

# LITERARY ANALYSIS OF GENESIS 1:1—2:3

## Introduction (Personal Testimony)

When I was in my introductory philosophy class (“Introduction to Logic and the Scientific Method”) during my first semester freshman year at the University of Missouri at Columbia in 1972, the professor sarcastically used Genesis 1:1—2:3 to show the alleged illogical inconsistencies and discrepancies of the literary biblical creation account. At the end of the series of lectures, he summarily rejected the entire account as folklore.

This was not to be an isolated incident during my academic years. In *all* of my biology, chemistry, physics, anthropology, physiology, psychology and sociology classes, the same attitude prevailed. How can a student combat such a formidable and galvanized affront toward the Scriptures? Especially if it comes from an university professor who degrades the Bible before the class and snickers at the thought of anyone reading it, let alone owning one! After all, is not the university where one goes to obtain higher learning? Is not the professor always correct?

Unknowingly to me at the time, these confrontations fueled and shape my thirst for biblical literary understanding. After many years of studying both the Old and New Testaments in the original languages, it is my personal conviction that a Christian can defend the literary and theological unity of the Creation Account; but not through the lens of western literary analysis, but that of ancient Near Eastern, the literary milieu in which the text was originally written.

The following study offers an introductory step for a Christian to appreciate the literary unity and theological thrust behind the Creation Account. Admittedly, because of the foreign method by which the ancient Near East composed their documents, the method is alien to modern experience and difficult to appreciate at first blush. But for the reader who is willing to study the general principles of parallel structure, the literary and theological rewards are considerable.

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The majestic opening of Genesis 1:1—2:3 forms the first major literary section of both the Hebrew and the Christian Bible. The second section begins with Genesis 2:4 with the words, “This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made earth and heaven” (NASB) and continues through Genesis 4:26 which traces what became of the universe God had so marvelously created: mankind became disqualified to rule in God’s “likeness and image” (Gen. 1:26-28) because of disobedience (3:1-7), resulting deterioration throughout the human race.

Strikingly, Genesis 2:1-3 echoes Genesis 1:1 by introducing paralleling phrases or concepts, but in reverse order in the Hebrew text (Figure 1).

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### The Literary Structure of Genesis 1:1—2:3

- A “He [God] created” ( ) rb; 1:1b)
- B “God” (Myhwl ); 1:1b)
  - C “heavens and earth” (Cr) hw Mym#&#242; 1:1b)
  - X FORMING AND FILLING OF THE EARTH (1:2-31)**
  - C’ “heavens and earth” (Cr) hw Mym#&#242; 2:1)
  - B’ “God” (Myhwl ); 2:2)
  - A’ “He [God] had made” (h#&#242; 2:3)

Figure 1.

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This chiasmic pattern brings the section to a neat literary conclusion which is reinforced by the inclusion “God created”, linking Genesis 1:1 and 2:3, “God had made”. The entire section stands apart from the episodes which ensues in style and content, thus making it the overture to the entire work of Genesis, that of the Torah, and indeed, the entire Bible.

Many commentators, both ancient and modern, and a few editors of the English versions (NIV; NEB; NJB) have regarded Genesis 2:4a not functioning as a heading to what follows, but as a postscript to what precedes, the account of creation in Genesis 1:1—2:3. It is argued that Genesis 2:4a makes a neat *inclusio* with Genesis 1:1.

However, there are problems that discourage dividing Genesis 2:4 in this way. First, the formula “this is the account” in Genesis 2:4a, if taken as a summary, would differ from its common use in Genesis where it uniformly refers to genealogy or narrative that follows, not precedes. Second, because of the chiasmic structure of Genesis 2:4 (Figure 2), it seems preferable to understand the entire verse as a structural unity, and thus as a “title” to Genesis 2:5—4:26. Likewise understanding Genesis 2:4 commencing a new section allows full weight to be given to the chiasmic structure of Genesis 1:1—2:3 (Figure 1), and

the recognition that the name “LORD God” does not occur once in Genesis 1:1—2:3, but many times in Genesis 2:5—3:24.

Thus, what matches Genesis 1:1 is not 2:4a but 2:1-3, where the seventh day serves as a satisfying denouement to the account’s narrative progression. The key terms of Genesis 1:1 (“created”; “God”; “the heavens”; “the earth”) are repeated in Genesis 2:1-3 but in reverse order (Figure 2), which clearly indicates that Genesis 2:1-3 forms the *inclusio* ending to the first section without the unnecessary first half of Genesis 2:4.

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### The Literary Structure of Genesis 2:4

- A “heaven” (Mym# $\text{h}$ )
  - B “earth” (Cr) h
    - C “created” ( ) rb)
      - C’ “made” (h# $\text{h}$ )
  - B’ “earth” (Cr) h
- A’ “heaven” (Mym# $\text{h}$ )

Figure 2.

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The purpose of the repetition of the starting point of creation in Genesis 2:4 is to establish the context for understanding the ensuing story of human sin and its devastating consequences on the human race and environs.

### The “Sevens” of Genesis 1:1—2:3

The correspondence of the first paragraph, Genesis 1:2 with 2:1-3, is underscored by the number of Hebrew words in both being multiples of seven. Genesis 1:1 consists of seven (7x1) Hebrew words, Genesis 1:2 consists of fourteen (7x2) words, and Genesis 2:1-3 thirty-five (7x5) words. In addition, “God” is mentioned thirty-five (7x5) times, “earth” occurs twenty-one (7x3) times, and “heaven/firmament” also twenty-one (7x3) times.

The number “seven” also dominates Genesis 1:1—2:3 in a startling way, not only in the number of words in a particular section, but also in the number of times a specific word or phrase recurs, which in all comprises the sevenfold patterning of this section:

- ◆ **Seven paragraphs:** The arrangement of Genesis 1:1—2:3 consists of an introduction and seven paragraphs. The introduction identifies the Creator and creation (Gen. 1:1-2); six paragraphs corresponds to the six creation days (1:3-21). The seventh paragraph marks the climactic seventh day, the day of consecration (2:1-3).

- ◆ **The announcement of the commandment:** “And God said”, while occurring ten times, is grouped into seven (7x1) groups (Gen. 1:3; 6; 1:9; 1:11; 1:14, 1:20; 1:24; 1:26, 28, 29).
- ◆ **The order formula:** “Let there be . . .”, while occurring eight times, the formula is grouped into seven (Gen. 1:3; 1:6, 9; 1:11; 1:14; 1:20; 1:24; 1:26).
- ◆ **The fulfillment formula:** “And it was so” occurs seven times (Gen. 1:3; 1:7; 1:9; 1:11; 1:15; 1:24; 1:30).
- ◆ **The execution formula:** “And God made” occurs seven times (Gen. 1:4; 1:7; 1:12; 1:16; 1:21; 1:25; 1:27).
- ◆ **The approval formula:** “God saw that it was good” occurs seven times (Gen. 1:4; 1:10; 1:12; 1:18; 1:21; 1:25; 1:31).
- ◆ **The subsequent divine word:** God’s naming or blessing occurs seven times (Gen. 1:5<sup>2</sup>; 1:8; 1:10<sup>2</sup>; 1:22; 1:28).
- ◆ **Seven days affirmed:** There are seven days mentioned (Gen. 1:5; 1:8; 1:13; 1:19; 1:23; 1:31; 2:2).

Although there are ten announcements of the divine word (#1 above) and eight commands actually cited (#2 above), the formulae are grouped in sevens. The intentional sevenfold pattering of Genesis 1:1—2:3 is only maintained by our author skillfully and intentionally omitting some of these formulae: the fulfillment formula is omitted in Genesis 1:5 (Day 5), the description of the act in Genesis 1:9 (Day 3), and the approval formula in Genesis 1:6-8 (Day 2). Whereas in each case the Septuagint (LXX; the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures by seventy men) mistakenly adds the appropriate formula, these additions obscure the original sevenfold pattern of this section.

### **The Literary Structure of the Six Days of Creation**

The following parallel columns clearly indicate that the creation account is organized in two parallel groups of three (Figure 3). In the first group, regions are created: night and day, firmament (and atmosphere) and oceans, and the land. In the second group, the corresponding inhabitants of these regions are created: astronomical bodies, birds and fish, land animals and man. This however, raises another perennial question: why are the plants created on Day 3 rather than on Day 6? The plants, we would think, should be grouped with the living beings rather than the earth. What classification criterion was the author using that put the plants even before the sun?

A clue to this comes from the peculiar description of the animals of dry land: “cattle and creeping things and beasts on the earth”. We can say that this phrase is intended as a synecdoche for all living land animals, but why select these as representatives? “Beasts of the earth” could refer to all land animals. Why then include cattle and creepers? At first this does not seem to be much of a clue. Yet, look at the way our author summarizes this list of earth animals in Genesis 1:28: “every living thing that moves upon the earth”.

Our author clearly underscores the kind of locomotion which the animals have. He puts the birds in Day Five because they move in the air “across” the firmament of the heavens”. If we classify animals according to locomotion, then those animals that move on the earth can be subclassified into three types. There are cattle and the like which walk on top of it; there are the creepers and crawlers which slide along it; and finally there are “beasts of the earth” which dig through it (NB: the punishment of the serpent has to do with its manner of locomotion!).

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### The Literary Analysis of the Six Days of Creation

Days of Forming	Days of Filling
1. “Let there be light” (1:3). 2. “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, and let it separate the waters from the waters” (1:6). 3a “Let dry ground appear” (1:9). 3b “Let the land produce vegetation” (1:11).	4. “Let there be lights” (1:14). 5. “Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens” (1:20). 6a “Let the earth bring forth living creatures” (1:24). “Let us make man” (1:26). 6b “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed, it shall be food for you” (1:29).

Figure 3.

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Once we see this, then the reason the plants are consigned to Day 3 becomes obvious. They, unlike the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the animals of the earth, and astronomical bodies, lack the capacity for locomotion. In that sense, they are “places”, rather than living beings.

Nonetheless, our author certainly recognizes that plants have something in common with the beings of Days 5 and 6, something which the astronomical bodies of Day 4 lack. The plants yield “seed according to their own kind”, much as the birds, fish, and land animals bring forth progeny according to their own kind. Hence we can see that Days 3 and 4 are, in a sense, a transition between the inanimate creation of Days 1 and 2, and the fully animate creation of Days 5 and 6. To be fully “alive” one must have capacity for both locomotion and reproduction.

Note carefully how Moses is careful to make sure that God Himself is fully alive according to the terms of the Creation Account! We first encounter God in motion—His Spirit moving across the face of the deep. The entire Creation Account can be read as the result of this motion. The creative motion of God has as its climax, a reproduction of Himself according to His own kind—humankind to rule over His creation, that is, human beings in His own image!

### *Literary Analysis of the Six Days of Creation*

From Figure 3, one can see that the characteristic verbs that tie together Days 1 through 3 are “separate” and “gather”: verbs of formation; while the verbs that unite Days 4 through 6 are “teem”, “fill”, “be fruitful”, and “increase”: verbs of filling. Thus, immediately we can see the relationship between the words of the Introduction (Gen. 1:1-2), “and the earth was formless and void (‘unfilled’)”. The first three days are concerned with forming and days 4-6 are devoted to filling.

A more startling observation is that comparisons between the days can be made horizontally as well as vertically. “Light” is the key word on Day 1, and “lights” is the key word on Day 4. On Day 2 God “separated the water under the expanse from the water above it”, while on Day 5 He said, “Let the water (under the expanse) teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky”; in other words, on Day 2 God separated the lower waters from the upper waters and on Day 5 He created animals to inhabit the lower waters and then others to inhabit the upper waters.

Days 3 and 6 are somewhat different from the other days in Genesis 1:3-31. “And/then God said” appears more than once (Day 3 [2x]; Day 6 [3x]). Two additional comparisons can be made between Days 3 and 6. On Day 3 “dry ground” appeared, and on Day 6 God made (1) “livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals”; and (2) “humankind” to inhabit the dry ground. In addition, Day 3 witnessed the covering of the earth with a carpet of “vegetation”, while on Day 6 God said that He would give to man “every green plant for food”.

These striking horizontal and vertical relationships between the various days can hardly be accidental. On the contrary, they demonstrate the literary beauty of the episode and emphasize the symmetry and orderliness of God’s creative activity. But the obviously careful planning and thought that went into the crafting of such a tightly woven account cause us to raise a question that may help solve several interpretive questions: Is it possible that the order of events in the creation narrative is partly literary and only partly chronological in order?

I would like to suggest that Moses, because of theological considerations, structured the Creation Account in a very tightly woven literary structure. If, as in the English Versions that translate the final words in Genesis 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31 as “the first day”, “the second day”, “the third day”, “the fourth day”, “the fifth day”, and “the

sixth day” respectively are correct, then of course the case is closed. The definite article with the word “day” would demand that the author intended chronological order. But in fact, the literal rendering of the Hebrew phrases in question is actually as follows: “one day”, “a second day”, “a third day”, “a fourth day”, “a fifth day”, and “the sixth day”. I would point out that the omission of the definite article from all but the sixth (and later, the seventh) days allow for the possibility of literary order as well as chronological order (the sixth and seventh days).

“Non-chronological”, needless to say, does not mean “non-historical”! The Book of Jeremiah, for example, is arranged in topical rather than chronological order, even though it is historical from beginning to end. Similarly, the two historical accounts of the temptation of Jesus by Satan in Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13 arrange the three crucial phrases of the temptation in differing orders, indicating that either Matthew’s order or Luke’s is not in chronological order.

If the Creation Account in Genesis 1:1—2:3 is at least partly not in chronological order, several puzzling problems can be easily resolved. For example, how can it be that God “separated the light from the darkness” and that He “called the light ‘Day’ and the darkness . . . ‘Night’” on Day 1 (Gen. 1:4-5) if the sun was not created until Day 4? The simplest answer would seem to be that these two days are not related to each other chronologically, but that they both refer to the same event—the creation of the sun. Indeed, this would seem to be implied in Genesis 1:17-18 where it states God set the sun “in the expanse of the sky . . . to separate light from darkness” (the latter phrase, in fact, is quoted directly from Gen. 1:4). In other words, we are told in Genesis 1:4 **that** God separated light from darkness and in Genesis 1:18 **how** He did it.

Or, to take another example. How can there be evening and morning (Gen. 1:5, 8, 13) before the sun is brought into existence? If chronological order is not demanded, that is no longer a problem. And again, how could plants, including fruit trees that require photosynthesis for their very existence survive apart from the warmth of the sunlight (Gen. 1:12-13)? The answer is best sought along these lines: the creation of the sun preceded the creation of plant life, providing warmth for the soil together with all the other conditions that would foster growth.

It must be stressed in conclusion, that I believe in a literal Six-Day creation (each comprising of twenty-four hours); it may be that because of theological issues which Moses desired to underscore, these days of creation in Genesis 1:3-31 display non-chronological arrangement, except for the sixth and seventh days.

*A “fourth” Day*

Day 4 is, of course, halfway through the creation week, and itself is elaborately constructed in a chiasmic pattern of terms introduced every time by the Hebrew preposition “to/for” (ל). It has been argued that there is a great amount of repetitiousness in the account of Day 4, and therefore it is evidence of multiple sources (as the entire Genesis Creation Account). However, the very repetition makes for a well-organized concentric structure. Its main elements consist of a list of functions, which are illustrated in Figure 4.

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**The Literary Structure of Genesis 1:14-18: Day 4**

- A “to divide the day from the night” (1:14a)
- B “for signs, for fixed times, for days and years” (1:14b)
- C “to give light on the earth (1:15)
- D “to rule the day” (1:16a)
- D’ “to rule the night (1:16b)
- C’ “to give light on the earth” (1:17)
- B’ “to rule the day and the night” (1:18a)
- A’ “to divide the light from the darkness” (1:18b)

Figure 4.

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The fulfillment of the divine commands in Genesis 1:14-15 is recorded in reverse order in Genesis 1:17-18! The creation of the sun, moon, and stars is mentioned at the center of the literary pattern (Gen. 1:16). Structure inversions of this sort are very common in Genesis, and throughout Scripture (see author’s introduction to chiasmus at this website).

The threefold function of the heavenly bodies, “to divide”, “to rule”, and “to give light”, are thus each mentioned twice, so as to underline their real function. Within these five verses, “to/for” occurs eleven times, defining the role of the sun, moon, and stars. Yet at the same time, there are slight variations between command and fulfillment (cf. A/A’ B/B’) which adds interest to the account. Given the subtlety of this composition, it becomes difficult to maintain that this is a composite account of several different accounts fused into one (The Document Hypothesis Theory; J E P D). Rather, it is a homogeneous unity, bringing out the characteristic concerns of the author and demonstrating through the structure of the narrative itself the sovereign power of the divine word in creation.



### *The “Seventh” Day*

The account of Day 7 (Gen. 2:1-3) stands apart from the standard framework of each of the other six days. It functions as an epilogue in that the terms “heavens and earth”, “God”, and “create” reappear in the reverse order to that of Genesis 1:1, and this inverted echo of the opening verse rounds off the section.

Instead of creation, there is finishing, ceasing, blessing, and sanctifying. The emphasis of Day 7 must then be the perfect completion of all creation. Indeed, the pattern of the words and clauses in the Hebrew text clearly underscore this emphasis. There are thirty-five (7x5) words in the Hebrew text of these verses, a multiple of seven. The three middle clauses (Gen. 2:2a; 2:2b; and 2:3a) in the Hebrew text have seven words each, and the adjective “seventh” is within each clause! The reader thus receives a strengthened impression that Day 7 is a celebration of completion. In this way, both form and content emphasize the distinctiveness of the seventh day.

Additionally, the seventh day is distinct from the six days of God’s creative work in that it is the only day which does not mention any new creative elements: it is the Day in which God ceased or desisted from His work. The Hebrew verb *shabat* (and its noun form), means to “cease” or “desist”. The idea of weariness is not implied in the verbal form. It is from this Hebrew word from which is derived the English term “Sabbath”. This was the name of the day which later was given to Israel by God as a time of cessation from normal activities to worship Him (Ex. 16:29; 20:10-11; Deut. 5:15; Jer. 17:21; Amos 8:5).

Strikingly, Day 7 is the only day that does not have the repeated formula, “And there was evening and there was morning, day . . .”. The author of Hebrews picks this up and announces to his readers that God’s rest has remained open to His people since the work of creation was finished, but, as in the case of the Israelites who died in the wilderness, will be forfeited by lack of faith (Heb. 4:1-10; cf. Heb. 3:7-19; Matt. 11:29-30).

On the following page is an interesting chiasmic structure composed by Klaus Potsch concerning Genesis 1:1—2:25 (Mr. Potsch attended a men’s conference which I taught the Joseph Narrative [Gen. 37:1—50:26] in Vienna, Austria, the winter of 1996) Any comments or questions may be directed to him via E-mail at **Klaus.Potsch@omv.co.at**.

**A Literary Structure of Genesis 1:1—2:25**  
**by Klaus Potsch**

a	1:1-3	bareness of matter
b	1:4-5	separation of light and darkness
c	1:6-8	separation of the waters above and the waters below
d	1:9-10	separation of dry land and the sea
e	1:11-13	fulfilling of the earth
f	1:14-19	filling of the sky with lights to govern and to measure time
g	1:20-23	filling of the waters below and the waters above with animals
h	1:24-25	filling the land with animals (living beings)
i	1:26	God's concept of mankind
j	1:27	creation of mankind, transfer of image
k	1:28	mankind's habitat - the earth
l	1:29-30	the basis of food for the living creatures
m	1:31	the heavens and earth made, day 6
n	2:1	God creation completed in content
o	2:2a	God's creation completed in time
p	2:2b	God rests on the 7th day
<b>x</b>	<b>2:3a</b>	<b>THE HOLY GOD BOTH BLESSES AND SANCTIFIES</b>
p'	2:3b	God rests on the 7th day
o'	2:3c	God's works created and made
n'	2:4a	the heavens and earth created (finished, completed)
m'	2:4b	the heavens and earth made in a timespan
l'	2:5-6	basis for life in the garden plants, moisture
k'	2:7a	man's origin = dust
j'	2:7b	man's creation, transfer of life
i'	2:8	man's place = the garden
h'	2:9	filling the garden with plants (tree of life)
g'	2:10-14	filling the garden with water
f'	2:15-17	filling the garden with a caretaker + measure for good and evil
e'	2:18	fulfilling Adam's life
d'	2:19-20	separation (discerning, naming) of the animals
c'	2:21-23	separation of man and woman
b'	2:24	separation of parents and children
a'	2:25	bareness of man

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