

GENESIS 1

I. THE CREATOR AND HIS CREATION (1:1–2:25)

A. THE CREATION VIEWED COSMICALLY (1:1–2:4a)

This majestic chapter, along with its sister narrative in Genesis 2:4-25, is the foundation for the rest of the Bible both in terms of its story and its theology. Its account of creation seems so simple and so obvious to modern readers that we have difficulty imagining how revolutionary it was when it was first written. There is no mythological speculation about rival gods here. In fact the center of interest is not on what happens in heaven with God but on the earth.¹ God, the one true God, creates the heavens and earth and then fashions the earth into a place where humanity and the rest of creation can live. The chapter is noteworthy for its simple logic as the different parts of creation necessary for life are systematically fashioned. In its original context this text was an assault on the polytheistic myths and worldviews so common in the ancient world. Here the forces of nature are not divinized or worshiped. The God who creates does so alone with no rivals. He speaks worlds into existence with a simple, “Let there be.” The stars are almost an afterthought. The greater and lesser lights (not the sun and moon) are mere objects spoken into existence by the all-powerful God. The physical universe here portrayed is one that can be trusted and need not be feared. The

¹Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 3: “The story of Creation, or cosmology, that opens the Book of Genesis differs from all other such accounts that were current among the peoples of the ancient world. Its lack of interest in the realm of heaven and its economy of words in depicting primeval chaos are highly uncharacteristic of this genre of literature. The descriptions in Genesis deal solely with what lies beneath the celestial realm, and still the narration is marked by compactness, solemnity, and dignity.”

highly structured organization of the narrative speaks of an orderly God who can be relied upon to act consistently in the physical world. There is no one before him, beside him, or in opposition to him. There is only God.

This God is also perfectly moral. He does not create because he needs to. His creation is good, yes, even very good. Any evil that arises in creation comes not from God but from the choices of creatures to rebel against him. Israel was very familiar with polytheistic versions of creation, whether they be Egyptian or Mesopotamian.² In those stories the chaos deities, usually depicted as violent and unstable monsters, had to be subdued by some god or gods. The threat that they might return to wreak havoc on creation was ever present and not far from the surface. In this account there is no evil, personal or otherwise, with which God has to contend. He is in control, and he creates an orderly world.

The account begins and ends in a similar way. This structuring device known as an *inclusio* reinforces the orderliness of creation portrayed throughout the passage. Every word here counts and the author has evidently counted every word.³ Creation is divided into two sets of three days which parallel each other, with days 1 and 4,

²Ibid. "There is abundant evidence that other cosmologies once existed in Israel. Scattered allusions to be found in the prophetic, poetic, and wisdom literature of the Bible testify to a popular belief that prior to the onset of the creative process the powers of watery chaos had to be subdued by God. These mythical beings are variously designated Yam (Sea), Nahar (River), Leviathan (Coiled One), Rahab (Arrogant One), and Tannin (Dragon) [Isa 27:1; 51:9-10; Job 26:12-13; Ps 104:9; Prov 8:27; Job 26:10; 38:8-11]. There is no consensus in these fragments regarding the ultimate fate of these creatures. One version has them utterly destroyed by God; in another, the chaotic forces, personalized as monsters, are put under restraint by His power." My insertions.

³Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), p. 6: "The correspondence of the first paragraph, 1:1-2, with 2:1-3 is underlined by the number of Hebrew words in both being multiples of 7. 1:1 consists of seven words, 1:2 of fourteen (7 x 2) words, 2:1-3 of 35 (7 x 5) words. The number seven dominates this opening chapter in a strange way, not only in the number of words in a particular section but in the number of times a specific word or phrase recurs. For example, 'God' is mentioned 35 times, 'earth' 21 times, 'Heaven/firmament' 21 times, while the phrases 'and it was so' and 'God saw that it was good' occur 7 times."

2 and 5, and 3 and 6 corresponding to each other. Nearly every creative act follows a pattern which is consistent but with minor variations for specific purposes. Each command is introduced with, "Then God said."⁴ Next there is the actual command with "Let there be" or its equivalent.⁵ The fulfillment of the command, "And it was so," is mentioned seven times (vv. 3,7,9,11,15,24,30). Seven times we are told, "And God made" (vv. 4,7,12,16,21,25,27), and seven times God's approval is recorded (vv. 4,10,12,18,21,25,31 [very good]). Seven times there is a subsequent word from God of either blessing or commission (vv. 5[2×],8,10[2×],22,28). Wenham comments on the numerical and other patterning in this chapter:

It is worth noting that although there are ten announcements of the divine words and eight commandments actually cited, all the formulae are grouped in sevens. Indeed, the fulfillment formula is omitted in v 20, the description of the act in v 9, and the approval formula in vv 6-8. In each case the LXX adds the appropriate formula, but it is characteristic of P to indulge in "dissymmetric symmetry" (McEvenue, *Narrative Style*, 113-115), and these additions obscure the sevenfold patterning of this section.⁶

The account begins with "heaven and earth" (1:1) and ends with "earth and heaven" (2:4). The narrative focuses more and more on things that happen on earth, rather than in the skies or heavens. Days 1, 2, and 4 concern events in the heavens, while days 3, 5, and 6 concern the earth. This yields a parallelistic pattern⁷ in which focus is directed more and more toward the earth, where humanity is eventually created.

Day 1	Heaven	
Day 2	Heaven	
Day 3		Earth
Day 4	Heaven	
Day 5		Earth
Day 6		Earth

⁴This occurs 10 times (vv. 3,6,9,11,14,20,24,26,28,29).

⁵This occurs 8 times (vv. 3,6,9,11,14,20,24,26).

⁶Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 6.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 7.

The way in which God creates is designed to provide a pattern for Israel's life. He works for six days and then rests on the seventh, not because he was exhausted by the onerous work of creation, but in order to provide a pattern of life for Israel, who did need to work and rest. The orderliness of his creative acts helps Israel to make the distinctions necessary for her life in the promised land. The account explains and exemplifies holiness. The ordinary and the special, the common and the holy are to be kept as distinct as the kinds of animals are kept distinct in the creation account. The tabernacle's worship was patterned after creation. The descriptions of the eternal state in the book of Revelation are also patterned after creation.

In Genesis 1 we witness the creation from a cosmic point of view. The reader is transported to somewhere "outside of" the physical universe to see it come into existence before his or her very eyes. As the account continues the reader is brought closer and closer to events on earth. This account is not as personal as the following narrative of the garden. Here only God speaks and creation responds with perfect obedience. But the focus narrows as the account moves on to focus on the final creation, humanity male and female. The transcendent God who speaks worlds into existence is concerned about humanity and our destiny in the world. The rest of the Bible explains how God has begun to and will eventually finish the job of restoring humanity to our original place and purpose in creation. This chapter begins the story in a majestic, cosmic view of creation.

1. The First Act of Creation (1:1)

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

1:1 In the beginning God

The Bible begins with God the creator. There is no attempt to explain the existence of God. The Bible assumes his existence. What the Bible does explain is just what sort of God he is. He is already there "in the beginning." Nothing precedes him and everything in the cosmos finds its origin in him. While there is disagreement on the translation of this verse (see excursus), the traditional translation "In the beginning" is, in my view, the only one which does justice to the original intention of the author and the wider "canonical con-

text.” The implications of that translation are enormous. God is “before” and “outside of” the time and space universe as we know it. There is no “preexistent” matter. There is no impersonal force and no person to rival God. The gods of the ancient world were limited in power and in morality. The God of Genesis one is the only God, and he is unlimited in power and unimaginably holy. He always and only acts morally. In fact, his character defines what “moral” is. He is separate from the material universe and not in conflict with it. There is no battle with the preexisting forces of chaos here. There is only God.

Unlike pagan creation myths Genesis 1 shows no interest in the question of God’s origin. His existence is assumed and needs no defense. The word used for “God” here and throughout Genesis 1:1–2:4 is the Hebrew word אֱלֹהִים (*’ēlohîm*). This is not a personal name like Yahweh, but the generic Hebrew word for God. Although the form appears to be plural (masculine nouns in Hebrew normally form their plurals by adding *îm*) it is usually used with a singular verb or adjective (as throughout this chapter). The plural is probably a plural of majesty or intensification. The use of *’ēlohîm* here, rather than the sacred divine name Yahweh, may be for theological reasons. Of the two, *’ēlohîm* connotes the universal God and not the particular God of Israel. It also connotes God’s transcendence rather than his particular redemptive acts on behalf of one nation. While the second chapter of Genesis makes clear that the one and only God is Yahweh, this chapter wants to emphasize God’s universality as creator and his transcendent power over all things.

Often in the history of Christian interpretation of the noun *’ēlohîm* there has been an attempt by those not thoroughly conversant with Hebrew to argue that the plural form of this word implies a plurality in the godhead. Later revelation and theological discussion then relates this plurality as a subtle hint of the doctrine of the Trinity. Unfortunately the grammatical form of a word in Hebrew does not necessarily tell us anything about whether the word should be understood in English as a singular or a plural. For example, the word translated “heaven” in verse 1 is grammatically plural (שָׁמַיִם , *šamayîm*), but is quite properly translated as a singular in English. Calvin warns against reading too much into this:

Moses has it *Elohim*, a noun of the plural number. Whence the inference is drawn, that the three Persons of the Godhead are here noted; but since, as a proof of so great a matter, it appears to me to have little solidity, I will not insist upon the word; but rather caution readers to beware of violent glosses of this kind.⁸

created

The Hebrew verb בָּרָא (*bārā'*)⁹ is found 46 times in the Old Testament. In every case in the Qal or Niphal¹⁰ God is the one who does the creating, and there is never any material substance which he uses to create. While this verb in and of itself does not tell us that God created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), the implication may be there. When one considers that Genesis 1 is a polemic against pagan cosmologies which place great importance on preexisting matter, the intimation is even clearer. The doctrine of Creation out of nothing is first *explicitly* articulated in 2 Maccabees 7:28, "Look up to heaven and earth and see all that is therein, and know that God made them out of things that did not exist." Hebrews 11:3 informs us that "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." In Romans 4:17 God is described as the one who "calls into existence the things that do not exist." Second Enoch 24:2 also teaches this doctrine explicitly.

the heavens and the earth

Often this phrase is seen as a merism, a figure of speech where two words are linked together to mean something more than the

⁸John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis*, trans. by John King (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), pp. 70-71.

⁹The word *bara'* begins with the same three letters in Hebrew as the phrase בָּרָא שָׁמַיִם (bārā' šāim) which is the first of the Hebrew Bible's many wordplays. These wordplays do not necessarily imply that we are reading poetry as they are common in Hebrew narrative texts, not just poetic texts.

¹⁰Stanley L. Jaki notes (*Genesis 1 through the Ages* [London: Thomas Moore Press, 1992], p. 9) that *bārā'* occurs 40 or so times in the OT, and it is only in the Qal and Niphal that God is the subject. Three certain cases in the Piel (Josh 17:15,18, hacking down trees; Ezek 23:47, hacking the adulterous partners of Oholah and Oholibah) and two uncertain cases (1 Sam 2:23; Ezek 21:24) are of purely human actions. Most lexicons regard the Piel instances as deriving from a homonymous root with a different meaning and so are not really exceptions.

sum of the individual parts. In this case, “heavens and earth” is viewed as a merism for “the totality of all things that exist.” According to this view, Genesis 1:1 is a sort of summary heading which summarizes the entire process of creation which is then described in detail beginning in verse 2. The main strength of this argument is that elsewhere the phrase, “heavens and earth” refers to the perfect creation and not some intermediate stage of creation.

I am not so sure. One problem with this view is that, if Genesis 1:1 acts as a summary statement, Genesis 1:2 is the beginning of the account and the unformed and unfilled earth is already there as pre-existent matter without any explanation of the origin of that matter. As we have attempted to demonstrate in the excursus, this is not consistent with the polemic against idolatry which fills this chapter.

If the words did not sound so fairytale like in English, I would suggest translating “heavens and earth” as “sky and land.” What God created was the basic stuff of the physical universe, both “terrestrial” and “celestial.” Genesis chapter 1 then tells us how God took that basic stuff and fashioned and formed it into the physical universe in its “perfect” state. God clearly differentiates between the sky and the land by creating the “expanse,” something similar to our word atmosphere, or at least the thing that makes the atmosphere possible. He then proceeds to form them into day and night for the sky and into dry land and water for the earth. After forming them, he proceeds to fill them. The earth is “filled” with vegetation and then creatures which inhabit the expanse (birds), the water (fish, etc.), and dry land (land animals and humankind) respectively. The sky is “filled” with the greater light (inhabiting the day) and lesser light (inhabiting the night) and the stars.