Michael’s questions would (if they could actually be found in Genesis) satisfy our scientific curiosity; the answers to Moshe’s questions (which can indeed be found in Genesis) make our lives ultimately meaningful.