

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 33

Studying the Original Languages of the Bible: Word Study Techniques, Part 2 (Part 4 of 4-part series)

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Summary

Episode 33 continues our series on Bible study at the word level. Last time we talked about word usage as it pertains to usage by a single biblical author within the scope of that author's writings. Our launching point was the lemma behind "unmarried" in 1 Cor 7. The lemma was used only four times in the New Testament, all within that chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Today we'll primarily focus on thinking about word usage in relation to other words — specifically, synonyms and grammatical relationships. Our starting point is the Hebrew word *bara'*, the lemma behind the word "created" in Gen 1:1. Find out what the word does and does not mean in this episode.

Transcript

Welcome back to the Naked Bible Podcast.

Today we're going to continue with our series on Bible study at the word level. In the last episode, we began talking about word study techniques, specifically we focused on examining word use by a single author throughout the material that author wrote. We looked at the case of the apostle Paul's use of *agameo* in 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul uses that term four times in that chapter, and those are the only four occurrences in the entire New Testament. Today I want to talk about considering words in relationship to other words. A word study isn't just a matter of seeing how many times a word occurs (math isn't part of exegesis) and then going to a lexicon and seeing which English gloss option you like best in a given passage. But that's what most people do. Word study is about word usage, and that takes thought—and careful thought, at that—based on careful observation. If you've listened to me for any length of time, you've probably heard me say that there is no substitute for *thinking* when doing Bible study, and that applies to word study. It's not just about look-ups of word occurrences. That's just a step for getting the raw material that you need to think about.

I want to illustrate this with the Hebrew word *bara*. The nuance and significance of *bara* can only be discerned by noting its used with respect to other words—specifically synonyms and the words that are used as *bara*'s grammatical subject. I

want to start by noting two familiar verses: Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:26. Now Genesis 1:1 is familiar:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

The word "created" there is the Hebrew word *bara*. In Genesis 1:26, we get the familiar passage about the creation of humankind. The verse says:

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

We notice right away that in verse 27, we have "created" (*bara*) three times! What's really interesting, though, is that in the prior verse (verse 26) we have "let us *make* man." That word is not *bara*. That verb there is *asah*. So what we have here is we have the creation of humankind spoken of by two terms, not just one, and that tells us that *bara* and *asah* are synonyms. They have some relationship. There's some sort of congruence or similarity between them. There's something about them that they share in meaning. There also would be, in that sense, something a little bit different, as well. Synonyms are, by definition, words that are similar in meaning but they're not identical. There's always a little bit of a nuance difference between terms.

So right away we have learned that *bara* has at least one synonym. It's going to have more than that, as well. So the very word that's used in Genesis 1:1 and then in Genesis 1:26-27 (specifically verse 27) is going to have a synonym. That's going to become important because to really understand what *bara* means and doesn't mean, we have to take note of this.

I've heard in my experience things about *bara* that preachers or Bible students or researchers or whatever have said about this term. They usually like to talk about how unique *bara* is—that specifically it means "creation out of nothing." They'll usually reference Genesis 1:1 for that: "It's *bara*, it's a special creation. It's not just any normal creation. God speaks and it happens and it exists. It's creation out of nothing." Well, that actually doesn't work, and that actually isn't true about *bara*. We've gotten our first clue (believe it or not) by looking at Genesis 1:26-17. Now, we've seen in verse 27 that *bara* is used of the creation of humankind. It also has a synonym (*asah*). Why is that a clue? Let me just ask you a really simple question. Those of you who have been doing Bible study for any amount of time are probably going to know the answer to this immediately. The simple question is this: Were

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humans created out of nothing? The answer to that is very obviously *no*, that isn't true. If you go to Genesis 2, we get another account of the creation of humankind in that chapter, and we read, for instance in Genesis 2:7 that:

⁷then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground...

"Formed" here in Genesis 2:7 is not *bara* and it's not *asah*. It's actually another Hebrew word—*yatsar*. But we wouldn't even really have to know that. We just read the verse. God is forming the man in the text from something—mainly dirt, the soil of the ground. The man is not created out of nothing. The man is created from something. And the same goes with the woman. This is important because Genesis 1:27 talks about God "*bara-ing*" humankind, male and female. So if we look in Genesis 2:22 we find:

²²Then the Lord God made a woman from the part that he had taken out of the man.

So right away, we also learn that the woman is also not created out of nothing. She's created from something. What this tells us, if we take Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 2:7, 22... If we take all that together, we've seen now that there are three words that describe the creation of humankind. One of them is *bara*, another is *asah*, and the third one is *yatsar*. They are synonyms. They have some similarity, but they also have some nuance of difference, as well. Very clearly, *bara* does not mean in and of itself "to create out of nothing." This is a myth that's been perpetuated by some well-meaning Bible students that really just didn't even bother to think very carefully about the word and the word's use in relationship to other words.

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You say, "What about Genesis 1—'in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth?' Surely the use of *bara* there refers to creation out of nothing, right?" Well, I've actually done a lot of work on this passage that is accessible to people who are not scholars, and on the podcast website under "Bibliography" I will link to some video of me talking about this. But Genesis 1:1-3 is actually highly argued about, highly debated, highly disputed as far as what is actually being described here. I'm with the majority here... I try to be with mainstream scholarship. I mean, I'm not always there and I'm not afraid to not be there, but in this case with Genesis 1:1-3, most scholars of Hebrew syntax (Hebrew grammar) would note that Genesis 1:1-3 actually does *not* describe a creation out of nothing. It depends on how you take the clauses of the first three verses. That's well beyond our subject for this podcast, but if you go to those videos that I've made and linked on the podcast "Bibliography" page, you'll be able to watch a full explanation of this that I think is very digestible for someone who doesn't even know Hebrew or Hebrew grammar. It's something I've presented in church several times, and I think you'll be able to follow it.

What you have in Genesis 1:1-3 is that God is actually creating... The creative act ("let there be light") actually comes with respect to material that is already pre-existing—something that's already there. Theologically, we would affirm that God put that there, too, but we don't really get that in Genesis 1. We get that from other passages. (Again, watch the video and what I'm talking about will be explained to you.) But for our purposes here, it's kind of interesting that we have in Genesis 1:1 the heavens and the earth "*bara*-ed" (created). And you would think that means creation out of nothing, but we've seen that *bara* is used elsewhere where it clearly does not mean creation out of nothing. So is this consistent? Well, you can see the videos for how Genesis 1:1-3 really does not (in terms of Hebrew grammar) tell us that we have a creation out of nothing here in Genesis 1:1. But I want to just show you something that you would probably miss.

In reality, the heavens and the earth elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible are described as being *made* and not *bara*-ed. In other words, there are other verbs of creative activity that are used to produce the heavens and the earth and those words are not *bara*—they're normal words of making things and creating things out of pre-existing material. We actually kind of saw or alluded to one of them already. We were in Genesis 2 and we looked at verse 7, where God formed (*yatsar*) the man from the dust of the ground, and we said that when you take that in parallel to Genesis 1:26 it's very clear that since Genesis 2 has humankind being created from something and not out of nothing, that we can't understand *bara* as speaking of creation out of nothing back in Genesis 1:26. Well, the same thing can be said for the heavens and earth because if you go to Genesis 2:4, we read:

**⁴These are the generations
of the heavens and the earth when they were *created*...**

Right there we have *bara*, but the verse isn't done yet.

...in the day that the LORD God *made* the earth and the heavens.

There we have *asah*. It's the same tandem parallel again—*asah* and *bara*—that we saw for the creation of humankind. This isn't the only place. Exodus 20:4 has the heavens and the earth being "*asah*-ed." The word is *asah* for the producing of the heavens and the earth. Exodus 20:11, Exodus 31:17... there's a whole bunch of these. There are almost two dozen instances where the heavens and the earth are not "*bara*-ed," they're brought into existence through another term that isn't as "special" as *bara*. It's just a generic verb that would be used hundreds and hundreds of times in the Hebrew Bible for making things out of materials. So the heavens and the earth of Genesis 1 are spoken of in the same way by the same verb, despite the fact that in 1:1, the verb happens to be *bara*. *Bara* and *asah* are synonyms and *asah* very clearly does not involve any sense of creation out of nothing.

We need to be looking at how the Bible itself uses terminology and not trying to defend a particular view of origins or of creation. Even the pre-existing material in Genesis 1, I would argue that other passages require us to see that God is the originator of that material, too. The point is just that Genesis 1 itself doesn't tell us how that material got there. It's just there and then God starts to work with it. Again, watch the video about the clauses in Genesis 1:1-3 and you'll get a better understanding of what I'm saying here. I don't want to rabbit-trail on it for the sake of the podcast.

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Now, we've just looked at *bara* in relationship to other words (synonyms), and that helps us to be informed about what *bara* means and doesn't mean. It means creation; it means to bring something into being. But it *doesn't* necessarily mean that the creation is out of nothing. It is quite supportable to say that even *bara* involves the creative act with pre-existing material. So we've learned that much. You say, "Well, what's the big deal about *bara*, then? Is there anything unique about it?" There actually is!

What I'm going to tell you and suggest that you do here would be very easy with Bible software such as Logos (which my employer produces). In fact, this is pretty unique. We don't have any competition here. There are no other software packages that can do what I'm going to describe for you here. What you need to determine/discover (if you have software it's easy and if you don't it's a little harder)... *Bara* doesn't occur that many times, so you could do this by hand in a reasonable amount of time. We need to determine what the grammatical subject of *bara* is. In other words, in all of *bara*'s uses (and there are a little less than fifty of them, so again, you could do it by hand if you wanted to). If you got a list of all the places where *bara* occurs, look for what does the action—what "*bara*-s" what. Who is the creator? Who is the grammatical subject of the verb *bara*? This is actually where *bara* is unique because in all the occurrences—every occurrence where it's used in the Hebrew Bible—only God is the grammatical subject of *bara*. What that means is that while other verbs of creation like *asah* and *yatsar*... a whole range of subjects are used with them because humans can *asah* and *yatsar*, and an animal can "make" its young. However it's used, you get a variety of subjects that are used with the other verbs of creation. That does not happen with *bara*. The grammatical subject of *bara* is always and only God.

What that means is if you're the biblical writer, if you want to make the special point... "Look, I'm going to describe an act of creation here that only God could do," you would use *bara*. And that's what happens in Genesis 1:1 and 1:26. Even though other verbs are used that very clearly involved creation with pre-existing material, the point of *bara* is not whether God used anything to create. The point of *bara* is that only God could do this thing that I'm describing. But you only get that if you were able to get a list of all the occurrences where *bara* is used and then you looked at them and did a little English grammar and looked at what the grammatical subjects were for that verb (for your study of *bara*). With software this takes just seconds, but you could do this kind of thing yourself. My point is that when you study a word, you need to think about it in terms of its relationship to other words.

That might involve looking at synonyms and it might involve looking at some grammar. We could also look at what is the object of *bara*. What are the things that get "*bara*-ed," as opposed to the subject or entity doing the creating—doing the "*bara*-ing" (if I could say it that way).

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Again, you have to start thinking about words the way they're used in sentences and also with respect to synonyms. It involves a lot more than just getting a list, checking it twice, and "Oh, my word is used X number of times in the Old Testament or New Testament or Bible." Well, great—what do you do with that? That's a nice little piece of trivia that you've accumulated to yourself. Usually people do that kind of thing maybe to put in a sermon to have some effect. Maybe it shows your congregation that you're studying something. But then people will open up a lexicon and look at all the English synonyms and use the thesaurus approach. "What other English words could I use besides 'create' for this word? Ah, that one sounds good here. That sort of breaks up the monotony. I'll talk about that meaning." That is not doing word study. Doing word study involves looking at how a word is used where it occurs in relationship to other words, which involves synonyms and some grammar.

Until next time, I hope that this is helpful to get you down the road to doing some real word study.