In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. 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.

1:1–11.26 Primeval History. The first eleven chapters of Genesis differ from those that follow. Chapters 12–50 focus on one main family line in considerable detail, whereas chs. 1–11 could be described as a survey of the world before Abraham. These opening chapters differ not only in their subject matter from ch. 12 onward, but also because there are no real parallels to the patriarchal stories in other literatures. In contrast to the patriarchal stories, however, other ancient nonbiblical stories do exist recounting stories about both creation and the flood. The existence of such stories, however, does not in any way challenge the authority or the inspiration of Genesis. In fact, the nonbiblical stories stand in sharp contrast to the biblical account, and thus help readers appreciate the unique nature and character of the biblical accounts of creation and the flood. In other ancient literary traditions, creation is a great struggle often involving conflict between the gods. The flood was sent because the gods could not stand the noise made by human beings, yet they could not control it. Through these stories the people of the ancient world learned their traditions about the gods they worshiped and the way of life that people should follow. Babylonian versions of creation and flood stories were designed to show that Babylon was the center of the religious universe and that its civilization was the highest achieved by mankind.

Reading Genesis, readers can see that it is designed to refute these delusions. There is only one God, whose word is almighty. He has only to speak and the world comes into being. The sun and moon are not gods in their own right, but are created by the one God. This God does not need feeding by man, as the Babylonians believed they did by offering sacrifices, but he supplies man with food. It is human sin, not divine annoyance, that prompts the flood. Far from Babylon’s tower (Babel) reaching heaven, it became a reminder that human pride could neither reach nor manipulate God.

These principles, which emerge so clearly in Genesis 1–11, are truths that run through the rest of Scripture. The unity of God is fundamental to biblical theology, as is his almighty power, his care for mankind, and his judgment on sin. It may not always be obvious how these chapters relate to geology and archaeology, but their theological message is very clear. Read in their intended sense, they provide the fundamental presuppositions of the rest of Scripture. These chapters should act as eyeglasses, so that readers focus on the points their author is making and go on to read the rest of the Bible in light of them.

1:1–2:3 God’s Creation and Ordering of Heaven and Earth. The book of Genesis opens with a majestic description of how God first created the heavens and earth and then how he ordered the earth so that it may become his dwelling place. Structured into seven sections, each marked by the use of set phrases, the entire episode conveys the picture of the all-powerful, transcendent God who sets everything in place with consummate skill in conformity to his grand design. The emphasis is mainly on how God orders or structures everything. The structure of the account is as follows: after giving the setting (1:1–2), the author describes the six workdays (1:3–31) and the seventh day, God’s Sabbath (2:1–3). Each of the six workdays follows the same pattern: it begins with “and God said,” and closes with “and there was evening and there was morning, the nth day.” After declaring that God is the Creator of all things (1:1), the focus of the rest of Genesis 1 (beginning at 1:3) is mainly on God bringing things into existence by his word and ordering the created things (“let the waters . . . be gathered together,” 1:9), rather than on how the earth was initially created (1:1). Different features indicate this. For example, vegetation is mentioned on day 3, prior to the apparent creation of the sun on day 4. Readers concerned with how to compare this passage with a modern scientific perspective should consult Introduction: Genesis and Science.

Viewed in its ancient Near Eastern context, Genesis 1 says that God created everything, but it is also an account of how God has structured creation in its ordered complexity. Readers are introduced in the first three days to Day, Night, the Heavens, Earth, Seas—all these items, and only these, being specifically named by God. In days 4–6 the three distinctive regions are populated: the Heavens with lights and birds; the seas with fish and swampy creatures; and the Earth with livestock and creeping things. God finally gives authority to human beings, as his vice-regents, to govern all these living creatures. Genesis 1 establishes a hierarchy of authority. Humanity is divinely commissioned to govern other creatures on God’s behalf, the ultimate purpose being that the whole earth should become the temple of God, the place of his presence, and should display his glory. 1:1 In the beginning. This opening verse can be taken as a summary, introducing the whole passage; or it can be read as the first event, the origin of the heavens and the earth (sometime before the first day), including the creation of matter, space, and time. This second view (the origin of the heavens and the earth) is confirmed by the NT writers’ affirmation that creation was from nothing (Heb. 11:3; Rev. 4:11). God created. Although the Hebrew word for “God,” Elohim, is plural in form (possibly to express majesty), the verb “create” is singular, indicating that God is thought of as one being. Genesis is consistently monotheistic in its outlook, in marked contrast to other ancient Near Eastern accounts of creation. There is only one God. The Hebrew verb bara’, “create,” is always used in the OT with God as the subject; while it is not always used to describe creation out of nothing, it does stress God’s sovereignty and power. Heavens and the earth here means “everything.” This means, then, that “In the beginning” refers to the beginning of everything. The text indicates that God created everything in the universe, which thus affirms that he did in fact create it ex nihilo (Latin “out of nothing”). The effect of the opening words of the Bible is to establish that God, in his inscrutable wisdom, sovereign power, and majesty, is the Creator of all things that exist.

1:2 The initial description of the earth as being without form and void, a phrase repeated within the OT only in Jer. 4:23, implies that it lacked order and content. The reference to darkness . . . over the face of the deep points to the absence of light. This initial state will be transformed by God’s creative activity: the Spirit of God was hovering. This comment creates a sense of expectation; something is about to happen. There is no reason to postulate that a long time elapsed between Gen. 1:1 and 1:2, during which time the earth became desolate and empty. Critical scholars argue that the word “deep” (Heb. tehom) is a remnant of Mesopotamian mythology from the creation account called Enuma Elish. Marduk, in fashioning the universe, had also to vanquish Tiamat, a goddess of chaos. These scholars believe that the Hebrew God had to conquer the chaos deity Tiamat in the form of the “deep” (notice the similarity of
And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. 2 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” 4 And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so.

And God called the expanse Heaven. 5 And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. 8 God called the dry land Earth, 9 and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, on the earth.” And it was so.

1:3–5 And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, 10 and for days and years, 

And let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light to the earth.” And it was so. 16 And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night. 17 16a or appointed times

the two words sehmôn and “Tiamat”), there are many linguistic reasons, however, for doubting a direct identification between the two. In any event, there is no conflict in Genesis or in the rest of the Bible between God and the deep, since the deep readily does God’s bidding (cf. 7:11; 8:2; Ps. 33:7; 104:6).

1:3–5 And God said. In ch. 1 the absolute power of God is conveyed by the fact that he merely speaks and things are created. Each new section of the chapter is introduced by God’s speaking. This is the first of the 10 words of creation in ch. 1. Let there be light. Light is the first of God’s creative works, which God speaks into existence. The light was good (v. 4). Everything that God brings into being is good. This becomes an important refrain throughout the chapter (see vv. 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). God called the light Day (v. 5). The focus in v. 5 is on how God has ordered time on a weekly cycle; thus, “let there be light” may indicate the dawning of a new day. God is pictured working for six days and resting on the Sabbath, which is a model for human activity. Day 4 develops this idea further; the lights are placed in the heavens for signs and seasons, for the purpose of marking days and years and the seasons of the great festivals such as Passover. This sense of time being structured is further emphasized throughout the chapter as each stage of God’s ordering and filling is separated by evening and morning into specific days: there was evening and there was morning, the first day. The order—evening, then morning—helps the reader to follow the flow of the passage: after the workday (vv. 3–5a) there is an evening, and then a morning, implying that there is a nighttime (the worker’s daily rest) in between. Thus the reader is prepared for the next workday to dawn. Similar phrases divide ch. 1 into six distinctive workdays, while 2:1–3 make a seventh day, God’s Sabbath. On the first three days God creates the environment that the creatures of days 4–6 will inhabit; thus, sea and sky (day 2) are occupied by fish and birds created on day 5 (see chart below). By a simple reading of Genesis, these days must be described as days in the life of God, but how his days relate to human days is more difficult to determine (cf. Ps. 90:4; 2 Pet. 3:8). See further Introduction: Genesis and Science.

### Location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Inhabitants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Light and dark</td>
<td>4. Lights of day and night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea and sky</td>
<td>5. Fish and birds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fertile earth</td>
<td>6. Land animals (including mankind)</td>
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<td>7. Rest and enjoyment</td>
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**1:6–8 Waters.** Water plays a crucial role in ancient Near Eastern creation literature. In Egypt, for example, the creator-god Ptah uses the preexistent waters (personified as the god Nun) to create the universe. The same is true in Mesopotamian belief: it is out of the gods of watery chaos—Apsu, Tiamat, and Mummu—that creation comes. The biblical creation account sits in stark contrast to such dark mythological polytheism. In the biblical account, water at creation is no deity; it is simply something God created, and it serves as material in the hands of the sole sovereign Creator. As light was separated from darkness, so waters are separated to form an expanse (vv. 6–7), which God calls Heaven (v. 8). As the ESV footnote illustrates by offering the alternative term “sky,” it is difficult to find a single English word that accurately conveys the precise sense of the Hebrew term shaman, “heaven/heavens.” In this context, it refers to what humans see above them, i.e., the region that contains both celestial lights (vv. 14–17) and birds (v. 20).

**1:9–13** Two further regions are organized by God: the dry land forming Earth, and the waters forming Seas (vv. 9–10). These are the last objects to be specifically named by God. God then instructs the earth to bring forth vegetation (vv. 11–12). While the creation of vegetation may seem out of place on day 3, it anticipates what God will later say in vv. 29–30 concerning food for both humanity and other creatures. The creation of distinctive locations in days 1–3, along with vegetation, prepares for the filling of these in days 4–6.

**1:14–19** This section corresponds closely with the ordering of Day and Night on the first day, involving the separation of light and darkness (vv. 3–5). Here the emphasis is on the creation of lights that will govern time, as well as providing light upon the earth (v. 15). By referring to them as the greater light and lesser light (v. 16), the text avoids using terms that were also proper names for pagan deities linked to the sun and the moon. Chapter 1 deliberately undermines pagan ideas regarding nature’s being controlled by different deities. (To the ancient pagans of the Near East, the gods were personified in various elements of nature. Thus, in Egyptian texts, the gods Ra and Thoth are personified in the sun and the moon, respectively.) The term made (Hb. ‘asah, v. 16), as the ESV footnote shows, need only mean that God “fashioned” or “worked on” them; it does not of itself imply that they did not exist in any form before this. Rather, the focus here is on the way in which God has ordained the sun and moon to order and define the passing of time according to his purposes. Thus the references to seasons (v. 14) or “appointed times” (ESV footnote) and to days and years are probably allusion to the appointed times and patterns in the Hebrew calendar for worship, festivals, and religious observance (Ex. 13:10; 23:15).

**1:16 and the stars.** The immense universe that God created (see note on
light to rule the night—and the stars. 17 And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, 18 to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. 19 And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

20 And God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.” 21 So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

22 And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” 23 And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

24 And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.” And it was so. 25 And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and every creeping thing creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

28 And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the

1 Or flying things; see Leviticus 11:19-20 2 The Hebrew word for man (adam) is the generic term for mankind and becomes the proper name Adam
The Seventh Day, God Rests

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and "all the host of them." And 'on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

The Creation of Man and Woman

1 These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.

2 When no "bush of the field" was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was

1 Or open country 2 Or earth; also verse 6

should be populated by those who know him and who serve wisely as his vice-regents or representatives. subdue it and have dominion. The term "subdue" (Hb. kabash) elsewhere means to bring a people or a land into subjection so that it will yield service to the one subduing it (Num. 32:22, 29).

Here the idea is that the man and woman are to make the earth's resources beneficial for themselves, which implies that they would investigate and develop the earth's resources to make them useful for human beings generally. This command provides a foundation for wise scientific and technological development; the evil uses to which people have put their dominion come as a result of Genesis 3. over every living thing. As God's representatives, human beings are to rule over every living thing on the earth. These commands are not, however, a mandate to exploit the earth and its creatures to satisfy human greed, for the fact that Adam and Eve were "in the image of God" (1:27) implies God's expectation that human beings will use the earth wisely and govern it with the same sense of responsibility and care that God has toward the whole of his creation.

1:31 Having previously affirmed on six occasions that particular aspects of creation are "good" (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), God now states, after the creation of the man and the woman, that everything he has made is very good; the additional behold invites the reader to imagine seeing creation from God's vantage point. While many things do not appear to be good about the present-day world, this was not so at the beginning. Genesis goes on to explain why things have changed, indicating that no blame should be attributed to God. Everything he created was very good: it answers to God's purposes and expresses his own overflowing goodness. Despite the invasion of sin (ch. 3), the material creation retains its goodness (cf. 1 Tim. 4:4).

2:1–3 These verses bring to a conclusion the opening section of Genesis by emphasizing that God has completed the process of ordering creation. The repeated comment that God rested does not imply that he was weary from labor. The effortless ease with which everything is done in ch. 1 suggests otherwise. Rather, the motif of God's resting hints at the purpose of creation.

As reflected in various ancient Near Eastern accounts, divine rest is associated with temple building. God's purpose for the earth is that it should become his dwelling place; it is not simply made to house his creatures. God's "activities" on this day (he finished, rested, blessed, "made it holy") all fit this delightful pattern. The concept of the earth as a divine sanctuary, which is developed further in 2:4–25, runs throughout the whole Bible, coming to a climax in the future reality that the apostle John sees in his vision of a "new heaven and a new earth" in Rev. 21:1–22:5. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy (Gen. 2:3). These words provide the basis for the obligation that God placed on the Israelites to rest from their normal labor on the Sabbath day (see Ex. 20:8–11). There is no evening-followed-by-morning refrain for this day, prompting many to conclude that the seventh day still continues (which seems to underlie John 5:17; Heb. 4:3–11).

2:4–4:26 Earth's First People. Centered initially on the garden of Eden, the episodes that make up this part of Genesis recount how God's ordered creation is thrown into chaos by the human couple's disobedience. The subsequent story of Cain and Abel and then Lamech (ch. 4) shows the world spiraling downward into violence, which precipitated the flood (6:11, 13). These events are very significant for understanding not only the whole of Genesis but all of the Bible.

2:4–25 The Man and Woman in the Sanctuary of Eden. The panoramic view of creation in ch. 1 is immediately followed by a complementary account of the sixth day that zooms in on the creation of the human couple, who are placed in the garden of Eden. In style and content this section differs significantly from the previous one; it does not contradict anything in ch. 1, but as a literary flashback it supplies more detail about what was recorded in 1:27. The picture of a sovereign, transcendent deity is complemented by that of a God who is both immanent and personal. The two portrayals of God balance each other, together providing a truer and richer description of his nature than either does on its own. In a similar way, whereas ch. 1 emphasizes the regal character of human beings, ch. 2 highlights their priestly status.

2:4 These are the generations of. This is the first of 11 such headings that give structure to the book of Genesis (cf. 5:1, which varies slightly; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1; 36:5; 37:2; see Introduction: Arrangement of the Book). Each heading concentrates on what comes forth from the object or person named. The earliest translators of Genesis into Greek (in the Septuagint) used the word genēsis to render the Hebrew word for "generations" (Hb. 'olelōdō); from this is derived the title "Genesis." The rest of the verse is artfully arranged in a mirror (or chiastic) form, the parts of the two poetic lines corresponding to each other in reverse order: heavens (A), earth (B), when they were created (C), in the day that the Lord God made (C), earth (B), heavens (A). This form unifies the two parts of the chiasmus, hereby inviting the reader to harmonize 2:5–25 with 1:1–23. Lord God. Throughout 1:1–2:3 the generic word "God" was used to denote the deity as the transcendent Creator. The reader is now introduced to God's personal name, "Yahweh" (translated as "LORD" because of the ancient Jewish tradition of substituting in Hb. the term that means "Lord" [Adonay] for "Yahweh" when reading the biblical text). The use of "Yahweh" throughout this passage underscores the personal and relational nature of God. The precedent for translating this as "LORD" and not "Yahweh" in English is found in the Septuagint's customary translation (Gk. Κυρίος, "LORD"). That translation was then quoted many times by the NT