

Commentary on Genesis 1-2

Explanations

In this "Explanations" section I provide information that will help explain the approach taken in translating and interpreting the text of Genesis chapters 1 and 2. The section is divided into four areas. "Position" indicates the basic theological context for understanding these two chapters. "Background" provides information about the apparent setting of the accounts recorded in these two chapters. "Translation" provides commentary about Hebrew grammar and usage that impact the translation. And "Interpretative" addresses some statements found within the text that help us come to an understanding of its flow.

Position

- The view supported herein is one that lies between "young earth" and "old earth" views, but much closer to the former than the latter. Typically, a young earth view assumes that the heavens and earth were created approximately six thousand years ago, or perhaps a bit more, and that the earth was as describe in Genesis 1:2. For an old earth view, the age of the earth is deemed to be considerably greater, measured in millions or billions of years. The position of this paper is that the age of the earth and the universe itself is to be measured in thousands of years. This would include the six thousand years of the young earth view plus additional years, perhaps several thousand, associated with a period between Genesis 1:1 and 1:3.¹ I designate this as a "modified young earth" view. The modification comes with the addition of a relatively short period prior to Genesis 1:3.²
- Although the earth itself has undergone various changes since its initial creation, there is nothing to indicate that the universe we find immediately after creation is significantly different from that we find

¹ I define the period as occurring between 1:1, the creation of the heavens and the earth, and 1:3, day 1 of the creation week. We do not know how long after creation in 1:1 before the earth can be described as in 1:2. Nor do we know how long the earth was in that condition before day 1 of creation week.

² I do not believe in the theory of evolution. Consequently, I do not believe the fossil remains found in the rocks of the earth existed prior to the creation week. Furthermore, I do not believe there was a great deal of time between the creation of the heavens and earth recorded in Genesis 1:1 and the subsequent fall of Lucifer, a fall which shows its effects in Genesis 1:2. Therefore, assuming the creation week occurred about 6000 years ago, I would limit the age of the universe to perhaps ten thousand years, or to tens of thousands at the most. I realize this creates difficulties in understanding light travel from distant stars and the ages assigned to rocks in the earth. Even so, I think a relatively young age for the earth is reasonable.

today: earth and the other planets orbit the sun, the sun moves through the Milky Way galaxy, and that galaxy moves through a universe of other galaxies. Even though this “modified young earth” position leaves questions that are difficult to answer given what we presently observe about the size of the universe,³ it does appear to be a position which is consistent with a literal understanding of Genesis 1 and 2 and the balance of Scripture.

- The six days mentioned in Genesis 1 and the seventh day mentioned in Genesis 2 are all solar days. The earth, as it came from the hand of the creator, was rotating on its axis illuminated by the sun. From the outset there would have been a regular day and night cycle as we understand it today. This would be the case even though this cycle would not have been detectable on earth once it came to be as described as in Genesis 1:2.⁴
- The first two chapters of Genesis are historical narrative in genre. It is possible that the narrator or author of the account in 1:1-2:3 and the narrator or author of the account in 2:5-25 are different individuals. Regardless, these accounts accurately and faithfully record what God did in creating the universe and human beings. Importantly, these two chapters describe steps God took in creating and preparing a habitation for those who would be made in his image, especially considering the dominion that would be given to them. These chapters do not tell us everything that God did, but they unfailingly do tell us significant things that he did.

Background

- As one reads Scripture in general and Genesis 1 in particular, one should keep in mind that the perspective of the author and readers⁵ is always that from the surface of the earth. So then, the perspective for Genesis 1 and day 1 is not of someone observing from space, looking down on the planet earth from space. Furthermore, when we read words like *earth* and *heavens*, as in 1:1, we should strive to understand what the author and the original readers understood when they used these words. However, that notwithstanding, the contribution of additional natural

³ Some questions may be answered by advances in science. Answers to other questions may await future revelation by God. Lack of answers should not prevent us from letting the text of Genesis say what it says.

⁴ With the understanding that these are solar days, there seems to be no reason to think that the days of Genesis 1:3 and following were other than the roughly 24-hour days that we experience today. Certainly, there is nothing in the text of Scripture to suggest otherwise. This 24-hour period likely goes back to the time of creation.

⁵ I refer to author and readers indicating a written account. However, there may well have been an earlier period during which what we read in these two chapters was given orally as others listened and only later written down.

revelation on our understanding of the Old Testament text must be considered.⁶

- The content of any history prior to the creation of Adam and Eve would necessarily have been based on direct revelation from God. Regarding the time when the accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 were written,⁷ the author's perspective appears to be after the fall of Adam (hereafter, Fall), but before the flood of Noah's day (hereafter, Flood). The perspective is post-Fall, pre-Flood.⁸ Since Genesis 1 and 2 appear to have been written pre-Flood, these documents were evidently passed along generation by generation and carried by Noah on the Ark (with other pre-Flood documents), then further passed down, perhaps through Abraham to Moses. Finally, they were incorporated by Moses when writing the book of Genesis.
- Sometimes I have referred to "creation week" and in so doing am referring to the activities of the seven-day period described in Genesis 1:3-2:3. This is a commonly used designation for this period. However, in some sense it is misleading. Nothing that is physical was created⁹ during this seven-day period. The creation of everything physical occurred prior to this week and is included in the scope of the statement of Genesis 1:1. Yes, it is true that God did create during creation week. However, what he created involved spiritual material not physical material. His creation activity was only of those creatures, including Man, in which we find blood, the blood of life.¹⁰ These are the creatures that God sets apart into a different category, with mankind itself set apart even further. These are the creatures that possess a "soul." Other than this spiritual creating, the text records no physical creating during the 7-day creation week.¹¹

⁶ See below under "Interpretative" regarding the impact of additional natural revelation.

⁷ I am assuming that written documents predated the Flood.

⁸ The parenthetical, descriptive account in chapter 2:10-14 strongly suggests a pre-Flood perspective. See remarks below, in the "Commentary" section. This would, of course, mean that these documents were written pre-Babel.

⁹ See below under "Interpretation" regarding the words *create* versus *make*.

¹⁰ In Genesis 9:4 God makes an equivalency between "life" and "blood." He told Noah, "You shall not eat flesh with its blood, that is, its life." Not all creatures that science classifies as part of the lower order kingdoms have this distinction. That is, not all life has blood. This distinction, having or not having blood, indicates a line of demarcation in the creatures God made.

¹¹ As will be explained later, the sun, moon, and stars mentioned on day 4 of the creation week account were included in the creating mentioned in 1:1.

Translation

- The translation of the Hebrew text in large measure is consistent with well-known versions.¹² For the most part the changes from those versions are to translation of the Hebrew conjunction *waw* (primarily when found as a *waw* consecutive) and to translation of verbs with regard to their tense.
- Hebrew has two main conjugations or aspects for its verbs. These two aspects, perfect and imperfect, express the kind of action. Basically, the perfect describes completed action whereas the imperfect expresses incomplete or progressive action.¹³ Other conjugations are also used. These conjugations include the cohortative, imperative, and jussive which indicate commands, first, second, and third person respectively. There is also an infinitive construct which is a verbal noun and an infinitive absolute, a grammatical intensifier. A participle is a verbal adjective or substantive.
- The stem of the Hebrew verb is used to indicate properties of voice and aspect. There are seven major stems: *qal*, *niphal*, *piel*, *pual*, *hiphil*, *hophal*, and *hithpael*. *Qal* and *niphal* express simple action with active and passive voice. *Piel* and *pual* express intensive action with active and passive voice. *Hiphil* and *hophal* express causative action with active and passive voice. *Hithpael* expresses intensive action with reflexive voice.
- Importantly, the tense of Hebrew verbs is not expressed by spelling but by context. Thus, depending on that context, there is some latitude in understanding the tense of a Hebrew verb. Therefore, careful attention to context is important, especially in these two chapters of Genesis.
- In the translation of Genesis 1 and 2 various words are used when translating the Hebrew conjunction *waw*¹⁴ when it is attached to a verbal form, particularly in the case of what is known as a “*waw* consecutive.” Basically, *waw* is the conjunction *and*. Substitution words that could be used to translate this word include: *then*, *when*, *or*, *so*, *now*, and *but*. Various versions also use the word *thus* (e.g., see Genesis 2:1 in the ESV and NASB). For a narrative account, which translation one chooses for the *waw* depends on one’s understanding of the flow or succession of the narrative at that point. In some cases the flow of the account could be more temporal while in other cases it could be more logical. Therefore, as we come to understand the verbs that include a *waw* consecutive we

¹² Versions that may be cited or mentioned in the commentary include the *English Standard Version* (ESV, 2016), the *New International Version* (NIV, 2011), the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB, 1995), the *NET Bible* (NETB, 2011), the *Christian Standard Bible* (CSB, 2017), the *New King James Version* (NKJV, 1982), and the *King James Version* (KJV, 1769).

¹³ However, see commentary below at verse 3 regarding narratives that have a perfect followed by imperfects with the *waw* consecutive.

¹⁴ *Waw* is the sixth letter in the Hebrew alphabet and is used as a conjunction.

need to pay close attention to the flow of the narrative. Sometimes we see temporal sequence or succession. What is stated follows chronologically what was stated earlier in the text. The emphasis is more on the time sequence. But at other times we see more of a logical succession. What is stated follows logically what is just stated in the text as an explanation for the action or as a result of the action just taken. In the translation of these *waw* consecutives I have chosen to use the word *then* in the instances where temporal succession is important and to use the word *so* where there is significant logical succession. By doing this it is hoped that one can more clearly see what the author is saying. What follows what temporally? And what follows what logically? I believe this distinction is important, particularly as we come to a consistent understanding of Genesis 1.

- In the translation a verb tense has sometimes been used which differs from that found in other versions. In some cases, based on context, an English simple past tense has been replaced with a previous past tense. As noted, the Hebrew language allows for this understanding since Hebrew verbs do not express tense by their spelling. Thus, depending on context, the translation "God made" could be translated as "God had made."¹⁵ Examples of previous past understanding of verbs can be found in the various versions. Such is the case in the NIV for the verbs "plant" ("had planted") and "form" ("had formed") in Genesis 2:8 and 2:19 respectively. The tense is understood as such because of the chronology of events recorded in chapter one. The land animals and birds were created before human beings. Another example of a change in tense understanding, in this case from past to present, is the verb *give* in 1:29 and 30. The ESV's, "I have given," may be translated as a present, "I give" (as in the NIV).
- I have translated the Hebrew word for "man," *'ādām*, in one of three ways. I use "man" when referring to the first human being God created, the male Adam. This use is preceded by the definite article so is "the man." One time (1:20) I have used "Adam" to "translate" the Hebrew word *'ādām*. Here the word is used as the name designating this first human being and is found without the definite article. For the remaining instances I have used "human beings." In these instances this word *'ādām* is used as a generic reference to human beings and may or may

¹⁵ Consider the previous past tense understanding of the verb "make" in Genesis 1:16. Grudem, in his *Systematic Theology*, writes, "Grammatically this is possible. ... This view would imply that God had made the sun, moon, and stars earlier ... but only placed them near the earth ... or allowed them to be seen from the earth on day 4" (p. 300). Grudem goes on to write that the previous past tense view "is the one that seems most persuasive to the present author" (p. 300).

not be preceded by the definite article.¹⁶ Two times (2:23, 24) a different word for “man,” *’iš*, occurs in the text. These two instances use the word *man* or *husband* as the opposite of *woman* or *wife* (*’iššâ*). I have translated them as “a man.”

- I have translated the Hebrew word *’ereš* in two different ways. This word may be understood as “ground,” “land,” or “earth.” When it appears to be used in the “dry ground” sense as in 1:10, I have translated it as “land.” When it appears to have a more global sense and is opposed to “the heavens,” I have translated it as “earth.” I have done similarly with the Hebrew word *šāmayim*. In some places I have used “sky” and in other places “heavens.”

Interpretative

- The positioning of the statement “and it was so” when it is included is significant and needs to be considered in Genesis 1 when understanding the flow of the narrative and the tenses of the verbs. These statements are used by the author to indicate that the action just noted has taken place and is now accomplished at that point in the storyline. These are what I will refer to as “completion” statements.¹⁷ Therefore any statements after these completion statements¹⁸ are commentary. These commentaries describe the result of the action or are explaining either what had taken place earlier to enable the action or what may now take place because of the action.
- Along with these completion statements, it seems that the pronouncement of “good” is also significant and needs to be considered. There is a recurrence of the statement “it was good” in Genesis 1. But sometimes the statement is “missing.” Admittedly we should take care not to read into the text too much when something is not stated. But perhaps we should not completely ignore what might be indicated when the pattern is broken. For day 2 the single action taken, the making of an expanse, is not pronounced to be good. It is possible that here where there is no pronouncement of good, it is true that God’s action is complete, but nevertheless with respect to that action in some sense

¹⁶ In the commentary I have also used “Man” and “mankind” to refer to human beings in general.

¹⁷ The statement “and it was so,” while often included, is not the only method the author used to indicate completion of an activity taken by God. For example, in 1:3 the author simply adds, “and there was light” to indicate that the “let there be light” was completed.

¹⁸ It should be noted that one action taken by God is not followed by a completion statement. There is no completion statement after the very first action, the creation of “the heavens and the earth” as recorded in 1:1. However, this verse is not a part of the following day-by-day account starting in verse 3. By way of note, verse 21 may or may not be considered as a completion statement for the action taken in verse 20. Lacking an explicit “and it was so,” for consistency, I have treated it as such.

there remains more to be done. Therefore, at that point what God had done is not pronounced good.¹⁹

- Based on (1) the understanding of a “temporal” versus a “logical” use of the *waw* consecutives, (2) the inclusion of completion statements, and (3) the pronouncement of good, I have divided the text of chapter 1 into segments. I designate the temporal segments in chapter 1 as “Creative/Reconstructive” segments. These are the segments where the author indicates God’s activity in creating or making something. I designate the logical segments in chapter 1 as “Observation/Follow-up” segments. These are the segments where the author either indicates what had taken place to allow the present activity or observes results that can now take place because of that activity. As noted earlier, I have chosen for my translation of the *waw* consecutives in Genesis 1 that start these “Creative/Reconstructive” segments to use the word *then* in a temporal sense (as the ESV does at the start of verse 26). For the subsequent “Observation/Follow-up” segments I use the word *so* in a logical sense (as the ESV does in verse 27).
- Two Hebrew verbs are used in the Genesis 1 account to refer to things that God created or made. Is this significant? The first verb is *bārā’* and is used three times in chapter 1 where God is the subject. This word is used in the sense of *create* and could include, but not necessarily, the sense of *create entirely from nothing*. God can create without using any previously existing material. In verse 1 the word *create* is used regarding the creation of “the heavens and the earth.” Then, in verse 21 the word is used of the creation of sea creatures and birds. And finally in verse 27 it is used of the creation of mankind. The making of animals and Man seems to involve two distinct components, one physical and one spiritual. The material used to make the physical component of these creatures had previously existed. This does not appear to be the case for the spiritual component. The second word used in this account of God’s creating or making is *‘āsâ*. It is used seven times (verses 7, 11, 12, 16, 25, 26, and 31) in this chapter with reference to God’s activity.²⁰ This word is understood as *make* or *construct* in a general sense. In verse 25 “make” is used of land animals. But as noted, earlier “create” had been used of sea creatures and birds. And in verse 26 “make” is used of human beings while in the next verse “create” is used of the same activity. Furthermore, in verse 31 “make” is used of all of the creating and making actions of the first chapter. “So God saw everything that he

¹⁹ See below in the “Commentary” section regarding Adam’s being alone as a situation that is specifically deemed to be “not good.” Additional action on God’s part was necessary to change this status.

²⁰ The word *‘āsâ* is also used in 1:11-12 to refer to what vegetation does in producing its seed or fruit.

had made" (1:31a). These two words occur together in 2:3. It appears that to some extent the words are used with overlapping meaning. However, it does seem that *bārā'*, when God is the subject, includes the idea of making something out of nothing, an idea not found with *'āśâ*.²¹ I have followed the versions with regard to the translation of these two words. In the text headings and commentary I distinguish the words as follows. I use the term *creative* to refer to those acts suggested by the word *bārā'*. And I use the term *reconstructive* to refer to those acts as understood by the word *'āśâ*. With human beings, while both terms apply, the emphasis seems to be on the creation of human beings as living spiritual beings who are in God's image.

- In the explanatory statement of Exodus 20:11 regarding why Israel was to keep the Sabbath, Moses provides a "summary" of what is recorded in Genesis 1:3-2:3. As translated in most versions, it appears that this is an all-inclusive statement going back to Genesis 1:1. However, notice the inclusion of "the sea." I think that rather than as typically translated "the heavens and the earth and the sea," the statement should be understood as "the sky and the land and the sea." These are the areas of God's activities during the 6 days of Genesis 1. The creation of the heavens and the earth themselves are outside of what is stated there. Therefore, I do not think that Exodus 20:11 includes Genesis 1:1 in its scope.
- There are two commonly held understandings of Genesis 1:1. On the one hand there is the view that this verse is a statement providing a summary or overview of what is recorded in the balance of Genesis 1.²² As such it is seen to be similar to the summary in 2:1. Furthermore, those holding this view often see 1:1 as analogous to the "these are the generations" statements of 2:4 and later, statements used to divide the narrative accounts in Genesis. On the other hand, Genesis 1:1 is viewed as a creative activity taking place at the beginning. As such in the chronology of Genesis 1 it documents the actual act of creating the heavens and the earth by God. It accounts for the physical creation of the universe. It is with this latter understanding that 1:1 will be interpreted herein.
- It is difficult when interpreting the creation account to distance one's 21st century understanding of cosmology from that of the original audience. For example, when we read the words *earth* and *heavens* in 1:1 we immediately think of planet earth rotating on its axis and revolving around the sun and of the great extent of the universe populated with not only stars in our Milky Way galaxy but also with innumerable galaxies

²¹ Interestingly, neither verb is used regarding God's actions taken on day 3 (the creation of plant life) and day 4 (the setting of lights in the expanse).

²² As an example, see Walton's comments regarding "The Role of Verse 1" in John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, pp. 43-45. See also below in the commentary on 1:1.

with still more stars. Those present when the account was originally narrated thought of the earth as the land or ground upon which they walked and of the heavens as the overhead sky holding the sun, moon, and stars they could see. They had no 21st century concept regarding the size or shape of the earth or the number of or distance to the stars. As we come to conclusions regarding what Genesis chapters 1 and 2 are revealing, we should keep these two very different perspectives in mind. On the one hand we can recognize their lack of knowledge and understand the text from that perspective. On the other hand, we can, I think rightly, use our fuller knowledge to take us beyond what they understood in the text. Why is this the case? Simply stated, today we have additional natural revelation.²³ And we can use that revelation to help us understand things that were written in the Old Testament canon regarding creation just as we use additional special revelation in the New Testament to help us understand that canon in other areas. If there is no contraction between understandings, we should not allow their more limited understanding to restrict our more extensive understanding. We may, without violating the text, let it say what it says using our modern perspective. Furthermore, in the commentary which follows I have suggested possible scenarios that help us understand the text from our perspective, realizing, of course, that the text itself is not specific regarding what took place as God worked.

²³ This is natural revelation in the sense that God has permitted mankind to make discoveries about the heavens and the earth he created. To the extent that these discoveries represent what is truly true, they have expanded Man's understanding of God's creation.