

MENU



Introducing International Development as Cosmic Battle

By Beth Snodderly, excerpted from her book, *Chaos Is Not God's Will*

Images of Light and Dark

In beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

As for the earth,

it was destroyed and desolate (tohu wabohu),

with darkness on the face of the deep,

but the Spirit of God stirring over the face of the waters.

Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light!

And God saw that the light was good (tov).

So God slashed a separation between the light and the darkness.

(Gen. 1:1-4, author's translation)

Even in darkness light dawns for the upright,

for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous.

(Ps. 112:4)

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

(Isa. 9:2)

Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness.

Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them

to make them
stumble.
(1 John 2:9, 10)

General Overview

Darkness followed by light is part of a pattern found in the opening verses of Genesis. This pattern, which consists of a general statement followed by the particulars (such as the moon, stars, and sun), will also serve as a pattern for this book. This chapter gives a general overview of the origin of the need for international development, symbolized by the disturbing images in Genesis 1:2. The thesis of this chapter (and the book from which it is excerpted) is that in a cosmic battle for the rulership of this planet, God is deliberately overcoming evil with good until, in the end, Jesus will reign in his Kingdom of *shalom*. But until God ushers in that final perfect new heaven and new earth, there is a need for believers to engage intentionally in international development efforts to demonstrate God's will for people, for societies, and for God's originally good creation. Jesus' followers serve as God's display window,[1] showing what Jesus' reign is meant to look like. As pastor-theologian, Gregory Boyd, says,

As Christ gave his all for us, so we are called and empowered to give our all for others. As we abide in Christ and participate in the love of the self-sacrificial God, our lives are to manifest the self-sacrificial love of God to others.[2]

Love eliminates chaos, which is not God's will. We see this in the opening verses of Genesis and in the First Epistle of John, where those causing confusion are ultimately labeled as "children of the devil" (1 John 3:10). We see examples of this theme throughout Israel's history, in the messages of the prophets, in Jesus' demonstrations of authority over the powers of darkness, in the Epistles where we find principles for living loving, godly, and non-chaotic lives, and finally in the Book of Revelation where, in the end, Jesus victoriously reigns over all. The images in the first few verses of Genesis set the tone and theme for the entire Bible as we see the Spirit of God hovering over the feared unknown of the darkness and deep, ready to stir it to life-giving status. Similarly, in the Gospel of John we see the tradition of an angel stirring up the waters of Bethesda, making them life-producing and healing. These images illustrate the origin of international development: setting right what is not right, something destroyed and desolate, something that is not compatible with life—*tohu wabohu*. "Creation ... constituted bringing order to the cosmos from an originally nonfunctional condition." [3] There is a need in all societies for restoring order and relationships to reflect God's will for this world, overcoming evil with good.

Particular Examples of the Cosmic Battle

Genesis 1: Physical Chaos

Tohu wabohu (Gen. 1:2) describes the disastrous result, at some point following God's original good creation, when a created being used the gift of free will to rebel against God's will.[4] Intelligent evil was (and still is) at work, distorting God's original good purposes. The author of Genesis shows in the rest of the first chapter how God goes about restoring his intentions for the earth, which are the exact opposite of the chaotic conditions. The author does this by emphasizing a definite pattern in the creation story, showing that God has evil under control and patiently counter-acts and replaces it with acts of creativity, including the creation of humans to join God in fighting back against forces that oppose God.

As a description of the consequences of opposition to God's ways, the figure of speech, *tohu wabohu*, also contains within itself the solution to addressing the root problem behind the chaos and desolation. Believers have the privilege of allowing God's Spirit to work through them to demonstrate God's glory, by bringing order out of chaos, and by overcoming evil with good (Hebrew, *tob*, a word play with the similar-sounding *tohu*)[5]. The rest of the Bible explains how to overcome and/or avoid *tohu* at various levels (physical, personal, family, social, political) or it shows what happens when *tohu* is not overcome. (The observable chaotic result can then be called *tohu wabohu*.) In Genesis 1, physical chaos is being overcome by God's good creation. A later chapter in this book will explore this figure of speech in great detail.

Isaiah 32 and 34: Societal Chaos

In addition to physical chaos, there is a need for chaos to be overcome within societies. In Isaiah 32 societal chaos is being overcome by the intervention of God's Spirit. In this chapter we see a metaphorical image of the consequences for societies whose people practice ungodliness, who use wicked schemes to leave the hungry empty, and who destroy the poor with their lies: "The fortress will be abandoned, the noisy city deserted; citadel and watchtower will become a wasteland forever" (Isa. 32:14). Destruction and desolation are inherent in a person or society rebelling against God. Evil choices are the evidence of a mind in opposition to God, and that mind or society can be characterized by the physical metaphor of *tohu wabohu*—destroyed and desolate. It is destroyed because it isn't working the way God made it to work—it is twisted, turned to wrong purposes, therefore purposeless from God's perspective. It is desolate because the Spirit has withdrawn from that life or society. Ezekiel's vision of the Spirit in the wheels leaving the temple and the land (Ezek. 10:15–19) serves as a visual metaphor of what happens when a person's mind or a society is twisted and turned to wrong purposes. Evil choices result in the Spirit leaving ("My Spirit will not contend with humans forever" [Gen. 6:3]), and the withdrawal of the Spirit of God leaves behind a desolate person or society that will self-destruct without the intervention of the Spirit. "God will stretch out over Edom the measuring line of chaos (*tohu*) and the plumb line of desolation (*bah*)" (Isa. 34:11). When the people of God, in whom the Spirit of God dwells, are absent, the Spirit of God is also absent, resulting in desert-like conditions in the physical, social, and spiritual realms. (The chapter in this book on the Hebrew term *tohu wabohu* will demonstrate this in detail.)

But when Spirit-filled people of God bring the light of Christ into a society and enough people respond to the outpouring of the Spirit, then we see real development in that society:

[Destruction and desolation] ... till the Spirit is poured on us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest. The Lord's justice will dwell in the desert, his righteousness live in the fertile field. The fruit of righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever. My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest (Isa. 32:15–18).

Isaiah is describing *shalom*: [the goal of international development](#).^[6]

These verses give an attractive description of the results of the Spirit's outpouring: flourishing, peace, and safety. What might Isaiah have had in mind that would bring about the outpouring of the Spirit on a chaotic and desolate society? In the first verses of the chapter, the prophet seems to be saying that leaders' deliberate choices to follow God's ways, the opposite of the ungodly ways being practiced, will bring the

presence of the Spirit. The description at the beginning of Isaiah 32, of a group of rulers collaborating to do what is right, harmonizes with Jesus' saying, "where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" [through the Spirit] (Matt. 18:20). "See, a king will reign in righteousness and rulers will rule with justice. Each one will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm, like streams of water in the desert... No longer will the fool be called noble nor the scoundrel be highly respected ..." (Isa. 32:1, 2, 5).

Isaiah 45 and Jeremiah 4: Spiritual Chaos

In a later chapter, Isaiah hints that the means of the Spirit's outpouring is through seeking God and turning to him: "I have not said to Jacob's descendants, 'Seek me in vain'" (Isa. 45:19). On the contrary, some of Jacob's descendants did seek God and their purpose in history is specified a few verses later: "Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; ... Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear" (Isa. 45:22, 23).

The prophet Jeremiah held out a similar plea to rebellious Israel to return to God. But God's people foolishly refused to know and obey God. Their moral values were completely reversed: "They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good" (Jer. 4:22). As a result of their disobedience and the resulting absence of God's Spirit, the land became empty, shaken, ruined, shattered. "I looked at the earth, and it was formless and empty (*tohu wabohu*); and at the heavens, and their light was gone" (Jer. 4:23). Creation is being undone in a sense. The earth will mourn and the heavens will be dark because of this judgment on God's people.

Summary of the Cosmic Battle Theme in Scripture

And Jeremiah brings us right back to Genesis 1:2 where all that can be seen is chaotic and desolate (*tohu wabohu*), but with the Spirit of God hovering over the darkness and the deep, waiting to stir non-productive places back to life.

This is the cosmic battle theme throughout Scripture. The whole theme of Scripture is to fight back against the opposition to God's intentions. This is the biblical worldview demonstrated throughout Israel's history, in the prophets' interpretation of that history, in Jesus' activity and words, and in descriptions of living in the Kingdom found in the Epistles, including a central emphasis in First John on the cosmic battle between the Son of God and the evil one. Where God's rule is not yet acknowledged, confusion and chaos (*tohu*) reign, with visible evidence of conditions contrary to God's will such as disease, violence, and injustice for the poor. Believers need to intentionally participate, with the help of God's Spirit, in continuing the mission of the Son of God to destroy the works of God's adversary, the devil (see 1 John 3:8). Philip Jenkins summarizes this mission in his book, *The New Faces of Christianity*: "In his acts of healing, Jesus was not

just curing individuals, but trampling diabolical forces underfoot, and the signs and wonders represented visible and material tokens of Christ's victory over very real forces of evil.”[7]

Overcoming *tohu*, the opposite of God's will, is central to the mission of the body of Christ, the Church. Holistic international development engages opposition to God's purposes at all levels of existence: personal, spiritual, societal, physical, and across cultures. Chaos—wherever it is found—is not God's will. Medical missionary Robert Hughes, in Shillong, India from 1939–69, wrote in his journal, “This kingdom of disease, death, ignorance, prejudice, fear, malnutrition, and abject poverty [is] most surely a kingdom which ought to be overthrown by the kingdom of our God.”[8] Demonstration of God's love, God's will, and God's glory is the responsibility of the body of Christ, so that all peoples can come to know and obey him.

(Excerpt from the book, *Chaos Is Not God's Will*, by Beth Snodderly. Available as a PDF download: https://www.academia.edu/6398743/Chaos_Is_Not_Gods_Will or from Amazon: <http://www.amazon.ca/Chaos-Not-Gods-Will-International/dp/0865850305>)

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Endnotes

[1] Ed Stetzer, *Subversive Kingdom: Living as Agents of Gospel Transformation* (Nashville: B&H, 2012), 189.

[2] Gregory Boyd, “Living In, and Looking Like, Christ,” in *Servant God: The Cosmic Conflict Over God’s Trustworthiness* (Loma Linda: Loma Linda University Press, 2013), 407.

[3] John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Academic, 2009), 35.

[4] Justification for these and subsequent claims will be explained in detail in later chapters. The condition of the earth prior to creation is described in Genesis 1:2 as “*tohu wabohu*,” which can be translated “destroyed and desolate,” or “topsy turvey,” or, traditionally, “formless and void.” In each of the other 18 occurrences of the word “*tohu*,” the broad context is judgment for rebellion against God. It seems logical that the first occurrence of the term would also have been in the context of judgment, setting the tone for the remaining usages of the term in the Hebrew Bible.

[5] John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis Unbound: a Provocative New Look at the Creation Account* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996), 63.

[6] Beth Snodderly, *The Goal of International Development: God's Will On Earth, as It Is in Heaven*. (Pasadena: WCIU Press, 2009), 157.

[7] Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008), 99.

[8] D. Ben Rees, *Vehicles of Grace and Hope: Welsh Missionaries in India 1800– 1970* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2003).

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