

Genesis 1:1-13

Lesson 2

בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

1. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Modern, more of a dynamic equivalence possibility of,

translation/commentary:

In the beginning, before space, time, matter and energy

existed, God created matter and energy and the space that

they occupied.

Chapter 1, verses 1 and 2 of Genesis contain the premise for all biblical faith.² It should be noted that the mystery of divine creativity is ultimately unknowable and that the Genesis narrative does not attempt to make that which is unknowable intelligible since it is, in reality, beyond human understanding. Care must be taken not to try to explain in human language that which transcends, and is outside the realm of any human experience.³

Attempts to make the Genesis account fit our modern scientific

¹ *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia : With Werkgroep Informatica, Vrije Universiteit Morphology; Bible. O.T. Hebrew. Werkgroep Informatica, Vrije Universiteit. 2006; 2006 (Ge 1:1). Logos Bible Software.*

² Walter Brueggeman, *Genesis*, in the Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 29.

³ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, in The JPS Torah Commentary series (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 3.

understanding will either cause us to distort the text, or fail to do justice to the complexity and mysterious nature of the creation described in this account.

In interpreting Genesis it must be kept in mind that the original audience was the nation of Israel that first heard the words of Genesis while in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. They were a people that daily saw the presence of God going before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire night. For 430 years the people of Israel had been in Egypt where they were exposed to Egyptian gods and Egyptian theology. Before that time they would have been exposed to the gods of Mesopotamia and their theology. Genesis was meant to begin correcting all the wrong theology, the wrong concepts, of the nature of God that had been accumulated through the centuries before the Exodus. It was for an ancient people living in an ancient world first, and only for us, as we understand that it was written for this people to fulfill a need that was both immediate and persistent.

“Create” (*bara*) – This word in Hebrew has the meaning of “to initiate” an object and does not have the meaning of “to

fashion” as does the Hebrew term “*yashar*” (“to fashion”). The idea of the context in Genesis 1:1 is that what is created is created from nothing (Rom. 4:17; Heb. 11:3; 2 Macc. 7:28).⁴ The word “*bara*” (“to create”) is only ever used, in its basic form, to describe the activity of God. In Psalm 51:10 the Psalmist prays for God to “create” a clean heart in him. He is asking for God to create something that does not exist, something new, he is not simply asking for a cleansing, revamping or restoration of the heart. This act of creation, called for in the Psalm, has a connection that goes all the way back to the foundational act of creation here in Genesis 1. Inherent in this word is the idea of “bringing into existence,” and the emphasis is upon the creator’s power.⁵

Unlike the pagan accounts of creation, the Genesis account displays no interest at all in the origins of God. Instead it conveys a sense that God is outside of both space and time and He creates from this (eternal) vantage point.⁶ The plural form of the word for God (Elohim) used here, in this first verse of Genesis, has been

⁴ W. H. Schmidt, *Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschrift: Zur Überlieferungsgeschichte von Genesis 1, 1-2, 4a und 2, 4b-3, 24*, in *Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament*; Bd. 17 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener-Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1967), pp. 166-167. Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis*, in *The Old Testament Library series*, Revised ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 49.

⁵ Thomas E. McComiskey, “**rb**” in R. Laird Harris, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), pp. 127-128.

⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 5.

the seed for a great deal of conversation and a great variety of opinions. Most would simply state that this form of the noun is a “plural of majesty” and the fact that most often a singular verb is used with this word would seem to lend itself toward this conclusion. There are however, further considerations such as the fact that in Genesis plural verbs are used with this term (Gen. 1:2, 26). Obviously, in a Christian context this evidence has been interpreted as an indication of the plurality and unity of the nature of God.⁷ Many have seen this as evidence of the triune nature of God displayed from the very first verse of the biblical account of creation.

The definite article (the) used in the context of “the heaven and the earth” are meant to convey that this act of creation is meant to encompass the observable universe.⁸ This creation is performed through divine fiat as is demonstrated elsewhere in scripture, such as at Psalm 33:6⁹ and 9¹⁰. The emphasis of the words here is that God created the universe, in its totality from

⁷ Jack B. Scott, *hl*) in R. Laird Harris, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), pp. 41-45.

⁸ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 5.

⁹ Psalm 33⁶ **By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth.**

¹⁰ Psalm 33⁹ **For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.**

nothing that previously existed.¹¹ This conceptual vantage point begins to break down the pre-conceived ideas and notions that the people of the Exodus will have been taught and likely have accepted for centuries. This tearing down of old ideas and concepts clears the way for the truth of God's nature to break through and shine into their present reality where they can observe God's presence with them day and night.

וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תְהוֹמוֹת וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹמוֹת וְרוּחַ

אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:

2. And the earth was formlessness and void and darkness was upon the face of the abyss and the Spirit of God was hovering upon the face of the waters.

Formlessness – This word is also used at Job 26:7, where it speaks of God hanging the earth upon “nothing.” The basic meaning of this word is: “confusion, the empty place.”¹²

¹¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Vol. 1 in the Word Biblical Commentary series (Waco TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), p. 15.

¹² Ronald F. Youngblood, hht in in R. Laird Harris, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), pp. 964-965.

Void – the word used here is always used in conjunction with *tohu* (emptiness Isa. 34:11; Jer. 4:23).¹³ The idea behind these two words is to express the lack of form and emptiness of creation at this point, the chaos and the disorder that existed.

Abyss – This is a word that designates the “cosmic abyssal water that enveloped the earth.” This term can have a mythic connotation to it, as it is often associated with Mesopotamian goddess Tiamat, the “female drangonesque personification” of the ancient saltwater ocean. She represented a tangible form or chaos, the point here in Genesis is that all of this is stripped away and demythologized leaving nothing but mindless chaos.¹⁴

Hover – This word has been construed in a number of different ways: one is in Deuteronomy 32:11 where an eagle is described as hovering over its young as a brooding mother. Some have seen “hovering” as part of the context here while others have inclined more to the meaning of this word at Jeremiah 23:9 of a “rattling” or “vibrating.”¹⁵ Despite the general disagreements as to the exact nature of what is taking place here in 1:2 it likely has to do with

¹³ Elmer A. Martens, *whb* in R. Laird Harris, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 92.

¹⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 6.

¹⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, pp. 6-7.

the mysterious “Spirit of God” “hovering” or “vibrating” over this chaotic abyssal water and bringing order to the chaos in His creative activity.¹⁶

This verse represents the continuation of the creative activity of God that was begun in verse one and represents the ease with which He conforms even the chaotic waters to His will as He “hovers” or “vibrates” over them. I think the concept of God “hovering” in a loving brooding manner what will follow in the creation fits the context here very well. There is no need for God to become agitated or vibrate, He creates with the greatest of ease out of His great power effortlessly taming what the depictions of the other ancient gods, supposedly struggled to accomplish.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אֹר וַיְהִי-אֹר:

3. And God said let there be light and there was light.

In this verse the divine word shatters the primal darkness and signals the birth of a new cosmic order.¹⁷ Here we have a powerful statement both about the will and the power of God:

¹⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Vol. 1, pp. 16-17.

¹⁷ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 7.

even His words form reality; they create and this creation fills the darkness and chaos that are now illuminated by the divine creation. Light and darkness are set in opposition to each other at this, the beginning point of time. This verse would serve as powerful beacon to the to the what the divine nature actually was as it dispelled the darkness and tamed the chaos.

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר

וַיַּבֶּן הַקָּשָׁף:

4. And God saw that the light was good and God divided between the light and between the darkness.

God viewed his creation in much the way that an artist views his handiwork and He likes what He sees and creates a division between the light and the darkness; the contrast created by this division is striking. God demonstrates His power and His control both in proclaiming what is good and in making a division between the light and the darkness by His sovereign power. God is sovereign over everything and He defines the reality of all that exists.

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאֹר יוֹם וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ קִרְא לַיְלָה וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב

5. And God called the light day and the darkness he called night and there was evening and there was morning the first day.

According to the ancients and their cosmological conceptions, possessing no name was equivalent to nonexistence; so if something had no name it did not, in reality, exist. In the calling, or naming, of things God is bringing them into true existence. In both the Egyptian context and in Mesopotamian context (*Enuma Elish*¹⁸) the period of primeval chaos is the period before things were named. The giving of a name was linked with both creation and by extension dominion as naming brought order to the disorganized chaos.¹⁹

The term for “day,” used here in Genesis, has had several proposed interpretations; those include everything from literal 24-hour days to extended epochs of perhaps millions of years. A third alternative is that the intent of the text is merely to give a literary framework designed to illustrate the orderly nature of

¹⁸ <http://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/stc/stc04.htm>

¹⁹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 7.

God's creation and not to give any real time designation at all.

This interpretation is consistent with the intent of the text, which has a theological emphasis rather than a concern for scientific or taxonomic issues.²⁰ Despite this, it should be noted that though the concern is not with a strict or scientific specificity regarding time, the more natural understanding of the period described here by the term "day" (יָמִים) is something bearing some resemblance to a 24-hour day rather than to some extended long period.²¹ Certainly the original audience was neither concerned with modern dating methods nor with the great time periods that are necessary for evolutionary theory.

The idea expressed here by the order evening and morning is that the first day ends with the coming of light and the dispelling of darkness with morning light.²² Wrapped in this understanding of the text are huge issues regarding whether in the time of the Patriarchs and the time of the Exodus the Jews followed a solar calendar rather than a lunar calendar. Though I will not go into those in detail you need to be aware that some

²⁰ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis, A Commentary* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2001), p. 61.

²¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Vol. 1, p. 19.

²² Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis, A Commentary* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 61-62.

think that the current calendar used by the Jewish community represents an innovation that occurred during the period of Israel's domination by the Babylonian-Persian empire.²³

Awareness of this is important as people choose to use the context of Genesis to prove the primacy of the Lunar Calendar, and this context does not settle the matter at all, but leaves it open to interpretation in more than one way. More discussion of this will follow in the verses that deal with the sun, the moon and the stars.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי רָקִיעַ בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּיִם וַיְהִי מִבְּדֵיל בֵּין

מַיִם לְמַיִם:

6. And God said let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters and let it divide the waters and the waters.

The Hebrew term for “firmament” (רָקִיעַ) is often used for “hammering out metal or flattening out earth, which suggests a basic meaning of ‘extending’.”²⁴ The idea is that the divider serves as a separation between the waters above and the waters below

²³ Shemaryahu Talmon, “Calendars and Mishmarot,” in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, eds. Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 108-117. Annie Jaubert, “The Calendar of Qumran and the Passion Narrative in John,” in *John and Qumran*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1972), pp. 62-76.

²⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 8.

this firmament. A space is created that allows for what will follow in the creation. The idea is that the power of God is displayed in the holding of the primal waters in their place. In Ezekiel 1:22 the word for *Raqia* seems to have a meaning something like an “ice dome”.

The creation of this expanse is yet another demonstration of the creative power of God that is leading His chosen people in this time of the Exodus. These people have to do nothing but look up into the sky and see the great power of God displayed as God holds open the expanse through His sovereign power. Linking the power of God with this very visible and constant reminder of God’s power would be a powerful symbol for the people. It served as a constant cathedral standing before the people to remind them both of God’s power and of His presence.

וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַרְקִיעַ וַיְבַדֵּל בֵּין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מִתַּחַת

לְרָקִיעַ וּבֵין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מֵעַל לְרָקִיעַ וַיְהִי־כֵן:

7. And God made the firmament and he divided between the waters, which are in the midst of the firmament, and between the waters, which were above the firmament, and it was so.

The use of the term “made” here should not be seen as indicative of something other than the creative power of God at work here (cf. Ps. 33:6), but there is a different flavor here. It is almost as if God is in this context is taking those things already created and forming them into something new, and yet something powerful and functional for the creation and sustenance of life. God sets divisions that cannot be breached even by the great and powerful forces of nature. Nature bends to His will and follows the command of God without any question or hesitation.

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְרָקִיעַ שָׁמַיִם וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר יוֹם שֵׁנִי:

8. And God called the firmament heavens and there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

On this day, God names the expanse that He had created, and thus completed His creative action in regard to the heavens. It is also worth noting that God once again provides a number to the day. There is a great deal of discussion as to whether this numbering is meant to indicate a chronological sequence or if it is simply a literary device to allow the author to pass from one item to the next. There is a thorough, if not convincing discussion of

this matter by Sterchi that provides no real clarity and seems to seek to make a very complex case out of a vast array of divergent and speculative evidence.²⁵ Much of the mental gymnastic exercise seems to be in order to somehow leave what they perceive to be either a logical or a scientific disconnect in tact. None of this is really necessary, the emphasis is upon the fact that God did this, and His nature is conveyed in this account that displays order, power, and concern for His creation and dominion. The only sense in which chronology is important in this context is that even time is a creation of God. It should also be noted that despite the fact that the author uses a cardinal number to designate the first day it can also function as an ordinal (Gen. 2:11, 13; 4:19; 8:5, 13; Exod. 40:2, 17; Lev. 23:24; Num. 1:1, 18; 29:1; 33:38 etc.).²⁶

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִקְוּ הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶל-מְקוֹם אֶחָד

וַתֵּרָאֵה הַיַּבְשָׁה וַיְהִי-יָקוֹן:

9. And God said, “let the waters from beneath the heavens be gathered in one place, and let the dry ground appear and it

²⁵ David A. Sterchi, “Does Genesis 1 Provide a Chronological Sequence?” in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (1996) 39:529-536.

²⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 8.

was so.

In this verse, the power of God to set boundaries is once again displayed, and the continued movement and progress is made toward the pinnacle of God's creation in this account: the creation of mankind. A place that is described as "good" by God is being created for mankind to occupy and have fellowship with this great and powerful God of creation. In each phase of creation, the nature of God is ever more clearly conveyed; this is a God of order, of beauty, of tremendous, unfathomable power, and a God who carefully, artfully crafts His creation.

The setting of the boundaries of the waters here does not necessarily indicate a single ocean, but a confining of the waters to their place. This is clear from the fact that in verse 10 this gathering is designated by the plural term "seas."

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לַיַּבְשָׁה אֶרֶץ וּלַמְּקוֹנֵה הַמַּיִם קָרָא יַמִּים וַיֵּרָא

אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב:

10. And God called the dry land earth and the gathering of the waters He called seas and God saw that it was good.

Once again we have God performing His acts of creation and

completing them by naming His creation. He creates this space that will be so crucial to what will follow, and once again the issue of boundaries set by His great power are exhibited. This aspect of creation is also designated as “good.”

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים תְּדַשָּׂא הָאָרֶץ דָּשָׂא עֵשֶׂב מִזְרִיעַ זֶרַע יַעַץ
פְּרִי עֵשֶׂה פְּרִי לְמִינּוֹ אֲשֶׁר זֶרַעוֹ-בֵן עַל-הָאָרֶץ וַיְהִי-כֵן:

11. And God said let the earth sprout vegetation, herbs, seed bearing plants after their kind, trees making fruit, which had seed in it upon the earth, and it was so.

In this verse the creative call of God is delivered to the earth who begins a creative act at the divine command. This is a new phase in the creation as God calls forth the generative powers of the earth to activity. This message destroys the image that many ancient cultures had that somehow the earth independently had the power of creation. Only through the power of God’s utterance are these generative powers called into action.²⁷

וַתוֹצֵא הָאָרֶץ דָּשָׂא עֵשֶׂב מִזְרִיעַ זֶרַע לְמִינֵהוּ וַיַּעַץ

²⁷ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 9.

עָשָׂה-פְּרִי אֲשֶׁר זָרְעוּ-בָן לְמִינֵהוּ וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי-טוֹב:

12. The earth brought forth vegetation, herbs, seed bearing plants after their kind, and trees making fruit, which had seed in it after its kind and God saw that it was good.

The indication is that God brings into being all the various kinds of plants, from those that have seeds to those that propagate in a different fashion. The idea is that God created all vegetation, and once again God makes the declaration that it is good.

וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר יוֹם שְׁלִישִׁי:²⁸

13. And it was evening and it was morning, the third day.

The end of this third day leaves an earth already beginning to sprout forth with life and the preparations for further acts of creation are put in place as yet another day ends.

Synopsis

The children of Israel had spent 430 years in Egypt and now through the mighty hand of God they were led from this captivity and now they needed to understand the nature of this

²⁸ *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia : With Werkgroep Informatica, Vrije Universiteit Morphology; Bible. O.T. Hebrew. Werkgroep Informatica, Vrije Universiteit. 2006; 2006 (Ge 1:13). Logos Bible Software.*

God who was leading them and wanted relationship with them.

Through the creation account He begins to undo some of the wrong conceptions that will have become a part of their understanding of God. Through the creation account he addresses the misconceptions while at the same time building up a picture of who God was and who He was not.

There are hints even in this first section that God desires personal contact with His creation and that He takes great care to order His creation. The great power of this God is displayed as He brings the universe out of nothing. The calling of light out of darkness begins to define the nature of the universe. God both creates and names His creation, once again demonstrating His power and His development of order.