

Q&A: What do we learn from the use of “saying” and “breathing” to describe creation in Genesis 1 and 2?

Dave0 asks:

Will, looking at creation accounts a Gen 1 & 2. In Gen 1 in various English translations it is 'And God said...' In Gen 2 God's creative act (in English translation at least) becomes 'breathed'.

Is this nuance there in the original Hebrew or is it the same word with a sense of say/breath and translators have followed precedent with said in the G1 and breathed in G2.

John picks this idea up and plays with word/life, at the start of his gospel.

I have some vague recollection of the idea that when we 'speak' this difference in our living being from the other creatures is this free will act of God emulating (in a very small way) speaking and changing, stewarding his creation.

Thanks, Dave0

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

Oh I do miss your questions, Dave0.
Forgive some interesting tangents in
what follows!



Some interesting thoughts to think about here. Three parts to
my answer

1. Let's look at the original text.
2. What does the story tell us about human distinctiveness?
3. Let's think about that in terms of creativity.

Part 1 – Original Text

*(Intended for the technically minded; feel free to jump to the
next heading)*

I'll start with a big caveat – I am nowhere near being a
Hebrew scholar! In all that follows, I'm relying on
internet tools, interlinears, and Strong's numbers etc! I
know from my (slightly greater) NT Greek work that such tools
can give a good beginning, but are sometimes a false path.

In Genesis 1, there is indeed a series of places where "God
said." It begins in Genesis 1:3 with the famous:

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light

Eventually we get to the creation of the man and the woman
1:26 and following. Here we have (I'm using the ESV as it
tends to have some lexical precision) this, with some
highlighting from me:

*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.

28 And God blessed them. And God **said** to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

29 And God **said**, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the **breath** of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. 31 And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

In each place, this speaking (“said”) is described using the Hebrew root word, *amar* (אמר) which simply means to “utter” or “say.” What God says he wishes to do is “make” (Hebrew *asah* (עשה) meaning “do” or “make”) and it is the same word used for the making of the various animals etc. Here, however, in verse 27, when it comes to describing what God actually *does*, the word is *bara’* (ברא) meaning to “create”, “fashion”, “form”, “choose”. It’s the same word used to describe creation of the heavens and earth in verse 1. But while it is used *distinctively* here, it is not unique; *bara’* is also used, for instance, to describe the creation of the sea creatures in verse 21.

There *is* a sense of breath/breathing which in the English in verse 30 with the reference to the “breath of life” but (and I found this surprising) this appears to be overplaying the “breath” imagery. The *Complete Jewish Bible* (which tends to

get its Hebrew nuances right) simply renders it as “everything... in which there is a living soul.” The Hebrew is more literally “everything with a living life” where “life/living being/soul” is *nephesh* (נֶפֶשׁ). There is some connection with the verb “to breathe” (*naphach* (נָפַח), see below) but this link is *not* emphasised. Nor is it particularly connected with the speech-acts of God in this context; it is language that simply seems to be a descriptor of all of the living and breathing creatures – human and animal alike.

The Genesis 2 parallel hones in on verse 7 (in the ESV):

*...then the Lord God **formed** the man of dust from the ground and **breathed** into his nostrils the **breath** of life, and the man became a **living creature**.*

Here “formed” is *yatsar* (יָצַר) meaning “to form” or “to fashion” and is used exclusively of the man and woman in this context.

“Breathed” is *naphach* (נָפַח) which is close to *nephesh* (נֶפֶשׁ), which we saw above relates simply to the liveliness of animal creatures. It is interesting that the ESV has deviated from its earlier rendering, using “living creatures” rather than “everything that has the breath of life”. It is forced to do so because there is an explicit reference to the “breath of life” here that uses *neshamah* (נְשָׁמָה). This *does* seem to emphasise the breathing as part of God’s act of forming the man. In my mangled grammar, the dynamic it’s like this: God forms by breathing (*naphach*) the breath (*neshamah*) of life so that the man becomes a living (i.e. “breathing” *nephesh*) creature. That is, there are three “breathing” words in the sentence – verb, noun, and adjective.

However, I don’t think this emphasis alone would make us consider that this “breathing” creative dynamic is unique to

the creation of humanity here, differently to the creation of the other animals. If there is any difference at this level of analysis between the creation of animals and the creation of the man, it is one of “more so” rather than “differently to”.

To draw a conclusion then, I would argue that while there is a contextual link between words relating to “creating”/“making”/“forming” and those relating to “breathing” and those related to “saying” this link is attached to the lexical choices, rather than derived *from* them.

Which is to say, that we’re on pretty safe ground with the decent English translations; there doesn’t appear to be anything of significance in the Hebrew that is particularly hidden or skewed by the translation choices. And so:

Part 2 – What does the story tell us about human distinctiveness?

Clearly, the creative acts of God are preceded by his *speaking*, and *saying*, his intent. There is no narrative that expands this causation (e.g. we could imagine a mythology in which God makes his orders known and some minions carry it out). Rather, as we see from 1:3 – God says and then something simply is: *God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.* It is right to think of creation as a speech-act of God, an outworking of triune communication (as I alluded to in a previous post), which, as you point out, is later picked up in passages such as John 1.

It is also clear that there is both a similarity and a distinctiveness between the creation of the man and woman and the creation of other animals. The similarity is clear as the word *nephesh* – “life”/“soul”/“existence” with a nuance of “breath” – is applied to all living things. And there is nothing theologically wrong with this – we *are* of the same

category as animals for some sense of it, and it is right to affirm this. Much gospel imagery, particularly when it derives from the concept of animal sacrifice, hangs on this point. But I'll leave it to others to unpack the implications of animals having *nephesh*, which can have the sense of a "soul"!

But there is also a distinction. It is only of human creatures that God declares them to be "made in our image, in the likeness of ourselves" (1:26). It is only the human creatures that are delegated dominion over the other living things. There are little phrases that emphasise the distinction: For the other creatures, God decrees "let the earth bring them forth" (1:24) almost as natural outworkings of the creation at that point, but for the man God himself "forms him from the dust of the earth" (2:7); there is something much more intimate and "hands on" – the man and woman don't just have the *nephesh* (life-breath) of the other creatures, but receive the very breath of life itself (2:7).

The speech-act of God with regards to the creation of humanity does indeed *breathe* something into us that makes us unique. The narrative makes this clear.

Part 3: Let's think about that in terms of creativity.

Clearly there are ways in which we can be creative that is similar to the animals. Across the animal kingdom, not only is there reproduction and procreation, but degrees of communication, and even emotion.

But your point, I think, is about how humanity operates creatively in our unique divine image? Particularly, can we do *speech-acts*, can our speaking also be *breathing* something new?

The answer, I think, is in the affirmative.

To limit ourselves to Genesis, we see that Adam speaks things

into existence. In 2:19 it is the man who *names* the animals and in 2:23 Adam's *declaration* over Eve is almost a consummation of God's creative act, i.e. it *does* something.

Even the concept of sexual intercourse and conception as the man *knowing* his wife (4:1) is not some euphemism (have you known the Bible to be squeamish?) but a connection of the creative act with knowledge/understanding and the *intercourse* (defined in its broadest sense) of the couple. The ultimate "speech"/communication is the intimate sharing of oneself with another – no surprise that it is also creative!

We see it also in the concept of "blessing" – of speaking words over others, particular offspring. God continues his speech acts, over, for instance, Noah, in 6:1. Noah then himself speaks over his sons (positively *and* negatively) in 9:25. It is also interesting that when the Lord wants to frustrate humanity's creativity (with good reason!), he does it through confusing *language* (11:7).

To extend beyond Genesis, consider, of course, Jesus. His speech is powerful, but not just in terms of his teaching. Most of his miracles attend to a declaration, an imperative, or even a rebuke. The Kingdom of God comes near, in a real and material sense, through speech. And the imagery comes full circle when Jesus *breathes* on the disciples as an act of imparting that same hovering Spirit of creation and re-creation. It is by that same Spirit that we *pray*, which is truly creative speech, resonant with intimate communion between our maker and ourselves.

The biblical narrative brings speech, breath, spirit, and creativity together as a powerful dynamic. And I don't think this is something strange within the general human experience: it derives from our roots as created beings.

I think, then, that we can generalise: Human creativity rests on our speech, and in a much more deeper sense than the mere passing on of information; our speech is creative, and unique

amongst the animal kingdom. It literally “puts ourselves out there” expressing ideas, imagination, hopes, dreams, and so forth. It externalises our intent, our will, our purpose, our self-understanding. Its initial effect is relational (speech requires a speaker and a listener), but also sociological, and even material.

It also grounds the gospel in our createdness: it makes absolute sense that the gospel turns on the God who *reveals* himself to us still, who *speaks* to us, and would have us speak to him. It is the basis of our mission, that would have us *speak* to the world, discipling and baptising nations in the name of the one who is the Word of God.