

Review

We always do well to pay heed to the literary structure of a book, because then and only then do we encounter the text as the author intended us to encounter it. This is true of all literature, the books of the Bible no less than any other.

As we have seen before, Genesis consists of eleven major literary units. The first, which extends from 1:1 to 2:3, supplies us with an introduction to the book as a whole. This in turn is followed by ten more units, each of which begins with some variation of, "These are the generations of..."

- I. Introduction: overview of creation (1:1-2:3)
- II. The generations of the heavens and the earth (2:4-4:26)
- III. The generations of Adam (5:1-6:8)
- IV. The generations of Noah (6:9-9:29)
- V. The generations of the sons of Noah (10:1-11:9)
- VI. The generations of Shem (11:10-26)
- VII. The generations of Terah (11:27-25:11)
- VIII. The generations of Ishmael (25:12-18)
- IX. The generations of Isaac (25:19-35:29)
- X. The generations of Esau (36:1-37:1)
- XI. The generations of Jacob (37:2-50:26)

The first literary unit can be divided into the following subunits.

Introduction	1:1-2	
First paragraph	1:3-5	Creation of light
Second paragraph	1:6-8	Creation of sea and sky
Third paragraph	1:9-13	Creation of earth and plants
Fourth paragraph	1:14-19	Creation of sun, moon, and stars
Fifth paragraph	1:20-23	Creation of fish and fowl
Sixth paragraph	1:24-31	Creation of land animals and man
Seventh paragraph	2:1-3	Consecration of the seventh day

Verses 1-2 give us the general statement of God's creative activity. In verses 3-31 we are given the particulars, and we should note that there is a correspondence between the creative acts of God performed on the first three days and those performed on the last three days.

Day	Day
1 – Light	4 – Sun, moon, and stars
2 – Sea and sky	5 – Fish and fowl
3 – Earth and plants	6 – Land animals and man

Two other aspects of this passage's structure should be noted. In the first place,

The story is designed so that the descriptions of the creative days grow progressively longer. The first two days are briefly recounted (with 31 and 38 words respectively). The next three days (3, 4, and 5) are approximately double that length (69, 69, and 57 words respectively); and the account of the final creative day (day 6) is doubled again (149 words). This structuring technique conveys the impression of ever-increasing variety and profusion. (Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*, p. 49)

Secondly, the Sabbath day, coming last and having no other day with which it is paired, "stands in the position of emphasis so that "its highlighting foreshadows its future importance." (Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*, p. 49).

Genesis 1

¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was without form and void, and darkness covered the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

Instead of taking verse one as an independent statement, grammatically separate from verse two, some have undertaken to render it as a temporal clause, ultimately dependent for its meaning on verse three.

When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep... —God said, "Let there be light" (*The Jewish Study Bible*)

This rendering implies that the earth was already in existence, or at least that there was material ready at hand for God to use in forming the earth. Another translation conveys this idea even more clearly.

When God set about to create heaven and earth—the world being then a formless waste, with darkness over the seas (E. A. Speiser, p. 3)

For grammatical and other reasons, the traditional rendering is to be preferred, which clearly conveys the idea of what may be called “absolute creation” (Douglas Kelly, *Creation and Change*, p. 79). This is creation *ex nihilo*, “out of nothing.” It is the creation of matter itself, prior to which nothing at all existed, except, of course, God himself.

The earth was without form and void — Cassuto translates this as “without form or life.” The dry land had not yet been made to appear and take shape with shore lines and mountains and valleys and other geological features that distinguish one part of the land from another. Rather, all solid matter lay beneath a vast world-wide ocean (*the deep*) that was void of life.

and darkness was over the face of the deep — The picture we get is that of solid matter covered with water, which is in turn covered with darkness (cf. Ps. 104:5-9).

And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters — The Hebrew for “the Spirit of God” is *rûah 'elôhîm*. E.A. Speiser translates the phrase as “an awesome wind.” He understands *rûah* to carry its most basic meaning, “a movement of air” (*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, p. 836), and takes *'elôhîm* as an adjective. Josephus also understands the passage as referring to the wind. “The earth,” he says, “was covered with thick darkness, and a wind moved upon its surface.”¹ Calvin, however, says, “The opinion of some that it means the *wind*, is too frigid to require refutation. They who understand by it the Eternal Spirit of God, do rightly...” (Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 1, p. 73)

Indeed, it seems best to render the phrase as “the Spirit of God,” and to understand that in the sequel it is the Spirit of God who performs the divine fiat in each case (cf. Job 33:4; Ps. 104:30).

¹ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 1.1.1

It is a beautiful figure which the divine author uses to describe the scene: “the Spirit of God was *hovering over* the face of the waters.” A related word is used in a similar image in Deuteronomy 32:11, depicting the Lord’s care for Israel.

Like an eagle that stirs up its nest,
that *flutters over* its young,
spreading out its wings, catching them,
bearing them on its pinions (Deut. 32:11)

Genesis 1

³ And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

(1:3) The account of each day of the creation week is introduced with the words, *And God said* – The creative act of God was performed by the word of his command (cf. Ps. 33:6; Heb. 11:3; 2 Pet. 3:5).

The creation of the universe *ex nihilo* by *fiat* is a feat of unrivalled power. The event is frequently pointed to as the basis for accepting Jehovah, the God of Israel, as the one and only true God (e.g., 2 Ki. 19:15; 1 Chron. 16:26; 2 Chron. 2:12; Ps. 124:8; Isa. 45:12, 18; Rev. 14:7).

It may be that “*God said*” is a figure for “*God willed*” (cf. Rev. 4:11).

No account is given in verse one of the means by which God created the heavens and the earth, which are said in verse two to be without form and void. But after this initial act of creation we find some variation of the words, “and God said, ‘Let there be...etc.’ ” *seven* times (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24). The first of these times has to do with the creation of light.

“*Let there be light*” – Note the terseness of expression both in the command as well as in the record of its fulfillment. “Let there be light. And there was light.” There are no

wasted words. The terseness seems intended to convey the thought that the command was obeyed as soon as it was uttered.

(1:4) *And God saw that the light was good* — This is the first of *seven* times the result of God's creative activity is said to be good.

The importance of recognizing the *goodness* of God's creation can hardly be overemphasized. The Bible's testimony on this point stands in stark contrast to various pagan, Gnostic, monastic, and even fundamentalist protestant ideas that holiness, or true spirituality, consists in denying oneself of finding enjoyment in the physical world, as if the physical world is inherently evil. But Scripture celebrates the works of God and his saints rejoice in his creation.

And God separated the light from the darkness —

(1:5) *And there was evening and there was morning, the first day* — Cassuto comments on the significance of the order ("there was evening and there was morning"):

"Throughout the Bible there obtains only one system of *computing time*: the day is considered to begin in the morning; but in regard to the festivals and appointed times, the Torah ordains that they shall be observed also on the night of the *preceding day*." (Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, p. 29)

For an example of this reckoning, see Leviticus 22:32. In speaking of the Day of Atonement, the Lord tells Moses,

It shall be to you a Sabbath of solemn rest, and you shall afflict yourselves. On the ninth day of the month beginning at evening, from evening to evening shall you keep your Sabbath.

Scoffers scoff at the fact that light was created on day, apart from the sun, which was not made until day four. Rabbi Sforno says, "This was the special light which functioned only during the seven days of Creation." (Sforno in *The Soncino Chumash*, p. 1) But why should God create a special light? Why not make the sun the first of his creatures? Because of man's predilection for sun worship.

The first and most important fact established in the Bible's opening chapter, indeed in its opening sentence, is that God, and God alone, created the world. This assertion represents a complete break with the prevailing view at the time, that nature itself is divine. Ancient man worshiped nature; the sun was its most common manifestation. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for sun, *shemesh*, from the root meaning "servant," leaves no doubt about the divine order of the universe: that which other people worship as God (i.e., the Babylonian sun god was called Shamash), the language of the Bible makes clear, is but God's servant. (Telushkin, *Biblical Literacy*, p. 5)

In his commentary on this passage, Calvin says,

It did not, however, happen from inconsideration or by accident, that the light preceded the sun and the moon. To nothing are we more prone than to tie down the power of God to those instruments, the agency of which he employs. The sun and moon supply us with light: and, according to our notions, we so include this power to give light in them, that if they were taken away from the world, it would seem impossible for any light to remain. Therefore the Lord, by the very order of the creation, bears witness that he holds in his hand the light, which he is able to impart to us without the sun and moon. (Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 1, p. 76)

He expands on this in the *Institutes*.

No creature has a force more wondrous or glorious than that of the sun. For besides lighting the whole earth with its brightness, how great a thing is it that by its heat it nourishes and quickens all living things! That with its rays it breathes fruitfulness into the earth! That it warms the seeds in the bosom of the earth draws them forth with budding greenness, increases and strengthens them anew, until they rise up into stalks! That it feeds the plant with continual warmth, until it grows into flower, and from flower into fruit! That then, also, with baking heat it brings the fruit to maturity! That in like manner trees and vines warmed by the sun first put forth buds and leaves, then put forth a flower, and from the flower produce fruit! Yet the Lord, to claim the whole credit for all these things, willed that, before he created the sun, light should come to be and earth be filled with all manner of herbs and fruits [Gen. 1:3, 11, 14]. Therefore a godly man will not make the sun either the principal or the necessary cause of these things which existed before the creation of the sun, but

merely the instrument that God uses because he so wills; for with no more difficulty he might abandon it, and act through himself. (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I. xvi. 2)

The creation of light apart from the sun is intended to teach us that God is able to accomplish his purpose with or without means (cf. Rev. 21:23; 22:5).

But there is even more to it than this. James Murphy says of this first day,

This day is in many ways interesting to us. It is the first day of the last creation; it is the first day of the week; it is the day of the resurrection of the Messiah; and it has become the Christian Sabbath. (James Murphy, *Barnes Notes*, vol. 1, p. 45)

This is worth pondering. That it pleased God to raise up our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead on the first day of the week, the day on which God first created light, ought to be a matter of special interest to us. The symbolism is particularly rich. In the same way that God brought forth light out of eternal darkness at the beginning of creation, so he brought forth that true spiritual light when he raised Jesus from the dead, thereby declaring him to be his own dear Son (Rom. 1:4) and bringing that life which is the light of men (Jn. 1:4) into the world. The apostle Paul links the transforming power of our redemption in Christ to the initial act of creation when he says, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

Light is used as a symbol of: (1) goodness as opposed to evil (Job 24:13; Jn. 3:20; Rom. 13:12; Eph. 5:8-9); (2) God's favor and the joy this favor brings (Esther 8:16; Ps. 97:11; 112:4; Prov. 4:18); (3) life (Job 33:28, 30; Ps. 49:19); (4) truth and understanding as opposed to error and ignorance (Ps. 19:8; 43:3; 119:105, 130; Dan. 5:14); (5) God himself (Isa. 60:19-20; Jas. 1:17; 1 Tim. 6:16; 1 Jn. 1:5); (6) the Messiah (Isa. 9:2[cf. Matt. 4:15-16]; Lk. 2:32; Jn. 1:4-9; 8:12; 12:46); and more.²

The resurrection of the Messiah was the beginning of a new creation (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15), the beginning of a new heaven and a new earth ().

² See Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III, *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), pp. 509-512