

**IN THE BEGINNING**  
**GENESIS 1:1 - 11:26**

## Introduction to Genesis 1-11

During the Babylonian Exile in the 6th century BC (see pages 20-22) the exiles came in contact with the religious ideas and cult of Babylon. They were stunned at how primitive it all was.

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands.  
They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see.  
They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell.  
They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk.  
They make no sound in their throats.  
Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them.

– Psalm 115:4-8

They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, “Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and have eaten. Now shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?” He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, “Is not this thing a fraud?”

– Isaiah 44:18-20

The exiles also came in contact with Babylonian myths about the genesis of the gods, the beginnings of humanity and the privileged position of Babylon in the world. What we are about to read in the first eleven chapters of Genesis presents an alternative view of creation, of the origins of mankind, and of the presence and action of God in the world – a view that is inspired by the distinctive faith of Israel in YHWH and in the special relationship of God with Israel. Scholars discern two different kinds of material in these chapters, recognisable by their different styles, interests and themes. We have an account of creation culminating in the blessing of the seventh day, a story of the Flood, and a number of genealogies. These have the distinctive style of the Priestly School (P). There is also a story of the beginnings of the human race, which looks at the human condition in the light of Israel’s faith, and includes the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the Flood and the Tower of Babel. The authors of Genesis have blended this material into one continuous narrative. Both strands are composed as counters to the primeval myths encountered in Babylon during the exile, and they declare that the God of Israel, YHWH, is the Creator of the universe and the Lord of history.

As noted in the Introduction, the most helpful way to read these chapters is to join the returned exiles and read these chapters as they found their final shape in the post-exilic period. These chapters are not history as we understand history, for they do not narrate historical events. At the same time they are not myth, for myth sets out to describe a stable and unchanging situation, usually supported by cult, and one that favours the power exercised by the ruler who is presented as ‘divine’. The material we are about to study has a different focus. It is on God as creator, on God’s relationship with creation, and especially with the human race, and on how people must live to benefit from God’s blessing.

The text expresses inspired insights into God’s design for creation and into why it is that God’s design is sometimes thwarted by human sin. The kind of sin that is highlighted comes from reflection on the kind of sin that brought about the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile. The post-exilic authors wanted their contemporaries to learn the right lessons, so as not to repeat the sin of their ancestors.

**PART I**  
**CREATION OF THE UNIVERSE**  
**GENESIS 1:1 - 2:4a**

### Introduction to Genesis 1

It was important for the authors of Genesis to state that their God, the God of Israel, was the one who created the universe. The destruction of Jerusalem, the exile in Babylon, and the fact that the community in Judah after the exile was still under the control of a foreign power (Persia) could have led some to think that YHWH, the God of Israel, was less powerful and of less significance than the gods of Babylon or Persia. Some in exile were tempted to despair: 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely' (Ezekiel 37:11). So it was for those left in Judah: 'YHWH has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me' (Isaiah 49:14); 'My way is hidden from YHWH, and my right is disregarded by my God' (Isaiah 40:27). The authors wanted to state that their God, the God of Israel, the only true God, is the creator of the universe, including the nations that had defeated them in battle and under whose authority they now lived.

The authors chose, therefore, to introduce the primeval narrative, indeed the whole Torah, with a magnificent, dramatic piece that said exactly this. There are indications that they were aware of the Mesopotamian creation myths that they encountered in exile (see page 23). Indeed, the image of the land and its human inhabitants coming to life out of the chaos of flooding waters parallels what we find in these myths. It is hardly a Palestinian image, where it is the desert, not flooding waters, that threatens life. The myths of Mesopotamia begin with the genesis of the gods. Not so in the opening chapter of Genesis. It begins with God, the only God (identified in 2:4 as YHWH, the God of Israel), and it begins with creation as we know it: the place where human beings live out their lives. The stars, worshipped as divine in Babylon, are declared to be creatures of God. Whatever power the Babylonians might wield, the people of Israel need not envy them, for whatever exists owes its being to the God of Israel.

Those who chose to introduce their writing with this triumphant cry show no signs of a weakening of faith. Others might see the victory of the Babylonian army as proof that the Babylonian god, Marduk, was more powerful than YHWH. Not so the authors of Genesis. Their God is the God who ‘created the heavens and the earth’. Bewildering as their exile had been to them, God had redeemed them from it, for, as the members of the Isaiah School reminded them: ‘The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called’ (Isaiah 54:5). For reasons that they struggled to comprehend, it was their God who ‘created the ravager to destroy’ (Isaiah 54:16). However, God would never abandon them and ‘no weapon that is fashioned against you shall prosper’ (Isaiah 54:17). Their faith and their praise of their God is echoed in prayer:

Let this be recorded for a generation to come,  
 so that a people yet unborn may praise YHWH:  
 that he looked down from his holy height,  
 from heaven YHWH looked at the earth,  
 to hear the groans of the prisoners,  
 to set free those who were doomed to die,  
 so that the name of YHWH may be declared in Zion,  
 and his praise in Jerusalem.

– Psalm 102:18-21

The creator of the heavens and the earth would create his people once again, and not just for them, but that they might carry out the mission entrusted to them – a mission for the world and for all humankind. Such was the faith that sustained them in exile, and this is the faith proclaimed here in the opening chapter of Genesis.

The Hebrew word for ‘God’ is a plural form, <sup>ʿ</sup>lohîm. Some suggest that it is a plural of sovereignty and authority: a statement that the God of Israel has all the qualities of the other gods put together. The word used for ‘create’ (bārāʾ) is never used in the Bible with any other subject but God. Its basic meaning seems to be ‘to cut’, to ‘separate out’, and so to order in a way that establishes identity. The heavens and the earth exist because of the action of God who wills it that way. Everything comes within the providence of this all-powerful God.

**<sup>1</sup>In the beginning  
 God created the  
 heavens and the  
 earth.**

God calls creation into being

**<sup>2</sup>The earth was *without form, an empty wasteland, and darkness covered the primeval deep.***

Take away God's creative activity and you are left with an earth 'without form, an empty wasteland' (tôhû wā bôhû) – a dramatic, symbolic image found also in Jeremiah who uses it to speak of the devastation brought about in Judah by the Babylonian army:

I looked on the earth, and it was *without form, an empty wasteland* (tôhû wā bôhû);  
and to the heavens, and they had no light.  
I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,  
and all the hills moved to and fro.  
I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,  
and all the birds of the air had fled.  
I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert.

– Jeremiah 4:23-26

In the swirling waters of primeval chaos, as in the desert, there is no life, no orientation, no forms, no space, no time. The formless void is shrouded in darkness.

**God's breath swept over the surface of the waters.**

The swirling of the waters of chaos is not the only movement. A powerful wind from God is blowing over it. The contrast between the swirling waters and God's powerful wind ('breath', 'spirit') sets up a tension and an expectation, which is resolved when God's breath becomes God's word of command (compare Psalm 18:10; 33:6; 104:3-4).

**<sup>3</sup>And God said: 'Let light be', and there was light.**

Verse two paints a picture of what the world would be like without God. The rest of Genesis 1 is a song of praise for what God is doing. It provides the universal context within which God's people are to reflect on God's will, which, as verse three makes clear, is to create light and order where all might seem darkness and chaos.

**<sup>4</sup>And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.**

There is still darkness in our world, but its all-pervasive dominance is shattered by God's powerful word. It is God's will that there be light, and nothing can resist God's will. The author is not thinking in terms of God creating out of nothing, nor is he imagining some formless matter in existence prior to God's creating act. Such notions first occur under the influence of Greek thought (see 2Maccabees 7:28 and Wisdom 11:17). Coming from God, light is necessarily 'good'. God separates light from darkness, thus setting in motion the rhythm of time. In naming the light and the darkness God is authoritatively declaring his dominion over both. Darkness, though not created by God, comes under God's divine providence. Like light, it is given a purpose.

**<sup>5</sup>God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.**

It is important to keep in mind that the authors are handing on ancient traditions about the make-up of the world. We cannot argue that they still imagined the sky as a solid vault, any more that we can assert that a modern person still thinks of the sun as circling the earth when he speaks of the sun rising in the east. Their aim is to state that the creating God of the ancient myths is the God of Israel.

Having created light and so time, God now creates space to make possible the order that we experience. Having decided to create (1:6), God goes on to 'separate' and to 'name', as in verses four to five. The repeated refrains reinforce confidence in the stability and predictability of the world. Day will always be there after night, and the solid vault of the sky will keep the waters that fall as rain from uniting with the waters that surround the earth and well up from the ground. God's creating action ensures that chaos is kept at bay. Space, like time, is under the dominion of God's providence.

The authors portray God as freeing the earth from the dominion of the chaotic waters by a powerful act of separation (creation). How would this have been read by those who had experienced the chaos of exile, and were once again living in the land promised them by God?

In naming the earth and the seas, God declares his dominion over them. Once again we hear that what God is doing is 'good' (see 1:4). This theme will continue for the rest of the hymn. The returned exiles are being called to celebrate what God does, for it is, indeed, good.

**<sup>6</sup>And God said: 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.'**

**<sup>7</sup>So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so.**

**<sup>8</sup>God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.**

**<sup>9</sup>And God said: 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so.**

**<sup>10</sup>God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.**

**<sup>11</sup>Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so.**

**<sup>12</sup>The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good.**

**<sup>13</sup>And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.**

**<sup>14</sup>And God said: ‘Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years,**

**<sup>15</sup>and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so.**

**<sup>16</sup>God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars.**

**<sup>17</sup>God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth,**

**<sup>18</sup>to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good.**

**<sup>19</sup>And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.**

God calls forth the inner potential of the earth, now that it has been freed from the swirling waters of chaos. This would surely have been an encouragement for the returned exiles as they struggled to make a living in the less than fertile land around Jerusalem, which was all that remained of Judah (see map page 30). If their God is the Lord of creation as well as of history, and if their God has willed that they return to the Promised Land, surely they can rely on God to make the land fruitful for them.

The authors do not name the sun or the moon – possibly because they were worshipped as gods in the surrounding cultures. Speaking of their dominion is perhaps an echo of the ancient myths, though here their dominion is limited to the day and the night. They are clearly God’s creation.

In God’s purpose the sun and the moon have three functions. Firstly, they are to give light. The authors make no attempt to coordinate this with the light created by God on the first day. Secondly, they are to exercise dominion. All human activity is ruled by time, which is determined by these lights of the heavens. This is celebrated in Psalm 104: ‘You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting’ (verse 19). (The whole of Psalm 104 is worth reading as it parallels Genesis 1). Thirdly, they are God’s instruments in separating night from day. Here, too, no attempt is made to link this with God’s action on day one.

The repeated refrains, the constant rhythm of the music, the assonance and the alliteration in the Hebrew poetry, underline the basic stability of what is being asserted here. It is God who calls creation into being, and creation is good. It is to be celebrated with joy (see Psalm 136:1-9).



God's action on the fourth day sees chaos overcome by divine power, and our beautiful cosmos established. God's creative action is celebrated in a spirit of wonder and praise. God has spoken. Creation is good and God can be trusted to continue to care for the creation he has made.

Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs;  
you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.  
You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water;  
you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it.  
You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges,  
softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.  
You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness.  
The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy,  
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain,  
they shout and sing together for joy.

– Psalm 65:8-13

The wonder of creation is echoed by Job:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?  
Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know!  
Or who stretched the line upon it?

On what were its bases sunk,  
or who laid its cornerstone  
when the morning stars sang together  
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

Or who shut in the sea with doors  
when it burst out from the womb?—  
when I made the clouds its garment,  
and thick darkness its swaddling band,  
and prescribed bounds for it,  
and set bars and doors,  
and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther,  
and here shall your proud waves be stopped'?

Have you commanded the morning since your days began,  
and caused the dawn to know its place,  
so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,  
and the wicked be shaken out of it?

It is changed like clay under the seal,  
and it is dyed like a garment.

Light is withheld from the wicked,  
and their uplifted arm is broken.

## The wonder of creation

Have you entered into the springs of the sea,  
or walked in the recesses of the deep?  
Have the gates of death been revealed to you,  
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?  
Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?  
Declare, if you know all this.

Where is the way to the dwelling of light,  
and where is the place of darkness,  
that you may take it to its territory  
and that you may discern the paths to its home?  
Surely you know, for you were born then,  
and the number of your days is great!

Have you entered the storehouses of the snow,  
or have you seen the storehouses of the hail,  
which I have reserved for the time of trouble,  
for the day of battle and war?  
What is the way to the place where the light is distributed,  
or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth?

Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain,  
and a way for the thunderbolt,  
to bring rain on a land where no one lives,  
on the desert, which is empty of human life,  
to satisfy the waste and desolate land,  
and to make the ground put forth grass?

Has the rain a father,  
or who has begotten the drops of dew?  
From whose womb did the ice come forth,  
and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?  
The waters become hard like stone,  
and the face of the deep is frozen.

Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades,  
or loose the cords of Orion?  
Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season,  
or can you guide the Bear with its children?  
Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?  
Can you establish their rule on the earth?

– Job 38:1-33

God now fills creation with life – in the sea and in the air. Psalm 104:25-26 celebrates the sea creatures:

Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

Here in Genesis Leviathan loses its mythical status. The crocodile is a creature of God like the smaller fish of the sea. It is all good.

With life comes God's blessing – the power to reproduce life and so carry on God's creative activity (see also 1:28; 9:1,7). This blessing recurs throughout the patriarchal narrative. God is not a controlling God (see pages 27-29) like the gods of the Babylonian myths, nor does creation exist to make life easier for the gods. God gives life, and with it the freedom for creation to carry on giving life.

God now fills the earth. All is good. The blessing of animals is held over till God creates and blesses mankind, for the animal world and the world of humankind belong to each other.

**<sup>20</sup>And God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.'**

**<sup>21</sup>So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good.**

**<sup>22</sup>God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.'**

**<sup>23</sup>And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.**

**<sup>24</sup>And God said, Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so.**

**<sup>25</sup>God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.**

**<sup>26</sup>Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'**

**<sup>27</sup>So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.**

**<sup>28</sup>God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'**

**<sup>29</sup>God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.**

**<sup>30</sup>And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so.**

**<sup>31</sup>God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.**

The word for 'God' in Hebrew is plural ('<sup>e</sup>lohîm), a relic of a polytheistic world, or a statement that God has all the qualities of the various gods put together. The plural 'us' could reflect this.

Human beings (hā 'ādām) are in God's image and likeness in that as male and female they are able to carry on God's creative act and reproduce other human beings. They are also entrusted with responsibility for the other living creatures created by God. Most importantly of all, they are in God's image and likeness because they alone of all the creatures of the earth are able to dialogue with God. Notice that in verse twenty-eight God directly addresses the human beings, the masterpiece of his creative action.

In reflecting on what it means to be human, the authors go to the heart of the matter, focusing on the relationship of human beings with God. Every human being is sacred, because made in God's image. At the most profound level we are all equal before God.

God makes the rest of creation subject to human beings, who are to take possession of the earth, for it is for them. This includes the responsibility to 'rule over' creation, not in the sense of using creation for their own purposes, but in the sense that human beings are responsible to see that the rest of the created world achieves the purpose set it by God. The word 'have dominion over' (rādâ) is used by Ezekiel (34:4) in relation to the king who is accused of failing to 'rule', in the sense of caring for his subjects like a shepherd. In commanding human beings to rule, God is commanding them to 'shepherd'. Their obligation is that of pastors.

God blesses the human beings. They can hand on the life they have received. By blessing them, God is giving a guarantee that he is always acting in and through them to give life and to care for creation. They do not have to wait on divine intervention. The blessing is inherent in being human. The animal world shares this blessing, and God gives them vegetation as their food. All is good.

God's creating action has been presented in seven scenes. The phases of the moon are the basis on which ancient societies divided time into seven day units. The authors also wanted God's creating action to reach a climax with the establishment of the Sabbath (*šābat* means 'to rest'). With the loss of the holy land (holy space) and the temple, and with it public cult, the priests saw the need to establish sacred time as a self-identifying element that set them apart from the surrounding culture. They could be sacred to God (*qādaš* means 'to set apart' for the Holy One) even though they were not in possession of the land and had no place in which to carry out the cult. Sabbath was a day for the family to come together to remember and to celebrate God's choice of them. While the returned exiles set about rebuilding the temple in order to re-establish the cult, they did not want to lose the benefit of Sabbath practice.

Inevitably they saw the collapse of Judah as divine punishment for their unfaithfulness to the covenant. But it was not to lead them to despair, or to lose faith. In fact the special mission given to them by God stood out in sharp relief when they saw the poverty of the religious culture into which they had been flung.

The fact that God ceases creating on the seventh day is an assurance of the stability of creation – a theme underlying all the ancient myths. In many of the traditional creation myths, the gods complete their work with the establishing of a temple. The authors of Genesis highlight the fact that their God transcends any physical place. God can be worshipped anywhere. They are to make time for this on the seventh day – the day consecrated to their God. Note that the seventh day has no end. The authors and their community were still living in the seventh day, as are we. All time, all human history, is to be lived out in the presence of the sacred mystery, the mystery that is God.

Though there are echoes here of the ancient myths encountered by the exiles, the authors have liberated the creation story from myth, for they want it to be seen in the light of history. Their God is the God who created the universe. This is the God who has acted and will continue to act in the history of Israel and of the world. God has punished them, but God will be faithful to his promises, and no foreign power can stand before the power of the creator of the universe. Everything in the Bible is to be read against the universal background established by this hymn of praise, placed here as a Prologue to the Torah.

**<sup>1</sup>Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their organised array.**

**<sup>2</sup>And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.**

**<sup>3</sup>So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.**

## Conclusion to the Prologue

***<sup>4</sup>This is the story of the heavens and the earth when they were created.***

‘Story’ translates the Hebrew *tôl’dôt* which appears here for the first time. It seems to be a key to the structure of the whole Book. It refers to ‘what came to be/was generated from something’. Here it functions as a conclusion to the Prologue, but, since chapter one is about creation, not generation, it is used here as a link with the following section. It introduces a story (as also 6:9, where it introduces the story of the flood, 11:27 where it introduces the story of Abraham, 25:19 where it introduces the story of Jacob, and 37:2 where it introduces the story of Joseph and his brothers). In other places *tôl’dôt* introduces a list of descendants (see 5:1, 10:1, 11:10, 25:12 and 36:1,9).