

A FURTHER DEFENSE OF THE INITIATION VIEW  
OF GENESIS 1:1: A REJOINDER TO  
DR. BRUCE WALTKE'S REVISIT TO GENESIS 1

VERN S. POYTHRESS

In an article in this issue of *WTJ*, Dr. Bruce Waltke has revised his arguments for the summary view of Gen 1:1. He presents five points. The first claims that “the earth” in v. 1 is defined as the dry land in v. 10. This argument does not account for v. 2 and is inconsistent with merism. The second argues that it is inappropriate to consider God as the author of the situation described in v. 2, because it is negative. This argument fails because Waltke admits that God did bring about the situation. The third, based on Isa 45:18, is not convincing because 45:18 is building on the general principle of creation rather than giving precise information about the meaning of “create” in Gen 1:1. The fourth and fifth points, as Waltke admits, provide at best confirmation of conclusions that have to be based on other arguments.

---

**D**r. Bruce K. Waltke has responded graciously in this issue of the *Westminster Theological Journal*<sup>1</sup> to an article of mine (2017) on Gen 1:1.<sup>2</sup> I appreciate his willingness to take up the topic. I now respond in turn. I focus on the main points rather than address every detail.

The discussion between us takes place within a larger context, which includes several stages.

Stage one took place as a number of scholars preceded Waltke in advocating the summary view of Gen 1:1, that is, the view that Gen 1:1 is a summary of 1:2–2:1.

Stage two took place when Waltke presented lectures on Gen 1:1–3 at Western Conservative Baptist Seminary in 1974, and then published them in

---

*Vern S. Poythress is Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary.*

<sup>1</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, “The Creation Account of Genesis 1:1–3 Revisited,” *WTJ* 86 (2024): 13–31 (henceforth called his “response,” and in the footnotes, “Revisited”).

<sup>2</sup> Vern S. Poythress, “Genesis 1:1 Is the First Event, Not a Summary,” *WTJ* 79 (2017): 97–121, available also at <https://frame-poythress.org/genesis-11-is-the-first-event-not-a-summary/>. The article has also been incorporated into a book, Vern S. Poythress, *Interpreting Eden: A Guide to Faithfully Reading and Understanding Genesis 1–3* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), appendix A, 291–321.

1975 and 1976 as a series of five articles in *Bibliotheca Sacra*.<sup>3</sup> Within this five-part series, “Part III” advocates the summary view. The remaining articles examine other views and set the discussion in a broader context.

Stage three includes two later pieces in which Waltke affirmed that God created *ex nihilo* and that God alone is eternal.<sup>4</sup> He thereby corrected the possible impression left at stage two that the unformed state in Gen 1:2 may not be created at all, but may stand alongside God as a second uncreated original.

Stage four took place when I advocated the initiation view (that Gen 1:1 describes the first event) in a critical analysis of Waltke’s “Part III” in the *WTJ*.<sup>5</sup> I recognized the existence of a broader scholarly discussion, and duly noted Waltke’s contributions at stage three, but chose to concentrate on Waltke’s piece at stage two, as the strongest defense of the summary view.<sup>6</sup>

Stage five is my book *Interpreting Eden* (2019), which includes stage four as appendix A, but also sets the discussion of Gen 1:1–3 in a larger context. The book explains how a hearer or reader in ancient Israel would naturally interpret Gen 1 by using analogies between experience of present providence and the once-for-all acts of creation in the past, as narrated by Gen 1.<sup>7</sup>

Stage six is Waltke’s response in the present issue of *WTJ*.<sup>8</sup> He responds directly to stage four, but makes no mention of stage five.

Stage seven is my rejoinder, the present article.

Waltke has five arguments in all. Let us consider his arguments, one at a time.

### I. *Semantics of “The Heavens and the Earth”*

Waltke’s first argument within stage six corresponds roughly to his first argument at stage two.<sup>9</sup> Both his arguments observe that the expression “the heavens and the earth” is a merism, that is, a literary structure that designates a larger whole by means of two extremes. Stage two and stage six both try to establish a difference in the referents of “the earth” (אֶרֶץ) in Gen 1:1 and 1:2 by appealing to other verses. But the two arguments differ radically in their details.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, “The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1–3, Part I: Introduction to Biblical Cosmogony,” *BSac* 132 (1975): 25–36; “Part II: The Restitution Theory,” *BSac* 132 (1975): 136–44; “Part III: The Initial Chaos Theory and the Precreation Chaos Theory,” *BSac* 132 (1975): 216–28; “Part IV: The Theology of Genesis 1,” *BSac* 132 (1975): 327–42; “Part V: The Theology of Genesis 1—Continued,” *BSac* 133 (1976): 28–41. These are cited in Waltke, “Revisited,” 13.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 68; Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 180.

<sup>5</sup> Poythress, “Genesis 1:1.”

<sup>6</sup> Poythress, “Genesis 1:1,” 98.

<sup>7</sup> Poythress, *Interpreting Eden*, especially ch. 8. Pages 144–46 present a coherent positive interpretation of Gen 1:1–2, based on attention to how the verses would be naturally read by Israelites using analogies with providence.

<sup>8</sup> Waltke, “Revisited,” 13–31.

<sup>9</sup> Waltke, “Part III,” 217–20; Poythress, “Genesis 1:1,” 101–14.

At stage two, one crucial point is that a merism allegedly has to be interpreted as a seamless whole. Therefore, the expression “the earth” occurring *within* the merism in Gen 1:1 can have a referent very different from “the earth” in v. 2. This argument is crucial for undermining the natural (and traditional) reading, which sees the repetition of “the earth” near the beginning of v. 2, shortly after its occurrence in v. 1, as an indication that v. 2 is providing circumstantial information about the state of affairs after the event of v. 1.

Stage six has completely abandoned the key argument found at stage two. “Earth” in v. 1, inside a merism, is now interpreted by means of v. 10, where it is not in a merism. Likewise, “heavens” in v. 1, inside a merism, is interpreted by means of v. 8, where it is not in a merism. This change destroys the stage-two argument that appeals to the distinctive structure of the merism in v. 1 to separate the referent of “earth” in v. 1 from the referent in v. 2.

What is left after the removal of the stage-two argument is a series of difficulties for the summary view.

The first difficulty is the main one. Waltke’s change away from stage two leaves stage six bare, without any substantive argument for thinking that the referents of “the earth” in v. 1 and v. 2 are radically different. Waltke appeals, of course, to v. 10. Verse 10 names the dry land “earth.” But if v. 10 were to define the “earth” as dry land throughout Gen 1, it would define it also for v. 2, where the earth is obviously not dry. An argument that fails to hold for establishing the force of v. 2 fails for v. 1 as well. My point is that an appeal to v. 10 cannot function as a ground for radically *distinguishing* “the earth” in v. 1 and in v. 2.

The second difficulty is the difficulty in sequencing that comes to light if we think about how an ordinary Israelite processes the message of Gen 1 as he hears it or reads it. When an Israelite reads Gen 1:1 and begins to go on to v. 2, he already begins to make up his mind in a preliminary way about the meaning of “the heavens” and “the earth” and the complete merism composed from the two smaller expressions. He also makes up his mind about the meaning of v. 1 as a whole. If he is perceptive, he may realize that the heavens and the earth at the *beginning* might not have quite the same form in detail as he experiences in providence. So there is flexibility. The specific form of the earth can be further specified in v. 2. But the reader does not wait in complete suspense until v. 10 in order to decide what the earth is. Verse 10, like all the verses after v. 2, can add some coloring. But in a typical case the reader is not going to take back, undermine, and reformulate all the assumptions that he has already made prior to v. 10, just because v. 10 gives him extra information. Instead, v. 10 is going to be fitted into the already existing picture.

Of course, in principle people are capable of undertaking radical reinterpretations of texts. But reinterpreting earlier pieces of texts on the basis of later pieces requires a lot more motivation and definite evidence than interpreting new pieces on the basis of what one already knows. Interpretive influence moves predominantly forward as one reads. As a result, an interpretation that

retrojects the meaning “dry land” from v. 10 to v. 1 is ignoring how ordinary readers read and ordinary listeners listen. It is an artificiality.

The idea of development is innate in Gen 1. In any description of development, there will of course be continuities, because the things that develop will in some sense remain the “same” things, in continuity with what they were before. But development also implies change. The referents cannot be *exactly* the same, all the way through the entire chapter of Gen 1, because the referents themselves change in subtle ways in the course of development. The dry land gets populated with plants and land animals; the heavens get populated with heavenly lights. This is an elementary aspect of the way the chapter communicates, and Israelite readers and hearers would understand it. The earth and the waters in v. 2 are not in exactly the same state, in detail, as the earth and the waters at later points in the majestic development that unfolds in Gen 1 as a whole. The earth can fittingly be called the earth already in v. 2, before the *name* earth is explicitly ascribed to the dry land in v. 10.

The third difficulty concerns how to deal with the key merism, “the heavens and the earth.” At stage six Waltke rightly retains his earlier stage-two claim that “the heavens and the earth” in v. 1 is a merism. A merism uses two extremes to encompass everything in between. That would naturally imply that in v. 1 “earth” is being used to designate the entire region below, not just dry land. In fact, it is used in v. 1 in the same way as in v. 2. The Hebrew word for “earth” (*’erets*, עֶרֶץ) can at times refer to the dry land and exclude the seas, but can also refer more broadly to the whole region below the observer.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to this broad, inclusive understanding of “earth” in v. 1, Waltke at stage six claims that “earth” in v. 1 designates the dry land (hence, not including the waters). Waltke claims at one point that there is no case where the merism “the heavens and the earth” “unambiguously includes the sea.”<sup>11</sup> That depends on how direct one expects the evidence to be. A merism is supposed to be inclusive of everything, so it naturally includes the sea by implication. Moreover, excluding the waters is in tension with 2:1, where the same merism “the heavens and the earth” reoccurs. At stage two and also at stage six Waltke rightly recognizes that 1:1 and 2:1 together form an *inclusio*; together they serve as the beginning and the end of the account of God creating the world. But 2:1 as a summary statement about God’s finishing his work (see 2:2) must include the waters and the water creatures (as part of “the host”).

Also, when Waltke cites Ps 148, he himself meets a case where the “great sea creatures and all deeps” are included under the general topic of the earth and its creatures (v. 7), in contrast to the heavens (vv. 1b–6).

Then how do the waters fit into the complete merism, “the heavens and the earth,” in 1:1? Waltke does not say explicitly. There seem to be two alternatives:

<sup>10</sup> BDB includes the meanings “earth,” “land,” and “ground.” Meaning 1b is “*earth*, opp. to heaven, sky.”

<sup>11</sup> Waltke, “Revisited,” 18.

either (a) the waters are left out, or (b) they are included by implication. Both alternatives generate difficulties.

Let us begin with alternative (a): the waters are simply left out, and not included at all within the totality to which the merism refers. But this alternative is in tension with the definition of a merism, which is supposed to include *everything* within the natural scope of its reference, by means of two extremes.

Consider then the second alternative: (b) The waters are included by implication. But this alternative is in tension with the idea that a merism operates by using two *extremes*, between which all intermediate cases fall. The waters of the seas are not in between the dry land and the heavens, but spatially are underneath the level of the dry land. The combination of heavens and dry land turns out not to be an operative merism, because the dry land cannot function properly as one extreme within the total cosmic picture.

In short, Waltke’s first main argument at stage six is incoherent in two ways. (a) It claims that “the earth” is defined in v. 10 in such a way that the definition is to be retrofitted into earlier verses, which is incoherent with v. 2. (b) It claims that the expression “the heavens and the earth” in v. 1 is a merism, but then interprets its meaning in a manner inconsistent with it being a merism.

In addition, as we observed, the first main argument at stage six has destroyed the argument at stage two. The overall result is a collapse. There is no convincing support here for the summary view. In the summary view, there is no coherent response to the observation that “the earth” in v. 2 connects backward to “the earth” of v. 1—the two being separated in the Hebrew word-order only by the conjunction *waw* (ו). It is only if one already *assumes* the summary view that it makes sense to relate v. 1 not primarily to v. 2, but primarily to a developed heavens and earth—in fact, primarily to the fully developed heavens and earth of 2:1, familiar to Israelite readers.

## II. *Creation of the Original Formless Earth*

We now move to Waltke’s second argument at stage six. He summarizes it in two sentences:

(2) The initial *waw* of v. 2 (וַיְהִי) *w<sup>h</sup>ā’āres* is a disjunctive (“now”), not a conjunctive (“and”), introducing the circumstances of the earth when God fashioned, made, and established it in six days. Furthermore, this prior state of the earth as תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ *tōhū wābōhū*, “desolate and empty,” the darkness, and the sea are not evaluated as good and may explain why they are not attributed directly to God’s creative word.<sup>12</sup>

The first sentence is a claim that depends for support wholly on evidence from other arguments.<sup>13</sup> So the substance of argument (2) is found in the second

<sup>12</sup> Waltke, “Revisited,” 15.

<sup>13</sup> As a matter of technical detail, the initiation view need not decide whether v. 2 is linked backward or forward, as if these were mutually exclusive options. Verse 2 links backward to v. 1 by

sentence alone. This sentence is similar to the second of the three main arguments that Waltke made at stage two.<sup>14</sup> What do we make of it?

The core issue is the origin of the formless earth of Gen 1:2. In his original *BSac* article (“Part III”; stage two) Waltke seemed to say that the formless situation described in Gen 1:2 could not be the product of God’s creative activity.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it could not be a more detailed description of the result of the event in v. 1. As noted in my article (stage four),<sup>16</sup> he later (stage three) affirmed creation *ex nihilo* in his *Genesis* commentary (2001)<sup>17</sup> and his *Old Testament Theology* (2007).<sup>18</sup> He reaffirms it again in his latest response (stage six). This affirmation has the effect of undermining the earlier argument that the situation of Gen 1:2 could *not* be theologically interpreted as a product of God’s creative activity.

Yet his response at stage six seems to want to have it both ways. He says:

The notion that God made everything without attributing to him the creation of the earth as *tōhū wābōhū* and of “darkness upon the face of the deep” is an antinomy: a paradox that infers a mystery.<sup>19</sup>

There is in fact no “antinomy” or “paradox” if, as Waltke concedes, it is theologically true that God brought about the situation in Gen 1:2. Waltke is correct that his summary view, in itself, “does not exclude the belief that God made everything.”<sup>20</sup> According to the summary view, Gen 1 does not comment on the origin of the formless earth. *Lack* of comment, *omission* of information, does not constitute either an antinomy or a paradox. Such a paradox would be introduced only if there were a positive indication in Gen 1 that the formless earth is something evil or something for which it is inappropriate to think that God created it. Waltke’s discussions do sometimes consider v. 2 as “negative” (my label). But of course it all depends on what *kind* of negativity is in view. The situation in v. 2 is “negative” in comparison to the fully completed heavens and earth of v. 31. But, as my article indicated (stage four),<sup>21</sup> that is fully compatible with it being an early stage that, according to the plan of God, would lead step by step to a completion.

We might compare the situation in 1:2 to the situation in 2:18. Genesis 2:18 says, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” The verse does not mean that it is “not good” in some absolute sense. It is not implying that God did not

---

informing us about the state of the earth at an early stage. It also links forward by further describing the starting point for the later developments. The grammar marks v. 2 as circumstantial information, outside the backbone of the narrative.

<sup>14</sup> Waltke, “Part III,” 220; Poythress, “Genesis 1:1,” 114–19.

<sup>15</sup> Waltke, “Part III,” 221.

<sup>16</sup> Poythress, “Genesis 1:1,” 117n41.

<sup>17</sup> Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 68.

<sup>18</sup> Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 180.

<sup>19</sup> Waltke, “Revisited,” 14.

<sup>20</sup> Waltke, “Revisited,” 14.

<sup>21</sup> Poythress, “Genesis 1:1,” 114–17.

or could not have brought it about. It means that it would not be good for the situation to continue to be as it was, for man to continue to be alone. It was “not good” *in comparison* to the situation after the creation of Eve. Likewise, it would not have been good for the desolate situation in 1:2 to have continued, because there would have been no suitable place for humanity to live. In both verses, what is “good” is relative to a narrative context and to God’s goals.

In a footnote, Waltke appeals again to “mystery”:

I am saying that Gen 1:1–2 leaves the origins of the proto-earth as a desolate and empty place, presumably covered with an unrestrained sea, blanketed in darkness, undiscussed and unexplained—a mystery. I suggest theologians recognize the mystery and also leave it unexplained.<sup>22</sup>

If Waltke’s summary view is correct, he is also correct in saying that Gen 1:1–2 does not tell us “the origins of the proto-earth.” But why does Waltke then add, “I suggest *theologians* recognize the mystery and also leave it unexplained”? He should have said “exegetes,” not “theologians.” The exegete who thinks that v. 1 is a summary realizes that Gen 1 as a whole does not supply information about “the origins of the proto-earth.” The exegete is noting both what is said and what is not said in Gen 1. But the theologian integrates the message of Gen 1 with the rest of Scripture. As a theologian, integrating the testimony of all of the Bible together, Waltke has himself cited Neh 9:6, John 1:3, Col 1:16–17, Heb 11:3, Rev 4:11, and other passages to show that God created everything and that God alone is eternal.<sup>23</sup>

All God’s works have mystery about them, in a sense, because God is incomprehensible. But on this question, on the basis of key verses in the Scriptures, theologians can openly and confidently proclaim that God created and brought about the formless situation described in Gen 1:2. Waltke seems to want something to remain “unexplained” that the Bible as a whole does explain by implication from key verses like Col 1:16. There is tension that Waltke has not been able to resolve between the theological affirmation of God’s creating everything and the rhetoric that suggests that Gen 1:2 is something evil, unfit to be ascribed to God’s activity. Waltke himself affirms that God made everything. But then he appears to undermine his own affirmation by appealing to “antinomy” and what is “unexplained.” He is still not giving us the clear statement that we would expect.

At one point Waltke himself partially solves the difficulty. He says, “Genesis intentionally leaves undiscussed and unexplained the mystery of chaos, darkness, and the unrestrained waters, which later become natural evils.”<sup>24</sup> The expression “later become” is helpful. The original situation in v. 2 is not actually a natural evil, but similar situations later on may be. The obvious theological

<sup>22</sup> Waltke, “Revisited,” 15n8.

<sup>23</sup> Waltke, “Revisited,” e.g., 29, 30.

<sup>24</sup> Waltke, “Revisited,” 29.

reason for the before-and-after difference with regard to desolate situations is the entrance of sin, which has ramifying effects beyond humanity (Gen 3:17–19).

Elsewhere in his response, Waltke reiterates his theme of associating 1:2 with bad things, and seems to continue the pattern of antinomy. On the one hand, “we may infer that God made the matter of the proto-earth and of the sea.” But on the other hand, Waltke takes considerable space to show elsewhere in the Bible the negative connotations of darkness and overflowing waters and what is “formless and void.” This, he thinks, is one reason why we ought to interpret v. 2 in disjunction with v. 1.

Of course, several thematic elements in v. 2—darkness and waters and desolate land—can be used symbolically and poetically in a negative way, because human beings cannot live and flourish in pure darkness or deep water or empty land. The whole thing has a straightforward explanation in the narrative development of Gen 1. God works in a progression of events. And the early stages—not only v. 2 but also any time before the creation of plants—are not yet suitable for human habitation. Even after the creation of plants, other things are needed for the flourishing of the whole.

The unsuitable character of the early stages in the creational development forms a natural background for later warrior imagery used in the Bible for God overcoming threats to his people. It can all be done without denying the difference between symbolic use of imagery (later in Scripture, often in poetry) and the actual stages of development of an initially unformed earth (Gen 1). The withholding of the pronouncement of “good” can be understood as appropriate along the same line.

Waltke’s argument becomes less plausible if we pay attention to ordinary Israelite readers. In reading or listening, an Israelite could distinguish an ordinary reference to something in the world from a poetic or symbolic use of associated themes. For instance, Israelites from time to time had contact with desolate places, bereft of permanent habitation. But if they were biblical monotheists, they would not think of such places as literally evil or be afraid of them. In various texts, God could evoke the theme of “without form and void” as a poetic symbol of desolation or judgment, without Israelites confusing it with a direct statement about an actual desert place that they knew of. So when an Israelite reads Gen 1:2, no necessity *automatically* leads to the thought that this must be an evil state. Rather, it is an immature state, near the beginning of a process. This principle holds whether Gen 1:1 is a summary or describes the initial event.

Genesis 1:2 also mentions darkness. Do Israelites need to be afraid of the darkness that comes every night, as if it were something “evil”? Or is it rather the case that they can distinguish a symbolic use of the theme of darkness from the ordinary darkness of the night? Does an Israelite standing on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea or the Dead Sea or the Sea of Galilee think that it is something literally “evil”? The answer is no. The seas are dangerous for human

beings, that is all. The deep and the waters in Gen 1:2 are not something evil that God cannot make. Whether symbolic overtones are evoked depends on the context. And the context of Gen 1, as many admit, is a context of majestic monotheism, not a context in which there is a conflict between the gods or a wrestling match with recalcitrant semi-animate forces of nature.

Waltke produces two arguments from silence. First, the formless situation in v. 2 is not said to be a product of the word of God. Waltke is in danger of producing an unnecessary tension with later biblical affirmations that everything was made through the word: John 1:1–3; 1 Cor 8:6. An argument from silence cannot overcome the positive evidence of connection between Gen 1:1 and 1:2 in the repetition of the word “earth.”

In addition, there is another possible explanation for the silence. The first half of v. 2 does not describe a new event. Rather, it describes a state of affairs already in place, after the new event described in v. 1. We would expect that God might speak to bring about something new, such as the first appearance of light. But v. 2 is not such a fresh act of God. No *new* speech is needed, because the situation is already in place, possibly as a result of earlier instances of God speaking that brought about new events.

If anything, a mention of God speaking would possibly be appropriate for v. 1, if v. 1 describes the initial event of creation out of nothing. And of course John 1:1–3 does endorse the idea that the eternal Word was active in the initial event. But it is particularly appropriate to mention God speaking when the speech defines and brings about something that the speech itself differentiates as *distinct*. For example, the light is a distinct item, newly appearing, and distinct from the darkness. God specifies it by saying, “Let there be *light*” (Gen 1:3). The initial act of creation, by contrast, does not yet focus on creating a named differentiation within the created order.

As a second argument from silence, Waltke observes that the rest of the Bible is silent about God producing the formless situation in Gen 1:2. But there are possible reasons for it, quite different from the negative connotations that Waltke postulates. One reason is the natural tendency in a simpler summary to focus on things rather than abstract patterns. In later passages, the affirmation that God is the maker of heaven and earth comes sometimes in a more extended statement, such as Neh 9:6 or Ps 104. But often it occurs in passing, as something already confidently known and not needing elaborate explanation:

The sea is his, for he made it,  
and his hands formed the dry land. (Ps 95:5)

For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,  
but the LORD made the heavens. (Ps 96:5)

May you be blessed by the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth. (Ps 115:15)

My help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth. (Ps 121:2)

Our help is in the name of the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth. (Ps 124:8)

May the LORD bless you from Zion,  
he who made heaven and earth! (Ps 134:3)

This truth about God would be deeply embedded in the minds of godly Israelites, and taught to their children. When summarizing the truth about God's work of creation, it is natural to focus on the *things* that he made—the earth itself, plants, heavenly lights, sea creatures, and man himself. Genesis 1 also devotes attention to structures and patterns—the oscillation of day and night, the role of the heavenly lights as time keepers, the pattern of reproduction among plants and animals. But the structural patterns are somewhat more “abstract.” In summary statements, it is natural to focus on things.

Now consider the formless situation in Gen 1:2. There are “things” there: the earth itself, darkness, and the deep. Later passages include affirmations that God made the earth and that he made the seas. Also, Isa 45:7 affirms that “I form light and create darkness.” What would be intrinsically less likely is that a later affirmation would focus on the expressions “without form” or “void,” because these are “structural” features.

Someone defending the idea that the formless state in Gen 1:2 is uncreated could respond that the later affirmations in the Bible have to do with the “earth” and the “seas” in their completed state. But of course that is the way that an Israelite would speak about it and explain it to his children. Unless there is some kind of special pressure, the ordinary person is not going to go into technical details about the developments that led to the completed state. When one affirms, in ordinary language, that God made the seas, one tacitly gestures toward whatever processes God may have used to bring them into their present condition. One affirms tacitly that God was at work in the processes. One does not slyly look for an escape from monotheism by introducing an explicit distinction between the final state and the processes leading to it. And for a monotheist, the processes would naturally include the coming into being of originally immature items. Waltke practically admits as much when he acknowledges that the creation of the original unformed state can be inferred from the general principle of monotheism. If it can be inferred, what reason do we have for denying that this inference was a tacit aspect of Israelite monotheism? If it was already tacitly there in the mind of an Israelite, it would be in mind when he read Gen 1:2.

Of course, some scholars postulate an exception in the case of Gen 1:2. They claim that the initial earth with its watery covering was not created. This idea occurs in the historical critical tradition partly because that tradition postulates sources that many times are at odds with one another. The historical critical tradition is free to imagine a source for Gen 1:2 in which there was a battle

against chaos or a chaos monster. It can assimilate Gen 1:2 to the polytheistic myths of the ancient Near East. Genesis 1:2 can represent a source different from Gen 1:1, and the two need not be harmonized.

But if one looks at Gen 1 as a literary whole, and attempts to read it like a godly Israelite, no such difficulties are visible.

In sum, Waltke's second argument within the sixth stage is undermined by his explicit concession to Israelite monotheism: he admits that it is legitimate to infer that God created the situation of 1:2. The result of Waltke's concession is to leave his second argument at stage six weakened and with remaining tension. On the one hand, he affirms that theologically it is true that God created the earth and the waters in an initially formless condition. On the other hand, his argument depends on that not being an appropriate thought to associate with 1:2.

### III. *The Evidence from Isaiah 45:18*

In stage six, Waltke's third argument appeals to Isa 45:18. My overall response is the same as in my previous article (stage four).<sup>25</sup> To read Isa 45:18 as a precise exegesis-like comment on the act of creation in Gen 1:1 and the state of affairs in 1:2 is to read it precisionistically, and not to appreciate the poetic style, which is meant to evoke imagery and themes rather than restate exactly the meaning of Gen 1:1–2. A reading as a restatement is theoretically possible, but it is not plausible.

As to details, two possible misunderstandings arise in stage six. First, Waltke interprets my statements about Isa 45:18 as implying that "Isaiah interprets 'created' in Gen 1:1 as referring to the entire or complete creation." Waltke interprets me according to what is in fact *his* view. My view, as is evident throughout my article at stage four, is that the act of creation described in Gen 1:1 is the first event. Isaiah 45:18 is alluding to Gen 1:1–31. But in my view Isa 45:18 is using the word *create* (בָּרָא) broadly, in lines Aαα and Ab, to describe the whole process of Gen 1:1–31.<sup>26</sup> Isaiah 45:18 does not and need not use the term *create* with *exactly* the same total impact as occurs in Gen 1:1.

Second, let us clarify the function of *tōhû*. Waltke points to a subtle difference: "The difference between the translation as a purpose phrase signifying 'to be *tōhû*' or as a predicating statement '*as tōhû*' is subtle but significant." I concur concerning this difference. I also concur with Waltke's own formulation: "Isaiah is looking at the earth in its finished state as not *tōhû*, not at the earth's earlier state as *tōhû* to be completed." That is my meaning in talking about the endpoint: "Isa 45:18 is saying that chaos is not the *endpoint*. But that is consistent with saying that, at an *earlier point in time*, God might have brought into existence an earth that lacks much of the later organization."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Poythress, "Genesis 1:1," 114–15.

<sup>26</sup> Poythress, "Genesis 1:1," 115.

<sup>27</sup> Poythress, "Genesis 1:1," 115 (italics original).

Waltke tells us that Isaiah himself is not commenting directly on 1:2: “Nevertheless, Isaiah knew the earth was originally *tōhū*, but he too leaves that early state undiscussed.” If so, Isaiah seems not to be commenting one way or the other on the precise meanings of Gen 1:1 in relation to v. 2. Waltke’s argument seems to depend wholly on the assumption that Isaiah gives the key word *create* exactly the same value as it has in Gen 1:1. But there is no proof of that use of **בָּרָא**. Isaiah is fully capable of picking up terminology from 1:1, 2, and 2:1, and at the same time discussing the whole picture in 1:1–31 rather than the commencement alone (if the commencement is indeed the topic of 1:1, as I claim).

The difficulties with Waltke’s use of Isa 45:18 as an argument for the summary view are two. First, we expect poetry to be evocative and to use allusions, but we cannot expect it to focus on an earlier text in a way that provides a precise exegetical commentary on the meaning of earlier writings to which it may allude. The context of Isa 45:18 is a context in which God’s power displayed in his work of creation provides the reinforcing background for an expectation of a redemptive second exodus, which can be compared to a re-creation. Poetry evokes the thematic relations powerfully, but it is not going to give us the kind of detail that we may be searching for in trying to understand the exact force of *create* in Gen 1:1.

Second, the book of Isaiah follows Gen 1:1 in time (according to a conservative dating). Isaiah 45:18 evokes Gen 1:1 rather than Gen 1:1 evoking Isa 45:18. The average person who reads Isa 45:18 and notes the evocative use has already decided on the meaning of the earlier text (Gen 1:1) before he comes upon the later text. The later text is not going to change his mind with regard to his basic understanding of the earlier text. Rather, it is going to be fitted into the understanding of the earlier text. This seriously weakens the value of using Isa 45:18 as an exegetical probe for Gen 1:1. Primarily one has to probe Gen 1:1–2:1 to find the meaning of 1:1. Accordingly, at best Isa 45:18 should be demoted to be on the level of Waltke’s last two arguments, which he characterizes as “corroborative,” rather than “definitive.”<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, that leaves Waltke with only two “definitive” arguments, the first two. And we have just seen in our analysis above that those two arguments lose most of their force because of the changes that Waltke has made in passing from stage two to stage six.

#### IV. *Evidence from Parallel Structure in 2:4–7*

Waltke offers as his fourth argument the parallel between 1:1–3 and 2:4–7. This argument mostly reproduces his third argument in his earlier piece at stage two.<sup>29</sup> He has omitted his earlier claims that there is a parallel in Gen 3:1

<sup>28</sup> Waltke, “Revisited,” 15.

<sup>29</sup> Waltke, “Part III,” 226–27; Poythress, “Genesis 1:1,” 119–21.

and in the beginning of the *Enuma Elish*. Readers who want the full information should consult my stage four critique.<sup>30</sup> I stand by my observation from stage four that some of the sequential pattern detected by Waltke is so common that it is not very striking. The sequence consisting of a circumstantial clause or clauses, followed by a *waw*-consecutive clause describing action within the circumstances, is common. The crucial issue is whether Gen 1:1 functions as a heading, like Gen 2:4. Waltke is right that not every heading has a special grammatical structure. It can be marked as a heading merely by the obvious fact that its contents are a summary of what is to come. So what about Gen 1:1? The evidence that Waltke gives is to appeal a final time to his earlier interpretation of “the earth” in Gen 1:1 as designating the dry land. So Waltke’s argument four is heavily dependent on the first argument. Waltke hints at this dependence when he indicates that the final two arguments are “corroborative” rather than “definitive.”

There is one further difficulty, namely, that for the ordinary reader of Gen 1–2, the encounter with the structure in 2:4–7 comes too late in the reading process. The reader has already made up his mind about the meaning of 1:1–3 by the time that he finishes reading v. 3. If he detects a parallel structure when he comes to 2:4–7, that could plausibly influence his interpretation of 2:4–7, because he knows about 1:1–3 and is still trying to make up his mind about 2:4–7. The reverse process, where reading 2:4–7 causes a change of mind about an already established meaning at 1:1–3, is much less likely. It is always possible to change one’s mind. But a writer is going to find himself ineffective if his words naturally lead to one interpretation of an earlier piece (1:1–3), and then he expects to overturn that meaning a chapter later, merely because of a structural parallel.

This instance is the third instance where the summary interpretation is beset by difficulties due to the natural order in which readers process meaning. Earlier, contrary to what argument one seems to suggest, the reader cannot be expected to make up his mind about the reference of “earth” in 1:1 only *after* he has the information about “earth” given in v. 10. He already makes up his mind when he reads 1:1–2. Under argument three, the reader has already made up his mind about Gen 1:1 before he comes to Isa 45:18, which was written hundreds of years later. One may wonder whether the proponent for the summary interpretation is thinking about the practical experience of reading in linear succession.

#### *V. Omission of Origin Information in Genesis 1:2 as Parallel to Its Omission for Satan*

Waltke’s final “corroborative” argument runs as follows:

---

<sup>30</sup> Poythress, “Genesis 1:1,” 119–21.

That Genesis intentionally leaves undiscussed and unexplained the mystery of chaos, darkness, and the unrestrained waters, which later become natural evils, finds corroboration in a parallel situation in the story of humankind's fall into sin (Gen 3:1–19). That story also leaves unexplained the spiritual origin of the no-good, fast-talking Serpent—in the trajectory of revelation later unmasked as Satan (Rev 12:9)—and so also leaves open the possibility of an eternal dualism between moral good and evil.<sup>31</sup>

The question about omission of information about the origin of the situation in Gen 1:2 is not best construed as narrowly about Gen 1:2. It is an observation about a key missed opportunity—if the summary view were true. Why include in Gen 1:1–31 all kinds of *other* affirmations about God creating this and that, but *not* include a statement about the most spectacular fact of all, namely, that God brought about an initial act of creation out of nothing? There is no obvious reason for omitting at least a minimum statement about a work of God that glorifies him spectacularly. Describing creation out of nothing is not at all a question of introducing something problematic, parallel to the case with the origin of sin, which could possibly call into question either the goodness of God or his omnipotence.

Waltke also says that there is mystery about “the spiritual origin of the ... Serpent.” But a thoughtful reading of Gen 1–3 as a whole would lead to the conclusion that the Serpent is among the created products in Gen 1 that are pronounced “very good” (v. 31). God is the universal creator. He created not only heaven and earth, but everything in them (2:1; Neh 9:6; Col 1:16). Most of the time in biblical passages on creation, the focus is on visible things, because they are more obvious and evident illustrations of the general principle of God's sovereignty and wisdom. But, as usual, such a focus is not intended to invite people cleverly to invent exceptions. God created everything that exists (Col 1:16). At an early point, it was “very good” (Gen 1:31). This affirmation is the answer to Waltke's claim that the story “leaves open the possibility of an eternal dualism between moral good and evil.”<sup>32</sup>

The mystery, then, is not that Satan as an angelic being has come into existence, but that he has fallen away from original goodness. The standard treatment in theology is that sinfulness is not a “thing” like an oak tree or a rose that God has created, but rather the perverse rebellion against the order of creation. It is indeed deeply mysterious. It is not comparable with the situation in Gen 1:2, which is an early stage in a succession of steps leading to a positive outcome in the form of the completed creation.

---

<sup>31</sup> Waltke, “Revisited,” 29.

<sup>32</sup> Waltke, “Revisited,” 29. Waltke's comment is qualified by the fact that the story to which he is referring is Gen 3:1–19. This story belongs to a larger narrative, which has already excluded eternal moral dualism (1:31).

## VI. *Conclusion*

In sum, all five of Waltke's arguments are weak.

The first two arguments have been fatally weakened from their original form in 1974 by Waltke's valid concessions concerning the interpretation of merisms (argument one) and concerning the appropriateness of believing that God brought about the situation described in Gen 1:2 (argument two).

The third argument, based on Isa 45:18, has little direct probative value for the original meaning of Gen 1:1, because Isa 45:18 operates with poetic force. Moreover, as a later text, Isa 45:18 depends on the meaning of Gen 1:1 and builds on whatever would be the typical godly Israelite's already-entrenched understanding of Gen 1.

The last two arguments are only "corroborative" by Waltke's own estimation; they cannot stand on their own. The fourth argument, concerning parallel structures, depends heavily on the prior decision that Gen 1:1 is a heading. The fifth argument fails to establish a substantive parallel between the alleged omission of creation *ex nihilo* and the omission of explanation for the origin of Satanic rebellion.

Despite his intentions to the contrary, Waltke's alterations in his present article confirm that the summary view is not viable.