

# Genesis

## The Creation of the World

1:1 In the beginning<sup>4</sup> God<sup>2</sup> created<sup>3</sup> the heavens and the earth.<sup>4</sup>

1:2 Now<sup>5</sup> the earth<sup>6</sup> was without shape

<sup>1</sup>tn The translation assumes that the form translated “beginning” is in the absolute state rather than the construct (“in the beginning of,” or “when God created”). In other words, the clause in v. 1 is a main clause, v. 2 has three clauses that are descriptive and supply background information, and v. 3 begins the narrative sequence proper. The referent of the word “beginning” has to be defined from the context since there is no beginning or ending with God.

<sup>sn</sup> *In the beginning.* The verse refers to the beginning of the world as we know it; it affirms that it is entirely the product of the creation of God. But there are two ways that this verse can be interpreted: (1) It may be taken to refer to the original act of creation with the rest of the events on the days of creation completing it. This would mean that the disjunctive clauses of v. 2 break the sequence of the creative work of the first day. (2) It may be taken as a summary statement of what the chapter will record, that is, vv. 3-31 are about God’s creating the world as we know it. If the first view is adopted, then we have a reference here to original creation; if the second view is taken, then Genesis itself does not account for the original creation of matter. To follow this view does not deny that the Bible teaches that God created everything out of nothing (cf. John 1:3) – it simply says that Genesis is not making that affirmation. This second view presupposes the existence of pre-existent matter, when God said, “Let there be light.” The first view includes the description of the primordial state as part of the events of day one. The following narrative strongly favors the second view, for the “heavens/sky” did not exist prior to the second day of creation (see v. 8) and “earth/dry land” did not exist, at least as we know it, prior to the third day of creation (see v. 10).

<sup>2</sup>sn God. This frequently used Hebrew name for God (אֱלֹהִים, *’elohim*) is a plural form. When it refers to the one true God, the singular verb is normally used, as here. The plural form indicates majesty; the name stresses God’s sovereignty and incomparability – he is the “God of gods.”

<sup>3</sup>tn The English verb “create” captures well the meaning of the Hebrew term in this context. The verb בָּרָא (*bara’*) always describes the divine activity of fashioning something new, fresh, and perfect. The verb does not necessarily describe creation out of nothing (see, for example, v. 27, where it refers to the creation of man); it often stresses forming anew, reforming, renewing (see Ps 51:10; Isa 43:15, 65:17).

<sup>4</sup>tn Or “the entire universe”; or “the sky and the dry land.” This phrase is often interpreted as a merism, referring to the entire ordered universe, including the heavens and the earth and everything in them. The “heavens and the earth” were completed in seven days (see Gen 2:1) and are characterized by fixed laws (see Jer 33:25). “Heavens” refers specifically to the sky, created on the second day (see v. 8), while “earth” refers specifically to the dry land, created on the third day (see v. 10). Both are distinct from the sea/seas (see v. 10 and Exod 20:11).

<sup>5</sup>tn The disjunctive clause (conjunction + subject + verb) at the beginning of v. 2 gives background information for the following narrative, explaining the state of things when “God said...” (v. 3). Verse one is a title to the chapter, v. 2 provides information about the state of things when God spoke, and v. 3 begins the narrative per se with the typical narrative construction (vav [ו] consecutive followed by the

and empty,<sup>7</sup> and darkness<sup>8</sup> was over the surface of the watery deep,<sup>9</sup> but the Spirit of God<sup>10</sup> was moving<sup>11</sup> over the

prefixed verbal form). (This literary structure is paralleled in the second portion of the book: Gen 2:4 provides the title or summary of what follows, 2:5-6 use disjunctive clause structures to give background information for the following narrative, and 2:7 begins the narrative with the vav consecutive attached to a prefixed verbal form.) Some translate 1:2a “and the earth became,” arguing that v. 1 describes the original creation of the earth, while v. 2 refers to a judgment that reduced it to a chaotic condition. Verses 3ff. then describe the re-creation of the earth. However, the disjunctive clause at the beginning of v. 2 cannot be translated as if it were relating the next event in a sequence. If v. 2 were sequential to v. 1, the author would have used the vav consecutive followed by a prefixed verbal form and the subject.

<sup>6</sup>tn That is, what we now call “the earth.” The creation of the earth as we know it is described in vv. 9-10. Prior to this the substance which became the earth (= dry land) lay dormant under the water.

<sup>7</sup>tn Traditional translations have followed a more literal rendering of “waste and void.” The words describe a condition that is without form and empty. What we now know as “the earth” was actually an unfilled mass covered by water and darkness. Later *tohu* (תֹהוּ) and *bohu* (בֹהוּ), when used in proximity, describe a situation resulting from judgment (Isa 34:11; Jer 4:23). Both prophets may be picturing judgment as the reversal of creation in which God’s judgment causes the world to revert to its primordial condition. This later use of the terms has led some to conclude that Gen 1:2 presupposes the judgment of a prior world, but it is unsound method to read the later application of the imagery (in a context of judgment) back into Gen 1:2.

<sup>8</sup>sn *Darkness.* The Hebrew word simply means “darkness,” but in the Bible it has come to symbolize what opposes God, such as judgment (Exod 10:21), death (Ps 88:13), oppression (Isa 9:1), the wicked (1 Sam 2:9) and in general, sin. In Isa 45:7 it parallels “evil.” It is a fitting cover for the primeval waste, but it prepares the reader for the fact that God is about to reveal himself through his works.

<sup>9</sup>tn The Hebrew term תְּהוֹם (*’thom*, “deep”) refers to the watery deep, the salty ocean – especially the primeval ocean that surrounds and underlies the earth (see Gen 7:11).

<sup>sn</sup> *The watery deep.* In the Babylonian account of creation Marduk killed the goddess Tiamat (the salty sea) and used her carcass to create heaven and earth. The form of the Hebrew word for “deep” is distinct enough from the name “Tiamat” to deny direct borrowing; however, it is possible that there is a polemical stress here. Ancient Israel does not see the ocean as a powerful deity to be destroyed in creation, only a force of nature that can be controlled by God.

<sup>10</sup>tn The traditional rendering “Spirit of God” is preserved here, as opposed to a translation like “wind from/breath of God” (cf. NRSV) or “mighty wind” (cf. NEB), taking the word “God” to represent the superlative. Elsewhere in the OT the phrase refers consistently to the divine spirit that empowers and energizes individuals (see Gen 41:38; Exod 31:3; 35:31; Num 24:2; 1 Sam 10:10; 11:6; 19:20, 23; Ezek 11:24; 2 Chr 15:1; 24:20).

<sup>11</sup>tn The Hebrew verb has been translated “hovering” or “moving” (as a bird over her young, see Deut 32:11). The Syriac cognate term means “to brood over; to incubate.” How much of that sense might be attached here is hard to say, but the verb does depict the presence of the Spirit of