

GENESIS 1:1–3 AND THE LITERARY BOUNDARY OF DAY ONE

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Abstract: *While Gen 1:5 clearly marks the end of day one, questions persist concerning whether day one begins in verse one (1:1–5), two (1:2–5), or three (1:3–5). The traditional interpretation of Gen 1:1–3—that day one begins in verse one—reflects the grammar and syntax in the most straightforward manner. This is confirmed by the inner-textual commentary in Exod 20:11 and 31:17. Further support can be found in ancient paragraph divisions (Qumran and later MT) and ancient Jewish literature. According to this view, Gen 1:1 is an independent clause depicting God’s initial creative act (creatio ex nihilo) on day one. Genesis 1:2 is a description of the condition of the earth as it was initially created. Genesis 1:3 then moves the narration forward. Thus, the first five verses (1:1–5) constitute the creative acts of day one. The text does not allow for the possibility of preexistent matter or an undisclosed period of time prior to day one.*

Key Words: *Genesis 1:1–3, literary boundary, day one, creation week, Hebrew grammar, Hebrew syntax, interpretation, preexistent matter, undisclosed period of time, Exodus 20:11, Exodus 31:17*

The Genesis creation account (1:1–2:3) is structured according to days which consist of God’s creative acts in six days and his Sabbath rest on the seventh day. Each of the six days of creation week are clearly marked off by the formula, “Then it was evening, then it was morning, day one/second day/third day/fourth day/fifth day/the sixth day.”¹ The paragraph sense divisions following the end of each day, attested in several ancient Qumran Genesis texts and preserved by the later medieval Masoretic Text, confirm this understanding of the structure of the creation account according to days. Due to such textual and paratextual markers at the end of each day, the beginning of each subsequent day within the narrative is rather straightforward. Nevertheless, while Gen 1:5 clearly marks the end of day one, questions persist concerning exactly where day one begins. Does the first day begin in verse one (1:1–5), two (1:2–5), or three (1:3–5)? Furthermore, how are we to understand the relationship of these opening verses?

1. *View #1: Day one begins in Gen 1:1.* The traditional view holds that verse one describes the initial creation of “the heavens and the earth” on day one.² Verse two

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¹ Gen 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31.

² E.g. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), 39–58; Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 90–96, 128–29; Edward J. Young, *Studies in Genesis One* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1964), 87–89, 103–5; Weston W. Fields, *Unformed and Unfilled: A Critique of the Gap Theory* (1976; repr. Collinsville, IL: Burgener Enterprises, 2000), 222.

serves as a parenthetical statement describing the initial state or condition of “the earth” as it was created in verse one. Verse three then moves the narration forward with a *wayyiqtol* verb, describing God’s creation of light.³ In this view, the first five verses (1:1–5) constitute the creative acts of day one. This view does not allow for preexistent matter or a period of time prior to day one of creation week. The following verses (1:6–31) then record the forming and filling of the heavens and the earth with the creation of the firmament (day two); dry land and plants (day three); the sun, moon, and stars (day four); sea creatures and flying creatures (day five); and land animals and man (day six).

2. *View #2: Day one begins in Gen 1:2.* Some hold that day one of creation week begins in verse two. Within this view, however, verse one is variously understood as either: (a) an introductory heading, summarizing the content of the creation account;⁴ or (b) a statement recording the initial creation of the universe (including the sun, moon, stars, etc.).⁵ Verse two then begins day one with the earth in a *תהו ובהו* state. Within this view, the opinion that verse one is an introductory heading (as opposed to the initial creation) allows for the possibility of preexistent matter since the earth would already be present (with no description of how it came to be) when God begins to create on day one. Also, regardless of how verse one is understood, this view allows for an undisclosed period of time prior to day one of creation week.⁶

Mark F. Rooker, “Genesis 1:1–3: Creation or Re-Creation? Part 1,” *BSac* 149.595 (1992): 316–23; idem, “Genesis 1:1–3: Creation or Re-Creation? Part 2,” *BSac* 149.596 (1992): 411–27. See also the works of Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. In addition, as will be argued, the traditional view is attested in ancient Jewish literature.

³ At the time God created light (1:3), the earth was in a *תהו ובהו* condition (1:2). See Young, *Studies in Genesis One*, 30–34.

⁴ E.g. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part 1: From Adam to Noah* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961; repr., Skokie, IL: Varda, 2005), 13, 19–30. After Cassuto referred to 1:1 as “the introductory verse” (p. 13), he further noted that 1:1 “constitutes a formal introduction to the entire section, and expresses at the outset, with majestic brevity, the main thought of the section: that in the beginning, that is, at the commencement of time, in the remotest past that the human mind can conceive, God created the heavens and the earth. How He created them will be related in detail further on” (p. 20).

⁵ E.g. John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 82–89; idem, *Genesis Unbound: A Provocative New Look at the Creation Account* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1996), 36–45. Sailhamer noted, “The first verse, a verbal clause, should be taken as an independent statement rather than a summary of the rest of chapter 1. Thus, 1:1 describes God’s first work of creation *ex nihilo*, and the rest of the chapter describes God’s further activity” (*Pentateuch as Narrative*, 82 n. 2).

⁶ The “ruin-reconstruction” gap theory, for example, views 1:1 as the original creation of the universe, followed by 1:2 which begins with the earth reduced to a *תהו ובהו* state as a result of God’s prior judgment. A long period of time is assumed between the initial creation in 1:1 and the re-creation beginning in 1:2. For grammatical, syntactical, and theological objections to the Gap Theory, see the systematic treatment by Fields, *Unformed and Unfilled*. Interestingly, Sailhamer has stated, “There are no ‘gaps’ in the creation account of Genesis 1, nor is there a ‘re-creation’ or ‘restitution’ of an original creation.” He then concluded that the “beginning” (*רֵאשִׁית*), described in 1:1, “was not a point of time but a period of time—in all likelihood, a long period of time” in which God created the universe. “After that period of time, God went on to prepare the ‘land’ as a place for human beings to dwell” during the six days of creation week as described in 1:2ff (*Genesis Unbound*, 44).

3. *View #3: Day one begins in Gen 1:3.* Others hold that the first two verses serve as a preface to day one which begins in verse three.⁷ Within this view also, verse one is variously understood as either: (a) an introductory heading, summarizing the content of the creation account,⁸ or (b) a statement recording the initial creation of “the heavens and the earth.”⁹ Verse two is understood as a description of the conditions of the earth just before day one begins.¹⁰ Verse three is then understood as beginning day one, based on the use of the *vayyiqtol* verb וַיֹּאמֶר (“then he said”). Within this view, the understanding that verse one is an introductory heading (as opposed to the initial creative act) allows for the possibility of preexistent matter as verse three would then begin God’s creative acts on day one with the earth already present. In addition, regardless of how verse one is understood, this view also allows for an undisclosed period of time prior to day one of creation week.¹¹

⁷ E.g. C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 42–43; idem, “Reading Genesis 1–2 with the Grain: Analogical Days,” in *Reading Genesis 1–2: An Evangelical Conversation* (ed. J. Daryl Charles; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), 83–85. Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 56–62; idem, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 179–85; Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 3–8; Richard E. Averbeck, “A Literary Day, Inter-Textual, and Contextual Reading of Genesis 1–2,” in *Reading Genesis 1–2: An Evangelical Conversation* (ed. J. Daryl Charles; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), 9–12; Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1967), 43–47.

⁸ For example, Waltke refers to Gen 1:1 as a summary statement “which encapsulates the entire narrative” (*Genesis: A Commentary*, 58) and as “the prologue to the entire narrative” (*An Old Testament Theology*, 179). Averbeck views Gen 1:1 as “a title announcing the subject of Gen 1, not as the actual beginning of God’s creation work in the chapter” (“A Literary Day, Inter-textual, and Contextual Reading of Genesis 1–2,” 10).

⁹ For example, Collins views Gen 1:1 as the “initial creation event” that “precedes the storyline” as opposed to “a summary of the account” (*Genesis 1–4*, 43). See also Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 44.

¹⁰ Averbeck, for example, posits that the description of the earth in verse 2 “corresponds to the common ANE pattern of starting creation accounts with the preexistence of a deep, dark, watery abyss” (“A Literary Day, Inter-textual, and Contextual Reading of Genesis 1–2,” 11).

¹¹ Concerning this view of 1:1–3, Collins concluded, “So, then, the six ‘creation days’ are not necessarily the first actual days of the universe; they are not even necessarily the first days of the earth itself. They are the days during which God set up the earth as the ideal place for human beings to live.” (“Reading Genesis 1–2 with the Grain: Analogical Days,” 85).

| View of Gen 1:1–3 and the Beginning of Day One | Implications ¹² |
|---|--|
| Day One Begins in 1:1 (1:1 as initial creative act) | Does not allow for preexistent matter. Does not allow for undisclosed period of time before day one. |
| Day One Begins in 1:2 (1:1 as initial creative act) | Does not allow for preexistent matter. Allows for undisclosed period of time before day one. |
| Day One Begins in 1:2 (1:1 as summary heading) | Allows for the possibility of preexistent matter. Allows for undisclosed period of time before day one. |
| Day One Begins in 1:3 (1:1 as initial creative act) | Does not allow for preexistent matter. Allows for undisclosed period of time before day one. |
| Day One Begins in 1:3 (1:1 as summary heading) | Allows for the possibility of preexistent matter. Allows for undisclosed period of time before day one. |

In order to determine where day one begins (1:1, 1:2, or 1:3), this paper will examine the grammar and syntax of Gen 1:1–3, along with the inner-textual commentary found in Exod 20:11 and 31:17, the paragraph divisions attested in ancient Qumran texts (and preserved in the medieval Masoretic Text), and the witness of ancient Jewish literature. However, a preliminary discussion on whether Gen 1:1 is an independent clause, as traditionally understood, or a dependent clause is warranted as the dependent clause view provides a markedly different understanding of the opening three verses.

I. GENESIS 1:1

The Bible begins with these familiar words—**בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ**—often translated, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Indeed, Gen 1:1 is the foundation of Scripture, and as such, a proper understanding of this verse is critical. Various interpretive and theological issues are raised from this single majestic statement. So, how should this verse be understood? What type of clause is 1:1?

¹² Others have recognized that the understanding of 1:1 as a summary heading allows for preexistent matter. E.g. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC 1; Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 11. He concluded that all views that understand 1:1 as either a dependent clause (discussed below) or, in this case, an introductory heading “presuppose the existence of chaotic pre-existent matter before the work of creation began.”

From antiquity the traditional understanding of Gen 1:1 has been that it is an independent clause. Thus, it is often translated something like, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”¹³ Some medieval Jewish commentators, however, advocated the view that Gen 1:1 is a dependent clause, with the main clause following in either verse two or verse three. Abraham Ibn Ezra (d. 1167), for example, viewed verse one as a dependent clause, with verse two as the main clause. Thus, the opening verses are understood as, “When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void.”¹⁴ Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, d. 1105), on the other hand, viewed verse one as a dependent clause, with verse two as a parenthetical statement, and verse three as the main clause. In this case, the opening verses are understood as, “When God began to create the heavens and the earth—and the earth was without form and void, etc.—God said, ‘Let there be light.’”¹⁵ Notably, it has been recognized that “the grammatical considerations did not motivate Rashi and Ibn Ezra in their choice. It was their own understanding about the order of Creation that led them to reject the traditional reading.”¹⁶

This departure from the traditional understanding of verse one as an independent clause has significant implications. The dependent clause view of verse one allows for the possibility of preexistent matter.¹⁷ That is, when God begins to create, the earth (along with the waters and darkness) is already present. Consequently, if verse one is a dependent clause, then the doctrine of absolute creation (*creatio ex nihilo*) is not clearly taught here in Gen 1:1–2:3.¹⁸

Determining how verse one should be read depends primarily upon how the opening word **בראשית** is to be understood. The view that verse one is a dependent clause (“When God began to create ...”) is based upon the understanding that **בראשית** is in the construct state. The central argument for this view is the absence of the definite article in **בְּרֵאשִׁית** and the fact that **ראשית** predominantly appears in the Hebrew Bible in the construct state. However, while **ראשית** does usually appear in the Hebrew Bible in the construct, it does also occur in the absolute state with-

¹³ This view of Gen 1:1 as an independent clause is reflected in numerous modern English translations such as NKJV, NIV, NASB, etc.

¹⁴ Ibn Ezra’s particular view of Gen 1:1 as a dependent clause, with 1:2 as the main clause, is reflected in the NRSV.

¹⁵ Rashi’s particular view of Gen 1:1 as a dependent clause is reflected in some modern English translations such as the JPS. See also Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 3.

¹⁶ John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” in vol. 2 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 22.

¹⁷ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26* (NAC 1a; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 137. Regarding the dependent clause views, he noted, “Both alternatives to the traditional translation give a relative beginning to creation, permitting the possibility of preexisting matter, though not necessarily so.” Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 11.

¹⁸ Young, *Studies in Genesis One*, 2; Sailhamer, “Genesis,” 21; Fields, *Unformed and Unfilled*, 161. Concerning the implications of the dependent clause view of Gen 1:1, Fields observed, “Besides the exclusion of *creatio ex nihilo* from Genesis, this interpretation presents a great problem by having the earth already in existence at the time of God’s creating.”

out the definite article (e.g. Isa 46:10).¹⁹ Consequently, the lack of a definite article with ראשית does not, by necessity, mean that it is in construct state. In other words, the definite article is not necessary for the absolute state. Further, time designations in adverbial expressions often lack the definite article.²⁰ Heidel, for example, observed that terms such as ראשית (beginning), ראש (head, beginning), קדם (ancient times), and עולם (forever, eternity), “when used in adverbial expressions, occur almost invariably *without* the article, and that in the absolute state.”²¹

In addition, neither the form of the word ראשית nor the context requires that it be understood as a construct. In fact, according to Young, “the context favors the absolute state.”²² Wenham, for example, noted, “The context of בראשית standing at the start of the account of world history makes an absolute sense highly appropriate here.”²³

Within the context of verse one the alliteration (בראשית ברא) also appears to tie together the concept of בראשית (“In the beginning”) with ברא (“he created”), a term (when in the *Qal* stem) used exclusively of divine activity. The verb ברא is also the most suitable word to express absolute creation. The linking of this term with בראשית here in verse one seems to express the idea that the beginning was by means of a divine creative act. Young concluded, “Hence, we may understand the writer as asserting that the heaven and earth had a beginning and that this beginning is to be found in the fact that God had created them.”²⁴

The construction of 1:1 (בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים) compared with 2:4b (בְּיוֹם עֲשׂוֹת) and 5:1b (בְּיוֹם בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים) “when the LORD God made”) and 5:1b (“when God created”) is also instructive. In 2:4b and 5:1b the dependent clause is marked by the construction בְּיוֹם (“in the day”), followed by an infinitive verb, both of which are absent in 1:1. A more natural way to render 1:1 as a dependent clause would have been to employ בְּיוֹם instead of בְּרֵאשִׁית. Also, in 1:1 בְּרֵאשִׁית is followed by a finite verb בְּרָא (“he created”) as opposed to an infinitive. Again, if 1:1 were a dependent clause, one would expect the infinitive form (בְּרֵא) here rather than the *qatal* form (בְּרָא).²⁵ Thus, a comparison of the clauses in these verses seems to indicate that 1:1 should be understood as an independent clause, “In the beginning God created”²⁶

¹⁹ Isa 46:10: מְגִיד מְרֵאשִׁית אַחֲרֵית (“declaring the end from the beginning”).

²⁰ Eduard König, *Historisch-Comparative Syntax der Hebräischen Sprache* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1897), 287; idem, *Die Genesis: Eingeleitet, Übersetzt und Erklärt* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1919), 130; Hasel, “Recent Translations of Genesis 1:1,” 158; Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 12.

²¹ Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis*, 92.

²² Young, *Studies in Genesis One*, 6.

²³ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 12.

²⁴ Young, *Studies in Genesis One*, 7.

²⁵ Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 138 n. 104. Heidel, among others, also suggested, “If the Massoretes [sic] had regarded verse 1 as a temporal clause subordinate to what follows, they would probably have used the more natural form *bérô* (בְּרֵא) in order to avoid ambiguity” (*Babylonian Genesis*, 94).

²⁶ See, for example, Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 106–7.

It is also significant that the traditional understanding, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” is supported by the ancient versions.²⁷ For example, LXX reads *Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν*, which understands Gen 1:1 as an independent (main) clause.²⁸ Indeed, these translations reflect an ancient understanding of the Hebrew text.

For all the above-stated reasons, the case for verse one as a dependent clause is unconvincing. The evidence compellingly points to the traditional view that verse one is an independent clause. Consequently, the biblical cosmology does not allow for preexistent matter.²⁹ Verse one stands as a declaration of absolute creation (*creatio ex nihilo*)—“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”³⁰

II. GENESIS 1:1–3

Within the consensus view that Gen 1:1 is an independent clause, there is still dispute concerning the relationship between verse one and the following two verses. Is verse one an introductory heading summarizing the content of creation week, with day one beginning in either verse two or three? Does verse one represent the initial creation of the universe, with day one beginning in either verse two or three? Or does verse one depict the initial creation of “the heavens and earth” on day one, with verse two describing the condition of the earth as it was created in verse one? These questions reveal several major challenges to the traditional understanding of Gen 1:1–3.

| Traditional View of Gen 1:1–3 | Challenges |
|---|---|
| 1:1 describes the initial creation of the “heavens and the earth” on day one. | 1:1 is an introductory heading summarizing the content of the creation account, resulting in day one beginning in either 1:2 or 1:3. |
| 1:2 is a parenthetical statement describing the condition of the earth as initially created in 1:1. | 1:2 does not describe the condition of the earth as initially created on day one, resulting in day one beginning in either 1:2 or 1:3. |
| 1:3 moves the narration of day one forward with a <i>wayyiqtol</i> verb, describing the creation of light. | 1:3 is understood as the beginning of day one, based on the <i>wayyiqtol</i> verb. |

²⁷ LXX, Aquila, Theodotion, Symmachus, Targum Onkelos, and the Vulgate.

²⁸ See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 94. Regarding LXX, he stated, “An indirect confirmation of this interpretation is seen in Jn 1:1; the sentence *Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ . . .* reflects an interpretation which understands Gen 1:1 as a main clause.”

²⁹ Mathews added, “there is no room in our author’s cosmology for co-eternal matter with God when we consider the theology of the creation account in its totality” (*Genesis 1–11:26*, 139).

³⁰ This doctrine is attested elsewhere in Scripture (e.g. Ps 33:6–9; John 1:1–3; Rom 4:17; Col 1:16; Heb 11:3; Rev 4:11).

1. *Genesis 1:1*. The traditional view holds that verse one describes the initial creation of “the heavens and the earth” on day one, with verse two describing the condition of the earth as it was initially created in verse one (via three circumstantial clauses). Yet others view verse one as an introductory heading (superscription; title) summarizing the content of the creation account, with day one beginning in either verse two or three.³¹

One point of contention is the understanding of the phrase “the heavens and the earth.” In the traditional view, “the heavens and the earth” were initially created “unformed and unfilled.” Waltke, however, argues that this view is unacceptable because it demands that the phrases “the heavens and the earth” (1:1) and “unformed and unfilled” (1:2) be understood differently from their usual meaning in the Hebrew Bible.³² And by the usual meaning of the phrase “the heavens and the earth,” he understands this to be a merism, meaning “everything” or more specifically “the organized universe, cosmos.”³³ In the case of Gen 1:1, the phrase “the heavens and the earth” is then taken to be a reference to the completely ordered universe/cosmos.

This, however, raises the question, “Must the expression ‘the heavens and the earth’ have the same meaning throughout the canon, especially if the contextual evidence explicitly refers to its formulation?”³⁴ The heavens and the earth (universe), as created in verse one, are not yet in their completed state as described in verse two and as the context of the following verses within the narrative shows them to be completed over a period of six days. The other references in the Hebrew Bible to “the heavens and the earth” all come *after* the completion of the universe as described in the creation account (1:1–2:3) and, naturally, would then refer to the completed heavens and earth (universe).

Another argument raised for viewing verse one as a summary statement is the parallel structure seen in the following narrative account of 2:4–7. Waltke, for example, understands the parallel between 2:4–7 and 1:1–3 as follows: (1) introductory summary statement (Gen 1:1 // 2:4); (2) circumstantial clause (Gen 1:2 // 2:5–6); (3) main clause (Gen 1:3 // 2:7).³⁵ Accordingly, Waltke sees this as evidence for verse one as a summary statement.

³¹ Cassuto, for example, views verse one as “the introductory verse” to the entire narrative section, with day one beginning in verse two (*A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part 1: From Adam to Noah*, 13, 20). Waltke and Averbeck, for example, also understand verse one as a summary statement or title, but view day one as beginning in verse three (Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 58; idem, *An Old Testament Theology*, 179; Averbeck, “A Literary Day, Inter-textual, and Contextual Reading of Genesis 1–2,” 10). For a more detailed presentation of this view, see Bruce K. Waltke, “The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1–3: Part III: The Initial Chaos Theory and the Precreation Chaos Theory,” *BSac* 132.527 (1975): 216–28.

³² See also Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 95.

³³ Waltke, “The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1–3: Part III,” 217–18. See also Averbeck, “A Literary Day, Inter-textual, and Contextual Reading of Genesis 1–2,” 10.

³⁴ Rooker, “Genesis 1:1–3: Creation or Re-Creation? Part 1,” 319.

³⁵ Waltke, “The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1–3: Part III,” 226–27.

However, while there are similarities between 1:1–3 and 2:4–7, the parallels are not exact. In fact, clear differences can be observed between these two texts.

| A Comparison of Gen 1:1–3 and 2:4–7 | |
|---|--|
| 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. | 2:4 This is the history of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, |
| 1:2 The earth was without form and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. | 2:5 before any shrub of the field was in the earth and before any herb of the field had sprouted. For the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the earth, and there was no man to work the ground; 2:6 but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground. |
| 1:3 Then God said, “Let there be light.” Then there was light. | 2:7 Then the LORD God formed the man of the dust of the ground. Then He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. Then the man became a living being. |

To begin with, the relationship between 2:4b and 2:7 differs from the relationship between 1:1 and 1:3. Westermann, for example, observed, “The beginning of Gen 2:4ff. differs from that of 1:1 inasmuch as 2:4b gives an indication of time and is saying something different from v. 7: ‘In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens. ... then the Lord God formed man ...’”³⁶ In other words, Gen 2:4b is marked with a temporal designation (בַּיּוֹם “in the day” or “when”) which is absent from 1:1 and, furthermore, the subject matter of 2:4b differs from that of 2:7. It is also seen that 1:1 is an x + *qatal* clause (בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא), while 2:4 contains two clauses, both of which are circumstantial clauses containing infinitives (בְּהֵיבְרָאִים and עֲשׂוֹת). In addition, it has also been noted that 1:1 is followed in 1:2 with an x + *qatal* clause, while 2:4 is followed in 2:5 with an x + *yiqtol* clause.³⁷ It is not until 1:3 and 2:7 that both begin with a *wayyiqtol* verb. Also, Rooker has observed that “the lengthy circumstantial clauses in Genesis 2:4b–6 indicate that the styles of the two narratives are distinct.”³⁸ He also noted that within the summary statement view of verse one, this parallel structure argument is “intricately linked” to the interpretation of the phrases “the heavens and the earth” (1:1) as the completed universe and “formless and void” (1:2) as the “antithesis of creation.”³⁹ As shown already, the interpretation of the phrase “the heavens and the earth” as the

³⁶ Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 97; see Hasel, “Recent Translations of Genesis 1:1,” 161. He also noted, “It is obvious that the relation and correspondence between 2:4b and 2:7 are not the same as the relation and correspondence between 1:1 and 1:3.”

³⁷ See, e.g., Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis*, 94.

³⁸ Rooker, “Genesis 1:1–3: Creation or Re-Creation? Part 2,” 414.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 415.

completely ordered universe is not supported by the context. Based on these observations, the arguments in favor of the summary statement view of verse one are unpersuasive and appear to be forced onto the text.

2. *Genesis 1:2*. While verse one is to be understood as depicting the initial creation of the “heavens and the earth,” there are still differing views on exactly when day one begins. Traditionally, verse two is understood as a parenthetical description of the earth as initially created in verse one. In this view, day one begins in verse one with the creation of “the heavens and the earth.” Yet, others do not see verse two as a description of the earth in its original state. Rather, in this view, day one begins in verse two, with the original creation of “the heavens and the earth” occurring prior to day one.

The gap theory (i.e. ruin-reconstruction; restitution theory), in particular, views verse one as referring to the original creation of the universe in the distant past. After an undisclosed period of time, Satan rebelled against God and sin entered the universe. As a result, the earth was judged with a flood, which is indicated by the water-covered earth in verse two. Thus, verse one refers to the original creation in the remote past and verse two begins day one of a re-creation week with an earth that has been reduced to a **תהו ובהו** (unformed and unfilled) condition due to judgment. This view allows for a lengthy period of time between the original creation in verse one and the re-creation beginning in verse two.⁴⁰

As support for this theory, the verb **היתה** in the opening clause of verse two is understood as “became” instead of “was,” which would then allow for the idea of sequence of time between verses one and two (“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. *Then the earth became* unformed and unfilled ...”). Also, the phrase **תהו ובהו** (“unformed and unfilled”) in verse two is understood as referring to the negative state of the earth based on Isa 34:11 and Jer 4:23 (the only other occurrences of the phrase **תהו ובהו**), where, in both cases, this phrase is used in the context of judgment.

While there are many objections to the gap theory, a few should suffice here. The first observation is that verse two opens with a *waw* + *x* + *qatal* clause: **והארץ והיתה תהו ובהו** (“And the earth was unformed and unfilled”). What concerns us here is the syntactical function of the *waw* conjunction in the phrase **והארץ** (And the earth), which begins verse two. The construction of the *waw* plus a noun (in this case, **והארץ**) is known as a *waw* disjunctive, which does not convey sequence, but a condition. In other words, the opening clause of verse two is functioning as a parenthetical description or background information concerning the earth as initially created in verse one. Thus, this clause cannot be understood as an independent clause and, furthermore, the form of the verb **היתה**, which is not connected to the *waw* conjunction, cannot be construed as “became” in this context.⁴¹ In other

⁴⁰ For a defense of the gap theory, see Arthur C. Custance, *Without Form and Void* (Brockville, ON: Custance, 1970). For a refutation of the gap theory, see Fields, *Unformed and Unfilled*.

⁴¹ See, e.g., E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, eds., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1909), 454, which noted, “such examples as Gn 1² *and the earth was* (היתה) *waste and emptiness*, can scarcely be regarded properly as verbal clauses; היתה is used here really only for the purpose of referring to past

words, the earth did not become unformed and unfilled (presumably due to judgment), but rather verse two describes the condition of the earth as it was initially created in verse one. Concerning the gap theory understanding of the phrase *תהו ובהו* (“unformed and unfilled”) as a negative state representing judgment based on Isa 34:11 and Jer 4:23, it should be noted that: (a) the context in these passages concerns future judgment and not a past historical event as in Genesis 1; and (b) the Bible nowhere mentions that God judged the earth when Satan fell. These observations show the gap theory to be an untenable position⁴² and confirm the traditional understanding that verse two is a parenthetical description of the condition of the earth in its initial created state.

While it is clear that verse two is a description of the condition of the earth, some view the circumstantial clauses in verse two as subordinate to verse three rather than verse one.⁴³ In other words, verse two describes the condition of the earth just prior to day one of creation week as opposed to the condition of the earth when it was created on day one. However, the traditional understanding that verse two is a description of the earth as initially created in verse one reflects the usage in other passages where clauses with a finite verb are followed by disjunctive clauses containing the verb *היה* (e.g. Judg 8:11 and Jonah 3:3).⁴⁴

3. *Genesis 1:3*. How does Gen 1:1–2 relate to 1:3? The traditional view holds that the first two verses are *part of* day one and that verse three *continues* the narrative of day one. However, another view that seems to have gained some traction in recent decades holds that verse three *begins* day one and that the first two verses stand *outside of* day one.

In this case, both views recognize that Gen 1:1 depicts the initial act of creation with a *qatal* verb (*ברא*) and that the subsequent acts of creation are described by *wayyiqtol* verbs beginning in 1:3. It is observed that the first *wayyiqtol* verb *ויאמר* (“then he said”) occurs in 1:3. Furthermore, each of the following workdays of creation week (days 2–6) begins with the same *wayyiqtol* verb *ויאמר* (Gen 1:6, 9, 14, 20, 24).

Thus, Collins reasons that day one begins in verse three.⁴⁵ He understands the *qatal* verb describing the original creative act in verse one to function as back-

time a statement which, as the description of a state, might also appear in the form of a pure noun clause.”

⁴² See, e.g., Bruce K. Waltke, “The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1–3: Part II: The Restitution Theory,” *BSac* 132.526 (1975): 139–40. Waltke observed that the gap theory “has not been accepted by the overwhelming majority of exegetes because it cannot stand the test of close grammatical analysis.”

⁴³ E.g. Waltke, “The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1–3: Part III,” 227; Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 42–43.

⁴⁴ Cf. Gen 1:1–2a: “In the beginning God created (*ברא*, a finite verb) the heavens and the earth. And the earth (*והארץ*, a *naw* disjunctive) was (*היתה*) unformed and unfilled ...”; Judg 8:11b: “Then he [Gideon] struck (*ויד*, a finite verb) the camp. And the camp (*והמחנה*, a *naw* disjunctive) was (*היה*) secure”; Jonah 3:3: “Then Jonah arose (*ויקם*, a finite verb) and he went (*וילך*, a finite verb) to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. And Nineveh (*ונינוה*, a *naw* disjunctive) was (*היתה*) a great city belonging to God.”

⁴⁵ On the contrary, the fact that each of the subsequent workdays of creation week begin with the *wayyiqtol* verb *ויאמר* (“then he said”) does not necessarily mean that day one must also begin with the *wayyiqtol* verb *ויאמר* (“then he said”) in 1:3. For example, within the narrative, *ויאמר* occurs in several

ground information and the *wayyiqtol* verb in verse three to begin the mainline of the story.⁴⁶ In this view, verse one is “an event that took place some time before the main storyline of Gen 1 got underway,” rather than the initial creative act on day one.⁴⁷ Therefore, he concludes that the first two verses stand *outside* day one of creation week.

However, the description of the first creative act with the *qatal* verb is then naturally followed by *wayyiqtol* verbs describing subsequent creative acts (note the chronological aspect of the narrative). To be part of day one, would verse one need to begin with a *wayyiqtol* verb? That would seem to be a bit out of place in this context of original creation, considering one of the primary (though not exclusive) functions of the *wayyiqtol* is to move the narration forward sequentially and given there would have been no creative acts prior to the beginning. The use of the *qatal* verb in this context is a more than suitable way to describe the absolute beginning. And the use of the *wayyiqtol* verbs to describe the subsequent acts is a natural progression.⁴⁸ The natural sense when reading these opening verses is that the first two verses are *part of* day one. In addition, it appears evident from elsewhere in Scripture that verse one is part of the first day of creation week.

III. INNER-TEXTUAL COMMENTARY: EXODUS 20:11 AND 31:17

Within the Torah, we have inner-textual commentary from Exod 20:11 and 31:17 indicating that the initial creation of “the heavens and the earth” in Gen 1:1 is part of day one of creation week. Exodus 20:11 states, “For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day.” Similarly, Exod 31:17 reads, “for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested.” According to these texts, the creation of the heavens and the earth in Gen 1:1 is placed squarely within the six days of creation week, not outside of it. Beall aptly concluded, “Exod 20:11 and Exod 31:17 thus become the definitive commentary on Gen 1:1, and in my view necessitate seeing Gen 1:1 as the first creative act of day one.”⁴⁹ Indeed, the inner-

places *other than* the beginning of a day (e.g. 1:11, 26, 29). Further, the *wayyiqtol* verb form is exactly what we would expect at the beginning of each subsequent day in order to move the narration forward sequentially from one day to the next.

⁴⁶ Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 42–43, 51. He argued, “The verb *created* in Genesis 1:1 is in the perfect, and the normal use of the perfect at the very beginning of a pericope is to denote an event that took place before the storyline gets underway” (51).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴⁸ The beginning of the narrative with a *qatal* verb describing the initial creative act, followed by *wayyiqtol* verbs, is typical of biblical Hebrew. *Wayyiqtol* verbs generally do not open narratives in the Hebrew Bible other than, of course, the special exception of וַיְהִי. The *qatal* in 1:1 can be understood perhaps as “present background.” It is already present on the mainline of the story. It is not background information *chronologically*.

⁴⁹ Todd Beall, “Four Responses to Chapter One,” in *Reading Genesis 1–2: An Evangelical Conversation* (ed. J. Daryl Charles; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), 37. Regarding the text of Gen 1:1–3, Edward J. Young concluded, “The beginning of the first day is not indicated, although, from Exodus 20:11, we may warrantably assume that it began at the absolute beginning, Genesis 1:1” (*Studies in Genesis One*, 104).

textual commentary in Exod 20:11 and 31:17 is detrimental to any view that places the beginning of day one anywhere other than Gen 1:1.

IV. ANCIENT PARAGRAPH DIVISIONS IN QUMRAN MSS⁵⁰

Perhaps another contribution to this discussion is the ancient interpretation that happens around the text at a scribal level. For example, a common scribal feature in the DSS is the subdividing of the text into units that were demarcated by means of spacing.⁵¹ These Qumran texts were subdivided into large units and segmentations of the larger units into smaller units. In other words, the available writing space on a line was intentionally left blank to indicate paragraph divisions or subdivisions within paragraphs.

The ancient scribal practice of denoting units in the text by means of spacing (open and closed section breaks) is illustrated nicely in the layout of the creation account in several fragmentary Genesis manuscripts from Qumran (4QGen^b, 4QGen^d, 4QGen^g, 4QGen^{h1}, and 4QGen^k).⁵² A major paragraph division (open section) was placed after each day of creation week, dividing the text according to days. Consequently, these Qumran texts indicate that in the Second Temple period scribes understood the creation account as being structured according to days. This general scribal practice is also present in the medieval Masoretic Text tradition. Notably, in the Leningrad Codex (AD 1008) the open section breaks (major divisions) in the creation account are identical to 4QGen^b and 4QGen^g.⁵³ Thus, this understanding of the structure of the creation account was preserved by the Masoretes.

⁵⁰ Material from this section regarding ancient paragraph divisions was published in slightly different form in Jeremy D. Lyon, *The Genesis Creation Account in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019). Used with kind permission from Pickwick Publications.

⁵¹ For a standard work on scribal practices, see Emanuel Tov, *Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); see also “Copying of a Biblical Scroll,” *JRH* 26 (2002): 189–209.

⁵² For the official edition of these texts see James R. Davila, “4QGen-Exod^a–4QGen^k,” in *Qumran Cave 4, VII: Genesis to Numbers* (Discoveries in the Judean Desert 12; Oxford: Clarendon, 1994; repr. 1999).

⁵³ Modern Hebrew Bibles such as *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* also preserve the open section breaks in the creation account (observed in the Qumran Genesis manuscripts and the medieval Masoretic Text) with a פ (for פתוחה – *petuchab* “open section”).

| 4QGen ^b , frag. 1 i (Genesis 1:1–25a) | |
|--|--|
| Day 1 section break → | <p>1בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ [1] הארץ [היתה] תהו ובהו וחשך על פני תהום ורוח אלהים מרחפת [על פני המים] 3ויאמר אלהים יהי אור [ויהי אור 4 ויירא אלהים את האור כי טוב] ויבדל אלהים בין האור ובין החשך 5 ויקרא את האור יום ולחשך ק[רא ל]ילה ויהי ערב [ויהי בקר יום אחד] [vacat]</p> |
| Day 2 section break → | <p>6 [ויאמר א]להים יהי רקיע בתוך המים ויהי מבדיל בין [מים למים 7 ויעש] [אלהים את הרקיע ויבדל] [בין] המים אשר מתחת לרקיע ובין המים אשר מעל לרקיע ויהי כן 8 ויקרא אלהים לרקיע שמים ויהי ערב [1] ויהי בקר יום שני [vacat]</p> |
| Day 3 section break → | <p>9 ויאמר אלהים יקוו המים מתחת השמים אל מקום אחד ותראה היב[שה] ויהי כן 10 ויקרא אלהים ליבשה ארץ ולמקוה המים קרא ימים וירא אלהים כי טוב 11 ויאמר אלהים תדשא הארץ דשא עשב מזריע זרע עץ פרי עשה פרי למיננו אשר זרעו בו על הארץ ויהי כן 12 ותוצא הארץ דש[א] עשב מזריע זרע למיננו ויעש פרי אשר זרעו בו למיננו וירא אלהים כי טוב 13 [ויהי ערב] ויהי בקר יום שלישי [vacat]</p> |
| Day 4 section break → | <p>14 ויאמר אלהים יהי [מא]רת ברקיע השמים להבדיל בין היום ובין הלילה והיו לאתת ול[מועדים ולימים וש]נים 15 והיו למארת ברקיע השמים להאיר על הארץ ויהי כן 16 ויעש אלהים את שני [המארת] ה'דלים את המאור הגדל לממשלת היום ואת המאור הקטן לממשלת הלילה ואת הכוכבים 17 ויתן [אתם אלהים ברקיע ה]שמים להאור על הארץ 18 ולמשל ביום ובלילה [ולהבדיל בין] האור ובין החשך וירא אלהים כי טוב 19 ויהי ערב ויהי בקר יום רביעי [vacat]</p> |
| Day 5 section break → | <p>20 ויאמר אלהים ישרצו המים שרץ נפש חיה ועוף יעופף על הארץ על פני רקיע השמים 21 ויברא אלהים את התנינים הגדלים ואת כל נפש החיה הרמשת אשר שרצו המים למיננם ואת כל עוף [כנף] למיננו וירא אלהים כי טוב 22 ויברך אתם אלהים לא[מ]ר [פרו ורבו ומלאו] את המים בימים והעוף ירב בארץ 23 [ויהי ערב ויהי בקר יום חמישי] [vacat]</p> |
| Day 6 | <p>24 ויאמר אלהים תוצא [הארץ נפש חיה למיננו בהמה ורמש וחיתו ארץ] למיננו [ויהי כן] 25 ויעש [vacat]</p> |

| 4QGen ^e , frags. 1 and 2 (Genesis 1:1–11, 13–22) | |
|---|---|
| Day 1 | [בראש[ית ברא]אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ ² [ע]ל[פני תהו]ם ורוח אלהים מרחפת על פני המים] [וי[רא אלהים]את האור כי טוב ויבדל אלהים] [ויקרא // // // // // // // // // אלהים לאור יומם ולחשך קר]א [יום אחד vacat] |
| Day 2 | [ויאמר אלהים יהי רקיע בתוך המים ויהי מב[דיל אלהים את הרקיע ויבדל בין המים אשר מתחת] מעל לרקיע ויהי כן ⁸ ויקרא אלהים לרקיע ש[מים יום שני vacat] |
| Day 3 | [ויאמר אלהים יקאו המים מתחת לשמים] [] ויהי כן ¹⁰ ויקרא אלהים ליבשה א[רץ [] כי טוב vacat ¹¹ ויאמר <i>text missing (end of fragment 1)</i> [] ויהי בקר יום שלשי] vacat [ויאמר אלהים יהי מארות ברקין]ע |
| Day 4 | [ובין הלילה והיו לאתות ולמועדים ל]ימים ושנים ¹⁵ והיו למאורת ברקע השמים להאיר על הארץ ויהי כן ¹⁶ את שני המארות הג[ד]לים את המאור הגדול [המ]אור הקטון לממשל[ת] הלילה ואת הכוכב[ים] ¹⁷ [השמים ל]האיר[על הארץ ¹⁸ ולמשול ב]יום [האו]ר ובין [החש]ך וירא אלהים כי טוב ¹⁹ [רבי]עי vacat] |
| Day 5 | [א]ל[הים ישרצו] המים שרץ נפש חיה וע[וף] ²⁰ [] ויאמר אלהים את התנינים] ²¹ [הרמשת אשר שרצו המים ל]מינהם [] אלהים כי טוב ²² ויבר[ך] [בימ]ים והעוף ירבה ב[ארץ] <i>text missing (end of fragment 2)</i> |

Concerning the literary boundary of day one, what can be gleaned from the Qumran Genesis manuscripts? 4QGen^b and 4QGen^s preserve the opening verses of the creation account and in both cases the first major section break occurs after 1:5, which seems to indicate that 1:1–5 was understood as constituting the creative acts of day one. However, the lack of a section break (open or closed) after Gen 1:1 or 1:2 does not necessarily demonstrate that the first five verses were understood as constituting the creative acts of day one. It is conceivable that a section break (open or closed) was not placed after 1:1 or 1:2 due to the small amount of text involved prior to the first major section break after 1:5 and/or due to the natural flow of the opening five verses of the creation account. However, in the creation account of the Qumran Genesis manuscripts, section breaks regularly occur within smaller intervals of text compared to the typically larger section divisions in many Qumran scrolls. Thus, the small amount of text prior to the first major section break (after 1:5) was not, by necessity, a deterrent for placing a section break after 1:1 or 1:2. Also, the natural flow of the opening five verses can just as easily point to the fact that they are to be read as a single unit constituting the creative acts of day one. In light of the section breaks observed in the creation account, it appears more problematic to imagine that the author or scribe understood 1:1 and/or 1:2 to be distinct from 1:3–5, without indicating this in any way. The section breaks in the Qumran Genesis manuscripts provide positive evidence for a particular literary structure of the creation account according to days, with no suggestion that 1:1–2 were separated from 1:3–5. Taken straightforwardly, the positive textual evidence indicates that the first five verses were understood as constituting the creative acts of day one.

V. ANCIENT JEWISH LITERATURE

The view that day one begins in Gen 1:1 finds further support in ancient Jewish literature. For example, the pseudepigraphal book of *Jubilees*, composed in the early second century BC, reworks biblical stories from Genesis 1 to Exodus 19 in the context of a divine revelation to Moses while on Mt. Sinai. Within this fascinating composition is a retelling of the creation account (*Jub.* 2:1–24).⁵⁴ While the biblical base text (Gen 1:1–5) is discernable, the retelling of God's creative acts on day one (*Jub.* 2:2–3) freely reformulates, omits, and adds material.

²²For on the first day He created the heavens, which are above, and the earth, and the waters and all of the spirits which minister before Him: the angels of the Presence, and the angels of sanctification, and the angels of the spirit of fire, and the angels of the spirit of the winds, and the angels of the spirit of the clouds and darkness and snow and hail and frost, and the angels of resoundings and thunder and lightning, and the angels of the spirits of cold and heat and winter and springtime and harvest and summer, and all of the spirits of His creatures which are in heaven and on earth. And (He created) the abysses and darkness—

⁵⁴ For a full treatment of the creation account in *Jubilees*, see Lyon, *Genesis Creation Account in the Dead Sea Scrolls*.

both evening and night—and light—both dawn and daylight—which He prepared in the knowledge of His heart.^{2:3} Then we saw His works and we blessed Him and offered praise before Him on account of all His works because He made seven great works on the first day.⁵⁵

This retelling mentions a total of seven great works of creation on day one: the heavens, earth, waters, angels, abysses/depths, darkness, and light. Notably, the author of *Jubilees* unequivocally included the creation of the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1–2) as part of day one. Consequently, the first five verses (Gen 1:1–5) were understood as constituting the creative acts of day one.

Also, ancient rabbinic discussion of day one can be found in the Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 12a: “Ten things were created on the first day, and these are they: heaven and earth, chaos and desolation, light and darkness, wind and water, the length of day and the length of night.”⁵⁶ Again, the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1–2) are included among the ten things understood to be created on day one of creation week. As a result, the first five verses are understood as constituting the creative acts of day one.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The traditional interpretation of Gen 1:1–3 reflects the grammar and syntax in the most straightforward manner. This is confirmed by the inner-textual commentary in Exod 20:11 and 31:17. Further support can be found in ancient paragraph divisions (Qumran, and later MT) and ancient Jewish literature. According to this view, Gen 1:1 is an independent clause depicting God’s initial creative act (*creatio ex nihilo*) on day one. Genesis 1:2 is a description of the state or condition of the earth as it was initially created. Genesis 1:3 then moves the narration forward. Thus, the first five verses (1:1–5) constitute the creative acts of day one. The text does not allow for the possibility of preexistent matter or an undisclosed period of time prior to day one.

⁵⁵ Translation from James L. Kugel, “Jubilees,” in *Outside the Bible: Ancient Jewish Writings Related to Scripture* (ed. Louis H. Feldman, James L. Kugel, and Lawrence H. Schiffman; 3 vols.; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2013), 1:289–90.

⁵⁶ Translation from Jacob Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary* (22 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005).