

Main Themes in Genesis 1

Starting Points:

The early chapters of Genesis accurately present two accounts of cosmic and human origins in the language and ideas of the ancient Hebrews. These texts should not be removed from their ancient context and read as if they speak literally about the universe or humans in 21st century scientific terms. They speak in terms of an Ancient Near Eastern perception of the world, and should be interpreted within that setting. When we discern the meaning of the texts in their ancient context, we find that they constitute a worldview statement about God and his relationship to the world, and about humans and their relation to God and the world. This basic worldview statement transcends its ancient cultural setting, and commands the attention of God’s people in all places and all times.

Adapted from Richard Carlson and Tremper Longman, *Science, Creation, and the Bible. Reconciling Rival Theories of World Origins* (InterVarsity Press, 2010).

1. God creates by bringing order out of chaos

a. Two views on Genesis 1:1-3

i. “Something out of nothing” view (NIV, NAS, ESV)

¹In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ²Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. ³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

ii. “Order out of chaos view” (NRSV, Jewish translations)

¹In the beginning **when** God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, **while** a the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters. ³ **Then** God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

b. “*In the beginning*” (Hebrew *bereshit*) = an early period of time of undetermined duration (cf. Jeremiah 27:1; Job 8:7; 42:12)

c. “*create*” (Hebrew = *bara’*) = assigning function, order, and purpose to the elements of the world (NOT bringing into material existence)

d. “*heavens and earth*” = “sky and land” (NOT “galaxies and the globe”!)

e. Creation by dividing and assigning purpose: Genesis 1 presents creation from a logically ordered point of view; it is not offering a literal, chronological sequence of the material origins of the universe.

Parallel Literary Structures in Genesis 1

<u>Environments</u>	<u>Inhabitants</u>
1. Light and dark (vv. 3-5) = Day and night	4. Lights (vv. 14-19)
2. Dome Ceiling (vv. 6-8) = Weather – Sky (vv. 6-7a) – Seas (v. 7b)	5. Inhabitants of the Dome (vv.20-23) – Fish in the Seas – Birds in the Sky
3. Dry Land (vv. 9-10) = Agriculture Vegetation (vv. 11-12)	6. Land Animals (vv. 24-25) Humans (vv. 26-31)

2. God's world is "good" (Hebrew = *tov*)
 - a. "good" = beneficial for human life (notice nothing "good" on the 2nd day)
 - b. "good" = inherent value and aesthetic beauty (see Psalm 104)

3. God rules his world through his image-bearing creatures: Genesis 1:26-28
 - a. "Image" (Hebrew = *tselem*): humanity *represents* the Creator to the creation and to one another.
 - b. God's kingdom happens in and through humans

4. God's work culminates in "rest"
 - a. "there was evening and morning" (for all 6 days: 1:5, 8, 12, 19, 23, 31)
 - b. The 7th day has no end... (see John 5:16-17)
 - c. "rest" = what results after stability and order are achieved, God takes up the operation and sustaining of the cosmos

The seven days are not given as the period of time over which the material cosmos came into existence, but the period of time devoted to the inauguration of the cosmic temple. It is this inauguration and entrance of the presence of God to take up his rest that creates the temple. If the seven days refer to a cosmic temple inauguration, then Genesis 1 as a whole has nothing to contribute to the discussion of the age of the earth. This is not a conclusion designed to accommodate science—it was drawn from an analysis and interpretation of Genesis in its ancient environment. The point is not that the biblical text therefore supports the view of an old earth, but simply that there is no biblical position on the age of the earth. Viewing Genesis 1 in this way does not suggest or imply that God was uninvolved in the material origins of the universe—it only contends that Genesis 1 is not that story.

John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (InterVarsity Press, 2009), 92, 95-96.