



BY T. VAN MCCLAIN  
God  
“Created”  
A WORD STUDY

## OPINIONS BY CHRISTIANS ABOUT HOW AND WHEN GOD CREATED THE UNIVERSE ARE QUITE VARIED.

**Y**oung Earth Creationists believe the universe is likely 6,000 to 10,000 years old and reject evolution as an explanation for the human species. Old Earth Creationists generally hold that the earth is billions of years old, and they also often reject evolution. Those who affirm Intelligent Design would argue that scientific evidence supports the belief in a Creator God. The BioLogos Foundation, for instance, argues that God did create the universe, but they also accept the processes of evolution as the explanation for how He created life. Opinions by Christians about how and when God created the universe are quite varied.

While all Christians may not agree on the details of how God created the universe and life, all believers would agree that He is the Creator of it all. The Hebrew word to express creation first occurs in Genesis 1:1 and is the word *bara'*. Other Hebrew verbs (such as *yasar*, meaning “to fashion something”) serve as synonyms of *bara'*. The term *bara'* is unique, though, in that it “emphasizes the initiation of [an] object.”<sup>1</sup>

### God's Initial Work of Creation

Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”<sup>2</sup> God is always the subject of this Hebrew verb when it means “create.” Said one Old Testament theologian and professor:

The scope of the use of the verb *bara'* is greatly limited. It is used exclusively to denote

**Right: Partial tablet containing the Mesopotamian creation myth celebrating the god Marduk defeating Tiamat, the goddess of chaos. According to this story, after his victory, Marduk created the heavens and the earth from Tiamat's**

**corpse and created humans from her blood. Marduk created humans for one reason, to serve the gods. The story dates to the 2nd millennium B.C.; but the tablet, which came from the library of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh, dates to the 7th cent. B.C.**

divine creation....As a special theological term, *bara'* is used to express clearly the incomparability of the creative work of God in contrast to all secondary products and likenesses made from already existing material by man.<sup>3</sup>

In English we can use the same verb in two sentences and the context will help determine the intensity of the action. For instance, we can say, “He closed the door.” Or, if someone slammed a door, we might say, “He didn’t just close the door; he CLOSED the door!” The second describes a more intense action. Similarly, Hebrew also uses variations to indicate action intensity. Some Old Testament passages use *bara'* to show intense action, and the verb means “to cut down” (Josh. 17:15,18; Ezek. 23:47). God is not the subject of the verb in these few verses, and these passages may have actually used a word similar to *bara'*. (Remember that Hebrew does not have vowels.) Or, *bara'* originally may have meant “to cut, divide,” although this is by no means certain. In contrast, when the Hebrew text uses the less intense form of the



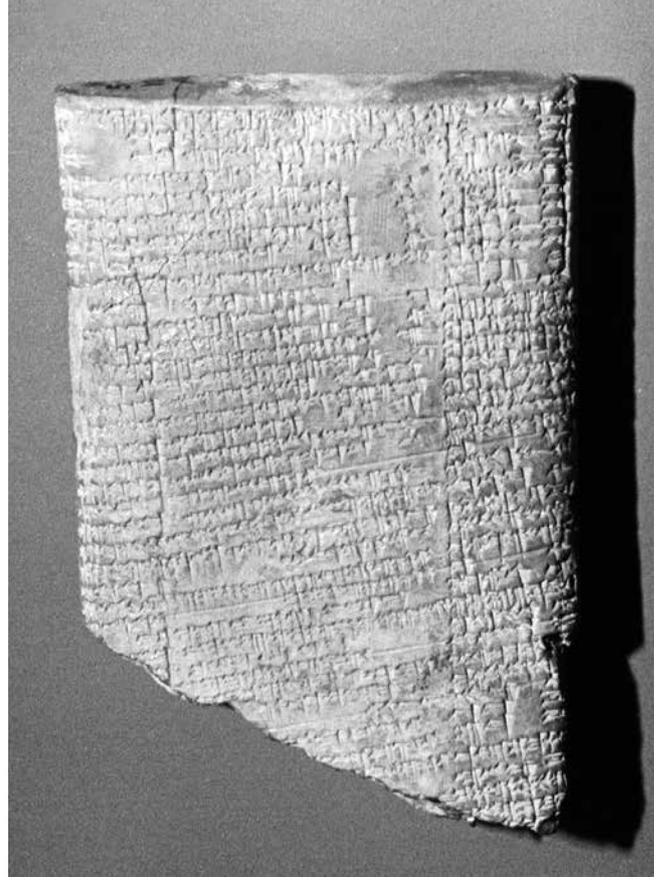
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/9776)

verb *bara'*, it always means “to create.”<sup>4</sup> The etymology of the word is quite disputed, as it occurs seldom if ever in the other Semitic languages.<sup>5</sup> As with many English words, when the Hebrew Old Testament uses *bara'*, context is generally more helpful than etymology in determining the meaning.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY (32/42/51)

**Left: Shell inlay in the shape of a bull from the Sumerian Temple of Ninhursag. Sumerian myths claimed that Ninhursag created the first humans out of clay. They further believe she was the mother of the Sumerian gods and associated her with what they believed to be a sacred cow.**



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (555/24)

**Right: Dated to the 6th cent. B.C., a bilingual Sumerian and Babylonian description of the god Marduk and goddess Aruru creating the world.**

The first chapter of Genesis uses the verb *bara'* in only three verses. In Genesis 1:1, the context indicates that God created the universe *ex nihilo* or “out of nothing.” Such action is beyond human capabilities. “The use of the term...strongly supports the nuance of ‘bringing into existence’...without the utilization of previous material.”<sup>6</sup> Other passages also affirm creation as *ex nihilo*. The writer of Hebrews wrote, “By faith we understand that the universe was created by God’s command, so that what is seen has been made from things that are not visible” (Heb. 11:3; compare Ps. 33:6,9; Col. 1:16). In fact, the statement in Genesis 1:1 that God created the heavens and the earth is a way of saying God created the total universe. This does not mean, however, that *bara'* always means “create out of nothing,” as I will discuss below.

The next two usages of the word *bara'* in Genesis chapter one highlight the creation of life, both animal and human life. Genesis 1:21 highlights the creation of animal life: “So God created the large sea-creatures and every living creature that moves and swarms in the water, according to their kinds. He also created every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.” Likewise, Genesis 1:27 says, “So God created

## CREATION AND THE SPIRIT HOVERING

Genesis says that when “the earth was formless and empty, darkness covered the surface of the watery depths, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters” (Gen. 1:2, HCSB). In time, Jews reading this verse made a strong connection between the Spirit’s hovering and creation.

One of the texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls echoes this connection. The text, called the “Messianic Apocalypse,” linked the Messiah with the Spirit’s hovering—this time over the poor:

[the hea]vens and the earth will listen to His Messiah, and none therein will stray from the commandments of the holy ones.

Seekers of the Lord, strengthen yourselves in His service!

All you hopeful in (your) heart, will you not find the Lord in this?

For the Lord will consider the pious...and call the righteous by name.

Over the poor His spirit will hover

and will renew the faithful with His power.

And He will glorify the pious on the throne of the eternal Kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

Some who witnessed Jesus’ baptism may have made the connection between the visible presence of the Spirit with the Messiah’s arrival and His initiating a new creation. Matthew records the details: “After Jesus was baptized, He went up immediately from the water. The heavens suddenly opened for Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming down on Him” (Matt. 3:16, HCSB).

Looking back, we can see a connection. Just as the Spirit had hovered over the waters when God brought forth creation, this time He descended over the waters of the Jordan as He was bringing a new way of life through the Messiah. And in Christ we are indeed a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17, HCSB). **B**

1. Geza Vermes, trans. and ed., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 391-92.

man in His own image; He created him in the image of God; He created them male and female.” The use of *bara’* with reference to living creatures indicates that God affirms the value of animal life. They are a special creation of God.

The use of *bara’* with reference to the creation of man indicates the special value that God places

on humanity. In fact, man is the Lord’s highest creation, for man is created in His image. God formed (created) man from the dust of the earth (Gen. 2:7)—a clear indication that *bara’* in this instance does not mean to create out of nothing.

### Continuous Creation Work

God’s creative work did not end with what we see in Genesis. The word *bara’* actually appears more times in the Book of Isaiah than any other Old Testament book, including Genesis. Isaiah promised that the creative work of God would be at work in the coming Messianic Age (Isa. 4:5). Much of the Book of Isaiah was written as a comfort for the people of Israel who would be in exile. Throughout the book, Isaiah reminded his readers that the Lord was the Creator. He further explained that just as the Creator God could fashion the

universe, so He would give His Servant for a new covenant in the future, not only for Israel but also for the Gentiles (42:5-7).

Also, the Book of Psalms uses *bara’* in a couple of ways that highlight God’s continued creative work. Psalm 102:18 says, “This will be written for a later generation, and a newly created people will praise the LORD.” Does this phrase “a newly created people” mean that God creates every soul out of nothing at each person’s conception? Some would answer affirmatively, and this view is known as “creationism.” Others would suggest that parents pass down the soul just as they pass down the body to their child. This view, called “traducianism,” teaches that human beings propagate whole beings—body and soul. With traducianism, each person is still a result of the creative work of God. Supporters

**Below:** Overlooking the ruins at the ancient site of Ebla (now called Tel Mardikh) in modern north-west Syria. In the 1970s, archaeologists unearthed thousands of tablets inscribed with details of everyday life in the city of Ebla late in the 3rd millennium B.C. Written in Sumerian script, the tablets contain many of the same

names of people and places that are in the Old Testament plus stories that are similar to the biblical accounts of the flood, the tower of Babel, and creation. However the people of Ebla did not know or worship Yahweh. Instead, they worshiped several gods, including Dagan, Ishtar, Enki, Ninki, and others.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/LOUISE KOHL SMITH (33/36/12)





ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS/ LOUVRE/ PARIS (268/28&32)

## Future Work of Creation

All of those who have placed their faith in Christ will take part in God's future work of creation. Isaiah 65:17 says, "For I will create a new heaven and a new earth; the past events will not be remembered or come to mind." The promise of a new heaven and a new earth that are made up of the redeemed people of God is one of the greatest promises of God's Word. Just as scholars disagree regarding

God's initial creation and how that took place, they also disagree as to how and when God will create this new heaven and new earth that Isaiah promised. Will it immediately follow the second coming of Christ, or will it immediately follow the millennial reign of Christ on earth? However God brings it to pass, the re-creation or new creation of the heavens and earth will usher in a place of indescribable peace and joy, where believers are finally delivered from the presence of sin. **B**

1. Thomas E. McComiskey, "בָּרָא" (*bara'*, to create) in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:127.

2. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the Holman Standard Bible (HCSB).

3. Karl-Heinz Bernhardt, "בָּרָא, *bara'*: III. Meaning" (*bara'*, to create) in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* [TDOT], ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 246.

4. McComiskey, "בָּרָא" (*bara'*, to create), 1:127.

5. Bernhardt, "בָּרָא, *bara'*: II.1. Etymology" (*bara'*, to create) in TDOT, 245.

6. T. V. Farris, *Mighty To Save: A Study in Old Testament Soteriology* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 21.

7. For a fuller description of creationism and traducianism, see Wayne Greudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 484-86.

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**Above and Right: Akkadian cylinder seal and its imprint depict the wedding of the goddess who was responsible for the creation of vegetation; dated about 2350–2200 B.C.**

**Left: A mikvot (a small pool for Jewish ritualistic cleansing) located adjacent to the synagogue at Gamla in northern Galilee. The related Hebrew word *miqveh* means "gathering of waters" and first appears in the creation account: "God called the dry land 'earth,' and He called the gathering [*miqveh*] of the water 'seas.' And God saw that it was good" (Gen. 1:10, HCSB). Gamla, a Jewish stronghold, fell to the Romans in A.D. 67.**



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE (60/9493)

of traducianism hold to this view, arguing that the essential idea in creation is to bring something into existence that had not previously existed. Each view has its strengths and weaknesses, and notable theologians have not agreed on the best way to answer the question of how God creates each soul.<sup>7</sup>

Also in Psalms, David prayed, "God, create a clean heart for me

and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Ps. 51:10). David's request affirmed his dependency on God's continued creative work.

God will still create a clean heart in one's life today, if that person will only call on Him. David was asking that his heart be cleansed of sin; that cleansing is available for all who will place their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior.