

Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Old Testament Literature, Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, Days of Genesis 1 Session 5, 6-min. Video Overview

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Alright, we're diving into one of the most famous stories ever told, the creation story from Genesis. But what if I told you there's a version you probably don't know? That there's a puzzle hiding in plain sight, right at the very beginning? I mean, come on, you know this line. It's maybe the most famous opening sentence in all of literature.

It feels so simple, so powerful, so final. We hear it, and we think, yep, got it. But that's not the whole story.

Not by a long shot. Because what if the very next sentence just throws a massive wrench into everything? What if it describes a scene of total chaos that seems to completely contradict the perfect creation we just heard about? Well, it does, and that contradiction creates a puzzle that people have been trying to solve for thousands of years. So it all comes down to the relationship between the first two verses of Genesis.

Seriously, if you can figure out how those two sentences connect, you unlock the key to what the original author was trying to say. Okay, look at this side by side. Verse 1. Done.

A complete, perfect creation. But then, verse 2, immediately after, describes the earth as formless, empty, and dark. So which is it? How can both of these things be true at the same time? How do you go from a perfect creation to total chaos in one sentence? The original Hebrew here is just incredible.

It uses this phrase, *tohu vavohu*. It paints this picture of a wild, chaotic, unorganized, and totally empty reality. This isn't just a simple description; it's the problem statement.

This is the raw, chaotic material that the rest of the chapter is going to fix. You can imagine, this apparent contradiction has led to centuries of debate. And over time, three major theories have emerged to try and solve this puzzle.

Each one completely changes how you read the rest of the story. So to solve this mystery, you have three main suspects. The Gap Theory, the Dependent Clause View, and the Independent Clause View.

Let's break them down, one by one. First up, you've got the Gap Theory. This idea is pretty wild.

It suggests there's a huge, unstated time gap between verse 1 and verse 2. In this gap, Satan falls, messes everything up, the dinosaurs live and die, and then the seven days we read about are actually a recreation of a ruined world. This theory used to be popular, but it's pretty much been abandoned by scholars. Why? Because there's absolutely zero mention of Satan or sin anywhere in Genesis 1. Okay, next is the Dependent Clause View.

This theory translates verse 1 a little differently, as when God began to create, this makes it sound like the raw materials, that *tohu vavohu*, were just already there. So in this view, God is less a creator and more of a cosmic sculptor. The problem with this? It creates a huge theological issue, suggesting matter is eternal right alongside God, which runs counter to the whole creation from nothing idea.

And that brings us to Theory Number 3, which is where most modern scholars land. This is the Independent Clause View. It suggests that verse 1 is basically a title for the whole chapter.

Think of it like a headline. In the beginning, God created everything. Then, verse 2 describes the starting point, the raw materials of that creation.

It was formless and void. The real play-by-play action doesn't actually kick off until verse 3 with *let there be light*. Now here's the best part.

The strongest evidence for this view is that the author does the exact same thing in the very next chapter. In Genesis 2, you get a summary title, then a description of the initial state, and then the action starts. It's a consistent writing style.

The author basically left us a roadmap for how to read his work. Okay, so now that we have a better handle on the literary structure, we need to zoom out. To really get Genesis, you have to understand the world it was written in.

This story wasn't created in a vacuum. It was an active participant in a much larger conversation happening all over the ancient world. Just look at this.

When you put Genesis next to other ancient creation myths like the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, you notice some similarities in structure. But the theology? It's radically different. Genesis has one, all-powerful God who creates just by speaking, not through a messy, violent battle between gods.

And humanity? We're created to reflect God's image, not to be slaves for the gods. That's a game changer. So think about it like this.

For centuries, these stories of creation were passed down orally. People would jazz the story up, change details. The Genesis account then comes in as a divine correction.

It's almost like God stepping in and saying, alright, you've all heard the myths; now let me tell you how it really happened. Now for the other big puzzle in Genesis 1: what's up with those 7 days? The entire debate really hinges on the meaning of one single Hebrew word, *Yom*. And trust me, it's not as simple as you'd think.

First, yes, *Yom* can absolutely mean a literal 24-hour day. That's its most common meaning, and the structure of the creation week seems to point that way. But even within Genesis 1, the text uses *Yom* to mean just the daylight hours, separate from the night.

So right there, in the same passage, it has two different meanings. It can also be used figuratively, to mean an era or a lifetime. You know, just like we do in English.

We say things like, back in my father's day. We don't mean a specific Tuesday. And finally, it can mean a vast, undefined age.

Prophetic texts talk about the day of the Lord, and they're definitely not talking about a single 24-hour period. So you can see why there's so much debate over this one little word. So when you pull all these threads together- the literary puzzles, the historical context, the flexible language- you start to get to the most important question of all.

What was the author's original goal? Why was this story written this way in the first place? And here's the crucial takeaway. The author of Genesis was not writing a scientific textbook. They weren't trying to argue against theories that wouldn't even exist for another 3,000 years.

If we try to read our modern debates back into this ancient text, we completely miss the point. Now, its original purpose was to be a polemic, a powerful, direct argument against the polytheistic myths of the surrounding cultures. It was a radical declaration that the universe wasn't born from the violent, chaotic whims of petty gods.

It was created by the intentional word of one good, powerful, and orderly creator. Ultimately, the purpose of Genesis 1 is doxological. It's meant to be a song of praise.

Just like this psalm says, creation itself is pouring forth speech, declaring the glory of God. The story isn't just a list of facts. It's a poem designed to inspire awe and wonder.

And that leaves us with one final thought. If Genesis 1 is less like a lab report and more like a cosmic hymn, a poem of praise answering the who and the why of creation, not the scientific how, well, how does that change the way we read it? And maybe more importantly, the questions we ask of it.