

The opening of Genesis is one of the very most familiar passages in the Bible – and one of the most controversial. People have understood it in many different ways, but it may be useful to collect many of these ways into two groups. In one group, the understanding starts with science as it has been revealed to us in the created universe. In the other, the understanding begins with the witness of scripture. There is no consensus on how to reconcile these, even among those firmly committed to both revealed truth and scientific truth.

It is not to be expected that this class can resolve such deep issues, and we do not try. In particular, we do not attempt to map correspondences between statements in this passage and events, as best we understand them, in the early history of the universe, or of the planet. We do affirm two principles: Genesis was not intended to answer scientific questions, and, as part of God’s word, it is true and reliable.

We attempt to come at the passage in a quite different way, trying to see how it would have been understood by Israel at the time the Pentateuch was composed. It deals with a question that was natural at that time and equally natural today: How did the world come into being? The pagan nations had their own answers. The *Enuma elish*,¹ a Babylonian poem apparently used in religious celebrations, gives a typical answer. It begins:

*When the sky above was not named,
And the earth beneath did not yet bear a name,
And the primeval Apsû, who begat them,
And chaos, Tiamat, the mother of them both,
Their waters were mingled together,
And no field was formed, no marsh was to be seen;
When of the gods none had been called into being...*

We notice that we start out with two gods and an already existent universe, albeit a mostly unordered one. The god Apsû is identified with fresh water, and the god Tiamat, with the ocean. Both are eventually killed.

This beginning excerpt could be misleading; rather than being a creation story, the *Enuma elish* is primarily about the rise of Marduk to become king of the gods. Creation of the world simply sets the stage, and the creation of man is done largely to free some of the gods from their forced labor.

Genesis 1 can be seen as a rebuttal to such pagan stories.² Instead of two gods, who quickly multiply, we have one God. The universe is not pre-existent, and God is not identified with any part of it. Instead, the universe is called into being simply by God’s word of creation (and not by magic).

There is another contrast. By any modern standard of literary style, the *Enuma elish* would have to be called rambling, whereas Genesis 1 is highly structured, in various ways. The following table³ gives one example of structure, in which events are organized by activity and by days:

Form what is formless		Fill what is empty	
Day 1	Light	Day 4	Luminaries
Day 2	Sky	Day 5	Birds and Fish
Day 3	Land (Plants)	Day 6	Animals and Man (Plants for food)
	Day 7		Sabbath

The emphasis is on God’s plan for creation. Genesis 1 shows the progressive transformation from chaos (*the earth was formless and empty*, 1:2) to the world we know, a place fit for human habitation. There are two types of activities. Because *the earth was formless*, it is given form, primarily by the separation of things into useful parts; this takes place in the first three days. Because *the earth was ... empty*, it is filled with good things. The filling takes place in the second three days; places formed in the first half of the week are filled in the second half.

The details in 1:3-31 follow this pattern, but not mechanically – there are some departures from it:

- *Let there be light* (1:3) creates something (light), but this is immediately followed by separation into *day and night: he separated the light from the darkness* (1:4).
- *Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water* (1:6) creates the vault of the sky that separates the heavens from the earth. At this stage, both places are just water.
- *Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear* (1:9) starts with a visual picture of an earth covered by water, which is collected into oceans so that continents emerge.

¹ Following the universal practice of the Near East at that time, the title is simply the first word or words of the document. In this case, they mean “when on high” or “when from above.”

² We are not claiming that Genesis 1 was based on the *Enuma elish* specifically, even to rebut it – this is in fact quite unlikely. However, most pagan nations had similar creation stories. The *Enuma elish* is simply one story that we have a good copy of.

³ The table is based on Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15, Word Biblical Commentary*, 1987, p 7. We note that there are many ways of organizing the material in chapter 1. Most are not mutually exclusive, and most have considerable merit.

- *Let the land produce vegetation* (1:11) immediately fills the new land with useful plants. Notice the slight break in the pattern: both creation and filling in the first half of the week.
- *Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night* (1:14) shows the heavens filled with celestial objects, primarily the sun and the moon. Although they are said to *separate the day from the night*, this separation was already done in day 1; the intent here seems to be that the two lights *serve as signs* of that separation.
- *Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky* (1:20). This fills both the sky created on day 2, and the waters below that the sky separated from the heavens.
- *Let the land produce living creatures* (1:24).
- *Let us make mankind in our image* (1:26). In a sense, this is a departure from the pattern, because the land was already filled with both wild animals and livestock. But the very mention of livestock implies men who will tend and use them.

We observe that this is an orderly account of creation that focuses on God's purposes. It is also an account suitable for its first hearers. Many modern readers would expect a more scientific description. In particular, the use of "days" in the exposition leads some modern readers to think about chronology, both how long events took and the order of the events. There is no indication that the first readers found the account problematic in this way.

Throughout this creation account, there is a running commentary: God sees what he has done, and pronounces it "good," and even "very good." Here, "good" has the sense of being useful, fit for its intended purpose. Creation had a goal, and the goal was fulfilled.

But, what was this purpose? God explains his intentions for what mankind will do:

God blessed them [mankind] and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (1:28)

The passage is, however, silent about any deeper purpose – except, perhaps, for the enigmatic *God created mankind in his own image* (1:27). The explanation I find most helpful starts from two facts about pagan nations:⁴

- The image of a god (i.e., an idol) was thought of as a representative of or substitute for the god.
- The king ruled, but some god was the ultimate ruler; hence, the king ruled on that god's behalf.

Putting these together, it was common to speak of the king as an image of a god.

This makes very good sense in this context: mankind is explicitly told to rule *over every living creature*. This does not exclude other meanings, such as sharing spiritual or moral qualities with God – but on the other hand, the text gives no help in knowing what these qualities might be. In the same way, we have been created to worship God and enjoy his presence forever, but Genesis 1 does not explicitly teach that.

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array (2:1). Genesis now declares that creation was *completed* with the creation of mankind, which was the climax of the exposition. This makes clear that man was what all the rest was leading up to – there is nothing else to come. It also emphasizes the scope of God's work: it was a *vast array*, all intended to be ruled by man.

Just as God had a plan for creation, He had a plan for man. Here we see only the positive part, as ruler of the earth and all on it. We will soon see other parts of the same plan: the provisions for man's sin.

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. (2:2-3)

We now come to the seventh day. These verses begin by repeating that God's work was *finished*, complete. Here, we have the introduction of two ideas, blessing and holiness. "Holy" is a familiar but difficult concept; I find the following particularly useful:

God is holy: holiness is the essence of his character. Anything else that is described as holy in the OT derives its holiness from being chosen by God and given to him in the correctly prescribed manner.⁵

The Sabbath, then, is holy because it is a day to be given to God. The prescribed way to give it to God is to cease work on that day. It is not clear what it means for the day itself to be blessed, other than that it had been made holy. However, it is clear that the intention was that mankind was to be blessed by that day, a day set apart from the work man was created for, and instead explicitly given over to the creator.

⁴ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 2001, p 66.

⁵ Wenham, *op. cit.*, p 36.