

Supplemental Group Study Creation Comparison

This supplemental group study exercise could be used alongside *The Heavens and the Earth* (Jan 5) and *The Garden* (Jan 12). The exercise is best completed before the Bible study discussion, so that the group members experience the process of discovery for themselves.

Divide participants into two groups. Group #1 is given Gen 1:1-2:3, while group #2 has Gen 2:4-25. The goal for each group is to answer all the questions below, but only using its assigned passage. After the groups have had time to answer the questions, come back together to compare notes.

Here are a few helpful tips to provide all participants:

- You will experience a strong impulse to find answers in the other group's passage (or the rest of scripture). This exercise is most fruitful when you proceed as though you only know what your passage says.
- For some questions, your creation account will provide explicit answers. In other cases, the answers will be less obvious and leave room for debate. Some questions will remain unanswered by your passage.
- The best results always come from groups that work together!

Study Questions

1. What is the creator called?
2. In what order or sequence does creation take place?
3. How long does it take for the creator to complete the work of creation?
4. How does the creator cause creation to come into being?
5. From what does the Creator make the world?
6. Are humans created at the beginning or end of the account?
7. When are the animals created in relation to humans?
8. How is the creation of humans portrayed?
9. What is the task of the human creatures?
10. What is the Creator's evaluation of creation?

Further Questions for “The Heavens and the Earth,” January 5, 2025

Based on the creation account in Gen 1:1-2:3, what are three words you would use to describe God’s nature and/or character?

Why do you think divine sovereignty is the first characteristic of God that the Bible portrays? How does Gen 1:1-2:3 portray God’s sovereignty – in other words, how is this divine attribute acted out in the passage?

How does beginning with this creation account affect way we read the rest of the biblical story?

Good Faith Bible Study Podcast

Editor’s Note: For accessibility purposes, we are providing the transcript for the Good Faith Bible Study podcast below.

Good Faith Bible Study
Kathy and Nathan Maxwell

January 5, 2025

"The Heavens and the Earth"

Genesis 1:1-2:4

<https://goodfaithmedia.org/bible-studies/>

Transcript:

All right, so we want to start by recommending a couple of resources. Now, these are intended to supplement facilitators using Good Faith Media curriculum, but really anyone who is interested in studying Genesis more can benefit from them and we encourage everyone to check them out.

The first is Tremper Longman's *How to Read Genesis*. Now the author, Longman, is an outstanding and well recognized scholar. But what I like most about this book is that it strikes the best balance between being informed by scholarship while at the same time being very readable and useful for studying or leading a study on the book of Genesis. And there's actually quite a few volumes in *How to Read* series, and I'd encourage you to check them out.

The second recommendation is John Walton's *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology, and the Origins Debate*. Now the author, John Walton, has published quite a few volumes in this *Lost World* series, and as of this recording, there's still one to come out in the next few months. But this one in particular is focused on a literary and theological reading of Genesis 1.

So the reason for choosing both of these texts, Longman's *How to Read Genesis* and Walton's *Lost World of Genesis One* is that many of the challenges we encounter when trying to get the most out the biblical story of creation are related to context. We have, of course, a natural tendency to take our own frame of reference for granted when making sense of this – or really any – passage of scripture. And so we understandably approach the biblical account of creation with questions and expectations that are really rooted in a contemporary, Western, rational and philosophical point of view.

But Genesis 1 has different roots, and it's focused on a different set of questions. We want a reasonable explanation for the universe, but Genesis 1 cares more about what sort of God made it and how things started out between us and that creator. The resources we have recommended do an amazing job of re-situating Genesis 1 in its ancient Near Eastern context, which really brings the story to life, and allows us to experience its full effect.

Okay, so next we want to point out a couple things that we didn't have a chance to mention in this week's lesson. The first is the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. This Latin expression means "creation out of nothing," and in this context it refers to the idea that stuff didn't exist – matter, space, time, that sort of thing,

until God created the universe. There are a number of biblical passages that seem to take this view for granted – see for example Hebrews 3:11, Romans 4:17, and Revelation 4:11. But somewhat surprisingly, Genesis 1 isn't really interested in accounting for the state of affairs before God's creative activity begins. We just sort of "drop in" on a story already in progress.

As God begins the work of creation, we are presented with a scene in which everything is a formless, empty, blob, which God then commands into the world we call home. The crux of the issue is the very first clause, woodenly translated as "at beginning, he created, God, the heavens and the earth." The NRSV translation brings out the subtle nuance of the missing definite article: "When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos... ."

To be sure, Genesis 1 doesn't contradict the doctrine of ex nihilo, it's simply that the story doesn't go far enough back solve that riddle – however honest the question might be. Even if Genesis 1 is quiet on ex nihilo, a Bible study on the passage is still a great opportunity to explore this important tenet of Christian faith. If you're a facilitator, consider asking your group: "What existed before creation?" After letting the discussion bloom, ask what Genesis 1 has to say about the matter. If your group discovers the gap, it's a wonderful opportunity to trace that belief through the rest of scripture and Christian tradition.

The second topic we want to address comes from verse 26. A careful reader is likely to stub a toe on the use of the first-person plural: "Let us make humankind in our image." Given how resolutely monotheistic the Old Testament is, the expression is surprising, to say the least. To whom does "us" refer? Tradition has usually equated the expression with the triune God of Christian faith. The problem, however, is that, well... Moses wasn't exactly a stalwart Trinitarian. So, interpreters have managed a number of explanations.

The so-called mythological reading suggests that the creation account was borrowed from Israel's neighbors, but somehow a reference to the pagan

pantheon slipped through. Of all the possibilities, a clumsy editor seems to be hardest for anyone to swallow.

Others have suggested that the creator is not addressing other gods, but the heavenly host – something like the “sons of God” in Genesis 6 or the divine council Psalm 82.

Noting that the man is in fact formed out the dust of the earth, a third option is that God is addressing the rest of creation that had been made so far.

The fourth possibility is based on the fact that the Old Testament word for “God” is itself grammatically plural. The so-called “plural of majesty” option therefore treats the plural pronouns as a kind of respectful, formal style.

A fifth option is dubbed the “plural of deliberation” – it’s something like when you ask yourself, “Let’s see, do I want a strawberry or chocolate shake?” As you consider the best choice – which is obviously chocolate – you are literally saying, “Let us see... .”

Finally, interpreters have suggested something like a “plurality within the Godhead.” It’s not quite Trinitarian theology, but it gets the closest to how Christian tradition has regarded this verse. Proponents of this view point out the reference to the spirit of God in verse 2, as well as the wisdom of God in Proverbs 8, who was “formed at the very beginning, when the world came to be.” If we take into account a progressive revelation of God through scripture, then it may not be too far-fetched to understand Genesis 1:26 as a kind of Trinitarian precursor – a nascent inkling of what the this central doctrine of Christian faith would eventually become.

There is so much more to explore in Genesis 1. We hope this week’s lesson marks the beginning of an ongoing discovery of this incredible opener to the biblical story.