

Genesis 1:1

The commentator John H. Sailhamer points out that chapters 1 to 11 of Genesis form an introduction to the book as a whole and, beyond that, the entire Pentateuch—Genesis through Deuteronomy. That is no doubt true, but that is not the intended purpose or perspective of this class. The venerable scholar H. C. Leupold states that the purpose of Genesis is “to relate how Israel was selected from among the nations of the world and became God’s chosen people.” Again, certainly true, but that is not our focus.

Genesis can be easily divided into two sections: The first, chapters 1-11a, deal with the general history of mankind, while the second, chapters 11b-50 deal with the special history of God’s chosen people. Our elder Jake Hopper has already addressed the history of Israel in his class, *Israel in the Old Testament*. This class will *end* where his began, in the middle of Chapter Eleven, where the generations of Shem, leading to Terah, and his son, Abram, are introduced. This class will end with the tower of Babel, which is discussed through verse nine of Chapter Eleven.

The *purpose* of this class is to understand how it all began, *why* it all began, and what that tells us about who and what we are today. For the cultural and societal roots of 2023 dwell securely in the Creation epic of Genesis. The *perspective* of this class will be, of course, *historical*, for we will be examining events that occurred in the past; it will be *textual*, for we will be studying in detail (as always, down to the bare metal) the biblical text; but beyond that the perspective will be *cosmic*, yet at the same time firmly rooted in the soil of this earth—just as Moses expresses in the first two verses of his *magnum opus*.

Read Genesis 1:1-2.

Verse one is cosmic; we might paraphrase it, “In the beginning God created the entire universe”—the unending vastness of all that is, far more than the human mind can encompass. Verse one is expansive, even vague, but verse two zooms down immediately onto our own little blue marble, with, “And the earth...”

Interestingly, when God creates the sun and the moon in vv14-18, He doesn’t even bother to call them by those or any names, referring to them only by that which they produce *for the benefit of the earth*; note the perspective in these verses:

Principal Commentators

During this study, and especially as we now begin to dig into the text of Genesis 1-11, I will be referring often to the work of two learned scholars: **John H. Sailhamer**, and his commentary of Genesis in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (1990), and **H. C. Leupold**, from his classic work, *Exposition of Genesis* (1942).

Then God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night [on earth], and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years [on earth]; and let them be for lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth”; and it was so. So God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night [on earth], and also the stars. And God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, and to rule the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness [on earth]; and God saw that it was good.

Before we begin our dissection of the text, I need to address the first of two elephants in the room. The second I will address later, with v2, but the first elephant in the room is the authorship of Genesis and the Pentateuch as a whole.

Just as there are those who smugly speak of evolution or man-produced global climate change as an established scientific fact with which only ignorant knuckle-draggers would disagree, there is a group of biblical “scholars” who claim that the text of the Pentateuch we hold in our hands is actually a composite created from four separate documents/writers/schools, compiled somewhere around 400 BC. I will let H. C. Leupold summarize this for us.

Leupold: Critics speak with much assurance, as though the proof for their position were unassailable, of the various sources that have been worked into the Pentateuch as we now have it; and they assure us that this composite work was finally compiled by an editor—commonly called Redactor (R)—after the time of the Exile perhaps as late as 400 B. C. The four major documents that have been worked into the Pentateuch are not only occasionally discernible in the work as a whole, but the cord has, as it were, been unravelled, and the four strands that compose it are laid before us side by side. The names given to these four documents or their authors are: (a) the Elohist document, written by the Elohist—abbreviated designation E-; (b) the Jahvistic or Yahwistic document—described as J; (c) the Priestly document or P; and (d) the Deuteronomic document—or D. Some critics consider E, J, D, and P as persons, others regard them as literary schools.

Many of us have seen or heard references to this literary criticism. As I will not be propounding their theory I’ll not waste time going into further detail. This class will take the more “pedestrian” approach of believing what the *Bible* says about the Pentateuch’s authorship—especially what God’s Son Himself said about its authorship. Repeatedly in the gospels Jesus refers to Moses as the author of what is written in the first five books of the Bible (e.g., on four separate occasions, as listed in the handout). Let’s look at just one of those.

Read Luke 20:37.

We take this our text—chapters 1 to 11a—to be *revelation with retentive memory*. That is, ancient man, who often had nothing better at hand, possessed a retentive memory that would shame most of us today. During Adam’s long lifetime language and writing did indeed develop, but the accurate, almost photographic memory of people, events, and sequence, passed down from every generation to the next, was, in many ways, more reliable—and often more *available*—than memory today so dependent on writing, recordings, still and video images, and computers. Although individuals such as Moses might have at hand some ancient writings or chronicles from which to glean information, the ancient mind for such things was far more developed than that of modern man—or, more precisely, the memory “muscle” in people today has almost atrophied from disuse. We have replaced human memory with the ubiquitous internet search.

Beyond that, however, and even more trustworthy, is that to Moses Yahweh *revealed* this history, just as He revealed to the apostle John the *future* history of the Apocalypse.

These two combined—revelation and retentive memory—give us a solid foundation by which to study the text, and take it to be the reliably accurate writings of just one man: the Spirit-inspired Moses.

v1

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

The first three words in our Bible translate two Hebrew words: *bereshith* (be-reh-sheet), which translates to the English “first [or original] beginning.” I like what Matthew Henry has to say about this:

Henry: In the beginning, that is, in the beginning of time, when that clock was first set a going: time began with the production of those beings that are measured by time. Before the beginning of time there was none but that Infinite Being that inhabits eternity. Should we ask why God made the world no sooner, we should but darken counsel by words without knowledge; for how could there be sooner or later in eternity?

“In the beginning”



Being German, Leupold gives us the appropriate German word, the *Uranfang* (wur-en-fahng).

Some, such as *Young’s Literal Translation*, would make v1, “In the beginning of God’s preparing the heavens and the earth...”, which makes the first three verses into one continuous statement:

“When God set about to make the heavens and the earth—the world being then a formless waste...—God said, ‘Let there be light’” (Sailhamer paraphrase).

Or, in *The Old Testament, An American Translation* (in which Genesis was translated by Theophile J. Meek),

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth being a desolate waste, with darkness covering the abyss and the spirit of God hovering over the waters, then God said: 'Let there be light.'

A purely grammatical case can be made for this,  but none of our common versions (i.e., NASB, ESV, NIV, KJVs) take that line. The problem with this alternate reading (as Sailhamer points out) is that “according to such a reading the world, as unformed material, *would have been present when the first act of Creation was performed*, that being God’s command in v3, ‘Let there be light.’ The first act of creation would have been the creation of light from darkness” (emphasis added). Instead, we hold that the text says that God’s first act of Creation was “creat[ing] the heavens and the earth.” That is, as stated earlier, *creatio ex nihilo*: “creation from nothing.” 

In the beginning God...

Remember, Moses is writing this as an explanatory, historical account for the benefit of the Hebrew nation, the people of which are already familiar with the standard names or references for their God: *El* or *Elohim*, *Adon* or *Adonai*, and *Yahweh* (*YHWH*). So as he begins this account, he employs the reference that best fits the moment; here it is *Elohim*.

By the very reference chosen, by that one word, Moses paints a word picture that every Israelite can understand. Who else but all-mighty, all-powerful, majestic *Elohim* could have spoken all that is into existence. As Leupold puts it, “God’s omnipotence outshines all other attributes in this account. Omnipotence rouses man’s reverence and holy fear rather than his love. In other words, it brings the Creator to man’s notice rather as *Elohim* than from any other point of view.”

So put this in perspective: Moses is not introducing to the Hebrews the god who created the heavens and the earth, as if he were asked, “Which god created all that is?” No, he is answering the question, “How did the heavens and the earth come into being?” And the answer is, “The one you bow before in holy reverence—the one before whom you quaked in fear at Sinai, even *Elohim*—*He* made all that is from absolute nothingness.”

The apostle Paul verifies the interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* in his letter to the Romans—

as it is written, “A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU”—in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. (Romans 4:17)

—as does the writer to the Hebrews:

“grammatical case can be made”

I am, of course, doing you the courtesy of not wading into all the grammatical logic behind these two interpretations.

“creation from nothing”

By the way, I like the way Leupold paraphrases this elsewhere: “The beginning was made by God.”

By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible. Hebrews (11:3)

...God created the heavens and the earth.

Verse 1 concludes with the *object* of His Creation. What did Elohim create? “the heavens and the earth.” Let’s look at the three operative words.

created

The Hebrew is *bara*, and it is only ever used of *divine* activity, and expresses “the origination of something great, new, epoch-making, as only God can do it” (Leupold). The word itself does not *have* to mean “something from nothing,” but the context does, in that when no existing material is mentioned, no such material is implied. For example, look at Isaiah 65:17-18.

Read Isaiah 65:17-18.

There the same word (*bara*) is used to describe the creation of the new heavens and new earth (*ex nihilo*) as well as the creation of Jerusalem and its people (not *ex nihilo*).

heavens

As we have seen in other studies, the word translated heavens (*samayim* [sha-MY-eem]) is a flexible word that can, depending on the context, refer to the sky overhead, endless space, or God’s dwelling place—i.e., collectively, “the upper regions.” Hebrew has no word for “universe,” which is how we might interpret the statement. If we are correct that God’s dwelling place predates Creation, and dwells on a different plane, then that would *not* be included in His creation of “the heavens.”

earth

In this “heavens” God created, specifically, “the earth,” the stage on which everything will be played out in the rest of His word, from Eden all the way to this earth’s destruction and its replacement with (as mentioned in Isaiah 65:17) a *new* earth—which will then become the stage for everything that plays out into eternity future.

The word is *erets* (AIR-ets), which is the entire solid earth in contrast to the heavens; that is, if the heavens are “the upper regions,” the earth is “that which is lower.” This word can refer to the material earth, the ground, but is also used to refer to the totality of the planet.

In fact, to the Hebrew mind, the phrase “the heavens and the earth” would have been a common figure of speech expressing “totality”—i.e., everything there is. 📌

an orderly, systematic Creation

We will see as we proceed further into Genesis 1 and 2, that God employs what might be termed a “form and fill” method: First the “container; followed by what goes *into* the container. That is,

Day and night (day 1) with the sun and moon to fill and rule them on day 4.

Waters above and below (day 2) with birds and fish to fill and rule them on day 5.

Land and vegetation (day 3) with land mammals to fill and rule them on day 6.

Behind these few simple words in v1 of God's word we see the beginning of its perspective. Yes, there will now be a vast, apparently endless universe of stars and planets and other fantastical creations, but all of that is just "above." If something is "above," then there must be something over which it is above—there must be something "below" that which is "above." If there is a ceiling, there must be a floor.

Here in these words we see God's perspective: There is a *foundation* to His Creation; it is not the sun or the moon or any other planet, but specifically this earth, this globe. Just as man himself, once he is created, will be special *on* this earth, the earth itself is special in all of Creation.

WHY v1?

Now we need to consider how Moses is using v1; that is, what does v1 contribute to the Creation epoch? How does it fit in? Do we see it as a title, a preface, or a summary of what will be restated in greater detail later? Or is it merely the first portion of a longer statement that is made in the first three verses? Also, is Moses intentionally referring to the Trinity when he use the plural *Elohim*? Let's consider this last point first.

What does it mean that the word Elohim is plural?

To be precise, the Hebrew *Elohim* is masculine, plural, absolute; Leupold calls it a "potential" plural. By this He means that we go too far to conclude that this is a purposeful reference, by Moses, to the Trinity as we know it—but we also go too far to conclude that there is no reference at all here to the Trinity.

Leupold: The term 'Elohîm...allows for all that which the fuller unfolding of the same old truth brings in the course of the development of God's Kingdom. When, then, ultimately the truth concerning the Trinity has been revealed, the fullest resources of the term 'Elohîm have been explored, as far as man needs to know them.

We might think of this as a placeholder of sorts; the *Jamieson, Fausset and Brown Commentary* helpfully puts it this way:

JFB: ...by its use here in the plural form, is obscurely taught at the opening of the Bible, a doctrine clearly revealed in other parts of it, namely, that though God is one, there is a plurality of persons in the Godhead—Father, Son, and Spirit, who were engaged in the creative work.

We might explain it this way: Moses himself could not know the fullness of the Triune Godhead, but the Spirit had him use a word for God that would permit that fullness to be realized by those who would follow—especially after the Incarnation.

Yet, v1 is more than just a free-standing introductory or summary statement, for such a preface would not be followed by “and,” which is the first word of v2 in the Hebrew text. No, we see v1 as describing the opening acts of Creation and, along with vv2-5, part of the first day.

We could draw a number of conclusions from this, but perhaps the most immediate and obvious is that this is a first expression of God’s grace—His *common* grace that envelops all people on this entire globe. We saw this earlier, for example, in v14-18 of Chapter One, where the universe “overhead” is created explicitly for the benefit of the earth.

Everything in that passage is earth-centric; the heavenly lights were not created as mere objects of beauty, or for the benefit of Mars or Jupiter, or the far-distant planet Vulcan (home of Spock), but specifically for planet earth—*this* planet. The imagery reveals a God who considers this planet—and, of course, its people—as not just another anonymous component in an endless sea of anonymous components, but as something dear to Him: a place where He would reveal Himself more fully than anywhere else, where His story would be enacted and told—and where, as we see in Revelation 21, He will dwell, now on a *new* earth, with his loved ones for all eternity:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them...” (Revelation 21:1–3)

SESSION 4

In the Beginning...
Genesis 1:1

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The Bible as a whole—and especially Jesus Himself— makes clear that Moses was the author of Genesis and the Pentateuch (**Matthew 8:4; Mark 7:10; Luke 20:37; John 5:45-47**). As to *how* Moses wrote it, we conclude it was by *revelation with retentive memory*.

Matthew Henry on “In the beginning...”

In the beginning, that is, in the beginning of time, when that clock was first set a going: time began with the production of those beings that are measured by time. Before the beginning of time there was none but that Infinite Being that inhabits eternity. Should we ask why God made the world no sooner, we should but darken counsel by words without knowledge; for how could there be sooner or later in eternity?

God created almost everything, with only a few exceptions, *ex nihilo*—from nothing (**Romans 4:17; Hebrews 11:3**).

“The heavens and the earth” is a Hebrew figure of speech meaning “everything there is.” But the “heavens” created by God in Genesis 1:1 did *not* include His own dwelling place—the third and highest heaven that has eternally existed outside the plane and time of Creation (i.e., the universe).

Regarding Elohim (“God”)

Moses employs the plural *Elohim* not knowing or expressing the fullness of what we know as the triune Godhead.

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