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PENTATEUCH

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Genesis

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Introduction

The sacred laws having been written in five books, the first is called and inscribed Genesis, deriving its title from the origin (*genesis*) of the world, which it contains at the beginning; although there are ten thousand other matters also introduced which refer to peace and to war, or to fertility and barrenness, or to hunger and plenty, or to the terrible destructions which have taken place on earth by the agency of fire and water; or, on the contrary, to the birth and rapid propagation of animals and plants in accordance with the admirable arrangement of the atmosphere, and the seasons of the year, and of men, some of whom lived in accordance with virtue, while others were associated with wickedness. (Philo, *On Abraham* 1.1)

Genesis tells many stories about God’s relationship with individuals and about their relationships with one another—about husbands and wives, parents and children, and birth and death; about leaders, political relationships, conflict, and negotiation; about migration and famine; about work and worship and prayer. These stories appear in Genesis as a whole in the context of a larger-scale story about the origin of the world as the audience knows it and about the audience’s ancestors. In turn, the framework of Genesis as a whole and its context in the Scriptures depict Genesis as an account of the opening stages in God’s working out his purpose in the world. In the Christian Scriptures, it then pairs with Revelation. These two scrolls form a frame around the biblical story, telling how the world began and how it will end, with the Scriptures in between relating what happens in the interim.

Within the First Testament, Genesis is the first in a sequence of scrolls extending to the end of 2 Kings. The sequence tells the story of Yahweh and Israel from its beginning to Yahweh’s destruction of the Ephraimite state in 722 BCE and of the Judahite state in 587 BCE. Genesis introduces the sequence by relating two aspects of Israel’s prehistory. Its immediate prehistory is Yahweh’s summons of Israel’s ancestors from Mesopotamia and his dealings with them

until they find themselves in Egypt, where the real history of “Israel” begins. Its further and ultimate prehistory is Yahweh’s summoning into being the creation as a whole and his dealings with the world as a whole. Making Genesis the introduction to Israel’s story suggests that one can understand Israel only against this double background and that one can understand creation and those ancestors only in light of where their stories lead.

Thus Genesis both is and is not a self-contained scroll; it is both complete and incomplete. It resembles the first series in a long-running television drama. It ends in Gen. 50 with some resolution of a number of the issues that the drama has raised, and in particular with some resolution of the family strife that dominates the last third of the book.¹ It is thus a distinct scroll; Exodus is then another. Genesis tells a story that has some coherence as it relates the normative way Israel came to understand the sequence of events before it escaped from Egypt to travel to Canaan. But Genesis thus also leads into Exodus. It ends with a recognition that its story needs to continue if Yahweh’s aim in calling the world into being and summoning Abraham and Sarah is to find fulfillment. It is incomplete in the sense that it focuses on God’s intention to bless the world and to bless Abraham, and to fulfill the former intention through the latter, and this aim has not been fulfilled by the end of Genesis. A key aspect of God’s blessing of Abraham’s family and a means whereby God is to bless the nations is the family’s coming into possession of the country of Canaan, yet at the end of Genesis they are living as a migrant community in Egypt. In itself this incompleteness would not make the scroll incomplete. But the Genesis story continues in the next scroll within the First Testament, and so does the story in the next scroll, as continues to happen with each scroll that follows (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers . . .), onward to 2 Kings. Even then, God’s intention has not been fulfilled, but there is no doubt that 2 Kings marks the end of the sequence that began in Genesis, because over the page in the Torah and the Prophets is Isaiah, and over the page in the First Testament in its Greek and English order is . . . Adam again.

The Narrative and the Genealogies

For the most part, Genesis is a narrative, a report of a series of connected events; it is not poetry, nor is it a record of someone telling other people what they should think or do, nor is it prayer or praise. It is dominated by past tense verbs (someone did this or that), not by future tense verbs (this is what is going to happen) or imperatives (this is what you should do) or appeals (please do this). It tells a story.

1. Thus D. L. Petersen (“Genesis of Genesis,” 28) calls it “a book in its own right.”

The narrative as a whole works largely by offering a chain of individual stories averaging maybe 400–500 words in Hebrew (rather more in English), most of which can stand alone to a fair degree, and most of which count as a chapter in a printed Bible. The stories also belong to sequences (e.g., stories about Abraham and Sarah), some tighter, some looser, so that something of their significance emerges from their place in their sequence as well as their place in Genesis as a whole. In this respect they again resemble the episodes in a television series.

A key role in the organizing and signposting of these sequences is played by accounts of people’s “lines of descent,” or genealogies, lists of ancestors and descendants—the Hebrew word is *tôlādôt*, from the verb meaning “father” or “give birth.” Such lines of descent in the Scriptures fulfill several functions. They may offer insight on characters by relating their background; they may provide validation for the status of characters; they may establish relationships between Israel and other peoples; they may suggest continuity within a people over the centuries; they may indicate links between peoples or periods that are otherwise widely separate; they may help establish chronology.² We should not overemphasize the distinction in significance between stories and genealogies. “The genealogical form operates as a mode of storytelling.”³

Genesis describes these lists as “lines of descent” frequently within 1:1–11:26 (see 2:4a; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1, 32; 11:10). The description usually leads into what follows, but it may summarize what precedes (see 2:4a; 10:32). The expression features more sparingly in 11:27–50:36 (see 11:27; 25:12, 13, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2). The lists play a key role in giving structure to the scroll, in providing a framework for the sequences of stories, and in marking key transitions in the scroll and thus in its narrative.⁴ “Genesis is a book whose plot is genealogy.”⁵ The lines of descent signal the stages in the story of the world and of the three generations of Israel’s ancestors.⁶ Utilizing the clues they offer, I treat Genesis as dividing into four parts:⁷

Part One: The lines of descent of the heavens and the earth, through Noah (1:1–11:26)

Part Two: The lines of descent of Terah, through Abraham and Sarah (11:27–25:11)

Part Three: The lines of descent of Isaac and Rebekah, through Jacob (25:12–35:29)

Part Four: The lines of descent of Jacob, through Joseph (36:1–50:26)

2. See Y. Levin, “Understanding Biblical Genealogies.”

3. Mbuvi, *Belonging in Genesis*, 43.

4. See Hieke, *Die Genealogien der Genesis*; Thomas, *These Are the Generations*.

5. Steinberg, “Genealogical Framework,” 41.

6. See further Carr, “*Biblos Geneseōs* Revisited.”

7. Luther (*Genesis 6–14*, 236, 245) describes Adam to Noah as the church’s first age, Noah to Abraham as the second age, and Abraham as beginning the third age.

The four parts give expression to four key truths about God. In Part One God is especially disciplinary, though also merciful. He chastens Adam and Eve, and Cain, and in due course the entire world, and then he chastens the nations as a whole after the building of the Babel tower. In Part Two he is especially promissory, though also demanding. He makes promises to Abraham and Sarah that seem more than unlikely of fulfillment, but he starts fulfilling them. In Part Three he is accommodating, though also persistent. In being involved with Isaac and Rebekah, he continues to work via their faith and their stupidity and those of their son. In Part Four God is proactive, though also interactive. He implements a plan to ensure the future of Jacob's family by harnessing tensions within the family and inspiring solutions to a crisis that threatens the life of Egypt.

Story and History

Genesis tells a story. But there are many kinds of story. One way of categorizing them is to divide them into fact and fiction, into historical narrative and works of the imagination. Factual stories tell of things that happened; fictional stories tell of things that did not happen. Both categories are of some help in understanding Genesis but are misleading if assumed to tell the whole truth. On one hand, Genesis tells about things that God historically did—he created the world, did so in a purposeful way, made it a good place, put humanity in charge of it, set about putting it right when it went wrong, made promises to Israel's ancestors and set about seeing that they were fulfilled, and so on. On the other hand, Genesis tells its story in a way that uses techniques characterizing works of the imagination: it talks about a tree that conveys knowledge and about sphinxes and a swordlike flame guarding a garden, it uses numbers symbolically, it tells the audience what people in the story are thinking, and it organizes its individual stories into arrangements such as palistrophes.

A major preoccupation in recent Western study of Genesis has been the relationship of its narrative to historical events in the world and in the Middle East. How can we understand that relationship? In a Western context, believers and secular people may assume that Genesis deserves to be taken seriously only if it tells a factual story. Believers may then focus on defending its factuality; secular people may dismiss it in the conviction that it is not factual. Both sides are misled by modern Western assumptions. Two analogies may help an understanding of the nature of Genesis.⁸

From the Middle East itself, we do not have examples of long prose works that compare with Genesis. But from First Testament times we do have examples from elsewhere in the Mediterranean world, notably the Greek histories

8. On the issues raised here, see further Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel*, 859–83.

of Herodotus (who was born in Turkey) and Thucydides (who was born in Greece). Both lived in the same century as Ezra and Nehemiah. Both are concerned with events of their own people's recent history but want to help people understand these events by seeing them against their historical background. So both include copious factual material. Yet these authors also include stories that they value as traditional stories and not as factual accounts. They include speeches by participants in the events that are the product of their own imagination. And they include evaluative judgments on the right and wrong, the good sense and bad sense, in what happened. They thus have a broad view of what telling their people's story means. It means passing on their people's traditions, using their imagination, and making their comments, as well as passing on facts.

The modern Western world suggests another parallel. I have drawn an analogy between Genesis to Kings and a TV series. Most such TV series are fiction, though they may take place in factual places and be based on factual situations. Other series and many movies tell the story of factual events but use imagination in doing so. There is a multi-year TV series about the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, called *The Crown*. It follows the history of events in Britain through the period in question, which are matters of public record—events such as the Suez crisis in 1957. It also incorporates reflection by different characters on the British constitution and accounts of conversations between the queen and other people. It thus combines factual data with the fruits of the author's active imagination and reflection.

One of the trickiest tasks in interpretation is determining whether an author was seeking to write history or fiction. Whereas some readers of Genesis have seen it as simply history, others as pure fiction, it looks more like something in between, like the Greek histories or like movies “based on fact” that use imagination to bring out the significance of events. In Genesis, the Holy Spirit inspired an author or authors to use their imagination to tell their factually based story. And while interpreters have worked hard in seeking to establish how far it is factual and how far traditional and how far imaginative, their work has not led to agreed results. In this commentary I have therefore not given much attention to this question, since I believe that the text of Genesis is what the Holy Spirit and the human author want us to study.

Interpreters have used a number of terms to describe what kind of story-based-on-fact Genesis might be or might include. There are several such terms used to describe traditional stories:

saga: a long story about a community and/or its heroes that has been handed down orally over the centuries. Behind Gen. 12–35, one can see saga material.

legend: a story about an impressive and important individual that again may have been handed down over time. Genesis 22:1–19 is an example.

explanation: a story that explains the origin of something to answer the questions of people living later. Genesis 23 is an example.

The word *myth* has also been applied to Genesis, and it can be used in a positive way, but it tends to suggest a story about a fantasy world; Gen. 6:1–4 has been seen as an example.⁹

Understanding Stories

While one can see saga and legend behind Genesis, the stories are more than transcripts of such traditional stories. Genesis makes use of folk material, but it is not folk literature. While folk literature is designed to engage, to entertain, and to amuse, underneath much humor lies a serious meaning;¹⁰ in Genesis, folk material passed down in the life of the Israelite clans has been turned into more reflective, literary, and sophisticated stories.

There are then other terms to describe such stories:

short story: one composed by an author who sets up a question and tells of a sequence of events that may initially complicate the question but eventually resolve it. Genesis 24 is an example.

novellette: a longer story composed by an author, possibly with a more complex plot, and focusing on an individual. The Joseph story in Genesis is an example.

report or *chronicle*: a narrative that gives a sequential account of events without providing a plot to the sequence or a tension that needs to be resolved. Genesis 29:31–30:24 is an example.

Since many of the stories in Genesis appear to be composed in a reflective and sophisticated way, approaches to interpretation that focus on plot and theme aid their understanding (compared with modern short stories, character is less important than plot and theme in Genesis). An interpreter may therefore ask:

- What is the question, problem, or issue that the story starts from?
- What is its answer to the question, its solution of the problem, or its resolution of the issue?
- How does it get from question/problem/issue to answer/solution/resolution?
- Are there obstacles that need to be overcome on the way?
- Does the telling of the story incidentally allow other insights to emerge?
- Does the story leave issues unresolved?

9. Coats, *Genesis*, 318–19. See further the introductory comments on Gen. 1.

10. Bascom, “Four Functions of Folklore,” 290.

- Does it incorporate surprising features that hold readers' attention to the end?
- What is the author's viewpoint?
- Who is the story's implied audience, the people it seems designed to speak to?
- Who is the main character in the story?
- Who are the other characters, and what role do they have?
- How do the events in the story affect them or change them?

One can ask these questions about Genesis as a whole: what is the backstory to Yahweh's bringing the Israelites out of Egypt and taking them to the country of Canaan? Its answer is clear: Yahweh had made promises to Israel's ancestors that he needed to keep. In turn, that answer prompts another question: why did Yahweh make those promises? The answer is apparent: the ancestors related to the project that Yahweh set in motion in creating the world in the first place.

Such formulations provide some of the background to the fact that human characters are not as central to the stories in Genesis as they are to modern stories. The main character in Genesis is God, as is the case elsewhere in the First Testament.

Genesis also shares additional features with other books in the First Testament.

- It sometimes organizes stories as palistrophes (chiasms), units in which the second half mirrors the first half. The Jacob story is the great example in Genesis.
- It often incorporates two related or parallel stories. There are two creation stories, two accounts of God making a covenant with Abraham, and in the Joseph story dreams come in pairs.
- It makes much use of irony, which (for instance) suggests the way things work out differently from the way people expect.
- It often reports events in a way that first gives a general account and then goes back to relate more detail. Thus it commonly prefers a dramatic order to a chronological order.
- It makes use of paronomasia, the way words may point to reality; it thus presupposes the revelatory potential of words, especially of names (e.g., Eve, Cain).

The Origin of Genesis

Genesis gives no indication of its authorship and no direct indication of when it was written. Jewish and Christian tradition came to describe it as

“The First Book of Moses” and thus as the introduction to Exodus through Deuteronomy, but that description parallels the description of the Psalms as David’s and of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs as Solomon’s. These are not statements about authorship. As one of the five Moses scrolls, Genesis has particular authority for the Jewish and Christian communities, but the authority came first and the description as Mosaic expresses its having authority, rather than vice versa.

The relationship between Genesis and Exodus through 2 Kings suggests that it came into being in the form that we have it after Judah’s fall to the Babylonians in 587, and occasional notes in the scroll fit with an origin in this period. For instance, not only does 12:6 postdate the time when the Canaanites were in Canaan (and therefore come from well after Moses’s day); 11:31 also has Abraham and Sarah setting out from “Ur of the Chaldeans,” but the Chaldeans became the rulers of Babylonia only with the arrival of Nabopolassar in 626. Yet such notes are few, and it seems implausible to think of Genesis being created from scratch in the Babylonian period; it must have issued from the compilation and reworking of materials that had accumulated over centuries. The story of Ezra bringing the Torah scroll from Babylon to Jerusalem in 458 (see Ezra 7) may mark the point when the Torah as we know it had come into being, during the Persian period.¹¹

Since the late nineteenth century, it has been common for commentaries on Genesis to give considerable attention to tracing the origin of the material before it reached its final form, and on the basis of such study to tracing the history of the events to which Genesis refers and the history of the development of Israelite religious beliefs. Such study of the origin of the material is potentially significant for an understanding of the text. For much of the twentieth century, there was a broad scholarly consensus about this process of development, accumulation, compilation, and reworking, but this consensus existed more because scholars needed to have some working hypothesis than because it was based on evidence. Several scholars in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries declared that the consensus view resembled the emperor who had no clothes and suggested that the Persian period played a much more creative role in the development of the Pentateuch. Indeed, “Abraham’s wanderings in Palestine and Egypt are nothing in comparison to the virtual travels he has experienced at the hands of the scholarly community.” It has been so exegetically; even more obviously, “chronologically, the dating of the patriarchs along a timeline from 2000 BCE to the post-exilic period went into free fall, occurring within a short period of forty years.”¹² Yet even if “it is widely agreed that the Persian period is the most likely historical setting for

11. For a reformulated version of this critical position, see Hendel, “Historical Context.” A useful introduction to the traditional JEDP theory focusing on Genesis is Kawashima, “Sources and Redaction.”

12. Noort, “Abraham and the Nations,” 4.

the final editing of Genesis,” such a conclusion may not aid the interpretation of the scroll in that “the implications of this consensus are disputed”: for instance, it can be read as ethnocentric or as resisting ethnocentricity.¹³ And even if there is currently a scholarly consensus on the origin of Genesis, there is no reason to think that the latest scholarly views on the question will have said the last word. Tracing the origin of the Pentateuch is an instance of “problems in biblical studies which are so complex that they seem never to find an agreed resolution, yet which are so fascinating that scholars never give up the quest.”¹⁴

I have not usually referred to the latest critical views on the origin of different passages in Genesis, not least because they will not be the latest critical conclusions by the time you read this commentary. One cannot base an understanding of Genesis on knowing the date of its stories or on seeing it as the expression of the ideology of a particular group or period in Israel’s history. I seek to understand it as it stands against the broad context of the life of Israel, as a repository of Israel’s collective memory or a reflective reworking of that memory that so commended itself to the community that the community held on to it when it let other memories fall away. Just as we know virtually nothing about how Genesis came into existence, we know virtually nothing about the process whereby it came to be part of the Scriptures. We do know that the Torah and the Prophets were part of the Scriptures by the time of Ben Sira.

The First Testament, the New Testament, and modern critical study do suggest several contexts against which to read Genesis, and as exercises in imagination I have sometimes noted how a story might impact an audience in particular periods. These exercises presuppose that most people came to know the stories by listening to them being read from the scroll or retold on the basis of the scroll. It is so in the Western world: people’s knowledge comes from hearing Genesis read in church if they are lucky, or from what preachers or Sunday school teachers tell them. It was also thus in the ancient world; hardly any Israelites would have possessed a copy of the scroll and read it in the way intellectuals read books.

The Text and Language of Genesis

The traditional starting point for identifying the Hebrew text of Genesis, as of other parts of the First Testament, is the “Masoretic Text” (MT), the version codified by Jewish scholars about 1000 CE, and the translation in this commentary follows the version of that text printed in the standard scholarly edition, *Biblia Hebraica Quinta*, edited by Abraham Tal. We have fragmentary copies of manuscripts of Genesis from Qumran that are a thousand years older than

13. Brett, “Abraham’s ‘Heretical’ Imperative,” 168.

14. Nicholson, *Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century*, v. Cf. Vervenne, “Genesis 1,1–2,4,” 36.

the MT and many manuscripts belonging to the Masoretic tradition from later in the medieval period. From later in the medieval period we also have copies of the Samaritan Pentateuch, with the text in Samaritan script as preserved among the Samaritans and thus in a separate tradition from the Masoretic. From the time between the Qumran scrolls and the Masoretic Text, we have manuscripts of the Pentateuch translated into Greek (the Septuagint), Latin (the Vulgate), and Syriac (the Peshitta). From these translations one can try to infer the Hebrew text they were based on and thus gain access to another tradition of the Hebrew text.

There are countless small differences between these versions of the text, and it is likely that one or other of these different versions are sometimes closer to the text of Genesis as it might have been known (say) in Jerusalem in 300 BCE than the MT is. In addition, biblical scholars have made countless suggestions for changing the MT to what they believe is an earlier version of the text. In some cases it is easy to see how the other traditions and these suggestions are tidying the form of the text in the MT, which was originally a bit untidy. And generally I am inclined to think that any attempt of mine to establish a more authentic text would likely be mistaken as often as it was right, so that the end result would be on average no more authentic than the MT. So I have nearly always worked with the MT.

Hebrew syntax is simple, and sentences commonly unfold in a simple way: “The upper ocean came onto the earth for forty days, and the water increased, and it lifted the chest, and it rose up from on the earth, and the water grew strong, and it increased greatly on the earth, and the chest moved on the face of the water” (6:17–18: to illustrate the point, I have made the translation quite literal). Further, Hebrew sentences usually follow an order different from regular English order, with the verb coming first. Thus translating word for word, “Came the upper ocean onto the earth for forty days, and increased the water, and it lifted the chest, and it rose up from on the earth, and grew strong the water and increased greatly on the earth, and moved the chest on the face of the water” (following the word order in English introduces some ambiguity into the sentences, but it does not usually do so in Hebrew). Yet further, Hebrew is an inflected language, which means that “it lifted” is one word, as is “it rose up” and “it increased.”

Working within the framework of those basic conventions, Genesis can introduce subtlety into the way it communicates. For instance,

If the “and” between clauses is missing, it indicates that the sentences do not relate in the regular way; possibly the first clause leads into the second. If the subject or the object or some other expression comes before the verb, it has emphasis.¹⁵ However, in a noun clause, context and other

15. See Bandstra, “Word Order and Emphasis.”

considerations must determine which is subject and which is predicate,¹⁶ and emphasis is thus harder to spot.

If a pronoun (“it” in the above examples) is expressed, which is unnecessary to the sense because it is contained within the verb, it has emphasis.

In the translation, while I have often omitted the “ands” to make things flow, I have sought to bring out these points. Two other frequent conventions in Genesis (commented on in the footnotes) are the following:

Hebrew makes less use of adverbs than English; it uses repetition instead.

So instead of saying, “You will definitely die,” it says, “Dying you will die” (“dying” is a gerund not a participle).

To signify a statement that is also an act (a “performative act”), such as “I hereby give,” Hebrew uses a qatal (perfect) verb, which would usually mean “I have given.” I translate such verbs with the English present tense: “I am giving.”

16. See Redford, *Study*, 34–35.

Part One

The Lines of Descent of the Heavens and the Earth

(1:1–11:26)



Within Genesis as a whole as the backstory to Yahweh’s involvement with Israel, the immediate backstory to that narrative is the promises Yahweh made to Israel’s ancestors, which include the idea that all earth’s families are to seek the blessing that came to these ancestors (e.g., 12:3). The further backstory to Gen. 11:27–50:26 is God’s dealings with the world as a whole. These dealings are the subject of Gen. 1:1–11:26. It relates how God’s purpose to bless the world goes back to the very beginning, before which there can hardly be a backstory. The question it considers is clear: why did God settle on one particular family as a means of blessing the entire world? The answer is that God had tried blessing the entire world, and it hadn’t worked. Indeed, God had tried it twice, and neither time did it work.

In Gen. 1:1–11:26 the story from creation to Abraham is a story in two acts in which Adam and his sons and then Noah and his sons play key roles. The account of the people’s lines of descent (notably 5:1–32 and 11:10–26) contributes to the shaping of the story. Interwoven with the lines of descent, the stories bring a focus on key moments, especially in the times of Adam and Noah. But lines of descent and stories interweave in a complicated rather than a straightforward way. While there are the regular “lines of descent,” this expression is also used to introduce the Noah story at 6:9; to introduce 10:1–32, which includes the Nimrod story; and most surprisingly at 2:4a to

close off 1:1–2:3. Further, 4:17–18 is surely a line of descent, but it is not labeled as such. In substance, then, the chapters can be outlined as follows.

Lines of descent	Story
1:1–2:4a	2:4b–4:16
4:17–18	4:19–26
5:1–32	6:1–9:29
10:1–7	10:8–12
10:13–32	11:1–9
11:10–26	

The non-straightforward nature of this sequencing makes it unsurprising that there are various ways of understanding the structure of 1:1–11:26.¹⁷

Since Gen. 1:1–11:26 is the backstory to Gen. 11:27–50:26 and Genesis as a whole is the backstory to the great narrative extending from Exodus through 2 Kings, it seems logically necessary that Genesis in some sense relates events that happened. God did create the world as a good place, humanity chose not to do as God said, and the situation became one that could not be rectified. At the same time, the opening chapters of Genesis portray the world in a way that recurs in the closing chapters of Revelation (e.g., with sacramental trees and a snake that talks) and that does not correspond to our experience. I infer that Genesis often tells its historical story symbolically. Further, Genesis shows an acquaintance with other Middle Eastern stories about the world’s origins and about a great deluge, though it sets the message of its story over against them rather than simply following them. I infer that the authors of Genesis took up traditional materials that they knew from their cultural context and truths that they knew about God from God’s dealings with Israel, and they used these imaginatively to compose a historical parable that told the real truth about the way God had dealt with the world from the beginning.

17. See Richelle, “La structure littéraire de l’Histoire Primitive.”

1

How God Created the World

(1:1–2:4a)



Overview

God created the heavens and the earth. But the initial question set up by the opening verses of Gen. 1 concerns how God will get to the creation of the heavens and the earth from a situation in which the earth is an empty void and darkness is over the face of the Deep (1:1–2). The answer to that question comes by means of an eight-stage process: four stages set the scene, and four fill in the scene. God makes this process the agenda for a week’s work—so he fits two stages into days three and six (1:3–31). Some of the holding power of a story comes from its dealing with problems or obstacles or diversions that threaten or delay the move from question to resolution (as happens in stories such as 2:4b–25 or 11:27–13:4). Here, the account of the first three days (which only put in place the framework for creation) sets up the suspense, and the account of the second three days resolves it. The way the story unfolds also makes it possible to repeat and thus emphasize some themes, such as God’s systematic way of working, God’s authority and power, and the goodness of what God brings into being. God is effectively the one character in the story, and by the end we have learned a lot about him. A question it might seem implicitly to raise is how the story fits with what the audience knows about the world and about humanity that does not seem to be “good.” It implicitly then answers that question by saying, “There was nothing bad about it when God made it.”

A surprise feature to keep people watching through the credits is God’s stopping work for day seven and making the seventh day of the week sacred. That closing note opens up the possibility that there was another question

the story answered. Why does Israel observe the Sabbath? The answer is that Israel is thereby following the pattern of God’s work in creation. The storyteller’s viewpoint is that of a teacher who wants to encourage people to keep the Sabbath, who through the use of sanctified imagination “knows” all about the process of creation and about God’s thinking and speaking on those days when no human beings were present, and who could thus teach authoritatively about it.

Translation

^{1:1}At the beginning of God’s creating¹
the heavens and the earth,
²When the earth² was³ an empty void,
with darkness over the face of the deep,
And God’s wind⁴ quivering⁵
over the face of the water,

1. The LXX and Vg have the more sonorous, impressive, and theologically suggestive “In the beginning God created” (cf. Brayford, *Genesis*, 205–7) while Tg. Onq. has “in former times God created”; cf. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on the verse; Reno, *Genesis*, 29–39; J. Lim, “Explication of an Exegetical Enigma.” While *bārē ’šīt* might possibly be understood as absolute, “in the beginning,” one would expect *bārē ’šīt*. The form *rē ’šīt* is usually construct and refers to the beginning of something, here suggesting “at the beginning of [when] God created” (for the construction cf. Isa. 29:1; Hosea 1:2; JM 129p; DG 13; cf. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 22; Holmstedt, “Restrictive Syntax of Genesis i 1”). Oswald (“Das Erstlingswerk Gottes”) argues for “As the beginning”; cf. L’Hour, “*Ré ’shīt* et *beré ’shīt* encore et toujours”; and for a survey of possible interpretations of the phrase, see Moskala, “Interpretation of *Bere ’šīt*.” On the LXX interpretation, one wonders, “The beginning of what?” (as Augustine reports the Manichees asking: see *Two Books on Genesis*, 49). On either translation God was creating against the background of the empty void that already exists or that he makes exist, with no implication that somebody else must have brought the empty void into being before God transformed it. For the argument that *bārā’* means “separate,” see van Wolde, “Why the Verb *br’* Does Not Mean ‘to Create’”; Wardlaw, “Meaning of *br’* in Genesis 1:1–2:3”; van Wolde, “Separation and Creation in Genesis.”

2. The noun precedes the verb, suggesting that this is a circumstantial clause (a similar circumstantial clause begins Gen. 3), which works against the idea that v. 2 is the main clause following on v. 1.

3. Scofield (*Scofield Reference Bible*, 3) sees v. 1 as referring to the original creation, which underwent cataclysmic change because of an act of divine judgment likely related to the fall of angels (v. 2); v. 3 then begins an account of God’s renewing creation. For earlier expositions of this view (and for a recent advocacy of the view that one can calculate the date of creation from Genesis, namely ca. 4200 BCE), see J. Tanner, “Old Testament Chronology.”

4. Vg has *spiritus* (spirit, breath, or breeze) while the LXX has *pneuma* (spirit, breath, or wind). The link with the water suggests wind or breeze (cf. Tg. Onq.), and 8:1 supports this inference. The same link suggests that it is “God’s wind” rather than “a godlike/supernatural/mighty wind” (and see next note). For the translation “spirit of God” see, e.g., Freedman, “*ruḥ ’llym*.”

5. The verb *rāḥap* comes elsewhere only in Deut. 32:11 (a bird flapping or fluttering) and Jer. 23:9 (bones trembling). “Brooding” (Jerome, *Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, 30; see further

³God said,⁶ “Light!”⁷

and light came into being.

⁴God saw that the light was good;⁸

and God made a distinction between the light and the darkness.

⁵God called the light “day”;

the darkness he called “night.”

There was evening and there was morning,
day one.

⁶God said,

“A dome⁹ in the middle of the water,

so it will be making water distinct from water!”

⁷God made the dome and made a distinction

between the water that was under the dome
and the water that was above the dome.

So it came to be;

⁸God called the dome “heavens.”

There was evening and there was morning,
a second day.

⁹God said:

“The water under the heavens is to gather
into one place,¹⁰

So the dry land may appear!”—

so it came to be.

¹⁰God called the dry land “earth,”

and the gathering of water he called “seas,”

and God saw that it was good.

Hayward’s notes, 102–4) seems to depend on Syriac usage (see Basil, “On the Hexaemeron,” 31; also BDB). Whatever the verb’s precise meaning, it also works against the translation “a mighty wind”: it suggests something calmer or calming.

6. The waw apodosis follows on from the extraposed expression occupying vv. 1–2; cf. Isa. 48:4, where also a prepositional phrase is continued by circumstantial clauses (cf. GKC 111h, 143d).

7. Literally, “There is to be light.” The standard English translation, “Let there be light,” necessitated by the lack of a third-person imperative in English, is misleading because it makes God seem to be addressing someone and urging them to give permission or to stop hindering something.

8. Literally, “saw the light, that it was good”; on the word order, see JM 158d. *DCH* translates “how good,” but the idea that *kî* can be an adverb seems questionable. At 18:20 *HALOT* takes *kî* as an emphatic particle, attractively inviting here the translation “indeed good,” but the expression *rā’ā kî* (saw that) is too common to infer this usage on one or two occasions.

9. Again, literally, “There is to be a dome.”

10. For *māqôm* 4QGen^h has *mquh* (gathering place; cf. LXX), perhaps assimilating to v. 10 (Tal, *Genesis*, 5, 78*).

¹¹God said:

“The earth is to grow vegetation,
 plant generating seed,
 Fruit tree¹¹ producing fruit by its species,
 with its seed in it, on the earth!”—
 so it came to be.

¹²The earth put out vegetation,
 plant generating seed by its species,
 And tree producing fruit with its seed in it by its species,
 and God saw that it was good.

¹³There was evening and there was morning,
 a third day.

¹⁴God said,

“Lights¹² in the dome of the heavens
 to make a distinction between day and night!
 They will be as signs for¹³ set times¹⁴
 and days and years.

¹⁵They will be as lights in the heavens’ dome,
 to give light on the earth”;
 so it came to be.

¹⁶God made
 the two big lights,
 The bigger light to rule the day,
 the smaller light to rule the night,
 and the stars.

¹⁷God put them in the heavens’ dome,
 to give light on the earth,

¹⁸To rule over the day and over the night,
 to make a distinction between light and darkness;
 and God saw that it was good.

¹⁹There was evening and there was morning,
 a fourth day.

²⁰God said,

“The water is to teem
 with living creatures.

11. SP, LXX, Vg, and Tg. Ps.-J. have “and fruit trees,” as in v. 12, which strictly implies that both plant and fruit tree are subsets of *deše*’ (vegetation), the word for grass or hay. The MT’s asyndetic reading (with Tg. Onq. and Tg. Neof.) probably implies three objects for the verb (grass, plant, fruit tree), which is more apposite since “fruit tree” is not really appropriate as a subset of *deše*’.

12. Again, literally, “There are to be lights.”

13. Literally, “signs and.”

14. The traditional English translation as “seasons” is misleading; *mô’ed* refers not to an agricultural season or to seasons such as summer and winter but to a specific time that is fixed by God—that is, the time for a festival (see, e.g., Rudolph, “Festivals in Genesis 1:14”).

Birds are to fly over the earth,
over the face of the heavens' dome!"

²¹God created the big sea monsters
and every living creature that moves,
with which the water teems, by their species,
And every winged bird by its species;
and God saw that it was good.

²²God blessed them:
"Be fruitful, be numerous.
Fill the water in the seas;
birds are to be numerous on the earth."

²³There was evening and there was morning,
a fifth day.

²⁴God said,

"The earth is to put out
the living creature by its species—
Animal, moving thing,
and the living thing of the earth, by its species!"—
so it came to be.

²⁵God made
the living thing of the earth by its species,
animal by its species,
And everything that moves on the ground by its
species;
and God saw that it was good.

²⁶God said,

"Let us make humanity in our image, as our likeness,
so they can hold sway over the fish in the sea,
Over the birds in the heavens,
over the animals,
Over all the earth,
and over all the things that move on the earth."

²⁷So God created humanity in his image;
he created it in the image of God;
he created them male and female.

²⁸God blessed them,
and said to them,
"Be fruitful, be numerous,
fill the earth and subjugate it.
Hold sway over the fish in the sea,
over the birds in the heavens,
and over every living thing that moves on the
earth."

²⁹God said,

“Here, I am giving you¹⁵
 all the plants that generate seed,
 Which are on the face of all the earth,
 and every tree with fruit that generates seed.¹⁶
 These will be food for you,
³⁰for every living thing of the earth,
 For all the birds in the heavens,
 and for all the things that move on the earth,
 Which have living breath in them,
 all the green plants as food”;
 so it came to be.

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

^{2:1}So the heavens were finished,
 and the earth, and all their army.¹⁷

²On the seventh¹⁸ day God finished¹⁹
 his work that he had been doing.
 So on the seventh day he stopped²⁰
 from all his work that he had been doing.

³God blessed the seventh day
 and made it sacred.
 Because on it God stopped
 from his entire work of creation that he had been doing.²¹

^{4a}These²² are the lines of descent of the heavens and the earth
 when they were created.²³

15. The declarative/performative qatal suggests a speech act, “I hereby give.”

16. God omits the *deše*’, which makes sense if it refers to grass or hay, which human beings do not eat.

17. For *šābā*’, the regular word for an army, the LXX has *kosmos*, which lacks the Hebrew’s martial implications and rather suggests “the finely tuned magnificence of the created universe” (Brayford, *Genesis*, 225); the Vg has *ornatus*, a standard translation of *kosmos* but a word that can also mean (military) equipment.

18. The SP and LXX deal with the oddity of God finishing the work on the seventh day by changing seventh to sixth. Krüger (“Schöpfung und Sabbat”) argues that the LXX and SP have the original reading. Contrast Tov, “Searching for the ‘Original’ Bible.”

19. NIV “by the seventh day God had finished” makes good sense as an alternative solution to the problem recognized by the LXX and SP (see previous note), but both the preposition and the verb tense are the same in v. 2b.

20. Cf. LXX; and Driver, *Genesis*, 18. “Rested” (Vg) overinterprets *šābat*.

21. Literally, “from his entire work which he had created, in making.”

22. “‘These’ are the things mentioned above” (Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 19).

23. The MT treats the whole of v. 4 as one sentence (so also the LXX) and as an introduction to 2:5–3:24. More often the formula in v. 4a is a complete sentence, and it makes sense to treat just v. 4b as the introduction to what follows (see the comment on 2:4a).

Interpretation

The medieval chapter divisions in printed Hebrew and English Bibles separate the six days of creation from the day when God “stopped,” which thus becomes 2:1–3. In the MT,²⁴ the seventh day belongs with the first six: the text actually has a chapter or unit marker (a *petuḥah*) after the account of each of the seven days of the week whose story is told in Gen. 1:1–2:3, so that Genesis begins with seven short “chapters” (the MT’s next unit stretches from 2:4 to 3:21). One might even argue that “the key to understanding the intrinsic nature of the Genesis cosmology is in an element that is often neglected, the seventh day.”²⁵ I thus treat the account of all seven days as the first section of Genesis (and I will refer to it loosely as “Gen. 1”). But I will treat the section as 1:1–2:4a, for reasons explained in the comment on 2:4a.

In form or genre, there is nothing to compare Gen. 1 with.²⁶ It is written in what one might call poetic prose or prosaic poetry. Its Hebrew has some classic marks of prose style, such as waw-consecutives, relative particles, and object markers. It also has some classic marks of verse: it makes little use of the definite article; much of it can be laid out in lines of about six words in which the second half complements the first half; it manifests much restatement within these lines—repetition involving variation rather than exact replication (“parallelism”); and it describes things in a figurative way, using images and figures of speech.²⁷ It is “poetic historiography.”²⁸

Corresponding to these two indicators of the kind of passage it is, listeners might bring to it expectations pointing in more than one direction. Genesis 1 is the beginning of the long narrative extending from Genesis to 2 Kings, which might make them ask how far it resembles the prose ending of that narrative, in 2 Kings 25. Listeners might also ask how far it resembles poetic descriptions of creation such as Yahweh’s own account in Job 38–39 and/or Jeremiah’s account in Jer. 10:12–13 and/or Ms. Wisdom’s account in Prov. 8:22–31.²⁹

As the beginning of that long narrative extending from Genesis to 2 Kings, in its prosaic aspect Gen. 1 speaks of something that happened in history.

24. More specifically, in the MT^L; the other MT manuscripts lack the division markers in Gen. 1–2 (Tal, *Genesis*, 11*).

25. Walton, “Creation in Genesis 1:1–2:3,” 58.

26. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis*, 1:62.

27. See further de la Lama, “Reiteraciones”; Polak, “Poetic Style and Parallelism”; R. Robinson, “Poetry of Creation.”

28. Diepstra and Laughery, “Interpreting Science and Scripture,” 10–11; they attribute this phrase to P. Ricoeur but do not give a reference. But Fouts (“Selected Lexical and Grammatical Studies,” 88–89) questions the idea that Gen. 1 is poetry at all. For recent discussions about how literally historical Gen. 1 is and how figurative, see Charles, *Reading Genesis 1–2*.

29. Though Landes (“Creation Tradition in Proverbs”) stresses the poetic features in Prov. 8 over against the prosaic nature of Gen. 1.

But in its poetic aspect it speaks in the manner of those other accounts: it communicates dramatically and in symbols and images. While the authors of the story might well have worked out that the sun was the source of light in the world,³⁰ this awareness need not have held them back from painting a theologically suggestive picture in which God, the source of all light, first creates light, then creates the sun. The audience might notice artificial aspects to the six-day sequence (there seems to be not much to do on day one and rather a lot to do on days three and six) and/or might intuitively realize that the chapter was not portraying God doing a literal week's work and then having a day off. As is the case in Jeremiah, Job, or Proverbs, God inspires a picture of creation that involves imagery and metaphor in order to communicate the truth about creation, rather than inspiring a literal account that nobody would have understood (at least, I don't understand *A Brief History of Time*,³¹ and nor—I have heard it said—do most of the nine million people who bought the book). Thus a theologian such as Chrysostom classically emphasizes the considerateness (*synkatabasis*) of the way God speaks in the Scriptures, starting where people are in order to communicate his truth.³² The ease with which Western readers assume that Gen. 1 is simply a prosaic narrative like 2 Kings 25 makes it advantageous to lay it out as verse and thereby draw attention to its poetic aspect. Realistically, it describes creation as an event that happened but is not accessible to us. We cannot investigate it by historical method. It is not unhistorical or timeless. But it is “‘non-historical’ history.”³³

Like those other accounts of creation, then, Gen. 1 speaks of God's making the world in a way designed to communicate and to bring a message home to people in their context. One way it does so is by taking up motifs from familiar creation stories and tweaking them to give a more reliable portrait of the significance of the real God's act of creation. It is common to refer to Gen. 1 as a myth and even more common to refer to those other creation stories as myths, but the word *myth* is used in so many different ways that it deserves to appear on the list of proscribed terms along with eschatology and apocalyptic. Genesis 1 and other peoples' creation stories are imaginative poetic accounts of how the world came to be. From none of them can we derive information on what the video camera would have caught if it had been there. From all of them we may derive some true information about the nature and purpose of the world and the nature of God. Yet another reason for hesitating to describe Gen. 1 as myth is that it stands at the beginning of a narrative that as a whole tells a story in some sense historical, as is not the case with other Middle Eastern accounts of creation.³⁴

30. See the comment on 1:3.

31. Hawking, *Brief History of Time*.

32. See, e.g., Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 1–17*, 42–45.

33. Barth, *CD* 3.1:79.

34. Cf. M. Smith, “Is Genesis 1 a Creation Myth?”

The narrator of the story in 2 Kings 25 may have witnessed the events described there, or may (like Luke, according to the introduction to his Gospel) have talked to people who witnessed the events or may have listened to the story that had been passed on for a generation or so. The author of Gen. 1 did not witness the events that are described and has not been able to talk to people who witnessed them or listen to a story passed down by people who did so (with the possible exception of 1:27–30). He or she is either more like the author of Job or Proverbs, who imagines what creation would have been like, or like Jeremiah, whom God told about the manner of his creation.³⁵ It makes no difference whether one thinks in terms of divinely inspired human imagination or humanly mediated divine revelation, because either way Gen. 1 offers a trustworthy figurative account of God’s historical act of creation.

The narrator introduces God’s words and reports on God’s action and provides the account’s “narrative thread,” which calms or tempers what would otherwise be the “overpowering” nature of God’s own relentless commanding words with their “controlled energy and force.”³⁶ The six “chapters” in Gen. 1 contain similar elements and have a similar structure, but each one is individualized; the First Testament commonly thus employs repetition with variation rather than engaging in exact repetition.³⁷ The elements are these:

1. God speaks a word of command.
2. The command is obeyed and/or God does what the command speaks of.
3. Thus “so it came to be.”
4. God looks at what has come into being and declares that it is good.
5. God names the thing he has brought into being.
6. The day comes to an end.

The variants are:

Day 1 has no “so it came to be.”

Day 2 has no “and God saw that it was good.”³⁸

Day 3 has two words of command and two fulfillments.

35. Cf. Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 44–45. Wiseman (*Creation Revealed*) interprets the six days of Gen. 1 as the period during which God gave such a revelation to Moses.

36. Fishbane, *Text and Texture*, 7, 8.

37. LXX makes the repetition more consistent (see Tov, “Harmonizing Character of the Septuagint”), unless the LXX is following a more consistent Hebrew original (see, e.g., Hendel, *Text of Genesis 1–11*, 16–39; Johann Cook, “Septuagint of Genesis”; Brown, *Structure, Role, and Ideology*). Bouteneff (*Beginnings*, 185–90) sets the LXX and NRSV texts alongside each other.

38. Thus one hardly needs a special explanation for the omission of this phrase in vv. 6–8 (see Ramantswana, “Day Two of Creation”).

Day 4 has no naming.

Day 5 has no “so it came to be” and no naming.

Day 6 has three words from God and the declaration “very good,” but no naming.

Day 7 has no naming or declaration about goodness or about “evening and morning.”

Only days 1 through 3 incorporate the setting up of a distinction or naming; only days 4 through 6 include creating or blessing. The seven days’ work is structured as follows:

Day 1 light	Day 4 lights in the sky
Day 2 waters separated	Day 5 waters filled
Day 3 land appears land produces growth	Day 6 land produces creatures humanity to rule over them
Day 7 all is finished	

Thus the first three days lay the foundations for the second three days, which fill them out, with days 3 and 6 each requiring two sets of actions. Perhaps the author of Genesis knew a story that told of eight acts of creation but fits them into six days so that they can form part of one week’s work.³⁹

Genesis 1 covers matters that Gen. 2–3 will also cover, and one could see it as in effect offering an anticipatory interpretation or anticipatory midrash on Gen. 2–3. One aspect of the nature of midrash is to take up questions raised by the scriptural text and puzzling aspects of it and then to offer some clarification of them. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the usual scholarly view of Gen. 1–3 is that the more folktale-like Gen. 2–3 story is older than Gen. 1, which has seemed more sophisticated, and understanding Gen. 1 as a midrash on Gen. 2–3 does illumine Gen. 1. Paradoxically, indeed, seeing it as offering an explanation of Gen. 2–3 helps clarify otherwise puzzling features of Gen. 1 itself. But the order of the chapters in Genesis invites us to work the logic the other way around: that is, Gen. 2–3 will clarify puzzling questions raised by Gen. 1. Indeed, given that the basis for dating different parts of Genesis is shaky, one might see Gen. 2–3 as a supplement to Gen. 1. The opening chapter left the origin of evil unexplained and would leave people with a puzzling account of the world. Genesis 2–3 answers the question it raises and/or raises questions about the earlier story.⁴⁰

39. See, e.g., Krüger, “Genesis 1:1–2:3 and the Development of the Pentateuch.”

40. So Otto, “Die Paradieserzählung Genesis 2–3”; Otto, “Die Urmenschen im Paradies”; cf. Waschke, “Zum Verhältnis von Ruhe und Arbeit”; Davies, “Making It”; more narrowly regarding the image of God, MacDonald, “Text in Search of Context.” Phillips (“Creation”)

Whether or not Gen. 1 is the Bible's first creation story, it is certainly not the world's first creation story. We have in fragmentary form a number of older creation stories, of which the fullest are *When on High* (Enuma Elish) and *Atrahasis* ("Exceedingly-wise," the name of its hero). *When on High*⁴¹ tells the story of the origin of the gods themselves, who were made from some earlier, already-existent entities. Conflict among these beings eventually issues in the triumph of one of the younger gods, Marduk, through whose initiative humanity is then created. More important, in the dynamic of the story, Marduk establishes Babylon as his sacred city, with its temple as the proper place to offer sacrifice. The First Testament story ultimately wants to affirm that actually *the* God is Yahweh, and *the* sacred city is Jerusalem. Indeed, the story of the creation of the world has been seen to picture it as a kind of sanctuary,⁴² though if such themes are present in Gen. 1, they are under the surface; there is not even a city in Gen. 1. Israel does not appear in the creation story; the First Testament has Israel "arriving late to its own story."⁴³ *Atrahasis*⁴⁴ tells of the creation of humanity to relieve the gods from their labor on the farm and elsewhere, but the growing human population disturbs the gods, so they first attempt population control but eventually decide to bring a devastating flood. A rogue god informs *Atrahasis*, who constructs a boat for himself and some animals in which they survive. *Atrahasis* then offers sacrifice, around which the hungry gods swarm like flies. The overlaps in Gen. 1 with other Middle Eastern creation accounts open up the possibility that the people whom the storyteller hoped would listen to the story are acquainted with these other accounts and for a variety of reasons might be tempted to take them seriously. Genesis 1 seeks to get them to commit themselves to the truth of this version. Genesis 1 is formulating the *real* story, which pictures deity, creation, and humanity in a markedly different way.⁴⁵

1:1–3. "With no introduction and little fanfare, the text announces with utmost simplicity that it was God—and God *alone*—who created the cosmos."⁴⁶ The way in which "*God*, the personal Lord, stands here at the beginning" contrasts with all other accounts of creation.⁴⁷ And "God comes on stage with a complete absence of preliminaries. Who is God? What is God? Where

then argues that Acts 1–7 mediates between the P and the J understanding. See also Goldingay, "Postmodernizing Eve and Adam."

41. See, e.g., Hays, *Hidden Riches*, 41–59; ANET 60–72; Hurowitz, "Genesis of Genesis"; Keel and Schroer, *Creation: Biblical Theologies*.

42. See, e.g., Walton, "Creation in Genesis 1:1–2:3"; Walton, *Lost World*; Walton, *Genesis 1*.

43. Mbuvi, *Belonging in Genesis*, 1.

44. See Lambert and Millard, *Atra-hasis*; Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 16–27.

45. See, e.g., Fieger, "Die Erschaffung der Schöpfung"; Sparks, "Enūma Elish."

46. Arnold, *Genesis*, 36.

47. Zimmerli, *1. Mose 1–11*, 36.

does he hail from? How does he differ from other deities?”⁴⁸ This chapter will answer those questions.

As is commonly the case with First Testament books, the opening expression in Genesis, “In the beginning” (*bārē ʾšīt*), provides the Genesis scroll with its title in Hebrew. More literally, Gen. 1 begins “in the beginning of [when] God created the heavens and the earth”; Gen. 2:4b will likewise begin “in the day of God’s making the heavens and the earth.” When on High similarly begins, “When the heavens above did not exist, and earth beneath had not come into being.”⁴⁹ Unlike When on High, however, Genesis would not have imagined (or rather, would not at all agree) that God came into being from some already-existing matter. But like When on High, Gen. 1 is a story about the creation of the world; the creation of humanity is subordinate to the broader story (in Gen. 2–3 the creation of humanity is more central; it thus compares more with Atrahasis).

The complexity of the opening sentence that occupies vv. 1–3 also anticipates the complexity of the corresponding opening sentence constituting 2:4b–7. In Gen. 1 too it will become clear that “the heavens and the earth” does not denote the entire cosmos—the world’s upper reservoir lies above the heavens and its lower water lies below the earth. The heavens and the earth denote the world within whose boundaries humanity lives. Nor does “the heavens” suggest heaven in the sense of God’s dwelling. It is thus advantageous to translate *šāmayim* literally as “heavens” rather than as “heaven.”⁵⁰

In a context such as Gen. 1, the English word “create” may by definition seem to refer to God’s bringing everything into existence way back at the beginning. But we also speak of “continuous creation,” of God’s continuing to bring things into existence; creation is not just a once-for-all past event (cf. Ps. 104:30). And we speak of God (and us) as being creative in envisaging and shaping new possibilities where there might have seemed to be none (cf. Ps. 51:10 [51:12]). We also speak of creativity in more trivial connections, so that creation talk is subjected to “inflation.”⁵¹ In an analogous way, the Hebrew word translated “create” (*bārā*) has broader meanings. It can suggest any action that can only be predicated of God and action that is novel, extraordinary, and effortless.⁵² The Prophets use the verb most often, especially in referring to something that God is going to do in restoring his people’s fortunes (e.g., Isa. 41:20; 45:7–8; 48:7; 65:17–18). Creation denotes a sovereign act whereby God transforms disorder, jumble, and disarray into form, harmony, and peace; thus the First Testament uses this verb only with God as the subject.

48. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 322.

49. Hays, *Hidden Riches*, 41.

50. Although *šāmayim* and *mayim* (water) look dual, they are plural (see GKC 88d; JM 91f).

51. Zimmerli, *1. Mose 1–11*, 38.

52. Cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 15.