

TOP SEVEN QUESTIONS ABOUT GENESIS 1:1-2:3

By Derek Sweatman

*Certain questions always seem to come up when reading the creation story in the Book of Genesis. In my years of teaching and pastoring, I have kept a running list of such questions. What follows are the **top seven** most frequently asked questions about this story. I hope and pray that these will enhance not only your understanding of the story, but will also breathe new life into your usage of the story in your own faith. (Note: Even though this creation story covers Genesis 1:1-2:3, it's always referred to as "Genesis 1", which is what I will call it, as well.)*

When was this story written?

Like almost all of the Old Testament's writings, there is no time stamp on Genesis 1. The writer doesn't tell us *when* it was written. Most of the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) were compiled by a community of writers and not one person, so, these books evolved over time. But deep within certain sections of the books, scholars are able to find historical clues and are able to place the writing in certain parts of Israel's history. This is based on the cultural and religious language within the story itself, a kind of literary archeology. With that, based on the structure and the wording and the images in the story, Genesis 1 appears to have been written *after* the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. During that time, Israel was scattered into various Babylonian cities across the empire. The trauma for Israel was the absence of the Temple, destroyed in the siege of 586. They were learning not only how to rebuild their lives, but also learning to worship *away* from the religious structure that the Temple provided. This is why the story seems to be built on the **seven-day** journey to the Sabbath (Day Seven), a practice associated with the First Temple period¹ of Israel's life and faith. There are also similarities to an older Babylonian creation story called *Enuma Elish*, also called, "The Seven Tablets of Creation." This creation story would have been known to the Israelites and scholars believe that Genesis 1 acted as a kind of counter-story to *Enuma Elish*.

Why does the writer say, "it was evening and morning, the first day"?

The Hebrew people began their day at sundown, not after midnight (the Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown still today). So, again, this is a look into the religious Sabbath language of the story that we first dealt with above. When the writer names the days *first, second, third* and so forth, the reader is invited to **count**. And in ancient Hebrew writings that ask you count, it is usually about the Sabbath...*We're walking towards the Sabbath day!* (Note: The Gospel of John is structured this way, too; it opens with the words, "In the beginning", and then sets out to tell

¹ The term *First Temple Period* refers the days before the destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE. The Temple would undergo reconstruction in the generations that followed, aptly named the *Second Temple Period*.

the story of Jesus through multiple series of **sevens** – seven signs [miracles], seven “I Am” statements, etc. John even *numbers* the first two signs, again, inviting the reader to count.)

Who is the “us” and “our” in verse 26?

Genesis 1:26 says, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” This question is never answered by the writer and almost appears to be some kind of understood idea, something called the “Divine Assembly.” Later Christian tradition would retrofit the Trinity (Father, Son, and Spirit) into this, which may very well be the case, something of an unconscious move by the original writer. However, Christians didn’t write this story and therefore the Trinitarian concept would not have been on the writer’s mind. But apparently God created all things *in community*. How? We don’t know! It’s a mystery. Move on.

Did God create everything out of nothing, “ex nihilo”?

It would seem that the answer to this is *yes*, because at some point there had to have been nothing *before* there was something. But Genesis 1 isn’t interested in this question. The first thing God encounters in the story is not nothing, but something: “...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*.” (Genesis 1:2) At a minimum we’re starting here with land and sea! Genesis 1 is more interested in the *condition* of the world, not necessarily the ground-up creation of the world. Thus, the phrase “without form and void” (Hebrew: *tohubohu*). The story unfolds as one about God bringing form and purpose to a broken creation, a broken people, and a broken life. The story of Genesis 1 begins with the second letter in the Hebrew alphabet, the letter **bet**. It looks like this:



Hebrew reads from right to left, so *bet* is called a “closed letter” because as you move from the right to the left you hit the “wall” of the letter on its right side. Normally a Hebrew story would begin with *aleph*, the first letter of their alphabet. The Rabbis like to say that *bet* is the first letter in the story because of its walled right side, which closes off our knowledge of what happened *before* the beginning, or even *how* the beginning came to be.

Are the days literal days?

In a sense, yes. They mark the movement of the story in light of the Sabbath rhythms of the Hebrew people. But what you’re asking is probably more along the lines of, “Was all that was created completed in seven literal days?” Once again, this is not what the story is attempting to

do. Remember, this story is about a **condition** of creation that God was working to remedy, not **how** God created all things. When the conversation around Genesis 1 turns to science, we are obligated to name *which* era of science we are referring to. Science, like all things, has evolved through time and what we know today is often different from what believed before. So, it's not wise to say that a 2500-year old story was written to coincide with the sciences of each new and changing generation. Plus, it also misses the point of the story, which is the arrival of creation at Day Seven, the day of rest and peace with God. The number **seven** in the Jewish mind is the number that signifies completion, wholeness, and rest. The story is built on sevens. My friend, Dr. William P. Brown, in his book, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, writes:

The account of Genesis 1 is carefully structured around seven days within which eight acts of creation and ten commands are listed. The number seven is no random counting. God "saw" and pronounced creation "good" seven times; "earth" or "land" (same word in Hebrew) appears twenty-one times; "God" is repeated thirty-five times. The number seven, or multiples thereof, also crops up within certain discrete passages: Genesis 1:1 consists of seven words; 1:2 features fourteen words; Genesis 2:1-3 renders a word count of thirty-five. In fact, the total word count of the narrative proper (1:1-2:3) is 469 in Hebrew (7 × 67).

When we see the story in light of the Sabbath journey, we are reminded that our *end* is a place of rest with God. To only be concerned with science is to miss this important – and frankly, more powerful – message of the story. (Note: It seems that God is *still* creating new worlds, by the way, with the birth of new stars and planets and galaxies always underway. Creation appears to have never stopped. The universe *is* expanding!)

Why does it say that God "rested"?

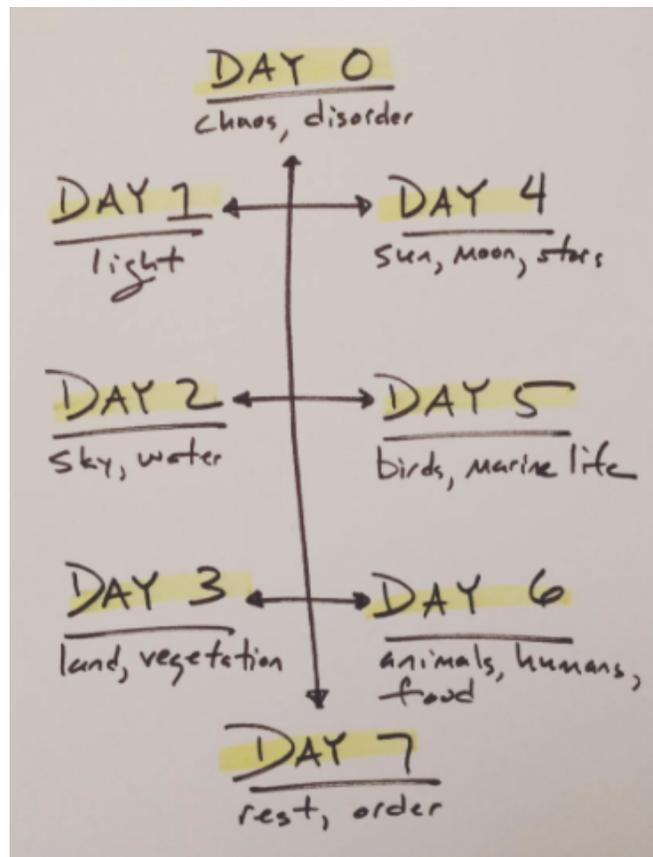
You've probably guessed by now that the writer isn't talking about a *tired* God, but rather that God has brought all things to their resting place, their completed and perfected state. Remember that the story begins on **Day Zero**, as it were, in Genesis 1:1-2, a day marked by chaos and confusion. The unfolding story takes the reader through six days during which God brings order to the chaos, day-by-day. Day Seven is the destination of the story. If you'll notice in the text, Day Seven does not have the phrase, "and it was evening and morning, the seventh day." Time stops at Day Seven, perhaps a first look at the eternal nature of creation's future. When the Hebrew people celebrate the Sabbath, they do so as a way of remembering, as Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to someone else." (*The Sabbath*) God is not tired. He is at rest with his resting creation.

What does it mean to be created in God's image?

This comes from Genesis 1:26, that says: "Let us make man in our own image." Early Christian ideas about what this meant centered on humanity's ability to reason, to know right and wrong, and so forth. This, of course, may be true. But the writer probably didn't have such ideas in mind. That appears more in Genesis 3. Instead, there is something else going on here. Because the story is so symmetrically written (see below), it is interpreted as something scholars call a "Temple Story", meaning, the writer is concerned with giving us the picture of God creating the Temple (earth) where he will dwell. In other words, the whole earth is God's place of residence! We see this in the poetry of Israel, Psalms 24:1 saying, "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." (ESV) The order and structure of the day-by-day creation is interpreted as a God systematically building his Temple. When temples were built in the ancient world, the last thing to go in the temple was the statue of the god for whom the temple was built. The statue, or the idol, was there to remind people of the god's presence (in the temple). What is the last thing created on Day Six in the Genesis 1 story? People. God is placing an image of himself within his creation, His Temple, so that He might be represented to the world *through* the lives of His people. Image is a vocation, not a condition.

Creation's Symmetry & Structure

Yes, my handwriting!



RECOMMENDED RESOURCES ON GENESIS 1-3
Books & Websites

Books (Easy to Moderate)

Genesis for Normal People, by Jared Byas and Peter Enns

The Lost World of Genesis One, by John H. Walton

The Lost World of Adam and Eve, by John H. Walton

How to Read Genesis, by Tremper Longman, III

Books (Academic)

The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder,
by William P. Brown

Discovering Genesis: Content, Interpretation, Reception, by Iain Provan

Genesis, by Walter Brueggemann (Interpretation Series)

Genesis, by R.R. Rano (Brazos Theological Commentary Series)

Seriously Dangerous Religion: What the Old Testament Really Says and Why It Matters,
by Iain Provan

Websites

www.biologos.org

www.sciencenandbelief.org