

# The Primeval History

LESSON  
ONE

## A PERFECT WORLD



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# The Primeval History

## Lesson One

### A Perfect World

#### INTRODUCTION

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A few years ago, I was driving my car and I came across a train that had jumped its tracks. And of course it just sat there going nowhere. When a train derailed off the path it was made to follow, it simply sits there, and it's one big mess.

Well, in the beginning of time, God laid a track, or a path, for his creation to follow and this path led toward a grand and glorious destiny for God's creation. But time and again, human beings have failed to follow God's path for his creation. We have derailed the world and ended up with one big mess.

In this series of lessons, we will be learning about the path that God laid down for his creation in the earliest years of world history — what we often call in Christian circles “creation ordinances.” And we will be exploring Genesis 1–11, often known as *The Primeval History*. These chapters of the Bible will help us see the amazing path God wanted the people of Israel to follow under the leadership of Moses. And they will also show us the path his people should follow even today.

We have entitled our first lesson, “A Perfect World” because we will focus our attention on Genesis 1:1–2:3, the passage where Moses first described how God shaped the world into a perfect order that greatly pleased him.

As we will see, this ideal world anticipated or foreshadowed the destiny toward which God took Israel in the days of Moses — the same destiny toward which God takes all his people throughout history. It not only shows us how things were in the beginning, but also how life should be now, and how our world will certainly be at the end of our age.

This lesson divides into four parts: First, we will present an overview of the primeval history of Genesis 1–11. Second, we will narrow our focus to Genesis 1:1–2:3, looking first at its literary structure. Third, we will investigate the original meaning of this portion of Genesis in the light of its structure. And fourth, we will look for the proper modern applications of this passage. Let's begin with an overview of the entire primeval history of Genesis 1–11.

#### OVERVIEW

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Our approach to Genesis 1–11 may seem a bit unusual at first. So, we should explain our basic strategy. At least three main ideas will guide our study of this part of the Bible: first, the inspiration of these chapters; second, the literary background behind these chapters; and third, the purpose for which these chapters were written.

In the first place, we are firmly committed to the divine inspiration of all of Scripture, including Genesis 1–11.

## INSPIRATION

Our evangelical understanding of inspiration reminds us of two very important features about this part of the book of Genesis: first, its reliability, and second, its intentional design.

### Reliability

We affirm in the strongest terms that this part of the Bible is completely reliable because it is divinely inspired. Now, many historical issues come to the foreground when we study this part of the Bible, and some of these issues have not been fully resolved. But for our purposes it will suffice to say that divine inspiration implies historical reliability. Moses intended his original readers to receive this portion of Genesis as historically true. Now, just as with all Scripture, we have to interpret these passages carefully so that we don't misunderstand their historical dimensions. Nevertheless, it is clear that other biblical writers, and even Jesus himself, believed that the stories of Genesis 1–11 were trustworthy history. These lessons will build on the belief that these chapters are true and reliable records of what actually happened in ancient times.

While we believe that the primeval history is reliable, we must always remember that God inspired Moses to select and arrange the content of these chapters according to a particular design.

### Design

Think about it this way: Genesis 1–11 covers the whole history of the world from creation to the days of Abraham, who lived around 2000-1800 B.C. Now we would all agree that Moses left out many more world events from that period of time than he included in these eleven short chapters. So, to understand Genesis 1–11 we must take note of this selectivity as well as of the arrangement of these chapters. As we notice how Moses intentionally designed this primeval history, we will be able to answer some very important questions. Why did God inspire Moses to include this little information? And why did God have Moses arrange these chosen materials as he did?

To understand why Moses wrote as he did, we must first look into the background of the literary traditions that existed in his day.

## BACKGROUND

The literature of the ancient Near East is very important to our purposes first because other primeval accounts were widely available to Moses, and second, because Moses actually interacted with other primeval accounts.

## Availability

Archaeological research has demonstrated that Moses was not the first person to write about the world's origins. To be sure, God inspired Moses, so that his account is true. But Moses wrote in a day when many nations and groups in the Near East had already written many myths and epics about primeval history.

Some of these ancient texts are well known. Many people have heard of things like the *Enuma Elish*, or the Babylonian creation story, or "Tablet Eleven" of the *Gilgamesh Epic*, or the Babylonian flood story. An assortment of primeval accounts were written in Egypt and Canaan as well. These and many other documents from the ancient world dealt with the origins and early history of the universe.

And not only that, but many of these ancient Near Eastern documents were actually available to Moses in his youth. Moses was educated in the royal courts of Egypt, and his writings indicate that he knew the literature of the ancient world. As Moses wrote his own divinely-inspired and true account of the primeval period, he was quite aware of other literary traditions in the ancient Near East.

Knowing that other primeval accounts were available to Moses, we are now in a position to ask another question: How did Moses interact with the myths and epics of other cultures?

## Interaction

As we will see throughout this series of lessons, Moses interacted with other primeval traditions both negatively and positively.

On the one hand, Moses wrote his history of the early times to counter falsehood with truth. We must always remember that the Israelites Moses led had been subjected to all kinds of pagan influence. They were tempted to believe that the world resulted from the efforts and struggles of many gods. They either rejected the true faith of their patriarchs, or they mixed this truth with the religious beliefs of other nations. In many respects, Moses wrote his account of the primeval times to teach the people of God the way things actually happened. He sought to establish the truth of Yahwism against the falsehoods of other religions.

At the same time, Moses accomplished this negative purpose of refuting false myths by interacting positively with the literary traditions of his time. His writings purposefully resembled other ancient near eastern writings so that he could communicate God's truth in ways that Israel could understand. Although there are many similarities between Moses' account and several important texts, recent archaeological research has pointed to a dramatic similarity with one particular literary tradition.

In 1969 an important document was published under the title *Atrahasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood*. Now we cannot be sure of how far back the tradition of this document reaches, but it is important to us because it brings together in one story many pieces which previously had been known only separately.

The *Atrahasis Epic* follows a basic threefold structure: It begins with the creation of humanity. The creation of humanity is followed by a record of early human history, which focuses especially on the corruption of the world due to the human race. And then finally, this corruption is rectified by a flood of judgment and a new world order.

Comparing Genesis with *Atrahasis* strongly supports the idea that Moses formed his record with an intentional overarching structure. At first glance, Genesis 1 through 11 may seem to be a loose collection of passages that move from one topic to another without much continuity, but simply noticing the broad literary parallels with *Atrahasis* helps us to see that Moses' primeval history holds together as a single story line with an overarching structure.

Genesis 1–11 divides into three parts: first the ideal creation in 1:1–2:3; second, the corruption of world due to human sin in Genesis 2:4–6:8; and then finally, the flood and new order in Genesis 6:9–11:9.

Now we are in position to ask a third question: Why did Moses write Genesis 1–11? What did he intend to convey to his Israelite readers?

## PURPOSE

On a very basic level, we can be sure that Moses wanted to teach Israel the truth about the past. He wanted them to know what their God had done in the early years of world history. Just as the myths of other nations were intended to convince people of the perspectives of those myths, Moses sought to convince Israel of the historical truths of their faith.

But upon closer examination, we are going to see an additional purpose behind Moses' primeval history. Specifically, he also wrote in order to influence Israel to conform themselves to God's will. Now, this additional purpose is not readily apparent to everyone who reads Genesis 1–11, but it becomes clearer once we realize that other primeval accounts shared this same purpose as well.

Before we can understand the purpose of primeval accounts of the ancient world, we have to realize that many ancient Near Eastern cultures believed that the universe was structured or patterned according to a supernatural cosmic wisdom. In its ideal state, the universe operated according to this wisdom or divine order. And it was the responsibility of every person in society, from the emperor to the slave, to conform as much as possible to this divine order.

Now what does this have to do with primeval myths and epics in the ancient near east? The cultures around Israel had primeval accounts which spoke about the events near the beginning of time. They did this in order to explain the structures, which the god's had erected in the world in ancient times. Their traditions regarding the primeval times were not merely concerned with early world history. They wrote their primeval accounts to justify their current religious and social programs. The writers of these texts, who were often priests, pointed to the ways the gods had originally arranged the world in order to show how things were supposed to be in their own day. At times, they focused on specifically religious matters, such as temples, and priests, and rituals. Which temple was favored by the gods, and which priestly family was to serve? At other times, they were concerned with broader social structures, such as political power and laws. Who was to

be king? Why were some people slaves? Their myths called the people to conform to the creation ordinances of the gods, the structures they had set for the universe.

As we will see in these lessons, Moses wrote Genesis 1–11 for very similar reasons. On the one hand, Moses wrote his primeval history with an explicit focus on the ways Yahweh had created and ordered the world in ancient times. From creation to the tower of Babel, Moses told Israel about the way things happened long ago. Yet he did not do this simply out of historical interest. As Moses led the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land, he faced many opponents who believed that he had actually misled the children of Israel. And in response to this opposition, the primeval history demonstrated that Moses' policies and goals for Israel were true to God's design for the universe. As a result, to resist Moses' program was to resist the ordinances of God.

In his record of the ideal creation in Genesis 1:1–2:3, Moses showed that Israel was actually moving toward God's ideal by going toward Canaan. In his record of the world's corruption in 2:4–6:8, Moses showed that Egypt was a place of corruption and hardship, which resulted from God's curse on sin. Finally, in his record of the flood and the resulting new order in Genesis 6:9–11:9, Moses showed Israel that he was bringing them into a new order with many blessings, just as Noah before him had brought new order and blessings to the world. These primeval facts fully justified Moses' vision for Israel's future. If he could convince Israel of these truths, then the faithful among Israel would turn away from Egypt and take the land of Canaan as their divine inheritance.

Now that we have introduced our general approach to the primeval history of chapters 1–11, we are in a position to look at the details of the first section of Genesis: God's Ideal World described in Genesis 1:1–2:3.

## LITERARY STRUCTURE

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When most Evangelicals think about the opening chapter of the Bible, they think about all the controversies that surround its interpretation. Did God create the world in six ordinary days? Were the “days” of Genesis 1 great ages or epochs? Or is Genesis 1 a somewhat poetic, non-historical celebration of God's creative activity? All of these positions are acceptable within evangelical circles. Although my own view is that Genesis 1 teaches that God made the world as we know it today in six ordinary days, not all Bible-believing Christians hold to this view.

As we approach the opening chapters of Genesis in these lessons, our concern is not so much with historical issues like these. We are more concerned with literary questions. We are more interested in how and why Moses wrote this chapter. What literary structures appear in this passage? And how do these structures help us understand Moses' purpose?

We should begin by noting that this passage has three major steps, namely, a beginning, a middle, and an ending.

Moses' creation account begins with 1:1-2. We may summarize the content of these verses as the “dark chaotic world.” Chapter 1:3-31 form a middle section of this material which contains the so-called “six days of creation,” or what we will call the “six



days of ordering” creation. Finally, 2:1-3 is the Sabbath day, or as we will call it, the “ideal world.”

We will explore all three portions of this structure in this lesson, beginning with the dark chaotic world. Second, we will investigate the last section which deals with the ideal world. And finally, we will explore the six days of ordering. Let’s look first at the dark chaotic world of 1:1-2.

## DARK CHAOTIC WORLD

Looking at the first portion of Genesis 1, we see a very important dramatic tension between the chaos covering the earth and the spirit of God.

The opening of 1:1-2 sets the stage by giving a title in verse 1, and by describing the initial condition of the world in verse 2. Listen to the way Moses put it in 1:2:

**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 (Genesis 1:2).**

This verse introduces the dramatic tension that flows through this entire chapter. On one side of this tension, the world is “formless and empty,” or as it is said in Hebrew, *tōhū wābōhū* (תהו ובהו). This Hebrew expression does not occur frequently enough in the Bible for us to know precisely what it means. But many scholars believe that it meant that the world was uninhabitable, hostile toward human life, much like a desert or wilderness is inhospitable to human life. So, at the beginning of this passage, we see that an uninhabitable, dark, primordial, chaotic deep covered the entire earth.

The second element in the dramatic tension also appears in 1:2. Moses wrote that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” The Hebrew term used here is *merachefet* (מְרַחֶפֶת) which means to “fly above” or to “encircle above.”

So we see a very dramatic picture right at the beginning of this passage. On one side we see chaos on the earth; on the other side we see the Spirit of God hovering above the chaos. In effect, God was ready to move into action to remedy the chaos which covered the earth. This initial dramatic tension raised several questions: What will the Spirit of God do? What will happen to the chaos?

With this initial dramatic tension of the opening verses in mind, we are in a position to look at the resolution of this tension in the final section of Moses’ creation account: the ideal world in Genesis 2:1-3.

## IDEAL WORLD

This section is structured very simply. It begins in 2:1 with a summary statement that God had finished his creative work, and it concludes in 2:2-3 with God at rest. We read these words in Genesis 2:2-3:

**By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy (Genesis 2:2-3).**

When Moses described God as entering a state of Sabbath rest, granting a special blessing to that day and making it holy, he declared that the tension between the chaos and God's hovering Spirit had been resolved. God had subdued the darkness, ruled over the chaotic deep, and delighted in his ideally ordered world. The creation story comes to an end with this delightfully peaceful vision of the universe in perfect harmony.

Now that we have seen how Moses' creation account begins and ends, we should look at the middle portion of this passage which describes how the tension between the chaotic world and God's hovering Spirit was resolved.

### SIX DAYS OF ORDERING

This passage teaches that God restrained the chaos by ordering the world according to a wondrous six day plan described in 1:3-31. The central focus of this material becomes clear when we see that Moses repeatedly introduced the actions with the phrase, "And God said." This is because God is the main character of this material, and his powerful word is the focus of these verses.

God's mere word brought magnificent order to the world. Unlike many of the mythological gods from other cultures, the God of Israel faced no struggles and no battles as he created. He simply spoke, and the world took its proper order. Beyond this, God's spoken word displayed his powerful wisdom. God put the world into the order that seemed best to him.

Many interpreters have recognized that the days of God's ordering creation fall into two sets of three: days 1 through 3 and days 4 through 6. The relationships between these two sets of days have been described in many ways, and there are multiple interconnections.

One helpful way to introduce ourselves to these patterns is to draw upon the description of the earth in Genesis 1:2. You will recall that Moses said the earth was formless and empty, *tōhū wābōhū* (תהו ובהו). These terms may be used to explain the significance of the two sets of three days.

On one side, during the first three days, God dealt with the fact that the earth was "formless." That is to say, he brought form to his creation by separating one area from another and shaping spheres or domains within his creation. On the other side, during the last three days, God dealt with the fact that the chaotic world was "empty" or "void." God's solution was to fill up the various domains he had created with inhabitants.

Think about the first three days. On day one, God separated the domain of day from the night. Even before there was a sun, God caused light to shine in the darkness of the dark, chaotic world.

On day two, God separated the area of waters below and waters above by stretching a dome, or firmament, above the earth. This divine action caused what we now call the atmosphere of our planet, separating the water on earth from the moisture in the sky above.

On day three, God separated the territory of dry land from the seas. The oceans were gathered into regions of the earth, and the land appeared. Vegetation began to grow on the dry land. So it is that on the first three days, God brought form to a formless world. He erected the domains of light and darkness, the sky separating waters above and waters below, and the dry land of the earth.

According to Moses' record, once God dealt with the formlessness of the earth by creating domains during the first three days, he then dealt with the emptiness of the earth in the last three days by placing inhabitants in these domains.

On day four God placed the sun, moon, and stars in the heavens to fill up the domains of light and darkness which he had formed on the first day. These heavenly bodies were put in the sky to rule over the day and night and to keep them separate.

On the fifth day, God placed birds in the air and sea creatures in the oceans. These inhabitants filled the domains of waters above and below which had been formed on the second day.

Finally, on the sixth day God placed animals and humanity on the dry land. These inhabitants filled up the domain of the dry land which God had caused to rise out of the sea on the third day.

Moses gathered the whole of creation into these domains and their inhabitants. In a word, God spent six days bringing a splendid order to the dark chaotic world. His work was so wonderful that six times God said:

**“It is good” (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25).**

And after he made humanity to live on the dry land, he said:

**“It is very good” (Genesis 1:31).**

Moses made it very clear that God was wonderfully pleased with what he had done.

So we see that Genesis 1:1–2:3 has a very intentional, complex structure. The passage begins with the world in chaos and God about to move upon it. For six days God spoke order into the chaotic world. Consequently, on the seventh day God delighted in the ideal order he had brought to the world, and he enjoyed his Sabbath rest.

Now that we have seen the large literary structure of Genesis 1:1–2:3, we are in a position to see how the original meaning of this passage is conveyed.

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## ORIGINAL MEANING

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We have already seen that on a large scale Moses' primeval history was intended to validate Israel's exodus and conquest by showing how they were in accordance with the order God had established in the early history of the world. But how did this general purpose show itself in the particular account of 1:1–2:3? How did Moses connect his ministry to Israel with the creation story?

We will explore how Moses did this by looking once again at the three main parts of Genesis 1:1–2:3. First, we will look at the dark chaotic world. Then we will move to the last section of the ideally ordered world. And finally, we will return to the middle portion of the passage where God ordered the world. Let's look first at 1:1-2, the dark chaotic world.

## DARK CHAOTIC WORLD

For our purposes, the most important feature of the first two verses of Genesis is the dramatic tension introduced in verse 2. The manner in which Moses described the dramatic tension between the chaotic world and the Holy Spirit made it clear that he was not only writing about creation, but was also writing about Israel's exodus.

On the one hand, you will recall that in Genesis 1:2 Moses described the earth as "formless," or *tōhū*. On the other hand, he described the Spirit of God as "hovering," or in Hebrew, *merachefet*.

The significance of this scene becomes clear when we look at a passage in which Moses alluded to this dramatic portrait from Genesis. In Deuteronomy 32:10-12 Moses used the terminology of Genesis 1:2 to draw special attention to the connection between Israel's exodus and the creation account. Listen to what he says in these verses:

**In a desert land [the Lord] found him, in a barren and howling waste. He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye, 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 Lord alone led him; no foreign god was with him (Deuteronomy 32:10-12).**

These verses are important because they are the only other place where Moses used the terms "formless" and "hovering" in all of his writings.

In verse 10, the term here translated "barren" is the Hebrew word *tōhū*, which appears in Genesis 1:2 as "formless." Also, in verse 11, the term translated "hovers" is *merachefet*, the term used in Genesis 1:2 when the Spirit of God "hovers" over the deep.

Moses put these two terms together in Deuteronomy 32 in order to connect it solidly with Genesis 1. But just how did the use of these terms draw this connection? What did the terms "barren" and "hover" mean in Deuteronomy 32?

In the first place, Moses applied the term "barren" to Egypt. In 32:10 we read these words:

**In a desert land [the Lord] found him, in a barren and howling waste (Deuteronomy 32:10).**

In the second place, Moses used the term "hover" for God's presence with Israel, probably the pillar of smoke and fire, as he led the nation toward the Promised Land. In 32:10-11 we read these words:

**He guarded him as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young (Deuteronomy 32:10-11).**

In many respects, we may treat Deuteronomy 32:10-12 as Moses' commentary on his own work in Genesis 1:2. It gives us insight into his intention as he wrote the first chapter of Genesis.

Deuteronomy 32 helps us understand that Moses saw a parallel situation between the creation and Israel's deliverance from Egypt. Moses wrote that both creation and Israel's deliverance from Egypt involved chaotic, uninhabitable worlds. He also wrote that God moved into the original chaotic world by hovering, much as he hovered over Israel when he delivered them from Egypt.

From these parallels between creation and the Exodus, we can see that Moses wrote about the dark chaotic world not simply to tell Israel about the creation; he also presented God's work at creation as a prototype, a pattern, or a paradigm, which explained what God was doing for the nation of Israel in his day. When Moses wrote about God's original work in creation, he did so to show his readers that they had not made a mistake in following him out of Egypt. Instead, the creation account proved how their deliverance from Egypt was a mighty act of God. God was re-ordering the world by delivering Israel from the chaos of Egypt, like he did in the beginning. God now hovered over Israel like he hovered over the creation in the beginning. Rather than being a mistake, the Exodus from Egypt was God at work bringing his desired order back to the world. In a word, Israel's deliverance from Egypt was nothing less than a re-creation.

With this parallel between the beginning of Genesis chapter 1 and Israel's exodus experience in mind, we can see this perspective confirmed as we look at the final portion, the ideally ordered world in 2:1-3.

### **IDEAL WORLD**

You will recall that the creation story ends with God entering his rest. The Hebrew term for "rest" in Genesis 2:2-3 is *shabbat* (שַׁבָּת), or as we say it, "Sabbath." And this terminology connects the creation story to Israel's exodus in yet another way.

Moses and the Israelites used the term *shabbat* primarily to refer to Sabbath observances which they would enjoy according to the law of Moses. In fact, in the listing of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, Moses explained that Israel was to observe the Sabbath because of what God had done in Genesis 2.

**Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy... For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day (Exodus 20:8-11).**

When Israel heard in Genesis that God rested on the seventh day, they could not help but relate the Genesis account to their own Sabbath observances and to the Ten Commandments.

Although the Israelites kept Sabbath in some measure in the wilderness, it is important to realize that the full extent of Sabbath worship could only take place in the Promised Land. The Israelites were to keep a weekly Sabbath, as we find in Exodus 20:8-11. But they were also to keep other holy days or Sabbaths. For instance, we learn from Leviticus 25 that they were also to observe every seventh year as a Sabbath year by leaving the ground fallow. Israel was also to keep the great year of Jubilee every fiftieth year when all debts were forgiven and all the families were to return to their original land inheritances. In Moses' law, the full worship of God in Sabbath observance was much more complex than anything the Israelites observed as they wandered through the wilderness.

Because the full observance of Sabbath could only take place as Israel entered the land, Moses often spoke of Canaan as a land of "rest," or the "resting place," using the Hebrew terms *nuach* (נָח) or *menucha* (מְנוּחָה), which are often closely associated with *shabbat* (Sabbath). In a number of places, Moses described the Promised Land as Israel's resting place where the nation would finally observe worship as God's law required. For instance, in Deuteronomy 12:10-11 we read these words:

**But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety. Then to the place the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name — there you are to bring everything I command you: your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, and all the choice possessions you have vowed to the Lord (Deuteronomy 12:10-11).**

We see in this passage that the full observance of Sabbath — the worship of God — would take place only after Israel had entered the land of rest.

For Moses, Sabbath stood for more than individuals and families setting apart a day for quiet worship. Sabbath was a central dimension of Moses' vision of dwelling in the land of rest, worshipping and celebrating at the special place where God would place his Name. This is why in Psalm 95:11 God spoke of those who were forbidden to enter the land of Canaan in this way:

**So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest" (Psalm 95:11).**

This close connection between Sabbath and the full national worship of God in the Promised Land explains why Moses ended his account of creation with God entering his Sabbath rest. Moses was explaining to the Israelites that just as God had moved the earth from chaos to Sabbath, he was moving Israel from the chaos of Egypt to the goal of Sabbath in the Land of Promise. Moses was leading Israel to the place of rest, the land of Canaan. And those who resisted Moses' program were not merely resisting a human plan. They were actually resisting God's efforts to bring his people into conformity with the ideal structures of the universe. Leaving Egypt and entering the Land of Promise was nothing less than lining up with God's perfect plan for the creation.

Now that we have seen how the chaotic beginning and Sabbath end of the creation story explained the true nature of what God was doing for Israel through Moses, we should look briefly at some of the elements of the middle portion of the days of ordering in Genesis 1:3-31. How did Moses link the days of creation to his ministry?

## SIX DAYS OF ORDERING

There are many links between the days of creation and Israel's exodus, but we will look at only two of these: first, the connections with the deliverance from Egypt, and second, the goal of possessing the Promised Land.

### Deliverance from Egypt

In the first place, in delivering Israel from Egypt, God displayed the same kind of power he demonstrated in the ordering of creation in Genesis 1. On one side of the picture, God reversed the order established at creation by sending plagues on the Egyptians. For example, rather than waters teeming with life as in the beginning, the waters of Egypt became deadly and the fish died when God turned the water into blood. Rather than humans having dominion over the living things as God ordained in the beginning, frogs, gnats, insects and locusts ruled over the Egyptians. The separation of light and darkness at creation was overturned as darkness covered the land of Egypt even during the daytime. And rather than the ground bringing forth vegetation, hail, fire and locusts destroyed all the crops in Egypt. Rather than being fruitful and multiplying, both Egyptian animals and people died in large numbers. In these and many other ways, the curses on Egypt reversed the order God had established in the six days of Genesis 1. During the time of the plagues, the land of Egypt truly regressed toward the primordial chaos. It is no wonder then that Moses summoned Israel to leave that place, calling it a formless, barren wasteland.

Any Israelite who believed that life was good in Egypt had to reckon with Moses' creation account. Their experience in Egypt stood in stark contrast to the way the Egyptians themselves thought about their land. The Egyptians believed it was a land blessed by the gods, and apparently at least some Israelites had believed this as well. But Moses made it clear that Egypt had become the opposite of God's ideally ordered world.

While this contrast with Egypt is plain enough, the six days of creation also had a positive correspondence to the deliverance from Egypt. While the Egyptians saw their land regress into the primordial chaos, the Israelites saw God ordering the world in their favor in ways that resembled the six days of creation. Their waters remained fresh and life-giving. They were not overrun by frogs and locusts. They enjoyed light while the Egyptians suffered in darkness. Israelite fields remained productive. Their animals were protected, and the Israelites multiplied while they were in Egypt.

And more than this, in an astounding, dramatic display of his control over creation, God held back the Red Sea and caused dry land to appear before the Israelites, just as it had appeared on the third day of creation. The natural wonders God performed

on Israel's behalf were not unprecedented. In many ways, they recalled the ways God ordered the world in the days of Genesis 1.

These correspondences between the way God ordered the earth in Genesis 1 and the way he delivered Israel from Egypt demonstrated to Moses' readers that God's work on their behalf paralleled his work of creation. In their exodus from Egypt, God reshaped the world as he had in the beginning.

Not only did the deliverance from Egypt recall the days of creation, but the order which God established in the beginning also anticipated the way life would be in the land of Canaan.

## Possession of Canaan

When Israel reached the Land of Promise, nature would be properly ordered with fertility and joy. This is why God called Canaan a land flowing with milk and honey. In addition to this, in the Promised Land, the Israelites would take the proper place of the image of God as it was established in the sixth day.

Notice especially that in Genesis 1:28, God told the human race:

**Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground (Genesis 1:28).**

Although Israel had experienced some of this blessing, even in Egypt, it was in the land of Canaan that God would afford Israel this honor in even greater measure. Under Moses' leadership, the Israelites were on their way to the place where they would fulfill this ideal position in the creation. Listen to what God promised would happen to the faithful Israelites in the land of Israel in Leviticus 26:9:

**I will look on you with favor and make you fruitful and increase your numbers, and I will keep my covenant with you (Leviticus 26:9).**

Here the allusion to Genesis 1:28 is obvious. God said in Genesis 1:28, "Be fruitful and increase in number." In Leviticus 26:9 he said that he would make them fruitful and increase their numbers in the land.

The land of Canaan would be like the wonderful world God ordered in the beginning. Canaan would be a place of natural harmony where the image of God would be able to fulfill its original role in the earth.

We have touched only on a few of the ways the six days of creation connect to Israel's experience in the days of Moses. But we see from this sampling that Moses' record of how God ordered the universe in the first six days was not simply a report of what had happened at the beginning of time. He described the six days of creation in ways that helped his Israelite readers to see clearly what was happening in their own lives. Just as God had moved the cosmos from chaos to Sabbath by ordering nature in



certain ways, God was taking Israel from the chaos of Egypt to Sabbath rest in Canaan by re-ordering the world on their behalf.

We can only imagine the reaction of the Israelites when they heard Moses tell them about the creation of the world. They would have realized what was happening to them was no accident. By redeeming them from Egypt and taking them to Canaan, God was moving in the world as he had done in the beginning to bring an ideal order to the universe. Israel's salvation was a re-creation, and they were to follow Moses into greater and greater experiences of that re-creation.

Now that we have seen the original meaning of Genesis 1:1–2:3, we should move to our final topic, the modern application of the creation account. In applying this text, we will closely follow the ways the New Testament elaborated on the themes of this passage.

## MODERN APPLICATION

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The writers of the New Testament relied heavily on Genesis 1 to tell them about God's creation of the world. They gave every indication that they believed in the reliability of Moses' account. Yet, as important as this fact may be, the New Testament writers also elaborated on Moses' central purpose as we have outlined it here in this lesson.

Just as Moses saw creation as a prototype of Israel's redemption from Egypt, the New Testament looks at Genesis 1:1–2:3 as a prototype of a much greater redemption — the salvation that comes in Christ. The New Testament teaches that all the experiences of salvation and judgment which Israel saw in the days of the Old Testament anticipated the great and final day when God would bring salvation and judgment through his son, Jesus. This belief led New Testament writers to approach Moses' account of creation with a special focus on Christ. Just as Israel was to see her own exodus in the light of creation, New Testament writers looked at Christ in the light of creation.

Whenever we explore the New Testament's teaching on the redemptive work of Christ, we must always remember that New Testament writers realized that Christ did not bring redemption to the world all at once. Instead, they believed that Christ brought great salvation and judgment to the world in three interconnected stages of his kingdom.

In the first place, Christ accomplished much for the salvation of his people when he first came to earth. We may call this period of Christ's first coming, the inauguration of the kingdom. The New Testament looks to Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension, as well as to Pentecost and the foundational ministries of the apostles, as the beginning of Christ's great redemption.

In the second place, the New Testament writers understood that Christ's kingdom continues now that he has left this earth. During this time, God's saving grace spreads over the world through the preaching of the gospel. The whole history of the church after the apostles and until the return of Christ comprises the continuation of salvation in Christ.

In the third place, the New Testament teaches that salvation will come in its fullness at the consummation of the kingdom, when Christ returns in glory. We will see

his victory over wickedness, the dead in Christ will rise, and we will reign with him over the world. The salvation begun at Christ's first coming and continuing today will be completed when he returns at the consummation.

These three stages of Christ's kingdom are so essential for understanding the ways New Testament writers elaborated on Moses' creation that we should look at each of them separately. Following the example of Moses writing to Israel, New Testament writers applied the creation account of Genesis to Christ's salvation in the inauguration, continuation, and consummation of Christ's kingdom. Let's look first at the ways the New Testament relates the first chapter of Genesis to the inauguration of the kingdom.

## **INAUGURATION**

How does the New Testament use creation as a lens for interpreting the inauguration of Christ's kingdom? Well, on several occasions the New Testament speaks of the first coming of Christ as God's re-creation, his reshaping of the cosmos. Consider first the opening words of the gospel of John. In John 1:1-3 we read these words:

**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made (John 1:1-3).**

Notice that John's gospel starts off, "In the beginning." We all realize that these words come from the opening words of Genesis 1:1 where Moses wrote:

**In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).**

From the outset, John put his readers in the framework of the creation account in Genesis. Then John went on to say that Christ was the person of the Trinity who made all things; he was the Word of God, spoken at creation, by whom the world was first made.

Although these verses begin with a clear reference to the creation story, as we continue to read in John 1, we find that John subtly shifted from Genesis to another set of events that paralleled the creation account. Listen to what he wrote in the next verses, in John 1:4-5:

**In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it (John 1:4-5).**

At this point John continued to draw upon the themes of Genesis 1, especially the theme of the *light* which God brought to the dark chaotic world on the first day. Yet, instead of simply speaking of Jesus as the light of Genesis, John pointed to the incarnation of Christ as the light shining into the darkness of the world caused by sin. By shifting from creation to the coming of Christ, John revealed that in Christ's shining against the sinful darkness of the world, God moved against the chaos of the world, just as he had done in the beginning.

A similar motif appears in 2 Corinthians 4:6. There Paul explained the glory of his ministry in this way:

**For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).**

Here Paul directly referred to Genesis 1 in the words, “God ... said ‘Let light shine out of darkness.’” He focused first on the original ordering of creation with the appearance of light, but then drew attention to an important parallel to the creation story — God also “made his light shine in our hearts” when “the glory of God” was seen “in the face of Christ.”

The apostle said that the inauguration of Christ’s kingdom — that time when Christ’s face could be seen on earth — was best understood when it was related to the prototype of God’s original creative work. The same glory God displayed in the appearance of light in the beginning was also revealed at Christ’s first coming into the world of darkness.

From these two passages we find an essential element in the Christian approach to Moses’ creation account. Followers of Christ find in Genesis 1 a portrait, an anticipation, of what God did in the first coming of Christ, the inauguration of the kingdom.

In many ways, you and I face the kind of temptation that the Israelites following Moses faced. God did something wonderful when Christ first came to this world, just as he did when he first delivered Israel from Egypt. Yet, we often fail to see how magnificent God’s work in Christ 2,000 years ago actually was. From an uninformed human vantage point, Christ’s life does not look very important. It can easily be brushed off as just one of many insignificant events that occurred in those times. When we are tempted to think this way about Christ, we must remember the outlook of the New Testament. Christ’s appearance on earth was the beginning of God’s final re-ordering of the world. God was delivering the world from the chaotic darkness of sin and death. Jesus’ first coming began the process by which God would make his creation a wonderful, eternally life-giving place for him and his image to dwell in glory forever. We are right to place our faith in Christ, and in him alone.

So far, we have seen that the New Testament uses the creation story to explain the significance of Christ’s first coming. Now we may see that the New Testament considers the continuation of the kingdom, the period between the first and second comings of Christ, to be a re-creation as well.

## CONTINUATION

One familiar passage which illustrates this outlook is 2 Corinthians 5:17:

**Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5:17).**

The King James Version translates this verse to say that when a person is in Christ he becomes “a new creature.” This translation is unfortunate because it fails to convey Paul’s allusion to the creation account of Genesis 1. The Greek expression is *ktisis* (κτίσις), which is properly translated “creation” (as in most modern translations), not “creature.” In fact, this portion of the passage may actually be translated, “There is a new creation.” Paul’s concept seems to be that when people come to Christ in saving faith, they become part of a new realm, a new world, a new creation.

In this light we see that during the continuation of the kingdom men and women experience the new creation when they place their faith in Christ. In this sense, the Genesis account of creation becomes a way of understanding properly what happens to everyone who hears, believes, and follows Christ. As we become part of God’s new creation, we begin to enjoy the wonder of God’s ideal order for the world.

For this reason, it is not surprising that Paul also described the process of an individual’s salvation in another way that drew upon Moses’ creation account. In Colossians 3:9-10 we read these words:

**You have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator (Colossians 3:9-10).**

In this passage, the apostle described what happens to the followers of Christ in terms of Genesis 1. We are “renewed ... in the image of [our] Creator.” Of course, Paul referred to Genesis 1:27 where Moses said that God’s ideal world included Adam and Eve who were created “in the image of God.” During the continuation of the kingdom of Christ, we find that we are constantly “being renewed” in a lifelong process of regaining the status that our first parents held as God’s images.

These two passages demonstrate that the New Testament used Moses’ creation account as a standard for understanding Christ’s work, not only in the inauguration of the kingdom, but also in its continuation.

Of course, the New Testament writers took the themes of Moses’ creation story to one final step. Not only did they look at Christ’s first coming as the beginning of a new creation, and to the continuation of the kingdom as a time when individual people enjoy the effects of the new creation in their lives, but they also applied Creation themes to the final stage of Christ’s work — the consummation of the kingdom.

## CONSUMMATION

At least two passages in the New Testament stand out in this regard. First, Hebrews 4 refers to Christ’s return in terms of Moses’ creation account:

**For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: “And on the seventh day God rested from all his work.”... There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from**

**his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest (Hebrews 4:4-11).**

Just as Moses used God's Sabbath day in Genesis 2 to spur Israel toward Canaan, the land of rest, the writer of Hebrews saw God's Sabbath day as an ideal prototype of the ultimate redemption we will experience when Christ returns. In the same way that God ideally ordered the world in the beginning and brought about Sabbath joy, when Christ returns in glory, he will re-order the world and give his people the joy of the final Sabbath rest. As we long for this day, we are told here that we must "make every effort to enter that rest," which will come when Christ returns.

Finally, one of the most magnificent passages that identifies Christ's second coming in terms of Moses' creation account is Revelation 21:1. Listen to the way John applied creation themes to the return of Christ:

**Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea (Revelation 21:1).**

John spoke of "a new heaven and a new earth," and this phrase recalls Genesis 1:1 which records that God created "the heavens and the earth." Moreover, John said that in this new world there would "no longer [be] any sea." You will recall that in Genesis 1:9 God restrained the sea, keeping it within boundaries so that dry land could appear and form a safe habitat for the human race. In the new world, after Christ's return, we'll find that the salt seas will be entirely removed from the earth and replaced with fresh life-giving water. The work of Christ is similar to the days of creation in Genesis 1, but in Christ God will go further, much further in bringing the ideal order to completion. The entire universe will be re-created into new heavens and a new earth, and God and his people will enjoy that new world together.

Unfortunately, Christians often disconnect their eternal hope from the creation. We assume that we will spend eternity in the spiritual world up in heaven. But the New Testament is very clear about this. Our final destiny is a return to the Sabbath ordained in the seventh day of creation. We will spend eternity in the new heavens and new earth. This was the hope of Israel in the days of Moses, and it is our hope even today.

When we follow the guidance of the New Testament, we should approach the opening chapter of Genesis as more than a mere record of what happened long ago. It is also a portrait of what God has done in Christ's first coming, what he is doing now in our lives day by day, and what God will one day bring to completion when Christ returns.

In all three stages of Christ's kingdom, God moves against the chaos of sin and death in the world, and in our lives. In the inauguration, continuation, and consummation of the kingdom, he sets the world on a path to its ideal end — a wonderful new creation for his people.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson we have seen four main ideas: the overarching purpose of Genesis 1–11, the structure and original meaning of Genesis 1:1–2:3, and the ways the New Testament applies the themes of the creation account to Christ and to our lives. The implications of this approach to Moses' creation record for today are astounding, to say the least.

As Christians living today, we need to see how Moses' original purpose in Genesis applies to our lives in Christ. Just like the Israelites who first heard the opening chapters of Genesis, we are easily discouraged as we follow Christ in this sinful world. But as Moses encouraged his readers to believe that they were on God's way toward his ideal world, we should also be encouraged as we walk God's amazing path toward this ideal world in Christ.