

HARK!

THE PLAYLIST OF CREATION



T4 BIBLE STUDY BOOK

BIBLE STUDY PROGRAM – TERM 4 2021

Hark! The playlist of creation

Study #	Title	Reading Plan	Page #
—	Introduction	—	3
Study 1	How great is our God	Psalms 104	9
Study 2	Where were you?	Job 38	12
Study 3	Filled with delight	Proverbs 8:22–31 and Job 39	15
Study 4	God's song	Genesis 1:1–2:3	18
—	Appendices	—	22

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Introduction

In this series leading up to Christmas and the new year, we'll be visiting seven creation stories from across the Bible: five from the Old Testament (four of which will have studies in this booklet) and two from the New Testament.

Over the last century in our society, and increasingly in the past twenty years, believing in God as creator has become increasingly unpopular. Changing attitudes in astronomy, geology, and biology challenge biblical narratives, and debates over what is "natural" abound. Many say that the Christian belief in a creator God is misguided, outdated, foolish, even restrictive or dangerous. For many of us, to say we believe that God created the heavens and the earth can feel like either putting our fingers in our ears and ignoring the scientific community, or mumbling something about poetry and non-literal creation.

And what does it matter, anyway? Why does it matter that God did this and that in such a way? Isn't it enough to say, "See all this stuff around you? God made it, and it belongs to him." Haven't we read Genesis 1 enough? But perhaps part of our creation story fatigue is because we've got a skewed picture of what biblical creation stories are actually about, and because we think that the only biblical creation stories are in Genesis 1 and 2. In fact, the Bible has at least *twenty* creation accounts, of varying lengths, and their purpose might be different from what we expect. Creation stories in the Bible aren't just trivia about the past: they're panoramic images of the order and logic of the universe, they're architectural plans for God's cosmic dwelling place, and they're songs of the joy and wonder that is found in God's wisdom as he has expressed it in space, time, matter, and humans in community.

Old Testament creation narratives also form the foundation for how the New Testament understands Jesus' humanity, his resurrection, the hope of New Creation when Jesus returns, and how Christians live in the present as new creations in Christ by his Spirit. As we approach Christmas, we're preparing to celebrate the uncreated God taking on created flesh. That created flesh was wounded and killed, only to be raised as the incorruptible, indestructible flesh of the New Creation. Reading biblical creation stories allows us to grasp the true weight of the Word made flesh: when we understand the logic of Psalm 104 and Genesis 1, we will be more driven to worship by John 1 and Revelation 21. That is why we're reading creation songs this Advent season.

This introduction has three main sections for you to read and use at your discretion:

- 1. What are Old Testament creation stories for?** This section looks at how creation stories are as much about wisdom and godliness in the *present* as they are about things that happened in the past. Old Testament creation stories are about how God runs the world and the purposes he has given to all created things.
- 2. Some common elements in biblical creation stories.** This section describes features to look out for that can help orient our thinking as we read these accounts. The patterns in how biblical authors *wrote* these things show us something of how they *understood* their god as creator.
- 3. Other helpful material.** This is a section of links and books that I've found helpful in understanding biblical creation stories.

Also worth noting here are the **appendices** located at the back of this booklet. The first is a reflection on ancient Israel and modern Australia, and how we instinctively read creation stories badly because of how different our lives are. The second is a brief look at how these Old Testament creation narratives get picked up and transformed in the New Testament (our studies stop before the New Testament). The third is a note on how the debates around evolution, the Big Bang, and Genesis 1 take over our conversations unnecessarily.

What are Old Testament creation stories for?

How would you answer the question, “Why does grass grow?”? Ask an average person on the street this question, and they’ll say likely either “I don’t know”, or they’ll give some half-remembered high school explanation of how plants grow. The way we answer it points to how we’ll think about creation stories: you’re less likely to get someone answering “to feed the cows” or “for us to walk on barefoot” (unless they’re being coy or ironic).

This is because in our understanding of creation, as contemporary Westerners, we tend to gravitate to answers that tell us *what* things are made from and the *process* by which they came to exist. Our culture’s creation narratives—of the Big Bang, plate tectonics, and Darwinian evolution—aim to answer these two questions of “what?” and “by what process?”.¹

Now, these questions aren’t wrong, nor are those creation narratives necessarily false, but they skew our understanding of what biblical creation stories are about, because biblical creation stories are asking fundamentally *different* questions from modern scientific ones. Biblical creation stories are almost never about *what* the world is made of: they assume that the reader already knows that.² There is also very little detail given about the *process* of creation; it’s usually enough just to say that God has *created*. So if biblical creation stories are not about *what* the world is or the *process* by which it came to be, what are they about?

Biblical creation stories tell us about the past, answer three main questions about the present:

- Who runs the universe?
- What rules does the universe follow?
- How can humans live the good life?

“There is no other”: who runs the universe?

The kinds of creation accounts we have in the Bible are not totally unique: we have other ancient creation stories from across Egypt, Canaan, Turkey, and Mesopotamia that use similar language and themes. A key difference between these creation stories and biblical creation stories is that these cultures ascribe creation to the work of a *number* of different gods. These gods scheme and fight and have sex, and the world comes into being. These stories identify the gods that humans are to worship.

In biblical creation stories, however, there is only one God, one creator, to whom even the most powerful primordial forces and creatures are subject (e.g. Gen 1:9; Job 40:15–41:34; Psalm 29:10, 104:7–9). This is not just a statement that *one* God made the world, but that *YHWH*, the god of Israel, made the world. Because of this, biblical creation stories are a powerful statement that God *alone* rules the world, that there is no other god like him. Any other powerful being in creation is merely his subject, and he alone is deserving of our worship.

Purpose over process: what rules does the universe follow?

If you asked the author of Psalm 104, “why does grass grow?”, he’d say something like “God makes it grow for cattle to eat” (Psalm 104:14). The author doesn’t really care about the *stuff* grass is made from or where that stuff came from; the point is that *Israel’s God* made this part of creation for the *purpose* of feeding humans’ livestock. The

¹ It’s not hard to show that this isn’t a “default” stance: if a child asks you why flowers grow and you talk about soil and watering, they might well say, “but *why* do flowers grow?” Our focus on “what” and “how” are at least partially culturally conditioned.

² In fact, there is very little real description of God creating matter itself; all his creative work is done with existing matter. This is not to say that God *didn’t* create matter itself, but just to point out that the Bible seems to take that for granted rather than actually describing it.

psalmist continues in this vein: why do crops grow? To feed people. Why does wine exist? To make people glad. Oil? To make their faces shine. The moon? To mark the seasons. The sun? To tell people when to go out to work.

Notice that these stories don't understand creation as just providing our basic material needs: creation is ordered so that it might be *enjoyable* for humans, and beneficial for the ordering of human society. A biblical author might agree with you that the sun keeps us warm and the moon helps us see at night, but they'd also say that God made the sun to mark the times for the Sabbath (Genesis 1:5; Leviticus 23:32) and the moon to tell them when the Passover was near (Genesis 1:14; Psalm 104:19).

This concern for order and functionality and beauty is woven into creation in what the Bible calls *God's wisdom*.³ God's wisdom is the ordering principle for everything in the universe, and his purpose for the universe is for it to operate according to that wisdom, so it will be beautiful and functional and productive, especially for humans and their communities.

Creation and wisdom: how can humans live the good life?

This wisdom of God that gives order to creation is also something that is accessible for human use. This, then, is the task that God gives to humanity: we were made to live well in God's world, to create order and beauty, to be productive and wise in how we use created things. Creation stories and wisdom literature show the good life as coming from living in harmony with the logic and order of God's creation. The biblical authors are saying that once you understand the way *God* runs everything, then you can properly decide how best to run *your* life, family, and community.

³ Each of the three major biblical wisdom books—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job—contain some kind of creation narrative. It's not always straightforward: Ecclesiastes 1:1–11 is a kind of anti-creation story, where all the elements of a creation story are there, but there is "nothing new". There are also creation narratives in other ancient Jewish wisdom literature, such as the Apocryphal books of Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach, and the theme of wisdom also appears in non-Jewish creation stories.

Some common elements in biblical creation stories

Biblical creation stories have a number of repeating motifs, most of which are explanations of the natural phenomena that shape community life in a pre-modern society. These motifs are often shared in some fashion by non-biblical creation accounts from Israel's neighbours,⁴ but the difference in the Bible is the way that God himself lies at the centre of these stories. We can see God's handiwork in all of creation, but God himself is not a part of creation as the other gods are.

God establishes order out of disorder

In all four creation stories we're going to study, there is a trajectory of the world going from disorder to order. God comes to a roiling cosmic sea (see "Chaotic waters" below) and tames it, marks off boundaries and lays foundations. God establishes cycles and rhythms, categories and structures. God begins his creative work with something disordered, and he brings order to it. Biblical creation stories reveal God as sovereign over all things and the sustainer of all natural processes;⁵ he brings order to disorder, and creates ordered space and time for people to live in. Biblical creation stories also reveal God as the source of all wisdom (see "Creation and wisdom" below): the one who establishes order over all things is also the one who will establish order among humans and communities when they listen to him.

Chaotic waters

The standard understanding in Israel and its neighbours was that the world began as a great cosmic sea that was unordered and unproductive (Gen 1:2; translated as "formless and empty" in NIV), and that the process of creation was a transformation of that sea into something that had order and purpose, and which would be productive for life and human society.⁶ Without God imposing order on that chaos, everything falls apart.

Light and dark

Although light and dark can have senses of good and evil, safety and danger, sight and blindness, etc., biblical creation stories often speak of light and darkness particularly in the context of the cycle of day and night. This cycle is often the language the Bible uses to talk about *time*: for example, we see God creating the cycle of evening and morning in Gen 1:3–5, which is echoed in Ps 104:19–23.

⁴ The fact that biblical creation stories are similar to non-biblical ones needn't bother us: after all, we all live in the same world, and rely on the same basic environmental principles for survival. Why *shouldn't* literature from neighbouring cultures look similar? Literary influence on the Bible from other texts doesn't make the Bible any less inspired by God or authoritative for us.

⁵ There has sometimes been a sense in Christian thought (at least since the seventeenth/eighteenth-century Enlightenment) that God created the world as an independent system, which he wound up and set spinning. This is not what biblical authors had in mind. To them, *all* natural processes depended constantly on divine activity: God's handiwork was to be seen in all places and at all times. Even our popular distinction between natural and supernatural wouldn't have made sense to them: angels and humans alike are created, "natural" beings, but at the same time, the conception of a child or a thunderstorm, both natural phenomena, are at the same time profound acts of God. Even miracles aren't "supernatural" in this sense: if God is always in control of creation, why should it be a surprise that sometimes he does something different with it?

⁶ This chaotic sea is sometimes connected to Leviathan, a great beast that shows up in Job, Psalms, and Isaiah (and perhaps unnamed in places like Gen 1:21). In other cultures' creation stories, this great sea monster fights with the gods, but in the Bible it, like the primordial sea, is fully under God's control.

The sky and weather

Agriculture in ancient Canaan relied heavily on seasonal rainfall. If too little rain fell or the storms were too strong, your crops would die, and then you would die. Therefore, God is often depicted as riding on clouds and commanding the weather, because he is in control of the key thing that can mean plenty or starvation for Israel.⁷

Land and plants

Hills, mountains, valleys, plains: the realm of human life. In the same way that storms reveal God's power in the sky, earthquakes reveal it in the ground. The land is not God's usual dwelling place in the Old Testament—that's either "in/above the heavens" or in the tabernacle/temple—but it's the place he has given to humans and animals for them to live. Included with the land are plants, which are the main source of food for animals and humans, and the habitat for smaller creatures.

Animals

Animals in biblical creation stories are usually divided into three main groups: things that fly, things that swim, and things that walk on land. Land animals are further divided into livestock and wild animals. The Bible usually talks about animals in these contexts to show the diversity of creation and God's power over all of it; this is often paired with the idea that God delegates this authority to humans (e.g. Gen 2:18–20; Ps 8:5–8).

Humans

Biblical creation narratives are remarkable in that they ascribe dignity and holiness to *all* humanity. Humans, regardless of sex, wealth, status, or ethnicity, are created to rule God's world with wisdom under his guidance. It's also worth noting significant differences from some other ancient texts that we might miss:

- Humans are created on purpose, and not as an afterthought.
- God creates women with as much intentionality as he does men, and women and men are equally dignified.
- God does not depend on humans for anything.
- God delights in humanity.

Construction and temple

A feature in most of the longer biblical creation stories is a picture of God as a builder: he measures and marks off and lays foundations, and he *constructs* his creation. On the one hand, we could read this as demonstrating God's power—he builds the entire universe as we would build a house. On the other hand, there is good reason for us to see God as a *temple*-builder in these acts. Genesis 1 structures its account like the building of a temple, and Psalm 104:3 refers to God building his own living quarters (= temple) atop the clouds. In addition, in other non-biblical creation stories we have from Israel's neighbours, creation narratives are connected with gods building houses (= temples) for themselves.

Temples themselves were also constructed to evoke the elements of the cosmos. If you could travel from the outside of Solomon's Temple into the Most Holy Place, the symbols you would pass by would tell you that you were in fact ascending from the depths of the cosmic sea, past the land and the lights in the sky, through the barrier of the sky and into the presence of God.

⁷ This is possibly part of why Baal worship became so common in Judah: Baal is *also* a god associated with rain and weather and fertility.

Other helpful material

How did Old Testament authors view the cosmos?

This Bible Project blog post contains a particularly useful diagram of the three-tiered cosmos that was the standard understanding in Israel and its neighbours:

<https://bibleproject.com/blog/creation-through-the-lens-of-ancient-cosmology/>.

How do ancient creation narratives work?

For a deeper look at this, with a particular focus on Genesis 1, see John Walton, *The lost world of Genesis one* (IVP, 2009).

Creation and biblical wisdom

The Bible Project has a three-part series on biblical wisdom books that explains the relationship between creation and wisdom; the first part is here: https://youtu.be/Gab04dPs_uA.

A more in-depth study of wisdom across the Bible: Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and wisdom*, published in *The Goldsworthy trilogy* (Paternoster Press, 2002), particularly chapter 10: “Wisdom in Old Testament theology”.

Creation and new creation

A fast biblical theology of creation: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/a-biblical-theology-of-creation/>.

A broader look at how new creation shapes the Christian life: Tom Wright, *Surprised by hope* (SPCK, 2011).

Science and Genesis 1–2

A summary of evangelical Protestant views on the topic:

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/evangelical-interpretations-genesis-1-2/>.

A good case for why Genesis 1 isn't a science textbook.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/biblical-reasons-to-doubt-the-creation-days-were-24-hour-periods/>.

My view generally follows that of John Walton in *The lost world of Genesis one* (IVP, 2009).

Study 1: How great is our God

Psalm 104

Talk about creation

1) Below are a number of different statements about creation. Choose a few of these statements: what do you think they get right? What do you think they get wrong? Why?

- “The universe is, on the whole, random and chaotic.”
- “Christians have a responsibility to protect the environment in all circumstances.”
- “Humans are created beings; Jesus is human; therefore Jesus is a created being.”
- “Arguing over how God created the world is just a distraction from actually telling people about Jesus.”
- “The hope of the Christian life is to leave the world and go to heaven.”
- “It’s wrong for a married couple to refuse ever to have children.”
- “When we read biblical creation stories, we should read them as metaphor, not as fact.”
- “Christianity isn’t a religion of the body; it’s a religion of the soul.”
- “God made the universe so it mostly works by itself, but sometimes he steps in and does miraculous things.”
- “All you need to do to know God is to look around at the natural world.”
- “I can do whatever I want with and to my body, because it’s my body.”
- “It’s wrong for humans to eat animals.”
- “Jesus is still human right now in heaven.”
- “It doesn’t matter what happens to my body after I die: it’s just a body; I’m not there anymore.”
- “Wisdom is living in the world as if you were actually living in heaven.”
- “When Jesus comes back; we won’t do work anymore.”
- “It doesn’t really matter *how* you think God created the world, so long as you agree that he *did* create it.”
- “God created the universe, and the universe created us.”
- “There is nothing in the natural world that can teach us how to live: we can only go to the Bible for that.”
- “Earthly work is of less value than gospel work.”

Study 2: Where were you?

This study looks at one of the later chapters of the book of Job. The book of Job asks the question, “does God really run the world with wisdom and justice?” Job is a wise and righteous man who has a family and wealth and happiness—all the good things of creation—but suddenly all he has is taken away from him: his family is killed, his wealth is destroyed or stolen, and he becomes sick and disfigured.

The majority of the book consists of a conversation between Job and his friends. They know that God is supposed to run the world with wisdom and justice. Job’s friends conclude that Job must have done something wrong to deserve all this: if God is just, there must be a cause–effect relationship between some sin of his and what God has done to him. Job, however, maintains his innocence, and concludes from his innocence that *God* is in the wrong: if Job is innocent, and God has done this to him, God must be unjust! Job calls on God to answer him (Job 31:35), promising that he would prove God unjust.

The thing is, as well as these two positions—“Job must have sinned” and “God must be unjust”—the book of Job *itself* shows us a scene (two, in fact: Job 1:6–12; 2:1–7) from God’s throne room that confirms that Job *is* innocent of wrongdoing. The book opens with one of God’s courtiers (called “the adversary” or “the satan”) suggesting that Job is only righteous and wise because God has been good to him. God gives this spiritual being permission to ruin Job’s life to demonstrate that Job is truly righteous.

So, is God unjust? As Job 38 begins, the stage is set for God to take the witness stand as Job has challenged him.

Job 38

Talk about wisdom and justice

- 1) In three words, how would you describe how God runs the world?

and/or

- 2) A Christian friend comes to you and asks, “If God is supposed to be wise and just, why did he let the pandemic happen; did we do something wrong, or is he just not as wise and just as we thought?” How would you answer?

and/or

- 3) Finish this sentence: “If I were God, I would _____.”

8) Does God answer Job's charge fully: does he give a reason for his own actions?

Discuss and apply

9) Discuss this summary of Job 38: "God created the world, but the way he runs it is completely hidden from us." Do you agree, or disagree? Why?

10) How does understanding the limits of our own wisdom and abilities help us understand how to live well as God's people?

Pray

- Praise God for his wisdom and understanding of the cosmos, that completely dwarfs our own capabilities.
- Thank God that he is always wise and just, even when we cannot understand why he does what he does.
- Pray that he will help us to seek wisdom to live well in his world, and to trust him when our wisdom fails us.

- 4) The NIV translation of vv. 30–31 is rather noble and reverent; read over this alternative translation:⁸

“I was beside him as a craftsman.⁹

I was playing daily,

laughing before him all the time.

Laughing with the inhabitants of his earth

and playing with the human race.”

Does this view of Lady Wisdom as a playful character conflict with our usual ideas about wisdom?

Discuss and apply

- 5) Since we were created in and by God’s wisdom, what is the relationship between our wisdom and God’s wisdom?

- 6) Since we live in a creation shaped by God’s wisdom, what is the relationship between our wisdom and creation?

⁸ From Tremper Longman III, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Proverbs* (Zondervan Academic, 2006).

⁹ “Craftsman” appears in the NIV footnotes; the word itself is difficult to translate, but most translators agree that Wisdom is supposed to have a co-labouring role here.

- 7) What are some possible examples of this God-reflecting, creation-honouring, joyful approach to wisdom?
Come up with some examples in each of these contexts:
- a. Ourselves
 - b. Our communities
 - c. The world around us

Pray

- Ask God to give us a broader and deeper understanding of what Christian wisdom looks like.
- Ask God to give us wisdom to do the things you talked about in Q7.

Study 4: God's song

Note: this study doesn't address the popular debate about the Big Bang, Darwinian evolution, and the creation accounts in Genesis. If you want to read more about that, have a look in the "Other helpful materials" section in the introduction to this booklet, and in Appendix C.

Genesis 1:1–2:3

Talk about being holy

- 1) What parts of your life would you describe as being "holy"; what sorts of activities are holy things to do?

OR

- 2) On a scale of one to five, how readily would you describe yourself as being a "holy" person?

Read and investigate: Genesis 1:1–2:3

- 3) Fill in the following diagram to summarise the events in Genesis 1:1–2:3.

Genesis 1:1–2:3	
Prologue (1:1–2)	
Day one (1:3–5)	Day four (1:14–19)
Day two (1:6–8)	Day five (1:20–23)
Day three (1:9–13)	Day six (1:24–31)
Day seven (2:1–3)	

Appendices

A Two different worlds: ancient Israel and modern Australia

Our lives as city dwellers are mostly defined by systems that we ourselves (as individuals or society) have put in place. We don't get up with the sun; we get up with our alarm. We don't raise or grow our own food: we buy it from a supermarket. Our jobs are highly specialised and bound up with complex technologies. Our society revolves around data and energy and supply chains. The Industrial Revolution, modern fertilisers, massive public infrastructure projects, and globalisation have meant that our food supply is much the same all year round: we have no planting or growing season; we don't slaughter and preserve our meat. If we want to, we can eat our favourite produce every month of the year. Weather is a matter of convenience, not survival. Our medical capabilities mean that we can save lives, treat diseases and heal wounds almost as a matter of course.

Contrast that with the life of an ancient Jewish community. Life is defined, not by clocks and schedules, but by cycles of the sun and moon, and the turning of seasons and their associated festivals. It's not an accident that Passover, Pentecost, and the lesser-known Feast of Tabernacles are timed with harvesting and threshing (Deuteronomy 16). Communities are small; most people have a wide variety of jobs to perform; all power comes from human or animal muscle; manual farming is the main industry. Supplies of food depend heavily on the weather: too hot, cold, wet, or dry, and crops will fail. Living in harmony with the environment is not some ultra-spiritual or enviro-chic slogan; it's the difference between life and starvation. Even assuming stable food sources, medical knowledge is limited: one in four babies don't survive birth, along with one in fifty mothers.

When we think of the glories of creation, our thoughts tend to go to serene retreats, instagram-ready views, and long walks on the beach. An ancient Israelite, however, would be just as likely to think of well-tended farms, suitable rain, and safe childbirth. For the past few centuries, our culture has increasingly tended to emphasise our independence from the natural world or our ability to override it—whether with lightbulbs, fertilisers, contraceptives, or concrete—but recent warnings about climate change and environmental hazards point to something that the biblical authors have always said: we creatures are inseparable from the rest of God's creation, and we ignore our createdness at our peril.

B The New Testament and new creation

Our studies only focus on Old Testament creation stories, but our sermon series will stretch into the New Testament as well. In the New Testament, we see the existing categories of creation stories reinterpreted and put into new context. Jesus is revealed as the wisdom of God, the one through whom all things were made (John 1:1–3; 1 Corinthians 1:24; Colossians 1:15–16), the one who tames and orders creation just as God did in the beginning (e.g. in the calming of the sea [Mark 4:35–41]). Jesus' resurrection signals the start of a new creation project (Hebrews 7–8; note that Jesus' resurrection occurs on the first day of a new week [like in Genesis 1]), which will be completed when Jesus returns and God makes all things new—a new heaven and new earth in the presence of God, just as he had intended it to be all along (Revelation 21–22). Just as God established order at the creation of the world, now, in the present time—the “last days” (Acts 2:14–17)—he is reestablishing order in the world through Jesus' death and resurrection, putting things right in people and, through them, in the world (Romans 8:1–30; Colossians 1:15–23). This resurrected creation necessitates a new wisdom, a new set of ordering principles for humanity to live by (Romans 13:11–14; Philippians 2:5–12; Colossians 2:20–3:3; James 3:13–5:9).

C Science and God in creation stories

Whenever we talk about creation, the question of science tends to emerge: what is the relation between biblical creation stories and modern scientific enquiry? When Christians try to describe biblical creation stories (usually Genesis 1 and 2), we often fall into one of three camps:

- “literal” readers, who see the Bible as conveying concrete, scientific and historical truth
- “non-literal” or “literary” readers, who deny that the text is trying to say much at all about real history and science, but should instead be read theologically: “it’s not about *how* God created; it’s about *why* he created”
- “concordance view” readers, who see the text as having some reference to history, but couched in more figurative language e.g. the days in Genesis 1 actually stand for eras of our universe’s history.

I think we might have inherited a problem in the language we use here. To illustrate, let’s zoom in on one detail in Genesis 1. In Genesis 1:6–8, God creates the sky: “a vault between the waters to separate ... the water under the vault from the water above it” It might seem weird to us for a non-solid thing like our atmosphere to separate two bodies of water—and what’s the deal with waters above and below the sky? Surely the clouds are *in* the sky?

Part of our difficulty is because we’ve got the wrong presuppositions. The Hebrew word translated as “vault” is a word describing a solid object, “hard as a cast metal mirror” (Job 37:18). Genesis is describing something that was common *scientific* knowledge in the Ancient Near East, that the sky was a solid dome separating a vast ocean above it from the world of humans below it. This might sound silly to us, but it seemed perfectly sensible at the time:

“Old world cosmic geography is based on what they could observe from their vantage point, just as ours is based on what we are able to observe given our scientific information. If water comes down, there must be some up there—so they all thought in terms of cosmic waters in the sky. If it doesn’t come down all the time, something must hold the water back—so it was common to think of something somewhat solid ... On and on the logic goes, following fairly transparent paths.”¹¹

So, as much as we might call Genesis 1 *non-literal*, the way that biblical creation accounts are written seems to match what was common *literal* knowledge among Israel’s neighbours. That is to say, when the author of Genesis wrote that God created a vault to separate water from water, he probably meant it: God *literally* separated the water of the sea from the water of the sky by creating a massive solid barrier between them—a barrier that, through the benefit of several thousand years of collective human experience and technological advancement, we now know doesn’t actually exist. Does this mean we’ve just disproven God?

No, but it *does* suggest that God speaks to people using categories and ideas that they can comprehend. Certainly, God *could* have inspired the author of Genesis 1 to begin with the Big Bang and the four fundamental forces, moving smoothly to the evolution of the first hominids some 13.77 billion years later. Instead, he chose to use the (flawed and inaccurate) presuppositions that ancient Israelites had about the natural world to describe his purposes for that world and for humanity.

Thankfully for us, it’s those *purposes* that form the real focus of biblical creation narratives, not the *processes* that lie at the heart of scientific enquiry. So, if we focus on those purposes we will definitely read creation accounts theologically! But even then, the fact that these accounts are *theological* doesn’t mean they’re totally *non-literal*—God *literally* made rain to fall from the sky to water plants!—it just means that God wants us to understand *who* the rain comes from, even when we haven’t quite worked out *how* it gets to us

¹¹ John Walton, *The lost world of Genesis one* (IVP, 2009), 27.

Genesis 1:1–2:3	
Prologue (1:1–2)	
Day one (1:3–5)	Day four (1:14–19)
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