



Genesis 1:1-5
What's In A Name?
Elohim: The Creator God

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1st Advent Sunday

As we acknowledged and celebrated at the start of the service, today is the first Sunday in Advent, the Sunday of “hope.” Often the sermons in Advent closely correlate to the themes of each Sunday in this time of the year, but not always. This year, we will be continuing on with our series looking at the names of God. Some easily tie in to Advent and the theme for each Sunday, while others maybe not as much.

Today we are looking at a name for God that is the second most common one in the Old Testament, with Yahweh (last week’s) being the most common. Today’s name for God is used over 2,600 times in the O.T. So this is another Hebrew name we are looking at this week, as most of them are that we are exploring in this series – though we will get to some names for God from the New Testament – which was written in Greek.

But today’s name is the first name for God we encounter in Scripture, coming to us in just the first few words of the Bible. So I invite you to turn with me to Genesis 1, where we will read the first 5 verses. These are words that are probably familiar to many of us, though I hope that today God might speak something new into your life through these verses and this message.

Genesis 1:1-5, followed by sermon graphic.

This passage is the tip of the iceberg as it goes on to tell the Creation story of God bringing to fruition everything that exists. It is a magnificent passage of Scripture that clearly portrays an uncreated God who creates everything else. The Hebrew word for God here is “Elohim”. In the first chapter of Genesis plus the first three verses of chapter two that conclude the 7-day Creation story, this is the only name for God used, and it occurs 35 times. In our English translation of the word, it comes across fairly simply: God. We almost take it for granted and make assumptions about the word. People say the name “God” all the time – both reverently and, unfortunately, irreverently as well.

But in Hebrew, there's much more depth to it that gets glossed over in the English, and it's fascinating. When we understand this depth, it brings an incredible perspective on who God is. Today's message is a little different, and we're going to really dive into the Hebrew today, because there are a couple important things to note about this word to begin with, and then more to understand about how this word is used. **The first thing of note about Elohim is the root word "El."** "El" means "might" or "strength" or "power." Over time, "El" also came to be a shortened version of Elohim...so "El" also essentially came to mean "God." So a word like "Bethel" which is a word we may be familiar with from Scripture or church names or other Christian usage, that word actually is two Hebrew words put together – "bait" and "el" – and it means "house of God." But the root, "El" means power/might/strength.

The second thing to note about this word, "Elohim" is that it is written in the Hebrew plural. The singular is "Eloha." In our English language, if you want to make a noun plural, you generally add what letter to the end of it? "-S" or sometimes it is "-es." So "house" becomes "houses" and "car" becomes "cars" and so forth.

Well, Hebrew is similar, but it adds "im" at the end of nouns or changes the end to "im" – like "Eloha" becomes "Elohim." The question, of course, is: Why is it written in the plural form to refer to one God? The Bible teaches that there is one true God. One God above all. Perhaps it's most clearly stated in Deuteronomy 6:4, **"Hear, O Israel: The Lord (Yahweh) our God (Elohim), The Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4).** It's a clear statement that there is one God.

Interestingly enough, even here in Deuteronomy this verse, "God" is "Elohim." At times, Elohim can refer to plural gods – we see it used in Scripture in regards to the gods of the neighboring nations. But here in this Deuteronomy verse, it's plural, even as it affirms that God is one. So what in the world is going on? Is this bad grammar? Bad theology? As Christian hip-hop artist Lecrae raps on his song, "Misconception, Pt. 2"...he says, speaking of himself: "I'm good truth and bad grammar." Is this "Elohim" a case of

good truth and bad grammar? Is it an unresolvable theological conflict they just ignored, and perhaps undermines our Biblical theology of God?

Here's what's happening. **The Hebrew plural *form* does not always mean that there is “more than one” of something.** In other words, it's written like a plural word, but it doesn't mean it's a plural noun. If you think that sounds crazy, that's understandable; but we have it in English, too. For instance, some of us here in the sanctuary this morning are wearing what on our legs? “Pants”... or “Jeans.” Even with the “s” they are singular. We don't say “I think I'll wear ‘pant’ today.” “I think I'll wear jean today.” It's always “pants” and “jeans.” Those of you at home this morning are wearing your “pajamas” not your “pajama.” “Eyeglasses” are the same thing, or just “glasses” when referring to what we wear to see better. You might own 2 pair of glasses, but you don't wear one “glass” at a time on your face. You wear your “glasses” one at a time.

In Hebrew, when a word is written this way – where it's plural construction but not plural in meaning – it often is doing so to emphasize or accentuate the meaning of the root word. This is called the “plural of intensity” or “plural of majesty.” So here, “Elohim:” is intensifying the root “El”—which means what? You weren't expecting a quiz in the middle of this sermon, were you? “El” means “power” or “might” or “strength”. So “Elohim” is communicating that this God, this “mighty one” is “strength on steroids.” This is “the mighty mighty one” or “the powerful powerful one”...something like that.

It's speaking of one who is mightier, stronger, and more powerful than anyone else. **The power of this mightiest one is above and beyond any other god, any other power, any other force. That's what “Elohim” is communicating.**

By the way, if you're a skeptic and you're thinking “Well, that's a convenient way to maintain a theology of one God in the face of a plural word...is this for real?” You need to know that this is simply Hebrew grammar. *And* it's not the only word we see this happening with in Scripture, by any means. It's

fairly common. For instance, in Isaiah 40:26, which is a verse that calls to mind this opening chapter of Genesis, we read this:

“Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens:

Who created all these?

**He who brings out the starry host one by one
and calls forth each of them by name.**

**Because of the greatness of his might [*plural “might”*] and strength,
not one of them is missing” (Isaiah 40:26).**

So here, the word for “might” is a different one than “El” – it’s the word “own” and it is plural in this verse – so it is, “ownim”. It’s the only plural word in this three-sentence verse. All the rest are singular. It’s emphasizing God’s “might” with this same “plural of intensity.” And that’s exactly what “Elohim” is doing, as well. It’s a word that communicates: this is “The mighty one,” the one who is mighty above all others.

Now, there’s one more thing we need to look at in these opening few verses of Genesis that helps us understand this and confirms for us what’s going on. **We have to look at the verbs: “Created,” “said,” “saw,” “separated,” “called,” and on it goes throughout the opening Creation account. Every single verb is written in the *singular* form.**

Let’s look at the word for “created,” in particular. The word is “bara”. First, when used in the Bible as “create” or “created,” “bara” is *only* used in regards to God. Only God creates. In the New Testament, Hebrews 11:3 summarizes the Creation account nicely, saying that “what is seen was made out of what is not visible.” Perhaps you’ve heard it said that God creates “ex nihilo” – which is Latin for “out of nothing.” That phrase is a way of summarizing this Hebrew verse that God made all that is seen out of that which is not seen. And this power to create something out of literally nothing belongs to Elohim alone.

But here’s the thing: **The verb here – “bara,” “created” – is singular. “He created” is the literal meaning.** If “Elohim” were intended to be read as plural, it would read, “The gods, he created.” It isn’t “they created” such as you would expect since it’s connected to a plurally formed Hebrew noun. In

Hebrew, like in a lot of languages but not all – in fact, English doesn't emphasize this as much as others – verbs and nouns usually agree when it comes to singular or plural form, and there are different forms for singular and plural. English doesn't do that as much. We say "I go" and "we go" for instance. Unlike Spanish – which perhaps many of you studied at one time or another – which would be "voy" and "vamos". Now, we do have it some in English. For instance, we say, "I am" not "I are;" we say, "we are" not "we is." So we have plural forms of some verbs, and they should match the noun that's affiliated with them in a sentence. Hebrew normally follows similar patterns, and is more like Spanish than English in that most verbs have singular and plural forms.

But here, with "created" it's mixed up. In fact, it's not just with "bara." Every single verb in these five verses is singular, matched with the plural "Elohim." Beyond that, every verb in the entire 7-day creation account is singular, and Elohim is the only name for God in those verses as I said earlier. **Beyond that, with just a few exceptions, every time Elohim occurs in Scripture and is speaking of God (2,346 out of 2,606), the verb affiliated with it is singular.** In the 266 instances where it is *not* speaking of the God of Israel – like referring to false gods of neighboring nations – the associated verb is plural, and the meaning of Elohim is therefore clearly plural in number rather than this "plural of intensity."

So when the Bible uses this plural "Elohim" with a singular verb, It's not good truth and bad grammar, and it's not bad truth and good grammar: it's good truth and good grammar, written with great precision to communicate about who God is. **The Bible emphasizes the power of God with the "plural of intensity" of Elohim, and the oneness of God with the singular form of whatever verb is with it.**

So what's the big deal(?) – right? I know that was really heavy on Hebrew grammar and hopefully it has been both interesting and informative. But how does this impact our faith and how we live in the world? Bible studies and sermons are useless if they're just head knowledge – God is interested in our hearts as much as our heads. There are three things for us to take away from this.

First, the God of the Bible is One. Our Christian Trinitarian understanding of God – One God expressed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – is so engrained in us that many Christians even seek to see Elohim as an expression of it – as if it’s a plural of number pointing us to the Trinity. But it is clear: God is one. And don’t let someone convince you that the doctrine of a singular God is forced on the text just because Elohim is in plural form. It’s not plural in number, as we’ve seen. There is one God over all the Universe. One God who spoke creation into being. One God who created you in His image. There is one supreme, all-powerful God of Creation; you can be sure and certain of that.

Second, this God is not just an impersonal power, but a God of relationship. God has made himself known, as I just said. We see this throughout Scripture as God creates human beings in His image, and then reveals himself by other names as well: such as Yahweh, Jehovah, the God who heals, the God who provides, Holy Spirit, and of course: as Jesus. There is one God, expressed concretely as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but who has many names so we might know him personally...might know him fully. God is not just an abstract, impersonal power; and no one name – not even Elohim – can fully reveal to us who he is and bring us into full relationship with Him. But that’s exactly what God desires –for you to know him, just as he already knows you.

Third, there is no god worth turning to, other than this God: Elohim. Why would you turn to any other than the one who can create “Ex nihilo”...can create something visible out of literally nothing? God speaks, and creation comes into being. That’s awe-inspiring and even fear-inducing. We think we’ve got power and can create cool stuff like buildings and cell phones and companies that ship things all over the world...and we *are* created in God’s image as Genesis 1 goes on to say. So creative powers are built into us. But our creativity and power and our sense of “being” pales in comparison to the God of the Universe. And yet some people struggle to turn to Elohim. Some people bounce back and forth between Elohim and other gods...or between Elohim and nothing.

I'm reminded of the story about a guy who was stranded on a deserted island. After several years of surviving on his own a ship came by not far away, and he quickly built a fire to get some smoke going. The ship came his way and a dinghy from it came to shore. When the dinghy got there, the captain noticed three shelters the man had built. The captain asked the guy about them. He said, "Well, this one's my house, and that second one is my church where I go to worship on Sundays." The captain said, "What about that third shelter?" And the guy said, "That's the church I used to go to."

It's a commentary about people who go from church to church and the underlying reasons why...but the same could be said about people who go from God to god. Or who pick and choose and pull together a little from here a little from there and fashion their own spirituality out of whatever *they* determine sounds good or makes them feel good. That's essentially playing God when we do that.

But: We see in Scripture that Elohim is the singular supreme power over all the universe. There is no god like Elohim. Why turn anywhere else? Any other comes up short...and you're created in Elohim's image. The Good News is that this Elohim is more than just an abstract power: He can be known personally, which gives us great hope in this life and the life to come.

Whatever situation you are facing in your life – pandemic, relationship struggles, financial difficulties, walking the straight and narrow path in life, sticking to your vows and your promises – no matter what it may be, remember the name "Elohim." The "mighty one" does not need raw materials with which to work. He doesn't need logical solutions to accomplish his goal. All He needs is himself...and yet he has set out to work in and through you and me. All *you* and I need is faith...trust, belief...whatever word resonates with you...All you need is faith in the one, true, all powerful God of all that is seen and unseen, who has made himself known from the opening moments of Creation...to Jesus...to his movement in your life here and now. I pray that faith is yours today, this Advent, and always. Let's pray...Amen.