

# In the Beginning God Created the Heavens and the Earth: Responsible Interpretation of Genesis 1 in Ancient and Contemporary Contexts

J. Richard Middleton  
middleton\_richard@roberts.edu

## Introduction: Toward Responsible Interpretation of Genesis 1

### 1. *The immense size and age of the universe (with twenty billion trillion stars)*

“Space is big. Really big. You just won’t believe how vastly, hugely, mind-bogglingly big it is.” (*The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*)

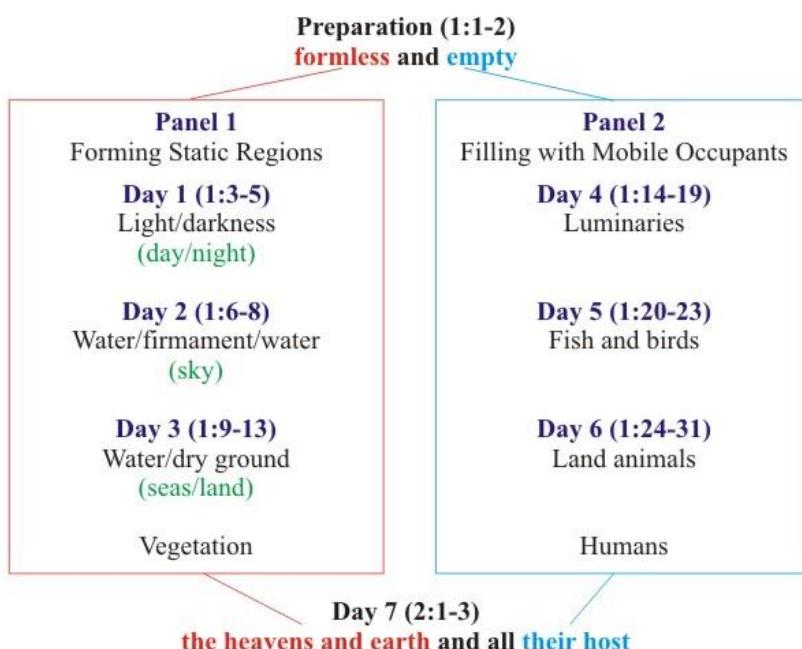
### 2. *The canonical placement and paradigmatic function of Genesis 1 (technically, Genesis 1:1–2:3)*

### 3. *The problem of how to read Genesis 1 in a contested cultural context*

- The skeptical approach—dismissing the Bible because its ancient cosmology doesn’t fit that of modern science (the “warfare” model)
- A common Christians approach—assuming that the Bible and science must agree, so ends up dismissing any science that seems to contradict the Bible (so-called “creation science”)
- Another inadequate Christian approach—interpreting the Bible’s cosmological statements to make them harmonize with what modern science says (the “Reasons to Believe” organization)

### 3. *We need to read Genesis 1 for its original purpose, not according to our modern assumptions*

## I. The Literary Framework of Genesis 1—Two Panels



### 1. Panel 1 (God's separation of realms) lays the foundation for Panel 2 (God's filling these realms)

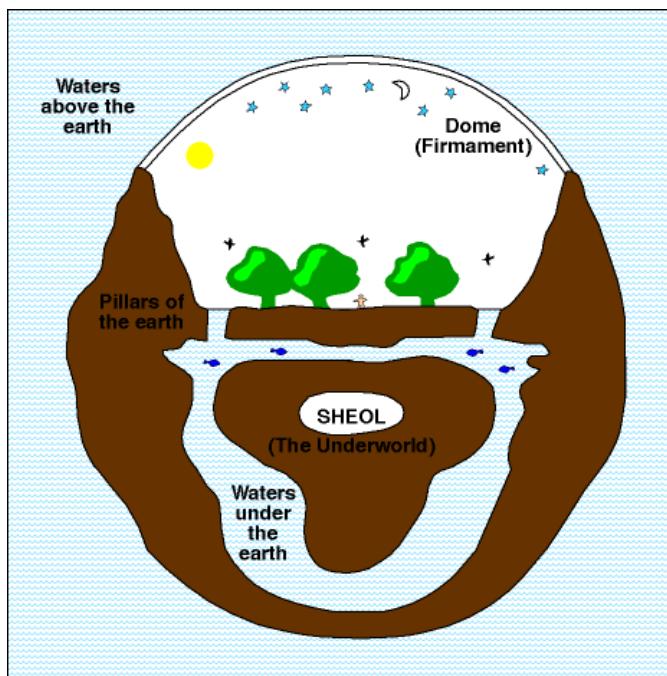
- The relationship of Panel 1 (separation of realms) to Panel 2 (filling with mobile creatures)
- Day 1 → Day 4 (realms of light and dark [= day and night]; luminaries)
- Day 2 → Day 5 (realms of water above and below the firmament; birds and fish)
- Day 3 → Day 6 (realms of water below and dry land; land animals and humans)
- Also: vegetation on Day 3; food for creatures on Day 6

### 2. An architectonic scheme—God's wise ordering of the cosmos

- Psalm 104:24 — The diverse and complex world *out there* exhibits God's wisdom
- Psalm 139:14 — *I am fearfully and wonderfully made*
- Proverbs 8:22–31 — Wisdom was there *before* God created (22–26) and *when* God created (27–31)
- Job 28:25–27 — God established wisdom at creation (it is embedded in the world God made)

### 3. The cosmos as a wisely constructed building—common biblical and ANE world picture

- Proverbs 24:3–4 — A house is built by wisdom and understanding, and by knowledge its rooms are filled with beautiful things
- Proverbs 3:19–20 — The *cosmos* is made by God's wisdom and understanding, and by God's knowledge it is watered (so things can grow on earth)
- Job 38:4–7 — God's challenge to Job about his knowledge of God's creation of the cosmic building (foundation, bases, measurements, cornerstone)
- Genesis 1:2 — Before God structured and filled the world, it was formless (*tohû*) and empty (*bohû*); but it didn't remain that way
- Genesis 2:1 — “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished and all their host”
- Isaiah 45:18 — God did not create the world a chaos (*tohû*), but formed it to be inhabited



*The World as a Cosmic Building*  
(from Barry Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament*)

## II. The Seven Day Literary Structure—What Does It Mean?

### 1. *The explicit sevens of Genesis 1*

- Seven days (6+1)
- Seven statements that “it was so”
- Seven statements that God saw that it was “good”

### 2. *Sevens beneath the surface of the Hebrew of Genesis 1:1–2:3 (someone went to a lot of trouble)*

- “God” = 35 (7x5)
- “Earth” = 21 (7x3)
- Number of words in Genesis 1:1–2 (the pre-creation preamble) = 21 (7x3)
  - Number of words in verse 1 = 7
  - Number of words in verse 2 = 14 (7x2)
- Number of words in Genesis 2:1–3 (the seventh day) = 35 (7x5)
- Total number of words in Genesis 1:1–2:3 = 469 (7x67)

### 3. *Sevens in the tabernacle account of Exodus 25–31*

- Seven speeches of God’s instructions to Moses (each beginning with “And YHWH said to Moses”)
- Fourteen summaries of Moses doing what God instructed (“just as YHWH commanded Moses”) —parallel to “and it was so” in Genesis 1

### 4. *Temples and seven in the Bible and the ancient Near East*

- Solomon built the Jerusalem temple in seven years (1 Kings 6:38)
- The temple was dedicated in the seven-day feast of Tabernacles—in the seventh month (1 Kings 8:2)
- Solomon’s temple dedication speech is structured as seven specific petitions to God (1 Kings 8:31–53)
- Gudea, ancient Sumerian king of Lagash (22nd century BC), had a seven-day dedication festival for one of his temples (the Gudea cylinder)
- The building of the temple for the Canaanite god Baal took seven days (the Baal cycle of myths from Ugarit)

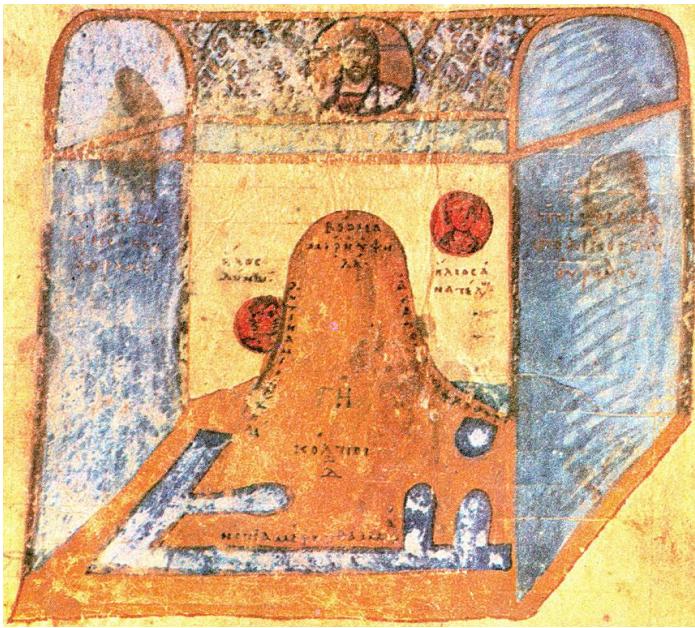
### 5. *Conclusion—The Meaning of the Sevens*

- Seven is the number associated with temples and worship in the Bible
- Jericho conquered by seven priests marching around the city for seven days, seven times on the seventh day, blowing shofars, in front of the ark of the covenant (Josh 6:3–15)
- The 6+1 timeframe of Genesis 1 has nothing to do with scientific calculations of how the universe came into being.

## III. Creation as God’s Temple—In Genesis 1 and Beyond

### 1. *God’s throne in heaven—the cosmic Holy of Holies*

- Isaiah 66:1–2a — heaven is God’s throne and earth is God’s footstool
- Psalm 115:16 — “The heavens are YHWH’s heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings”



***The world as tabernacle, with Mt. Zion as the Holy of Holies***

(rendered by the 6th century monk Cosmas Indicopleustes, in *Christian Topography*, Book 3)

***2. The Mediation of God's Presence in a Sacred Cosmos***

- God's Spirit given to Bezalel, the overseer of tabernacle construction (Exod 31:3; 35:31)—to build a replica of the cosmos (thus he was filled with wisdom, understanding, and knowledge)
- When the tabernacle was completed it was filled with God's glory-presence, the *Shekinah* (Exod 40:34)
- When the Jerusalem temple was complete it was also filled with God's presence (1 Kings 8:10–11)
- God's Spirit was hovering over creation in the beginning (Gen 1:2), yet did not fill the cosmic temple when it was complete (Gen 2:1-3)
- Instead, God breathed into a human being made from the dust of the ground (Gen 2:7)
- The parallel with the “mouth washing” or “mouth opening” (*mīs pî* / *pît pî*) ritual in Mesopotamia
- Humans created to be God's image in the cosmic temple (Gen 1:26–28)
- In Gen 1 & 2 humans are created to mediate God presence from heaven to earth by how they exercise power on behalf of the King of the universe
- Humans are to be God's *prism* in the world, refracting his light into a rainbow of cultural activities that scintillate with his glory

***3. God's rest on the seventh day***

- Why does God rest? Is God tired out?
- Divine “rest” in ANE cosmogonies—the deity takes up residence in his temple, sitting on his throne
- The evening and morning formula in Genesis 1—missing at the end of the 7th day
- The 7th day is the (unfinished) day of human history, when God has delegated rule of the earth to us