

In the Beginning

GENESIS 1:1

Rev. Dr. Richard D. Phillips
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In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1).

When the apostle Paul began his long exposition of the gospel in the book of Romans, it is not by chance that he opened with the doctrine of creation. All people are accountable to God, Paul said, since “what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them” (Rom. 1:19). When we ask when and how God revealed himself to every person, Paul answered, “ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:20). Every person is obligated to glorify God because he has made himself known in creation. God’s glorious self-revelation was also the thesis of Jonathan Edwards’ famous 1765 treatise, “The End for Which God Created the World.” Edwards wrote: “what God aimed at in the creation of the world, as the end which he had ultimately in view, was that communication of himself which he intended through all eternity.”¹ Or, as Paul concluded in the final words of his gospel treatise in Romans, since “from him and through him and to him are all things,” therefore, “To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

Paul pointed out in Romans that man’s chief problem is forgetting the glory of God. One remedy for this problem is the creation itself with which we are daily confronted. Seldom has the impact of the sheer glory of God in creation been more potently stated than on Christmas Eve, 1968, as the *Apollo 8* spacecraft orbited the moon for the very

¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1834, reprint 1998), 1:101.

first time. Never before had human eyes beheld the planet Earth rising above the surface of another sphere. As the world held its bated breath at the images beaming back from the lunar capsule window, the broadcasters were literally speechless. What do you say in response to the first view of our planet rising over an alien horizon? Astronaut William Anders knew, breaking the silence in the crackling hiss of the distant radio with these words: “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.”² In this way, like it or not, the marveling human race joined in fulfilling the purpose of creation by giving glory to God.

The Beginning of All Things

In the Hebrew canon, the name of the Bible’s first book is derived from its first word: *bereshit*, meaning, “In the beginning.” This was a fitting title, because as the Latin Vulgate heading *Genesis* indicates, it is the book of origins. Here we are told by God about the beginning of the universe and of history. If we want to understand the world, the meaning of life, the nature of our own selves, the salvation for which we hope, and the destiny awaiting us in the end, the origin of all these is recorded in Genesis.

These opening words form the initial basis for a Christian worldview. That there was a beginning means that things have not always been. Matter and life have a definite beginning, and by identifying that origin we learn vital truths about them. Little children ask, “Mommy, where did we come from?” Even at a young age we realize that where we come from says much about who we are. In its opening sentence, Genesis answers this important question.

In the 1950’s, scientists taught a “steady-state” theory of the universe, stating that it has always existed. This theory needed to be replaced when Edwin Hubble observed that the stars and galaxies are moving apart from one another, evidence which suggests that there was a beginning which launched this matter into all directions. The currently dominant scientific theory is therefore called the “Big Bang,” which supposedly took place some 13.7 billion years ago. This idea

² Cited from Alasdair Paine, *The First Chapters of Everything* (Ross-Shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2014), 17.

holds that first there was nothing, then there was an explosion (or a “singularity” as it is sometimes called) that caused everything. This theory leaves numerous questions unanswered, most important of which is the question of origins. If the universe started with the Big Bang, we inevitably ask, “What caused the Big Bang?” Moreover, we ask, how is it rational to believe that something came from nothing? It is thus remarkable that those who believe in the Big Bang find the Christian doctrine of the resurrection impossible to believe!

Genesis 1:1 agrees with the Big Bang Theory in stating that there was a beginning to the universe, even if it radically disagrees on the source of the beginning. Already, however, we can agree against the idea that history involves a never-ending circle, as taught by the Eastern religions. If there was a beginning, things have not always been. Time is not a circle, but a trajectory. We may therefore ask where the line is pointing. Before we see what the answer is, the question itself is important. If there is a beginning, there is history, meaning, direction, and purpose. What, then, we ask is the source of this beginning, and therefore of history and purpose?

God in the Beginning

“**I**n the beginning,” says Genesis 1:1, prompting the question, which it immediately answers, “God.” Here we confront one of the most titanic claims in the entire Bible. If there was a beginning, what was already there at the beginning? The Scriptures answer, “God was there.” “The cause of everything that is, [Moses] says, is the creative, powerful, and sovereign hand of almighty God.”³ Francis Schaefer notes the significance: “Christianity as a system does not begin with Christ as Savior, but with the infinite-personal God who created the world in the beginning.”⁴ God the Creator is a truth that precedes God the Redeemer.

It is here that the Bible presents an answer at the very point that secular science does not. We ask, what was the true and first cause of all that there is? and science has no answer. There was a

³ Derek Thomas, “The Bible’s First Word,” in Richard D. Phillips, ed. *God, Adam, & You: Biblical Creation Defended and Applied* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 2.

⁴ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time*, in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, 5 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1985), 2:68.

“singularity,” science muses vaguely. But what caused the singularity? we ask, and only silence is heard. Science has nothing to see and point to as the source behind all things. Ravi Zacharias points out that we live in “an ‘ontologically haunted’ universe,” meaning that observable reality cannot provide an answer for its being. Thus if there is no material source to be observed we must conclude that the beginning was caused by an immaterial source. Zacharias writes: “There has to be something more than physical or ‘natural,’ something quite different in character from which or from whom this physical universe derives its existence.”⁵ On this rationale, Zacharias urges secularists to consider the possibility of a personal, non-material source for all things, namely, Genesis 1:1’s claim: “In the beginning, God.”

The Bible first verse claims that there is a single being who does not have a beginning: God. In the beginning, God already was. God is the actor in the creation and the source of all things. This statement is staggering in its implications. We earlier noted that a beginning indicates a direction and future. Since the beginning indicates a trajectory, if God was in the beginning then he created not only the beginning but determined its direction. If the cause and source of history is a person, as the Bible reveals about God, then the purpose of creation and the meaning of life is shaped by him who made it all. Already in Genesis 1:1, therefore, we encounter the reality that Moses put so beautifully in Psalm 90:

Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God (Ps. 90:2).

Genesis 1:1 declares God not only as the source of all things but as the subject of the Bible that will follow. G. Ch. Aalders writes: “The first words of Scripture purposely lift our hearts on high to God. In this way it becomes apparent from the outset that Holy Scripture, in its very nature, is the revelation of God. And first of all, the revelation of God as Creator.”⁶

⁵ Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 1992.

⁶ G. Ch. Aalders, *Genesis*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 1:52.

The claim that in the beginning God already was points out that God is not himself a part of the creation. In this way, Genesis 1:1 stands against pantheism, the popular view that God is all and all is God. Instead, the Bible claims that there is God the Creator and there is the creation. They are not one and the same. God is apart from his creation. His being exists outside of the rocks, rivers and trees. Neither is he like the mythological gods of ancient Babylon and Greece, whose soap-opera existence is a reflection of human foibles. The world with all the things in it is not eternal but is created. God alone is eternal, absolutely free above all that is.

The name for God in Genesis 1:1 is the Hebrew *Elohim*. It is the name associated with God the Father as Creator. It is a name the first readers of Genesis 1 had already heard – the name of the loving, faithful, personal God who had revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is the true and living God, who dwells in majesty and glory. Many Christian writers have noted that *Elohim* is a plural name for a singular God, and have taken this as proof for the doctrine of the trinity. Genesis does reveal God as trinity but it is probably not sound to base it on this plural name. Rather, the word *God* is plural probably as an expression of majesty and power as befitting the Creator. Moreover, as John Calvin points out, *Elohim* is used as a name for the Father, in distinction from the Spirit who appears in verse 2. It is thus used here not as encompassing the trinity but the Creator Father.⁷

Reading that God was in the beginning provides the greatest comfort to the Christian, especially when he prays to God in time of need. God is involved and invested in the creation, otherwise we would not have Genesis 1:1. At the same time, God is exalted above the creation. He who was before is also after and above. His will, which formed the universe, is not constrained by any created power. This realization grounded the hope of Psalm 121: “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (Ps. 121:1-2). The Creator’s help is one that cannot be thwarted by anything in this world. The apostle Paul likewise grounds his assurance in God’s supremacy over

⁷ John Calvin, *Genesis* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1554, reprint 1992), 71-2.

all creation: “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39).

More broadly, in this opening verse, the aim of the entire Bible which it begins is disclosed. “In the beginning, God” means that there is a personal source who has determined the meaning and direction of all things. It raises the question, “What is your relationship to God? Do you know him? Do you know his purpose for you and your life? Do you know how to be in his favor?” G. Campbell Morgan observes:

The consummation of every human life must therefore inevitably be related to the originating cause. No man can escape God here or hereafter. . . . God is the originating Cause; man is His stuff, His design, His workmanship. These are the things from which I cannot escape. I live and move and have my being in Him, whether I will or not; the beating of my heart, the throbbing of my nerves, all these things are of Him.⁸

Created in the Beginning

The final statement of Genesis 1:1 is that in the beginning God “created the heavens and the earth.” The particular word used for “create” (Hebrew, *bara*) is a seldom-used term that always refers to God’s activity in making things from nothing. Alec Motyr writes that when this verb *to create* “has a subject, it is always God; when it has a presumed subjected, it is always God. . . . it is used throughout the Old Testament of acts or events which either by their specialty or novelty or both point to God as their originator.”⁹ In Genesis chapter 1, this word is used three times: in verse 1 for the creation of all things, in verse 21 when God created the living creatures, and in verse 27 when God created man in his own image.

Genesis describes what theologians refer to as creation *ex nihilo*, that is, creation out of nothing. Christians do not believe the absurd proposition that something came from nothing. We believe that God, who has always been, created all things where there had been nothing but himself. Only God can create in this way, never man. The distinction is between making things out of existing material, as for

⁸ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Westminster Pulpit*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1906, reprint 1995), 5:322.

⁹ Alec Motyer, *Look to the Rock* (Leicester: IVP, 1996), 67.

instance a carpenter makes a chair, and that of creating the wood itself that will become the chair. The writer of Hebrews identifies creation by God out of nothing as a cardinal article of Christian faith: “By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible” (Heb. 11:3).

It is awesome to consider the universe that God created by his own power. Physicist Stephen Hawking stated in his best-selling book *A Brief History of Time* that our galaxy is of only average size at a diameter of 100,000 light-years. Hawking writes that “our galaxy is only one of some hundred thousand million that can be seen using modern telescopes, each galaxy itself containing some hundred thousand million stars.”¹⁰ At the micro level, “God created every speck of dust in the hundred thousand million galaxies of the universe. He created every atom – the sub-microscopic solar systems with the whimsically named quarks. . . and leptons. . . and electrons and neutrinos. . . all of which have no measurable size.”¹¹ To consider the magnitude and the marvel of what God has created is to stand in awe of his glory, power, and wisdom. Isaiah is just one of many biblical writers to refer to God’s creation as an impulse to praise:

To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name, by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power not one is missing (Isa. 40:25-26).

Verse states that God created “the heavens and the earth.” It is often said that this statement constitutes what is called a merism. This device involves referring to polar extremes as a way of gathering together everything in between. To say that God created “the heavens and the earth” is simply, then, a way of saying that he created everything, that is, the universe. Alasdair Paine writes: “*The heavens and the earth* is deliberately all-inclusive: there is not a postal address anywhere in the cosmos which does not have one or the other as its bottom line. God made all that! The galaxies, the black holes, the

¹⁰ Quoted from R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

earth, the rainforests, incy-wincy spider, you, me, everyone. He is not the result of our imagination; we are the result of his.”¹²

It is undoubtedly true that God created the universe, but it is unlikely that the expression “heaven and earth” is merely making this point. Rather than functioning as a merism, it identifies the two great realms of creation, in the terms of the Nicene Creed, “of all things visible and invisible.” This is the first of many binary couplets that we will encounter in the creation account. In addition to the material, there is also the unseen, heavenly world that was also created by God. In this way, Genesis 1:1 rejects materialism, the view that matter is all there is. David Atkinson writes:

“heaven” refers to a higher world, of angels, of God’s throne, of God’s glory. . . . There may be much within the created world which we cannot sense, cannot weigh and measure, cannot put in a test tube; there may be more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy; but the Lord God made them all. There is a created spiritual world, just as there is a created material world.¹³

This was evidently the view of the early church Council of Nicea, which began the Nicene Creed by saying, “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.”

Genesis 1 will detail the creation and forming of the material universe, which is why verse 2 focuses on “the earth” separately from the heavens. But from the beginning, God created all that is, including the spiritual realms. No doubt, from the perspective of the original hearers of Genesis, “the heavens and the earth” encompassed both the material and spiritual realms. Looking around them they saw the rocks, hills, and streams. Looking up they saw not only light from the distant stars but they imagined the heavenly realms of glory that even today the strongest telescope cannot perceive.

To say that God created all things rules out the theory that matter came into being by chance. But Genesis chapter 1 will also make clear that verse 1 launches a highly developed creative process that shapes and forms all things. Therefore, not only broad categories like

¹² Alasdair Paine, *The First Chapters of Everything*, 18.

¹³ David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 22.

matter and time were created by God, but actual planets, molecules, laws of nature, and definitions of life. What God created, he also formed. This is true not only for physical laws but also for moral laws. The Ten Commandments are just as fixedly created as are the laws of nature. Realizing God's created design is increasingly essential in today's neo-pagan Western culture. We hear today that gender is a social construct, whereas Genesis says that God created man "male and female" (Gen. 1:27). Our courts may decree that marriage licenses must be issued to any kind of romantic relationship, but Genesis 2 will teach that God created marriage between a man and a woman. There is right and wrong, life and death, male and female, good and evil because of God's sovereign design in creation. We reject these created distinctions not only to our peril but to the great offense of the living God who created them as a reflection of own character as a God of truth.

It is in this sense that we remember Paul's warning that creation exposes the great folly of idolatry. The original readers of Genesis lived in a world where idolatry was common and widespread. Genesis 1 is intended as an assault against all false gods and all false worship. Henri Blocher writes: "Just as Abraham left his family and the land of his ancestors, so with its very first step the metaphysics of the Bible leaves behind the metaphysics of the pagan world."¹⁴ There is one God who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth. Genesis declares that the maker of the galaxies is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who revealed himself not only in creation but also through his revealed Word through the patriarchs and the prophets. Rebellious creatures who refuse him worship and exalt others in his place will find themselves at odds with the very Creator whose purposes are certain to stand.

The Story Begins

We have noted that the words, "In the beginning," show that there is a history that began long ago and of which we are still a part. There is a trajectory and a story that Genesis 1:1 announces. The great question to ask is "What is that story?" If we wonder, we

¹⁴ Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1984), 61.

should ask the original audience to which the book of Genesis was written. The Bible tells us that Genesis was written by Moses during the time of Israel's exodus from Egypt. Therefore, when we read the words, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," we should imagine the people of Israel walking upon the desert earth, gazing up at the million shining lights of the blazing heavens which God had made. God made all the glory shining down on them, as well as the good earth of the land to which they were sojourning. If we ask those Israelite readers, "What is your story?" we will gain a clue to what began in Genesis 1:1. We know their answer, that the story that begins with God's creation is the great story of redemption. They were living the story of deliverance from bondage to evil and salvation in a land of promise which God intended from the Bible's first verse. Their story looked back to God's creation and then to man's sin and the misery and death it produced. But their story looked forward to a Savior, who was also part of God's original design, to the lamb slain "before the foundation of the world" (1 Pet. 1:19).

It is no wonder, then, that the New Testament Gospel message begin in language that deliberately echoes Genesis 1:1. Moses began the story of creation, from which the tale of sin and redemption would emerge, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." The apostle John, centuries later, opened the gospel story of the new creation in deliberate echo, speaking of Jesus Christ, "In the beginning was the Word" (Jn. 1:1). In this way we are reminded that to begin the Bible is to relish the story it tells, the terrible problem it defines, and the marvelous solution it offers from God. Beginning in Genesis 1:1, we learn about God, creation, and history, and from there begin to learn about ourselves, sin, death, and salvation. Just as the Israelites who first heard the message of Genesis were a people moving forward to a saving encounter with God's Messiah, so too should we read Genesis as a beginning of our meeting with God, for salvation through the Savior he has appointed to come to us in our need, the Redeemer Jesus Christ.