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INTERPRETATION OF *b^{e}re'šît* IN THE CONTEXT OF GENESIS 1:1-3

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"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."[1] This bedrock biblical statement, on which all the rest of God's revelation depends and is its commentary, stirs an intense controversy. A heated debate exists among scholars regarding the first Hebrew word *b^{e}re'šît* ("in the beginning"). Is it written in a construct or absolute state? The critical question is whether Gen 1:1 is a principal independent clause or a subordinate temporal sentence. The implications of such a choice are enormous and seriously influence the answer to the question whether there was already something in existence on the earth before God's creative activity of the creation week. Was matter in existence before the creative work of God (Gen 1:1)? What is the relationship of Gen 1:1 to vv. 2 and 3?[2] These crucial issues are subjected to a thorough scrutiny by different schools of interpretation. The proper evaluation of these pertinent questions depends on the translation, sequence of thoughts, intention, and theology of these verses.

When interpreting a biblical passage, the most important question is always concerning what the text really says, and one needs to be cautious not to impose on it one's own worldview, current scientific understanding, or culture. We have to constantly remind ourselves that the biblical text must speak for itself in order to know the original intention of the author! As is well known, each translation of the Bible is already an interpretation; therefore, interpretation needs to be based on sound exegetical, syntactical, and theological principles.

Translation of the Hebrew Text

If the word *b^{e}re'šît* is grammatically an absolute, then the translation renders "in the beginning" (God created). On the other hand, the translations "in the

[1]The seven Hebrew words are in the following sequence: (1) *in beginning*; (2) *created*; (3) *God*; (4) sign of the direct object; (5) *the heavens*; (6) *and*, with sign of the direct object; (7) *the earth*. The number seven is dominant in the first creation narrative—seven days of creation; the word "good" is used seven times; the second verse has 14 (2x7) words in Hebrew; the term *Elohim* occurs 35 times (5x7); and the noun "earth," 21 times (3x7). I have presented the main ideas explored in this article to my students for more than thirty years. With this study, I wish to contribute to the current debate on the original intent and meaning of Gen 1:1-3.

[2]Victor P. Hamilton formulates the problem in the following way: "The larger concern is this: Does Gen 1:1 teach an absolute beginning of creation as a direct act of God? Or does it affirm the existence of matter before the creation of the heavens and earth? To put the question differently, does Gen 1:1 suggest that in the beginning there was one—God; or does it suggest that in the beginning there were two—God and preexistent chaos?" (*The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 105).

beginning of" (God's creating), or "in the beginning when" (God created), take the word to be a construct.[3]

Six main interpretations of Gen 1:1-3, which are elaborations of four basic types of translations, seem possible:

1. *Bᵉre'šît* is a construct state. Verse 1 as a temporal clause is subordinate to the main sentence in v. 2: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (NRSV; see also NEB).

2. *Bᵉre'šît* is a construct state. Verse 1 as a temporal clause is subordinate to the main sentence in v. 3, with v. 2 being a parenthesis describing conditions of the Earth prior to God's creation: "When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (JPS; see also NJPS and NAB).

3. *Bᵉre'šît* is an absolute state. Verse 1 is an independent main clause summarizing God's creative activity (a title to the whole chapter), with v. 2 describing prior conditions, and v. 3 pointing to the divine act of creation. This explanation is made, for example, in the NIV: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (and many others such as ESV, KJV, NASB, NJB, NKJV, NLT, REB, RSV).

4. *Bᵉre'šît* is an absolute state. Verse 1 is an independent clause narrating God's act of creation; v. 2 describes the conditions of the creating phase of v. 1; and v. 3 focuses on the further immediate creation work of God. This interpretation can be built on translations such as in point 3: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light: and there was light'" (KJV; see also, e.g., ESV, NASB, NIV, NJB, NKJV, NLT, REB, RSV).

5. *Bᵉre'šît* is an absolute state. Verse 1 is an independent main clause narrating the first act of creation. Verse 2 describes the consequence of v. 1 (condition of Earth after the first creating phase), while v. 3 is the beginning

[3]The term *bᵉre'šît* is a *hapax legomenon* in the Pentateuch. The author of the first creation account deliberately chose it, even though he could have employed other words used elsewhere in the book of Genesis such as *bāri'šonāh* ("at/in the beginning," "at the first"—Gen 13:4; see also Num 10:13-14; Deut 17:7; Josh 8:5-6, 33; 2 Sam 20:18; 1 Kgs 17:13; 20:9, 17; Prov 20:21; Isa 52:4; 60:9; Zech 12:7), or *battᵉḥillāh* ("at/in the beginning," "earlier," "before," "first"—Gen 13:3; 41:21; 43:18, 20; see also Judg 1:1; 20:18 [twice]; 2 Sam 17:9; Dan 8:1; 9:21). The noun *re'šît* ("the beginning") is used several times in the Pentateuch and also outside of it (Gen 10:10; Exod 23:19; 34:26; Lev 2:12; 23:10; Num 15:20; 24:20; Deut 18:4; 21:17; 26:10; 33:21; 1 Sam 15:21; 1 Chron 31:5; Neh 10:38; Job 40:19; Pss 78:51; 105:36; 111:10; Prov 1:7; 4:7; 8:22; 17:14; Jer 2:3; 49:35; Ezek 20:40; 48:14; Amos 6:1; Mic 1:13).

of God's second creative act after an indeterminate period of time. This interpretation also stands on the translations reflected in points 3 and 4 (e.g., ESV, KJV, NASB, NIV, NJB, NKJV, NLT, REB, RSV).

6. *Bᵉre'šît* is an absolute state. Verse 1 is an independent main clause summarizing God's first creative activity, with v. 2 describing conditions of the Earth after Satan's rebellion against God and his judgment. Verse 3 points to the divine act of restoration of the original creation. Consider *The Scofield Reference Bible* translation: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light; and there was light.'" The headings before each verse in the *Scofield* translation are crucial for understanding this type of interpretation: "The original creation—v. 1"; "Earth made waste and empty by judgment (Jer 4:23-26)—v. 2"; "The new beginning—the first day: light diffused." *The New Scofield Reference Bible* has a note following v. 2: "The second [interpretation], which may be called the Divine Judgment interpretation, sees in these words a description of the earth only, and that in a condition subsequent to its creation, not as it was originally (see Isa 45:18; . . . Isa 14:12; Ezek 28:12)."[4]

It is obvious that all translations and interpretations cannot be right. These various translation and exposition possibilities can be summarized in the following major interpretative categories, which compete among themselves (the first two represent a nonliteral reading of the text and the other three, a literal reading). Only a basic description and brief critique of these interpretations of Gen 1:1-3 will be mentioned here.[5]

An Overview of the Main Interpretative Possibilities

1. *Nonliteral reading: mythological narrative*. Some scholars take Genesis 1–2 as a general aetiological story of the origin of life on Earth, emphasizing similarities between the scriptural text and extrabiblical mythological stories and thereby concluding that the Genesis account is reminiscent of mythological imagery.[6]

[4]C. I. Scofield, ed., *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 1. See also ibid., 752, n. 2; and Arthur C. Custance, *Without Form and Void* (Brockville, ONT: C. I. Scofield, 1970), 41.

[5]For further discussion on this part of the Genesis creation account, see Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC (Waco: Word, 1987), 11-18; Richard M. Davidson, "The Biblical Account of Origins," *JATS* 14/1 (Spring 2003): 4-43; Gerhard F. Hasel, "Recent Translations of Gen 1:1: A Critical Look," *BT* 22 (1971): 154-167; Hamilton, 106-108; Bruce Waltke, "The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3, Part III: The Initial Chaos Theory and the Precreation Chaos Theory," *BSac* 132 (1975): 222-228; E. J. Young, "The Relation of the First Verse of Genesis One to Verses Two and Three," in *Studies in Genesis One* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976), 1-14; Hershel Shanks, "How the Bible Begins," *Judaism* 21 (1972): 51-58; Walter Eichrodt, "In the Beginning," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage: Studies in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. B. W. Anderson and W. Harrelson (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 1-10.

[6]H. Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos* (Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 1895).

This type of interpretation does not maintain the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*. Against this theory is the fact that the biblical creation account is a polemic against the mythological understanding of its time.[7] This antimythological text lacks in its scope constructions such as "when from above"; nor does it mention fighting among the gods, the creation of gods or semigods, or an indication of preexisting material.

2. *Nonliteral reading: theological-poetic account*. Many scholars explain the biblical creation account as a mere theological interpretation of the origin of life on Earth, written in the form of a poetic and liturgical literary composition.[8] According to this theory, the creation story is a nonhistorical story because theology and history are pitted against each other. This theory states that the biblical creation presupposes (according to v. 2) that the existence of the Earth was in a chaotic state before God's creative activity. There is no explanation of where this unformed, uninhabited Earth originated. This view jeopardizes the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* and diminishes the portrayal of God as the Creator of all things. Matter stands beside God without explanation of when or where this matter came into existence. A comparison with extrabiblical creation stories plays a major role in this type of interpretation. This view usually argues for a theistic evolutionary theory,[9] in which the days of creation represent long indefinite periods/ages, during which God used the evolutionary process to create life and everything on earth.[10] A major

[7]Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology," *Evangelical Quarterly* 46 (1974): 81-102.

[8]Marty E. Stevens speaks about "a liturgy of praise" (*Theological Themes of the Old Testament* [Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010], 2); Fritz Guy identifies Gen 1:1–2:3 as "an expression of praise, an act of worship" ("The Purpose and Function of Scripture: Preface to a Theology of Creation," in *Understanding Genesis: Contemporary Adventist Perspectives*, ed. Brian Bull, Fritz Guy, and Ervin Taylor [Riverside, CA: Adventist Today, 2006], 93); Walter Brueggemann argues that the creation story "is a poetic narrative that likely was formed for liturgical purposes" (*Genesis*, IBC [Atlanta: John Knox, 1982], 22).

[9]For more discussion on theistic evolution and the reasoning of its proponents, see Richard F. Carlson and Tremper Longman III, *Science, Creation and the Bible: Reconciling Rival Theories of Origins* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010); Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2007); Michael Dowd, *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2008); Alister E. McGrath, *The Passionate Intellect: Christian Faith and the Discipleship of the Mind* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010) John Polkinghorne, *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity: Questions to Science and Religion*, rev. updated ed. (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 2006); idem, *Theology in the Context of Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); John Polkinghorne and Nicholas Beale, *Questions of Truth: Fifty-one Responses to Questions About God, Science, and Belief* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); Robert John Russell, *Cosmology: From Alpha to Omega* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008); and Davis A. Young and Ralph Stearley, *The Bible, Rocks and Time: Geological Evidence for the Age of the Earth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008).

[10]One group of scholars who subscribe to this theory take *bᵉre'šît* as a construct, and another group identifies *bᵉre'šît* as being in an absolute state and accepts the

problem with this theory (along with the problematic exegesis, see below) lies in the fact that it includes death not as a result of sin, but as a natural integral phenomenon of the evolutionary process (death existed before the creation of Adam and Eve and their disobedience). Thus God uses death for evolving higher levels of life, which makes him a tyrant.[11]

3. *Literal reading: active gap theory (also known as the ruin-restoration or reconstruction theory)*. In the beginning God created everything good and perfect (v. 1), but Satan rebelled against God and succeeded in setting a part of God's creation against him (an event that occurred during an indefinite gap of time between vv. 1 and 2). After Satan's rebellion, planet Earth *became* chaotic (v. 2), and God, in order to make everything right again, put things into their original perfection during the seven-day creation week (v. 3ff.). Thus Gen 1:1 and 3 are two independent clauses with v. 2 playing the role of a parenthesis that explains what happened during Satan's revolt against the Creator of the whole universe.[12] Consequently, the concept of *creation ex nihilo* is maintained in this view.

This theory is not sustainable because it stands on faulty exegesis. Syntactically, the three short sentences in v. 2 are descriptive in style, meaning that this verse is naturally tied with v. 1. Verse 2 does not stand on its own because the conjunction at the beginning of v. 2 is closely coordinated with v. 1, not being an apposition but circumstantial to it. F. F. Bruce correctly explains that the Hebrew construction of the "waw copulative with perfect [v. 2a] does not suggest an event subsequent to creation, but describes the condition of the earth as it came to exist."[13] Consequently, it means that the word "was" is the proper translation—the earth "was" (and not "became") formless and empty during the first act of God's creating. In addition, there is no indication in v. 2 that it should be taken to describe the result of the war in heaven.

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first verse as an independent clause that functions only as a title or a summary of all God's creation described in Genesis 1. See, e.g., Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, ed. and trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 103-133; W. Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, rev. ed. (New York: Union for Reform Judaism, 2005), 19-22, 34-35; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 74-112; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, AB (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981), 3-13.

[11]John T. Baldwin, "Revelation 14:7: An Angel's Worldview," in *Creation, Catastrophe, and Calvary: Why a Global Flood Is Vital to the Doctrine of Atonement*, ed. John T. Baldwin (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 28.

[12]See *The Scofield Reference Bible*.

[13]F. F. Bruce, "And the Earth was without Form and Void," *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 78 (1946): 21-23. Gesenius's assertion that *haytah* is used here "as the description of a state" also refutes this particular understanding of the beginning of planet Earth (see Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 2d ed. [New York: Clarendon Press, 1910], 454, n. 141i). See also a lengthy explanation of the term "was" of Gen 1:2 in Weston W. Fields, *Unformed and Unfilled: A Critique of the Gap Theory* (Collinsville, IL: Burgener Enterprises, 1976), 87-112.

4. *Literal reading: no gap theory—young-earth and young-life view* (vv. 1-3 describe the events of day one). Verse 1 is taken as a main independent clause in the sense of a summary or title. Verse 2 is a subordinate (but independent!) clause describing God's initial process of creation (activity of an early part of day one), while v. 3 and the following verses describe the process of creation within seven days. The unorganized matter referred to in Gen 1:2 did not exist prior to the six-day creation, but represents the early stage of a process beginning on day 1 that was brought to completion in stages over a six-day period. This view stresses a short chronology of life and *creatio ex nihilo*. The age of the Earth and the length of life on the Earth are equally old.[14]

This theory is difficult to accept for at least three reasons: (1) several biblical passages suggest that life and intelligent beings were created in heaven before life was made on planet Earth (Job 38:7; Ezek 28:15). (2) According to Scripture, rebellion against God occurred in heaven before the actual creation of life on planet Earth (see, e.g., Gen 3:1-6; Isa 14:12-15; Ezek 28:11-19; Rev 12:7-12). The presence from the very beginning of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden suggests that Satan had access to this tree right from the time of God's making it. (3) It is difficult to take v. 1 solely as a summary view of the whole creation process of the first creation account, because vv. 1 and 2 belong together. John Sailhamer, who argues convincingly against the view that v. 1 is a title for the whole chapter, provides three compelling arguments: "1. In the original the first verse is a complete sentence that makes a statement, but titles are not formed that way in Hebrew. . . . 2. The conjunction 'and' at the beginning of the second verse makes it highly unlikely that 1:1 is a title. . . . 3. Genesis 1 has a summary title at its conclusion, making it unlikely it would have another at its beginning."[15] Thus Gen 1:1 does not fit the requirement for being a title or a summary of the first creation narrative (see also above the last paragraph in point 3 above).

5. *Literal reading: passive gap theory—old-earth but young-life view* (unspecified period of time between vv. 2 and 3).[16] The biblical author intentionally presents

[14]There are two opinions within this theory for understanding of v. 1: (1) God created absolutely everything in the whole cosmos within six days (Exod 20:12), making the entire universe only a few thousand years old, and sustaining the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*. (2) V. 1 represents the initial phase of what God created at the beginning of the first day, and the phrase "the heavens and the earth" refers only to planet Earth and its surrounding heavenly spheres. V. 2 describes the conditions of that initial phase. V. 3ff. describes how God created the material things and life on earth, as well as the entities in relationship to our planet in six days, but not the whole universe (in this scenario it is not clear when and how the rest of the entire universe came into existence). For the first view, all critical points mentioned in this section are relevant; for the second opinion, see below the interpretation on "the heavens and the earth."

[15]For more details, see Sailhamer, 102-103.

[16]This time gap between vv. 2 and 3 is implied, but not explicitly stated. This is not a unique biblical phenomenon that occurs only in Gen 1:1-3. One can encounter, e.g., similar implied time gaps in the OT in connection with the expectations of the establishment of the kingdom of God (no explicit distinction is made between the

how, what, when, and why God created the world.[17] Verse 1 is understood as a main independent clause. God created the observable universe together with planet Earth at an indefinite point of time in the past—"in the beginning," i.e., in the cosmic beginning; thus only a general statement with no date is given.[18] The Earth was created in its raw state (in Hebrew terms as *tohu wabohu,* i.e*.,* formless and empty, without forms of life).[19] When the text mentions that the Earth was in a formless, uninhabited state (Gen 1:2), it means that it stayed like that for some time, a point worth mentioning; otherwise the stress would be on God's creative activity. However, after a significant period of time (thousands or even millions of years?—the text does not specify), God, during the seven-day literal, historical week of creation, created life on Earth. Life is, therefore, a recent phenomenon of several thousands of years, but the Earth's age may be much older. According to this view, God created the Earth in an unorganized and uninhabited primordial state and left it in such a condition for

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kingdom of grace and the kingdom of glory), or to the statements about the mission of the Servant of the Lord (no apparent difference is made in the biblical text between what the Messiah will accomplish during his first or second comings).

[17]The author of the Genesis creation account wrote from an earthly, rather than from a cosmic viewpoint. William Shea rightly asserts: "The Creation acts were revealed and recorded as if they had passed before an observer positioned upon the earth, not outside of its system. That point of view makes some elements in the narrative more understandable" ("Creation," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000], 420).

[18]The word *bᵉre'šît* appears outside of Gen 1:1 only in the book of Jeremiah (26:1; 27:1; 28:1; 49:34). In these four occurrences, this term is consistently used in construct chains together with the terms for "reign" and the king's "proper name" (either Jehoiakim or Zedekiah). Thus the literary context reveals that this word has a totally different syntactical usage in Jeremiah than in Gen 1:1, where it is not connected with another noun, but is followed by the verb in the perfect. Even though the syntax is not similar, Jeremiah's texts allude to the creation account because he stresses that "in the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim/Zedekiah," the Word of the Lord came to him. The allusion to creation is also supported in the context of Jeremiah 49 by God's seven actions that he will perform according to the message against Elam (see Jer 49:34-39), which is reminiscent of the seven days of creation, seven statements of "God saw," and the ten occurrences of the phrase "and God said" in the first creation narrative. However, it is important to notice that the phrase "in the beginning" has, in Jeremiah, more the meaning "during the beginning," thus helping to nuance the meaning of the term *bᵉre'šît*, thus referring to a period or duration of time rather than to a specific moment in time (Gen 1:1; Job 8:7; Jer 28:1). For this crucial observation, see John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis Unbound: A Provocative New Look at the Creation Account* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1996), 38-42.

[19]The phrase "formless and empty" appears elsewhere only in Jer 4:23 (and in a loose way in Isa 34:11). The word *tohu* also occurs in Deut 32:10; 1 Sam 12:21; Job 6:18; 12:24; 26:7; Ps 107:40; Isa 24:10; 29:21; 40:17, 23; 41:29; 44:9; 45:18-19; 49:4; 59:4.

an unspecified period of time under the care of the Spirit of God (Gen 1:2).[20] Thus vv. 1 and 2 speak about a period of time preceding the seven days of the creation week.[21] In this interpretation *creatio ex nihilo* is upheld.

Additional Interpretative Factors

Consideration of the following issues should be made when determining the best translation and interpretation of Gen 1:1-3:

1. The identical grammatical construction to *bᵉre'šît* is the expression *mere'šît* (grammatically also a noun without the definite article plus the preposition) in Isa 46:10. Scholars agree that the word *mere'šît* is in the absolute state, thus translating it as "[declaring the end] from the beginning";[22] therefore, there is here a strong reason to also take *bᵉre'šît* as absolute. Furthermore, a normal rule of expressing the construct relationship in Hebrew is that the word in the construct state needs to be followed by an absolute noun (which is not the case in Gen 1:1!), as it is consistently attested elsewhere in the texts associated with the word *bᵉre'šît* (Jer 26:1; 27:1; 28:1; 49:34-35). The syntax of *bᵉre'šît* in Gen 1:1 is unique—it is followed by a finite verb *bārā'*.

2. The verb *bārā'* in Gen 1:1 is in perfect (3d person singular, masculine), functioning syntactically as the predicate of the subject, *Elohim*. The verbal phrase "God created" is a unit, which has two direct objects: "the heavens and the earth." Thus the translation should be "God created" and not "of God's creating" (as if the verbal form of *bārā'* is the infinitive *lᵉro'*). In this way, the prepositional phrase *bᵉre'šît* is set apart from this subject-predicate unit.

[20]The verb *raḥap* ("hovering"; root of *meraḥepet*, Piel participle feminine singular) is employed here to describe the activity of the Spirit of God. This word is mentioned only once more in Piel form in Deut 32:11, where an eagle is pictured hovering over its little ones: "Like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions." The Spirit of God is thus portrayed in Gen 1:2 as the one who was a caretaker, sustainer, and protector of the newborn "baby," planet Earth.

[21]Gen 1:1-2 forms a literary unit, and these two verses are set apart from the rest of the creation story, in which the first six days of creation are described in a deliberately literary style. The author uses specific formulas (speech formulas ["and God said"], commands, executions, approvals, "evening-morning" formulas) to mark the individual days (for details, see Wenham, 17-18; Brueggemann, 30), but this feature does not occur in the introductory verses; thus they are not only different in style, but actually happen before the first day of creation. John E. Hartley aptly notes: "The consistent pattern used for each day of creation tells us that verses 1-2 are not an integral part of the first day of creation (vv. 3-5)" (*Genesis*, NIBCOT [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000], 41).

[22]The Hebrew word *mere'šît* has no definite article; however, scholars translate it "from the beginning," "at the start," because they identify this form as the absolute. See John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 233; Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 89; Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 357.

3. Ancient translations such as the Septuagint, Aquila, Theodotion, Symmachus, Targum Onkelos, Syriac, and Vulgate treat *bᵉre'šît* as an absolute, thus rendering Gen 1:1 as a principal independent clause.

4. The Massoretic interpretation of the word *bᵉre'šît* indicates that its construction should be taken in an absolute state because the Hebrew disjunctive accent *tifcha* was put under it.[23]

5. A stylistic observation is that the sentences throughout the first creation account are short, clear-cut, and brief (in contrast to taking *bᵉre'šît* as a construct, in which case the sentence would be very complex).

6. Verse 2, in relation to v. 1, is to be taken syntactically as the description of a state. The conjunction ("and") plus the noun ("the Earth") plus perfect ("was") indicate that v. 2 is a disjunctive sentence and that its three clauses enumerate conditions of a previously mentioned situation. Verse 2 in relationship to v. 1 is to be taken syntactically as the subordinate clause.

7. Even if the grammatical form of the word *bᵉre'šît* is accepted as a construct state, syntactically this form has the power of an absolute.[24] That the construct can have the absolute force in meaning is obvious from the above example of Isa 46:10.[25]

8. The intertextual comparison of Gen 1:1 with John's Prologue demonstrates that John clearly understood the word "beginning" of Gen 1:1 as the absolute beginning in time: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning" (John 1:1-2).

Thus according to the above analysis and evaluation, there are weighty arguments for taking *bᵉre'šît* in an absolute state and Gen 1:1 as a main clause. One needs to incorporate into the discussion a broader theological perspective that sheds further light on this crucial issue.

Theological Considerations

The heavens and the earth have not existed from eternity; they had a beginning. The creation story testifies that God created the universe, organized matter, and made life on Earth. Everything has its origin in him. Only God existed before the beginning, prior to anything in our cosmos. When the verb *bārā'* ("created") is used in the Hebrew Bible (38 times in the Qal and 10 times in

[23]On the function of accents in the MT, see Jacques B. Doukhan, *Hebrew for Theologians: A Textbook for the Study of Biblical Hebrew in Relation to Hebrew Thinking* (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1993), 181-190; and William Wickes, *Two Treatises on the Accentuation of the Old Testament* (New York: Ktav, 1970).

[24]I am indebted for this observation about the intended absolute sense of Gen 1:1 to my colleague Jacques Doukhan, who pointed out this interpretative possibility to me in a recent conversation.

[25]For further insight and examples, see Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, Subsidia Biblica 27 (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 2006), ¶96 A *l*, *m*, *q*; ¶97 B *c*, C *b*; and ¶97 F *a*.

the Niphal stems),[26] God is always the author of the described activity or the implied subject of the passive verb constructions. Creation is an act of God alone! It is highly significant that *bārā'* in Gen 1:1 does not occur in a context in which materials are mentioned. The preexisting matter is not spelled out by the author's deliberate choice.

We recognize that *bārā'* does not automatically mean *creatio ex nihilo*,[27] but in a certain context, as it is here, it is its obvious meaning and demanded by the context. The verb *bārā'* stresses that God brought everything into existence (see also Ps 148:5; Rom 4:17; Col 1:16-17; Heb 11:3; cf. 2 Macc 7:28). Before the creation of matter, God already existed!

Sequence of Thoughts

The first three verses of Genesis 1 depict God's creative activity in two different stages: Verse 1 describes the first act of the divine creation (the so-called *creatio prima*) in general terms, in which questions concerning his material activity of when, who, how, and what are answered. Verse 2 then explains the conditions of the newly "born" Earth in the raw, unformed, uninhabited phase. Verses 3ff. depict the second phase of creation after an unspecified period of time (the so-called *creatio secunda* in the old-earth-but-young-life view) and describes what happened in the seven consecutive, contiguous days of the creation week (Gen 1:3–2:4a). The expression that God created "the heavens and earth"[28] is

[26]Qal: Gen 1:1, 21, 27 (three times); 2:3; 5:1, 2; 6:7; Num 16:30; Deut 4:32; Pss 51:12; 89:13, 48; Eccl 12:1; Isa 4:5; 40:26, 28; 41:20; 42:5; 43:1, 7, 15; 45:7 (twice), 8, 12; 18 (twice); 54:16 (twice); 57:19; 65:17, 18 (twice); Jer 31:22; Amos 4:13; Mal 2:10. Niphal: Gen 2:4; 5:2; Exod 34:10; Pss 102:19; 104:30; 148:5; Isa 48:7; Ezek 21:35; 28:13, 15.

[27]For further discussion on *creatio ex nihilo*, cf. J. B. Doukhan, *The Genesis Creation Story: Its Literary Structure* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1978), 203-212; John Walton, *Genesis*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 70-71; Brueggemann, *Creation*, 29; A. P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 105-107; Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 98-100; Wenham, 14-15.

[28]"The heavens and the earth" is a merism (a statement of opposites to indicate totality), which expresses that God created everything, the cosmos as well as the Earth. Then during the creation week the focus is on God's activities related only to our planet and near heavenly surroundings.This dyad of Gen 1:1, "the heavens and the earth," should not be confused with the triad, "the heavens, the earth, and the sea," of Exod 20:11 because they have different realities in view, the former referring to the entire universe, and the latter to the three Earth habitats (for an excellent insight about these differences, see Davidson, 22, 32-36). There is a progression of thought in the first Genesis creation account in regard to the "heavens and the earth": (1) a general statement that God is the Creator of the entire universe (1:1); (2) the process of the creation of "the heavens and the earth" with "all the host of them was finished" after the six days of creation (2:1); and (3) after the creation of the Sabbath, the creation of "the heavens and the earth" came to its climax (2:4a).

a general summary statement of what happened before the seven-day creation week, and not a summary of that week's activities.[29]

The literary structure of the first account can serve as aid for grasping the whole process of God's creative activity. The Genesis 1 account is built upon two Hebrew nouns—*tohu* ("formlessness," "without form") and *bohu* ("void," "emptiness"). There are three pairs of parallel days. The first, second, and third days are related to the concept of the forming, while the fourth, fifth, and sixth days are related to the concept of the filling activity of God. Thus the biblical account in v. 3ff. reverses what is described in v. 2: what was formless will be formed (first three days of creation—opposite to *tohu*), and what was empty will be filled (the additional three days of creation—opposite to *bohu*). After light and space were created and the content made, then the inhabitants of different habitats were created. The seventh day crowns God's creation work with the Sabbath, which is about God's presence and relationship with humans. Humans need to learn how to live in dependency upon God and in a personal relationship with their personal Creator God. Creation is about life; and the essence of life is relationship. The crux of both biblical creation narratives is about vertical and horizontal relationships. The literary structure of Gen 1:2–2:4a summarizes the whole creation account and provides an aid for understanding the seven-day process of creation.

Figure 1. Literary Structure of Genesis 1:2–2:4a

Without form (v. 2) *tohu* (formless)	Without life/inhabitants (v. 2) *bohu* (empty)
forming (v. 3ff.) Space	filling (v. 14ff.) Inhabitants (Content)
1st day: light—division	**4th day: luminaries**
day	sun
night	moon
2nd day: firmament—division	**5th day: inhabitants of water and sky**
water	fish (inhabitants of water)
sky	birds (inhabitants of air)
3rd day: dry land	**6th day: inhabitants of land**
earth	animals; humans (man and woman)
vegetation	food for humans and animals

7th day: Sabbath—God in relationship with humans

Palace in time filled with God's presence (holiness)

[29]Against, e.g., Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 94, and Waltke, 58: "The daring claim of verse 1, which encapsulating the entire narrative, invites the reader into the story. . . . 'Beginning' refers to the entire created event, the six days of creation, not something before the six days nor a part of the first day."

The author of the biblical creation story gives humans knowledge of their roots and the ultimate meaning of life, which is derived from God. The intention is to provide the reader with an authentic account of the origin of life on Earth, and present and connect them with their God as their Creator.

Conclusion

In spite of some interpretative difficulties with Gen 1:1-3, the main message and intent of the author are clear: God is the Creator of the heavens and earth, i.e., the whole universe[30] and the ultimate source of life. The creation process was done by his special intervention. The first biblical sentence is a theological statement built on the reality of what the Creator God made. It is a proclamation about the when ("in the beginning"), who (*Elohim*), how (*bārā'*), and what ("the heavens and the earth") of his activities. He created the material world rather than only establishing its functions.[31] Hermann Gunkel stresses the uniqueness of the beginning of the Genesis creation narrative: "Simply and powerfully, the author first establishes the doctrine that God created the world. No statement in the cosmogonies of other peoples approaches this first statement in the Bible."[32] He also maintains that the first verse of the Bible "can be best taken as a main clause 'in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.'"[33]

God and matter are not coeternal. In the beginning was God, and this solemn proclamation testifies that there was no physical element prior to creation. Only God existed before the creation of the universe. Only he can create without previous existing matter; he can make things out of nothing. He is the starting point and cause of all creation!

There is complete silence in the text about the existence of matter before or with God (cf. John 1:1-3). However, the ultimate purpose of the biblical creation stories is to praise the Creator. One cannot know God as the Creator without admiring and worshiping him. Creation is not to be argued about, but enjoyed and proclaimed. Even though Genesis 1 is not a liturgical text, it leads to worship.[34]

[30]See Wenham, 15.

[31]This is contrary to Walton's assumption that the "beginning" mentioned in Gen 1:1 is a summary of the seven-day week and not something that preceded the week of creation. It is also against his claim that *bārā'* is God's functional and not material activity. For details, see his chapter "'Create' (Hebrew *bārā'*) Concerns Functions," in *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Academic, 2009), 38-46.

[32]Gunkel, 103.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Claus Westermann, *The Genesis Accounts of Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 37.