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Before “The Beginning”

By Jim Myers

One of the most well-known Bible verses has to be Genesis 1:1 (KJV) –

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”

It also is at the heart of one of the hottest *political / theological* battles in our country. The war is being fought over which group’s position will appear in textbooks purchased for use in our public schools. Needless to say, beyond heated debates, there are many dollars at stake too!

The question behind the debate is how the universe came into being. One side believes that the “literal” words of their Bible provides the answer and the Genesis account should be included in textbooks. The other side holds that the *Theory of Evolution* answers the question and should be in the textbooks. An important part of the debate centers on the meaning of the word “theory.” *Scientific American* provides a very accurate definition for how modern scientists define the word “theory”:

Many people learned in elementary school that a theory falls in the middle of a hierarchy of certainty--above a mere hypothesis but below a law. Scientists do not use the terms that way, however. According to the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), a scientific theory is "a well-substantiated explanation of some aspect of the natural world that can incorporate facts, laws, inferences, and

tested hypotheses." No amount of validation changes a theory into a law, which is a descriptive generalization about nature. So when scientists talk about the theory of evolution--or the atomic theory or the theory of relativity, for that matter--they are not expressing reservations about its truth. (July 2002)

Ultimately the controversy comes down to *theology vs scientific theory*. Obviously, this debate is heated and we will not be able to resolve it in one article. But, one thing we can all agree upon is that the Bible is a book of words. In order to accurately understand its words we must follow basic linguistic rules. One of those rules states -- **we must examine the words of a message in their contextual environment.**

Context is defined as that which precedes and /or follows any part of a discourse and can throw light on the meanings of the author's message.

When a word, sentence or paragraph is removed from its contextual environment the original meaning can be completely lost and a new unrelated meaning substituted in its place. When words are taken out of context they can be made to mean just about anything – even things that would be offensive to the original author.

The Hebrew text of Genesis 1:1 says that God (a word which will be discussed in a future article) created –

הַשָּׁמַיִם and הָאָרֶץ

These are the Hebrew words that are translated as “heaven” and “earth” in Genesis 1:1 as well as many others places in our English translations. In almost all of the other verses the correct translations would be “heaven” and “earth.” But, when we consider the context of Genesis 1, two very different translations are required.

Following the Genesis Timeline

The author of Genesis provides readers with a very clear timeline for the events – *a six day chronological framework*. Genesis 1:5 marks the end of the first day. The second day activities are recorded in Genesis 1:6-8. The third day activities are recorded in Genesis 1:9-13. The author provides us with a daily construction report on the work in progress.

The author reports that on the first day “light” was brought into being. When the project began there was no “light,” but at the end of the first day – “light existed.” The author’s next report discusses the work that was done on the second day -- God made –

רָקִיעַ

This word has been traditionally translated as “firmament.” It didn’t exist on the first day, but was made by God on the second day. So, on the first day the project was “light” and on the second day the project was the making of a “firmament.” Please keep the order and timetable in mind.

The third day was a very busy day. The first thing God did was use the firmament that He created on the previous day to divide the waters beneath it. After this was accomplished, the author reports that something new appeared –

יַבֵּשָׁה

The King James Version translates this word as “dry *land*.” Notice that “land” is in italics, which indicates that it wasn’t in the original text but was added by the translators. So, technically, the

correct translation would be the “dry,” or according to my version – “the dry stuff.” There were other significant projects on the third day, but they do not affect Genesis 1:1. Now let’s review the work on the Genesis construction project for the first three days.

- (1) First Day – light
- (2) Second Day – firmament
- (3) Third Day – dry stuff

At the end of the first day neither the “firmament” nor the “dry stuff” existed. The “firmament” was “made” on the second day and the “firmament” was required in order to produce the “dry stuff” on the third day. Please keep in mind that our goal is to view these words of Genesis 1:1 through the eyes of their author and see what he saw so many thousand years ago. In order to do this we must use the “contextual meanings” of the words that are usually translated as “heaven” and “earth.”

The contextual meaning of the word translated as “heaven” (the first Hebrew word at the top of the page) is given in verse eight –

And God called (named) the firmament “Heaven...”

The contextual meaning of the second word is found in verse ten:

And God called (named) the dry stuff “Earth...”

Now let’s retranslate Genesis 1:1 using the “contextual meanings” of the above words –

In the beginning God created the (on the second day) the firmament (which He named “Heaven”) and (on the third day God created) the dry stuff (which He named “Earth”).

The origins of two very important elements are not mentioned by the author -- *the water* and *the wet stuff*. They appear to exist “before the beginning” – *just like in another, much older, creation story from Mesopotamia.*

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