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GENESIS

INTRODUCTION TO GENESIS

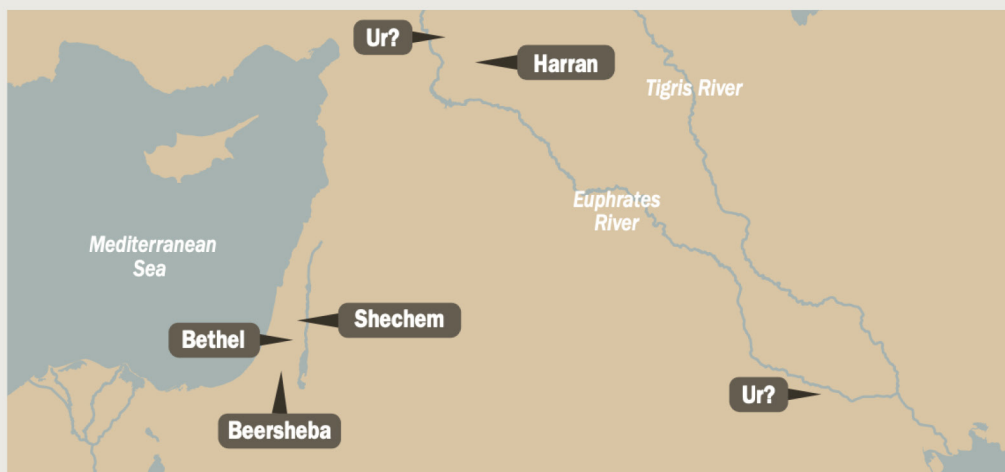
Genesis is about beginnings—of the world, of humanity and of Israel. The book focuses on the early stages of God’s relationship with humankind, as he sets a plan in motion to redeem the world. God chooses Abraham—known as Abram at the time—and his descendants to participate in this plan. The thrilling stories of Abraham and his family make up the majority of Genesis.

BACKGROUND

The name “Genesis” comes from the Greek word meaning “origins.” But there is great debate about the book’s origins and the rest of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). While the text of Genesis does not identify its author, Jewish and Christian traditions ascribe the book to Moses (e.g., Lk 24:44). However, this does not necessarily mean Moses himself wrote the Pentateuch—it may simply be in the tradition of Moses, the first known writing prophet (Ex 20). The Pentateuch may use multiple sources, and multiple people may have added to it and edited it over time—with it reaching its final form in the fifth century BC. Even if Moses had a major hand in shaping this material, certain passages (such as the record of his death in Dt 34:1–12) indicate that it underwent at least some editorial revision.

STRUCTURE

Genesis can be divided into two sections. First, Genesis 1–11 is known as the *primeval history*; this section describes creation and its corruption by sin, with passages about humanity’s fall



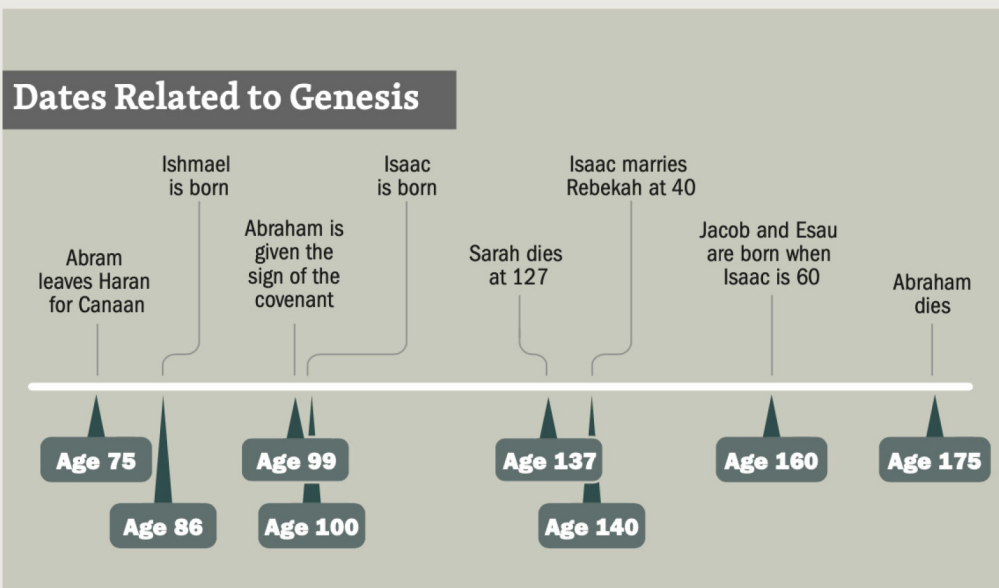
There is disagreement about whether Ur of the Chaldeans is a large city in southern Mesopotamia or a smaller city in northwest Mesopotamia.

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(Ge 3), Noah's ark (chs. 6–9) and the tower of Babel (ch. 11). The second section, the *patriarchal narratives* (chs. 12–50), begin with God's promise to Abram—to make him a great nation, bless him and make him a blessing to the world (12:2). As the patriarchal narratives unfold, we discover how Abram and his descendants respond to this promise.

Genesis 1–11 serves as a literary prequel to the rest of the book and to the Pentateuch. Israel's origin is set within the context of the origins of the universe, the earth, humanity and separate people groups and languages. The section concludes with the introduction of Abram (11:27–32), the major character of the patriarchal narratives and the forefather of the Israelites. As a backdrop to the Bible's message, Genesis 1–11 introduces us to God (known as Yahweh)—showing his power in creation and revealing his expectations for humanity.

In Genesis 12–25, God calls Abram to leave his home and move to a new land. God intends to show Abraham a land that he and his descendants will inhabit, the future land of Israel. God also promises that a great nation will descend from Abram and his barren wife, Sarai. As a sign of God and Abram's special relationship—called a “covenant”—God changes the couple's names to Abraham and Sarah (ch. 17). Holding on to a promise but still impatient, the couple decides for Abraham to have a son by Hagar, Sarah's servant; the son is named Ishmael. In spite of this, Sarah eventually gives birth to the son promised by God, Isaac.



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Isaac fathers twins, Esau and Jacob (25:19—36:43). Jacob—whose name God changes to “Israel”—has 12 sons, including Joseph. Through a series of challenging events, Joseph eventually claims a powerful role in Egypt’s royal court, and his family joins him in Egypt where, unfortunately, they will one day be enslaved (chs. 37–50; see Exodus).

At every stage of the story, characters take matters into their own hands and often suffer painful consequences, yet God remains faithful to his promises and his people, now known as Israel.

OUTLINE

- Creation, sin and the early history of the nations (1:1—11:32)
- The life of Abraham (12:1—25:18)
- The lives of Isaac and Jacob (25:19—36:43)
- The lives of Joseph and his brothers (37:1—50:26)

THEMES

Adam and Eve’s choices compromised our ability to live in God’s image; Genesis tells the story of the beginning of God’s effort to renew his image in us. In Genesis, the people of Israel are selected to initiate God’s grand plan of salvation by being a blessing to the world—a plan that is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus.

The major themes of promise and blessing run throughout the patriarchal narratives, as God’s promises are repeated to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Their failures send a clear message that God’s blessing is not because of any merit or righteousness on their own part; instead, God’s blessing reflects his desire to restore humanity to right relationship with him. Genesis is the story of God calling people to turn from the sinful world and obey him.

The Beginning

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ²Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

³And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.

⁵God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

⁶And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.”

⁷So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. ⁸God called the vault “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

1:1—2:3 The Bible’s opening narrative introduces the Bible’s main character—God. The creation account emphasizes God’s power as he brings all things into existence through divine decree. God’s creative activity occurs over six days in Ge 1:3–31. The account ends with the description of God’s rest on the seventh day in 2:1–3. The six-day structure reflects the overall pattern the writer gives to God’s work. Creation is organized into three categories: the heavens, the sea and sky, and the earth. God’s creative activity forms and then fills each of these categories. The focus of the creation account demonstrates how God brought order and structure to the universe. Throughout the Bible, God’s power over creation shows his sovereignty (see Ps 104:1–35 and note; Isa 40:12 and note).

1:1 In the beginning Genesis opens with the Hebrew phrase *bereshith*, typically translated as “in the beginning.” There are two possible interpretations of this phrase: a specific, absolute beginning of all time; or a nonspecific, general beginning of God’s work of creation. **God** The Hebrew word used here for “God,” *elohim*, is plural. While *elohim* may be used to describe multiple deities, OT authors usually use the term to refer to the singular God of Israel (more than 2,000 instances), such as here. See the infographic “The Days of Creation” on p. 6. **created** The Hebrew word used here is *bara*. Compare Isa 40:26; note on Ge 1:27. **the heavens and the earth** This phrase refers to the entirety of creation. The OT often uses opposing word pairs to refer to a totality.

create the earth empty (*bohu*), does not contradict Ge 1:2, where God orders and fills an initially empty (*bohu*) creation. **darkness** Throughout the Bible darkness represents evil or calamity. Here, darkness refers to the unformed and unfilled conditions of the material of v. 1. **the deep** The Hebrew word used here, *tehom*, refers to the primordial or primeval sea—the cosmic waters of chaos. *Tehom* is similar to the Babylonian words *tamtu* and *Tiamat*. *Tiamat* refers to a chaos deity, and the slaying of a chaos monster is described elsewhere in the OT in the context of creation (Ps 74:12–17). However, a closer parallel can be found in the Ugaritic *thm*, the term for the primeval abyss. Since *thm* is not personified, *tehom* in Ge 1:2 should likewise not be considered a personified god. In both instances, the description credits the God of Israel with subduing the chaotic primordial conditions to bring about an ordered, habitable creation. Although chaos is not eliminated in the OT account, God’s action yields order and restraint. The chaos is part of what God deems “very good” in v. 31. It is nevertheless a perpetual danger that will only be finally removed at the end of the age when there is no longer any sea (Rev 21:1). **Spirit of God** Since the Hebrew word used here, *ruach*, can mean “spirit” or “wind,” this phrase can be translated “Spirit of God” or “wind from God” (or even “mighty wind”). However, the pairing of *ruach* with God (*elohim* in Hebrew) usually refers to God’s Spirit.

1:3 And God said The ordering of creation begins with the spoken word. Only one other ancient Near Eastern creation account, the Egyptian Memphite Theology, includes an example of creation by speech. **Let there be light** God creates light before the creation of the sun (Ge 1:14–18). This reflects an understanding of the world, common in the ancient Near East, that held that the sun does not serve as the source of light. See the infographic “Ancient Hebrew Conception of the Universe” on p. 5.

1:4 good God calls his handiwork good seven times in ch. 1 (vv. 4,10,12,18,21,25,31). The Hebrew word used here, *tov*, has a broad range of meaning but generally describes what is desirable, beautiful or right. In essence, God affirms creation as right and in right relationship with him immediately after he creates it. The material world is good as created by God.

1:5 evening, and there was morning—the first day The expression “evening, and there was morning” specifies the length of a “day” (*yom* in Hebrew). While the author may have meant a 24-hour day, less specific interpretations are possible. The Hebrew word *yom* can refer to a 24-hour cycle, the daylight hours or an unspecified future “someday.” The meaning of the word, though, does not settle the debate over whether the passage references a literal six-day creation or symbolic days. In addition, the sun (which marks the change from evening to morning) is not created until the fourth day. Nonliteral interpretations of this phrase fall into two main groups: those that privilege the literary qualities of ch. 1, and those that seek to accommodate scientific conclusions about the



BARA

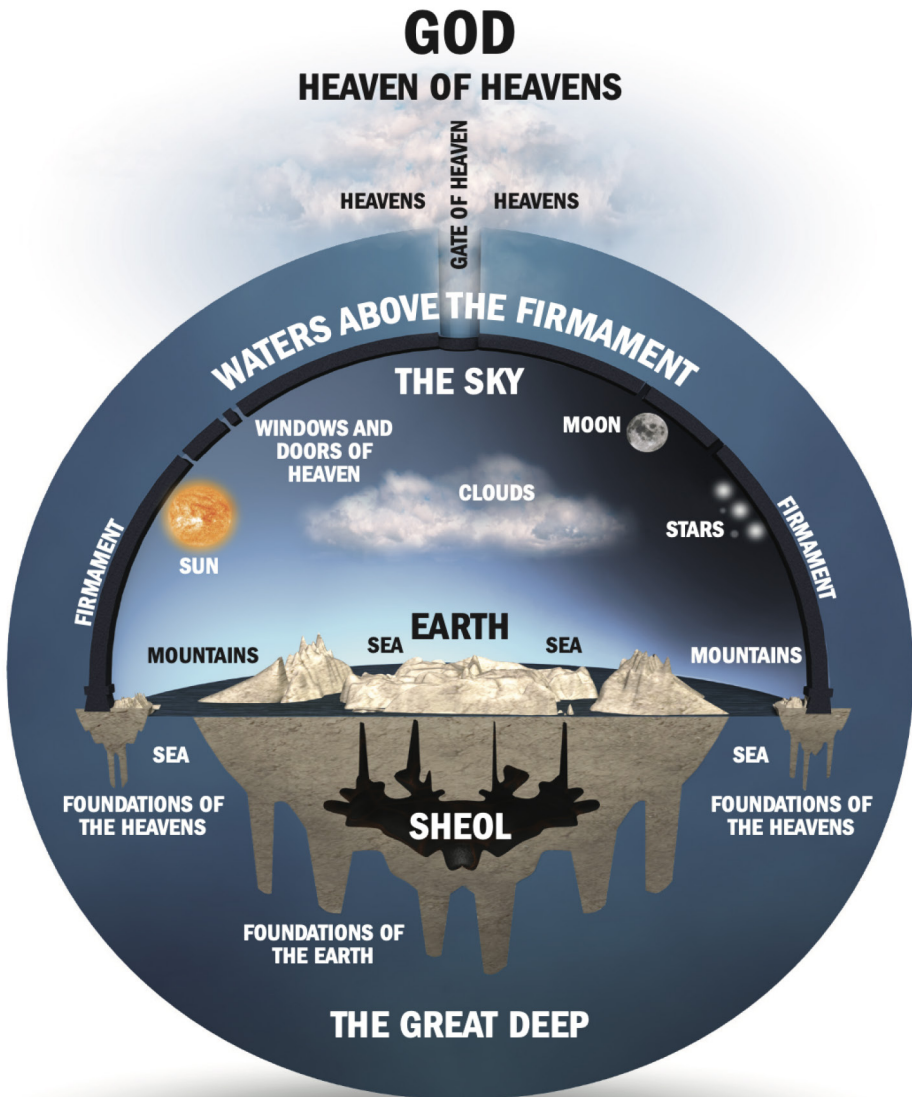
The Hebrew word for “create” (*bara*) is used in the OT to refer to divine activity only—Yahweh alone serves as its grammatical subject—implying the writer wanted to emphasize that people cannot create in the way that Yahweh creates and that no other god can claim to be the creator. The verb *bara* also conveys the idea of ordering or determining function, suggesting God’s creative activity consists of bringing proper order and function to the cosmos.

1:2 formless and empty The Hebrew terms used here, *tohu* and *bohu*, describe material substance lacking boundary, order and definition. This same word pairing occurs in Jer 4:23, indicating that the meaning of *tohu* and *bohu* is not nonexistence but a nonfunctional, barren state. The Hebrew structure implies that this material existed in a formless and empty state when God began his creative work. This does not mean that God didn’t create this material prior to the time period recorded by the Biblical text. Hence, Isa 45:18, which declares that God did not

Ancient Hebrew Conception of the Universe

The ancient Israelites divided the world into Heaven, Earth, Sea and the Underworld.

- ▶ They viewed the sky as a vault resting on foundations—perhaps mountains—with doors and windows that let in the rain. God dwelt above the sky, hidden in cloud and majesty.
- ▶ The world was viewed as a disk floating on the waters, secured or moored by pillars. The earth was the only known domain—the realm beyond it was considered unknowable.
- ▶ The Underworld (Sheol) was a watery or dusty prison from which no one returned. Regarded as a physical place beneath the earth, it could be reached only through death.



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⁹And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. ¹⁰God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered waters he called “seas.” And God saw that it was good.

¹¹Then God said, “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it,

according to their various kinds.” And it was so. ¹²The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. ¹³And there was evening, and there was morning — the third day.

¹⁴And God said, “Let there be lights in the vault

age of the earth. The first group includes the framework view, in which the days of creation are a literary device that structures the creation account. Also included in this group is the analogical day view, in which each day of creation represents God’s work day, but the length of this day might not equal a literal 24-hour period (see 2Pe 3:8). Three main theories try to reconcile science with the days of creation. The punctuated activity view says that each day of creation was separated by a huge gap of time. The gap view argues for a gap of millions or billions of years between Ge 1:1 and 1:2. Finally, the day-age view states that each day of creation represents a geological era. These three theories are all influenced by scientific conclusions that the earth is millions or billions of years old.

1:6 a vault The Hebrew word used here, *raqia'*, refers to a dome-like structure that was thought to separate the sky from the heavens (v. 8). In the ancient Near East, people conceived of the structure of the universe differently than the modern conception. People thought of a solid, dome-like structure encircling and enclosing the earth (e.g., Job 26:10; Pr 8:27–28; Job 37:18; compare Eze 1:22). God dwelled above this expanse (Ps 148:1) as though the earth was his throne (Am 9:6; Ps 29:10). The earth was thought to be surrounded by waters, so the seas were gathered together in one place (Ge 1:9).

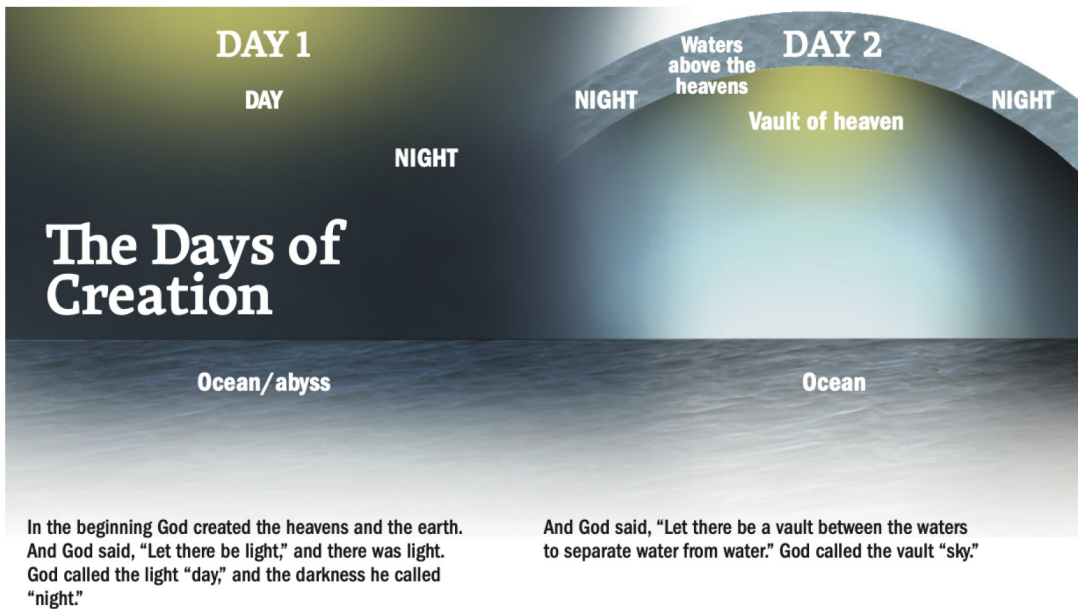
1:9–13 The third day of creation involves two more distinct acts of creation. Both are affirmed with the phrase, “And God saw that it was good.” The first three days of creation are characterized by three acts of separation: God separates light from darkness (v. 4), heaven from earth (vv. 7–8), and land from sea (v. 9–10).

1:9 water under the sky The writer explicitly distinguishes the waters of the sea from the waters above the expanse because of the ancient Near Eastern view that the sky held back the waters above (compare note on v. 6).

1:11–13 This passage refers to the creation of plant life, but it does not cover all botanical varieties. Similarly, the list of animals in v. 20–25 does not represent all categories of animal life. Both lists are selective. Here, the seed-bearing plants and fruit trees likely represent only the plants designated for human consumption.

1:11 Let the land produce vegetation God’s command for vegetation to grow is the first indirect command in the creation sequence. **seed-bearing plants** The earth is to produce not only plants and fruit trees, but also plants and fruit trees that bear seeds.

1:14–18 God creates the sun and moon on the fourth day. The sun, moon and stars provide the daily and seasonal cycles required for agriculture that, combined with land and water, sustain life.



The Days of Creation

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.”

And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.” God called the vault “sky.”

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of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years,¹⁵ and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.” And it was so.¹⁶ God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars.¹⁷ God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth,¹⁸ to govern the day and the night, and to separate

light from 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 water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.”²¹ So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind.

1:14 lights The creation of the lights in the heavens on the fourth day parallels the creation of light in general on the first day. These lights produce another separation—day from night (compare note on vv. 1:9–13). **signs to mark** Celestial phenomena were often understood as divine signs in the ancient Near East (see note on Jer 8:2). **sacred times** The Hebrew word used here, *mo'adim*, could refer to seasons—indicating the natural agricultural cycle—but *mo'adim* also frequently indicates religious festivals or sacred times.

1:16 two great lights This refers to the sun and the moon, but the writer deliberately avoids the words “sun” (*shemesh* in Hebrew) and “moon” (*yareach* in Hebrew) that correspond to the names of West Semitic deities: Shamash and Yarik. Avoiding the Hebrew words for “sun” and “moon” may be part of a larger agenda in the narrative to cast all of the heavenly bodies as natural, created phenomena that are subject to the Creator—not deities in themselves. In this way, Ge 1 offers a subtle critique of prevailing ancient Near Eastern beliefs about the sun, moon and stars.

1:20–25 Creation on the fifth day includes the creatures of the sky and sea. God creates land animals on the sixth day. These creative acts parallel the activity on the second

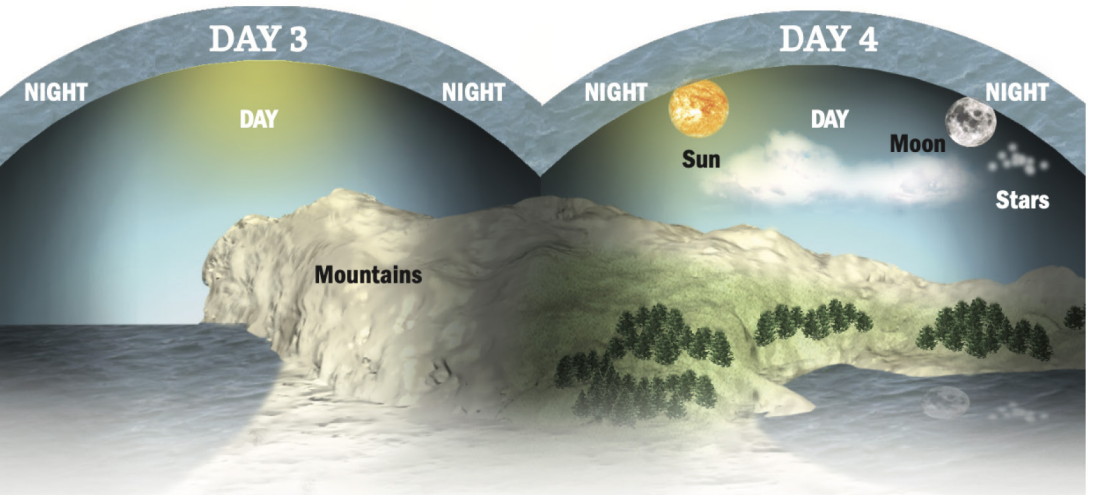
day, when God separates sky and sea, and the third day, when land appears. The description focuses on order and balance in nature. The zoological categories reflect those known to human experience: sea creatures, birds, wild and domesticated animals, and creatures that move along the ground. (The latter description is not restricted to insects as it describes movement, not species.)

1:20 living creatures Here, the Hebrew term *nephesh* refers to animal life.

α Genesis 1:20

NEPHESH While the Hebrew word *nephesh* (often translated as “soul”) can refer to animal life, it can also refer to human life or a person’s life force (their soul) along with emotions, intellect, personality and will (see Ge 9:5; 27:4; Ex 23:9; 1Sa 19:11).

1:21 creatures of the sea A translation of the Hebrew word *tannin*, which does not refer to any specific member



And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered waters he called “seas.” Then God said, “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.”

And God said, “Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.” God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars.

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And God saw that it was good. ²²God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.” ²³And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

²⁴And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so. ²⁵God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground ac-

ording to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,^a and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

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

^a ²⁶ Probable reading of the original Hebrew text (see Syriac); Masoretic Text *the earth*

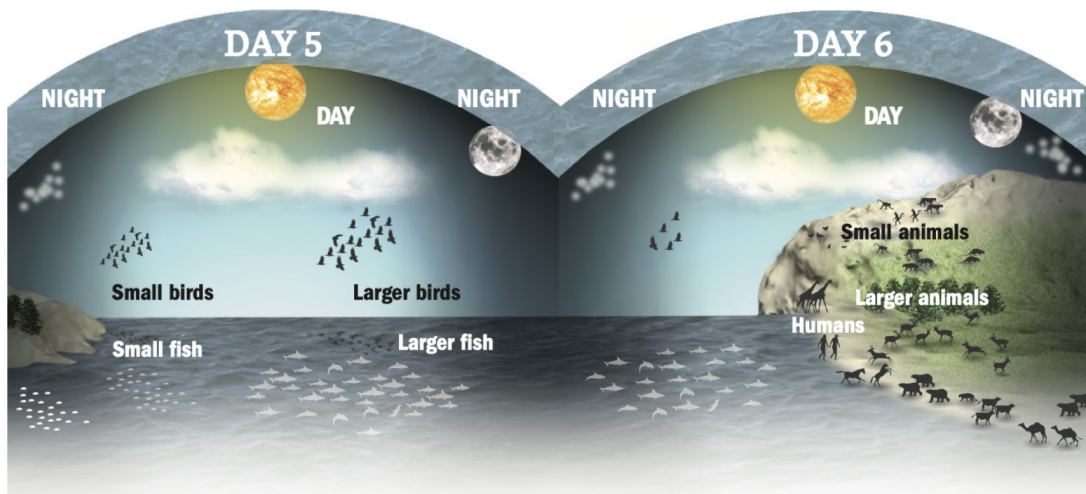
of the aquatic kingdom. The term *tannin* occurs in Canaanite mythology for supernatural sea creatures who served the god Yam in his primordial battle with the god Baal. Yam was depicted as Leviathan, a chaotic monster of the primordial deep. Attributing the creation of the *tannin* to the God of Israel served to assert his superiority over the gods of Canaan, especially those symbolizing the watery chaos that existed before God brought order to the world. It was a message of hope that God was the Creator of even the chaos and thus could subdue it.

1:22 Be fruitful and increase in number God created life to be fertile. Here, the capacity for sexual reproduction is cast as a divine blessing.

1:26–31 The creation of man and woman is the climax of God’s creative activity. This passage contains several key words and concepts: God’s reference to himself in the plural, the concept of the “image of God,” the separation of humanity into two genders—male and female—and the divine command for humanity to fill and rule the earth.

1:26 Let us make The occurrence of “us” in this passage has been understood to refer to the plurality of the godhead: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This understanding would have been unknown to the authors of the OT. Another possible explanation is the so-called “plural of majesty,” but this type of grammatical usage is more common for nouns and adjectives than verbs. A simpler explanation is that “us” reflects an announcement by the single God of Israel to a group in his presence—the heavenly host. Other OT passages support the idea of a heavenly host or divine council (Ps 29:1; see Ps 82:1 and note). This explanation also applies to Ge 11:7. The phrase “our image” then means that the members of the heavenly host also reflect the divine image.

1:27 image of God Being created in the image of God distinguishes people from all other earthly creation. God’s image is not described as being possessed in part or given gradually; rather, it is an immediate and inherent part of being human. The image of God likely does not refer to



And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.” God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.”

And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.” Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.” God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number.”

²⁸God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

²⁹Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground — everything that has the breath of life in it — I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

³¹God saw all that he had made, and it was

very good. And there was evening, and there was morning — the sixth day.

2 Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

²By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. ³Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

Adam and Eve

⁴This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.

any specific ability (intelligence, sentience, emotional capacity, free will, etc.). This would result in an ethical problem, since human beings do not possess these abilities equally. Likewise, connecting the image of God to the internal makeup of a human being—by appealing to the application of the Hebrew words *nephesh* for “soul” or *ruach* for “spirit” for people—does not resolve this issue, as both terms are used to describe members of the animal kingdom. Rather, it refers to our creation as God’s image, his unique representatives on earth. People are thus God’s agents, functioning as he would if he were embodied. Jesus is the ultimate image of God (Heb 1:3). **male and female** There is no status distinction among bearers of the divine image; they are equal while having distinct capacities and roles in fulfilling the divine mandate to steward the earth. **he created them** The Hebrew verb used here, *bara*, is the same word used in

Ge 1:1. However, the plural declaration “let us make” in v. 26 uses a different verb. The verbs for “make” (*asah*) and “form” (*yatsar*) are also used elsewhere with *bara* to refer to God’s work as Creator in chs. 1–2. In ch. 2, yet another verb is used for the fashioning of Adam (*yatsar*). These verbs are synonyms. Compare note on 1:1.

1:28 Be fruitful and increase in number As with the animal kingdom, humanity is created to be fertile. The capacity for sexual reproduction is cast as a divine blessing. **subdue it. Rule over** These terms indicate active power or rule involving physical force or effort (Jer 34:16; Est 7:8; Jos 18:1; Isa 14:2; Eze 29:15). Active rule is not destructive, as creation is meant to sustain people. Humanity is instructed to keep creation under control—to keep the chaotic conditions that God subdued at bay. All must function as God originally ordered it to function (compare Ge 2:15).

1:31 very good The totality of the ordered creation meets the expectations of its Creator.

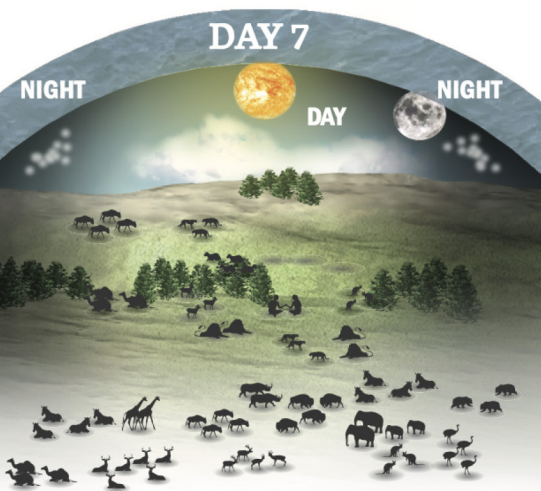
2:1–3 The seven days of creation end with this description of God’s rest. The creation account of Ge 1:1–2:3, where God works for six days and rests on the seventh, provides a theological rationale for the Sabbath observance. The command to observe the Sabbath in Ex 20:8–11 is based directly on the pattern developed in this passage.

2:2 By the seventh day God had finished Some translations render this “on the seventh day,” suggesting that God worked on the seventh day in violation of the Sabbath. However, the Hebrew text here can be translated “by the seventh day,” resulting in the verb being rendered “had finished,” expressing the completion of the act. See the infographic “The Days of Creation” on p. 6.

2:3 God blessed the seventh day The creation week serves as the model for the six-day week and Sabbath rest noted in Ex 20:11 and other Israelite laws.

2:4–25 Leaving behind the cosmic view of creation in Ge 1:1–2:3, the narrative turns to what is happening on earth—specifically, the creation of the first man and the preparation of the Garden of Eden as his home. The narrative presents a more personal view of God interacting with his creation. Rather than presenting two unconnected creation accounts, the narratives of chs. 1 and 2 tell complementary stories, with ch. 2 offering a closer look at the creation of humanity.

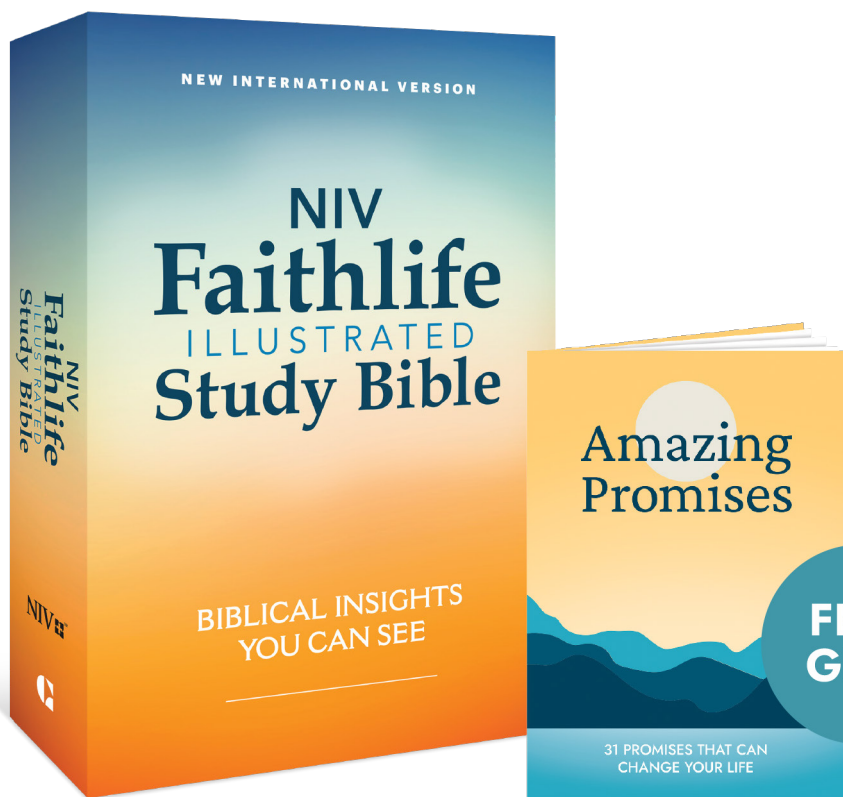
2:4 This is the account The formulaic Hebrew phrase used here, *elleh toledoth*, is used throughout Genesis



Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.

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