

Did God Create (*Bara*) or Make (*Asah*) in Genesis 1?

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Many people who have written on Genesis 1 have attempted to make a very significant distinction between two Hebrew words found there: *bara* (בָּרָא, to create) and *asah* (עָשָׂה, to make or do). Theistic evolutionists (TEs) and old-earth creationists (OECs) both accept the millions of years advocated by the scientific establishment (although the OECs do not accept neo-Darwinian evolution while TEs do). They sometimes try to defend the acceptance of millions of years by saying that *bara* refers to supernatural creation *ex nihilo* (Latin for “out of nothing”) but that *asah* means to make out of pre-existing material and therefore allows for creation over a long period of time. Such people say that the only supernatural creation events were in relation to the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1), sea creatures and birds (Genesis 1:21) and Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:27). Since *asah* is used for all other creative acts in Genesis 1, those acts could have been creative processes over the course of millions of years.

But this argument will not stand when we look carefully at the use of these words in Genesis 1 and in other biblical passages related to creation. Compare these two lists:

<i>Bara</i>: to shape or create		<i>Asah</i>: to do or make	
Genesis 1:1	created the heavens and earth	Genesis 1:7	made the expanse between the waters above and below
Genesis 1:21	created the sea creatures and birds	Genesis 1:16 *	made the sun, moon and stars
Genesis 1:27 *	created man (both Adam and Eve)	Genesis 1:25	made all land creatures
Genesis 2:3 *	created and made all His works	Genesis 1:31	all that He made
Genesis 2:4	created heavens and earth	Genesis 2:3 *	all His works which God created and made
Genesis 5:1	created man (both Adam and Eve, cf. 5:2)	Genesis 2:4 *	made heaven and earth
Genesis 5:2	created male and female	Genesis 3:1	made the beasts of the field
Psalms 89:47	created all the sons of men	Genesis 3:7	made loin clothes from fig leaves
Psalms 104:30	created sea creatures	Genesis 3:21	made garments from animal skins
Psalms 148:5	* created heavens, heights, angels, hosts, sun, moon and stars	Genesis 5:1 *	made man (referring to both male and female)
Isaiah 40:26	* created stars	Genesis 6:6 *	made man
Isaiah 40:26	created trees, rivers	Genesis 7:4 *	destroy every living thing that I have made
Isaiah 54:16	created the blacksmith and the destroyer	Genesis 9:6 *	man made in the image of God
		Psalms 121:2 *	made the heavens and the earth
		Psalms 104:24 *	made the sea, sea creatures and land animals
		Isaiah 41:20 *	done this, made the trees and rivers
		Isaiah 43:7 *	made, created and formed man
		Isaiah 45:18 *	made, formed, established and created the earth

The question before us is whether God’s “creating activities” and “making activities” in Genesis 1 are categorically different kinds of events or processes. From these verses above we can note the following:

1. The * after the verses above indicates those entities that God is said to have both “created” and “made”. *Bara* (create) and *asah* (make) are used interchangeably in the Bible in reference to the creation of the following: the sun, the moon, the stars, sea creatures, trees, rivers, man, the heavens, and the earth. In several verses they are even used together to describe the same event.
2. The plants were neither “created” nor “made,” according to the words used in Genesis 1:11–13. But clearly (from passages such as Genesis 2:1–3, Psalm 33:6–9, Psalm 148, Hebrews 11:3, etc.) they were created and made by God’s Word on the third day, even though God did not use these particular words to describe His actions. There is no basis in science or Scripture for saying that vegetation came into existence by purely natural processes but that everything else was created supernaturally. In fact, the formation of the first plants was clearly supernatural, for they were made as mature plants with fruit already on them.

3. *Bara* does not always mean to create out of nothing. God created the first male and female humans (Genesis 5:2). But we know from Genesis 2:7 that God formed (יצר, *yatsar*) Adam from the dust of the earth and in Genesis 2:22 we are told that God fashioned (בנה, *banah*) Eve from the rib of Adam.

So, making a strong distinction between *bara* and *asah* in Genesis 1–2 is as unjustified as making a distinction between “create” and “make” in English. It is true that in Scripture only God is the subject of the verb *bara*; men make (*asah*) things, but only God creates (*bara*). But God also makes (*asah*) things. The verbs alone cannot tell us how God created and how long He took to create.

New Testament references confirm this understanding when describing the creative work of our Creator, Jesus Christ. For example, John 1:3 says that all things came into being (ἐγένετο, *egeneto*) by the Word of God, who is Jesus Christ (John 1:14). Colossians 1:16 says that all things were created (ἐκτίσθη, *ektisthē*) by and for Christ. Hebrews 1:2 says He made (ἐποίησεν, *epoiaysen*) the original creation by His Word (cf. Hebrews 11:3). “Come into being”, “create”, and “made” in these passages are clearly referring to the same divine activities in Genesis 1 and 2. No distinction can be made between these Greek words in reference to Creation Week. These Greek words in these texts are in the aorist tense. None of these words by themselves connote any specific time frame other than that, in these cases, they refer to completed past action. They cannot be interpreted to mean that the processes are still going on (which would require a different Greek verb tense—present tense). Therefore, they disallow an evolutionary meaning, since evolution is said to be a process that is continuing today.

Conclusion

This short study shows that there is no basis for saying that *bara* **only** means an instantaneous, out-of-nothing, supernatural creative action but that *asah* **only** means a slow, out-of-existing-material, natural process of making (under God’s providence, of course). In the Creation account (Genesis 1:1–2:3) both words are used in reference to *ex nihilo* creation events and both are also used in reference to things God made from previously created material.

So, only the context in which the words are used can give the precise meaning, if there is a distinction to be made. The context of Genesis, indeed the whole Bible, is overwhelmingly in favor of interpreting both *bara* and *asah* **in Genesis 1** as virtually instantaneous acts. Whether God created something out of nothing or created something from material that He had just made, the force of the words in context is that both kinds of activities were instantaneous and supernatural after God spoke “Let there be. . . .” In Genesis 1 and 2 we should assume *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) creation unless the text clearly indicates otherwise (for example, Genesis 2:7, 22).