

Genesis 1:1-2 – God in the Beginning

The Eternal Nature of God

When young children are first taught the creation story, they almost always ask some important, pointed questions...

- What was there before God created the heavens and the earth?
- What was there before God?
- How was God created?
- Who created Him?
- How old is God?

These simple, profound questions continue to haunt grown-ups' minds. In our humanity, we cannot logically conceive of any sort of existence without the passage of time and the presence of space, which have been our frame of reference since the moment we were conceived. Yet the creation story itself tells us that God created this very frame of reference. Hard as it is for our human minds to conceive, God dwells both within and outside of His creation – both within and outside the very passage of time (which He Himself created). These fundamental concepts are so hard for us to come to grips with, virtually all of us (including me) simply take the Scarlet O'Hara approach...

I can't think about that right now. If I do, I'll go crazy. I'll think about that tomorrow.

Genesis 1:1 gives us a simple and equally profound answer to these questions.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis 1:1 (ESV)

God's Word makes no attempt to rationalize the existence of God or explain how God came to be. He begins His message to mankind by simply stating His presence from the beginning of all other things. The eternal nature of God is a theme repeated throughout His Word.

***Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*** Psalm 90:2 (ESV)

ASIDE – Psalm 90 is the only psalm attributed to Moses.

When Moses asked God how he should answer when asked by his people in Egypt who had sent him to them, God replied...

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" Exodus 3:14 (ESV)

Jesus also proclaimed His eternal nature to the Jews in the temple...

Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."

John 8:58 (ESV)

If we deeply ponder this eternal nature of God, we inevitably come to the conclusion that we are unable to explain it or even fully comprehend it. Like every other aspect of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we must simply take what God tells us about Himself on faith and at face value. Paul expounded this principle in his letter to the Roman church.

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***18**For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. **19**For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. **20**For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.* Romans 1:18-20 (ESV)

The Holy Trinity from the Beginning

Take a closer look at the first two verses of Genesis.

***1**In the beginning, God [אֱלֹהִים 'ēlōhîm] created [בָּרָא bārā'] the heavens and the earth. **2**The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit [רוּחַ rūah] of God was hovering over the face of the waters.* Genesis 1:1-2 (ESV)

English is incapable of rendering a beautiful subtlety we find in the very first verse of God's Word. In English we most often form the plural of a noun by appending "s" or "es" to the singular form of the noun. For example, "church" becomes "churches" and "day" becomes "days." In Hebrew, the singular word for God is אֱלֹהִים 'ēl. But Hebrew is one of many languages that have distinct dual (indicating a pair) and plural (multiple) forms of nouns. Normally, the dual is indicated by adding the suffix יים -ayim to a singular noun. For example, "day" יום yōm becomes "days" יומיים yomayim to indicate a pair of days. The plural (not dual) form of masculine nouns is indicated by adding the suffix ים -im. So here in Genesis 1:1 the masculine singular noun for God – אֱלֹהִים 'ēl – is written in its true plural form אֱלֹהִים 'ēlōhîm. The dual form of אֱלֹהִים 'ēl is never found in God's Word. This is significant. We find the Holy Trinity referred to in the Bible from the very beginning.

Notice also that in Genesis 1:2 we find the first reference to God's Spirit. The Hebrew word here is רוּחַ rūah. It means wind, breath, mind, or spirit. This is similar to the Greek word found in the New Testament referring to God's Holy Spirit – πνεῦμα pneuma. This word can also mean wind or breath. We find an intriguing use of both connotations of this word in a single verse of Jesus' teaching to Nicodemus – the Jewish leader who came to Him by night.

The wind [πνεῦμα pneuma] blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. [πνεῦμα pneuma] John 3:8 (ESV)

Creation versus Construction

Take another look at Genesis 1:1.

***1**In the beginning, God [אֱלֹהִים 'ēlōhîm] created [בָּרָא bārā'] the heavens and the earth.* Genesis 1:1 (ESV)

The Hebrew verb in this verse is בָּרָא bārā'. It means to bring something into being without tools or raw materials. Without trivializing God's miraculous work of creation, think of it as baking a cake without ingredients, a pan, or an oven, or painting a beautiful painting without brushes, paints, or

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canvas. Human magicians can bring about the illusion in the minds of an audience of things appearing and disappearing, but only God can actually **do** it!

Contrast **בָּרָא** *bārā'* with the Hebrew word **עָשָׂה** 'āśâ – meaning to make or produce – that we find throughout Genesis 1-2 and elsewhere. This word implies the use of tools to rearrange raw materials into some finished product. While **בָּרָא** *bārā'* is translated into English as “create,” **עָשָׂה** 'āśâ is usually translated as “make.” For example, when we read that God made “an expanse” to separate the waters above from the waters below in Genesis 1:7, the word there is **עָשָׂה** 'āśâ. After God created (**בָּרָא** *bārā'*) the heavens and the earth on the first day – bringing time, space, and matter into existence by the power of His Word alone – He rearranged (**עָשָׂה** 'āśâ) these raw materials into the forms He had always envisioned that we find in our world today during the remaining five days of creation. We find a similar Hebrew word – **יָצַר** *yāsar* – used in Genesis 2:7 to describe God forming Adam from the dust of the earth on the final day of creation. It also means to make something new out of materials that are already present.

God – The Three in One

There is another grammatical subtlety in the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:1 that is lost in the English translation. In English, we would use the same form of the verb “created” to say either that one person created something or that several people created something. In Hebrew the singular and plural forms of the verb differ. In Genesis 1:1, the Hebrew verb **בָּרָא** *bārā'* translated into English as “created” is in the singular form. But the subject of the sentence – **אֱלֹהִים** 'ēlōhîm – is plural as we have seen. The Hebrew text includes an intentional grammatical error – mismatched number between the subject and the verb. This subtle play on words highlights an important truth about the nature of God.

The Holy Trinity of God is certainly three distinct persons, but God isn't three separate persons. He is three-in-one – triune. This truth is highlighted again in the scripture passage found inside the phylacteries (boxes) that orthodox Jews bind on their foreheads and wrists, and place inside the **mezuzah** **מְזוּזָה** found on the doorposts of virtually all Jewish houses, schools, and businesses in accordance with the direction given in Deuteronomy 6:6-9. This passage is known as the **שְׁמָע** *šāma* (hear) after the first word of the passage in Hebrew. It is the passage which Jesus quoted when He was asked what the greatest commandment in the Law is.

4“Hear [שְׁמָע *šāma*], O Israel: The LORD our God [אֱלֹהִים 'ēlōhîm], the LORD is one [אֶחָד *'ehād*]. 5You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 7You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. 8You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (ESV)

Twice during His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus also affirmed His unity with the Father...

And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. John 17:11 (ESV)

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22The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. John 17:22-23 (ESV)

Jesus also affirmed His triune nature in answer to the Jews' request that He tell them plainly whether He is the Christ.

27My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. 28I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. 30I and the Father are one.” John 10:27-30 (ESV)

Although God's Word repeatedly makes this point about the triune nature of God, that doesn't mean that we can truly understand or explain it. Over the years, I have read many analogies seeking to explain the triunity of God. I found all of them just as flawed and unsatisfactory as you no doubt found my lame example earlier about baking a cake without ingredients.

We can be comfortable with the idea of the Trinity only if we don't examine our understanding of it too deeply. On the contrary, if we ponder God's triune nature carefully, we surely uncover questions for which we can find no satisfactory answers. For example, how did God the Son come in the flesh of the man Jesus of Nazareth and still remain one with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit? Here again, just as we can't come to grips with the eternal nature of God both inside and outside of His creation, neither can we truly understand His triune nature. We must simply take Him at His Word by faith in both these instances and in many others, knowing what He has revealed to us about Himself without ever hoping to fully understand it.

Looking Ahead

Having carefully examined the first two verses of God's Word, next time – God willing – we'll launch into our full-blown study of Genesis with the story of God's creation of the universe and mankind followed by the fall of mankind into sinful rebellion against God, bringing the curse of death under which all of us live and labor today.