First Creation Account

Genesis 1:1-2:4

The Text

Genesis 1

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

3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. 4 God saw that the light was good, and He separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning-the first day.

6 And God said, "Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water." 7 So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it. And it was so. 8 God called the expanse "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning-the second day.

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

11 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 it was so. 12 The 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. 13 And there was evening, and there was morning-the third day.

14 And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years, 15 and let them be lights in the expanse 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 expanse 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 expanse of the sky." 21 So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. 22 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." 23 And there was evening, and there was morning-the fifth day.

24 And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so. 25 God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.
26 Then God said, "Let us make humans in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

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

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

29 Then 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. 30 And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground-everything that has the breath of life in it-I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

31 God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

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

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

The Context

The study of this text is a course in itself. The following notes cover the core points of emphasis regarding the first creation account (Genesis 1:1-2:4) within the broader context of Genesis as the first book of the Pentateuch.

Genesis

- The first eleven chapters of Genesis contain stories of the origins of the Jewish people. These stories arose out of the tribal and oral traditions of these ancient nomads.
- As stories of origins they have been influenced by their neighbours’ cultures and religions.
- These stories are not history nor are they historical narratives. They are myths. The question to ask is not, “Is this really the way things happened?” but rather, “What are the meanings within the stories?”
- There are two very different creation accounts in Genesis. The oldest is Genesis 2:2-25. It is the story centred on humankind with God depicted with human characteristics. Genesis 1:1-2:4 is very different being centred not on humankind but on God.

Genesis 1:1-2:4

The overall account of the Creation (Genesis 1:1-2:4) is notable for its order, especially its ordering according to spatial differentiation and different levels of detail. It begins with God organising the universe by the separation of the heaven from the earth, the light from the dark, the sea from dry land. After all of the major divisions are completed, God begins to organise within the new spaces. He deals first with the earth and then with the sky. The
whole earth is made to bring forth plants, then the heavenly bodies are fixed in the sky. Next, this newly organised earth is populated one habitat at a time according to the scale of each. The sea is populated first, then the air, and finally the land. Once God has created the beasts, humans are formed (Gen.1:1-27). The hierarchy of creation extends from large to small and from general to specific.

Not only is the order of the Creation itself important, but the manner in which God proceeds gives the reader clues as to the relationship between the Creation and the Creator in Genesis. “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light and that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness” (1:4-5). God not only creates by calling, or naming, but he also uses separation as a means of creation. God is an organiser as well as creator.

The phrase, “it was good,” is an integral part of this creation account. It appears six times in the first chapter and its repetition adds to the poetry and symmetry of the writing. “It was good” appears not after God has created something, but after He has seen how that creation is organised with respect to the rest of nature. “It was good” denotes the congruence between the new creation (or separation) and the rest of nature. God is following a set of rules, or rather creating a set as he goes. God is creating nature with some order; it is not randomly formed.

The Authors
Priestly scribes probably edited this text in the sixth century BCE around the time of the Babylonian exile. The Priestly themes are predominantly present – the transcendence of God rather than the immanence of God (as in the second creation account) and the orderliness of the events indicating God’s total control.

Te mention of festivals and time calculations (seven days) were the domain of priests. The declaration that God made the sun and moon which were worshipped by other cultures also betrays a priestly teaching that God is greater than the sun and the moon.

Many commentators suggest that this account was a liturgical hymn – again a priestly link. The refrain structures of the verses (God said let there be . . and it was) reinforce a hymn-like, chant-like structure.

Theological Points to Note
The first creation account was never meant to be a scientific treatise. It is rather a primary witness to the profound truth of God who created the universe, who created each one of us, who loves and cares for us, and presents God’s challenge to us to be responsible stewards of the gift of life that we have been given. It is poetry not science.

The first creation account draws heavily on the stories and myths of neighbouring cultures of the time:

- For example, the Babylonians had a story called the Enuma Elish. Here the deities Apsu (male) and Tiamat (female) begot another god named Ea, who in turn had a son named Marduke. Ea slayed Apsu, and Marduke then slayed Tiamat. From the carcass of Tiamat, Marduke fashioned the world. Marduke also slayed Kingu, Tiamat’s counselor, and with his blood, fashioned mankind.

In the first Genesis account of creation, 1:1-2:4 we find an omnipotent, omniscient, all-loving, eternal and infinite God. He creates freely according to His divine wisdom and is motivated by genuine love.
In Genesis, God creates in a very orderly fashion, following a seven-day plan. The number seven was considered a perfect number for the Jews. Although the word day normally means a 24 hour period of time, it can also be used for a season, a particular time or event (e.g. "judgment day"), or a period of time. We must remember that God is infinite and thereby is not bound by time. Consequently, in Genesis, day and the seven-day sequence refer more to a designed, purposeful span of time over which God creates.

**Ancient Cosmology**
The creation accounts are based on a Hebrew understanding of cosmology. The earth was seen as being flat with four corners (Ezekiel 7:11, Isaiah 41:9, Revelation 7:1). An expanse or firmament, also called heaven, separated the waters below the earth from the waters above (Genesis 1:6-8, Exodus 20:4, Deuteronomy 5:8). The sun, moon and stars moved about in the firmament (Genesis 1:14-18). The earth was supported on pillars (1 Samuel 2:8, Psalms 75:3). Sheol, the abode of the dead, was a pit under the earth.