

Contemporary Views of Genesis 1:1-3

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Introduction

How one understands the first three verses of Genesis 1 (their relationship to one another) is one of the more important issues in the interpretation of the creation account. Of course, there are other important issues that must also be considered, such as how one understands the word “day” (*yôm*), the literary structuring of the six days, how there can be light on Day One before the creation of the sun, etc. For a detailed discussion, see my paper “Exegetical Details Pertaining to Genesis 1–2.”

I. The Literal Six-Day Traditional View¹

- Everything in Gen 1:1–2:3 happened in six literal 24-hour days
- Gen 1:1-5 all describe Day One²
- Gen 1:1 is an independent clause reflecting an *absolute beginning*, with the first act of God creating the heavens and the earth in their initial (but unfinished) state.
- Gen 1:2 is a circumstantial clause (parenthetical disjunctive), not advancing the sequence of action but simply indicating the state of the heavens and earth as they initially came from God’s hand.
- Gen 1:3 continues the narration with the creation of light (but not light from the sun).

II. Day One Begins with Gen 1:2

A. Gen 1:1 is an introductory heading for the chapter (not a first act) – Cassuto³

Although Cassuto takes Gen 1:1 as an introductory heading for the chapter, he *assumes* that the primary constituent parts, the heavens and the earth, are created on Day 1, since Gen 1:2 begins by describing the condition of the earth in its raw form. Hence, the whole chapter is an *absolute beginning*. The earth would also include the waters and everything beneath the surface in contrast to the heavens above earth’s surface].

¹ There are many proponents of this view. See especially Mark Rooker, "Genesis 1:1-3: Creation or Re-creation? Part 1," *BibSac* 149:595 (Jul-Sep 1992): 316-23; and Part 2 in *BibSac* 149:596 (Oct-Dec 1992): 411-27; Todd Beall, "Reading Genesis 1-2: A Literal Approach," in *Reading Genesis 1-2; An Evangelical Conversation*, ed. J. Daryl Charles (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2013), 45-59; H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1942); J. Ligon Duncan III and David. W. Hall, "The 24-Hour View," in *The G3N3SIS Debate*, ed. David G. Hagopian (Mission Viejo, CA: Crux Press, 2001), 21-66; Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury, eds., *Coming to Grips with Genesis; Biblical Authority and the Age of the Earth* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2008); and Jeremy D. Lyon, "Genesis 1:1-3 and the Literary Boundary of Day One," *JETS* 62.2 (2019): 269-85. Although Cassuto takes Gen 1:1 as an introduction to the entire chapter, he otherwise holds to the traditional view.

² The fact that the first five verses constitute the events of Day One receives secondary support from the way the creation days were demarcated in the DSS fragments of Genesis (notably, 4QGen^b and 4QGen^s). In these fragments, there is a break placed after each day, but the first break does not occur until after verse five. See Jeremy Lyon ("Genesis 1:1-3 and the Literary Boundary of Day One," 281-84) for substantiation. Cf. *Jubilees* 2:1-4 which names seven great works that God did on the first day, including the creation of the heavens and the earth (James C. VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary on the Book of Jubilees, Chapters 1-50*, ed. Sidnie W. Crawford, Hermeneia [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018], 1:167).

³ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part One, From Adam to Noah* (Hebrew Univ Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1989), 19-20.

B. The creation week begins with Gen 1:2 following a “long beginning” of the universe in Gen 1:1 – Sailhamer⁴

Sailhamer sees “the beginning” (Gen 1:1) not as an instantaneous act, but as a prolonged period in which God creates the initial universe, including the sun, moon, and stars. [On Day 4, they are not created, only meant to “appear”]. Day 1 of the creation week begins at Gen 1:2 with the earth in a state of *tōhū wābōhū*. There is no gap between verse one and verse two; verse one is simply a long, protracted period of unknown duration. “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).

III. Gen 1:1 is the Original Creation but Differs from the Six-Day Creation Account

A. The Gap Theory⁵

According to the gap theory, there is a gap of time between the original creation in Gen 1:1 and the judged earth in Gen 1:2, followed by recreation in 1:3. So, Gen 1:1 is the original creation (an absolute beginning), but there is a *gap of time* (of unknown duration) between verse 1 and verse 2. Verse 2 depicts a chaotic earth as a result of evil and judgment (usually attributed to the fall of Satan). This view supposedly allows for the geological ages before the six-day *recreation* of the heavens and the earth that begins with Gen 1:3.

B. The Analogical Day View - Collins⁶

Gen 1:1-2 is an absolute beginning of creation, i.e., the creation of the material universe. The purpose of the six-day creation week is to prepare “the land” for man, but this comes *sometime after* the creation of the universe. The six-day creation (beginning with Gen 1:3) does not begin until the end of the dry season (once it began to rain—see Gen 2). Since the 7th day has no concluding refrain, “it does not end” (87). On this basis Collins takes the days in a non-literal fashion (they are God’s workdays, not our days—an analogy for man to follow).⁷

⁴ John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, rev ed., Vol. 1: Genesis-Leviticus (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 2008); and *Genesis Unbound*, 2nd ed. (2011).

⁵ Gap Creationism was advocated in the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1917), and subsequently defended by Arthur C. Custance, *Without Form and Void* (Brockville, Ontario: n.p., 1970); and Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Commentary on the Old Testament; Volume 1, Genesis—Song of Solomon* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 5.

⁶ C. John Collins, “Reading Genesis 1–2 with the Grain: Analogical Days,” in *Reading Genesis 1-2; An Evangelical Conversation*, ed. J. Daryl Charles (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2013), 73-92. Cf. Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006).

⁷ Todd Beall makes a good point as to why the days of Gen 1 are not “God’s workdays”: “The Hebrew word *yom* is used six times in Exod 20:8-11; are we really to believe that it means a literal day in four usages (20:8, 9, 10, 11b) but an undetermined amount of time in the other two (20:11), all in the same context? No, the seven-day week and the Sabbath were based on the actual creation week, and there is nothing in the text of Gen 1 or Exod 20 (or Exod 31) to indicate that these were God’s ‘workdays’ rather than actual days” (“Responses to Chapter Three; Todd S. Beall,” in *Reading Genesis 1-2; An Evangelical Conversation*, 98).

IV. Gen 1:1 is Not an Original Creation and Day One Begins with Gen 1:3

In the following views, the earth is simply *already there* when God begins the six-day creation that Gen 1:1–2:3 speaks of. Thus, the original creation of the universe is not addressed in this passage. Also, Day One does not begin until verse three, and there are various possibilities of a prolonged period of time before this. The days may or may not be literal 24-hour days.

A. Gen 1:1 as a Dependent Clause – Rashi and Ibn Ezra⁸

Rather than taking Gen 1:1 as an independent clause, some would see this verse as a *dependent clause* and thus subordinate to what follows, either to verse 2 or to verse 3. If so, this could be rendered either (1) “At the beginning of the creation of the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void;” (Ibn Ezra) or (2) “When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth being . . . , God said, ‘Let there be light’” (Rashi; Kidner). Either case would allow for the fact that when God began to create, the earth (along with waters and darkness) were already present, thus negating the doctrine that Gen 1:1–2:3 teaches an absolute beginning of creation.

B. Gen 1:1 is an Independent Clause that Serves As An Introductory Summary Statement of the Whole Chapter

1. Precreation Chaos Theory – Waltke and Ross⁹

Gen 1:1 is not a statement of an absolute beginning but a summary of the new creation described in Gen 1:3–2:3 in which earth is made habitable for mankind. There is a prolonged period of time of unknown duration that precedes Gen 1:2. Gen 1:2 gives the reader the state of the earth at the time God began His creative work which actually begins with Gen 1:3. Without necessarily attributing the state of the earth in Gen 1:2 to the fall of Satan, it is the result of catastrophic judgment (and thus not as it came from the hand of God).

2. Literary Day View - Averbeck¹⁰

This view also takes Gen 1:1 as a summary of the chapter (not an absolute beginning). Like the Precreation Chaos Theory, there is a prolonged period of time of unknown duration preceding Gen 1:2. But this view sees Gen 1:2 as an introduction to Day One (which begins in verse three) without ascribing its cause as due to evil or judgment. The earth of Gen 1:2 is simply what is there when Day 1 begins. Averbeck, who champions this view, also takes a non-

⁸ So Rashi and Abraham Ibn Ezra (medieval Jewish rabbis; see Cassuto [19] for discussion) and some modern commentators. Derek Kidner appears to take the same view as Rashi. See *Genesis; An Introduction & Commentary*, Tyndale (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1967), 44.

⁹ B. K. Waltke, “The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1–3: Part III: The Initial Chaos Theory and the Precreation Chaos Theory,” *BibSac* 132 (Jul-Sep 1975), 216-28; and Allen P. Ross *Creation and Blessing; A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 105-07.

¹⁰ 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, Mass: Hendrickson, 2013), 7-34.

literal view of the six days. According to him, they are “schematized,” not meant to be read in a literalistic way. He calls this “God’s work week,” and thus the days are simply a structure for relating the sequence that God went through. He claims (31), “Thus, the seven-day structure is an analogy that derives from and reinforces the regular pattern of the work week that God was so concerned the Israelites adhere to: work six days and rest on the seventh.”

Others follow a similar approach as Averbeck but combine the idea of literary days (non-literal) to argue for *theistic evolution*.¹¹

¹¹ Tremper Longman III, “What Genesis 1–2 Teaches (and What It Doesn’t),” in *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation*, ed. J. Daryl Charles (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2013), 103-128. Others advocating theistic evolution include Francis Collins (*The Language of God* [New York: Free Press, 2006]), N. T. Wright (*Surprised by Scripture: Engaging with Contemporary Issues* [Great Britain: SPCK, 2014], 1-40), the BioLogos organization, and Bruce K. Waltke (*An Old Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007], 202).