

## WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT

# Six Days to Create the World

It is an issue that divides school boards, inflames legislatures, and loads the dockets for courtroom battles. Should we teach in our public schools that God created the universe? Many of us are happy to leave science to scientists and teachers, and matters of faith to clergy and theologians. But from within our own faith settings, a closer look at what the Bible says about God's act of creation might have something to offer. The Bible has much to teach us today about why God created us. Just as we may want to clearly understand what science teaches regarding evolution and the origins of the universe, we might also read Genesis to more deeply appreciate its truth.

Believing in Scripture is not at all the same thing as taking Scripture literally. For example, there are actually two accounts of creation in the first two chapters of Genesis. On the surface, they seem to contradict each other. If forced into a literal interpretation, they could confuse those who read Genesis expecting a detailed account of exactly how the world was created. When a believer reads Genesis with a different expectation—to learn God's purpose in creating the world—the two versions simply show different aspects of God's purpose. Both accounts affirm the dignity and purpose of creation, truths that nurture our faith without denying the credibility of modern scientific understandings, whether that means the big bang, evolution, or something else.

### The questions Genesis answers

When we read Genesis 1 and 2, instead of asking how long it took God to create the world, or if God literally shaped Adam out of dirt from the earth, we might find even richer rewards if we join the ancient Hebrew people in asking some very important, enduring questions. Is the world God's creation? Is God in control or not? Why did God create us? What is our relationship to the rest of creation? How can we honor our purpose in the daily patterns of our life?

**Read the two creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2. What are some key differences between them that stand out for you?**

One reason the days are so important to the story of creation is because the world in which we live our lives is marked by the constant pattern of days we experience as a week. It is within this



**We believe in the divine inspiration of the Bible. Is it always necessary to interpret the Bible literally? Why or why not?**





How might reading Genesis 1:1–2:4a as poetry affect the way it is understood?



What message about God's purpose in creating the heavens and the earth is conveyed by the events depicted in the six days of creation?

basic rhythm of time that we must find our meaning and fulfill our purpose as divinely created beings. The creation story can help us in our own time to find our meaning and purpose as well.

Because the days of the week reflect the rhythmic pattern of our lives, they are presented as the literary structure of the creation account in Genesis 1. It is a well-thought-out, structurally precise pattern. Like most ancient Hebrew poetry, it seeks to rhyme, not words or sounds, but ideas. Read Genesis 1 carefully. Note how in each of the first three days God creates a place and then goes back to each of those places in days 4–6 to fill them with the things that call them home. Days 4–6 are the “rhymes” that make this story poetic.

### The poetic structure of Genesis 1

Day	Places	Creature	Day
1	Day and Night	Sun, Moon, and Stars	4
2	Sky and Water	Birds and Fish	5
3	Dry Land	Animals and Humans	6

The poetry of this creation story tells us something very important about its message as well. It tells us to look beyond the mere words for the message and to look at its structure for clues to its meaning. The message is an age-old wisdom, one that our parents tried to teach us and we try to teach our children: “Everything has a place, and there is a place for everything.” To take it further, we might say that the earth is our home; we belong here. We were made for each other. But when it comes to humans there is also a special message. We have been assigned a unique role in creation. This part of the first story of creation tells us that God appointed one special creature to bear the divine image in the world, freeing God to take a well-deserved rest from labor.

### Created to represent God in the world

As a sign of royal authority, kings in the ancient world would place an image of the national god in prominent places to remind people who was god. These images also reminded people that the king was that god's representative. When we read in Genesis 1:26, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,” we note that it is quickly followed by a statement about human authority in the world: “Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground.” Dianne Bergant tells us in *Israel's Story, Part One* that being made in God's image is a statement about our authority. We have been made God's regents in the world.

Unlike the kings of Israel's neighbors, or even their own kings, however, the authority God gives his regents (all humanity) is intended to extend God's own

benevolent care for creation. In making humans, God is choosing to rest from some of his own labors in creating the world and choosing to bring creation to completeness, to fulfillment, through his regents. One special aspect of our divine purpose in creation, then, is to enhance the order and dignity that God has already initiated in creation. We are to work with creation, not against it, in order that the dignity and beauty of creation is made even more evident because of our labors.

### Genesis and other creation stories

It has often been noted that there are similarities between the creation account in Genesis 1 and the creation myths of ancient Israel's neighbors, especially that of the Babylonian people. This shouldn't really surprise us, because most peoples of what is known as the Fertile Crescent shared many similar concerns about the nature of the world.

This was a time after the first civilizations in the world had developed. Instead of following food in the wild (hunting and gathering), planting and harvesting now made it possible for entire cities to grow and prosper. Their relationship with the earth was fragile, however. They needed regular cycles of rain and dry heat to nourish and mature their crops. Along with these cycles came chaotic changes as well. Floods devastated crops and destroyed homes, livestock, and people. If farming proved successful, entire cities grew and prospered only to be threatened by the military might of other cities.

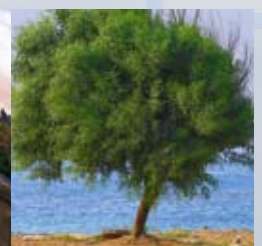
The regular pattern of rainy and dry seasons, along with months, weeks, and days of predictable, unceasing labor, were the orderly nature of the world that kept them alive. But how long could anyone expect a perfect pattern in natural activity, or human activity, to last? A mortal enemy, chaos, always seemed lurking behind every rain cloud or in the dust kicked up in the wind. Would it be a flood this time? Would an army invade?

All people of the Fertile Crescent would have had stories—myths—to explain why the world was the way it was. This is a very important thing to remember in reading any creation story from before the advent of modern science. Creation stories were not written to explain how the world was created. Explaining the chain of events that produced the physical nature of things as we encounter them today is an example of scientific curiosity seeking to discover practical causes and effects.

Ancient peoples were curious about something else altogether. Myths were attempts to explain the relationship between the world of human experience and the gods they assumed were in control. They wanted to know why there was a regular pattern to life and a cycle to nature that, under the right circumstances, would keep them alive, but also why there was such chaos in the world. Why did most people have to slave day in and day out while a few ruled over them in splendor and abundance? Death, disease, storms,



**What is meant by being made in the "image" of God? What responsibility does this suggest we have to the rest of creation?**





**In what ways does God's power over chaos (Gen 1:2) have relevance to life in the modern world?**

**In Genesis 2:19 Adam is given authority to name the creatures of the world. Why is this an awesome responsibility?**



earthquakes, floods, war—what could explain why life could be a constant rhythm of labor for days on end and then, without warning, be destroyed by flood or war or plague?

### **The special insights of Genesis**

The myths they told offered explanations. In that respect, the Genesis story seems to be just another myth to some readers. It seems to answer the same questions that peoples all over the Fertile Crescent were asking. There is a tremendous difference in the way Genesis answers the questions, though. The myths of the region claimed that chaos was a great and powerful enemy that the gods had to fight in bloody battle.

When the creation accounts of Genesis were put in their present form, it could be that the mythologies of Israel's neighbors had an influence on their content, but they influenced Genesis in a way that provoked a response. The creation accounts in Genesis may well be setting the record straight.

In the Genesis 1 account of creation, there is a concern for chaos, but the concern is that we who read Genesis understand that our Creator is in control at all times. A primeval chaos can be seen in the phrase that describes the world as "a formless wasteland" (1:2). What also stands out in this account is the lack of any struggle between God and this "formless wasteland." Unlike the myths of surrounding areas, God's people are told that primeval chaos has no powers of its own. There is no war between an enemy god and our Creator beneath the tumultuous surface of the story. The formless wasteland is merely the unfinished state of a creation that awaits the transforming power of its Creator's breath, which sweeps across it like a mighty wind.

One myth that is said to have similarities to Genesis claimed that humans were the slaves of the gods, created from the slain body of a fallen god so that the victorious god would be able to feed from the earth's plenty without effort on his part. When Genesis 1 tells us that we were created as the last great work of God, after which God rests, there is no hint that God could now rest because we could take over his chores. There is, instead, a rather lofty theological proposition being presented. Made in the divine image, we are intended to be an extension of God's benevolent creative and authoritative power in the world. This theme is picked up in a colorful way in the second creation account (Gen 2:4b-25). In this account, God tells the human he creates to name all the animals. God leaves this last, great culminating act of creation to the human. Whatever the human names them, that will be what they are. In other words, God has given to us the power to define our relationship to creation and creation's relationship to us. This is an awesome responsibility, one that could be misused and abused, but who can deny that we actually have that responsibility? Today we see more clearly than ever the effects of our power. Hopefully we are beginning to realize our responsibility.

## Honoring God's creative intentions

Issues of global warming and extinction of entire species of animals tell us we still have much to learn about handling our power in a responsible manner! In telling us to "fill the earth and subdue it," we are not given carte blanche to wreak havoc on the earth's ecology. In our role as divine regents we must always recognize God's creative intentions in filling the earth with such abundant life, held together in a vast but incredibly delicate network of mutual self-giving.

Our highest purpose, however, is not in direct relation to the creation at all. It is in our nature as God's personal creation to find our rest in God even as God takes up rest in us. It is here that we are best able to appreciate the presence of time, the numbering of the days of the week that form the structural context for the story of creation.

That God took six literal days to create the world was never an important theological intention of Genesis 1. That we are created in the context of time, however, and that our earthly labors seem to consume our time, day in and day out, is an important fact of our creation. It is not to be the ultimate reality for us, however. The greatest truth about us is that we were not just made by God but that we were made for God. The Sabbath rest is described in Genesis 1 as an intrinsic reality of our nature. We are called to look beyond our earthly labors and create space in our lives for God and to routinely set apart time that has no other purpose than to honor our relationship to our Creator.

## Seven timeless truths of creation in Genesis

In the process of examining the importance of the six days of creation, we have touched on many timeless truths that Genesis teaches concerning the creation of the world and of ourselves. Arising from a time long before scientific inquiry was available to teach us about the astrophysical, geophysical, and biological forces involved in the process of creation, Genesis still tells a profoundly compelling theological account of God's intentions in the fact of creation. In the spirit of the Seven Days that compose the creation account of Genesis 1, the following are seven timeless truths that a careful study of Genesis still communicates:

1. God spoke creation into being. By its very nature the world exists in relationship to God.
2. The feared powers of chaos that seem to threaten creation are incapable of resisting God's purposes.
3. As at the creation, the Word of God brings order, dignity, and purpose to the world.
4. The world is good!



**How does the Sabbath rest indicate a lofty purpose for humans in God's creation?**



**What are some of the more meaningful messages about God's creation you see in the Genesis creation accounts?**





5. God made man and woman in the image of God: humans are to be God's regents in the world, completing God's task of creation by bringing about even more order, dignity, and purpose in creation.
6. We exist within the context of time, and our human labors are fixed to the rhythm of days, of weeks, of seasons, and of years, but we have a purpose and a dignity that transcends time itself.
7. Just as God takes up rest in man and woman, man and woman are to take their rest in God. Man and woman will discover their full dignity, purpose, and goodness by deliberately resting from their activity and honoring their Creator.

—Clifford M. Yeary  
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**Scripture study, with the right aids and done in the context of faith, can be a wonderful source of joy and renewal in the faith. The study of God's Word is more important than ever for Catholics, as popular misunderstandings of Scripture, or interpretations of Scripture meant to serve only the specific beliefs of a particular denomination, reach us through the mass media or even word-of-mouth. Why not consider joining or starting a small-group Bible study under the auspices of your local Catholic parish?**



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