

“A Theater for His Glory” (Genesis 1:1-2:3)

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Genesis 1:1–2

¹ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.¹

I'm very excited to start something new today. Over the next four months, we're going to take a look at the big picture of the Bible as we try to answer the question, "What is the story of the Bible?"

This is important for several reasons. One, Christians read, preach, and teach the Bible. We understand that it is God's written word to us. It's not merely a book written about God, but it's a book authored by God. Christians believe that the Holy Spirit caused people to write what he wanted them to write. So the Bible is God's Book.

The second reason is that the Bible is the foundation for our theology. If we want to know God, we need to know the Bible. We can't think and speak and write accurately about God if we don't have an accurate understanding of the Bible.

The third reason why we need to understand the story of the Bible is that the Bible has been a tremendously influential book. It's the best-selling book of all-time. It remains a best-seller today. It is the most influential book ever. It has often been misused and abused, but there's no denying the important role the Bible has played in shaping the world.

So it's important to understand what the Bible says, for those reasons. But, let's face it, the Bible is not always easy to understand. It's long. It was written a long time ago. If we're going to understand the Bible, we have to do some homework.

Since the whole book is authored by God and since the whole book is about God, we should expect that it tells one big story.

But the Bible is also a collection of smaller books, like Genesis and Job and Isaiah and Matthew and Romans. In fact, the Bible is an anthology of 66 books: 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. And there are roughly 40 human authors of the Bible, who wrote over the course of about 1,500 years. They wrote in different times and places. They wrote in

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

different languages and cultures. They had different personalities and experiences. They wrote using different styles of literature: some wrote histories, some wrote poems, some wrote letters, and some wrote in other genres.

If we are going to understand the Bible, we need to understand the one big story it tells, and we're going to have to understand a bit about particular passages. We're going to have to see both the forest and the trees.

In this series, I want to help us see the big story of the Bible. So I'll keep an eye on the forest. But to help us understand the one big story, we'll look at individual passages. We'll examine some important trees that make up the forest. Some weeks, I'll look very closely at one particular passage. In other weeks, I'll do more summarizing and painting with a broad brush.

Yet each week, I'll try to do a few things:

I'll help us understand who God is.

I'll help us see the major plot points of the one big story of the Bible.

I'll show how these turning points relate to each other.

I'll show how these turning points relate to Jesus. That's important, since the whole Bible is about him.

I'll also show why all of this matters for our lives. I'll show how the ideas in the Bible are very relevant for today.

So, with that in mind, "Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start."² We'll begin today with the very beginning of the Bible: Genesis.

Many people want to know where we come from. That makes perfect sense. Where we come from determines where we're going. I think that's why so many people are interested in origins. That's why some people are very interested in family trees and genealogies.

Many people also want to know the nature of the world and the universe. Is the universe eternal, or did it coming into being at one point in time? Is there a God who created the world or did it somehow accidentally come into existence?

We see that the Bible says everything begins with God. That's why the very first verse of the Bible says, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). It all starts with God.

² These are the opening words to "Do-Re-Mi" from *The Sound of Music*.

Now, before I go any further, I have to say something about reading the Bible. In order to understand the Bible, we need to understand how it would be read and understood by its initial audience. The first five books of the Bible were primarily authored by Moses, roughly 3,400 years ago.³ The message of Genesis had to make sense to people who had just come out of Egypt and were about to enter the Promised Land of Canaan. This was probably in the late 15 century BC. We must remember that though the message of Genesis is for all times, it wasn't written directly to us.

We must remember that Moses was very familiar with ancient Near East culture. He was raised in Egypt. He grew up in the Pharaoh's court. He "was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22). He would have known all about the Egyptian gods and mythologies. And he probably was aware of the stories of other cultures, like ancient Babylon, which is where Abraham came from. If we're going to understand Genesis correctly, we have to read it through the eyes of Moses. We're going to have to try to understand something of the ancient culture and how they viewed things. They would understand different referents than we do, because they had different mental furniture, so to speak.

Let me use an example. Let me say a few words and see if you can guess the setting. If I say, "White hat, black hat, spurs jangling," what am I talking about? You know I'm describing a shoot-out. You know that because you grew up with Westerns on television and in the movies. We'll see today that some specific words give us a clue as to the setting that Moses is describing.

Let me say something else about presuppositions. When we read, we all bring to the text some pre-conceived ideas, some things we assume to be true. Most people today, when they read the beginning of the Bible, want to know how the Bible relates to science. I think that's an interesting discussion, and it's an important one. However, the fact that we think about things like the age of the universe and the Big Bang and evolution shows that we are bringing to the text a set of questions that we think are important. We tend to think about things scientifically, even if we don't know a whole lot about science. Many people come to Genesis expecting that it will have something scientific to say about the origin of the universe. They assume it must speak to these issues.

³ I say they were "primarily" written by Moses because there is evidence that Moses didn't write all of the Pentateuch. He couldn't have written about his death (Deut. 34). There are also some anachronisms regarding place names (in Gen. 14:14, there is a reference to a town called Dan, which was known as Laish in Moses's time and was only later named Dan [Judg. 18:29]). Nothing in the doctrine of Scripture says that each book of the Bible had to be written by only one person, at one particular time.

The thing that we have to understand is that not all ages were so concerned about scientific issues. In the time of Moses, people were not very concerned about material origins, or how old things were. They knew nothing of modern science. If Moses had written something in modern scientific terms, the initial audience wouldn't have understood anything. If he had said, "In the beginning, God created the Higgs Boson," the Israelites would have said, "God created the what?" "You know, the 'God particle.' And let me tell you about quarks." "What's a quark?" "Well, I don't really understand myself, but people thousands of years from now will understand this stuff, so let me write it down."

In Moses's day, people didn't have scientific questions. And that's okay. Science doesn't address the most meaningful questions in life. People in the time of Moses didn't care about the *how* of creation. They wanted to know the *who* and the *why* of creation. They had questions about gods. They wanted to know which god or gods made the world, and why. People wanted to know who to worship. They wanted to know which god or gods were behind elements of nature, such as the sun and the moon. The beginning of Genesis tells us who God is. It also tells us what the world is. And it tells us who we are.

Today, I want to focus on God and the world he made. Genesis tells us that there is one God. He alone made the world, and he made it in an orderly way. He spoke into existence and he arranged everything in the world to be a temple, a theater for his glory.⁴

In the beginning, there is God. He has always existed. Before there was a universe, there was God. That was a unique belief in Moses's time. In his day, many people were polytheists. They believed there were many gods, gods who controlled the sun and the moon and other elements of nature. Other cultures had strange creation stories of gods accidentally creating elements of the world while they were fighting or doing other sordid activities. For example, in a Babylonian story called *Enuma Elish*, which was written at roughly the same time as Genesis, one god, Marduk, kills another god, Tiamat. Tiamat's corpse then splits into two and becomes heaven and earth. In these stories, there are a lot of gods, many of whom are associated with elements of the created order. And their activities randomly and accidentally create everything else.

⁴ The idea of creation being a "theater" comes from John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I. iii. 3; I. v. 3–5, 8.

That may seem strange to us, but today's creation myths have something in common with those stories. Many scientists up until the beginning of the twentieth century thought that the universe had no beginning. They thought it always had existed. But astronomy in the twentieth century changed all of that. The Big Bang theory—or the family of Big Bang theories, to be more accurate—implied that the universe had a beginning. And if the universe has come into being at some point, that implies there's a God who made it. Some scientists dislike that idea so much that they come up with alternate theories that have no evidential support. So they come up with theories like our universe was born out of another universe, which was born out of another universe, and so on. However, there's no evidence to support that such a thing is even a possibility, let alone that it happened.

A number of scientists don't like the idea that the universe is orderly, and that it seems that everything in the universe was set up to support life on only one planet, Earth. Many different variables, such as the strength of gravity, or the strong nuclear force—the force that binds neutrons and protons together—need to be within very specific ranges for the universe to exist and for life to exist. This is referred to as cosmic fine tuning. Some scientists dislike the idea that the universe seems to be tuned by a supernatural agent. So they believe in the “multiverse” theory: they believe that our universe just happens to be one of countless other universes, and that given the fact that there are so many universes, it is natural that one of them would support life. But there is simply no evidence that other universes exist.

What those ancient myths have in common with modern scientific myths is this: there is no one God in control, and all of reality is the result of chance. We exist by accident, they say. If that is so, there is no meaning in life. There is no objective purpose. With no God, there can be no objective morality, no right and wrong. The atheistic philosopher Bertrand Russell said that “man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving.” He claimed that our origin and everything we experience is “the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms.” He said that every aspect of our lives is “destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system” and that “the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins.”⁵

⁵ Bertrand Russell, “A Free Man's Worship,” in *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957, 107

But the Bible says something very different about a temple. And it gives us meaning and purpose. The Bible says God created everything to be his temple. That may be a very new way of thinking about the beginning of the Bible, but I want to show you why I think that's what this passage is communicating. I realize that this reading of the beginning of the Bible may be very different than anything you're used to. But bear with me. The more I've thought about this passage, the more I've studied the cultural background, the initial audience, and the Hebrew, the more I believe this reading is the right one. I could be wrong, but I want you to follow along with me.

First of all, we should ask, What is a temple? It's a place of rest, where God is enthroned as King. A temple is a dwelling place for God. More specifically, it's a place where God dwells with his people. It's also a place of worship, where God is glorified. It's sacred space. It's holy ground. So, if God made the universe to be his temple, he intended to dwell there with his people. It's a place that would be filled with his presence and his glory, his magnificence.

In the time of Moses, when people thought of gods, they thought of temples. We must also remember that Moses probably wrote this after God had told the Israelites to build a tabernacle, which is a movable temple. They had already built the tabernacle, and it went with them everywhere they went. So the Israelites were used to thinking about temples, and they would expect that any story of God would include a story of a temple.

There are several clues in Genesis 1:1-2:3 that God made the universe to be his temple. Let's consider the structure of this passage. There are seven days mentioned: six days of God's activity followed by one day of rest. And even within the passage, there are many multiples of seven. For example, in the first verse, there are seven Hebrew words. In the second verse, there are fourteen (2x7) Hebrew words. Genesis 2:1-3 mirrors Genesis 1:1-2. In Genesis 2:1-3, there are thirty-five (5x7) Hebrew words. "God" is mentioned thirty-five times, "earth" is mentioned twenty-one times. The phrase, "God saw that it was good," appears seven times.⁶ This can't be an accident.

The seven days mentioned in this account are also very structured. Days 1-3 are paralleled by days 4-6. The point is that this passage is very, very structured. It's artful. All these multiples of seven are not accidents. Moses wasn't just reporting the news. He was trying to

⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1987), 6. Wenham says "heaven/firmament" appears twenty-one times, but I could (on multiple occasions) only count twenty. He claims "and it was so" appears seven times, but I could only count six.

communicate a great theological truth. When we read this passage, we should be aware of the fact that Hebrew literature wasn't always arranged in the way that modern English literature is. They didn't write history in the way you would today. They often arranged stories to communicate important truths that a mere recitation of the facts wouldn't communicate.

So why the number seven, and why all these multiples of seven? Numbers had a lot of meaning in Hebrew. "In Hebrew literary tradition the number seven was the number of perfection, the number of wholeness and of the divine."⁷ This number means the same thing in the book of Revelation, and it comes up a number of times throughout the whole Bible. Here, it means God's fashioning of the world was perfect and complete.

But the number seven is also associated with temples. In ancient Near Eastern literature, temples were built or dedicated in seven days. This is true in stories that come out of Babylon and Mesopotamia.⁸ Now, all these other accounts are myths. They are fictional stories of false gods. But the point is that in Moses's day, everybody knew that temples were built or dedicated in seven days. And I think the point of the beginning of Genesis is that the true God built the universe to be a temple.

We even see the significance of the number seven connected to the temple within the Bible. When Solomon, the king of Israel, built the temple in Jerusalem, it took him seven years to build it (1 Kg. 6:38). He dedicated the temple in the seventh month, as part of the seven-day Feast of Booths (1 Kgs. 8:65). At that time, Solomon prays a prayer that has seven petitions in it (1 Kgs. 8:31-55).

The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed hundreds of years after it was built. Later, another temple was built there. When the altar was built (see see this in chapter 3 of Ezra), it was built during the seventh month at the time of the seven-day Feast of Booths. When the prophet Ezekiel was given a vision of a future temple, he was told that when the altar is built, there should be seven days of sacrifices for atonement made on it (Ezek. 43:25-26).

Again, none of this is accidental. God wants us to see that he made the heavens and the earth to be his temple. So, with that in mind, let me explain Genesis 1:1-2:3.

⁷ John Dickson, *A Doubter's Guide to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 19.

⁸ "In Ugaritic mythology Baal takes seven days to construct his sanctuary. On the seventh day of the Akitu festival (annual Babylonian enthronement festival on New Year's Day), the god made the procession from the Akitu house outside of the city to assume his place in his temple and his role as suzerain. . . . Gudea's account of temple building and construction in Sumerian literature also indicates seven days for the celebration of the temple's commencement." John H. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 155.

Let's look at the first two verses:

¹ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

These verses serve as the background to what happens in the rest of the passage. They use a different verb tense⁹ than the rest of the passage,¹⁰ which in Hebrew grammar indicates that these verses happened before the rest of what follows. I think this is what these verses mean: Before these seven days, sometime in the indefinite past, God created everything. The phrase “heavens and earth” means the whole created order, the whole universe. But this creation wasn't functioning as it should. It was “without form and void,” which is to say that it wasn't functioning properly yet. It wasn't set up as God's temple. God needed to do something before to bring order to his creation.¹¹

As an aside, we should also notice that the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity, is involved. He is about to help turn creation into God's temple. The Holy Spirit was involved in creation, and he is the one who recreates us when we become Christians.

Then there is the first day, in verses 3-5:

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

Notice that the light is called “Day” in verse 5. “Light” here means the period of daylight, which lasts for roughly half the day. So when God says, “Let there be light,” he means, “Let there be a period of light.”¹² He's distinguishing this period of the day from the darkness. He's distinguishing day from night.

This isn't a reference to God creating something new. He already created it back in verse 1. But he's giving it a name and a function. In the ancient Near East, in the culture that

⁹ Qal perfect.

¹⁰ The narrative of Gen. 1:3-2:3 uses Qal imperfect, *wayyiqtol* verbs. In Hebrew, these form the backbone of the main narrative, while other verb tenses provide background information. See C. John Collins, *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 21-22, 42-43.

¹¹ John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 143. Elsewhere, Walton writes, “these terms indicate that the cosmos was empty of purpose, meaning, and function—a place that had no order or intelligibility.” John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 187.

¹² Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 180.

surrounded Israel, things didn't come into existence until they had a function, until they were named. So now God is giving day and a night a function. He's creating time.¹³ We'll come back to this idea when we get to day 4.

When we see the language of "separating" here, think of it like this: Imagine you had a bunch of kids all try out for the high school football team. They were tested to see if they were fast and/or strong. Now that they are on the team, they have to be separated into positions. Some will play offensive or defensive line. Some will play running back or linebacker. Some will play wide receiver or defensive back. Some will be kickers. They all were created a while ago, but now they are being given roles on the team. That's sort of what's going on here.

Now let's go to day 2, in verses 6-8:

⁶ And God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters."⁷ And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so.⁸ And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

A similar thing is happening here. God is taking water and separating them. There is now water on the earth, and there is "water" above the sky. We should remember that this isn't scientific language. It's phenomenal language. When it rains, it appears as though there must be water "above the sky" that is falling. It should also be noted that the Hebrew word translated as "made" here doesn't necessarily mean "created from nothing." Again, it was created back in verse 1. Now it is "fashioned" (see the ESV footnote) or "appointed" to function in a certain way.¹⁴ The point here is that God is fashioning the space that we could call sky, and he's distinguishing that from the space of the sea, or the ocean. We'll come back to this in day 5.

But let me point out another clue that this is related to a temple. The word that appears as "expanse" can also be translated as "canopy."¹⁵ We also see this word in other places in the Bible, such as Isaiah 42:5:

Thus says God, the LORD,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who *spread out* the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people on it

¹³ These thoughts reflect the thought of John Walton in the various works cited herein.

¹⁴ This reflects Walton's thought, but it's also an observation Collins (*Genesis 1-4*, 57) makes with respect to verse 16.

¹⁵ The Hebrew is רָקִיעַ (*raqi'a*). This appears in Gen. 1:6, 7, 8, 14, 15, 17, 20.

and spirit to those who walk in it.

Whenever you see language in the Bible that says God stretched out the heavens, it's language that likens the sky to the tabernacle.¹⁶ When you see language that says God set the earth on foundations, it's referring to the foundation of the temple.¹⁷ The point is that God made the Earth to be a temple.

Now let's look at day 3, in verses 9-13:

⁹ And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

¹¹ And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth." And it was so. ¹² The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

Now God distinguishes the sea from the land. On the land, there is vegetation: plants and fruit.

Now, before we move on to the next three days, let me point out that God seems to be filling the places or spheres of days 1-3 with things that will rule them. So, in day 4, God makes two lights that "rule," or govern, the daytime and the nighttime. This parallels day 1. Let's look at verses 14-19:

¹⁴ And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so. ¹⁶ And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷ And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, ¹⁸ to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

It's a bit odd that the words "sun" and "moon" don't appear here. But the word that's translated as "lights"¹⁸ is used elsewhere in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, only of the

¹⁶ For example, see Isa. 40:22; 42:5; 44:24; 45:12; 48:13; 51:13.

¹⁷ For example, see Job 38:4-7.

¹⁸ The Hebrew words is תָּאֲרָם.

lights on the tabernacle lampstand.¹⁹ The tabernacle and the temple were supposed to represent the universe. They were literally microcosms. Just as the cover of the tabernacle represented the sky, the lights on the menorah represented the heavenly bodies. And the fact that daytime and nighttime preceded God's putting the sun and the moon in place shows this passage is more about God organizing the universe to be a temple out of things he had already made.

Here's the fifth day, in verses 20-23:

²⁰ And God said, "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens."²¹ So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.²² And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth."²³ And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

This parallels day 2. Now the birds fill the sky and the fish and all other sea creatures fill the sea. And God blesses them and tells them to multiply and to fill their respective spaces.

This brings us to day 6, which we find in verses 24-31:

²⁴ And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds." And it was so.²⁵ And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

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

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

²⁹ And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food."³⁰ And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so.³¹ And God saw everything that

¹⁹ G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 34. See Exod. 25:6; 27:20; 35:8, 14 (x2), 28; 39:37; Lev. 24:2; Num. 4:9, 16.

he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

I'm not going to say a lot about day 6 because I'm going to talk about God's creation of Adam and Eve next week. But I want to point out that this day parallels day 3. Man and woman were placed in the sphere of the earth to rule over it. And they are the most important part of the temple. That's why more words are used about them than anything else in this chapter. They are made in the image of God. I'll talk more about that next week, but I want to point out that the "image of God" is another clue that this passage is about world as a temple. In the ancient Near East, when a temple of a god was built, images of that god were put inside the temple. These images were made to represent that temple's god. This was certainly true in Egypt; in fact, the king of Egypt was supposed to be the "living image of the god" in question.²⁰ Images were also supposed to represent kings. According to Greg Beale, "Ancient kings would set up images of themselves in distant lands over which they ruled in order to represent their sovereign presence."²¹ So when God made people, they were meant to reflect and represent who he is. They were meant to represent God's presence and his rule on earth. They were supposed to represent his presence in his temple.²²

When God fashioned his temple, he called everything "good." That means that it was now functioning the way he wanted it to. And when he installed people in the temple, it was "very good." It was now complete.

Finally, that brings us to the seventh day. This is Genesis 2:1-3:

¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. ² And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

If you read these verses and didn't know anything about the cultural background, you may have thought that God did so much work on the first six days that he was tired and needed a break.

²⁰ Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, 89. Beale (88-89) provides several examples.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

²² At this point, I would also like to indicate the similarity between this account in Genesis and the account of Moses building the tabernacle. When the command to build the tabernacle was given, the people built the tabernacle. The "and so they did" in Exod. 39:32 echoes the "and it was so" of Gen. 1:7, 9, 11, 15, 24, 30. When all the work of the tabernacle was completed, Moses saw it (Exod. 39:43), just as God saw his work (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Moses all blessed the workers (Exod. 39:43) as God blessed as God blessed the animals, people, and the seventh day (Gen. 1:22, 28; 2:3).

But that's not what rest means. God never grows tired (Isa. 40:28). So what is this rest all about? In the ancient Near East, temples were built when a king defeated his enemies and had rest. The building of the temple was a sign of the king being enthroned. According to John Walton, "Inhabiting his resting place is the equivalent of being enthroned—it is connected to taking up his role as sovereign ruler of the cosmos. The temple simply provides a symbolic reality for this concept."²³ In other words, the seventh day shows that God is the King of the Universe who is now seated on his throne.

I realize that some of this may sound like a real stretch, but this reading of the beginning of Genesis makes sense of a lot of other passages in the Bible. For example, David, the great king of Israel, was a warrior king. He defeated Israel's enemies and secured its borders. But he wasn't allowed to build the temple in Jerusalem. That job was left to his son, Solomon, whose name is related to the Hebrew word for peace, *šālôm*.²⁴ We see this in 1 Chronicles 22:6-10:

⁶Then he called for Solomon his son and charged him to build a house for the LORD, the God of Israel. ⁷David said to Solomon, "My son, I had it in my heart to build a house to the name of the LORD my God. ⁸But the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 'You have shed much blood and have waged great wars. You shall not build a house to my name, because you have shed so much blood before me on the earth. ⁹Behold, a son shall be born to you who shall be a man of rest. I will give him rest from all his surrounding enemies. For his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quiet to Israel in his days. ¹⁰He shall build a house for my name. He shall be my son, and I will be his father, and I will establish his royal throne in Israel forever.'

Solomon, the temple builder, was a man of rest. God gave him rest and the throne.

So the beginning of Genesis shows that God created the universe, and then he fashioned elements of the creation to be his temple. It's his dwelling place, the place where he meets his people, the place where he is worshiped and glorified, and the place over which he rules.²⁵

What does this passage mean for us?

²³ Walton, *Genesis*, 148.

²⁴ שָׁלוֹם.

²⁵ According to John Walton (*Genesis*, 151), "In a temple-construction project, the structure was built, and the furniture and trappings were made in preparation for the moment when all was ready for the dedication for the temple." He adds (152): "On this occasion, normally a seven-day celebration, the functions of the temple were declared, the furniture and hangings were put in place, the priests were installed, and the appropriate sacrifices were made to initiate the temple's operation. Somewhere in the process, the image of the deity was brought into the temple to take up residence (rest)."

First of all, we should remember that God made everything. And because he made it, he owns it. Psalm 89:11 says,

The heavens are yours; the earth also is yours;
the world and all that is in it, you have founded them.

Everything exists for God. The reason that anything exists is to magnify God's greatness. And we can see evidence of God's greatness even now. Psalm 19:1 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God." Or, as the poet Gerald Manly Hopkins (1844-1889) wrote, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God."²⁶ The whole purpose for everything is to see God's grandeur, and to worship him, and to love and serve him. Everything revolves around God. The Bible is all about him. He is the main character.

The second thing we should notice is that everything that is not God is, well, not God. There's a sharp divide between God and his creation. God has always existed. We can't say that about anyone or anything else. All of creation depends upon God for its existence. But the fact that the universe was created by God means that life has meaning. This isn't some cosmic accident or cruel joke. And Carl Sagan was wrong to say, "The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be."²⁷

The third thing we should notice is that God acts through his word. In this passage, he speaks, and then something happens. And not only does he act through his word, but he also evaluates it. Here, he calls his creation "good." Throughout the Bible, God tells his people he's going to do something in the future, then he does it, and then he provides commentary on what he did. In a sense, that's the whole structure of the Bible. In the Old Testament, God makes promises. These promises are fulfilled in Jesus, who became a man, lived a perfect life, died in the place of his people, and rose from the grave. After the accounts of Jesus' life, we find letters in the New Testament that provide commentary on what Jesus has done for us.

The fourth thing we see is that God is a God of order. God brings order to things. When God is not in the picture, things turn chaotic. The same is true of our own lives.

We also see that God is a good God. He not only makes a creation that he calls "good," but he blesses it. He blesses the animals (Gen. 1:22) and he blesses the people (Gen. 1:28). And he is good to give us his Word. We have the opportunity to know God. We can know something

²⁶ *God's Grandeur*.

²⁷ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 4

about God as we look at the world he made, but that doesn't tell us a lot of specific things about him. God has also given us his written Word, the Bible, so that we can know more about him. Through the Bible, we can know things about God that we could never discover on our own.

The last question I want to ask and answer is this: What does this have to do with Jesus? The Bible tells us that Jesus made the world. More specifically, we would say that God the Father made the world through God the Son by the power of God the Spirit. John's Gospel, recalling the beginning of the Bible, puts it this way:

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (John 1:1-5).

Not only did Jesus make everything, but all things continue to exist because of him (Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 1:3). If Jesus ceased to exist, so would the universe.

When Jesus walked this earth, his body was the temple. He was where God dwelled. He was where God dwelled with his people. And he is still the place of worship, the place where God is glorified.

When Jesus died on the cross for the sins of his people, he died on the sixth day of the week, Friday. When he died on the cross, he cried out, "It is finished" (John 19:30). His work was done. And he rested on the seventh day in the tomb. On the first day of the next week, Sunday, he rose from the grave. His resurrection was the first installment of the new creation. Jesus is now at work building a new universe, a "new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1), one that he will bring when he comes again. And he will make the universe perfect in every way.

There's a lot more to this story, but this is the beginning, and a very good one at that.

Appendix

Here are two pieces of evidence that show that Genesis 1:1-2:3 describes God fashioning the universe to be his temple. It is generally acknowledged that Revelation 21-22, the last two chapters of the Bible, parallel Genesis 1-2. For example, Revelation 22:2 mentions the “tree of life” (Gen. 2:9), and Revelation 22:1-3 describes the new creation (the “new heaven and new earth” of Rev. 21:1) in terms that intentionally recall the garden of Eden. Revelation 21 describes the new creation as a city, the new Jerusalem, and a Most Holy Place. That latter term isn’t used, but the new Jerusalem has the shape of a massive cube: 12,000 stadia in length, width, and height (Rev. 21:16). That’s approximately 1,500 miles in each direction. The only other cube mentioned in the Bible is the inner chamber of the tabernacle/temple, the Most Holy Place, where the Ark of the Covenant (representing God’s throne) was located. The precious building materials and jewels of the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:18-21) are also associated with the temple, which is another clue that the new creation is a temple. If the end of the Bible intentionally mirrors the beginning, and if the new creation is a temple, it stands to reason that the first temple is a temple, too.

Another piece of evidence that shows that universe was created to be God’s temple. This evidence links the creation of the tabernacle to the creation of the world. In Exodus 31:3, we’re told that God filled Bezalel with the Spirit of God (cf. Gen. 1:2) and with “ability and intelligence, with knowledge” in order to build the tabernacle. The Hebrew is for that quoted portion is **בְּחָכְמָה וּבְתַבּוּיָהּ וּבְדַעַת וּבְכָל-מְלָאכָה**.

Now let us compare Proverbs 3:19-20:

- ¹⁹ The LORD by wisdom (**בְּחָכְמָה**) founded the earth;
by understanding (**בְּתַבּוּיָהּ**) he established the heavens;
- ²⁰ by his knowledge (**בְּדַעַתוֹ**) the deeps broke open,
and the clouds drop down the dew.

The Hebrew nouns are the same as in Exodus 31:3, even though they are translated slightly differently (“ability” in Exodus and “wisdom” in Proverbs; “intelligence” in Exodus and “understanding” in Proverbs). Two of the three words are used in Jer. 10:12; 51:15, which also speak of God creating the world and stretching out the heavens.