

Lesson 1 Genesis 1–3: Creation, Order, and the Birth of Sacred Humanity

Readings & Resources Worksheet



Cognitive Preparation

Before diving into ancient texts, it is important to understand how our own minds work. Steven Pinker is one of the clearest and most accessible voices on how human reasoning operates, especially when beliefs are tied to identity or emotion. As Pinker explains, we often fall into what he calls “my side bias,” where we defend what feels true rather than what is best supported by evidence. Learning to recognize this helps us separate emotional belief systems from careful reasoning grounded in facts and patterns. This skill will be essential as we encounter ideas that may feel unfamiliar or challenging.

- Steven Pinker, “Reason to Believe: How and why irrationality takes hold, and what to do about it” (Persuasion, 9 Jan 2023). Discusses myside bias and intuitive dualism, essentialism and teleology. Available at the Persuasion [website](#).
- Steven Pinker, **How the Mind Works** (1997) – Chapter 4 on reasoning and cognitive biases.

Documentary and Composition

The Hebrew Bible contains multiple voices, styles, and perspectives that can sometimes appear contradictory at first glance. Understanding how these narratives were compiled helps us read them more carefully and charitably. Joel S. Baden is widely regarded as the clearest modern guide to how scholars understand the formation of Genesis and the Pentateuch. His work shows how different sources were preserved and woven together. In our next class we will explore this in greater depth, but these readings provide an excellent foundation for understanding how the text came to be.

- Joel S. Baden, “The Re-Emergence of Source Criticism: The Neo-Documentary Hypothesis” – summarizes how a compiler combined four sources in Genesis, available [here](#).
- Joel S. Baden, **The Composition of the Pentateuch** (2012) – introduction and chapter 1.

Divine Council & Early Israelite Religion

To understand the world of the Hebrew Bible, we must first understand the religious assumptions of ancient Israel. There is strong and well-documented evidence that belief in a Heavenly Father, a Heavenly Mother, and their divine children was widespread in early Israelite religion. Prophets such as Abraham and Moses emerge from this worldview rather than standing outside of it. The sources in this section provide the historical and archaeological foundation for understanding how these beliefs functioned and how later theology developed from them. The word Elohim itself preserves traces of this earlier framework, acting as a linguistic fossil from Israel's earliest understanding of the divine.

- Mark S. Smith, **The Early History of God** (second edition, 2002) – chapters on El, Baal and the divine council.
- David Frankel, “El as the Speaking Voice in Psalm 82:6–8,” **Journal of Hebrew Scriptures** – surveys the debate over who presides in Psalm 82, available [here](#).
- William Dever, **Did God Have a Wife?** – chapters on Asherah and archaeological evidence.
- Center for Online Judaic Studies, “Asherah, 10th–7th century BCE” – discusses inscriptions “by Yahweh and his asherah”, available on their [website](#).

Mesopotamian Texts

The narratives found in the Hebrew Bible did not arise in isolation. Stories of creation, law, kingship, and covenant circulated throughout the ancient Near East long before they were written down in Israel. These traditions were passed through oral storytelling and shared cultural memory. Scripture itself teaches that God speaks to people according to their understanding and language (Doctrine and Covenants 1:24), building truth line upon line. In the same way, the biblical authors inherited earlier narratives and reshaped them through revelation, using familiar forms to teach deeper and more accurate truths. These texts help us see how Israel's story both resembles and transforms its cultural surroundings.

- Enuma Elish – read the translation of the opening lines describing primordial waters and cosmic **ordering**.
- Atrahasis – focus on the creation of humans to bear the load of the **gods**.
- Epic of Gilgamesh – read **Chapter 5** for the flood narrative.
- Sumerian King List – read the prologue and the **antediluvian section**.

Concordism, Science, and Reading Genesis

The Bible was written in the language and worldview of ancient people, not modern science. Many readers assume that Genesis must either match modern scientific descriptions exactly or be rejected altogether. Concordism offers a different approach. It recognizes that science is the technical language of a God of laws. It describes how God's creation works. And while scripture teaches why it exists and how humans are meant to understand their place within it. Science, in this view, is simply the technical language we use to describe the natural laws God established.

The creation narrative in Genesis reflects the ancient Hebrew understanding of the cosmos, including ideas of their time like a flat earth and a solid firmament. At the same time, the text uses language about life emerging gradually from water, the earth bringing forth living beings, and humanity arising through ordered processes. These ideas move beyond what ancient understanding alone could explain. This suggests that God revealed truth through familiar concepts while gently expanding understanding beyond them, teaching “line upon line” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:24).

Try it (optional):

- Read Genesis 1–6, paying attention to how creation unfolds gradually through ordered stages rather than instantaneous acts.
- Compare this with Abraham 4:10–12, where the text states that “the Gods prepared the waters that they might bring forth” living beings.
- Notice the language of preparation rather than command. Life emerges through conditions being set in place.
- Look closely at the phrase “living creatures.”
- In Hebrew, the term used is נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה (nephesh ḥayyāh), which does not mean a category of animals but refers broadly to all living life on earth animated beings sustained by breath
- Then consider how modern science explains the development of life through natural processes.
- Read Genesis 1:6–8 and note how the firmament is described still according to their understanding at the time. An accommodation of God.

Reflection question:

How might Genesis be teaching divine truth through ancient language rather than modern scientific terminology?

Further Research

- “Origins: Earth is Born” (PBS Nova) – This 52-minute documentary, narrated by Neil deGrasse Tyson, traces how the Earth formed from cosmic debris and gradually cooled into a habitable planet over 4.5 billion years. It is an accessible introduction to the natural formation of the world and helps students appreciate that science describes the how of creation without challenging the why. We recommend watching it if you can access it, otherwise here is a [link](#) to the site where they have the transcripts.
- Neil deGrasse Tyson says in Cosmos. In the episode "Ladder to the Stars" (Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey, Episode 2), that a key cognitive mutation separating Homo erectus from Homo sapiens could have arisen from something as simple as a random event like a cosmic ray or ionizing radiation hitting DNA. Another great series, here is a [link](#) to a site where the episode is available for free.
- Paul H. Seely, “The Firmament and the Water Above, Part I: The Meaning of raqia’ in Gen 1:6–8” (1991) – Seely’s peer-reviewed [article](#) argues that standard Hebrew lexica and many biblical scholars understood the raqia’ (firmament) as a solid dome over a flat earth . He shows that all ancient cultures believed the sky was physically solid , making Genesis 1’s language consistent with its cultural milieu.
- Ted Davis, “Old-Earth (Progressive) Creationism: History and Beliefs” (BioLogos) – Historian of science Ted Davis [explains](#) the concordist approach sometimes called progressive creationism, which seeks harmony between the geological record and the days of Genesis. Davis notes that concordism aims to harmonize the Bible’s creation days with geological ages and emphasizes that both nature and Scripture are reliable sources of truth when properly interpreted.

Language and Methodology

Modern linguists and biblical scholars have developed careful methods for studying how the Hebrew Bible was written and how its language works. Through historical linguistics, textual analysis, and comparative study, scholars are able to trace how words, phrases, and narrative structures developed over time. The articles and books in this section introduce the tools and methods used to study the Hebrew text diachronically, meaning across different periods of history. These readings provide a helpful starting point for seeing how language, structure, and meaning come together in the biblical text.

- Jared Lambert: “The Epiphanic Arc: Narrative Tension and Masoretic Accents.” **Analyses** how mid-level and major disjunctive accents correspond to problem-solution patterns in Hebrew prose. ResearchGate accounts are free, in the event it prompts you to sign up.
- Ziony Zevit: **What Really Happened in the Garden of Eden?** – chapter 12 on Eve’s creation and the meaning of *šēlā’*. (The whole book is amazing)
- Articles on cantillation and pictographs – for example, the **Jewish Encyclopedia** entry on mnemonics, an introduction to trop, and resources explaining that ancient Hebrew letters were pictographic.;

How to Study a Hebrew Word

There are a small number of key tools that linguists rely on when studying Biblical Hebrew. While some of the most advanced resources are hidden behind paywalls or institutional access, there are also excellent tools that are freely available and easy to use. These resources allow anyone to explore how Hebrew words functioned in their original context, often revealing layers of meaning that are not visible in translation. The goal here is learning how scholars ask questions and to show how language carries meaning across time.

Biblical Hebrew words usually carry families of meaning, not just one definition. Scholars use tools like:

- SED **link** (shared meanings across Semitic languages),
- HALOT **link** (how a word is used across the Hebrew Bible),
- DCH **link** (how meanings develop over time), and
- ORACC **link** (related Akkadian texts) to better understand how a word functioned in the ancient world.

You can access many of these summaries through BibleHub: <https://biblehub.com>



Try it (optional but encouraged):

- Look up Genesis 2:18 on BibleHub, click the word helper, and read the short HALOT entry.

Question: What surprised you about how the word is used elsewhere?

Example – Semantic Cloud (עֵנָן):
rescue • strength • divine aid •
military support • covenant loyalty

Next Week Prep (optional but encouraged):

1. Go to <https://biblehub.com>
2. Look up Genesis 2:6 and click on the word mist (טָל)
3. Read how the word is used and what images it carries
4. Then look up Genesis 2:9 and click on tree (עֵץ)
5. Question: What do these words seem to do in the story beyond their surface meaning?