

I



Creation (Genesis 1:1–2:3)

Introduction and Day 1 (Genesis 1:1–5)

At the beginning of Scripture, the Holy Spirit through the prophet Moses introduces us at once to God in the essential fullness of his being. All prefatory matter is excluded: it is to God, and God alone, that we are brought. It is he who is the subject of the Hebrew creation account. We hear him, through the divine revelation, penetrating earth's silence, shining into the primordial darkness, with the sole intent of creating a sphere in which he might display his sovereignty, incomparability and power. And he makes himself known through these works of his creative will: 'The heavens are recounting the glory of God, and the works of his hands are being declared by the expanse' (Ps. 19:1).

1:1. *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*

Although many scholars would undermine its significance, this verse serves as the theme sentence of the creation account.¹ It is a solemn declaration of God’s creation of the universe, including the seen and the unseen.² In other words, the opening verse is a formal introduction and a caption to the entire creation narrative.³

The biblical author used the word *bērē’sīt* to characterize the time framework of the creation. It is properly translated ‘*in the beginning*’, or ‘*at the first*’. Frequently the term, or a related form, was employed to describe the first phase or step in an event.⁴ In the context of Genesis 1 it means that creation took place at the beginning of time.⁵

A few commentators, both ancient and modern, render the first clause as ‘when God began to create’.⁶ This is a translation that is linguistically possible. However, it alters the meaning of the text significantly. Note what happens: ‘When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void...’ This translation suggests that when God began his creative activity, he started with a pre-existent material. In other words, the physical base of the earth already existed, but it was merely without form and it was empty. On the other hand, the traditional rendering, ‘In the beginning...’, is an absolute clause which testifies that there was no physical element prior to God’s creation; that is to say, God created the universe *ex nihilo* (Latin for ‘out of nothing’).

Four basic arguments fully support the traditional translation:

1. Nothing in the text mentions pre-existent matter.
2. The construction, ‘In the beginning’ is found in every ancient translation without exception.
3. ‘When God began to create’ is a linguistically possible translation, but it does not reflect or represent common Hebrew usage.

4. The verb ‘to create’ (Hebrew *bārā*) confirms the absolute sense of verse 1.

This last point deserves further consideration. In ancient Hebrew a variety of words expressed the idea of ‘making’ or ‘forming’. These words may have either God or mankind as the subject (e.g., 3:21; Exodus 38:1–3). The subject of the verb *bārā*, however, is only and always God; the word is never used of an action of mankind (in the active Qal stem, as it appears here). The reason for this is that man cannot create *ex nihilo*, but only out of a pre-existent matter. The verb *bārā* was only used of God because only he could create that way (see Exodus 34:10; Isa. 65:17).

Clearly then, the ancient Hebrews believed that at the starting-point of time, God created the heavens and earth out of nothing.⁷ That historical event demonstrated his power, incomparability and sovereignty. All things exist because of the decree and will of God.

The Hebrews had no single word to describe the universe. When they wanted to express the concept of all reality, they spoke of ‘the heavens and the earth’. Thus, when Melchizedek blessed Abram in the name of the sovereign God of the universe, he said, ‘Blessed be Abram of God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth’ (14:19). The expression ‘the heavens and the earth’ is a merism—two opposites that are all-inclusive. So when Melchizedek described God as the owner of heaven and earth, he meant not only the places themselves, but also everything in heaven and on earth. Likewise, when the writer of Genesis stated that God created ‘the heavens and the earth’, he was saying that God fashioned the entire universe.⁸

The common name for the God of Israel, *’ēlōhīm*, is used here. It is a masculine plural form of Hebrew *’l*, which means ‘strength, might’. When it is used of the God of the Hebrews it has singular

agreement; when it designates other gods it takes plural agreement (as in Exodus 20:3). The plurality of God's name probably reflects the Hebrew practice of the honorific plural or plural of majesty (*pluralis majestatis*), in which a singular object is characterized by a quality to such an extent that a plural is used for the object. Others have used the plurality of the name as an argument in support of the doctrine of the Trinity.

1:2. And the earth was formless and empty. And darkness was upon the surface of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the water.

The universe, and particularly the earth, is now pictured as it appeared in the process of creation.⁹ First, the earth is called 'formless' (Hebrew *tōhū*), a word that reflects a state of wilderness. And, second, the earth is described as 'empty' (Hebrew *bōhū*); it was devoid of all living things, plants and animals. These words, *tōhū* and *bōhū*, are found together on only two other occasions in the Hebrew Bible. In both cases (Isa. 34:11; Jer. 4:23) the prophets were having visions of what the earth would look like after God's judgement. The earth will be destroyed on that day, and it will consequently become 'wilderness' and 'emptiness'. It will return to a wild and dark state, as it was in the beginning.

The picture of darkness over the surface of the deep merely exhibits the fact that, as yet, no light existed upon the earth. Some scholars contend that the word 'deep' (Hebrew *tēhôm*) is a remnant of Mesopotamian mythology.¹⁰ They allege that it relates to Tiamat, the goddess of the deep sea who was a foe of the creator-god Marduk. In the Mesopotamian creation account Marduk vanquished Tiamat in order to use her body to create the earth, seas and heavens. These scholars argue that Genesis 1:2 demonstrates

that the Hebrew God had also to conquer the chaos deity Tiamat in the form of the ‘deep’ (note the assonance of the two words). This equation has come to be regarded as fact in much recent literature.¹¹ In reality, the identification of Hebrew *tēhôm* and the Babylonian Tiamat is dubious, at best.¹² The Hebrews simply understood the deep as the primal world ocean and nothing more—they certainly did not deify it.

The Spirit of God is pictured as ‘hovering’ over the newly formed earth. This word is used elsewhere in the Pentateuch only in Deuteronomy 32:11, where it speaks of an eagle hovering over its young to protect and nurture it. In Genesis 1:2 the Spirit of God was doing the same thing.

This is the first reference in Scripture to the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Some commentators argue that the term *rûāh* just means ‘wind’ in this context, but that is highly unlikely (see Job 33:4).

1:3. *And God said, ‘Let there be light!’ And there was light.*

God shattered the darkness and the formlessness by the mere act of speaking the words: ‘Let there be light!’ His awesome, crushing power was demonstrated dramatically by that command of just four words in English (only two in Hebrew). God spoke and the physical came forth out of nothingness. By mere verbal fiat, the light was called to break into the formless, empty and dark world.

The command is a jussive form. By using it, the speaker imposes his will upon another party. In addition, the jussive gives express emphasis to the action: it bears a sense of spontaneity and of the immediacy of the event’s completion.

What was this light? Since the sun had not yet been created (not until Day 4) it cannot have been a natural light. Some rabbinic

writings believe it was ‘the effulgent splendour of the divine presence’.¹³ The New Testament writings agree that it was reflective of God’s presence, but here in the person of Jesus Christ (see John 1:1–5; Col. 1:16).¹⁴ The idea of light having existence independent of the sun is not unique to this passage (see Isa. 30:26; Rev. 22:5).

1:4. And God saw the light, that it was good. And God divided between the light and the darkness.

The *waw* consecutive (an imperfect verb with ‘and’ attached to it as a prefix) appears twice in this verse. This construction is a fundamental feature of Hebrew narrative and, thus, it points to the fact that these events took place in sequence.

The motif of separation plays a significant role in the creation account. In Genesis 1 the verb *bādāl* (‘to divide’) is used five times of God’s creative activity. He is pictured as having divided light from darkness (1:4,18), waters above from waters below (1:6–7), and day from night (1:14). And although the word *bādāl* is not used, the idea of separation is also central to the creation of land on Day 3. Separation of natural phenomena was an expression of God’s creative activity.¹⁵

The phrase, ‘It was good,’ appears seven times in Genesis 1.¹⁶ The number seven is often emphatic in Hebrew, and it symbolizes completion and fulness. The seventh appearance accentuates the entire account when it says that all God had made ‘was very good’ (1:31).

1:5. And God called the light ‘day’ and he called the darkness ‘night’. And there was evening and there was morning, Day One.

Here God was naming objects of creation. Prefixed to the words

‘day’ and ‘night’ are *lamed* prepositions. Many translators leave these prepositions untranslated, as if they were serving as signs of the direct object.¹⁷ In reality, they may be spatial *lameds* which mean ‘to’. If so, the first half of the verse may read: ‘And God called to the light “Day!” and to the darkness he called “Night!”’

This activity reflects the ancient idea that all objects are inextricably bound to the spoken word.¹⁸ In fact, many believed that an object took its identity from its name. In other words, things had no being or character unless they had been named. A good example of that belief is the Hebrew practice of giving names that fit individual characters and personalities (3:20; 4:2; 25:25). In the creation account, the naming of the created objects certified their essence and existence. Without names they had no real being.

In addition, the act of name-giving reflects God’s authority over the objects that he named. For further work on this concept, see commentary on 2:19.

The word ‘one’ is a cardinal number. When it is found with an indefinite noun it may have an emphatic force.¹⁹ The meaning ‘first’ given in many translations ‘is derived solely from context’.²⁰

The temporal framework of creation was ‘evening’ and ‘morning’ (literally ‘sunset’ and ‘sunrise’). Together they constitute a figure called a merism, which signified the end of light and encompassed the entire period of darkness. Thus Day 1 began with the entrance of light and it ended at the departure of darkness. Day 2 began at sunrise. Cassuto comments: ‘An examination of the narrative passages of the Bible makes it evident that whenever clear reference is made to the relationship between a given day and the next, it is precisely sunrise that is accounted the beginning of the second day.’²¹ This accounting of time was the same as that held by the ancient Egyptians.

Application

The opening verses of the Bible are simply astounding! Such seemingly simple sentences, which we often take for granted, are loaded with grand biblical truths. These are plain statements that refute much of today's false teaching. Firstly, they deny *atheism*, for the one God created everything. Secondly, they deny *pantheism* (the belief that a god is in all things and all people), for God is transcendent, above and beyond creation. Thirdly, they deny *polytheism*, for only one God made the universe. Fourthly, they deny *humanism*, for God, and not man, is on the throne of the universe. Fifthly, they deny *evolution*, because man did not develop from the primordial soup, but he was specially created by the one true God. And, frankly, that is why there is meaning to life. That is why those who believe in God can say that our chief reason for existence is to glorify him and enjoy him for ever. If this God is the Creator, then we are to live for his glory! As the apostle John declares, 'Worthy are you, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honour and power; for you created all things, and because of your will they existed, and were created' (Rev. 4:11).

We should also consider that the creation of the world was a pattern, or paradigm, for the creation of the Christian. That is to say, God's breaking of light into darkness was a model of his saving work of opening our darkened hearts with the light of the knowledge of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul says as much in 2 Corinthians 4:6: 'For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the one who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.'