

## Key Points:

- Genesis 1:1 is not a summary of the account to follow. Rather Genesis 1:1 is most likely describing an actual creative act by God that took place sometime before the rest of the Genesis creation account.
- Read this way, ‘the heavens’ created in Genesis 1:1 are referring to the invisible realm of creation and its inhabitants (such as angels). ‘The earth’ of Genesis 1:1 is referring to the earth as it is described in Genesis 1:2 (without form and void, dark, watery). The visible and stellar “heavens” of the first day (Gen. 1:8) and fourth day (1:14), then, are derivatives of “the earth” of Genesis 1:1 and formed or summoned during the creation week.
- Genesis 1:1 supports the doctrine (‘teaching’) of creation out of nothing, sometimes referred to in Latin as *creatio ex nihilo*. Genesis 1:1 also suggests that the cosmos had a definite beginning.
- Since the text says nothing of the amount of time between the creative act of Genesis 1:1 and the first day of the creation week (Genesis 1:3-5), this leaves open the possibility of an ‘old earth’, even for those who opt for a more literal reading of Genesis 1 understanding the creation week as 7 sequential 24-hour solar days.
- The creation of the cosmos in Genesis 1:1 by a single God who is intentional in all He does stands in stark contrast to other ANE creation accounts where creation is often the result of the accidental procreation or comingling of gods. This is our first indication that life has a divine purpose.

### *Structure of Genesis 1:1-3*

Good opening lines are indispensable to good storytelling. Done well, they tease the imagination imparting fortitude to press further into the narrative waiting just beyond. Check out a few of these openers:

“There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.”

– *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* by C.S. Lewis

“The final dying sounds of their dress rehearsal left the Laurel Players with nothing to do but stand there, silent, and helpless, blinking over the footlights of an empty auditorium.”

– *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates

“Lydia is dead. But they don’t know this yet.”

– *Everything I Never Told You* by Celeste Ng

*“Life changes fast.  
Life changes in the instant.  
You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.  
The question of self-pity.”*

“Those were the first words I wrote after it happened.”

– *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion

“It began the usual way, in the bathroom of the Lassimo Hotel.”

– *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan

Was I right? Did you want to keep reading?

What about the Bible? Or better, what about Genesis?

Arguably one of the most iconic opening lines ever, overshadowing the likes of Herman Melville’s “Call Me Ishmael,” stands Genesis 1:1:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

Okay, maybe you think I’m overstating the case. Or, could it be we’ve been snookered by some translations and commentators that would have us take Genesis 1:1 either as well-mannered opening summation of what follows or a benign subordinate clause.

Yawn. Nobody wants to be a subordinate clause.

But what if these opening words are something different? Something with bite and jarring? What if they don’t politely stand at the headwaters of this massive story as a mere introduction observing proper etiquette in line with what one might expect in an opening stanza to an ancient creation account? What if, instead, they are something radical that would have turned the worldviews of its day on their ears?

I want to suggest they are and they do. But before getting to that, let’s look at some different ways the opening lines of Genesis get translated:

**Translation A** (ESV, NASB, NIV and RSV)

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*

**Translation B** (NRSV)

*In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, ...*

**Translation C** (CEB, TLB)

*When God began to create the heavens and the earth – ...*

Dude, they don't look all that different – you want us to be that nitpicky about the translation of Genesis 1?

I do.

I want you to be nitpicky about two differences in particular: The insertion of the word “when” in Translations B and C; and that only Translation A ends with a period (.) as its punctuation mark.

Go ahead, read them again. Do you notice the differences?

The reason for this is that while Translation A treats Genesis 1:1 as an independent clause (thus the period), Translation B and C treat it as a subordinate clause expressing temporality (thus the use of the word “when” to express timing, and no period).

We can state the matter like this: Should Genesis 1:1 be translated as an independent clause (Translation A) or a dependent clause (Translations B and C)?

Eek! Independent and dependent clauses – what are those again?

Let's take a short trip back to grammar school.

An independent clause forms a complete thought and can stand all on its own as a sentence. That's why it's independent. Here's an example:

We walk to school.

That's a complete thought. Nothing else is needed. It's independent.

A dependent clause, on the other hand, does not technically form a complete sentence but requires more information to complete its thought. That is, it's dependent on being attached to an independent clause. Here's an example of a dependent clause,

When the busses aren't running.

Do you feel it? Something is missing. When the busses aren't running, then what? What happens when the busses aren't running? We need more information.

Now if we combine our two examples, we can turn the dependent clause into a complete thought.

When the busses aren't running, we walk to school.



Dependent Clause  
(Temporal Subordinate)



Independent Clause

Ah, that feels better. In our now complete sentence, the first clause is functioning as a subordinate clause expressing temporality. That is, it's expressing the times during which the main action of the independent clause takes place.

This is similar to how Translations B and C render Genesis 1:1. And since they translate verse 1 as a dependent clause expressing an incomplete thought, they must attach it to Genesis 1:2, or in the case of Translation C, attach it to Genesis 1:2 and 1:3 in order to complete the thought. Let's take a look at how this plays out:

### Translation B

(v.1) **In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth,** (v.2) **the earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep, and the spirit of God was hovering over the waters.**

Translated this way Genesis 1:1 is a **dependent clause** and does not form a complete thought on its own. It needs something more. So, translators then treat verse 2 as the "something more" making it the **independent or main clause**.

## Translation C

(v.1) When God began to create the heavens and the earth – (v.2) and the earth was without form and void and darkness was over the face of the deep and the spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters – (v.3) God said, “Let there be light.”

Here verse 1 functions as **dependent clause**, verse 2 is a **circumstantial clause**, and verse 3 is the **independent or main clause**.

So what’s the big deal? Why all the grammar?

Here’s why – and maybe you’ve already picked up on this: Translations B and C never provide an account of the initial creation of the material matter from which the earth is formed. It is merely assumed to already to be in existence. This is most transparent in Translation C. When God begins to create the heavens and the earth, the earth is already there – albeit without form and void – but there’s something there already! Where did that something come from? Or put another way: How did the conditions in verse 2 come about where the earth is without form and void and darkness is over the face of the deep and the Spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters? Did the formless earth and the waters just always exist? Did they appear on their own out of nowhere? Or did God create them at some point? Translations B and C never say. We’re left to ourselves to make assumptions.

While minor in appearance, these translations are communicating different things. If we adopt Translations B or C, then we should conclude that Genesis is silent as to whether God created the universe out of nothing. Sometimes this teaching is called *creatio ex nihilo*, which is Latin for “creation out of nothing.” Translations B and C lead us to believe that Genesis takes for granted the preexistence of the primordial material from which God forms and shapes the cosmos and says nothing about the ultimate origin of the original material – it’s just there.

Yet the Jewish people did believe that in the beginning God created out of nothing as it is affirmed in Jewish writings as well as in the New Testament. Here’s two examples:

2 Macc. 7:28 – “I beseech you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that *God did not make them out of things that existed.*”

Heb. 11:3 – “By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.”

The question which Old Testament Scholar Jack Collins poses is, if the Jewish people did not arrive at this doctrine of creation out of nothing from Genesis 1:1, then from where did they get it?

So what about Translation A – does this rendering communicate that God created out of nothing?

Yes, but not necessarily.

There are two ways we may understand Genesis 1:1 as rendered by Translation A. Some will say that it serves as an introductory title or overarching summary statement of what follows. To draw out this meaning we might expand it to say, “What follows is the account of when God created the heavens and the earth.” The Voice translation interprets Genesis 1:1 this way by rendering it, “In the beginning, God created everything: the heavens above and the earth below. Here’s what happened: ...”<sup>1</sup>

If Genesis 1:1 is only a summary statement of what follows, then it does not make a statement as to whether God created the material universe. Rather Genesis 1 only speaks of God shaping and filling it and assigning function.

There is, however, good reason to read Genesis 1:1 not a summary statement of what follows but as describing a creative event. The author has employed the perfect verb tense (i.e. created). As Collins states, “The normal use of the perfect at the very beginning of a narrative is to denote an event that took place before the storyline gets under way.” This is evident in Genesis 24:1-2 (cf. also Gen. 4:1; 16:1; 21:1; 39:1; 43:1). Thus, based on the history of interpretation among the Jewish people and the inspired authors, as well as the grammatical features of the text, Genesis 1:1 is describing an act by God, namely, the creation of the heavens and earth.

So here is my opinion in a nutshell on how Genesis 1:1-3 function together:

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<sup>1</sup> Curiously The Voice goes on to translate Genesis 1:2-3, “*At first* the earth lacked shape and was totally empty, and dark fog draped over the deep while God’s spirit-wind hovered over the face of the surface of the *empty* waters. *Then there was the voice of God*” (*italics* original). This translation presumes the prior existence of “the earth that lacked shaped,” waters, space, and time without ever telling us where these things came from. Further, according to this translation, God’s first creative act doesn’t happen until verse 3 when He creates light. This is at odds with The Voices’ introductory note to the account which reads, “Out of nowhere, time, space, and all the living whirl forth as God speaks the universe into existence.” This is essentially affirmation of *creation ex nihilo*, yet this same affirmation is not reflected in the translation of Genesis 1:1-3, which leaves the question of creation out of nothing entirely open.

Genesis 1:1 stands all on its own as a complete thought. Grammarians would call it an independent clause. It commences the grand narrative describing an act of God that would have astounded the audiences of its time. It would have done everything you would want an opening line to do. Foisting itself upon the comfortable worldviews of the day, it challenged the ancients' views of the gods, origins, and experience. It was certainly the boldest and most straightforward cosmological claim of its day, and perhaps remains so to date. Together with verses 2 and 3 it sets the grand story of history in motion.

We may describe the relationship of the first three chapters of the story as follows:

Genesis 1:1 describes an initial creative act that took place some point prior to God's speaking and creation of light in verse 3. Verse 2 then describes the circumstances present when God speaks in verse 3. And then verse 3 begins the main story line which continues through Genesis 2:3.

Genesis 1:1 – An initial creative act preceding the main story line.

Genesis 1:2 – The circumstances present when the main story line gets under way in verse 3.

Genesis 1:3 – Beginning of the main story line (i.e. the creation week)

We can think of Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 as providing background information and teeing us up for the main story, which begins in 1:3. Think about the first two verses like a movie that begins by showing us something important that happened before our present story begins, and then jumps ahead to a wide angled shot giving us the current overall picture right before focusing in on the main characters and chain of events.

Okay, need a more specific example? Have you seen the movie Twister? Us Midwestern's in America love our disaster movies. And those of us in tornado alley, love tornado disaster movies all the more. And this is one of the best. The movie begins by showing one of the main characters as a little girl living in Oklahoma. An "F5" tornado is headed for her house. Her and her family take shelter in the storm cellar, but the force of the tornado rips open the door and sucks up her dad. (I know, traumatic, right?) This was an event that happened before the main story line of the movie gets underway, similar to Genesis 1:1.

Then, the movie jumps forward to the "present day" when the girl has grown up (played by Helen Hunt) and is now a storm chaser. But before we see her again, the movie gives the circumstances of the "present day". We start with a grand view of earth and a GOES 8 weather satellite. Then the focus comes down to earth to the NOAA National Severe Storms Laboratory. We learn that the present condition in

Oklahoma are ideal for a “record outbreak of Tornados.” Exactly what you want for a good twister movie! This is like Genesis 1:2 where we are given the conditions setting up the story to follow – the very Spirit of God is poised for action hovering over the watery mass.

Then the scene focuses in on the truck of the other main actor played by Bill Paxton and begins with the dialogue between him and his fiancé. And this is where the main storyline finally begins in earnest – now the action gets started. This is like Genesis 1:3, when God speaks saying, “Let there be light”, the action of the main storyline has begun.

So now that you know the grammatical structure of Genesis 1:1-3, let’s talk a little more about their content and how it compares to other ANE accounts.

### **What did God create in Genesis 1:1?**

The phrase “the heavens and the earth” is frequently used to denote the world or universe since there is no single word in the Hebrew language to express this. Though in this instance, I think we can be even more specific.

The Hebrew word for heavens is *shamayim*. This word is plural and has three different referents in the Hebrew Scriptures:

- The visible sky and heavens (Gen. 1:20; 7:3)
- The visible stellar heavens (Gen. 1:14; Deut. 4:19; Ps. 8:3)
- The invisible realm of creation (Duet. 10:14; Ps. 2:4; 115:16; 1 Kgs 8:27; Neh. 9:6).

I believe the “heavens” of Genesis 1:1 are referring to the invisible heavens/realm of creation (third referent listed just above). This seems to be what Paul is referencing in Colossians 1:16 when he writes: “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.” (Colossians 1:16 ESV). The visible sky (the sky of the birds, clouds, etc.) and the stellar heavens (the sky of the sun, stars, etc.) are created later in the creation week.

This may shed some light the question of, “Where does “the serpent” of Genesis 3:1 come from?” As we will discuss later in this course, there is every indication that this serpent is either a fallen angel or being used as a mouthpiece for a fallen angel, whose identity is revealed later in the biblical narrative. As such, this angel is part of God’s creation in Genesis 1:1. Seemingly, something must have happened after Genesis 1:1



and before Genesis 3:1 to cause this creature to turn antagonistic towards YHWH Elohim and His good creations, particularly against YHWH Elohim's human creatures made as His own image and crowned with glory.

“The earth” of Genesis 1:1 refers not to the earth as formed, but all the stuff of the visible, material creation that is used to form and fashion the rest of creation, including the earth in its state of being without form and void, dark, and watery.

Further, the phrase “the heavens and earth” here in Genesis 1:1 describes the universe as a twofold entity, namely, that of the invisible realm and visible realm, or we might say the spiritual and material. That the “the heaven” and “the earth” occur in tandem, however, cautions us from seeing too much of a dichotomy or split between the two. The two are meant to interact and infuse into one another.

Another feature that should caution us from seeing too much of a divide between the spiritual and material worlds is in the very next verse. Here in Genesis 1:2 we meet the description of the Spirit hovering over the waters who goes to work fashioning and, in a general sense, pervading all of creation. There are few points in these opening verses that we can begin to consider:

- We must not create a false dichotomy between the spiritual and material worlds viewing the material as bad and as something to escape from and the heavenly, invisible spiritual realm as the ultimate good and place to escape to. God declares all of creation very good, and nowhere does He renege on that declaration.
- Heaven and earth seem to be presented in Genesis 1:1 as interlocking. We might use the language of marriage, just as a man and woman are two separate individuals, in marriage, they at the same time, become one – and so it is with the heavens and earth being different, but yet one and complimentary to each other. It seems to me something happens in Genesis 3 to bring about a degree of separation or break between the two from the way they are meant to be related. Redemption will involve the re-marrying of the heavens and earth and as our hearts are healed, our spirits should become more in tune with the spiritual integrating the spiritual with the material – and both thereby becoming more real.
- True spirituality will include the material. This means God may use things of visible creation to speak to us and communicate His love and grace to us (and other spiritual realities), such as through the rites of baptism and the Lord's Supper, or through spending time outdoors in His good creation or enjoying a well-prepared meal with friends. This also means otherwise seemingly

mundane and monotonous activities have the potential to be spiritual and become conduits for enjoying aspects of God's presence – everything from doing dishes, yard work, changing diapers, running kids around, career – all of life becomes sacred.

### **Genesis 1:1-3 and Implications for age of the earth.**

As already argued, Genesis 1:1 begins by describing an event that happened some time before the main storyline, which doesn't begin until verse 3. How long before Genesis 1:3 did Genesis 1:1 take place? We don't know. The text doesn't say. Could have been not so long. Could have been very long. Apparently, the author was not as concerned about the timing of events as we seem to be today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as his aims lied elsewhere. As Collins remarks, "Genesis 1:1 describes the initial creation of all things, some unspecified time before the first day begins in 1:3. Hence the creation week is not necessarily the same as the first week of the universe" (Collins, 2006, 129).

This means someone could hold to a literal 24-hour, 7-day creation week and yet also end up with an old earth, as the earth without form and void may have been around for quite some time before the "let there be light" of Genesis 1:3.

### **Genesis 1:1 and the Physical Sciences**

The creation account of Genesis is by no means a scientific explanation, that is, if by "scientific" we are speaking in terms of our modern understanding of science. First of all, the ancients lacked the technical language we employ today. Secondly, as we have already said in our discussion about genre, there are indications in the texts of the creation account that the author's reasons for writing lie elsewhere. In other words, Moses' primary task was not composing a technical book on cosmogony for Pearson Books. This is, however, in no way to say that the Bible does not or cannot inform our modern scientific theories. As the true account of origins of the universe, Genesis is making truth claims about an event that actually happened, and therefore some of its truth claims should and will inform our scientific endeavors. As an example, with regard to Genesis 1:1, we should look for and expect to find evidence that the cosmos had a definite beginning, since the grammar, language, and context of Genesis 1:1 all point towards a definite beginning to all things, including the creation of and beginning of time itself. Now I can't really imagine life without time – but God being outside of time is one of the ways that Christ's sacrifice on the cross is able to reach backwards to efficaciously stand behind the Old Testament sacrifices (efficacious just means those sacrifices actually did something) as well as apply to us afresh today in celebration of the Lord's Supper (this is not the Catholic doctrine of re-sacrificing Christ each time we celebrate communion – that teaching resulted as an

interpretive misstep made by Cyril of Jerusalem.) It is also why prayers in arrears still matter – ever have someone ask you to pray for something – like a meeting or doctor appointment the next day at a specific time – and then the next day comes along and you look at the clock and the time has already passed and you forgot to pray? Should you still pray? Yes!

## **Genesis 1:1 and other ANE Creation Accounts**

*Monothelism (The One God).* Genesis 1:1 makes a splash in comparison to the openings of others ancient Near Eastern accounts. Perhaps most outstanding, is that creation is entirely the act of a single god! In the Sumerian creation stories, the four important Sumerian deities are involved in creation, An, the heaven-god, Enlil, the air-god, Enki, the water God, and Ninhursag, the great mother-goddess. In the Babylonian Genesis the path to creation begins with the procreation between the gods Apsu and Tiamat (Apsu's wife and mother goddess). In the many creation accounts of the Egyptians, the work of bringing the material world into existence is the work of multiple gods. For example, in one Egyptian Memphite account, Ptah inaugurates creation in thought and speech, and then Atum carries it out. These traditions stand in sharp contrast to the Hebrew Genesis account where one God creates the heavens and the earth and He does not need nor does He enlist the help of any other gods. This theme is reiterated throughout the account where God first declares his desire (much like Ptah would) with the phrase "Let there be.." and then the same God makes what He desires (whereas in the Memphite Theology a different god Atum would make what Ptah desired). In Genesis, all of creation is the will and act of one God, and this one God is good!

*Creation from Nothing.* The phrase *bereshit* ("In the beginning") + the verb *bara* (created) + the phrase "the heaven and earth" precludes the preexistence of any primordial material. This is quite different from other ANE accounts where the elements of the world are considered preexistent or even eternal. This is even the case in accounts that may at first glance appear otherwise, since all the gods are identified with or personified as elements of the world. For example, the Sumerian gods are attached to water, air, etc. In the Babylonian account Apsu and Tiamat were primeval fresh water and primeval sea waters, respectively. As Heidel remarks, "In them were contained all the elements of which the universe was made later on, and from them were descended all the gods and goddesses of the vast Babylonian-Assyrian pantheon." Genesis, on the other hand, presents God as existing apart from and independently of all cosmic matter. God is not nature personified. God is not creation and creation is not God. God is creator and sustainer of creation. A few implications:

- Creation is not to be worshipped. Only God alone is worthy of our worship. (Exodus 20:1-5; Isaiah 45:21; Romans 1:23). Creation is to be enjoyed, but then the praise for its enjoyment is to be directed towards God.
- God is completely other than anything or anyone we can fully imagine. Yes, God reveals himself and wants to be known. Yes, creation reveals things about God (Rom. 1:20). But there will always be a degree of mystery when considering and interacting with the infinite, eternal God who stands apart from space and time.

*Intentionality and Purpose.* Creation in other ANE accounts is often the result of the gods procreating, to solve some sort of problem (such as feeding the gods), random accident or much worse, rape and violence. Most likely this was the result of the ancients grappling to understand and explain the contradictions, disappointments, ugliness, and frustrations that often discolor life. The Hebrew account gives a different answer to life's tragedies: While the world was originally created good by a single God who created with purpose and desire, it was and is still marred by human creatures disobeying and rebelling against Him in colluding with the Evil One. Even so, beauty and meaning can not only still be found, but what once was can still be recovered as God never gives up on His beloved creation, as God has dealt with death through the faithful life, sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus.

Further, a common theme in other ancient accounts is for the gods to create humans to work for them and feed them. This idea is absent in the Hebrew account. God is in no way dependent upon His creation or human creatures. In other words, God did not create you because He needed. He does not need any of us. He created you because He wanted you. He desires to have you in loving relationship with Himself. He intentionally created a world for His human creatures to enjoy Him, both directly and through creation, and a world just right for humans to flourish and be provided for.