

Genesis 1:1-14: Creation

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Background

"The book of Genesis addresses the most profound questions of life. Who are we? Why are we here? And, more to the focus of Genesis, who is God, how does God relate to the universe, and what are the origins of God's chosen people, Israel? Many cultures, ancient and modern, have produced similar philosophical speculations about the nature of God, humanity, and cosmic origins, but none has left the impact on world history and thought as enduring as that of Genesis." - Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, p. 1.

Text

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Isaiah 45:18-19 ¹⁸For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!): I am the LORD, and there is no other. ¹⁹ I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, "Seek me in chaos." I the LORD speak the truth, I declare what is right.

Psalms 33:6, 9 By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth. ... For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.

Hebrews 11:3 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.

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

⁶And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." ⁷So God made the dome

Issue of translation of v. 1 "When God began to create, the earth was formless ..." Support of creation ex nihilo, or of one God + chaos? BCL: "First this: God created the Heavens and Earth – all you see, all you don't see.

Does v2 imply a preexisting "stuff" used by God? Is "formless void" not the same as chaos? Pre-existing?

A temporal beginning or a conceptual beginning?

Presents the creation of the entire world, not the story of one tribe (as will be the case starting with Gen. 11)

Was darkness created?

"wind from God" "God's Spirit" LXX: καὶ πνεῦμα θεοῦ

"Nothingness" can't exist.

Is it a) "existence" vs. "non-existence" or b) "chaos" vs. "order"?

Creation by verbal command (or thought or will) rather than creation by action.

What sort of light is this? No stars as yet. Can there be a "literal" meaning of an image? Is this the illumination of wisdom? Figurative and spiritual meanings.

What is the meaning of "day"? Can a figurative meaning be sustained by the text? Will a figurative meaning solve the scientific issues?

Victor Hamilton: "... the literal understanding of "day" is not necessarily a more spiritual and biblical interpretation, and therefore is not inherently preferable." *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*, p.53

How heard by the initial audience? Ancient context is a clash of polytheistic vs. monotheistic views. Not a clash of secular vs. religious.

When did the water get created? Text assumes it already existed.

What structure of the universe is implied by having the world divided from sky before there are planets?

and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so.⁸ God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

Co-texts: other early creation stories

- Babylonian, "Epic of Creation" (Enûma Elish). Dates to the late second millennium B.C.E. Battle of Marduk and Tiamat.
- Egyptian, "Memphite Theology". 13th cent BCE. Creation by word, god is satisfied at creation. "Instructions of Merikare." God conquers chaos, creates according to likeness.
- Greek: Pandora myth

Compare to other creation stories

- Only one creating, active force. No fight with other gods.
- No activity in heaven.
- Not concerned with the history of God(s).
- What are the implications of parallels to other stories?

Nature of relationship

- Use of common terms?
- Direct borrowing?
- Rejection of other?

Text, continued

⁹And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. ¹⁰God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. ¹²The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. ¹³And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

Why create in days at all?

Context & Issues

Can the text have a meaning?

Challenges to interpreting this text (1): history, myth, truth

- Cosmology – and the scientific evidence for the origins, size and age of the universe

“I fear that I will be laughed at by those who have scientific knowledge of these matters and by those who recognize the facts of the case.” - Augustine, (ca. 400) *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, quoted in Arnold, p. 33

- Biology (Evolution) – and the specialness of humans

What interpretive stance do we take to this in relation to concept of “truth”?

- Are we reading an attempt at history, or an attempt at philosophy?
- History or myth?
- Do we engage in “Demythologizing” or “Dekerygmatising”?

Challenges to interpreting this text (2): transcendence

- Psychology & Neurology – and the possibility of free will

Challenges to interpreting this text (3): justice

- Gender

What do we use to assist interpretation?

What is the proper context to read this text against?

- Against cultures at its own time?
- Against origin stories of cultures around it at its time?
- Against issues in its own culture?
- Against our culture?

What is the purpose of this text?

- “The purpose of the Torah in this section is to teach us that the whole world and all that it contains were created by the word of the One God, according to His will, which operates without restraint.” - Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the book of Genesis*, part 1
- “... it does matter that Rashi will say that God creates for the sake of the Torah, over and against the author of John’s Gospel, who implies that God creates for the sake of the incarnation of his Word – both of whom are contradicted by the modern biblical scholar who says that the writer or writers of the creation account formulated the seven-day sequence for the sake of reinforcing a Jerusalem-oriented temple ideology. All agree that creation emerges out of a prior plan or purpose.” - Reno, *Genesis*, p. 34
- Can a text seem to make historical points, but not be about history?

Sources

Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis (The New Cambridge Bible Commentary)*. Cambridge, 2009.

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