

Back to the Beginning: Genesis Session 2 Summary and Study Guide

Welcome back to our Bible study series, *Back to the Beginning*, where we dive into the foundational truths of Genesis. In this second session, we begin exploring the opening verses of Genesis 1, focusing on the creation account and its significance. Our goal is to understand the text as it was originally received by its audience while uncovering the profound truths about God's nature and His creative work. Use your Bible and the provided study notes to engage with the material, whether you prepare in advance or follow along as we explore together. Let's embark on this journey with open hearts, ready to grow in our awe of God.

Lesson Objectives

In this session, we will:

1. Examine the original audience and context of Genesis 1 to better understand its meaning.
2. Explore the significance of the Hebrew names for God, *Elohim* and *Yahweh*, and their implications for the Trinity.
3. Study Genesis 1:1–3, focusing on the state of the earth and the Spirit's role in creation.
4. Reflect on the concept of God bringing order out of chaos and its relevance to our faith.

Part 1: The Context of Genesis 1

I. Who Was the Original Audience?

To fully appreciate Genesis 1, we need to consider its original audience. While the Holy Spirit inspired Scripture for all generations, Genesis was first written by Moses for the Israelites, God's chosen people, likely during their wilderness wanderings after the exodus from Egypt. This context shapes how we understand the text. The Israelites, newly freed from slavery, were learning about the one true God in contrast to the pagan gods of Egypt and surrounding nations. Genesis 1 was not just a creation story but a declaration of the power and uniqueness of their God, who created all things by His word.

The book of Genesis is written in a poetic, narrative style, distinct from other genres like the poetry of Psalms or the epistles of the New Testament. Hebrew poetry doesn't rely on rhyme but on vivid imagery and repetition, which we'll see in Genesis 1. Understanding this helps us read the text as the Israelites would have, capturing the awe and wonder of God's creative acts.

II. Reflection Questions

1. Why is it important to consider the original audience when studying Genesis?
2. How might the Israelites' experience in Egypt influence their understanding of Genesis 1?

Part 2: The Names of God in Genesis

III. Elohim: The Creator God

In Genesis 1:1, we read, "*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*" The Hebrew word for God here is *Elohim*, a plural noun used in a singular sense to refer to the one true God. This word is significant for several reasons:

- **Generic Term:** *Elohim* is a generic term for deity, used not only for the true God but also for false gods, such as the golden calf (Exodus 32:4) or the gods of other nations. In English, we distinguish the true God with a capital "G" and false gods with a lowercase "g," but Hebrew lacks this distinction, relying on context.

- **Hint of the Trinity:** The plural form of *Elohim* hints at the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is reinforced in Genesis 1:26, where God says, “*Let us make man in our image.*” The plural language suggests a divine conversation within the Godhead, pointing to the relational nature of God.
- **Related Terms:** Variations of *Elohim* appear in names like *Bethel* (“house of God”) and *El Shaddai* (“God Almighty”). These terms emphasize God’s power and presence. *Emmanuel* would be another example of how *El* is used in a compound word.

IV. Yahweh: The Personal God

In Genesis 2, we’ll encounter another name for God: *Yahweh* (often translated as “LORD” in all capital letters in English Bibles). Historically pronounced as “Jehovah,” many scholars now prefer “Yahweh,” reflecting the Hebrew consonants YHWH. This name, revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14 (“*I AM WHO I AM*”), emphasizes God’s personal, covenantal relationship with His people. Unlike *Elohim*, which is more general, *Yahweh* is God’s personal name, highlighting His unique identity and faithfulness.

Some Jewish traditions avoid pronouncing *Yahweh* to honor the command not to take God’s name in vain (Exodus 20:7). However, using God’s name as revealed in Scripture allows us to address Him directly, fostering a deeper connection. When we see “LORD” in our Bibles, recognize it as *Yahweh*, the God who enters into relationship with His people.

V. Reflection Questions

1. How does the plural nature of *Elohim* deepen your understanding of the Trinity?
2. Why might it matter to use God’s personal name, *Yahweh*, in our worship and prayers?

Part 3: Exploring Genesis 1:1–3

Let’s read Genesis 1:1–3: “*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.*”

VI. The State of the Earth: Tohu and Bohu

Verse 2 describes the earth as “*without form and void*” (Hebrew: *tohu* and *bohu*). These words paint a picture of a chaotic, empty, and desolate state—often translated as “formless and empty.” Other translations of *tohu* in Scripture include “wasteland,” “wilderness,” “confusion,” or “empty space” (e.g., Isaiah 34:11, Jeremiah 4:23). The term *bohu* often accompanies *tohu*, emphasizing emptiness. Together, they suggest a formless, chaotic, water-covered, and dark world.

This description raises questions: Why was the earth in this state? Several interpretations exist:

1. **A Starting Point for Creation:** The earth’s formless state could be like a potter’s clay—an unformed “blob” that God intentionally created as a starting point. Over the six days of creation, He shapes it into an ordered, inhabited world, as Isaiah 45:18 states: “*He did not create it in vain [tohu], but formed it to be inhabited.*” This view sees the chaos as a temporary stage in God’s creative process.
2. **A Result of Judgment:** Some suggest that the earth became *tohu* and *bohu* due to a divine judgment, possibly related to Satan’s fall (as speculated in traditions like John

Milton's writings). This view posits a "gap" between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, where something caused the earth to become chaotic before God reordered it. It's interesting to note that when the eternal state in heaven becomes a reality, there will be no more sun and no more sea.

3. **A Pre-Creation World:** Older interpretations, like the Scofield Bible, propose a previous creation with animals or people that God judged, resulting in a formless earth. Some people believe fossils are evidence of this judgment on a previous creation. However, this view conflicts with the biblical teaching that death entered the world through Adam's sin (Romans 5:12), as argued by scholars like Ken Ham.

While we may not know the definitive answer, we must affirm that God makes no mistakes. His plan was established before time, and the chaotic state of the earth was part of His purposeful design to bring order and beauty. The imagery of *tohu* and *bohu* in passages like Isaiah 34:11 and Jeremiah 4:23, where they describe judgment, suggests that chaos is contrary to God's ideal of *shalom* (peace and order). Genesis 1 shows God transforming chaos into a world of order, reflecting His power and intentionality.

VII. The Spirit's Role: Hovering Over the Waters

Verse 2 also introduces the "*Spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters.*" The Hebrew word for "hovering" (or "moving") implies a fluttering, protective motion, like a bird brooding over its nest. Picture a bird fluttering over its eggs, focused and vigilant. Similarly, the Spirit of God is actively present, watching over the formless, water-covered earth, ready to bring it to life. I think there is an expectancy in His hovering. The term "deep" (*tehom*) evokes a vast, flood-like expanse of water, adding to the sense of chaos, yet the Spirit's presence assures us that God is in control, preparing to create order. Thus, we see all three persons of the trinity present: God, the Word, and the Spirit.

VIII. God's Word Brings Light

In verse 3, God speaks: "*Let there be light, and there was light.*" This act is profound. God's word alone brings light into existence, demonstrating His supreme authority. John 1:1–3 connects this to Jesus, the Word (*Logos*), who was with God and was God in the beginning. The Greek term *Logos* encompasses wisdom, logic, and the organizing principle of the universe. Proverbs 8 personifies wisdom as present at creation, likely pointing to Christ. Thus, when God speaks, it is the second person of the Trinity—Jesus—through whom creation comes into being (Psalm 33:6–9). John goes on to tell us that the Word became flesh and lived here among us. This is actually quite a startling statement! Since when does "word" become human?

This act of speaking creation into existence inspires awe. As Psalm 33:7–9 says, "*he gathers the waters of the sea together as a heap; He lays up the deep in storehouses. Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him. For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast.*" Unlike humans, who cannot create by speaking, God's word has the power to bring something from nothing (Romans 4:17). This same God, in the person of Jesus, who creates also sustains all things (Colossians 1:17), holding the universe together by His power. If He were to withdraw His power, the universe and everything in it would fall apart.

IX. Reflection Questions

1. What does the imagery of a formless, void, and dark earth suggest about God's ability to bring order from chaos?
2. How does the Spirit's "hovering" over the waters shape your understanding of God's active involvement in creation?
3. Why does God's ability to create through His word inspire awe and reverence in us?

Part 4: Study Exercises

To deepen your engagement with Genesis 1, try these exercises:

1. **List God's Actions:** Read Genesis 1:1–2:3 and make a list of everything God does (e.g., "God said," "God saw," "God created"). Note patterns, such as how often "God saw" or "God said" appears. This will reveal the structure and rhythm of the creation account.
2. **Explore *Tohu* and *Bohu*:** Review the references to *tohu* and *bohu* in the study notes (e.g., Isaiah 34:11, Jeremiah 4:23). How do these contexts (often judgment) inform your understanding of Genesis 1:2?
3. **Reflect on the Spirit's Hovering:** Visualize the Spirit of God "hovering" over the waters. What images come to mind (e.g., a bird over a nest, a presence over waves)? How does this imagery enhance your view of God's care in creation?

Conclusion and Next Steps

Genesis 1:1–3 introduces us to a God of infinite power, who speaks creation into existence and brings order from chaos. The terms *Elohim* and *Yahweh* reveal His majesty and personal relationship with us, while the Spirit's hovering assures us of His active presence. As we study, let these truths deepen our awe of God, who not only created the world but sustains it and redeems us through Christ.

For next week, take time to:

- Complete the study exercises, especially listing God's actions in Genesis 1.
- Reflect on the reflection questions to prepare for discussion.
- Consider how the creation account reveals God's character and invites us to worship Him.

Let's pray: *Lord, we thank You for Your Word, which reveals Your power and purpose in creation. You spoke, and the world came into being; Your Spirit hovered, bringing order from chaos. Help us to stand in awe of You and to grow in our understanding of Your greatness. Guide our study in the weeks ahead, and may we honor You with our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.*