

Summary Overview of Genesis 1:1–2:3



THE FIRST CHAPTER of the Bible, Genesis 1, opens doors to many questions that fill us with curiosity and inevitably lead to controversy. The large number of these questions and issues makes the task of the commentator formidable. So many items demand attention that dealing with them in the detail they deserve can result in the big picture being lost in the flood of details. In the treatment of Genesis 1 that follows, the text has been divided into admittedly fragmented segments (1:1–5; 1:6–13; 1:14–31; 2:1–3) so that some continuity could be maintained from Original Meaning comments through Bridging Contexts to Contemporary Significance. Before we embark on that fragmented path of discovery, it is important briefly to look at the whole of Genesis 1 and get the big picture conveyed by the entire literary unit at all three levels.

Original Meaning

GENESIS 1 IS a simple but majestic account of God's bringing order to the cosmos. The literary balance between days 1–3 and days 4–6 results in highlighting day 7 as the climactic moment, when God takes up his residence and history begins under his exclusive sovereignty. Disdaining the myth-laden concepts of the ancient world and disregarding any attempt at scientific sophistication either ancient or modern, the text charts a course of theological affirmation that results in a picture of an ordered, purposeful cosmos with God at the helm, masterfully guiding its course. The cosmos functions just as it was designed to function—it was good. People are portrayed as the pinnacle of creation, endowed with dignity as those made in the image of the Creator. They are made in order to serve God, not as slaves but as partners, whom he delegates to do his work in the world. They enjoy his favor (blessing), and he provides what they need (food).

Bridging Contexts

IN THE CONTEXT of Genesis, chapter 1 is intended to show that the world was not always as it is now. The chaos of sin and the struggle to survive were not part of the original picture. God's initial work dispelled the chaos and brought everything into perfect order and equilibrium. It is important to understand that hope for the future does not

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depend on the attempt to achieve something that has never been but to restore what has been lost. God's intent was not to be distant or inaccessible. The corruption of the cosmos that plagues humanity does not testify to his inability to harness chaos or to any inadequacy in his person or power. God demonstrates his grace that instead of resolving the chaos of sin through judgment and destruction, he chose a path of reconciliation and restoration—but that already moves beyond Genesis 1.



FALLEN HUMAN NATURE inevitably adopts a diluted, diminished, and in other ways corrupted concept of deity. Just as the Israelites had difficulty rising above the common view in their world that portrayed gods with needs and whims, so it is also difficult for us to rise above the common views of our world. Our world does not reduce God by distributing his power to other deities. Rather, we reduce God by making him a figurehead. We too often portray him as standing back from a world that runs on its own. We banish him to the hidden corners of our lives while we amble through life, pursuing our own ambitious goals driven by narcissism, hedonism, and materialism and refusing to allow God to bridle our self-sufficiency. We need a revitalized concept of who God is, and Genesis 1 is the appropriate starting place.

Genesis 1:1–5



IN THE BEGINNING God created the heavens and the earth.
²Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

³And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

*Original
Meaning*

IN THIS FIRST CHAPTER, we will probe many of the methodological issues that must be examined before we can proceed. Particularly verses 1–2 require an analysis of each phrase in order to set the context for the rest of the commentary on Genesis 1:1–2:3.

Literary Introduction (1:1)

IN THE BEGINNING. It sounds so simple, yet behind it lurk many of the ultimate questions of philosophy, theology, and metaphysics. Unfortunately, it is often the sad duty of the exegete to penetrate the sublime in pursuit of the tedious. The moment we begin to ponder the phrase, its cloudlike simplicity dissipates to reveal rugged mountain peaks. In the beginning of what? Many readers may have never specifically asked themselves this question, but most have an answer in their heads. We realize that it is not the beginning of God and therefore not the beginning of everything. Is the author suggesting a beginning of something abstract, such as time or history? Is it perhaps a more scientific beginning—like the beginning of matter or the universe ("the heavens and the earth")? Is it possible that we are trying too hard and that the beginning is literary (i.e., the beginning of the story)? What about something more personal: our beginning as a human race?

Before we pursue the answer to this question, however, we need to consider our methodological assumptions. The questions just posed work on the assumption that the word "beginning" must (as in English) indicate the beginning of something. But does the Hebrew usage carry the same implication? One of the greatest obstacles we face in trying to interpret the Bible

is that we are inclined to think in our own cultural and linguistic categories. This is no surprise, since our own categories are often all that we have; but it is a problem because our own categories often do not suffice and sometimes mislead. The fact that the Hebrew word *bʿrešit* can be translated “in the beginning” does not mean we can now be content to explore the English word “beginning” in English terms and categories. Linguistic and cultural information must be derived from linguistic and cultural sources. In this case we must explore the usage of this word in the Hebrew Bible and see if any cultural information across the ancient Near East can help.

Certainly Hebrew can use *rešit* to refer to the beginning of something. But there is more to it than that. J. Sailhamer has pointed out the unique function of the term as referring to an initial period or duration rather than to a specific point in time.¹ His case is supported most convincingly by passages such as Job 8:7, which speaks of the early part of Job’s life, and Jeremiah 28:1, which refers to the beginning period of Zedekiah’s reign. Often in keeping records of a king’s reign, his first year did not begin with his accession to the throne, but with the first new year’s day of his reign. Historians refer to the partial preliminary year as the accession year. In Hebrew it was referred to as the *rešit* of his reign. This was an initial *period* of time, *not a point* in time. This linguistic discussion therefore offers an alternative way of understanding the “beginning,” but how can we know that this was on the mind of the author? None of these other verses are exact syntactical equivalents of Genesis 1:1.²

When we couple the linguistic discussion with cultural information, however, a clearer direction may be possible. Egyptian usage is particularly helpful on this point. Egyptian creation texts make use of a similar concept. For example, someone from Thebes speaks of the god Amun who evolved in the beginning or “on the first occasion.”³ Egyptologists interpret this beginning not as an abstract idea but as a reference to a first-time event.⁴ Given

1. J. Sailhamer, *Genesis Unbound* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 1996), 38. Detailed discussion may be found in Sailhamer’s “Genesis,” a contribution to the *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. F. E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:20–23, and a summary by B. Arnold in the article on *rešit* in *NIDOTTE*, 3:1025–26.

2. Distinguishing syntactical features in Gen. 1:1 include the use of the preposition without the definite article; the sequence of a verbal form following *rešit* rather than a nominal form; and the masoretic use of a disjunctive accent to separate this first word from what follows. For discussion of these technical points, see the commentaries, especially G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1987), and V. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

3. The text is found on Papyrus Leiden I:350, dating to the time of Rameses II in the 13th century. It is translated in COS, 1:24–25.

4. S. Morenz, *Egyptian Religion* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1973), 166–68. Morenz discusses the phrase across its wide usage in Egyptian literature.

biblical usage and the Egyptian analogy, the Bible can be seen as presenting the creation account as an initial, distinct period of time that served as a prelude to human history. It would be similar to the way that *eschaton* (“the latter days”) refers to an ending period of time, not an ending point of time.⁵

The next question must concern what portion of the text was contained in this initial period. Sailhamer is inclined to see it as an extended period of time preceding the seven days.⁶ Another possibility is that the initial period describes the entire seven days. In scholarly discussions of the twentieth century, the options have been reflected in the renderings of 1:1–2a found in popular translations today.

1. In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void. . . . (NRSV)
2. When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void . . . God said. . . . (NJPS)
3. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. [Now] The earth was. . . . (NIV, KJV, NASB, NLT)

The NRSV rendering treats verse 1 as a dependent clause that finds its main clause in verse 2. The NJPS considers the clause of verse 1 as dependent on a main clause in verse 3, with verse 2 being parenthetical. The third option, the traditional rendering, understands verse 1 as an independent clause, which either refers to creative activity that preceded the seven-day sequence⁷ or provides a literary introduction to the events of the seven days.⁸

The grammatical issues are complex and will not be discussed in detail here. The technicalities are thoroughly treated in the technical commentaries.⁹ In brief, those who favor the dependent clause approach need to emend the masoretic vocalization¹⁰ to achieve their end. They believe this is justified by (1) the fact that there is no definite article on *b'rešit*, and by (2) the grammatical comparison to the Akkadian creation account preserved in *Enuma Elish* (which begins with the dependent clause, “When on high . . .”).

5. Compare the use of Greek *arche* (used in the LXX of Gen. 1:1) in contexts such as Mark 1:1 and John 1:1.

6. *Genesis Unbound*, 40.

7. This would result in this sense: First God created heaven and earth, resulting in a formless and void situation; this was then rectified by creating light, etc., over a seven-day period.

8. This would result in a summary/title for the chapter: God created heaven and earth. Now let me explain how he went about it. The earth was formless, etc., then God created light.

9. See especially Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 11–13; Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 103–8; K. Matthews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 136–44; Sailhamer, “Genesis,” 21–23; A. P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 718–23; C. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, trans. J. J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 93–98.

10. Typical is the change of the verb from a finite verb to an infinitive.

Against (1), research has shown that time designations in adverbial expressions do not require the definite article;¹¹ against (2), the Akkadian account provides insufficient basis for emendation.¹²

A further case can be made that the syntax of verse 2 favors the treatment of verse 1 as an independent clause. Turning to the traditional translation, we still must ask whether anything happens in verse 1. Does it refer to some creative activity that preceded the seven days (in which something that can be designated heaven and earth were created), or does it introduce and summarize the activity of the seven days (during which heaven and earth were created)? There are two evidences that I believe offer support for the second option. (1) The book of Genesis typically operates literarily by introducing sections with a summary statement. Thus, for example, beginning in 2:4 and ten additional times throughout the book, a *tol'dot* statement introduces a section (see introduction). (2) Even more persuasive is that the account of the six days closes with the comment that "the heavens and the earth" were completed (2:1).¹³

Thus, Genesis uses literary introductions, and the six days accomplished the creation of heaven and earth. It can therefore be concluded that the text is not suggesting that anything was actually created in 1:1; rather, the verse is a literary introduction, a summary of what follows. The "initial period" indicated by the word *b're'sit* is not described in verse 1 but in chapter 1.

God created. The text next speaks of God's activity using the Hebrew word *bara'*, unanimously rendered "created." Again, however, we must be careful to remember that to interpret the Bible accurately, we must understand *bara'* in Hebrew terms. The verb occurs forty-eight times in the Old Testament and has some curious features worth noting. (1) It takes only God as its subject and therefore must be identified as a characteristically divine activity.¹⁴

(2) The objects of this verb are widely varied. They include people groups (Ps. 102:18; Ezek. 21:30); Jerusalem (Isa. 65:18); phenomena such as wind, fire, cloud, destruction, calamity, or darkness (Ex. 34:10; Num. 16:30; Isa. 45:7; Amos 4:13); and abstractions such as righteousness, purity, or praise (Ps. 51:10; Isa. 57:19). Even when the object is something that could be "manufactured" ("creatures of the sea" in Gen. 1:21), the point need not necessarily be physical manufacturing as much as assigning roles. This direction is picked up nicely in Genesis 5:2, where God "creates" people male and female, that is, with established gender functions. In all of these cases, something is

11. G. Hasel, "Recent Translations of Genesis 1:1," *BT* 22 (1971): 156–57.

12. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 96–97.

13. This inclusio was first pointed out to me by one of my students, Marco Castillo.

14. We may be tempted to call it an *exclusively* divine activity, but forty-eight occurrences are too few to be confident about that inference by extrapolation.