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# Genesis 1&2 Explained: Interpretation and Meaning

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## Abstract

This essay demonstrates the compatibility of the Genesis account with the discoveries of modern science to help those who struggle with the conflict between their commitment to the biblical text and their desire to accept the new universe story the sciences are writing. I am grateful to Joel M. Hoffman, a Hebrew linguist and translation theorist, and Jacques Ellul, a prominent Christian social and theological thinker of the twentieth century.

According to the unequivocal scholarly consensus, the Hebrew/Aramaic texts never claimed to tell us how creation happened. The text does not offer a set of abstract (scientific) truths about creation but a series of stories of the history of God and his people. However, this distinction between the biblical and scientific approaches does not mean the latter is without theological implications. To this end, I show that the Genesis account deserves a closer look considering the enormous shifts our traditional view of the creation is undergoing in our time.

## Approaching the Text

Nevertheless, difficulties arise when we read an ancient text in modern English, for we cannot avoid our cultural conditioning relating unwittingly to inherited cultural filters, including religious ones, and our own culture-based knowledge that can cause the text to convey meaning other than the originally intended. We shall look at key phrases with Jacques Ellul's help to disentangle us from any baggage of religion and morality. When we

do, a surprising openness to an understanding of God's creation appears that neither precludes nor conflicts with the findings of modern science, contrary to the "flat reading" of contemporary culture.

For instance, the Old Testament (OT) presents a vision of the universe that is both dynamic and historical, a view that is about the possibilities and promises that the God of Israel was believed to have built into the creation. Its story is complete with conflicts, chance events, and contingencies, yet filled with an ever-present openness that invites exploration and discovery. Scientists have discovered similar characteristics that underlie the new cosmic story. Full of "symmetry breakings," new orders emerging from chaos, and discoverable lawfulness, they are impressed by the all-encompassing wisdom that seems to pervade the universe.

## Inspiration

Conservative Christians believe that every word in the Bible is God's utterance (plenary, verbal inspiration) and, therefore, true, normative, and authoritative (inerrant). However, this assertion has a few problems: No Jewish interpreter ever held such a view, plus questions about how far inspiration extends, i.e. to quotes from pagan authors, the inexact use of Old Testament texts in New Testament, to later copies and translations. This tightly knit scheme shuts down what Walter Brueggemann has called the "imaginatively playful" element necessary for true biblical interpretation.

Reading the text through the notion of God's self-revelation as the liberator, he puts humans in a situation of *response-ability*. As responders to God's performative word, they will employ their language, culture, and state of knowledge to express what they understand God to be saying, and a view of the writers from various angles. According to Ellul, human beings have heard certain things from God and transcribed what they thought they heard using what they knew as successive revelations.

## God Names for

In Genesis 1, God is referred to as Elohim, and in Genesis 2, as YHWH. The significance lies in the meaning of these two names and their relevance for interpreting each chapter. *Elohim* (a plural form of *El*) refers to the generic for God, the plurality of divine names used by the surrounding culture. This God is abstract and distant, the hidden deity known only through his acts. When Genesis 1:25 says that *Elohim* speaks, it points to the divine powers at work in

the cosmos, the powers that awed them through creation's stunning grandeur, beauty, and ceaseless creativity.

*Elohim* was experienced as an unnerving presence. Discerning God in his works will unravel human adequacy even today when, for instance, we encounter the latest space photos. Encounters such as this may bring us closer to God. The ancients realised that there is a Creator, there is a God.

The second creation account no longer speaks of *Elohim* but uses *YHWH* (Yahweh). The first account focused on knowing who creates and God's relation to the universe as a whole. In the second account, the emphasis shifts to organising and directing, especially the relationship between God and humanity.

Genesis 2 sees everything from this perspective, even "demanding that everything is related to humanity from now on because *YHWH* is the God of the personal relationship. We encounter grace and intimacy from God, who – within limits -- gives himself over to people.

Yet, his name, *YHWH*, remains unpronounceable, which no human can utter. God reveals himself but remains hidden at the same time. Humans can claim to know God, but when God reveals himself, everything we have claimed about God is invalidated.

So, when the God of personal relationships speaks, it is not *Elohim* who speaks, but the one who gives his name, and it is here that we meet the one who reveals himself as *YHWH*. He is at the heart of all life, the one who hands over his name as he did with Abraham, Moses, and all the prophets, always on God's initiative and his terms. This is the God of the OT tradition, and we sense the great theological distance between the first and the second accounts.

## Other Issues of Interpretation

### "In the Beginning ..."

Genesis 1:1 usually says, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." This traditional rendition, which is so familiar in the English-speaking world, is an unfortunate mistranslation that misses the true meaning of the Hebrew. It came into use with the King James Version in 1611. The original Hebrew reads *Be'reasheet*. While it can mean "in the beginning of," it cannot mean "in the beginning," writes Gerald L. Schroeder. He continues:

The difficulty with the preposition “of” is that its object is absent from the sentence; thus, the King James Version merely drops it. But the 2100-year-old Jerusalem translation of Genesis into Aramaic takes a different approach, realizing that *Be’reasheet* is a compound word: the prefix *Be’* “with” and *reasheet* a “first wisdom.” The Aramaic translation is thus, “With wisdom, God created the heavens and the earth.

This puts Genesis 1 on a fresh footing, acknowledging divine wisdom as a fundamental building block of the universe (see also Psalms, Proverbs, Jeremiah, and Job).

Moreover, *Be’reasheet* does not describe a point of departure but a setting like “within the beginning,” “to begin with”, or “first of all.” As a literary device, it can also mean “the narration can now begin.”

For the authors of Genesis 1, the principal concern was the revelation of the God who creates, the relationship between the Creator and humanity, and how this relationship came about.

The text points to a God above the fray of mythical cosmic forces (unlike Babylon and Egypt). For us, the question arises of how compatible the authors’ perception of the creator and the creation is with the cosmological picture of modern science. Let’s look at an excerpt from a translation of Genesis 1:1ff by the nineteenth-century French Hebrew scholar Fabre d’Olivet.

At-the-first-in-principle, he-created, Ælohîm (he caused to be, he brought forth in principle, HE-the-Gods, the- Being-of-beings), the-self-sameness-of-the-heavens, and-the-self-sameness-of-earth. And-the-earth was contingent-potentiality in-a-potentiality-of-being: and-the-darkness (a hard-making-power)-was on-the-face-of-the-deep (fathomless-contingent-potentiality of being) and-the-breath of-HIM-the-Gods (a light-making-power) was-pregnantly-moving upon-the-face of-the-waters (universal passiveness).

Astonishingly, this language verges on how modern physics describes quantum states where reality exists only potentially in superposition before the event when potentiality “descends” (falls) into the actuality of classical physics in the collapse of the wavefunction.

God was perceived as the “Being-of-beings,” who did not create a set of finished products but a “contingent potentiality of being” with room and freedom to be itself and even explore

creatively its built-in potentiality. Such an insight is far more fluid and compatible with a contemporary understanding of the world than a “plain reading” of the text, which cannot be taken literally as divine words.

## The God Who Creates

Genesis 1:1 and 2 tell us that it was *Elohim* who created and the *tohu wabohu* (an expression without specific meaning and linguistic roots) and the *tehom* (a plural made by doubling *tohu*), while in verse 3 *Elohim* speaks. *Tehom* is followed by a significant biblical term, “the waters,” which refers to the powers of destruction that seek to undo the creation in the same way water dissolves sun-dried mud bricks. The Jews strongly refused to conceptualise what was before creation, hence the use of *tohu wabohu*, an inexpressible term. There are other uses of *tehom*, such as the depths of the sea and abyss.

We are never told outright that *Elohim* created the world from nothing. This conception gradually emerged within Judaism, making its first documented appearance around 150 BCE; from there, it later entered Christian theology. We only learn that creation happens through divine speech acts, which has become one of the fundamental tenets of biblical revelation. When we read, “And *Elohim* said ...” which recurs throughout Genesis 1, we meet with an important ambiguity. God creates by means of a word, by something distinct from God and yet is also God himself. The usual verb is *dabar*, meaning a word and an action simultaneously, and the Jews refused to distinguish between the two. It can, therefore, be translated as “God speaks” and “God acts.” In other words, words represent power with a twofold effect: they bring order and establish a relationship, and both occur when God speaks. We may go as far as saying that when God brings forth something like light or water, he brings forth something other than himself while also imparting something of himself (just as we do when we speak). God’s action and revelation are a duality that runs through both the Old and the New Testament, foreshadowing the incarnation and a relationship with humanity that invites dialogue yet offers freedom to the listener to accept or reject it.

### “Here Is the Good”

We read in Genesis 1 how *Elohim* evaluated what he had created at various stages of creation. Current translations state: “And God saw that it was good” (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 25). However, relying on a literal translation from Hebrew, experts are convinced that the current English wording is too weak. A better translation would read: “*Elohim* sees: ‘O, here is the

good.”” In other words, every time God acts, something good appears, including a hint of wonderment on God’s part. Yet “the good” is not in the things themselves but in that God has acted. Therefore, we cannot read these exclamations as comparisons with an abstract good, let alone as indicating perfection. Instead, they affirm an original deposit that God placed in a distinct time and place and in his own way, imparting a positive connotation to every element of the natural world. If we took this notion seriously, we might be more restrained in treating it as we please.

Here we must ask whether the affirmations “here is the good” and “the very good” (Gen 1:31) support the belief held by many Christians that the creation was once perfect but “fell” from that state because of human transgression.

In other words, the fundamental plank in most Christians' beliefs that God created a perfect world in the beginning is not supported by the biblical text, for the text is quite clear that “good” is meant, not perfection. Moreover, Genesis 2 even states that in God’s eyes, Adam’s single state is “not good,” requiring remedial action.

### “Let the Earth Bring Forth ...”

The first Genesis account does not show us a Creator who acts like a magician and brings forth predetermined creatures or fills space with predesigned objects the way one fills a container. Rather, we see *Elohim* calling on certain created things, the sea and the earth, to bring forth living creatures. As God invites created entities into the process of creation, he imparts self-creative powers to his creation, a power-sharing process that implicitly involves the entire cosmos.

By saying, “Let the earth (or the waters) bring forth ...” (Gen 1:11, 20). God seems to create room for creaturely realms to fulfil the creation as they bring forth vegetation, mammals, ants, butterflies, fish, and microorganisms. This means God created every creature with a certain autonomy that God will not violate but with room for diversity (mutations). Thereby all creatures bear their own unity of being to form the ecological coexistence we see everywhere in the natural world.

We note that God seems to limit his omnipotence in sharing his creative power with creaturely realms. By entering such a relationship with the created world, God appears to redress the serious relational imbalance with his creatures, an imbalance that could not be any

greater. What does it mean to relate to a God who has the power to create a universe as vast as ours and sustain it over billions of years? How do we relate to a deity who has the ultimate power to annihilate, to reveal and conceal, the power to be present everywhere, and the power to withdraw and hide? How does one relate to such a God? In the first Genesis account, two clues present themselves. In other words, God ordains created things (not just humans) to “bring forth,” to participate in the creative process, to become stakeholders in the creativity that promotes life.

In the divine *letting be*, God invites creaturely realms to be cocreators with him. By letting be, he creates a cosmos that, among other things, brings forth life on at least one planet in a manner deeply consonant with the Christian experience of God’s humble, self-emptying love. Letting be creates being and involves letting go, which, in human experience, is a greater power than defending or holding on.

This divine attitude of letting be toward the creation is paradigmatically reflected in the NT parable of the Prodigal Son: the father in the parable acquiesces to the son’s request to hand over the inheritance prematurely. He lets the son go, keeping a vigil of love until his return. We will see the same stance in another place below when God blesses the creation.

## Time

As we saw above, in Judaism—contrary to any other religion in the surrounding culture—God created by means of his word. We also saw that in Jewish thought, the creation was an event in time, not a space or container filled with objects. If the surrounding culture began with space, the Jews began with time. The world was happening in time, constantly breaking out in further developments (as reflected in the biblical wisdom literature), so that the Jewish understanding of creation was not at all what others thought it to be.

Therefore, when we read that God appears in the first five days of creation, we see God in action: he gives it form and separates light from darkness, water from land, and land from the sea. In each act of separation, he gives shape and form to what is formless, making expressible and comprehensible what is *tohu wabohu*.

A similar point may be made in relation to the Hebrew word for day, *yom*, which can also mean a finite period. Recalling in passing the many fruitless attempts to refute evolution by parsing the meaning of *yom* and the volumes that have been written to quantify a day’s

duration, I want to stress that none of these arguments is relevant to the meaning of the text. Again, the interest of the Genesis authors was entirely elsewhere.

Far more important in Jewish thought is that the day begins with evening followed by morning, presaging a pattern frequently encountered in the Bible whereby the negative element is followed by God's positive act. First, there is night, then comes the light; first, there is *tohu wabohu*, and then comes life and humanity.

This pattern contrasts with the Greek and Roman approach—the model for Western culture—where the day begins with sunrise and ends with sunset. We begin with life and end with death. In Jewish eyes, the text deals with a counterintuitive reversal of the cultural model: you begin with death and end with life. It leaves to one side the fruitless squabbles about whether a biblical day was 24 hours or thousands of years long. The egregious misreading of the text, especially when used to argue against evolution, could not be more obvious.

While the text speaks of a certain order and periodicity and holds it in high esteem, it does not tell us what “actually happened,” as so many authors of the young Earth creationist movement have falsely asserted in their attempt to disprove Darwin. It should be clear by now how wrongheaded this enterprise has been from the start.

### “According to Their Kind”

In several places, the Genesis accounts state that species of plants and animals are to propagate “according to their kind [meaning species].” This traditional phrasing, too, is based on a mistranslation of the Hebrew. The latter, Ellul asserts, does not imply a predetermined outcome but a point of departure, so the phrase should be translated “with a view to . . .,” an important nuance implying that everything is to propagate *with a view toward* the creation of its species. In this case, the cosmos and our living world are far more fluid and dynamic than readers of the Genesis texts have traditionally thought possible. What had contributed to this static view was the long-held belief that the creation was complete and, therefore, nothing new could be expected in a “finished work” (Gen 2:18).

Although the Hebrew text suggests that our universe is a dynamic and open system, I want to reiterate that no convergence of the biblical with the modern scientific description of the world is intended, for the modern description itself is an emergent phenomenon in its own right. What I do maintain, however, is that using Genesis as a weapon to refute the scientific



description of the universe by claiming the Bible knows better and alone provides an all-time, valid, step-by-step report of how creation happened amounts to a blatant misreading of its revelational intent.

## God's Dialogue with Himself

Next, God precedes the creation of humanity by a dialogue between God and himself. This inner dialogue seems to suggest that God summoned the cosmos to witness what is about to come forth before creating humans while instilling the dialogical principle in humanity intended to govern the divine-human relationship at the apex of creation. While this dialogical principle is of the utmost importance in every age, it attains special significance in our time given the man-made ecological crisis we are facing globally.

## God Blessed Them

The first creation account ends with God blessing the sea creatures, the birds, and all the living things (Gen 1:22–24). By addressing them this way, God sets them apart from the rest of creation, which he had already declared good. In its multiple meanings, the Hebrew word for blessing (*bârak*) is highly significant here.

The first meaning is to kneel. This seems strange because we are accustomed to thinking that the one who gets blessed is the one who kneels before the one who bestows the blessing. In blessing all things, the Creator bows himself before his creatures. This presents us with an image of God who, in kneeling, takes the stance of a servant, upending all power relations that seek to assert superiority of one over the other. This image reminds us of a passage in the Fourth Gospel, where Jesus kneels before his disciples, washing their feet (John 13:3–14).

The second meaning of *bârak* is to proclaim salvation, which may also be understood as being loved by God. Hence, what God brings to his creatures in this stance of service is not only the affirmation that they are good but also that they are loved. This theological understanding is further enlarged when we consider the human species. On the “sixth day,” God blesses the man and the woman, who are created in “the image and likeness of God,” so that, as a species, humans correspond more than any other creatures to the Creator. Created as God’s counterpart that transcends all differences between men and women, between one ethnic group and another, humans are empowered, as conscious creatures, to choose their posture vis-à-vis the material world of which they are a part. We humans can assume the very

posture of the Creator, who kneels in humble service before the creation. If we did, we would indeed give effect to the image in which we have been created, as servants and stewards of the creation.

In the foregoing, I have shown that it was not the intention of the biblical authors to inform us about how the creation happened because their concerns lay elsewhere. I also hinted at the compatibility of the biblical revelation with a dynamic understanding of the creation. In what follows, by looking more closely at God's creative activity in both accounts and focusing on key relational clues, we will see more compelling evidence for why the claim of modern cosmology for an evolutionary universe does not conflict with a biblical understanding of creation.

Ignoring for now the huge differences between the two creation accounts and the fact that both seem to conflict with current scientific knowledge of the universe, we just want to note that the first account presents God's creative activity known by the subdivision of "seven days" (Gen 1:1 – 2:3), and the other (Gen 2:4–25) sets out, in a different way, to recount the history of the heavens and the earth as created by God.

## Seventh Day and God's Rest

The first creation account concludes on a celebratory note. The seventh day of creation is no longer a workday but the crown of creation. The number seven is important because it indicates completeness and achievement. Since the text omits any reference to "evening and morning," we are told that creation has entered an open-ended period, which, according to Ellul, is the time of cosmic and human history. Structurally, then, in the first six days, the cosmos appears, followed by human history after humanity has been created.

Many English translations of the Bible render the Hebrew *shavat* as "rested," but a more accurate translation would be "abstained." Theologically, the text informs us that God "abstained from his creative work" on the seventh day. As Ellul puts it, "God steps back from his creation and no longer acts. It is not that God stops being the creator, but that he no longer makes new things." Those who think of God in terms of being an impersonal "first cause" would find this notion disagreeable. But since God is not abstract, in abstaining, he acts like a person and not like an impersonal Providence. If he were a "first cause," God would have to go on acting endlessly. We find instead that God, in deciding to rest, manifests

his freedom. Since this decision to abstain occurs within history, the text implies that God no longer interferes with creation but grants it freedom.

By abstaining from acting in history, God grants freedom to the cosmos and humanity to become what they might become. God is not a micromanager who directs everything; indeed, he abstains from action to the point of resting. Rather, when God created humanity, he created a species through which love is possible, and as soon as this step is completed, God steps back to allow his creature the freedom love needs, for love without freedom is unthinkable.

This decision to step back does not render God indifferent, for he does not abdicate responsibility; rather, he grants freedom to his entire creation to become itself. And while present, he is present at a certain distance, leaving open the possibility of coming into the fray of human history and working in it but only through his dialectical relationship with his creation, that is, using opposing forces.

The text also teaches us that God provides us—made in his image—with a model to abstain from interfering with creation and to cease controlling and manipulating the world as we find it at least once a week. This example is especially relevant in a technological age that prides itself on having created a global system of ceaseless production. Humans are not reduced to objects that must conform to divine fiat but, in their freedom to make their own decisions, are invited to enter voluntarily into the perfect freedom of divine love, which is “the rest of God.”

## All about Meaning

If the foregoing demonstrates anything, it is that the revelation of the Genesis accounts is all about meaning, not meant to provide information on how creation happened. Even when it offers us events and facts, this is only to convey their meaning for the people concerned—that is, first, the people of Israel, then the surrounding nations and later generically for all humanity. The centrality of meaning cannot be overstated, of which events and facts are the outer clothing. This understanding will guard against the error of equating reality with truth. When we assume that God created first ‘a reality’ and then provided us with facts about it in the Bible, we commit a serious error of interpretation.

Rather, the events and other data presented in the Bible serve the primary purpose of conveying meaning. As all knowledge, human abilities, and energies were gifts that stood under the sway of a faithful Creator, the Bible knows nothing of so-called worldly matters.

All had meaning, and to find it was a matter of reading it properly based on prayerful theological inquiry.

To summarise, like all biblical texts, the Genesis account is not divine dictation but an “imaginative remembering” of the prophetic voice in ancient Israel as the people of Israel perceived God’s voice within their specific historical-cultural context. This context differed widely from our modern conception of history. *YHWH*, the God of Israel, was believed to be the creator of all that exists, who had revealed himself through his “performative word” that gave rise to acts of creation. God revealed neither a metaphysics, philosophy, or system but something quite different: God revealed himself in a personal relationship *with the people of Israel*.

As we probed this self-revelation of God more closely, we can assert that the *meaning* of the text does not contradict the new scientific understanding of the cosmos. On the contrary, based on the biblical text, God’s work in creation is far more open and internally dynamic than most Christians believe. This departure from the “plain” reading of the text should be liberating for many Christians. It allows them to live with greater confidence that by adopting an evolutionary view of the creation, they will not be unfaithful to the Scriptures.

One of the strongest pieces of evidence is the richly relational side of the biblical narrative. The text speaks of power-sharing, that is, of an attitude of *letting be*, of the Creator’s stance as a servant vis-à-vis the creation, of a divine-human relationship marked by dialogue, and of the Creator's withdrawal from acting in history to make room for human freedom for love’s sake.

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