



Genesis - Chapter One

Summary of Chapter One

This chapter, written as a poem, provides the reader with an insight as to how and why God created an entire universe out of nothing, and why it is that humankind is the predominant living creature in terms of their spirituality, the characteristics of reason, morality, language, a capacity for relationships governed by love and commitment, and creativity in all forms of art, that exists anywhere in the Cosmos as far as current scientific knowledge and understanding can tell.

The creation account spans six days separated by the phrase: 'there was evening and there was morning.' Some believe these to be six literal days while others believe them to be various time periods to reflect God's process of creation. This structure provides cadence to the poem and also provides the structure that still governs how humankind measure time.

The poem provides little in the way of scientific evidence for the creation account although the sequence of events is an extremely good match for that of current scientific understanding of the universe and life on the planet earth. Quite remarkable since it was written down at least 3250 years ago and was probably spoken of for much longer prior to that!

I. Genesis 1:1-11:26 - Primeval History

The first eleven chapters of Genesis differ from those that follow. Chapters 12-50 focus on one main family line in considerable detail, whereas Chapters 1-11 could be described as a survey of the world before Abraham. These opening chapters differ not only in their subject matter from Chapter Twelve onwards, but also because there are no real parallels to the patriarchal stories in other literatures. In contrast to the patriarchal stories, however, other ancient non-biblical stories do exist recounting stories about both creation and the flood.

The existence of such stories, however, does not in any way challenge the authority or the inspiration of Genesis. In fact, the non-biblical stories stand in sharp contrast to the biblical account, and thus help readers appreciate the unique nature and character of the biblical accounts of creation and the flood. In other ancient literary traditions, creation is a great struggle often involving conflict between the gods. The flood was sent because the gods could not stand the noise made by human beings, yet they could not control it. Through these stories the people of the ancient world learned their traditions about the gods they worshipped and the way of life that people should follow. Babylonian versions of creation and flood stories were designed to show that Babylon was the centre of the religious universe and that its civilisation was the highest achieved by mankind.

Reading Genesis, readers can see that it is designed to refute these delusions. There is only one God, whose word is almighty. He has only to speak and the world comes into being. The sun and moon are not gods in their own right, but are created by the one God. This God does not need feeding by man, as the Babylonians believed they did by offering sacrifices, but he supplies man with food. It is human sin and not divine annoyance that prompts the flood. Far from Babylon's tower, i.e. the Tower of Babel, reaching heaven, it became a reminder that human pride could neither reach nor manipulate God.

These principles, which emerge so clearly in Genesis Chapters 1-11, are truths that run through the rest of Scripture. The unity of God is fundamental to biblical theology, as is his almighty power, his care for mankind, and his judgement on sin. It may not always be obvious how these chapters relate to geology and archæology, but their theological message is very clear. Read in their intended sense, they provide the fundamental presuppositions of the rest of Scripture. These chapters should act as eyeglasses, so that readers focus on the points their author is making and go on to read the rest of the Bible in light of them.

I.a. Genesis 1:1-2:4a - Six Days of Creation and the Sabbath

The Book of Genesis opens with a majestic description of how God first created the heavens and earth, and then how he ordered the earth so that it may become his dwelling place.

Structured into seven sections, each marked by the use of set phrases, the entire episode, written in the form of a poem, conveys the picture of the all-powerful, transcendent God who sets everything in place with consummate skill in conformity to his grand design. The emphasis is mainly on how God orders or structures everything. The structure of the account is as follows: after giving the setting (1:1-2), the author describes the six workdays (1:3-31) and the seventh day, God's Sabbath (2:1-3). Each of the six workdays follows the same pattern: it

begins with ‘and God said,’ and closes with ‘and there was evening and there was morning, the nth day.’

After declaring that God is the Creator of all things (1:1), the focus of the rest of Genesis 1, beginning at 1:3, is mainly on God bringing things into existence by his word and ordering the created things: <<**Let the waters under the sky be gathered together**>> (1:9b), rather than on how the earth was initially created (1:1). Different features indicate this. For example, vegetation is mentioned on Day 3, prior to the apparent creation of the sun on Day 4. Readers concerned with how to compare this passage with a modern scientific perspective should consult Introduction: Genesis and Science.

Viewed in its ancient Near Eastern context, Genesis 1 says that God created everything, but it is also an account of how God has structured creation in its ordered complexity. Readers are introduced in the first three days to Day, Night, the Heavens, Earth, Seas – all these items, and only these, being specifically named by God. In Days 4-6 the three distinctive regions are populated: the Heavens with lights and birds; the Seas with fish and swarming creatures; and the Earth with livestock and creeping things.

God finally gives authority to human beings, as his vice-regents, to govern all these living creatures. Genesis 1 establishes a hierarchy of authority. Humanity is divinely commissioned to govern other creatures on God’s behalf, the ultimate purpose being that the whole earth should become the temple of God, the place of his presence, and should display his glory.

¹ In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Genesis 1:1-2

In the beginning. This opening verse can be taken as a summary, introducing the whole passage; or it can be read as the first event, the origin of the heavens and the earth, perhaps sometime before the first ‘day,’ including the creation of matter, space and time. This second view, the origin of the heavens and the earth, is confirmed by the NT writers’ affirmation that creation was from nothing: <<**By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible**>> (Hebrews 11:3), and: <<**You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created**>> (Revelation 4:11).

God created. Although the Hebrew word for God, ‘Elohim,’ is plural in form, possibly to express the majesty of the Godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the

verb create is singular, indicating that God is thought of as one being. Genesis is consistently monotheistic in its outlook, in marked contrast to other ancient Near Eastern accounts of creation. There is only one God. The Hebrew verb *bara*,³ meaning create, is always used in the OT with God as the subject; while it is not always used to describe creation out of nothing, it does stress God's sovereignty and power.

The heavens and the earth here means everything. This then means that In the beginning refers to the beginning of everything. The text indicates that God created everything in the universe, which thus affirms that he did in fact create it *ex nihilo*, Latin for 'out of nothing.' The effect of the opening words of the Bible is to establish that God, in his inscrutable wisdom, sovereign power, and majesty, is the Creator of all things that exist.

The initial description of the earth as being a formless void, a phrase repeated within the OT only in Jeremiah 4:23, implies that it lacked order and content, a chaotic state. It is a similar image to that of the human soul without God.

The reference to darkness covered the face of the deep points to the absence of light. This initial state will be transformed by God's creative activity: the wind from or Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters, for Hebrew *ruach* means Spirit, breath or wind. This comment creates a sense of expectation; something is about to happen. There is no reason to postulate that a long time elapsed between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, during which time the earth became desolate and empty.

Critical scholars argue that the phrase the deep, Hebrew *tehom*, is a remnant of Mesopotamian mythology from the creation account called Enuma Elish. Marduk, in fashioning the universe, had also to vanquish Tiamat, a goddess of chaos. These scholars believe that the Hebrew God had to conquer the chaos deity Tiamat in the form of the deep, notice the similarity of the two words I and Tiamat. There are many linguistic reasons, however, for doubting a direct identification between the two. In any event, there is no conflict in Genesis or in the rest of the Bible between God and the deep, since the deep readily does God's bidding, as confirmed by Genesis 7:11 and 8:2, as well as Psalms 33:7 and 104:6.

³ Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Genesis 1:3-5

Then God said. In Chapter One the absolute power of God is conveyed by the fact that he merely speaks and things are created. Each new section of the chapter is

introduced by God's speaking. This is the first of the 10 words of creation in Chapter One.

Let there be light or 'light be.' Light is the first of God's creative works, which he speaks into existence. This initial action of creation is in keeping with the basic scientific model for understanding the sequence of creation - the Big Bang Theory.

This light existed before the sun of earth's solar system was formed. God is not dependent on his own creation for light, which is just how it will be with the new heaven and earth and the New Jerusalem that he will one day create: <<And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb>> (Revelation 21:23). God can create light without sun, can spread the Gospel without ministry and bring souls to salvation without human or angelic intervention, for he does as he wills.

The light was good. Everything that God brings into being is good. This becomes an important refrain throughout the chapter.

God separated the light from the darkness. Although this passage speaks of the separation of day and night, it is also indicative of how humankind has chosen to either live for God or separated from him: <<And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God>> (John 3:19-21).

God called the light Day. The focus in v.5 is on how God has ordered time on a weekly cycle; thus **let there be light** may also indicate the dawning of a new day or period of history. God is pictured working for six days and resting on the Sabbath, which is a model for human activity. Day 4 develops this idea further: the lights are placed in the heavens for signs and seasons, for the purpose of marking days and years and the seasons of the great festivals such as Passover. This sense of time being structured is further emphasised throughout the chapter as each stage of God's ordering and filling is separated by evening and morning into specific days.

There was evening and there was morning, the first day. The order – evening, then morning – helps the reader to follow the flow of the passage: after the workday (vv.3-5a) there is an evening, and then a morning, implying that there is a night time, the worker's daily rest, in between. Thus the reader is prepared for the next workday to dawn. Similar phrases divide Chapter One into six distinctive workdays, while 2:1-3 make a seventh day, God's Sabbath. On the first three days God creates the environment that the creatures of Days 4-6 will inhabit; thus, sea and sky (Day 2) are occupied by fish and birds created on Day 5. Refer also to the

supplementary material on the website. By a simple reading of Genesis, these days must be described as days in the life of God, but how his days relate to human days is more difficult to determine; refer also to Psalm 90:4, 2 Peter 3:8, and Introduction: Genesis and Science.

⁶ And God said, ‘Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’ ⁷ So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. ⁸ God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

Genesis 1:6-8

The waters. Water plays a crucial role in ancient Near Eastern creation literature. In Egypt, for example, the creator-god Ptah uses the pre-existent waters, personified as the god Nun, to create the universe. The same is true in Mesopotamian belief: it is out of the gods of watery chaos – Apsu, Tiamat, and Mummu – that creation comes. The biblical creation account sits in stark contrast to such dark mythological polytheism. In the biblical account, water at creation is no deity; it is simply something God created, and it serves as material in the hands of the sole sovereign Creator.

Just as light was separated from darkness, so waters are separated to form an expanse, referred to here as the dome, which God called Sky or Heaven, for it is difficult to find a single English word that accurately conveys the precise sense of the Hebrew term *shamayim*. In this context, it refers to what humans see above them, i.e. the region that contains both celestial lights and birds.

⁹ And God said, ‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.’ And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹ Then God said, ‘Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.’ And it was so. ¹² The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

Genesis 1:9-13

Two further regions are organised by God: the dry land forming Earth, and the waters forming Seas. These are the last objects to be specifically named by God.

God then instructs the earth to put forth vegetation. While the creation of vegetation may seem out of place on Day 3, it anticipates what God will later say in vv.29-30 concerning food for both humanity and other creatures. The creation of distinctive locations in Days 1-3, along with vegetation, prepares for the filling of these in Days 4-6.

Just as God created the earth to be fruitful from the outset, so too he desires his human creation to be just as fruitful. A sign of Christian salvation should be a natural outpouring of good works and a reflection of God's love and grace towards all other people.

¹⁴ And God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.' And it was so. ¹⁶ God made the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night – and the stars. ¹⁷ God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, ¹⁸ to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

Genesis 1:14-19

This section corresponds closely with the ordering of Day and Night on the first day, involving the separation of light and darkness (vv.3-5). Here the emphasis is on the creation of lights that will govern time, as well as providing light upon the earth. By referring to them as the greater light and the lesser light, the text avoids using terms that were also proper names for pagan deities linked to the sun and the moon.

Whether one views that the stars, sun and moon were created at this point or whether they simply became visible to earth as the mists lifted as the moisture in the atmosphere condensed as described on Day Two matters not in this account. The purpose of this passage is that the reader might learn of the purposes of God in providing light in this way and associating with the call on his people to be light for others, as Jesus had taught: <<*You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden*>> (Matthew 5:14), and indeed as he himself is: <<*The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world*>> (John 1:9).

Chapter One deliberately undermines pagan ideas regarding nature's being controlled by different deities. To the ancient pagans of the Near East, the gods were personified in various elements of nature. Thus, in Egyptian texts, the gods Ra and Thoth are personified in the sun and the moon, respectively.

The term made, Hebrew *‘asah*, need only mean that God fashioned or worked on them; it does not of itself imply that they did not exist in any form before this. Rather, the focus here is on the way in which God has ordained the sun and moon to order and define the passing of time according to his purposes. Thus the references to seasons or ‘appointed times’ and to days and years are probably an allusion to the appointed times and patterns in the Hebrew calendar for worship, festivals, and religious observance as listed in Exodus 13:10 and 23:15.

And the stars. The immense universe that God created is mentioned here only in a brief phrase, almost as if it were an afterthought. The focus of Genesis Chapter One is on the earth; the focus of the rest of the Bible is on humankind, both male and female, as the pinnacle of God’s creation and the object of his great salvation.

²⁰ And God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.’ ²¹ So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.’ ²³ And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

Genesis 1:20-23

Having previously described the creation of the waters and the dome of the sky, this section focuses on how they are filled with appropriate creatures of different kinds. As reproductive organisms, they are blessed by God so that they may be fruitful and fill their respective regions.

The term for the great sea monsters, Hebrew *tannin*, in various contexts can denote large serpents, dragons, or crocodiles, as well as whales or sharks, the probable sense here. Some have suggested that this could also refer to other extinct creatures such as dinosaurs. Canaanite literature portrays a great dragon as the enemy of the main fertility god Baal. Genesis depicts God as creating great sea monsters, but they are not in rebellion against him. He is sovereign and is not in any kind of battle to create the universe.

Introduction to Genesis 1:24-31

This is by far the longest section given over to a particular day, indicating that Day 6 is the peak of interest for this passage. The final region to be filled is the dry land or Earth as it has been designated in v.10. Here, a significant distinction is drawn between all the living creatures that are created to live on the dry land,

and human beings. Whereas vv.24-25 deal with the living creatures that the earth is to bring forth, vv.26-30 concentrate on the special status assigned to humans.

²⁴ And God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.’ And it was so. ²⁵ God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

Genesis 1:24-25

Cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth. These terms group the land-dwelling animals into three broad categories, probably reflecting the way nomadic shepherds would experience them: the domesticable stock animals, e.g. sheep, goats, cattle, and perhaps camels and horses; the small rodents and insects, e.g. rats and mice, lizards, spiders, etc; and the larger game and predatory animals, e.g. gazelles, lions, tigers, hippopotami, etc. The text specifically says these creatures were created of every kind. This does not refer to every species or breed of animal coming into existence at the same time and modern genetics provide an insight as to how this probably occurred, although there remains no scientific evidence to support evolutionary theories. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, and it is hard to know where to put some animals, e.g. the domestic cat. For further comments refer to the section Genesis and Science in the series introduction on the web site.

²⁶ Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’

Genesis 1:26

Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. The text does not specify the identity of the us mentioned here. Some have suggested that God may be addressing the members of his court, whom the OT elsewhere calls ‘the heavenly beings,’ e.g. Job 1:6, and the NT calls angels, but a significant objection is that man is not made in the image of angels, nor is there any indication that angels participated in the creation of human beings. Many Christians and some Jews have taken us to be God speaking to the persons of the Godhead, i.e. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, since God alone does the making in 1:27, as confirmed in 5:1; making this, along with the plural *Elohim* (v.2) the first hint of the Trinity in the Bible.

So God created humankind in his image,
 in the image of God he created them;
 male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:27

There has been debate about the expression the image of God. Many scholars point out the idea, commonly used in the ancient Near East, of the king who was the visible representative of the deity; thus the king ruled on behalf of the god.

Since v.26 links the image of God with the exercise of dominion over all the other creatures of the seas, heavens and earth, one can see that humanity is endowed here with authority to rule the earth as God's representatives or vice-regents, refer to the comment on v.28. Other scholars, seeing the pattern of male and female, have concluded that humanity expresses God's image in relationship, particularly in well-functioning human community, both in marriage and in wider society. Traditionally, the image has been seen as the capacities that set man apart from the other animals, ways in which humans resemble God, such as in their spirituality, the characteristics of reason, morality, language, a capacity for relationships governed by love and commitment, and creativity in all forms of art. All these insights can be put together by observing that the resemblances, man is like God in a series of ways, allow mankind to represent God in ruling, and to establish worthy relationships with God, with one another, and with the rest of the creation. This image and this dignity apply to both male and female human beings. This view is unique in the context of the ancient Near East. In Mesopotamia, e.g. the gods created humans merely to carry out work for them. The Hebrew term 'adam, translated as humankind, is often a generic term that denotes both male and female, while sometimes it refers to man in distinction from woman; it becomes the proper name Adam. At this stage, humanity as a species is set apart from all other creatures and crowned with glory and honour as ruler of the earth, as confirmed in Psalm 8:5-8. The events recorded in Genesis Chapter Three, however, will have an important bearing on the creation status of humanity.



This image is Michelangelo's interpretation of God's image, which is part of the decoration in the Sistine Chapel. However, it is clear for Scripture that God does not appear in human form, except through the incarnation of Christ, who both the same essence as God spiritually: <<*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation*>> (Colossians 1:15), and yet fully human in his physical form.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’

Genesis 1:28

In the same way that God blessed the sea and sky creatures in v.22, so too he blesses humanity.

Be fruitful and multiply. This motif recurs throughout Genesis in association with divine blessing and serves as the basis of the biblical view that raising faithful children is a part of God’s creation plan for mankind. God’s creation plan is that the whole earth should be populated by those who know him and who serve wisely as his vice-regents or representatives.

Subdue it; and have dominion. The term subdue, Hebrew *kabash*, elsewhere means to bring a people or a land into subjection so that it will yield service to the one subduing it (Numbers 32:22 and 32:29). Here the idea is that the man and woman are to make the earth’s resources beneficial for themselves, which implies that they would investigate and develop the earth’s resources to make them useful for human beings generally. This command provides a foundation for wise scientific and technological development; the evil uses to which people have put their dominion come as a result of Genesis Chapter Three.

As God’s representatives, human beings are to rule over every living thing that moves upon the earth. These commands are not, however, a mandate to exploit the earth and its creatures to satisfy human greed, for the fact that Adam and Eve were ‘in the image of God’ (1:27) implies God’s expectation that human beings will use the earth wisely and govern it with the same sense of responsibility and care that God has toward the whole of his creation.

²⁹ God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so.

Genesis 1:29-30

I have given you every plant. With the exception ‘of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil’ the gracious and benevolent God has given an abundance of nutritional food to every living creature. The original diet for both humans and

animals was strictly intended to be vegetarian for, until the fall, it was intended that there would be no death.

It should be noted that God cares for all of his creation and has provided sufficient to meet its needs. In a world where there are millions of people starving to death, living in poverty, without clean drinking water and dying from curable diseases, it should be noted that the world still has sufficient resources to overcome all these things. It is not God who withholds anything but those who have chosen their own comfort above that of others.

And it was so. This final phrase compliments the opening statement of God said. God has supreme authority over all things. This is the sixth occurrence of these statement pairings in this chapter. It informs the reader that all that God wills comes to pass, all his promises will be fulfilled as will all his warnings to those who do not heed them and choose to do their own will.

³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Genesis 1:31

Having previously affirmed on six occasions that particular aspects of creation are 'good,' God now states, after the creation of the man and the woman, that everything he has made was very good; the additional indeed invites the reader to imagine seeing creation from God's vantage point. While many things do not appear to be good about the present-day world, this was not so at the beginning.

Genesis goes on to explain why things have changed, indicating that no blame should be attributed to God. Everything he created was very good: it answers to God's purposes and expresses his own overflowing goodness. Despite the invasion of sin in Chapter Three, the material creation retains its goodness, as confirmed by Paul: <<*For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving*>> (1 Timothy 4:4).