

Days 1–4

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Before we creationists begin to devise scientific models of what might have occurred during God's creative workweek, we should be sure we are interpreting Genesis 1 as its author intended in every detail possible. In digging deeply into the account itself and attempting to identify and eliminate all preconceptions about its meaning, I and two colleagues have concluded that our beloved pioneers of classical modern creationism may have missed some of the grandeur and majesty that the account attributes to God. He did His job not just rapidly and with a perfect result, but also in a logical order. My purpose here is to present that order for Days 1–4, as we see it spelled out in Genesis 1, for the reader's thoughtful consideration.

Axioms

For the purposes of this viewpoint, I take a few things as axiomatic, to be supported elsewhere:

1. 'Create' and 'make' have distinct meanings, although 'God our Maker' and 'God our Creator' and other such references have considerable semantic overlap, each with a different emphasis.
2. 'Create' (Hebrew *bara*) means to start with nothing and to finish with something. This feat only God can perform.
3. 'Make' (Hebrew *asah*) means to work on or develop some pre-existing material.
4. The creating *and* making account (Genesis 1:1–2:4a) is God's own broad-brush story of the real God kick-starting the physical universe in real time involving real material objects and real living creatures.
5. This historical narrative tells of the orderly development of a finished universe, a habitat for humanity, starting with its creation in an unfinished state.
6. Verse 1 is not a summary but a statement of the first in a sequence of 12 divine actions that are the backbone of the story.¹
7. Verses 1–2 are not a preface to the main storyline but an integral part of it. They state the first divine action and describe the initial state of part of its results, respectively.
8. Genesis 1 is like the report of a contractor who agreed to build a habitat for a couple. They were out of town for nearly six months after signing the contract. When they returned, they were surprised to see that the huge project was already finished and perfectly done. They inquired of the contractor how he had finished so soon. He answered with a brief outline by month (M):

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| <p>M1: Building materials delivered; set up lights.
 M2: Establish foundation and frame the main structures.
 M3: Grade the grounds, dig the pond; plant grass and trees.
 M4: Install the light fixtures and heating system.
 M5: Stock the pond with fish and the aviary with exotic birds.
 M6: Add a couple of dogs in the back yard; welcome the man and woman home; provide a gift of food.</p> |
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This analogy goes only so far. I intend that it illustrate only these points: (a) it reports only *the milestones* of the construction, (b) *not every detail* is needed to get across the gist, (c) based on *experience with and knowledge of* the final product, one can make *reasonable inferences* about details that are not included (e.g., that unmentioned wiring had to go in before the light fixtures could be installed and the construction of the aviary had to precede the birds being put in), (d) the account serves to convince the couple that the contractor *knew what he was doing* and that he did not take unwise shortcuts to get *the job done quickly*, (e) the report is precise and accurate *as far as it goes*, and (f) this is new construction, not a remodel job. (A shortcoming of the analogy: God was also the Architect.)

Similarly, Genesis 1 is an outline of the milestones of God's making of His habitat for humanity. Not every detail is included, but readers/hearers can reasonably deduce some details based on their understanding of God, the cosmos, and this world. The more we learn about God and His cosmos, the more details we can infer. God's methods are consistent with His character. God's competence is indicated not only by the perfect result (before the fall), but also by the speed with which He completed the task without mistakes. The narrative is a precise, summary report of the milestones as they actually happened, but it is not comprehensive in details. Moreover, the narrator's main purpose is to reveal the character of God as Creator and Maker through the construction story.

My hope is that the exegesis that follows of the descriptions of Days 1–4 will be an eye opener for many readers and that it will stimulate an ever deepening understanding of this foundational story of the Bible. I believe that it answers some questions that the classical interpretation leaves subject to speculation. What was the nature of the first light (v. 3)? Where did it originate? From what material were the stars made (v. 16)? Why on Day 4 did darkness/night need to be separated a second time from the light/day? Why on Day 2 did God not pronounce the expanse 'good'? ...

Please expect this exegesis to identify some preconceptions, and be prepared to set them aside, at least temporarily, to see if this viewpoint doesn't bring out more of God's majesty and glory than the classical view.

God's own definitions: 'God called...'

Notice that God explicitly defines five terms: day, night, heavens, earth, and seas. He defines each one only after man, if he had been there, could have perceived the thing named. Some of these have *additional* meanings that the reader can reasonably infer from the flow of the report. Three are defined in terms of something that existed before God coined the new term: day, night, and seas. However, God uses two of the five terms before He defines them: heavens and earth.

What is the significance of such 'delayed' definitions? How is the reader to understand the two terms when they are used before God defines them in the account? Let us consider all five definitions in the order God provides them.

Day

'God called the light "day"' (v. 5a). This refers to the light he had just called into existence for the first time: 'Let there be light' (v. 3). However, it is obvious from the context that this definition does not equate 'day' with 'light'. Rather God is defining 'day' to be a *period* of light, in reference to the first period of physical light. Hence, it is reasonable to translate the definition, 'God called the light *period* "day"'.

God gives a second meaning for 'day' by using an appositive (v. 5c): 'And there was evening and there was morning, one "day"' (or "'day" one'). Again, it is obvious that this is a time period: the full daily cycle.

These two definitions do not explicitly specify a length for the periods, but the narrator has given the reader an abundance of clues that are confirmed in the description of Day 4. All the clue words (evening, morning, day, and night) suggest ordinary days in the experience of mankind.

Night

'The darkness He called "night"' (v. 5b). Again it is obvious that God is defining a time period in terms of 'the darkness'. Which darkness? Only one has been referenced so far: the darkness 'over the face of the deep' (v. 2). Hence, the night of Day 1 was the time period during which 'darkness was over the face of the deep'. It started immediately after 'the beginning' when 'God created the heavens and the earth' and extended until 'God said, "Let there be light"'. That started the first morning. Hence v. 5 clearly indicates that the description of Day 1 consists of vv. 1-5.²

Heavens

'Heavens' is used in vv. 28 and 30 in the phrase 'birds of the heavens'. Thus, the reader reasonably understands this use of 'heavens' to mean the (inner) atmosphere. Verse 20 tells the reader more precisely that 'birds fly above the earth in the face of the expanse of the heavens'. Thus, the air is merely the surface of the expanse of the heavens, as viewed by mankind. The alert reader concludes that the narrator used 'heavens' in vv. 28 and 30 as an abbreviation for 'the face of the expanse of the heavens'.

Now, what is this 'expanse of the heavens'? That phrase appears three times (vv. 14, 15, 17) as the location where God places the luminaries (the greater and lesser lights and the stars). Hence, 'expanse of the heavens' denotes extraterrestrial *space*, where the sun, moon, and stars are located.³ God made this expanse on Day 2 and 'He called the expanse "heavens"' (v. 8a). So now 'heavens' means two things, space and atmosphere: the locations of the luminaries and the locations where the birds fly.

God *made* (not created) the expanse (v. 7a). From what did He make it? The form 'expanse of the heavens' may indicate the 'what', for it is used four times (vv. 14, 15, 17, 20) even after God called it 'heavens'. Thus, 'expanse of the heavens' suggests 'the expanded form of the (original) heavens'. That sounds like God started with the original heavens of v. 1—the substance or fabric from which to make *finished heavens*—and expanded or stretched them out to make places for the luminaries (space).

Thus, 'the expanse of the heavens' seems to be the stretched-out form of the original heavens. Confirmations are found in Scriptures written later, if stretching is identified with expanding. Job 9:8, Is. 40:22, Is. 51:13, Jer. 10:12b=51:15b, Zech. 12:1, 'Who/He (alone) stretches (-ed) out the heavens'. Is. 42:5, He 'created the heavens and stretched them out' (created and made). Is. 42:12, Is. 48:13, add the anthropomorphism: '...with His hands/My right hand...'. Ps. 104:2b, 'stretching out the heavens like a tent curtain'. Some take such stretching as metaphorical, but equating 'expanding' with 'stretching' obviates any reason to do so and makes good sense.

God called that stretched-out form itself 'heavens' (v. 8a). Therefore, we now have three meanings of 'heavens': air, space, and the fabric of which space is made—a fabric that God *created* then stretched out to *make* a 'tent' for humans to live in. 'Tent' is the metaphor, in the sense of 'habitat', not the stretching.

Also we see that the four occurrences of 'the expanse of the heavens' (vv. 14, 15, 17, 20) could as well have read 'the heavens of the heavens'. Indeed, the term 'heaven(s) of heavens' appears later in Neh. 9:6 where the likely meaning, based on God's definition (v. 8a) and His uses of the term, is 'the expanse of the heavens', i.e. space.

An alternative view favoured by Dobberpuhl⁴ is that the original heavens of v.1 are both the spiritual heavens and a nearly empty three dimensional physical heavens. The 'stretching' verses listed above refer to God stretching the gravitational fields between the separated 'waters'. I leave it as 'an exercise for the student' to decide between these views.

Earth

Now consider the use of 'earth' in Genesis 1. Each occurrence after 'God called the dry land "earth"' (v. 10) can reasonably mean dry land: vv. 11, 12 (bring forth vegetation), 15, 17 (light on), 20 (fly above), 22 (multiply on), 24a (bring forth living creatures), 24b, 25 (beasts of), 26b (rule over), 26c (creeps on), 28b (men to multiply and

fill), 28c (move on), 29 (plants on surface of), and 30 (beast of, moves on). In some instances (vv. 15, 17, 20, 26b), one could argue that the narrator means ‘earth’ to include the seas, but the focus is still on the surface, not on the whole globe, especially its interior, nor as a celestial body. Hence, not a single occurrence of ‘earth’ in Genesis 1:10–31 must be understood as referring to planet Earth.

So what did ‘earth’ denote in vv. 1 and 2 before God called the dry land ‘earth’? Actually, v. 2 tells us explicitly, but we must read it without presuppositions. We must not assume that we already know what ‘earth’ means at that initial stage. Moreover, we must carefully parse the sentence to get its intended meaning.

Verse 2 says, ‘And the earth was unformed and unfilled and <C1> and <C2>’ where <C1> and <C2> are subordinate clauses serving as a third and fourth adjective in the outer sentence. <C1> is ‘darkness was *over the surface of* the deep’, and <C2> is ‘the Spirit of God was hovering *over the surface of* the waters’. The two clauses have a parallel structure, both using ‘*over the surface of*’, so there is an emphasis on the face or surface of this initial ‘earth’. Thus over the surface it was dark and the Spirit was hovering, and below the surface it was ‘deep’ and ‘waters’. What had this surface? The ‘earth’. So what was ‘deep’ and ‘waters’? The ‘earth’. Notice that it does not say that the earth had a surface of waters or an ocean at its surface. It literally says the earth itself was (entirely) ‘waters’, and ‘deep’.

That is, each of the two adverbial subordinate clauses, <C1> and <C2>, makes a statement of its own *and* provides an adjective to modify ‘earth’. Temporarily dropping the statement each subordinate clause makes, the outer sentence simplifies to ‘And the earth was unformed and unfilled and deep and waters’.

Now when ‘waters’ is used as an adjective, as here, it makes phrases like melted hearts and weak-kneed. Thus, its basic adjectival meaning is ‘liquid- or fluid-like’.⁵ So v. 2 says the initial earth was unformed, unfilled, deep, and fluid-like (all of it, not just an outer shell), and it had a surface over which the Spirit was hovering in darkness.

This is the point that most readers will find difficult to accept, because we have been taught that ‘earth’ in vv. 1 and 2 means the planet. My challenge to any who want to hold that position is to show where the wording suggests a globe of concentric shells with the outer shell being a global ocean—a highly formed or structured object, contrary to ‘unformed’. As I describe below, I *do* believe that state exists early on Day 3, but I see no wording or flow of the story to indicate that in v. 2. Hence, it seems to me to be a preconception to assume that the narrator means by ‘earth’ in vv. 1 and 2, the planet Earth.

If you can abandon that preconception, at least temporarily, allow the wording to tell its own story. Consider the implications of the sentence structure as parsed above:

If we take all four adjectives literally and in the extreme, which the context seems to demand due to the special circumstance being described, we see that the whole of the initial ‘earth’ was:

1. *not yet formed* (Hebrew *tohu*): totally without structure—it was not a sphere or globe or concentric shells with a core—even down to the finest level, hence no particles or atomic structure, which would emit light if atoms existed this early in the story, before God formed light;
2. *not yet filled* (Hebrew *bohu*): without occupants—God starts several ‘fillings’ later in the account, thereby explaining what is meant in v. 2 by empty, void, or unfilled; each thing that ‘fills’ is a living creature;
3. *deep, vast, huge, an abyss*—this is not a reference to an ocean because it applies to the whole of the ‘earth’, the subject of the outer sentence; it describes the ‘earth’ as a whole;
4. *liquid- or fluid-like* and has a surface.

Over all of which the Spirit of God was hovering in darkness, already starting His development.⁶

God the great architect and builder has His building materials in place, the initial ‘heavens’ and ‘earth’. The great potter sets to work on His ‘clay’—substance of earthen material, hence, ‘earth’ for short. His job for the next six days is to form the heavens (fabric of space) and this earthen substance into His habitat for humanity (including humanity itself). He adds *form* by making several separations on Days 1–4, as noted below. He makes and creates ‘*fillings*’ for this habitat on Days 5 and 6 (note that He did not say of the plants, ‘Let them *fill* the earth’, as He did of the living creatures).

Conclusion: The original fluidic ‘earth’ is not seawater or H₂O, but a primitive liquid-like substance (like quark soup?) from which first particles and atoms, and then bodies in the cosmos, will be made, as shown next.

Seas

The narrator tells his readers in v. 2 that the initial ‘earth’ was ‘waters’ or ‘fluids’—not had some waters or was partially waters. Then, in v. 6, God calls for ‘an expanse in the midst of the fluids’ and for it to ‘separate the fluids from the fluids’. That is, the expanse was within the initial earthen substance. That separation introduced new form in the universe. So in v. 7, God made that expanse and it does indeed ‘separate the fluids *below* the expanse from the fluids *above* the expanse’ as God intended.

At that point there still were no seas, which term includes oceans. That is, there was not yet any seawater. God did not make those until ‘the [fluidic earthen matter] below’ gathered together and the dry land appeared (v. 9). Where did the dry land and seas come from?

The story indicates a progression from ‘the fluids below’ to the dry land and seas. The dry land and seas apparently came from the fluidic earthen material below. Verse 1 is about both the heavens and the earth, but v. 2 elaborates only on the earth. Similarly, v. 7 mentions both the fluids above and the fluids below, but v. 9 elaborates only on the fluids below. Indeed, just as there is never a statement explicitly describing the initial state of the heavens, so also there is no explicit statement about what ever happens to the fluids above. The reader must infer answers in both cases.

Apparently the planet was already being formed late Day 2, for only the surface needed formation early Day 3. The seawater gathered in one place, presumably in a shell around the outside. The wording suggests that it was previously in many places, (*speculation:*) perhaps in formation chambers under the early crust. Then the land appeared, possibly pushed up from under the seawater or formed in place by crystallization and sedimentation out of the seawater.⁷

The ‘waters/fluids below’ had now been transformed into planet Earth, whose surface consists of dry land and seas: one or more continents and many bodies of seawater. (Presumably, therefore, all these seas had the same initial degree of saltiness and mineral content.)

Lights in the expanse

God’s five explicit definitions and the role they play in the narrative have led us to understand some of the most important elements of the story. Now consider Days 2 and 4 in light of that understanding—but first, light itself:

Light

‘Let there be light’ concerns physical light, as confirmed by all the other references to light in Genesis 1. In particular, on Day 4 the ‘lights’ are ‘to give light on the earth’. Surely this means the full spectrum of light, for certainly the ‘greater light’ gives heat to the earth. The text does not mention heat, ultraviolet, infrared, etc., but it is reasonable that all these are included in the term ‘light’.

With our modern knowledge, it is also clear that physical light means atoms. Neither can exist without the other. Light is emitted and absorbed by atoms when their electrons change energy bands. Hence we can infer that God made atoms for the first time, and no doubt, electrons, protons, and neutrons, and related particles. God was forming the original fluid-like ‘stuff’ into all these things. Thus, He was developing the fluid into matter and energy as we know them.

Day 2

In making the expanse of the heavens, God separated the fluids into those above and those below. Isaiah 42:5 puts it like this: ‘... who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and its offspring ...’. See also Isaiah 44:24. In other words, as God stretched out the heavens, He also distributed the earthen substance, thus producing offspring. This sounds like the birth of the gross structure of the universe. Isaiah painted a word picture of God sticking his big hands (Isaiah 45:12) into the earthen material, now with light and atoms, and flinging ‘droplets’ (offspring) out over the universe. That picture is compatible with the words describing Day 2 in

Genesis 1:6–9 with ‘stretched out’ corresponding to ‘made the expanse’.

In modern scientific terminology, this was God establishing the large-scale structure of the universe—not yet stars but their raw material, scattered as needed, from which to form galaxies. If this understanding is close to correct, it gives a more glorious and majestic meaning to the account than the classical reading.

Furthermore, this interpretation doesn’t have God calling into being a near finished universe, with Earth only needing its surface formed and creatures added, and stars needing to be created separately with Earth belatedly spun into orbit. Instead, it sees God starting with primitive building materials and making from them light and atoms, then distributing that throughout the cosmos for use in forming galaxies.

Notice that God does not call this initial expanse ‘good’, which also seems to imply finished. It is not yet finished, as man will eventually perceive it, in that the stars are not yet formed and ignited. What God has done so far is to distribute matter to proper locations throughout the universe from which He is actively making heavenly bodies, including Planet Earth.

Day 4

The cosmos is largely intact now, with planet Earth in its orbit and its surface finished to the extent that vegetation sprouted and grew to maturity on it during Day 3b. God was ready to provide light (including heat) upon the earth. All He had to do was ignite the stars and fix them in place (v. 17). They would, in turn, light up the planets and moons.

Now the narrator eliminates any doubt about the length of a ‘day’. The inverse parallelism of vv. 14b–16 is displayed in figure 1. It is part of an even larger literary structure that facilitates memorization of the story. It associates both days (12/24 hours) and years (365 days) with ‘the greater light’ which hereafter ‘governs the day and night’ (v. 18; ~12 hours each).

Obviously the language is phenomenological—from the point of view of man on land. Just as obviously, the description is accurate in associating (a) years with the earth’s circuits around the sun, (b) days with the earth’s rotations, and (c) seasons with the positions of the stars. The language is accurate, it is structured for ease of

F	for signs and	Signs defined by...
G	for seasons (festival times) and	Festivals defined by...
H	for days and years; and	Days and years by ...
I ¹⁵	let them be for lights in the expanse of the heavens	Lights (function)
J	to give light on the earth’;	→ dry land
J'	And it was so (established).	Founded (4)
I ¹⁶	And God made the two great lights	Lights (sources)
H'	the greater light to govern the day, and	... the sun
G'	the lesser light to govern the night;	... the moon
F'	the stars also.	... the stars

Figure 1. Verses 14b–16 with their inherent literary structure displayed.

memorization, and it is understandable to people of all times and degrees of knowledge—barring preconceptions.

Now, consider the narrator's statement in v. 14a that one purpose of the lights is 'to separate the day from the night' and the parallel in v. 18b 'to separate the light from the darkness'. Again this is by parallelism associating (a period of) light with 'day' and (a period of) darkness with 'night'. This implicitly reiterates the definition in v. 5. However, one might ask, why does this separation need to be done again, for v. 4b says 'God separated the light from the darkness' on Day 1. I believe the narrator is telling his readers by this obvious allusion that there is a transition from time-telling on a cosmic perspective to time-telling relative to a particular place on the dry land. This corresponds to what we call a time zone today.

If so, it is interesting to consider what special location must have been in that time zone. Clearly the answer must be the Land of Eden: Genesis 2 says that is where God placed man and woman after making and creating them. Since Day 4 saw God igniting and fixing the luminaries in their places, He could have lit the sun at anytime during the fourth night, but it must have been lit in time to govern the fourth daytime period from the perspective of Eden. He could have ignited the other stars at any time during Day 4.⁸

Finally, notice that this transfer in time-telling is just part of a zoom in the story telling. The focus is initially cosmic: 'the heavens and the earth' is a *merism* referring to the entire universe still in primordial form on Day 1, ready for transformation. On Day 2 the focus is on the entire expanse of space. The focus on Day 3 zooms into the surface of planet Earth. On Day 4, although God's activity is again extraterrestrial, the purpose He accomplishes is to provide light (and heat and timekeepers) for the surface of the earth. On Day 5 He creates the first living creatures, fish and birds, to fill land and seas, so the focus is still on the surface. Finally, on Day 6 He further zooms into a particular time zone where He places man, the point of His creation.

Contractor's report in modern language

In summary, I and my two colleagues, Amunrud⁹ and Dobberpuhl¹, understand Genesis 1 to tell us (leaving out some important details) that:

Day 1. God began His creating-and-making workweek by *creating* from nothing *all* the 'raw material' needed to *make* the physical cosmos. That raw material was in two substantive forms: the fabric of space (heavens) and the essence of matter and energy (earth). The latter was initially a vast fluid-like substance, entirely without form (course or fine) and fillings (creatures), with a surface over which the Spirit of God hovered in darkness.

Then God formed from that 'raw material' light and all that it entails: photons, other particles, atoms—the tiniest of structures. God was progressively transforming the primordial 'stuff' eventually to become a mature, complete, and finished cosmos (v.2:1).¹¹

God's view of the original, fluidic 'clay':

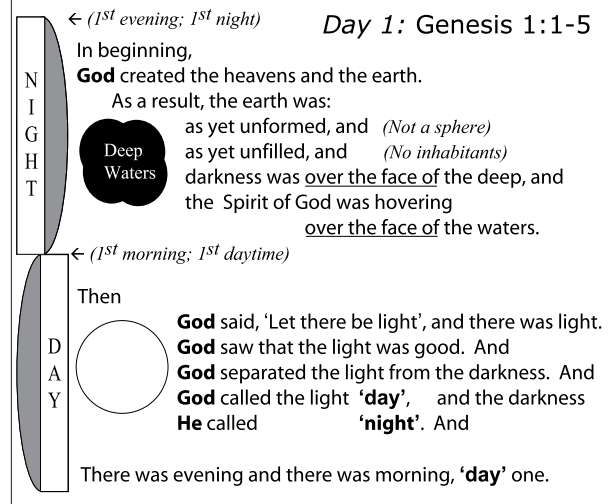


Figure 2. Create from nothing the raw material, and activate it.

God called the initial dark period 'night', and the initial light period 'day'. The whole cycle of evening, night, morning, and daytime, was also one 'day'. See figure 2.

Day 2. God put His big hands into that developing liquid-like 'earth' and spread it out all over the cosmos. This stretched the 'heavens' (fabric of space) as a result, and established the large-scale structure of the universe. That structure consisted of the 'droplets' of earthen matter ('offspring') and stretched-out space, gravitational fields, and light waves between them.

God was especially interested in one particular droplet, 'the waters below'. The other droplets were collectively called 'the waters above'. The expanse in the midst of the fluids God also called 'heavens', i.e., the stretched-out 'heavens'. Later He referred to them as 'the expanse of

God's view of the developing cosmos:

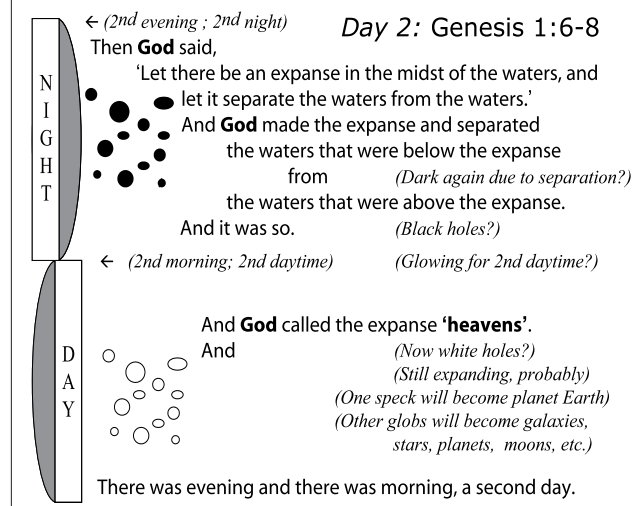


Figure 3. Stretch out (expand) the heavens and spread out the earthen material in them.

the heavens' and even later in Scripture they are called 'the heavens of the heavens'.

Inference. God's separating the matter droplets so far from each other caused their light to dim or go out temporarily, for a second night time. It also stretched out the first light in the universe, resulting in low-frequency background radiation. Hence, this second night was not utterly devoid of light, as was the first, but it was relatively dark as ours are now.

Speculation. Perhaps the second daytime was caused when the dark droplets (black holes?) began to spew out molten material in which God was now forming more complex atoms. As it gathered in clumps, the spewed-out molten material was the beginnings of galaxies, stars, planets, moons, etc. The planets and moons, in particular, were cool by early Day 3—their foundations were set.¹²

This second daily cycle constituted a second day. See figure 3.

Day 3. God turned His attention to what had been the droplet called 'the waters below'. It had by now become a sphere with a solid crust, and with seawater formed in various places (*speculation*: chambers beneath the surface or crust, where gases were probably also forming). The seawater escaped and collected around the surface (*inference*: with released gases around that). The dry land either formed in place (*speculation*: condensing/crystallizing out of the seawater) or it rose from underneath (*speculation*: with a layer of sedimentation on it and erosion occurring as it rose,

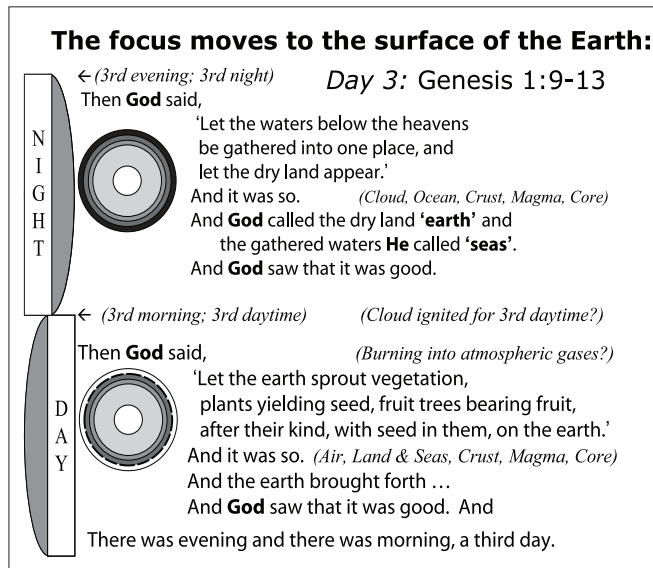


Figure 4. Form the surface of planet Earth, then grow a 'garden'.

thus making valleys and canyons). It too was called 'earth' and the seawater now in basins was called 'seas'. When all this settled down, the surface was ready for planting, so God caused plants to sprout from the dry land and produce fruit that day.¹³

Speculation. Perhaps the third night (now from the viewpoint of the surface of the dry land) was caused by a thick, dark cloud of gases (Job 38:9) surrounding all the Earth, and/or the proto-stars were relatively dim, and the third daytime may have been caused by those gases burning to form an atmosphere suitable for life (Dobberpuhl now has another proposed cause).

This third dark-then-light cycle constituted a third day. See figure 4.

Day 4. God finished off His making of the stars by igniting them or setting their brightness levels as He wanted them (1 Cor. 15:41) and by fixing them in their (dynamic) places in the cosmos. Lighting them, in turn, caused the planets and moons to be lit, in that they began to reflect light from the star that we call the sun. God's primary purpose for the sun was to provide light and heat on the earth, and it took over the function of regulating the dark and light periods and thus the full-cycle days, as well as years.¹⁴

This fourth daily cycle constituted a fourth day—this day, and hereafter, from the viewpoint of a particular region

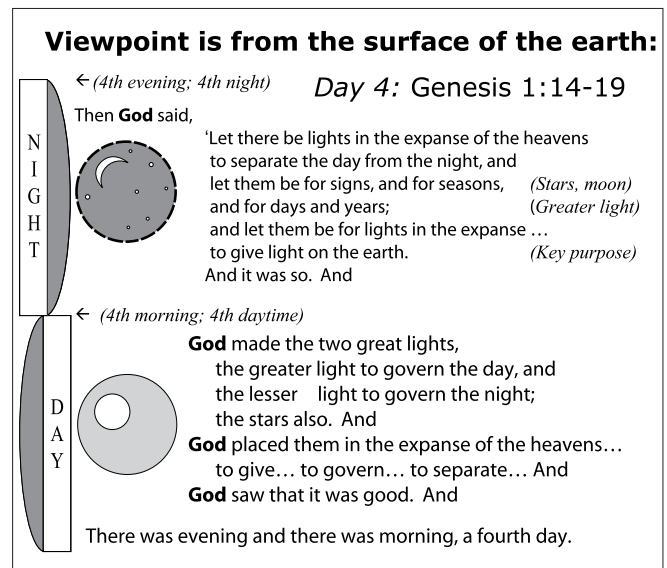


Figure 5. Finish making the heavenly lights and place them in the expanse of the heavens.

on the dry land. (*Inference* from Genesis 2: this region was probably the Land of Eden.) See figure 5.

Many interpretations

Evangelical Christians who want to understand the author's intent have proposed at least ten different interpretations of Genesis 1. Why?

In AD 1380, John Wycliffe gave us the first English translation of the Bible. Nearly all modern translations adopted his translation of Genesis 1:1 almost unchanged. While his translation was excellent for his time, words take on different meanings over time. Two words, in particular, have taken on new meanings since 1380. That shift in meanings has caused modern English readers to

get an inaccurate view of this verse and has led to many interpretations of Genesis 1. Those two words are ‘heavens’ and ‘earth’.

The modern English word ‘heavens’ can mean space or spaces, the stars, the atmosphere, God’s abode, etc. The original Hebrew word ‘*shamayaim*’ has the same set of meanings with one significant difference. Nowhere in Scripture (KJV and NASB) is it translated ‘stars’. On Day 4, God made the stars and placed them *in* the heavens. In Scripture, *shamayaim* is always a *place*. It is the place where weather happens, where the stars are, where light travels, or where God dwells. It never means stars.

While ‘heavens’ is a good translation of ‘*shamayaim*’ in most cases, in Genesis 1:1 it is better translated ‘spaces’. Certainly the stars did not yet exist as such at that time according to the account, for God did not make them until Day 4.

The second word that has taken on more meanings is ‘earth’. In 1380, the primary meaning of earth was not planet Earth, but rather ‘soil’. The Hebrew word ‘*eret*’ can mean planet Earth in Scripture, but it most commonly means ‘land’. In Genesis 1:1, context indicates that the word is related to matter, soil, ground, or land, hence, ‘the substance or essence of matter’ from which God made all those things. If planet Earth already existed as of Genesis 1:1–2, then, contrary to v. 3, light would already have existed, for atoms in the planet would emit and absorb light.¹⁵

It makes a huge difference whether 1:1 is translated, ‘In the beginning God created the stars and planet Earth’ versus ‘In the beginning God created the spaces and the substance of matter’. I have attempted briefly to show that the latter translation is more accurate than the former.¹⁶ This is due to semantic, contextual, and supporting Scriptural evidence.

Summary and conclusions

My intent here is to get across the majesty of what God was doing in the first four days, according to an even more literal than usual reading of Genesis 1. The scientific speculations may be off, but they are a place to start. The main issue is that my colleagues and I see the story telling a logical sequence of events. Those events start with the *creation* from nothing of some raw materials (the question is just how raw), and then the orderly *making* of those materials into a finished habitat (‘tent’) for humanity.

To us, this scenario seems to fit the story better than assuming planet Earth existed already on Day 1. It also seems more logical: if the sun was created from nothing on Day 4, God would have had to cast a near finished Earth into orbit for the first time then. It also provides reasonable answers for certain questions that seem to have unsatisfactory answers in the classical early-earth¹⁷ scenario:

1. ‘Heavens’ and ‘earth’ reasonably have different meanings before God explicitly defines them, not the same meanings before and after. The alert reader infers the initial meanings from the flow of the story.
2. Verse 1 need not be called a summary. Rather, it is a

statement of God’s first action. The ‘then’ (Hebrew *waw*-consecutive) beginning v. 3, which introduces the second action, links back to that prior action.

3. There is no need to equate the distinct words ‘create’ and ‘make’, claiming that they are interchangeable. Doing so destroys critical information. The story makes perfect sense recognizing the difference, when read as proposed here.
4. God clothed Himself in light (Psalm 104:2a). How? The first physical light (v. 3) probably started on the doubly referenced surface (v. 2) of the original ‘clay’, over which His Spirit was initially hovering in utter darkness (no light at all: v. 3). From the perspective of the original ‘earth’, the Spirit now appeared clothed in light. No speculation is needed that God shined some temporary light on this initial earthen substance until He made the sun on Day 4.
5. There is no mystery about the destiny of ‘the waters above’. The luminaries were made from them, as part of the original liquid-like ‘clay’. Hence, there is no need for a second, unmentioned creation of the same kind of material from which God formed planet Earth: ‘the waters below’. God created all the needed ‘stuff’ at the beginning¹⁸, activated it by forming light on Day 1, distributed it throughout the universe on Day 2, finished the surface of planet Earth (*sans* inhabitants) on Day 3, and finished (ignited) the luminaries and fixed them in place on Day 4.
6. God did not pronounce the expanse/heavens ‘good’ on Day 2. Why? Because they were not finished until their ‘hosts’, the luminaries, were ignited and placed on Day 4. This allowed man, when he came about on Day 6, to perceive the heavens, the vastness of space, via the light waves travelling through them (Psalm 19:1).
7. The light/day and darkness/night did not need to be separated a second time on Day 4. Rather this language suggests that the function was transferred. Up to Day 4 light and dark periods had been caused by God’s developmental actions. From then on, the light and dark periods were from the perspective of a particular region on planet Earth as it rotates. Hence, Days 1 and 2 are described from a cosmic perspective, and subsequent days from an earthly viewpoint. Even God’s making and placing the luminaries on Day 4 is for the purpose of giving ‘light on the earth’, hence has an Earthly focus.
8. A literal reading of Genesis 1 makes good sense, so it should be taken as the Author’s intended meaning. Likewise, later Scriptures that refer to God ‘stretching out the heavens’ and ‘spreading out the earth and its offspring’ make good sense physically. Thus, they too should be taken literally, not metaphorically.
9. In my humble opinion, the interpretation presented here is more literal than classical readings, especially as regards v. 2. It takes ‘formless’ and ‘void/uninhabited’ literally and in the extreme. It takes ‘deep’ and ‘waters’ as adjectives modifying ‘earth’, as the syntactic structure

of v. 2 indicates, thus meaning vast and fluid-like. That avoids the assumption that ‘deep’ means a global ocean and thus a partially formed planet of concentric shells: hardly formless. It takes ‘darkness’ as utterly dark—no light at all. It takes ‘be’ in v. 3 literally, concluding that light, particles, and atoms could not have existed before. It takes ‘hovering’ as indicating God’s active and ongoing participation in and control of the development of His cosmos.

10. Generally, this proposed reading leaves fewer loose ends than the classical views. Still, many details remain about which we can speculate.
11. Finally, this interpretation has little effect on the interpretation of later Scriptures that refer to ‘the heavens and the earth’ because they usually refer to the finished product (v. 2:1) rather than the raw materials (1:1). The final product is the same in either case.

At the least, this different understanding of Genesis 1 should be given an airing. I trust no one will be bashful about testing it against the Scriptures, as good Bereans.

References

1. The starting verse and key verb root in each of the descriptions of the 12 actions: 1 create, 3 be, 6 make, 9 gather-appear, 11 sprout, 14 make, 20 create, 24 make, 26 make-create, 29 give, 2:2b stop-rest, and 2:3 bless-sanctify
2. Hence, (1) v. 1 is not a summary, (2) vv. 1–2 are not a preface describing a state of things before the main storyline but an integral part of the description of Day 1, and (3) there is no time gap between either vv. 1 and 2 or 2 and 3.
3. This excludes the concept that ‘the waters above the expanse’ could have been a canopy of water vapor above the atmosphere, for the luminaries are in the expanse.
4. See reference 10.
5. Not literally a fluid because it is an adjective, and because a fluid as we know it would have surface tension, atoms, light, etc., which do not exist as of v. 2.
6. Apart from God’s creating living creatures in v. 21 and the image of God in man in v. 27, the rest of the account reports God making, forming, working on, or developing the original ‘stuff’. It is not appropriate, then, to call the report just the Creation Account; instead, it should be called the Creating and Making Account. Indeed, old-earth compromisers (OECs), leaving out the important making action sequence, focus on God as Creator and impose their own ‘making’ activities, order, and timing on Him. They need to accept God as Maker as well as Creator by accepting His account of how He did it.
7. Second Peter 3:5b–6 does not apply here for it is about the destruction of the Flood of Noah’s time: ‘... the earth was formed out of water and by water, through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water.’ Genesis 1 presents a formation, not a destruction.
8. It is likely that presumed black holes of night 2 spewed out plasma to start daytime 2: free protons, etc. The plasma would have included nuclei of all the elements that had formed inside the black hole. As the nuclei left the black hole (now turned to a white hole) they would have captured electrons to make all the elements as the plasma cooled. During Day 2, gases and liquids would have been collecting into spheres that would then become proto-stars, -planets, -moons, etc. Some of the latter would cool into solid crusted spheres, others into gas giants, while fusion would begin in the largest (proto-stars) on Day 4. (Dobberpuhl’s ideas since he wrote reference 10.)
9. See also a similar paraphrase: Paraphrase of Genesis 1 in Modern Language by Mark Amunrud, president of Montana Bible College, available by e-mail from <Mark@Amunrud.com>; also his modern translation of the account.
10. The physical interpretation and speculations are drawn in part from Dobberpuhl, Delmar, Creation by Intelligent Design, <www.ldolphin.org/cid.html>. However, he is still developing his model.
11. Indeed, chiasmic v. 2:4 harks back first to v. 1:1, creation of the raw materials, and then to v. 2:1 and the fully made universe.
12. Psalm 104:5 and Job 38:4.
13. I apologise for not doing justice to Day 3b. A more thorough paraphrase of God’s causing plants to grow after their own kind is beyond the scope of this paper. Likewise, I apologise for losing the amazing literary structure of Day 4’s description.
14. This does not mean days were redefined on Day 4. God defined ‘day’ on Day 1, and God’s definition still holds. It is only that the regulation function was transferred to the sun on Day 4, as the report’s perspective zooms in to a particular time zone. Hence, this interpretation does not support a theory that the first three to four days could have been longer than usual. The sun serves God’s definition of day, not vice versa.
15. The same is true of stars. This excludes any reading that has stars existing as of v. 1.
16. In the Hebrew (and the Greek of John 1:1), there is no definite article, so it really should be ‘In beginning, God created ...’, as in ‘In beginning His work, God ...’. Although this may be seen as semantically equivalent, it appropriately places the emphasis on God rather than the beginning.
17. Not only are we young-earth creationists. We believe planet Earth is two days younger than most young-earthers!
18. The merism ‘the heavens and the earth’ is understood to refer to the whole universe, but v. 1 is an exception if the stars were not created until Day 4, for v. 1 then refers to all the universe except the stars.

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