

ARTICLES

THE WORD “EARTH” IN GENESIS 1:1

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WHAT THIS ARTICLE IS ABOUT

Genesis 1:1 states that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”; however, a serious question can be raised as to what is meant by the word “earth.” Is it the physical (inorganic) material of our planet, the planet itself as part of our solar system, or the ground upon which life exists? This study presents a linguistic analysis which reveals that the usage of the word “earth” in its Near Eastern setting is as varied as its present-day usage. Among the meanings of “earth” are the concepts of the whole world (or universe), a ruler’s territory, the sphere of human life, and land (or ground). In the context of Genesis 1:1, it is not possible to circumscribe the Hebrew term to fit any specific category.

A time problem is presented in Genesis 1:2, because it seems to imply preexisting material on the first day of creation. Among creationists are two major divisions of thought concerning the meaning of this verse. While one view postulates that both life and the inorganic matter of our earth was created during creation week, others interpret the verse to allow for the possibility of the existence of the inorganic matter long before creation week. With the author’s observations about the Hebrew usage of the word “earth,” it is possible to allow for either an entire creation event of inanimate and animate material in close succession or a long interval between the two.

The opening sentence of the Old Testament is beautiful in its simplicity, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Even a child can understand it, and yet every single word in it has been the object of interpretative disagreement.¹ The word “earth” under discussion here is no exception. The question is, does it refer a) to the physical material of the earth;² b) to the planet earth as a part of our solar system;³ c) or to our earth in the sense of the land upon which life can exist?⁴ We will address this question very briefly by reviewing four problems. First we will examine the meaning and usage of the word “earth” (Heb. *ʾeres*). Secondly, we will consider the word in the context of Genesis 1:1. Thirdly, we will review the problem of Genesis 1:2. Finally, we will seek to ascertain what is the biblical conception of the physical world as expressed in this verse.

THE WORD “EARTH”

The Hebrew word from which the English word “earth” is a translation in Genesis 1:1 is *ʾeres*, and it is generally rendered “ground,” “earth,” or the like. Can we be more specific about its meaning? In answering this question the interpreter commonly begins by looking for the root meaning by examining the word in its Near Eastern context.

The most common Egyptian word for “earth” or “land” has several meanings ranging from “earth,” “dust,” “dirt,” and “ground” to “land,” “nation,”

and “country.”⁵ It also occurs with the word for heaven, thereby forming a word pair indicating the larger (deified) cosmos. Unfortunately it is not possible to determine which of these meanings is original.⁶

The Accadian language of ancient Mesopotamia employed several words for earth, but one, *eresetu*, is clearly related to the Hebrew *ʿeres*.⁷ It is used together with the word *šamu* (heaven) to form the familiar pair, heaven and earth, meaning the whole world, or even universe. Interestingly enough, it also refers to the underworld, the land of no return, and less frequently to the land or territory of a ruler. Finally, it means “ground,” the material which can be plowed, soaked in blood, and used for burial.

Closely related to the Hebrew language are the west Semitic dialects of Canaan and Phoenesia. In Ugaritic *ʿrs* means “earth,”⁸ and again stands in antithesis to heaven/clouds, thereby indicating the sphere of human life. Elsewhere it specifies the ground to which someone can fall, upon which it rains, and from which produce grows.⁹ Finally the word appears in the Mesha inscription (Moabite) meaning “land” (Chemosh is angry with his land).¹⁰

These illustrations could be multiplied, but the emerging picture would not change much. A word “earth,” related to the Hebrew *ʿeres*, was used commonly in the ancient Near East with the meanings of “earth,” “ground,” and “land.” Only its context will indicate if reference is made to the whole world (what we call the planet), to the surface of the earth on which life is lived, or to a territory of the earth.

The Hebrew *ʿeres* (earth) occurs more than 2500 times in the Hebrew (and Aramaic) Old Testament. To examine all of these, or even a good part of them, would take us beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, even a cursory look at the word will suggest that its meaning varies within the Old Testament just as is the case with its usage outside the Old Testament, and it includes the idea of planet earth, earth surface, and land.

Thus, *ʿeres* refers to the whole earth (or planet, as we say); for example in expressions such as “the God of heaven and of the earth” (Gen 24:3), “creator of heaven and earth” (Gen 14:19, 22), and “Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool” (Isa 66:1). This does not mean that the earth was always perceived as a sphere then as now. Thus, it is described (poetically) as having four corners (Isa 11:12) and ends (Isa 40:28). It is also said to have a center; literally, a navel (Ezek 38:12), and it could tremble and quake (Ps 18:7) and stagger like a drunkard (Isa 24:19f).

Secondly, in addition to the two-part division of the world into heaven and earth (planet), a three-part division also appears in the Bible. Heaven is above, the water beneath, and the earth is the dry land in between (Exod 20:4; Ps 135:6). In these cases *ʿeres* (earth) refers to only the dry surface, or the land of the living (Ps 52:5; Isa 38:11). Of course, it also provides the dead with their graves (Isa 26:19; Ezek 31:14). Moreover, the dry dust and the waste places are part of it (Deut 28:23; 32:10; Ps 107:34; Jer 2:6). Thus, not just the earth’s lifegiving surface, but its specific and various materials are indicated by *ʿeres*. A person can be pinned to it (1 Sam 26:8), and blood can be spilled upon it (1 Sam 26:20).

At this point *ʔeres* receives a meaning akin to that of *ʔadama* (ground, soil, earth),¹¹ but primarily it is the ground upon which life can thrive (Gen 1:11f; 27:28; Deut 1:25).

Finally, *ʔeres* means “land” in the sense of circumscribed territory. Thus, we find “the land of the north” (Jer 3:18); “the land of the plain” (Jer 48:21); “the land of the fathers” (Gen 31:3); “the land of their captivity” (1 Kings 8:47); “the land of the Canaanites” (Exod 13:5); “the land of Israel” (1 Sam 13:19); “the land (territory) of Benjamin” (Jer 1:1); and “land of Yahweh” (Hos 9:3).

Once again we must conclude without a clear definition of our term. Earth, dry land, ground, territory, all are suitable and common translations of the Old Testament word *ʔeres*. Only the context can guide us in the selection of a proper translation.

EARTH IN THE CONTEXT OF GENESIS 1:1

A contextual investigation is difficult to contain in a limited space, since the context of a verse or word compares well with the ripples a stone will make when thrown into the water. The problem grows larger even as one pursues it. Consequently, we can make only summary observations.

The immediate context is verse 1, specifically the expression “the heavens and the earth.”¹² It is a familiar expression¹³ that is generally taken as a reference to all — the whole world, on the grounds that heaven and earth are the outer limits intended to include everything in between, i.e., the whole world.¹⁴ Of course, one could also read the expression as a reference to God’s and man’s residences or realms respectively (Eccles 5:2). In this case, the heavenly vault and the earthly surface would be the meanings intended. However, in the context of divine creation there is some support in the Old Testament for understanding these terms as an inclusion (of all things) rather than as a specification of the realms (Ps 136:1-9; Isa 40:21-23; 45:11f).

The whole translation of Genesis 1:1 is difficult, as recent versions of the Bible make clear.¹⁵ This matter cannot be taken up here, except to say that verse 1 likely is a general introduction to the whole account of creation (Gen 1:1; 2:4)¹⁶ and should be translated “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Heaven and earth, then, is everything that follows in the account, beginning with God’s first act of creating the light (v 3). Subsequently, the second day witnesses the formation of heaven (v 8) and the third day tells of the making of earth (v 10), followed by the creating of their respective contents (v 11 - 2:1).

The emerging earth (v 9) *yabašša* (dry land) is named *ʔeres* (land) as opposed to the waters that are called sea. This might lead us simply to identify *ʔeres* as the physical hard ground (earth, rocks etc.) were it not for the fact that the word *ʔeres* (earth) is also used already in verse 2 to describe that which had not yet been separated into dry land and sea. Consequently, some may conclude that *ʔeres* (earth) in the opening chapter of the Bible has at least two meanings. It obviously refers to the dry land (v 10) but also to the formless and void something that preceded it (v 2).

It seems clear that the first of these meanings, “dry land,” dominates the rest of the chapter (v 11, 12, 20, 22, 24, 26, 29, 30). In one instance (v 25), the earth (*ʿeres*) is specifically identified with the ground (*ʿadama*) as though to underscore that point. However, in a few places a more global understanding of *ʿeres* may be preferable. Thus verses 14-19 speak of sun, moon, stars and their relationships to the earth. They are positioned in the firmament not only to give light, but also to measure seasons (festivals), days and years. It would seem that the solar system and its movements (as understood then) is being considered here. Genesis 2:1, 4 similarly speak of heavens and earth and their hosts, indicating, we may presume, the whole system, and thus complete the account that began in verse 1.¹⁷

We can thus draw the following preliminary conclusions. In general the word *ʿeres* (earth) refers in Genesis 1:1 - 2:4 to the dry land, in distinction from air and sea, on which plants, animals and man can live. In other words, *ʿeres* is the earth surface. Secondly, the account also implies that this earth is part of a larger system, including sun, moon, and stars,¹⁸ and hence has a larger meaning than mere dry ground upon which to stand. It is at least a realm as well, the sort of thing we mean by the adjective “terrestrial.” As such, it includes the sea for the fish and the air for the birds, both of which are created together on the fifth day before land animals. Thirdly, in the expression “heaven and earth,” *ʿeres* is part of an inclusion encompassing everything God has created from the terrestrial to the celestial realm. However, here *ʿeres* is least instructive to our query, for it is concerned neither with the material nor with the territory of the earth, but simply with the lower end of the spectrum that describes God’s whole creation. When we ask, therefore, what is the heaven and the earth God created in Genesis 1:1?, we probably should answer, everything that follows in Genesis 1:2 - 2:4, but chief attention is given to the earth, the fruitful surface that can sustain and maintain life.

THE PROBLEM OF GENESIS 1:2

This leaves us with the knotty problem of Genesis 1:2, a verse that is often used to describe the condition of the very first earth. But what is meant by the term “earth” here? A globe, physical material, or ground covered with water? Can we somehow penetrate the screen that hides God’s creative work and know how he really did it at first? Several proposals have been made.

- 1) The verse describes the existence of the earth in the interval between the original creation of matter and the creation of life. Either it should be seen as raw material waiting to be shaped into an orderly earth,¹⁹ or, following the so-called hypothesis of restitution,²⁰ it describes a world fallen in Lucifer-like fashion from its pristine glory (v 1).
- 2) The verse describes God’s first work of creation, a watery dark earth, on Day 1 of the creation week. This view may place some strain on the sequence of God’s works of creation beginning with light and ending with man, and could lead to the impossible

suggestion that God's first creative act was not good.²¹ However, Young has argued that this first earth, created by God, was in fact good, though not yet ready for life.²² Here *ʿeres* would have different meanings in verse 2 and verse 10. The latter would show a development beyond the former.

- 3) The verse describes a chaos that stands not so much before creation as opposite creation, expressing an ever-present threatening possibility of divine judgment.²³ Here the earth of verse 2 is the earth of verse 10 as it would be or might be without God's creative power.
- 4) The verse describes the earth prior to creation and characterizes it as a "nothing," that is, as no more than a condition in which creation of the earth could occur. According to this very common suggestion, *ʿeres* (earth) in verse 2 has no special meaning at all (just like a totally empty room has no content).²⁴ Here verse 2 reiterates the theme of verse 1, but in a negative sense, namely that God has created everything in the beginning.

This means that *ʿeres* (earth) in verse 2 is not very helpful in resolving our question, unless, of course, we posit a gap between verses 1 and 2 so that verse 1 becomes a temporal clause and verse 2 a description of pre-existing matter, but that goes against some careful studies of the problem.²⁵ Alternatively, verse 2 does not contribute to a description of the created earth, unless we follow the view of Young, but that is endowed with serious difficulties, particularly, that the suggested divine creation of the earth in verse 2 does not follow the pattern of God's other works of creation. If we thus eliminate proposals 1 and 2, we are left with 3 and 4, neither of which contribute anything to our concept of the first earth, other than that God created it.

Consequently, we are thrown back upon Genesis 1:1 which announces in summary fashion that God created the heavens and the earth, followed by a description of this event. It would appear that the earth (*ʿeres*) is the dry land upon which life can flourish, though it is recognized that this realm is part of a larger system (sun, moon, stars) that gives light and orders its temporal seasons.

THE EARTH IN BIBLICAL THOUGHT²⁶

This leaves a final question. What conclusions can we draw from the above considerations regarding the geophysical questions with which we began? Does Genesis 1:1 report the creation of the material earth, the planet earth, or the land on the surface of the earth? To answer this, we must first inquire about the meaning of the word "earth." We have found that it generally means land (certainly in Gen 1 - 2:4), although with the awareness that there is more to the earth than just its land (v 14-19). However, when we put our contemporary question to the Bible, we must also inquire about the willingness of the Bible to acknowledge our distinctions and our reasons for making them.

For example, we distinguish between earth and planet because science has given us a long chronology for the existence of the planet, whereas the

Bible has given us a short chronology for the earth. But there is no evidence that the Bible was confronted by this problem. Rather, it distinguishes between the earth as land and planet (world) because the former represents the realm of human life and its dominion, whereas the latter is God's work and charge: thus God created the heavens and the earth (the whole world), whereas the earth (dry land) was made for life and for mankind. The distinction is based upon a perspective of function, not of chronology, and consequently no explicit temporal distinction between the two can be expected, nor indeed is found.

The best we can say about the creation of the earth in Genesis 1:1 is that it concerns this world, our earth, and that it involves the ecological system within which we live. Much more may need to be said about the geophysical questions in our time, but the Bible is generally silent about them. Thus, our finding that the word *ʔeres* (earth) refers primarily to the dry surface of our planet and to its life does not allow us to conclude that Genesis 1 portrays a second stage of a two-stage creation, first the matter of the planet, then the earth, with a temporal interval in between. It does allow a distinction of perspective between our world system, heaven and earth, and the earth as dry land with its life and territories, but any temporal distinction between them we will have to introduce on our own initiative, without the help of the Bible. It is not without significance, it would seem, that the Bible and the story of creation opens with a single word, *b^ere-ʔit*, meaning "in the beginning" (and not with the word "God," as some have thought). Hereby the Bible instructs us that anyone who wishes to understand its story of creation is not invited to inquire about what may have happened prior to the beginning, for at the beginning stands only God, nothing else. We are invited by the Bible to inquire about that which happened following the beginning of God's creation, but alas, it does not answer all our questions.

ENDNOTES

1. The literature is overwhelming and varied. See for example: (a) Eichrodt W, 1962. In the beginning. In: Israel's prophetic heritage (NY), p 1-10; (b) Hasel GF. 1972. Recent translations of Genesis 1:1: a critical look. The Bible Translator 22:154-167; (c) Young EJ. 1964. Studies in Genesis one (Philadelphia); (d) Ridderbos NH. 1958. Genesis i:1 und 2. Oudtestamentische Studiën 12:214-260; (e) Schmidt WH. 1967. Die Schöpfungsgeschichte (Neukirchen); (f) Westermann C. 1967. Genesis BK1/2 (Neukirchen), p 130-141.
2. This unusual position is advanced only infrequently and is probably influenced by the words *tohu wabohu* (without form and void) in verse 2. See: (a) Calvin J. 1847. Genesis (Edinburgh), p 70; (b) Clarke's commentary. 1830. Vol. I (NY), p 30.
3. This is the most common view. It reads "the heaven and the earth" (v 1) as an expression of the whole world, the universe, or the like. (a) Gunkel H. 1922. Genesis (5th ed., Göttingen), p 102; (b) Skinner J. 1910. Genesis (NY), p 14; (c) Westermann, p 140f (Note 1f).
4. A less frequently expressed view which questions that the Old Testament has a universal perspective. Instead its perspective is limited to the vault of heaven with the land below. See: (a) Young, p 9f (Note 1c); (b) Cassuto U. 1978. A commentary on the Book of Genesis, Vol. I (Jerusalem), p 26; (c) Vawter B. 1977. On Genesis: a new reading (NY), p 38.
5. Helck W, Otto E, editors. 1975. Lexicon der Ägyptologie (Wiesbaden), p 1263f.

6. See: Morenz S. 1973. *Egyptian religion* (London), p 29f.
7. *The Assyrian dictionary*. 1958. Vol. IV (Chicago), p 311-313.
8. *Ugaritic textbook* 1965. (Rome), p 366f.
9. See: Botterweck GJ, Ringgren H, editors. 1978. *Theological dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI), p 392.
10. Gibson JCL. 1971, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic inscriptions*, Vol. I (Oxford), p 74.
11. Recently: Miller PD. 1978. Genesis 1-11. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement* 8:37f.
12. The Hebrew word heaven (*šamayim*) is dual (rather than plural), indicating perhaps two heavenly regions. See: Stadelmann LJJ, S.J. 1970. The Hebrew conception of the world. *Analecta Biblica* 39:37-41 (Rome).
13. See Habel NC. 1972. Yahweh, maker of heaven and earth; a study in tradition criticisms. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91:321-337.
14. See: Honeyman AM. 1952. Merismus in biblical Hebrew. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 71:16.
15. See the New English Bible, the New American Bible, the New Jewish Version, Anchor Bible, all of which abandon the traditional rendering "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."
16. See Hasel (Note 1b).
17. See Schmidt, p 76 (Note 1e).
18. The Hebrew *cocavim* (stars) are heavenly bodies other than the sun and moon. A distinction between planets and fixed stars is possible but not necessary on the basis of the word alone. The reference to the stars here is incidental, almost parenthetical, to complete the picture. See Westermann, p 182 (Note 1f).
19. This view presupposes an early creation of the material universe and is favored by those scientists who accept a long chronology for matter and a short chronology for life on this earth.
20. Also called the "Ruin-Reconstruction Theory of Genesis 1:2." In: Lammerts WE, editor. 1971. *Scientific studies in special creation* (Philadelphia), p 32-40.
21. Childs B. 1962. *Myth and reality in the Old Testament* (NY), p. 31-43.
22. Simpson CD. 1952. *Genesis, Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. I (NY), p 468.
23. Young, p 32 (Note 4a).
24. Arguments supporting this interpretation are taken from ancient Near Eastern creation stories and Genesis 2:4 which uses the formula, when as yet no plant, etc., existed. See: (a) Westermann, p 141f (Note 1f); Ridderbos, p 224-227 (Note 1d), et al.
25. See Note 1.
26. For a thorough assessment of this subject, see Stadelmann, p 126-154 (Note 12).