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# The Book of Beginnings – Studies in Genesis

LESSON VI : GENESIS 1:1 – INTRODUCTORY VERSE

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*“The beginning and unique creation — namely, that of heaven and earth — are here joined together. Hence, we may understand the writer as asserting that the heaven and earth had a beginning and that this beginning is to be found in the fact that God had created them. The first verse of Genesis therefore stands as a simple declaration of the fact of absolute creation. When we consider the universe, and the question arises in our minds, ‘Who made these things? What was there origin?’ the first verse of Genesis gives an answer. And it answers with the simple declaration that God created the heaven and the earth.” [Young, 7]*

*‘Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?’ (Job 38:4-7)*

*‘He stretches out the north over empty space; He hangs the earth on nothing.’ (Job 26:7)*

***The opening verse is a formal introduction and a caption to the entire creation narrative:***

***‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’ (Gen 1:1 NKJV)***

**IS GENESIS 1:1 A DEPENDENT CLAUSE?** — The majority of both Jewish and Christian Bible teachers (i.e., among those who understand Genesis to present a factual account of what actually occurred in creation and not merely untrustworthy tradition or mythology) regard Genesis 1:1 as an independent clause, an introduction to the creation story. This is the ‘traditional’ translation and is reflected in most versions, e.g., AV, NKJV, NASB, ESV, NET, NIV etc. This is not universal however; there are two main interpretations which do not consider Gen 1:1 as an independent clause:

- Some regard v. 1 as a dependent clause with the main statement appearing in v. 2. The thought would be:

*‘When God began to create the heaven and the earth, the earth was without form and void...’*

- Others believe v. 1 to be a dependent statement with v. 2 a parenthesis, the main thought being expressed in v. 3; the sense therefore being:

*‘When God began to create the heaven and the earth — and the earth was without form and void, etc. — then God said, “Let there be light.”’*

A few English translations therefore translate Gen 1:1 as *‘When God began to create...’* (e.g., Common English Bible [CEB]; The Living Bible [TLB]; New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition [NRSVUE], with *‘In the beginning God created ...’* as an alternative in the footnotes). Others such as the RSV has *‘In the beginning God created...’* but then includes *‘When God began to create’* as a footnote.

Why is this important? Briefly, ***the translations which do not consider Gen 1:1 as an independent clause all presuppose the existence of chaotic pre-existing matter before the work of creation***

began. *“Each of these two interpretations constitutes a serious departure from the traditional position that the first verse is an independent statement. It must be clearly seen that if verse one is a dependent clause, the doctrine of absolute creation is then not taught in the first chapter of Genesis. On either of these constructions, when the work indicated by [‘create’] is begun, there is already in existence material which may be designated [‘earth, land’], albeit that material was an uninhabitable mass. Pre-existing material was there at hand, and, consequently, whatever else [‘create’] may then mean, in the nature of the case it cannot denote absolute creation. At best it would have to indicate some work of moulding or forming. Inasmuch, however, as the material which God is to employ is already at hand — how it came to be there we are not told — God’s activity mentioned in verse one would not be that of true creation.”* [Young, 2f] Thus for the evolutionists, Gen 1:1 being a dependent clause would fit within their world view.

Among the reasons to reject v. 1 being a dependent clause would be that this is how the Masoretes understood the verse (this is not decisive in itself for the Masoretes were not infallible, but it does have its place). Likewise no ancient versions without exception understood Gen 1:1 to be a dependent clause. In addition to this is the Hebrew grammar, the details of which is beyond the scope of this classroom setting; if interested, the reader may see Edward Young, *Studies in Genesis One*, 1-14; Rabbi Umberto Cassuto, *Genesis: Adam to Noah*, 19f; Gordon Wenham, *Genesis*, 1:11-13; Victor Hamilton, *Genesis*, 1:103-108; Ken Mathews, *Genesis*, 1:136-139; Karl Keil, *Pentateuch*, 1:46. *“It follows, therefore, that the first verse is an independent sentence that constitutes a formal introduction to the entire section, and expresses at the outset, with majestic brevity, the main thought of the section: that in the beginning, that is, at the commencement of time, in the remotest past that the human mind can conceive, God created the heavens and the earth.”* [Cassuto, 20] *“[T]here is no room in our author’s cosmology for co-eternal matter with God when we consider the theology of the creation account in its totality. That ancient cosmogonies characteristically attributed the origins of the creator-god to some pre-existing matter (usually primeval waters) makes the absence of such description in Genesis distinctive. Verse 1 declares that God exists outside time and space; all that exists is dependent on his independent will.”* [Mathews, 1:139]

**v. 1 – ‘In the beginning’** — The first word in our Holy Scriptures is b<sup>ṛ</sup>e’šhîṭ (preposition + noun) and is found in this form four other times in the OT (Jer 26:1; 27:1; 28:1; 49:34; ‘in the beginning of the reign of \_\_\_’). According to Keil, the word itself is a relative notion, indicating the commencement of a series of things or events (such as ‘from the beginning of the year,’ Deut 11:12; or ‘at the beginning of the reign of...’, Jer 26:1). **But here the context gives it the meaning of the very first beginning, the commencement of the world, when time itself began. Not only does this preclude the idea of the eternity of matter but shows that the creation of the heaven and the earth was the actual beginning of all things.**

**‘BEGINNING’ OFTEN PAIRED WITH ‘END’** — ‘In the beginning’ not only marks inauguration but could also anticipate the ‘end’ of the universe and human history, being often paired in the OT with its antonym ‘end’ (’ahānt) thus indicating an inclusive period of time. If that association was in the mind of Moses when he wrote, then from the outset creation’s ‘beginnings’ were initiated with a future goal intended, an eschatological purpose.

*‘For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind.’* (Isa 65:17)

*‘Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.’* (Rev 21:1)

From the very outset He is the Sovereign God who knows and controls the ‘*end from the beginning.*’

*‘Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, “My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure”’ (Isa 46:10)*

**‘In the beginning’ IN THE LXX** — We should note this single compound word in the Hebrew is translated as ἐν ἀρχῇ (en archē) in the LXX, the exact same words as John 1:1, *‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’* Although the universe had a beginning, the Word was already there and thus transcends the universe.

*‘All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.’ (John 1:3)*

*‘For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.’ (Col 1:16,17)*

*‘You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created.’ (Rev 4:11)*

**THE BEGINNING OF ‘SPACE – MASS – TIME’** — I cannot say it better than Henry Morris so allow me to just quote: “Not only does the first verse of the Bible speak of the creation of space and matter, but it also notes the beginning of time. *The universe is actually a continuum of space, matter, and time, no one of which can have a meaningful existence without the other two.* The term ‘matter’ is understood to include energy, and must function in both space and time. ‘Space’ is measurable and accessible to sense observation only in terms of the entities that exist and the events that happen in space, and these require both matter and time. The concept ‘time’ likewise is meaningful only in terms of entities and events existing and transpiring during time, which likewise require space and matter.” [Morris, 41]

**‘God’** — *The first subject of Genesis and the Bible is God.* This word is the second most frequent noun in the OT. Of the three names for ‘deity’ or ‘god / God’ in the Hebrew Bible (*El*, *Eloah*, and *Elohim*), the word used most by far is *’elōhîm* (2750x, the masculine plural of *El*). **The word ’elōhîm is an appellative**, i.e., it can be used of any deity. It is not a personal name such as *Yahweh*, *El Shaddai*, or even the pagan *Marduk*. That Moses uses *’elōhîm* rather than *Yahweh* in Genesis 1 is due to the theological emphasis of the creation story; creation extols God’s transcendence and the power of the spoken word (thus *’elōhîm* is preferred) whereas *Yahweh* is commonly associated with the personal, covenant God of Israel.

Because of the general meaning of *el* or *’elōhîm*, it is sometimes difficult to know for sure what emphasis the Scripture writer intended. **It can refer to pagan deities where it is translated ‘gods’** (e.g., Exod 12:12; 20:3), **to human judges** (e.g., see Exod 21:6 where the KJV has ‘*Then his master shall bring him unto the judges...*’ but the RSV has ‘*then his master shall bring him to God...*’). See also Exod 22:8 where the KJV has ‘*If the thief be not found, then the master of the house shall be brought unto the judges...*’ but the RSV has ‘*If the thief is not found, the owner of the house shall come near to God...*’), **to angels and spirits** (e.g., the witch of Endor in 1 Sam 28:13 the KJV has ‘*And the king said unto her, Be not afraid: for what sawest thou? And the woman said unto Saul, I saw gods ascending out of the earth;*’ but the NKJV has ‘*And the king*

said to her, “Do not be afraid. What did you see?” And the woman said to Saul, “I saw a spirit ascending out of the earth.”). **or to the one true God of Israel** where the word stresses His majesty and omnipotence.

**SHOULD WE IMPOSE UPON THIS WORD THE TRINITY?** — When used of the one true living God, the plural noun commonly occurs in the Hebrew with a singular verb as it is found here. While the reason for it being plural is uncertain, the Jews (among others) ascribe it to the use of the Hebrew plural that indicates honor or majesty. We as NT Christians see the trinity therein (and correctly so), but it would be an error to impose that upon the thinking of Moses. **“It is unreasonable to burden this one word Elohim with a developed view of the Christian Trinity. It is fair to say, however, that the creation account implies that there is a plurality within God. But it is not until the era of the church that the Trinity is clearly articulated.”** [Mathews, 1:126]

**‘created’ – bārā’** — When used as it is in Gen 1:1 (in the Qal stem) **this word is employed exclusively of the divine activity; the subject of the verb is always God and never man nor even pagan deities. What is created is a divine creation, the production of that which had no existence before. Men can ‘make’ things or ‘form’ things but only God can ‘create’ things.** This word has a more restricted use than our English word ‘create.’ **If in Gen 1:1 Moses desired to express the thought of absolute creation there was no more suitable word in the Hebrew language at his disposal.** When taken in conjunction with ‘in the beginning,’ it may be paraphrased, ‘The beginning was by means of a creative act.’

The word ‘create’ (bārā’) is used six times in the creation account: 1:1, 21, 27 (3x); 2:3; e.g., ‘So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.’ (1:27; bārā’ 3x). The word is found most often in Isaiah (twenty times in chapters 40-66) where the prophet distinguishes God as Creator and Lord of history.

Note the companion verbs found in the creation story:

**‘āsāh – ‘to make, to do’** – The word ‘make’ (‘āsāh) occurs in 1:7, 16, 25; e.g., ‘Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image”’ (1:26). The verb ‘āsāh may have as its subject human activity (as well as divine) whereas bārā’ always has the Lord as its subject. Of particular importance is that the word ‘āsāh is used where ‘making’ involves existing material (e.g., in Gen 3:21 God ‘made’ tunics from skins for Adam and Eve).

**yātsar – ‘to form’** – ‘Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground’ (2:7), again involving existing material.

While Moses’ use of the word ‘create’ (bārā’) allows for absolute creation, it should be noted the word is not exclusively used for absolute creation, what theologians refer to as *creatio ex nihilo*. For example, it can be used of the creation of man who was made out of pre-existing material (1:27; 5:1,2) and of the creation of Israel (Isa 43:15), but in the context of Genesis 1 we would be correct to understand *ex nihilo* is what Moses intended. The existence of any pre-existing material is precluded by the object created: ‘the heaven and the earth.’ That God did create the world out of nothing is certainly implied in the rest of the Scriptures:

*Creatio ex nihilo* (Latin, ‘creation out of nothing’) is the doctrine that matter is not eternal but had to be created by some divine creative act.

*‘By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.... For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast.... Let them*

*praise the name of the Lord, for He commanded and they were created.’ (Psalm 33:6, 9; 148:5)*

*‘The Lord possessed me [‘wisdom’] at the beginning of His way, before His works of old. I have been established from everlasting, from the beginning, before there was ever an earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills, I was brought forth; while as yet He had not made the earth or the fields, or the primal dust of the world. When He prepared the heavens, I was there, when He drew a circle on the face of the deep’ (Prov 8:22-27)*

*‘By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.’ (Heb 11:3)*

“If the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is expounded here, it must be from the tenor of the text and not from this single lexical term. Elsewhere in the narrative it is apparent that God created *ex nihilo*.” [Mathews, 1:139] Even science implies absolute creation:

“Generally speaking, the First and Second Laws of Thermodynamics are considered to be among the most widely accepted, proven bases of physics. And they do seem to render an indirect witness to the necessity of divine creation.... **The first Law of Thermodynamics** is called ‘the law of conservation of energy’. It states that energy can neither be created nor destroyed. Energy can change from one form to another, but its total amount remains the same.... ***This First law indicates that since energy (including matter) is not now being created nor destroyed, there must have been a point outside physical time when creative energies were in operation, which no longer obtain within our natural realm.*** Another way to phrase it is this: ‘energy (matter) cannot be naturally created from nothing.’ Something, or rather, someone, outside the natural space / time process is required to explain how a world in which material reality is not being created could have come into being. **The Second Law of Thermodynamics**, or the law of entropy, further confirms the verdict of the First Law: that energy, matter cannot be accounted for within present physical processes.... [A]ccording to the law of entropy, all physical reality is ‘running down’. ***Entropy is increasing, which leads to disorder and finally to a uniform distribution of all heat energy, the results of which would be death. But the creation (with its high order and productive life) had to have occurred under non-entropic conditions; under conditions that are no longer operative.***” [Kelly, 78ff]

***‘the heavens and the earth’*** — ‘Heaven’ is the Hebrew word *shāmayim* which like *’elōhîm* is plural and can be translated either ‘heaven’ or ‘heavens.’ In Gen 1:1 the term refers to the component of space in the basic space-mass-time universe. [Morris] ‘Earth’ is the Hebrew word *’erets* and is often also translated ‘ground, land.’ As ‘heavens’ can refer to outer space or our atmosphere, ‘earth’ word can refer to a particular portion of earth (e.g., the ‘land of Canaan,’ Gen 12:5) or to the earth in general (e.g., ‘let the earth bring forth grass,’ Gen 1:11). “At the time of the initial creation, there were no other planets, stars, or other material bodies in the universe; nor did any of them come into being until the fourth day. ***The earth itself originally had no form to it (Genesis 1:2); so this verse must speak essentially of the creation of the basic elements of matter, which thereafter were to be organized into the structured earth and later into other material bodies.***” [Morris, 41]

## IS 'HEAVEN AND EARTH' THE ANCIENT HEBREW TERMS TO MEAN 'UNIVERSE'?

— We all have heard it said that Moses wrote in Gen 1:1 *'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'* because there was no ancient word for our concept of the universe. Hamilton even translates v. 1 *'In the beginning God created the universe'* in his commentary on Genesis since *'this is an illustration of hendiadys, an idea expressed by two nouns connected by "and;" or of merism, a means of expressing totality through two contrasting parts.'* Wenham makes the point that it is characteristic of many languages to describe the totality of something in terms of its extremes; e.g., *'good and bad,' 'big and little,'* etc. And granted, in our modern thinking we would understand that to be what Moses intended, but Rabbi Cassuto makes an interesting observation:

“It has been widely held that Scripture used this phrase because classical Hebrew had no special word for what we call today ‘the universe’; hence it was necessary to employ a circumlocution of this kind. But this view is incorrect. ***The concept of the unity of the world was unknown among the Israelites till a late period, and then the appropriate term for it was immediately coined. The ancient Hebrew conceived God alone as a unity; what we designate ‘the universe’, they regarded as two separate entities: the HEAVENS are the Lord’s heavens, but the EARTH He has given to the sons of men (Psa. cxv 16). By earth is to be understood here everything under the heavens, including the sea; cf. Psa. cxlviii 7: ‘Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps.’***” [Cassuto, 20]

**THE POLEMIC EMPHASIS OF THE CREATION STORY** — The book of Genesis was not the only creation story of the ancient world. Probably the most well known is the Babylonian creation story *Enuma elish*, although there are other creation stories from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. While there may be vague similarities between these myths and Scripture (e.g., the creation of light, firmament, dry land, luminaries, and the divine rest), there are more differences than similarities. ***“There thus runs through the whole Genesis cosmology ‘a conscious and deliberate anti-mythical polemic.’ The author of Gen 1 therefore shows that he was aware of other cosmologies, and that he wrote not in dependence on them so much as in deliberate rejection of them.”*** [Wenham, 1:9] Moses attacks rival cosmologies in five areas:

- In some Near Eastern cosmogonies, dragons *tinn* are rivals whom the Canaanite gods conquer, whereas in Gen 1:21 the great sea monsters are just one kind of the aquatic animals created by God.
- These myths describe the struggle of the gods to separate the upper waters from the lower waters; but Gen 1:6-10 describes the acts of separation by simple divine fiat.
- The worship of the sun, moon, and stars was current throughout the ancient orient. Genesis pointedly avoids using the normal Hebrew words for sun and moon, lest they be taken as divine, and says instead God created the greater and the lesser light.
- Babylonian tradition sees the creation of man as an afterthought, a device to relieve the gods of work and provide them with food. For Genesis, the creation of man is the goal of creation and God provides man with food.
- Genesis shows God creating simply through His spoken word, not through magical utterance as is attested in the Egyptian myths.

***How unique and majestic is the Word of God!***