

Genesis 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

“In the beginning.” The word “the” is not in the Hebrew text, so that leaves [Genesis 1:1](#) open for some debate about how the verse should be translated and what it means. The absence of the definite article, along with the different ways some of the words can be structured or translated has given rise to a few different ways of translating—and ways of understanding—[Genesis 1:1](#). These include, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (KJV; ESV); “When God began to create the heavens and the earth” (CEB); “At the beginning of God’s creating of the heavens and the earth” (Fox, Schocken Bible).

“In the beginning God.” The first verse of the Bible says, “In the beginning God...” The word “God” is translated from the Hebrew word *elohim* ([#0430](#) אֱלֹהִים), and it refers to our one God.

The word *elohim* is always found in the plural form and is often called a uni-plural noun. A uni-plural noun is a word that appears in the plural form but is used for singular and plural subjects alike. “Deer” and “fish” are examples of uni-plural nouns in English. As with many Hebrew words, *elohim* carries more than one definition. When it is being used in a plural sense, it refers to “gods” or “men with authority.” When it is used in its singular sense, it can refer to “God,” or “a god,” or “a man with authority, such as a judge.” The Hebrew lexicon by Brown, Driver, and Briggs is considered to be one of the best available and it has as its first usage for *elohim*: “*rulers, judges, either as divine representatives at sacred places or as reflecting divine majesty and power, divine ones, superhuman beings including God and angels, gods.*”^a

In referring to a plural subject, *elohim* is translated “gods” in many verses. [Genesis 35:2](#) reads, “Get rid of all the foreign gods you have with you,” and [Exodus 18:11](#) says, “Now I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods.” It is translated as “judges” in [Exodus 21:6](#); [22:8](#) and [22:9](#) (KJV; HCSB; NET; NIV). It is translated as “angels” (KJV) or “heavenly beings” (NIV) in [Psalm 8:5](#). Some Trinitarians teach that since the word *elohim* is plural it implies a compound unity when it refers to God. In its plural use, there is no evidence that *elohim* implied that these “gods” had some kind of plurality of persons within themselves.

Elohim is also translated as the singular “god” or “judge,” and there is no hint of any “compound nature” when it is translated that way either. Examples of this use are: [Exodus 22:20](#), “Whoever sacrifices to any *god* other than the lord must be destroyed.” [Judges 6:31](#): “If Baal really is a *god*, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar.” [Exodus 7:1](#): God says that He has made Moses a “god” (*elohim*) to Pharaoh. In [Judges 11:24](#), the pagan god Chemosh is called *elohim*, and in [1 Samuel 5:7](#), the pagan god Dagon is called *elohim*. It is not taught or believed that these pagan gods were made of some kind of “compound unity” just because they were called *elohim*, and we should not conclude that because our true God is called *elohim* that He is a compound unity. He is not.

Scholars have debated exactly how to translate *elohim* in [1 Samuel 2:25](#) as to whether *elohim* in the verse refers to a human judge or to God. The KJV says “judge.” The versions are divided between them, some translating *elohim* as a man, others as God Himself. The fact that the scholars and translators debate about whether the word *elohim* refers to a man or God shows vividly that the word itself does not have any inherent idea of a plurality of persons otherwise the choice would be easy and *elohim* could not be translated as “god” when referring to a pagan god, or as “judge” when referring to a man. Thus, the evidence in Scripture does not warrant the conclusion that the Hebrew word *elohim* inherently contains the idea of a compound nature.

The great Hebrew scholar Gesenius is considered a foremost authority on the Hebrew language, and He wrote that *elohim* occurred in a plural form for intensification and was related to the plural of majesty and used for amplification. Gesenius states, “That the language has entirely rejected the idea of numerical plurality in *elohim* (whenever it denotes *one* God) is proved especially by its being almost invariably joined with a singular attribute.”^b

Another interesting point that Gesenius makes is that the singular pronoun is always used with the word *elohim*. A study of the occurrences of *elohim* will show that the singular attribute (such as “He,” not “They,” or “I,” not “We”) is always used in conjunction with *elohim*. Furthermore, when the word *elohim* is used to denote someone else besides the true God, it is understood as either singular or plural (depending on the context), but never as a “uniplural.” God is not a “compound” being in any sense of the word. He is the “one God” of Israel in the true singular sense. Another example of *elohim* being used of a singular god apparently occurs in [Ruth 1:15](#), where *elohim* refers to Chemosh. The NET text note on [Ruth 1:15](#) says, “it is likely that Naomi, speaking from Orpah's Moabite perspective, uses the plural of majesty of the Moabite god Chemosh. For examples of the plural of majesty being used of a pagan god, see BDB 43 s.v. אֱלֹהִים 1.d. Note especially [1 Kings 11:33](#), where the plural form is used of Chemosh.” Many scholars agree with this, and *elohim* is translated “god” in a large number of versions (cp. ASV; CJB; ERV; JPS; NAB; NET; NJB; YLT).

In addition, when we study the history and the language of the Jews who spoke Hebrew, we discover that they never understood *elohim* to imply a plurality within God in any way. In fact, the Jews were staunchly opposed to people and nations who tried to introduce any hint of more than one God into their culture. Jewish rabbis have debated the Law to the point of tedium, and have recorded volume after volume of notes on the Law, yet in all of their debates, there is no mention of a plurality within God.

[For more on the grammatical plural being used of God and other people, see [commentary on 1 Kings 1:43](#). For more information on *elohim* not referring to a “God in three persons,” see [Appendix 10](#), “Jesus is the Son of God, Not God the Son,” and see [Appendix 11](#), “What is the Holy Spirit?” Also see Graeser, Lynn, and Schoenheit, *One God and One Lord: Reconsidering the Cornerstone of the Christian Faith*, 412-14.]

“God created the heavens and the earth.” Although there are scholars who translate [Genesis 1:1](#) as saying something to the effect that “God began creating the heavens and the earth,” there is more circumstantial evidence from the nature of God that He would have created everything perfect in the beginning—He certainly has the power to do that. Then, due to the war between God and Satan, the earth became without form and void (see [commentary on Gen. 1:2](#)).

a)

Francis Brown, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 43.

b)

E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 399.
