

Visual Commentary:

Genesis 1

STUDY NOTES

As the first book of the Hebrew Bible, Genesis sets up multiple themes and storylines that are found throughout the Bible. This rich biblical text, and its familiar stories of the garden of Eden and the birth of the nation Israel, ultimately points to the arrival of Jesus, who came to fulfill God's promises in the garden and set right humanity's failings. A thorough understanding of the structure and themes of Genesis will bring the entire biblical story into clearer focus. These notes will allow you to dig deeper into the ideas presented in our video Visual Commentary: Genesis 1.

Contents

The Literary Design of Genesis 1	3
Genesis 1:1-2: The Introduction and the Pre-Creation State	4
Genesis 1:1	4
Genesis 1:2	5
The Pre-Creation State and Biblical Ontology	6
The Cosmos of Genesis 1: Days One Through Six	7
Literary Design of Days One Through Six	9
The Cosmology of Genesis 1 and the Narrative World of the Bible	14
Time in Genesis 1 (Eschatology)	15
Why the Number Seven?	18
Why Does God Rest on the Seventh Day?	18
Creation as the True Temple	19
Why Does God “Bless” the Seventh Day?	22
The Seventh Day That Has No End	22

The Literary Design of Genesis 1

Just as Genesis as a whole sets the stage for the story of the Bible, so Genesis 1 is packed with details that bring the book of Genesis to life. The literary design of this first chapter is intentionally designed. Let's take a look. The prologue (1:1-2) and the epilogue (1:31-2:3) of Genesis 1 have been designed as a macro frame around the internal sequence of six days.

1:1 Summary Prologue	
In the beginning, God created the skies and the land [7 words].	
1:2 Exposition of Prologue in Three Lines	
Now, the land was wild and waste (heb: <i>tohu va-vohu</i>) and darkness was over the face of the deep abyss (heb: <i>tehom</i>), but the breath of Elohim was hovering over the face of the waters (heb: <i>hamayim</i>). [7x2 words]	
DAY 1	DAY 4
DAY 2	DAY 5
DAY 3	DAY 6
2:1 Summary Epilogue	
Thus were finished, the skies and the land and all their hosts.	
2:2-3 Exposition of Epilogue in Three Lines	
And God completed on the seventh day his work which he had made [7 words].	
And he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made [7 words].	
And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it [7 words] because on it he rested from all his work which God created to make . [key word from 1:1]	

This design structure acts as an envelope around the sequence of six days, with a clear strategy of emphasizing the seven-fold symbolism of God's actions and the culmination of the entire narrative on the seventh day.

Notice how the key words of the opening prologue ("created" "skies" "land") as well as the 1x7 and 2x7 design of 2:1-2 are taken up and completed in the prologue with the same words and the 3x7 design.

Genesis 1:1-2: The Introduction and the Pre-Creation State

Genesis 1:1-2 is easy to misinterpret without a clear understanding of the key Hebrew words in these verses. First we'll look at the word that's translated in our English Bibles as "beginning," and then we'll unpack the meanings of "wild and waste" and "deep abyss" found in verse 2.

Genesis 1:1

"In the beginning (*reshit*) God created the skies and the land."

It's important to note that the word "beginning" (Heb. *reshit* / ראשית) here refers not to a first point in time but to a preliminary period of time. We see this usage in other passages of Scripture as well.

*If you are pure and upright, surely then [God] will rouse himself for you and restore your rightful habitation. Even though your **reshit** was insignificant, your end will be very great.*

JOB 8:6-7

*Now in the same year, in the **reshit** of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the fourth year, in the fifth month, Hananiah the son of Azzur, the prophet, who was from Gibeon, spoke to me in the house of the Lord in the presence of the priests and all the people, saying...*

JEREMIAH 28:1

*In the **reshit** of the reign of Zedekiah the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying...*

JEREMIAH 27:1

In the first passage, the entire period of Job's life before his suffering is called the *reshit*, the beginning period.

In the Jeremiah passages, notice how the *reshit* of Zedekiah's reign extends over four years! It is clear that the word here refers to the initial period of his reign before the crucial events of his downfall began.

"In Genesis, the 'beginning' (re'shit) refers to a preliminary period of time rather than a first point in time... This leads us to conclude that the 'beginning' is a way of labeling the seven-day period of creation described in the remainder of Genesis 1 rather than a point in time prior to the seven days... It provides a literary introduction to the period of creativity that then flows into the...rest of the book." — JOHN WALTON, GENESIS ONE AS ANCIENT COSMOLOGY, 126-127.

Genesis 1:2

“Now the land was wild and waste (Heb. *tohu vavohu*) and darkness was over the face of the deep abyss (Heb. *tehom*)...”

Let's look at the Hebrew phrases “*tohu vavohu*” and “*tehom*” to understand the pre-created state of the world according to Genesis 1.

Other uses of *tohu* or *bohu*: “empty/uninhabited/wasteland”

*For the Lord's portion is his people;
Jacob is the allotment of his inheritance.
He found him in a desert land,
And in the howling tohu of a wilderness;
He encircled him, he cared for him,
He guarded him as the pupil of his eye.*

DEUTERONOMY 32:9-10 (NASB95)

*The city of tohu is broken down;
Every house is shut up so that none may enter.
There is an outcry in the streets concerning the wine;
All joy turns to gloom.
The gaiety of the earth is banished.
Desolation is left in the city
And the gate is battered to ruins.*

ISAIAH 24:10-12

For this is what the Lord says, he who created the heavens, he is God. He who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it. He did not create it to be tohu but formed it to be inhabited. He says: “I am the Lord, and there is no other.”

ISAIAH 45:18 (NIV)

*[Yahweh] pours contempt upon nobles,
And he makes them wander in tohu that has no road.*

PSALM 107:40 (JOB 12:21, 24)

Other uses of *tehom*: “deep abyss”

*Have you entered into the springs of the sea
Or walked in the recesses of the tehom?
Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
Or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?*

JOB 38:16-17

*Water encompassed me to the point of death.
The tehom engulfed me,
Weeds were wrapped around my head.
I descended to the roots of the mountains.
The earth with its bars was around me forever,
But you have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God.*

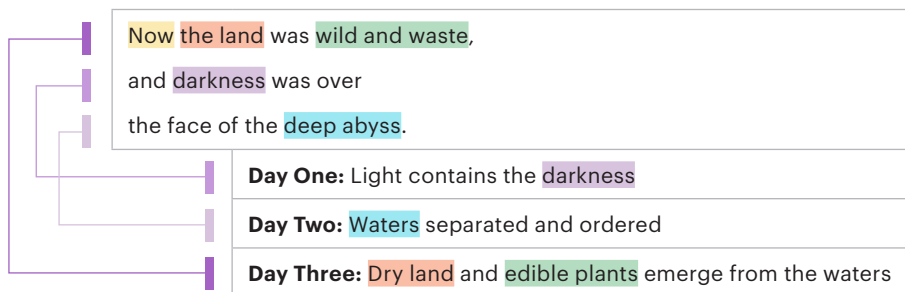
JONAH 2:5-6

In ancient Near Eastern cosmology, the “cosmic sea” belongs to the pre-creation state. It's thought of as a neutral, functionless state of non-organization and lifelessness.

The Pre-Creation State and Biblical Ontology

“Genesis 1:2...describes the pre-cosmic condition as it was understood in Israelite thought. As in the rest of the ancient world [the pre-creation state] is not absent of matter, as the primordial waters are already present... [T]hey are the functionless cosmic waters...where order has not yet been imposed, the desert and cosmic waters above and below.” — JOHN WALTON, GENESIS ONE AS ANCIENT COSMOLOGY, PP. 139, 143.

“Very little in ancient Near Eastern cosmologies [including Genesis 1] relates to the manufacture of the material cosmos... Rather, they recount the organization and ordering of the elements of the cosmos as a functional whole. If we are going to understand ancient views about how the cosmos came into existence (creation cosmology), it is essential that we understand ancient views about what constitutes existence (creation ontology). In the ancient world, something came into existence when it was separated out as a distinct entity and given a function and a name... this is a function-oriented ontology. This is in stark contrast to modern ontology, which is focused on the material existence or structure of something. For us, the existence of the world is perceived in physical, material terms... this is a substance-oriented ontology... [For the ancient biblical authors] creation was about the establishment of the functioning cosmos, not about the origins of the material structure or substance of the cosmos.” — JOHN WALTON, ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN THOUGHT AND THE OLD TESTAMENT, 180-181.



Notice that the three elements of “disorder” in Genesis 1:2 all find parallels in ancient Near Eastern cosmologies, and each one is separately addressed in days one through three of Genesis 1.

The Cosmos of Genesis 1: Days One Through Six

Days one through six have been neatly organized as two triads that each address the “problems” with the cosmic order presented in Genesis 1:2: uninhabited darkness and disorder.

Days one through three address the problem of disorder as God organizes the cosmos into distinct realms: the heavens above, the middle heaven/earth, and the land below. Days four through six then supply each of these realms with their appropriate inhabitants: the heavenly realm with lights, the middle heaven/earth with birds and fish, and the dry land with creatures and humans.

The land is	
wild/unordered (<i>tohu</i>)	waste/uninhabited (<i>bohu</i>)
Day One (The Skies) “And God said...” Light and dark / day and night Evening and morning: day one	Day Four (Host of the Skies) “And God said...” Light separate and rule day and night Evening and morning: day four
Day Two (The Skies) “And God said...” The dome separates ...the waters above ...the waters below. Evening and morning: day two	Day Five (Host of the Skies) “And God said...” Creatures in the water ...birds by the water above ...fish in the waters below Evening and morning: day five
Day Three (The Land) “And God said...” The waters below gather The dry land emerges Plants and seeds emerge from the ground Evening and morning: day three	Day Six (Host of the Land) “And God said...” Land creatures emerge from the dry land Humans appointed to rule Provided with trees, plants, and seeds Evening and morning: day six
And so they were completed	
the skies and the land	and all their hosts

Similarities Between Days One and Four

Day One	Day Four
<p>And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. And God called the light day and the darkness he called night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">GENESIS 1:3-5</p>	<p>And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the skies to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for festivals and for days and years; and let them be for lights in the dome of the skies to give light on the land," and it was so. And God made the two great lights, the great light to rule the day, and the small light to rule the night; and also the stars. And God placed them in the dome of the skies to give light on the land, and to rule the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness; and God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, fourth day.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">GENESIS 1:14-19</p>

On day one, God himself provides the light of his divine glory that meets the darkness and fits it within the larger divine purpose. God names it and limits its scope by containing it within the cycle of alternating periods of darkness and light.

When days one and four are compared, based on the clearly parallel vocabulary, we see God's attention return to the heavenly realm as he fills it with inhabitants, namely, the lamps. It is significant that God delegates to the lights the role that God himself played on day one, that of separating light and dark.

This is why these lights are called "signs" (אִתּוֹ), physical symbols of God's own light, glory, and power that meet the darkness on day one.

Similarities Between Days Two and Five

Day Two	Day Five
<p>And God said, "Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." And God made the dome, and separated the waters, which were below the dome, from the waters which were above the dome, and it was so. God called the dome "skies," and there was evening and there was morning, second day.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">GENESIS 1:6-8</p>	<p>And God said, "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the land against the face of the dome of the skies." And God created the great sea-monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind, and every bird of wing after its kind; and God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the land." And there was evening and there was morning, fifth day.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">GENESIS 1:20-23</p>

On day two, God orders the middle realm that will exist between the skies above and the land below. It begins with the unordered chaos waters of Genesis 1:2. And God "separates," that is, creates a meaningful distinction that will serve his purposes.

The border between the waters above and below is called a "dome" (רָקִיעַ), and it creates a horizon line between the waters. Only the waters above receive a name, "skies," while the waters below will receive their name on the following day.

On day five, God fills the waters above and below with inhabitants, addressing them in the same order as on day two. The waters below swarm with sea creatures and monsters, while the birds inhabit the realm above the land against the surface of the sky-dome.

The extra element on day five is God's blessing on the living creatures, summoning them to "be fruitful and multiply." Unlike the lights and stars of day four, these inhabitants must be called by God to actively experience the divine blessing of life and abundance. Their existence is not a given; it is contingent upon the divine blessing.

Similarities Between Days Three and Six

Day Three	Day Six
<p>And God said, "Let the waters below the skies be gathered into one place, and let the dry ground be seen," and it was so. And God called the dry ground "land," and the gathering of the waters He called "seas," and God saw that it was good.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">GENESIS 1:9-10</p>	<p>And God said, "Let the land bring out living creatures according to their kind, cattle and creeping things and beasts of the land according to their kind," and it was so. And God made the beasts of the land according to their kind, and the cattle according to their kind, and the creepers of the ground according to its kind, and God saw that it was good. And God said, "Let us make human in our image, according to our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the land, and over every creeper that creeps on the land." And God created human in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the land, and subdue it. And rule over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky and over every living creature that creeps on the land."</p> <p style="text-align: center;">GENESIS 1:24-28</p>
<p>And God said, "Let the land sprout vegetation, vegetative plants that produce seed, fruit trees that make fruit according to its kind, which has its seed inside it upon the land, and it was so. And the land brought out vegetative plants that produce seed according to its kind and trees that make fruit which has its seed in it according to its kind, and God saw that it was good. And here was evening and there was morning, third day.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">GENESIS 1:11-13</p>	<p>And God said, "Behold, I have given to you every plant producing seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit producing seed; it shall be food for you; and to every beast of the land and to every bird of the sky and to every thing that moves on the land which has animal life in it, every green plant for food," and it was so. And God saw all that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, sixth day.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">GENESIS 1:29-31</p>

Literary Design of Days One Through Six

Day three provides shifts from the focus of day two on the middle realm and the waters above and below. Day three shows God creating one last environment, the land which emerges out of the water. This day also has a bonus act, which is a +1 unit for the first triad of days. This +1 element in 1:11-13 focuses on the fruitfulness of the land, specifically in vegetation and fruit trees that spread their seed.

Day six displays a remarkable parallel design to day three. It also shows God entirely focusing on the land by creating its inhabitants (both plants and animals "come out" of the ground in 1:12 and 1:24). God first focuses on the animals of the land and then on humans, who constitute the divine image on the land.

Day six also has a final +1 element in 1:29-30, which takes up precisely the +1 element of day three. The vegetative plants and the fruit trees with seed are assigned as food for the animals and humans. These matching relationships are clearly intentional, creating what is called a "forward symmetry" (ABC//A'B'C'), which can be visualized in the table below.

However, this forward symmetry between days is not the only literary design feature of Genesis. Each of the triad also has its own internal shape, which leads the reader to compare matching elements in the first and last elements of the triad.

This design highlights features that match between the first and last parts of each triad, as well as the matching halves of the middle part.

<p>Day 1</p> <p>And God said, "let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. And God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night."</p> <p>And there was evening, and there was morning, one day.</p>	<p>A</p> <p>God ordered the heavens</p> <p>Light = divine glory</p> <p>Dark = disorder and chaos</p>
<p>Day 2 - Part 1</p> <p>And God said, "let there be a dome in the middle of the waters, and let it separate the water from the waters."</p> <p>Day 2 - Part 2</p> <p>And God made the dome, and he separated the waters below the dome from the waters above the dome, and it was so. God called the dome "skies."</p>	<p>B</p> <p>God commands the chaos waters to split.</p> <p>B'</p> <p>Fulfillment of God's plan to split the waters.</p>
<p>Day 3</p> <p>And God said, "Let the waters below the skies be gathered into one place, and let the dry ground be seen, and it was so. And God called the dry ground "land," and the gathering of the waters he called "seas," and God saw that it was good."</p>	<p>A'</p> <p>God orders the land.</p> <p>Land = refuge from God</p> <p>Waters = disorder and chaos</p>

This design structure invites the reader to compare and contrast the matching elements.

- Days one and three both portray God as addressing the two most iconic images of disorder, chaos, and death in the biblical imagination: darkness and the waters (note that they were already paired in 1:2). We are encouraged to see both as corresponding images of anti-creation.
- Day two is set apart from days one and three in having the most elaborate "command/fulfillment" structure of the three days. While day one registers a command and a short fulfillment, and day three displays only a command and then a fulfillment summary ("and it was so"), day two has a repetitious and lengthy command followed by an equally lengthy fulfillment.

- But note that the two halves match nearly identically. This is a literary embodiment of the theme of day two, which is the complete division between the heavenly and earthly by means of splitting the waters.

The reader walks away from days one through three with a robust awareness of the makeup of the biblical cosmos. Heaven and earth are viewed as mirror realities. The provision of divine light contains the darkness and creates the most basic condition necessary for God's plan for life to flourish. In a similar way, on earth, the provision of the land pushes back the waters, creating a space where life can flourish.

God's "conflict" with the darkness is a foundational image of the spiritual conflict that underlies the story of the Bible. Similarly, God and humanity's conflict with the chaos-waters can function as an image of the human conflict (the metaphor scheme of humans as chaos waters).

God's victory over darkness (day one) and the waters (day three) happens by means of speaking a word. Day two focuses on God's "splitting" the waters, again by speaking a word. But this is followed by an act of creation, as God separates the chaos waters.

Every single part of this network of images will be developed throughout the remainder of the biblical narrative.

- Waters → darkness → death → enemies
- Dry land → light → life → refuge
- God splitting the waters to create life → God's victory over chaos and evil

Now let's consider the design of days four through six in a similar way. Noting the comparisons and contrasts reveals the rich imagery in this section.

<p>Day 4</p> <p>And God said, "let there be lights in the expanse of the skies to separate the day from the night, and let them be for symbols...and God made the two great lights, the great light to rule the day, and the small lights to rule the night; and also the stars. And God placed them in the dome of the skies to give light on the land, and to rule the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness; and God saw that it was good.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">A</p> <p>God delegates heavenly rulers</p> <p style="text-align: center;">They are "symbols"</p> <p style="text-align: center;">They rule light and darkness and separate the calendar</p>
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<p>Day 5 - A</p> <p>And God said, "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the land..."</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">B</p> <p>God apportions the waters above and below to birds and fish</p> <p>God also make "sea-monster"</p>
<p>Day 5 - B</p> <p>And God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind, and every bird of wing after its kind...</p>	
<p>Day 5 - A'</p> <p>And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the land."</p>	

<p>Day 6</p> <p>And God said, "let us make human in our image, according to our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the land, and over every creeper that creeps on the land..." and God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the land, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living creature that creeps on the land."</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">A'</p> <p>God delegates earthly rulers</p> <p style="text-align: center;">They are divine images</p> <p style="text-align: center;">They rule the land and its wild creatures</p>
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This design structure invites the reader to make new contrasts and comparisons:

- God's delegated rulers mirror each other. On day four, the sun and moon both function as a pair that rules day and night. Note that the stars are not included in the delegated rule; rather, they make up the part that is ruled (the darkness and night). Similarly, on day six, the man and woman function as a ruling pair over the land and animals. This last point fosters the comparison between the objects in the heavenly and earthly realms that are subjected to the rule of God's images: the stars and the animals (consider how these implicitly come together in Genesis 3).

- Notice how all three days have an extra object created that sticks out among the other lists: the stars (the rulers), the sea monsters (Leviathan), and the cattle (Behemoth).

When this overlapping set of design structures are laid on top of each other, one gets what scholar David Andrew Teeter calls “literary origami.” The six days of Genesis 1 are arranged along two “folds,” a vertical axis that forms two matching triads and a horizontal axis that forms each triad into a mirror shape.

The land is	
wild/unordered (<i>tohu</i>)	waste/uninhabited (<i>bohu</i>)
Day One (The Skies) “And God said...” Light and dark / day and night Evening and morning: day one	Day Four (Host of the Skies) “And God said...” Light separate and rule day and night Evening and morning: day four
Day Two (The Skies) “And God said...” The dome separates ...the waters above	Day Five (Host of the Skies) “And God said...” Creatures in the water ...birds by the water above
...the waters below. Evening and morning: day two	...fish in the waters below Evening and morning: day five
Day Three (The Land) “And God said...” The waters below gather The dry land emerges Plants and seeds emerge from the ground Evening and morning: day three	Day Six (Host of the Land) “And God said...” Land creatures emerge from the dry land Humans appointed to rule Provided with trees, plants, and seeds Evening and morning: day six
And so they were completed	
the skies and the land	and all their hosts

The Cosmology of Genesis 1 and the Narrative World of the Bible

The waters above the sky are not the source of rain; rather, they are a heavenly mirror of the dark waters below the land. The “many waters” above are the source of the flood.

Then God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” God made the dome, and separated the waters which were below the dome from the waters which were above the dome; and it was so. God called the dome “heavens/skies.” And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.

GENESIS 1:6-8

But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark; and God caused a wind to pass over the earth, and the water subsided. Also the fountains of the deep and the windows of the skies were closed, and the rain from the sky was restrained; and the water receded steadily from the earth, and at the end of one hundred and fifty days the water decreased.

GENESIS 8:1-3

In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on the same day all the fountains of the great deep burst open, and the windows of the skies were opened.

GENESIS 7:11

Psalms 104 and 148 are poetic explorations of the cosmology of Genesis 1, summoning every tier of creation and all their inhabitants to praise the creator.

*Bless the Lord, O my soul!
O Lord my God, you are very great;
You are clothed with splendor and majesty,
Covering yourself with light as with a cloak,
Stretching out heaven like a tent curtain.
He lays the beams of his upper chambers in the waters;
He makes the clouds his chariot;
He walks upon the wings of the wind;*

PSALM 104:1-3

*Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord from the heavens;
Praise him in the heights!
Praise him, all his angels;
Praise him, all his hosts!
Praise him, sun and moon;
Praise him, all stars of light!
Praise him, highest heavens,
And the waters that are above the heavens!
Let them praise the name of the Lord,
For he commanded and they were created.
He has also established them forever and ever;
He has made a decree which will not pass away.*

PSALM 148:1-6

Many texts describe where Yahweh sits above on his heavenly throne as the “great waters above” (Jeremiah 10:12-13; Psalm 29:3, 10; 104:1-3).

These cosmic heavenly waters are different from the rain waters released by the clouds, which float below the sky-dome.

He wraps up the waters in his clouds,
And the cloud does not burst under them.

JOB 26:8

Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving;
Sing praises to our God on the lyre,
Who covers the heavens with clouds,
Who provides rain for the earth,
Who makes grass to grow on the mountains.

PSALM 147:7-8

The water falling from the clouds was viewed as different from the cosmic waters that God holds back by the sky-dome above.

But Yahweh is the true God;
He is the living God and the everlasting King.
At his anger the earth quakes,
And the nations cannot endure his indignation.
So you shall say to them,
"The gods that did not make the skies and the land will perish
from the land and from under the skies."
It is he who made the land by his power,
Who established the world by his wisdom;
And by his understanding he has stretched out the skies.
When he utters his voice, there is a tumult of waters in the skies,
And he causes the clouds to ascend from the end of the earth;
He makes lightning for the rain,
And brings out the wind from his storehouses.

JEREMIAH 10:10-13

The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
The Lord is over the great waters.
...in his temple everything says, "Glory!"
The Lord sits as King at the flood;
Yes, the Lord sits as King forever.

PSALM 29:3, 9-10

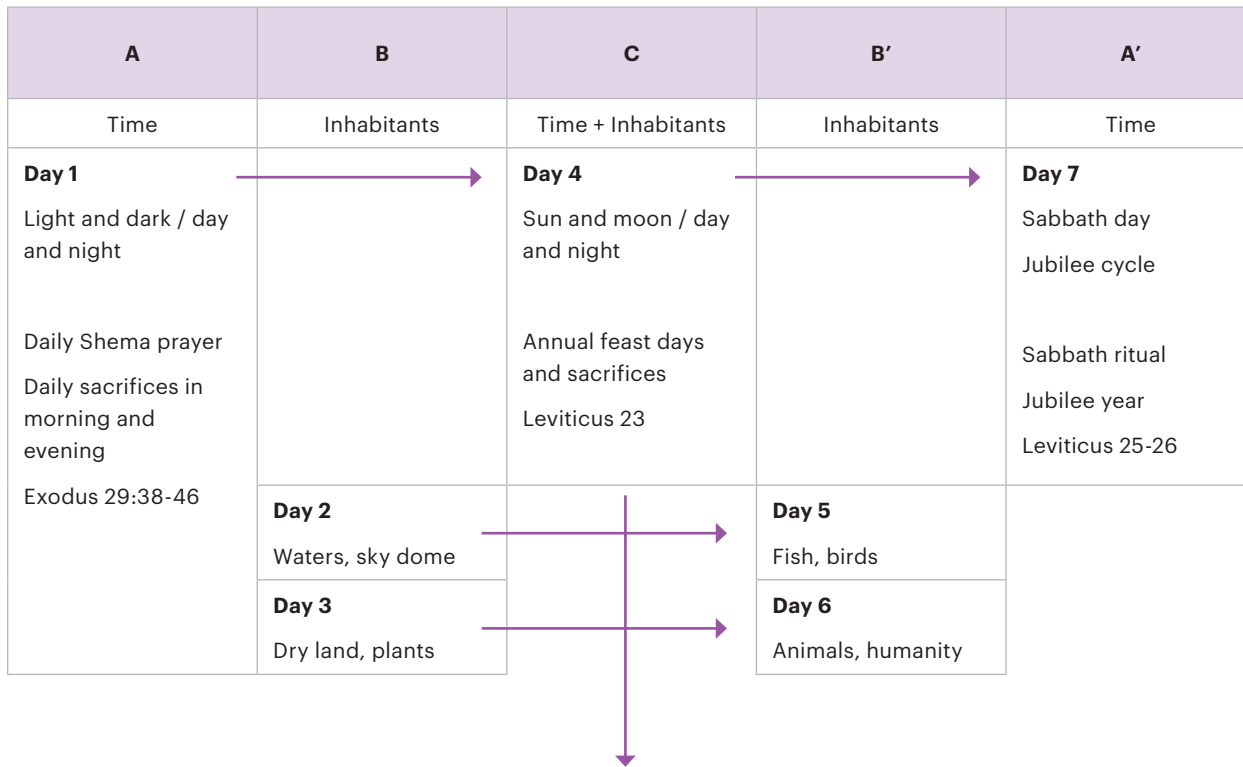
Time in Genesis 1 (Eschatology)

The most self-evident design feature of Genesis 1 is its seven-day sequence. The number seven is an organizing principle for the entire chapter from beginning to end.

The opening line of Genesis 1 has seven words, and the central word, untranslated in English, is two Hebrew letters, the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

7	6	5	4	3	2	1
הָאָרֶץ the land	וְאֵת and	הַשָּׁמַיִם the skies	אֵת	אֱלֹהִים God	בָּרָא he created	בְּרֵאשִׁית In-the-beginning
א = aleph / ת = taw						

In Genesis 1:1, the reader is being informed that the structural design of the sentences is meaningful and can convey deeper layers of significance. Here, the number seven is introduced as significant, alongside the structural importance of the central word. This same design structure is at work on the macro level in Genesis 1. The first, middle, and final days all focus on the theme of time in a coordinated way.



A	1:14a And God said, "let the lights be in the skies for dividing between the day and between the night, 1:14b and let them be for signs and for festival times and for days and for years.
B	1:15 And let them be for lights in the dome of the skies, to give light upon the land. "
C	1:16a And God made the two great lamps, the great light for ruling over the day
C'	1:16b and the little lamp for ruling over the night and also the stars.
B'	1:17 And he set them in the dome of the skies, to give light upon the land.
A'	1:18a And to rule over the day and over the night 1:18b and to divide between the light and between the darkness.

This design highlights the structural significance of “divinely ordered time” in Genesis 1. God provides the essential order (day one) and then delegates the maintenance of that order to others (day four), which is mirrored by the sacred calendar of Israel and leads up to the Sabbath (day seven).

Other patterns of seven in Genesis 1 from Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part I, From Adam to Noah (Genesis 1-6)*, p.13:

- There are seven words in Genesis 1:1 and fourteen words in Genesis 1:2
- There are seven paragraphs in Genesis 1:1-2:3 marked by “evening and morning”
- The concluding seventh paragraph in Genesis 2:1-3 begins with three lines, which have seven words each (2:2-3a)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
And-he-finished	God	On-the-day	The-seventh	His-work	Which	He-made
And-he-ceased	On-the-day	The-seventh	From-all	His-work	Which	He-made
And-he-blessed	God	The	Day	The-seventh	And-he-sanctified	It

Each of the key words in Genesis 1:1 are repeated by multiples of seven in Genesis 1:2-2:3

- “God” = 35x (7x5)
- “Land” = 21x (7x3)
- “Skies” and “dome” = 21x (7x3)

Key words repeated seven times

- “Light” and “day” together on day one
- “Light” on day four
- “Living creature” on days five through six
- “God saw that it was good”

God speaks 10 times in Genesis 1:1-2:3

- Seven divine commands to creation itself: “let there be...”
- Three divine initiatives toward humanity: “let us make ‘adam...’”
“be fruitful and multiply,” “behold I have given to you...”

“To suppose that all these appearances of the number seven are mere coincidence is not possible. This numerical symmetry is, as it were, the golden thread that binds together all the part of the section.” — UMBERTO CASSUTO, A COMMENTARY ON THE BOOK OF GENESIS: PART I, FROM ADAM TO NOAH (GENESIS 1-6), P. 15.

Why the Number Seven?

Seven was a symbolic number in Israelite culture and literature. It communicated a sense of fullness or completeness. The word “seven” (שבע *sheba*) in Hebrew is a homonym for the Hebrew words for “complete/full” (שבת *shaba*). This makes sense of the pervasive appearance of patterns of seven in the Bible.

The origins of the number seven being symbolic of fullness possibly originate in the lunar calendar of moon cycles. The biblical Hebrew word for “month” is the same as “new moon” (חדש), a period of time made up of 29.5 days/month, consisting of four 7.3-day cycles, making a “complete” cycle of time (Farbridge, *Number Symbolism in Biblical and Semitic Cultures*, pp. 134-37).

However, the Israelite Sabbath cycle is independent of the moon cycle, and Sabbaths do not coincide with the new moon. Rather, the seven-day cycle in Genesis 1 is portrayed as the ideal “complete” time sequence of creation. It stands outside of any natural cycle of time (sun, moon, and stars).

Why Does God Rest on the Seventh Day?

God’s rest involves a whole matrix of ideas connected with temples. God is taking up his rest within a sacred space by filling it with his divine presence.

Two Key Rest Words Associated with Sabbath in the Hebrew Bible	
<i>Shabat</i> (Genesis 2:1-2)	<i>Nuakh</i> (Exodus 20:11)
Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. On the seventh day God completed his work which he had done, and he rested (Heb. <i>shabat</i>) on the seventh day from all his work which he had done.	For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested (Heb. <i>nuakh</i>) on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath (Heb. <i>shabbat</i>) day and made it holy.

The Hebrew word *shabat* means “to cease from.” God ceases from his work because “it is finished” (Genesis 2:1). Compare this with Joshua 5:12: “The manna ceased (*shabat*) on that day...”

The Hebrew word *nuakh* means “to take up residence.”

- Exodus 10:14: “The locusts came up over the land of Egypt and rested (*nuakh*) in all the land.”
- Deuteronomy 12:10: “When you cross the Jordan and live in the land which the Lord your God is giving you to inherit, and he gives you rest (*nuakh*) from all your enemies around you so that you live in security.”
- 2 Samuel 7:1: “Now when King David dwelt in his house, for Yahweh had provided rest (*nuakh*) from his enemies.”

When God or people *nuakh*, it always involves settling into a place that is safe, secure, and stable.

Creation as the True Temple

In Genesis 1, creation is depicted as the cosmic temple proto-type, of which all later temples are symbolic miniatures. In each later biblical temple, the seventh day is when God’s presence fills the sacred space.

Creation and Sabbath	Tabernacle Designs and Sabbath	Tabernacle Completion and Sabbath	Jerusalem Temple Completion
Creation’s completion (Genesis 1:31-2:3)	Tabernacle instructions (Exodus 25-31)	Completion of the Tabernacle (Exodus 39-40)	1 Kings 6-8
Seven days that open with the divine command: “And God said...”	Seven speeches that open with the divine command: “And YHWH spoke to Moses...”	Seven acts of obedience to the divine command to complete the tabernacle: “And Moses did... just as YHWH commanded Moses.”	Seven petitions of Solomon upon the completion of the temple: “Blessed be YHWH who spoke to my father David...”
Day 1: Genesis 1:5	Speech 1: Exodus 25:1	Act 1: Exodus 40:19	Petition 1: 1 Kings 8:21-32
Day 2: Genesis 1:8	Speech 2: Exodus 30:11	Act 2: Exodus 40:21	Petition 2: 1 Kings 8:33-34
Day 3: Genesis 1:13	Speech 3: Exodus 30:17	Act 3: Exodus 40:23	Petition 3: 1 Kings 8:35-37
Day 4: Genesis 1:19	Speech 4: Exodus 30:22	Act 4: Exodus 40:25	Petition 4: 1 Kings 8:37-40
Day 5: Genesis 1:23	Speech 5: Exodus 30:34	Act 5: Exodus 40:27	Petition 5: 1 Kings 8:41-43
Day 6: Genesis 1:31	Speech 6: Exodus 31:1	Act 6: Exodus 40:29	Petition 6: 1 Kings 8:44-45
Day 7: Genesis 2:1-3	Speech 7: Exodus 31:12	Act 7: Exodus 40:32-35	Petition 7: 1 Kings 8:46-53
Sabbath	Sabbath	Divine Rest	Seven-Day Feasts

Seventh day culminates in Sabbath (Genesis 2:1-3)	Seventh speech emphasizes the "sign of sabbath" (Exod 31:12-17) Priesthood installed after a seven-day ordination (Exodus 28-29)	Seven acts of obedience complete the tabernacle	Solomon hosts two seven-day feasts to dedicate the temple (1 Kings 8:65)
And God saw all that he had done, and behold, very good. And there was evening and morning, the sixth day. And God blessed the seventh day... GENESIS 1:31, 2:3		And Moses saw all the work they had done, and behold, just as YHWH commanded, so they did, and Moses blessed them. EXODUS 39:43	Then the king faced about and blessed all the assembly of Israel, while all the assembly of Israel. 1 KINGS 8:14
And the skies and the land were completed. GENESIS 2:1	And it came about when he completed speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai. EXODUS 31:18	And Moses completed the work. EXODUS 40:33	And Solomon built the temple and he finished it. 1 KINGS 6:14
And God rested on the seventh day... GENESIS 2:2		And the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of YHWH filled the tent. EXODUS 40:34	And the cloud filled the house of Yahweh. 1 KINGS 8:10-11
...From all his work...and God blessed the seventh day and made it holy. GENESIS 2:2-3	You shall keep the Sabbath for it is holy for you... Six days let the work be done, and on the seventh day it is a Sabbath of Sabbath. EXODUS 31:14-15	Aaron and his sons are brought before the tent for seven days in the ordination ceremony. LEVITICUS 8-9 (SEE 8:35)	In the eleventh year, in the ... eighth month, the temple was finished throughout all its parts and according to all its plans. So he was seven years in building it. 1 KINGS 6:38 And the work of the pillars was finished. 1 KINGS 7:22 Thus all the work that King Solomon performed in the house of the Lord was finished. 1 KINGS 7:51
Temptation and fall narrative: Genesis 3	Temptation and fall narrative: Exodus 32	Temptation and fall narrative: Leviticus 10	Temptation and fall narrative: 1 Kings 9:1-9 and 11:1-13

In a similar way, the temple in Israel was spoken of as the place of God's "rest."

Let us go into his dwelling place/tent [משכן, mishkan];
Let us worship at his footstool.
Arise, O Lord, to your resting place [מנוחה, menukhah]
You and the ark of your strength.
For the Lord has chosen Zion;
He has desired it for his habitation.
This is my resting place [מנוחה, menukhah] forever;
Here I will sit enthroned, for I have desired it.

PSALM 132:7-8, 13-14

You will bring them and plant them in the mountain of your inheritance,
The place, O Lord, which you have made for your dwelling [לשבתך, le-shibteka // shabat],
The sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established.
The Lord shall reign forever and ever.

EXODUS 15:17-18

"The role of the temple in ancient Israel was not only a place where people gathered for worship. It is first and foremost a place for the deity—sacred space. It is God's home, but more importantly, his headquarters—the control room. When the deity rests in his temple, it means that he is taking command, that he is mounting his throne to assume his rightful place and his proper role..... So, what did God do on the eighth day? In this view, on the eighth day, and every day since then, he is in the control room from where he runs the cosmos that he set up. This is the ongoing work of creation. If one thinks of Genesis 1 as an account of material origins, God's creating is an action in the past that is now over and done with. God made the physical universe and now the cosmos exists. But viewing Genesis 1 as an ancient account of the cosmos' functional origins offers a more faithful account to the scriptural depiction of God's creational "rest" as ongoing." — ADAPTED QUOTE FROM JOHN WALTON, THE LOST WORLD OF GENESIS 1, PP. 75, 77

"Humanity's elevation, made in the image of God, is designed for the exaltation of the Sabbath day. The Sabbath thus becomes the day for humanity to enjoy its privileged status of being created as God's image. The Sabbath is the symbolic time for humanity's climactic union with and representation of its Creator... Just as the divine work began with a workman's week as an archetype of the human week, now humanity can live in the image of God. The Sabbath and the image of God are linked together and interdependent themes." — ADAPTED FROM MICHAEL MORALES, WHO CAN ASCEND THE MOUNTAIN OF THE LORD, P. 48, QUOTING HENRI BLOCHER.

Why Does God “Bless” the Seventh Day?

God’s blessing upon the creatures and humans on days five and six was directly connected to them being fruitful and multiplying and filling the land.

By analogy, the “blessing” on the Sabbath would also involve a kind of fruitfulness that is appropriate to a period of time. The idea is that the Sabbath would become many Sabbaths, as it’s observed and experienced by others.

“Set apart from all other days, the blessing of the seventh day establishes the seventh part of created time as a day when God grants his presence in the created world. It is then his presence that provides the blessing and the sanctification. The seventh day is blessed and established as the part of time that assures fruitfulness, future-orientation, continuity, and permanence for every aspect of life within the dimension of time. The seventh day is blessed by God’s presence for the sake of the created world, for all nature, and for all living beings.” — MATHILDE FREY, THE SABBATH IN THE PENTATEUCH, P. 45.

The Seventh Day That Has No End

The seven days portray God as working to bring order and life out of darkness and chaos. This divine work culminates in the delegation of human-images who rule the fruitful land on God’s behalf (day six). It is only after God delivers creation from the darkness and chaos-waters and appoints his human images to rule that creation is “completed” (Gen 2:1) and God can “rest/cease” from his work.

Reflect on the following words from biblical scholars to understand the significance of God’s rest and the opening of Genesis as a formula for how we are to live now as God’s images on earth.

“Unlike the previous days, the seventh day is simply announced. There is no mention of evening or morning, no mention of a beginning or ending. The suggestion is that the primordial seventh day exists in perpetuity, a sacred day that cannot be abrogated by the limitations common to the rest of the created order.” — SAMUEL BALENTINE, THE TORAH’S VISION OF WORSHIP, P. 93.

“The seventh-day account does not end with the expected formula, “there was evening and morning,” that concluded days one through six. Breaking the pattern in this way emphasizes the uniqueness of the seventh day and opens the door to an eschatological interpretation. Literarily, the sun has not yet set on God’s Sabbath.” — RICHARD LOWRY, SABBATH AND JUBILEE, P. 90.

“The Sabbath is that point in time where God and man meet. On the seventh day of creation, God joined himself and his eternal presence to his temporal creation, to the world of man. On the Sabbath day, man not only recalls but participates in an act of cosmic creation...he experiences the original structuring of time within the microcosm of his own life... The observance of the Sabbath links humanity to a divinely ordained future, as well as a divinely created past. Sabbath observance has cosmic implications... a foretaste of an eschatological future...a prefiguration of the final phase of the divine/human reconciliation. In pointing back to the beginning, the Sabbath also points to what is yet to be, to the final destiny to which all creation is moving.” — BERNARD OCH, “CREATION AND REDEMPTION: TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF CREATION,” P. 240.

“With regard to the lack of the final formula, “there was evening and there was morning,” commentators have argued that the seventh day is not meant to be understood as a literal day. This argumentation then has led to an eschatological interpretation of the seventh day. However, as part of the first creation account, the seventh day is the last of the seven sections, and the formula “there was evening and there was morning” in the account of the weekdays may be taken not only as a closing formula but also as a literary feature to anticipate what comes next within the series of sections in the creation account, that is the next day of the creation week. Functioning as a transition from one day to another the closing formula is a feature that moves the text forward throughout the six weekdays with the intention to arrive at the seventh day. Once it arrives at the last section, the text highlights the identification of the seventh day by stating it three times and then has no more need for the formula because there is no eighth section following for an eighth day. Creation has come to an end, for the seventh day has arrived.” — MATHILDE FREY, THE SABBATH IN THE PENTATEUCH, P. 38.