

Prose Parallelism in Genesis 1 and the Image of God

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In Hebrew	In English
(Gen 1:1) בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ	With the firstborn son God created the universe (1.1)
(Gen 1:21) ... ויברא אלהים את־התנינים הגדלים	Then God created the great sea creatures... (1.21)
(Gen 1:27a) ויברא אלהים את־האדם בצלמו	Then God created mankind in his image (1.27a)
(Gen 1:27b) בצלם אלהים ברא אתו	In the image of God He created him (1.27b)

Many scholars have recognized that there is a highly structured, almost elevated style to Genesis 1. Several key phrases are repeated (e.g., “And God saw...” or “And it was so”) and days 2-6 are structured very similarly. Such organization lends itself to closer inspection. Here we are examining how the author chose to use the word ברא (*bara*), or ‘to create’. In this first section of Genesis (1.1-2.3) it is used several times. The chart above highlights its first five uses in the chapter. Interestingly, they are used syntactically as a chiasm. In other words, the author used *bara* in a special way to help highlight something. The chiasm would look as follows:

A (1.1) “With the firstborn son God created the heavens and the earth”	x-qatal-DO
B (1.21) “Then God created the great sea creatures and...”	wayyiqtol-DO
B’ (1.27a) “Then God created mankind in his image...”	wayyiqtol-DO
A’ (1.27b) “In the image of God he created him”	x-qatal-DO

This structure helps us to link clauses that may be easily overlooked otherwise. For instance, the parallelism between A and A’ creates a link between *the firstborn son* in 1:1 and *in the image of God* in 1:27. Each of these are the ‘x’ elements of the clause type. The implication of these links is rather important theologically. Who is the firstborn of God that was with God in created the universe (c.f. Proverbs 30:1-4)? And, what is the image of God? It seems that there must be a perfect physical form of God that has always existed within God. Isn’t God a spiritual being, without a body?

That these two references are connected together leads toward the question: is the image of God a person? And if so, is this person the firstborn son of Genesis 1:1? We know at least two ancient interpreters thought so: the apostles John and Paul. Paul wrote in Colossians 1:13-15, “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” Here, Paul is not telling us about the character of Jesus, but is telling us who Genesis 1:1 and 1:27 are referring to: Messiah Jesus. Jesus is the firstborn son of Genesis 1:1, and he is the Image of God in Genesis 1:27.

What does it mean, then, for mankind to be created in the image of God? It means that we have been patterned after the likeness of the firstborn son, the Messiah, Jesus, from before the foundations of the universe. There is a “godness” about us that correlates to our closeness with God, both spiritually and physically. In God, the Image is singular (‘And God made’), yet plural (‘Let us make...in our image’), and mankind is patterned likewise: plural (‘male and female he created them’) and singular (‘one flesh’).

That the apostle Paul picked up on this kind of parallelism in Genesis 1 shows us that the early interpreters of the Bible were paying careful attention to Hebrew syntax and poetic style, much more so than we may have ever anticipated.