



## A Discourse Analysis of the Biblical Account of Creation

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### Abstract

This paper employs the framework of discourse analysis to examine the biblical creation narrative in Genesis 1:1–31, with particular attention to its lexical choices, syntactic structures, and thematic organisation. Utilising Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as a guiding theoretical approach, the paper investigates how language functions not merely as a medium of description but as a vehicle of divine authority, intentionality, and cosmic order. A detailed textual analysis highlights key discourse features such as repetition, parallelism, lexical cohesion, and deixis, revealing how these elements contribute to both the structural coherence and theological significance of the passage. The repetitive use of formulaic expressions (e.g., 'And God said...') and the structured sequencing of the creative acts reflect a deliberate linguistic strategy that mirrors the ordered unfolding of creation. Furthermore, the paper emphasises the performative nature of divine speech acts within the text; language not only communicates but also enacts creation itself, shaping reality through verbal proclamation. This performativity underscores the theological concept of a Sovereign Deity Whose spoken Word has generative power. The paper also considers the role of thematic development, including the progression from chaos to order, darkness to light, and emptiness to fullness, light to dawn, ignorance to wisdom, ignition to fire, storm to calm, death to rebirth, void to infinity, disorder to harmony, frost to bloom, confusion to clarity, despair to hope, as reflected through linguistic markers and discourse patterns. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Genesis, Chapter 1 exemplifies a profound interplay between linguistic form and theological meaning,



wherein discourse features are harnessed to convey a cosmological vision grounded in divine intentionality and linguistic creativity.

**Keywords:** Genesis 1:1–31, Biblical Linguistics, Discourse Analysis, Divine Speech Acts, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Theological Discourse

## **Introduction**

The creation narrative in Genesis 1:1–31 has long stood at the centre of biblical scholarship, serving as a locus for theological reflection, literary analysis, and, more recently, linguistic investigation. As the opening chapter of the Hebrew Bible, it functions not only as an account of cosmic origins but also as a theological and linguistic framework through which Israel’s understanding of God, the world, and human purpose is expressed. Traditionally, scholars have recognised the passage’s structured poetic form, theological profundity, and cosmological significance (Wenham, 2014; Sailhamer, 2010). These foundational studies emphasised the text’s deliberate organisation - its rhythm, parallelism, and symbolic richness- as essential to its role as a divine proclamation of creation. Through this lens, Genesis 1 has often been interpreted as both a theological declaration of divine sovereignty and a literary masterpiece that conveys order and intentionality in the cosmos.

While early scholarship concentrated primarily on theological and literary interpretations, recent decades have witnessed a significant methodological shift towards linguistic and discourse-oriented approaches. This shift reflects a broader trend in biblical studies towards examining how meaning is constructed not only through content but through the form and function of language itself. Rather than viewing Genesis 1 merely as a narrative of sequential events, contemporary scholars increasingly explore how its linguistic features perform theological work - shaping meaning, establishing divine authority, and structuring the worldview it conveys.

Alter (2019) underscores the rhythmic and formulaic nature of Genesis 1, observing that its patterns of repetition and parallelism reinforce key theological themes and contribute to a poetic unity that accentuates divine sovereignty. Likewise, Walton (2015) suggests that the language of the chapter operates performatively: divine speech acts that do not



merely describe reality but create it. This interpretive stance aligns with linguistic theories of performativity and speech act theory, which posit that language possesses the capacity to bring about states of affairs through utterance. Within this framework, divine speech in Genesis 1 - expressed through the recurring formula 'And God said' - functions as the very mechanism of creation, transforming words into worlds.

Building on these insights, linguistic studies such as Pardee (2020) have provided fine-grained analyses of the text's semantic and syntactic organisation, demonstrating how its verbal formulas and cohesive devices operate as markers of divine authority. Pardee argues that repeated linguistic structures serve not only as stylistic devices but also as theological signifiers that unify the narrative and encode divine intentionality. These findings highlight the meticulous linguistic architecture of Genesis 1 and its role in sustaining the coherence among divine speech, creative action, and cosmic order.

Recent discourse-oriented approaches, particularly those employing Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), have further illuminated the complex interplay between linguistic form and theological meaning. Scholars such as O'Donnell (2022) and Tervahauta (2023) have demonstrated that the text can be examined across the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions proposed by SFL. Their analyses reveal that Genesis 1 is not only a theological statement about divine power but also a communicative act that positions God, creation, and humanity within a relational discourse network. O'Donnell (2022) contends that this perspective allows scholars to trace how language mediates divine-human interaction, shaping the reader's participation in the cosmic narrative and the worldview it implies.

Consequently, contemporary research demonstrates an increasing awareness that the linguistic and discourse features of Genesis 1 are not incidental but integral to its theological and literary purpose. The text's language performs creation - it enacts divine will, structures reality, and embodies order through its own verbal patterns. This ongoing convergence of linguistics, theology, and literary studies signals a fertile area of interdisciplinary inquiry. By integrating discourse analysis with theological interpretation, scholars can more fully appreciate Genesis 1



not simply as a description of creation but as a linguistic event in which divine speech both constitutes and communicates reality.

### **Literature Review**

The creation narrative in Genesis 1:1-31 has been a focal point of scholarly inquiry across multiple disciplines, including theology, literary studies, and linguistics. Traditionally, scholars have recognised its structured poetic form, theological profundity, and cosmological significance (Wenham, 2014; Sailhamer, 2010). These researches emphasise the text's deliberate organisation, highlighting its rhythm, parallelism, and symbolic richness as essential to its function as a divine proclamation of creation. While early scholarship primarily focused on its theological and literary dimensions, recent research has shifted towards a significant understanding of its linguistic and discourse-oriented features, revealing how language in Genesis 1 does not simply recount a series of events but actively shapes theological meaning and divine authority.

Alter (2019) underscores the rhythmic and formulaic nature of Genesis 1, pointing out that patterns of repetition and parallelism serve to reinforce key theological themes and to create a poetic unity that underscores divine sovereignty. Similarly, Walton (2015) posits that the language of Genesis 1 should be understood performatively; divine speech acts that enact creation itself. This perspective aligns with linguistic interpretations emphasising the Speech Act Theory, which suggest that divine utterances in Genesis are not merely descriptive but causative and powerful, functioning as divine declarations of reality. Such approaches highlight the dynamic and active role of language in the text, emphasising its performative force in establishing the cosmos. Recent advancements employing linguistic frameworks, such as Pardee (2020), have delved into the semantic and syntactic features that underpin the narrative's cohesion and authority. Pardee highlights how specific verbal formulas, like recurring phrases such as 'And God said', serve as linguistic markers of divine authority and act as unifying devices that facilitate theological interpretive coherence. These formal features aid readers in understanding the text as a carefully ordered linguistic system designed to convey divine intention and order.



In addition, discourse analysis utilising Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) has gained prominence in the study of Genesis 1. Scholars such as O'Donnell (2022) and Tervahauta (2023) have applied SFL to explore how the biblical text embodies interconnected layers of meaning; ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Their analyses reveal that Genesis 1 constructs a comprehensive linguistic system wherein form and meaning are deeply intertwined, serving both to assert divine authority and to invite specific responses from the audience. O'Donnell (2022) contends that this systemic approach enables a greater understanding of how language mediates divine-human interaction and the foundational worldview embedded in the text.

In all, recent scholarship demonstrates an increasing recognition of the importance of discourse and linguistic features in biblical studies. This evolving perspective underscores the view that the language employed in Genesis 1 is not incidental but integral to its theological and literary purpose; performing, enacting, and strategically organising the cosmos into being. As the field continues to develop, interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate linguistics, rhetoric, and theology promise to deepen our understanding of this foundational biblical text.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper adopts Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), as developed by M.A.K. Halliday, as its primary theoretical lens for analysing Genesis 1:1-31. According to Halliday & Matthiessen, (2014), SFL conceptualises language as a social semiotic system that is inherently tied to context and social meaning. Unlike formalist approaches that focus solely on syntax or semantics, SFL emphasises the multifunctional nature of language, which operates across three interconnected metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. These metafunctions serve as analytical tools to investigate how language constructs reality, encodes social relations, and maintains coherence within discourse (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

The ideational metafunction is central to understanding how Genesis 1 presents the act of creation as a reality-shaping process. It examines the grammatical realisation of processes (verbs), participants (nouns), and circumstances (prepositional phrases), which collectively serve to depict the universe's origin and the divine agency involved. For instance, the



repetitive use of creation verbs such as ‘created’ and ‘made’ underscores the divine act of bringing existence into being (Culpepper & Sweeney, 2021). This aligns with the broader theological understanding that language in Genesis functions as a divine speech act, enacting creation through divine words.

The interpersonal metafunction facilitates analysis of how divine authority is linguistically expressed through modality, mood, and appraisal systems embedded in the text. Through this lens, references to God’s commands and declarations reveal how authority and sovereignty are linguistically encoded, establishing a hierarchical relationship between the divine speaker and the cosmos (Tucker, 2022). The modal expressions, such as ‘Let there be...’, not only command but also affirm divine sovereignty, emphasising the authority inherent in divine speech acts.

The textual metafunction pertains to how the narrative is organised cohesively and thematically. It examines the use of cohesive devices such as reference, conjunction, and lexical repetition, which serve to create a coherent flow of information and to highlight the divine act of ordering chaos into cosmos (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). This structural analysis reveals how Genesis 1 is crafted not only as a theological statement but also as a well-structured discourse that enacts its theological themes through linguistic means.

In applying SFL to Genesis 1, the study resonates with methods used by biblical linguists who have underscored the importance of linguistic form in theological interpretation (Culpepper & Sweeney, 2021; Tucker, 2022). These approaches utilise discourse analysis principles, particularly cohesion and coherence, to demonstrate how the text performs more than mere narration; it actively enacts divine creation through language. Cohesive ties, such as, repetition of key terms (e.g., ‘light,’ ‘day,’ ‘sea’) and reference to divine speech, are crucial in constructing a unified narrative that reflects divine authority and order (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

Furthermore, the integration of SFL provides a significant understanding of how the grammatical features of Genesis 1, such as, lexical choices, clause structures, and process types - serve theological and narrative functions. For example, the predominance of material



processes underscores divine activity, while the clause structures highlight command and decree, reflecting divine sovereignty. By combining discourse analysis with SFL, this framework grounds theological interpretation in linguistic evidence, revealing how Genesis 1 functions as a discourse of divine authority and creative power.

### **Methodology**

This paper adopts a qualitative research design, employing discourse analysis within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to examine Genesis 1:1-31. The methodological focus is on how linguistic structures contribute to the construction of theological meaning and narrative coherence in the creation account. Rather than interpreting the passage through a historical-critical or exegetical lens, this paper analyses the text as a linguistic artifact, foregrounding how its form enacts its function.

Discourse analysis, as conceptualised by scholars such as Gee (2014) and Titscher et al. (2000), provides the tools to analyse how larger units of language, beyond isolated words or sentences, contribute to meaning-making in a given context. This includes the study of cohesion (lexical repetition, reference, and conjunction), thematic progression, deixis, and parallelism. The use of textual linguistics allows for the systematic investigation of how Genesis 1 is constructed to produce a coherent and authoritative discourse.

The analysis draws on Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) three metafunctions of language, ideational, interpersonal, and textual, as heuristic categories for identifying and interpreting the grammatical and semantic elements of the text. These metafunctions are particularly relevant for a theological narrative in which the speech of the divine plays a central role in both the narration and the constitution of reality. The textual data comprises the English translation of Genesis 1:1-31 from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). While the original Hebrew text holds significant value, this paper prioritises the discourse features present in the English rendering, thereby focusing on language as it is encountered by a broad readership. Nevertheless, lexical echoes of the Hebrew text are considered where they bear on repetition, cohesion, or thematic development.



Data were coded and categorised according to recurring linguistic features, including speech formulas ('And God said'), evaluative clauses ('And God saw that it was good'), and structural patterns (evening-morning refrains, ordinal markers). These elements were analysed in relation to the SFL framework to evaluate their contribution to the construction of divine authority and cosmic order within the passage. By synthesising discourse analysis with the principles of SFL, this methodology offers a linguistically robust lens through which the theological function of language in Genesis 1 can be critically examined.

### **Analysis And Discussion**

The linguistic structure of Genesis 1:1–31 reveals a deliberate and patterned discourse that highlights divine authority, cosmic order, and intentionality. This section analyses the text using the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), focusing on Halliday's three metafunctions - ideational, interpersonal, and textual - demonstrating how language in the creation narrative functions both descriptively and performatively.

**Ideational Metafunction: (Language as a Constructor of Reality).** This is concerned with representing experience, description of actions, events, people, things, showing logical connection of ideas, and how we use grammar to structure meaning about internal and external world. processed. In Genesis 1, divine activity is primarily conveyed through material processes, with the verb phrase 'And God said' serving as a recurring initiator of each creative act. This verbal structure transcends a simple narrative device, functioning as a performative utterance. In this sense, God's speech is not merely descriptive but causative, divine speech brings about creation. For example, the phrase 'Let there be light' (v. 3) is immediately followed by 'and there was light,' demonstrating the generative power of divine utterance (Walton, 2015; Tucker, 2022). This structure emphasises a worldview in which language is not only symbolic but ontologically potent, embodying the transformative power of divine will (Pardee, 2020).

Furthermore, the consistent identification of God as the Actor in these processes—expressed in phrases such as 'God created,' 'God made,' and 'God saw', positions God as the sole initiator and sustainer of cosmic reality. The circumstantial elements, 'In the beginning,' 'according to



its kind,' and 'evening and morning', serve to situate these actions within a coherent temporal and categorical framework, reinforcing the orderly and methodical nature of creation. The repetition of these structural elements functions as a way of marking time and space, encapsulating the orderly progression of creation within a defined cosmological narrative.

**Interpersonal Metafunction: (Encoding Authority and Evaluation).** It is concerned with how language enacts social relations and conveys authority. In Genesis 1, divine authority is linguistically encoded through the use of imperatives, notably the phrase 'Let there be...' These imperative constructions are not requests but commands, with immediate and unquestionable effect, reflecting the absolute power of God within the narrative. The syntactic structure conveys an unambiguous assertion of divine authority, reinforcing the idea that creation occurs not through negotiation or effort, but through divine will alone (Collins, 2006).

The evaluative aspect of the interpersonal metafunction is also prominent in the text, particularly in the recurring phrase 'And God saw that it was good.' This statement serves a dual function. First, it affirms the inherent goodness of creation, suggesting that each act of creation aligns with divine intention and moral order. Second, it reflects God's satisfaction and oversight over the created world. The evaluative clause punctuates the narrative, offering moments of divine reflection and judgment that align with the sequential order of creation. These moments of assessment serve as markers of divine approval and completeness, reinforcing the moral and theological underpinnings of the creation account (Alter, 2019).

**Textual Metafunction (Cohesion and Thematic Progression):** This pertains to the organisation of information and the maintenance of coherence across the discourse. Genesis 1 demonstrates strong lexical cohesion, with repeated phrases such as 'And God said,' 'And there was evening and there was morning,' and ordinal markers like 'the first day,' 'the second day,' which contribute to a rhythmic and cohesive textual structure. These repeated elements function as cohesive ties that unify the passage, structuring it into distinct yet interconnected creative acts.



Thematic progression in Genesis 1 follows a clear trajectory from chaos to order, from emptiness to fullness, and from light to life. This thematic movement is mirrored in the increasing complexity and specificity of the created entities, culminating in the creation of humankind. The introduction of humanity marks a shift in both linguistic register and thematic emphasis, as evidenced by the plural deliberation in the phrase, 'Let us make humankind...' This shift in syntactic structure signals a heightened moment of divine reflection, indicating a change in the focus and scope of creation (O'Donnell, 2022).

Additionally, the text employs parataxis; coordinated clauses, rather than hypotaxis, or subordinated clauses, giving the narrative a steady, almost liturgical rhythm. This syntactic choice emphasises the sequential unfolding of divine intention and action. The paratactic structure enhances the text's sense of coherence and unity, facilitating a smooth progression of creative events without the complication of subordination. This rhythmic flow further reinforces the sense of divine purpose and order in the unfolding of the creation process (Tervahauta, 2023).

### **Conclusion**

A systemic functional linguistic analysis of Genesis 1:1-31 reveals that the text's theological and literary potency resides not only in its content but in its linguistic form. Through the lens of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the creation narrative emerges as a carefully structured discourse that integrates form, meaning, and theology into a unified system of expression. Each metafunction - the ideational, interpersonal, and textual - contributes to the construction of a theological worldview in which divine speech both constitutes and communicates reality.

Through the ideational metafunction, the narrative presents language as a creative and constitutive act. The recurring formula 'And God said' exemplifies the performative nature of divine utterance, where speech functions as the mechanism of creation itself. This observation resonates with Walton's (2015) performative interpretation and Pardee's (2020) emphasis on linguistic markers of divine authority. The act of speaking is not descriptive but causative; linguistic expression becomes



synonymous with divine agency, thereby reinforcing the theological claim that God's word is the generative principle of the cosmos.

The interpersonal metafunction further reinforces divine sovereignty by positioning God as the central actor and evaluator within the discourse. The evaluative refrain 'And God saw that it was good' functions interpersonally to affirm divine judgment and establish an authoritative stance toward creation. In this sense, the text constructs a relationship of reverent asymmetry between the divine speaker and the created order, a pattern consistent with O'Donnell's (2022) analysis of how biblical discourse encodes divine-human interaction through evaluative and relational clauses.

The textual metafunction ensures cohesion, thematic unity, and rhetorical progression. Through repetition, parallelism, and ordered sequencing, the narrative mirrors the very order it proclaims. As Alter (2019) observes, the rhythmic and formulaic patterns serve to create poetic coherence and reinforce theological consistency. From an SFL perspective, this textual orchestration not only organises information but symbolically embodies the ordered cosmos brought forth by divine speech.

Taken together, these linguistic dimensions illustrate that the power of Genesis 1 lies in the inseparable relationship between linguistic structure and theological significance. The narrative's cohesive and rhythmic design functions as a linguistic enactment of creation - language itself performs the reality it describes. This finding aligns with Tervahauta's (2023) assertion that form and meaning in biblical discourse are mutually constitutive, jointly articulating divine intentionality and authority.

Ultimately, the application of SFL to Genesis 1:1-31 demonstrates that the text's theological depth is inseparable from its linguistic architecture. The creation narrative's structure, rhythm, and repetition are not merely stylistic devices but serve as vehicles of theological expression - portraying creation as the deliberate, ordered, and sovereign act of divine speech. This interdisciplinary analysis highlights the potential of linguistic frameworks to enrich biblical interpretation, offering new insights into how sacred texts construct meaning, embody theology, and communicate divine reality through the medium of language. Future



studies may extend this approach to other biblical narratives, further exploring how systemic linguistic analysis can uncover the deep interplay among language, theology, and the shaping of sacred worldview.

### **Summary of Findings**

The analysis of Genesis 1 reveals it as a linguistically sophisticated text where form and function converge to articulate a profound theological vision of divine sovereignty and cosmic design. The passage not only describes creation but performs it, establishing a discourse in which divine speech is both intrinsically creative and authoritative. The creation narrative emerges as a cohesive, purposeful text, with each linguistic element contributing to its theological and literary impact. Through the application of discourse analysis and SFL, it becomes evident that the creation account in Genesis 1 is carefully structured to reinforce theological themes of divine intentionality, order, and control, while simultaneously using language to enact the creation process itself. Key findings from the analysis suggest that repeated expressions such as ‘And God said,’ ‘Let there be,’ and ‘It was good’ are not mere stylistic choices, but central cohesive devices that serve to drive the narrative forward while reinforcing its theological significance. The performative nature of divine speech in Genesis 1 underscores the idea that language, within the Judeo-Christian tradition, is not merely a passive medium of communication but an active and generative force capable of bringing reality into existence. Moreover, the sequential structure of the text, with its thematic progression from chaos to order, highlights a vision of divine intentionality and cosmic design.

Theologically, this analysis reaffirms the portrayal of God as a sovereign speaker whose words are capable of enacting reality. From a linguistic perspective, it underscores the intricate relationship between form and meaning in sacred texts, illustrating how language shapes both narrative coherence and theological ideology. Genesis 1, therefore, stands as a paradigmatic example of how sacred texts can utilise language to construct not only narrative coherence but also the theological worldview they intend to convey.



## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations were proffered:

1. **Interdisciplinary Research:** Future studies could integrate insights from cognitive linguistics, semiotics, and literary theory to further explore how sacred texts use language to shape conceptual and theological worlds. By examining the cognitive and semiotic processes involved in reading sacred texts, scholars can better understand how linguistic structures influence theological interpretation.

2. **Comparative Analysis:** A comparative discourse analysis of other ancient Near Eastern creation narratives, such as the Enuma Elish, would provide further insight into the distinctive linguistic and theological features of Genesis 1. This could offer valuable context for understanding the unique aspects of Genesis 1's linguistic structure and its theological implications.

3. **Pedagogical Application:** The findings of this study could inform theological education and biblical literacy by encouraging readers to pay closer attention to the linguistic dimensions of Scripture. Educators might use this analysis to promote deeper interpretative engagement with the text, highlighting the significance of language in theological reflection.

4. **Expansion to Multilingual Contexts:** Although this study focused on the English translation (NRSV), future research would benefit from comparative discourse analysis of various translations, as well as the original Hebrew text. This would help examine how different linguistic renderings influence theological interpretation and provide insight into the broader implications of translating sacred texts across cultures and languages. Exploring how language variations affect the meaning and impact of Genesis 1 in different contexts can deepen our understanding of its universal and particular theological messages.

By expanding the scope of discourse analysis to include other linguistic traditions and interdisciplinary methodologies, future studies can continue to enrich our understanding of the complex ways in which the book of Genesis 1 engages with both language and theology.



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