

In the Beginning: Why Genesis 1:1 Changes Everything

“In the beginning Elohim created the heavens and the earth.”

— Genesis 1:1

Introduction

I am sometimes asked, “What do you think is the most important verse in the Bible?”

There are many answers we could give.

Someone might choose:

“Hear, O Israel! ADONAI is our Elohim, ADONAI is one!”

— Deuteronomy 6:4

Someone else might choose:

“You shall love ADONAI your Elohim with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

— Deuteronomy 6:5

Others might choose a verse about loving our neighbor, repentance, faith, redemption, or Messiah.

But when I am asked that question, I often return to the very first verse of Scripture:

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

Bereishit bara Elohim et hashamayim ve'et ha'aretz.

“In the beginning Elohim created the heavens and the earth.”

Why would I call this perhaps the most important verse in Scripture?

Because if Genesis 1:1 is not true, we have a serious problem with everything that follows.

If The Almighty did not create us, by what authority does He tell us how to live?

If the world does not belong to Him, why should His commandments govern what happens in it?

If our lives are ultimately accidents of nature, on what basis can we say that human beings have a purpose established by their Creator?

But if Genesis 1:1 is true, then everything changes.

If The Almighty created the heavens and the earth, then the heavens and the earth belong to Him.

And if He created us, then we belong to Him.

That means He has the right to tell His creation how His creation is to live.

Genesis 1:1 therefore does much more than tell us **how everything began**.

It establishes **who is in charge**.

I. Scripture Begins With The Almighty

Notice something fascinating about the Bible.

It does not begin by trying to prove that The Almighty exists.

Genesis does not begin:

“Here are five philosophical arguments demonstrating the existence of The Almighty.”

It simply begins:

“In the beginning, Elohim...”

The existence of The Almighty is the starting point.

Before Abraham.

Before Israel.

Before Sinai.

Before Torah.

Before the Temple.

Before prophets.

Before kings.

Before Messiah.

Before mankind itself.

There is The Almighty.

The Hebrew says:

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים

Bereishit bara Elohim.

“In the beginning, Elohim created.”

Notice the subject of the first sentence of Scripture.

It is not Adam.

It is not Israel.

It is not mankind.

It is not even creation.

The central actor is **Elohim**.

That immediately establishes the perspective from which the entire Bible must be understood.

Scripture is not primarily the story of mankind searching for The Almighty.

It is the story of The Almighty acting within His creation and calling mankind into relationship, responsibility, covenant, and obedience.

We are not the central character.

He is.

That is an important lesson for us because human beings have a tendency to read Scripture with ourselves at the center.

“What does this mean for me?”

“How does this bless me?”

“What does The Almighty want to give me?”

Those are not always wrong questions.

But Scripture begins with a much larger truth:

Everything begins with Him.

Before asking, “What can The Almighty do for me?” perhaps the more biblical question is:

“Why did The Almighty create me, and what does my Creator expect from me?”

II. “Created” Establishes Ownership

Genesis does not merely say that The Almighty existed.

It says:

“Elohim **created** the heavens and the earth.”

The Hebrew verb is בָּרָא — **bara**.

The important point for our lesson is that creation establishes a relationship between the Creator and what He has made.

The Psalmist says:

“The earth is ADONAI’s, and all it contains,

The world, and those who dwell in it.”

— Psalm 24:1

Why does the earth belong to Him?

Because He made it.

Psalm 100 says:

“Know that ADONAI Himself is Elohim;

It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves;

We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.”

That is the logical progression.

He made us; therefore, we are His.

We understand this concept even at a human level.

If an artist creates a painting, we recognize that the work belongs to the artist unless he transfers ownership.

If a craftsman builds something from his own materials, we recognize a relationship between the maker and what has been made.

How much more when we speak about the One who created everything?

We sometimes speak about “my life.”

“My body.”

“My time.”

“My money.”

“My abilities.”

“My plans.”

There is nothing necessarily wrong with that language.

But Genesis 1:1 challenges us to remember that everything we call “mine” exists only because The Almighty first gave it to us.

Even the breath with which we say, “This belongs to me,” is a breath He has allowed us to take.

So Genesis 1:1 confronts the idea of absolute human autonomy.

I am not my own creator.

I did not give myself life.

I did not create the world in which I live.

I did not establish the laws by which creation functions.

Therefore, I cannot logically place myself above the Creator and say:

“I will decide what is right and wrong entirely for myself.”

That conflict will appear only a few chapters later.

III. The Creator Determines What Is Good

Throughout Genesis 1 we repeatedly read:

“Elohim saw that it was good.”

The Hebrew word is טוב — *tov*.

Tov means more than morally “good.” It describes what the Creator judges to be good, desirable, appropriate, and fitting within His purposes. The Creator, not the creation, determines what is *tov*.

Who determines that creation is good?

The Creator does.

This becomes very important.

Genesis establishes that good and evil are not ultimately defined by human opinion.

They are grounded in the judgment of The Almighty.

At the end of His creative work we read:

“Elohim saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good.”

— Genesis 1:31

Then in Genesis 2, The Almighty gives the man a command concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

And in Genesis 3 the serpent introduces another possibility:

Perhaps mankind can determine good and evil independently of the Creator.

That is one of the great conflicts running through Scripture.

Who has the authority to define good and evil?

The Creator?

Or the created?

Genesis 1:1 already gives us the answer.

If He created us, then He knows what we were designed to be.

And therefore, His instructions are not arbitrary restrictions placed upon human freedom.

They are the instructions of the Creator for the proper functioning of His creation.

That brings us directly to Torah.

IV. Genesis 1:1 Is the Foundation of Torah

Sometimes Torah is presented as though The Almighty suddenly appeared at Mount Sinai and began issuing arbitrary rules to Israel.

But Torah does not begin at Sinai.

The story begins with creation.

The One who gives the commandments at Sinai is the One who created heaven and earth.

This is especially clear in the commandment concerning Shabbat.

Exodus 20 says:

“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.”

Why?

The explanation is:

“For in six days ADONAI made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore ADONAI blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.”

Notice what Torah does.

It reaches all the way back to Genesis.

The authority behind Shabbat is creation itself.

The Almighty can establish sacred time because **time belongs to Him**.

He can designate the seventh day because **He created the days**.

The same principle extends much farther than Shabbat.

- 1) Why can The Almighty tell us what constitutes justice?
Because He created us.
- 2) Why can He establish boundaries concerning sexuality?
Because He created male and female.
- 3) Why can the Almighty define what we may eat and what we may not?
Because he designed our bodies, as well as the animals, and knows what is best for us.
- 4) Why can He command honesty?
Because He establishes righteousness.
- 5) Why can He tell us how to treat the stranger, the widow, the orphan, and the poor?
Because every human being is His creation.
- 6) Why can He tell Israel how to worship?
Because worship belongs to the Creator rather than the creation.

This is why Genesis cannot be separated from Torah.

Creation establishes the authority of the Lawgiver.

v. Genesis 1:1 Gives Humanity Dignity

There is another side to this.

The Creator's authority does not diminish human beings.

It gives us extraordinary dignity.

Genesis 1:26–27 says:

“Then Elohim said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...’”

And then:

“Elohim created man in His own image, in the image of Elohim He created him; male and female He created them.”

Human value is therefore not based upon wealth.

Not intelligence.

Not race.

Not nationality.

Not physical ability.

Not social standing.

Not productivity.

Human beings have dignity because human beings bear the **tzelem Elohim** — **צלם אֱלֹהִים** — **the image of Elohim.**

Think about the consequences.

A newborn child has value.

An elderly person has value.

A poor person has value.

Someone with severe intellectual limitations has value.

Someone who cannot contribute economically to society still has value.

Why?

Because human dignity does not come from what we can produce.

It comes from **the one who created us.**

Genesis 1:1 therefore becomes the foundation not only of authority but also of human worth.

The Creator who has authority over me also places obligations upon me regarding how I treat another person created in His image.

I cannot claim to honor the Creator while mistreating His creation.

VI. Creation Means Accountability

There is another implication that we may not find quite as comfortable.

If there is a Creator, then creation is accountable to Him.

Ecclesiastes concludes:

“The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear Elohim and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For The Almighty will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.”

— Ecclesiastes 12:13–14

Notice the connection:

Keep His commandments.

Why?

Because He is Judge.

But why does He possess the authority to judge?

Ultimately, we return again to Genesis.

He is the Creator.

Paul makes essentially this same argument when speaking in Athens.

He identifies:

“The Elohim who made the world and all things in it.”

And because He is Creator, mankind is accountable to Him.

This is why belief in creation cannot merely be an intellectual position.

A person can say:

“Yes, I believe The Almighty created the universe.”

But Genesis asks for more than agreement with a doctrine.

If He created me, then my life belongs to Him.

And if my life belongs to Him, then the question becomes:

Am I living as though that is true?

VII. The Great Temptation: “You Decide”

The serpent's temptation in Genesis 3 becomes especially significant when read against Genesis 1:1.

The Creator has spoken.

He established what may be eaten and what may not be eaten.

Then the serpent asks:

“Indeed, has Elohim said...?”

That question has never disappeared.

“Did Elohim really say?”

“Does that command still matter?”

“Should we really have to obey that?”

“Can't we decide for ourselves?”

The temptation in Eden was not simply about eating a piece of fruit.

At its deepest level it concerned **authority**.

Who determines what is right?

The Creator or the creature?

The serpent says:

“You will be like Elohim, knowing good and evil.”

In effect:

You can determine these things for yourself.

That is the same temptation mankind faces today.

The modern world often says:

“My life belongs to me.”

“My body belongs to me.”

“I decide my truth.”

“I determine what is right for me.”

Genesis 1:1 answers:

You are not your own creator.

There is a Creator before you.

And because there is a Creator, there is an authority higher than personal preference.

viii. Why Genesis 1:1 Matters to Faith

This brings me back to my original statement.

Why do I sometimes say Genesis 1:1 may be the most important verse in the Bible?

Not because the rest of Scripture is unimportant.

Certainly not.

Rather, because Genesis 1:1 establishes the foundation upon which everything else rests.

If I reject the Creator, then why should I care about His covenant?

If I reject the Creator, why should I submit to His Torah?

If I reject the Creator, why should I listen to His prophets?

If I reject the Creator, why should I care whom He appoints as Messiah?

But if Genesis 1:1 is true, then suddenly all of those questions become enormously important.

There really is a Creator.

We really are His creation.

Our lives really do have purpose.

Good and evil really do have meaning.

His commandments really do carry authority.

Judgment really does matter.

Repentance really does matter.

Covenant really does matter.

And the Messiah whom The Almighty has appointed really does matter.

Everything that follows Genesis 1:1 depends upon the reality introduced by Genesis 1:1.

IX. Bereishit Is Not Merely About the Past

We sometimes approach Genesis as though we are studying ancient history.

“How old is the earth?”

“How long were the days?”

“What exactly happened during creation?”

“What did the Garden of Eden look like?”

Those can be interesting questions.

But if we spend all our time arguing about the mechanics of creation, we can miss the theological message of creation.

Genesis is not merely asking:

“What happened long ago?”

It is asking:

“Whose world are you living in today?”

That is a very different question.

When I wake up tomorrow morning, whose day is it?

When I sit down to eat, whose food is it?

When I receive income, whose resources am I managing?

When I speak to another person, whose image does that person bear?

When Shabbat arrives, who declared that day holy?

When I open Torah and encounter a commandment, who is speaking?

The answer begins in Genesis 1:1.

The Creator.

X. Creation Should Produce Humility

There is another lesson here that we desperately need.

Creation should produce humility.

Psalm 8 says:

“When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,

The moon and the stars, which You have ordained;

What is man that You take thought of him,

And the son of man that You care for him?”

David looks at creation and realizes how small mankind is.

And yet The Almighty cares for us.

That should produce both humility and gratitude.

We live in an age that constantly tells human beings how important we are.

Genesis gives us balance.

Yes, mankind possesses enormous dignity because we bear the image of Elohim.

But we are still creatures.

We are not the Creator.

We are dust into which The Almighty breathed life.

There is tremendous freedom in understanding that distinction.

I do not have to be The Almighty.

I do not have to control everything.

I do not have to understand everything.

I do not have to determine right and wrong for the universe.

My responsibility is to trust the One who created me and faithfully walk according to His instructions.

XI. “In the Beginning” Also Gives Us Hope

Finally, Genesis 1:1 gives us hope.

Why?

Because the One who created everything is not limited by the creation.

When Israel stood trapped between Pharaoh's army and the sea, the Creator could make a path through the waters.

When Israel had no food in the wilderness, the Creator could provide.

When there was no water, He could provide water.

When Israel was scattered among the nations, the prophets could speak of restoration because the One making the promise was the Creator of heaven and earth.

The prophets repeatedly appeal to creation as evidence of His power.

Isaiah says:

“Do you not know? Have you not heard?

The Everlasting Elohim, ADONAI, the Creator of the ends of the earth

Does not become weary or tired.”

The same One who created is able to sustain.

The same One who formed Israel is able to restore Israel.

The same One who created mankind is able to redeem mankind.

Therefore our faith is not ultimately confidence in ourselves.

It is confidence in the Creator.

Conclusion

So let us return one final time to the first words of Scripture:

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים

Bereishit bara Elohim.

“In the beginning Elohim created...”

Before Torah says, “You shall...”

Before Torah says, “You shall not...”

Before Abraham is called.

Before Israel becomes a nation.

Before Sinai.

Before Jerusalem.

Before David.

Before the prophets.

Before Messiah.

Before any of us existed—

The Almighty was there.

And He created.

That truth establishes everything that follows.

Because He created the world, the world belongs to Him.

Because He created us, we belong to Him.

Because we belong to Him, He has the authority to instruct us.

Because He created humanity in His image, every human life possesses dignity.

Because He is Creator, we are accountable to Him.

And because He is Creator, we can trust that He is able to accomplish what He has promised.

So perhaps the most important question raised by Genesis 1:1 is not:

“Do I believe that The Almighty created the heavens and the earth?”

The more difficult question is:

“Am I living as though I believe it?”

Because if I truly believe:

“In the beginning Elohim created the heavens and the earth,”

then every part of my life must ultimately answer to the One who created it.

And perhaps that is why Scripture begins exactly where it does.

Before The Almighty tells us what to do, He tells us who He is.

He is the Creator.

And we are His creation.

Shabbat shalom and Ha Sof.