

As It Is Written

In Genesis 1:11-12 it is written thus

And Elohim said: 'May the earth, by itself, bring forth vegetation, herbs yielding seed, and fruit trees making fruit, after its kind, wherein is the seed thereof, upon the earth.' And it was so. 12 And the earth, by itself, brought forth grass, herb yielding seed after its kind, and trees making fruit, wherein is the seed thereof, after its kind; And Elohim saw that it was good.

In these verses, God relinquishes and delegates His creative authority to the earth. Normally, this text is translated along the lines of “the earth brought forth”. While nominally correct, the Hebrew grammar reveals a much clearer picture of the author’s intention. The Hebrew verbs used in verses 11 (תָּדַשְׁתִּי - *tadshei*) and 12 (וַתֹּצִיֶה - *vattotzie*) are commonly (and correctly) translated as “brought forth” (NRS) or ‘produced’ (NIV). Significantly, both verbs occur in the Hiphil or causative stem. Verbs in this form are often used to express the idea of making something possibleⁱ. In this case God makes it possible for the earth to “bring forth” plants and trees. This is important because God does not directly create or produce the plants and trees. The actual creation is accomplished by a nature whose creative power is constrained by the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology - established when God created light and, presumably, the principles of physics, chemistry, and biology that govern the universe.

Why is this important? Recall that the cultures surrounding the ancient Hebrews all were pantheistsⁱⁱ. As such, they viewed nature as the source of all creation. In this verse, the Genesis author explicitly rejects pantheism by describing nature as a tool, a proxy for a transcendent God – an entity allowed to do God’s bidding, not its own – and an entity that, while it can create, is limited by God through His agency of physical law. In other words, nature creates, not by its own accord, but as allowed and enabled by God.

fruit trees making fruit: עֵץ פְּרִי עוֹשֶׂה פְּרִי (*etz pəriy oseh pəri*) Literally “trees of fruit making fruit”. A less literal and more meaningful translation – and one I prefer – might be “trees bearing fruit making fruit”. The implication is that God instructs nature

to bring forth trees that are continually in fruit, not seasonally. In any case, this is a curious construction because in the very next verse, we learn that the earth produces something entirely different, “trees making fruit” not “fruit trees making fruit”!

trees making fruit: וְעֵץ עֹשֶׂה פֵּרוֹת (vəetz oseh-pəri) Literally “and trees making fruit”. In the previous verse, God had commanded the earth to produce “fruit trees making fruit”, but evidently the earth was unable to comply producing instead, “trees making fruit”.

Rashi¹ claims that these two verses reveal the earth as failing to meet God’s commandⁱⁱⁱ. Rashi further argues that the curse God later levies against the earth (Genesis 3:17 “...*cursed is the ground*”) is punishment for its disobedience. This makes little sense to me because the major purpose of the creation story is to position nature as being without will. In all of Genesis 1, the author is very careful to present nature as non-divine, acting only under the purview of God’s physical law. Put another way, nature is everywhere depicted as bereft of independent action. Nature is no more a moral agent than is a computer that is instructed to launch nuclear missiles at an unsuspecting nation.

In this verse, God delegates the creation of vegetation and fruit trees to the earth. Accordingly, the earth, limited by the laws of science, of which God was the creator, can only produce an approximation of God’s wish. From this we conclude that, while God may be all powerful, his creations are not. To this end, the biblical witness is explicit: nature is not divine and does not possess God’s power of divine creation (*bara*). Unlike divine creation, nature’s creative power (*asah*) is constrained by physical principles – the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology, established by God earlier in 1:3.

Second, the inability of the earth to comply with God’s demand can be explained as a consequence of the underlying indeterminacy of the universe – especially evident at the quantum level. Looking back with the benefit of an understanding of quantum physics, this verse suggests a creation entirely consistent with physical law^{iv}. God indicates a desire for a certain kind of tree and nature responds with a close approximation. Here we see that God did not [intend to] create a completely predictable

¹ Wikiwand: <https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Rashi>

world; one that rigorously and always conforms to the law of cause and effect. His creations, at their core, are governed by natural law and constrained by unpredictable events.

Rightly understood, the Hebrew of these two verses conveys an important truth about God's creation: while a perfect all-powerful Creator is surely capable of producing a completely predictable universe, He obviously chose not to do so. More specifically, such a God would certainly be able to produce a universe in which He really does play dice, contra Albert Einstein.

We cannot know why God created and shaped an indeterminate universe – maybe because predictable outcomes are seldom delightful and never surprising. But this we do know: free will cannot exist in a universe that is completely deterministic. And, as the larger biblical narrative testifies, God desires mankind, of their own free will, to adopt His values (Deuteronomy 30:19).

God does not desire the work of drones or the adulation of sycophants. He desires beings whose worship and fealty are freely chosen. The indeterminacy of our universe, a small piece of which is illustrated in these two verses, is the lynchpin underlying the mechanism by which God chose to create a universe in which mankind was free to choose its own path.

Genesis 1:13

And there was evening, and there was morning. A third day.

ⁱ The Hiphil can be difficult to translate. So an example may suffice: when an author wants to emphasize that the subject was enabled or caused to do something, the Hiphil is used. Suppose English had a causative stem, like the Hebrew Hiphil. Consider the following two sentences:

1. The baby suckled (Normal)
2. The baby suckled (Causative)

Unlike the first, the second sentence calls the reader's attention to the baby having been enabled, allowed, or caused to eat. The implication is that there exists an outside agency (i.e., the mother) that enables the baby to feed.

ⁱⁱ Pantheism is the belief that all reality is identical with divinity, or that everything composes an all-encompassing, immanent god. Pantheists thus do not believe in a distinct personal or anthropomorphic god. The pantheists of the Ancient Near East viewed natural objects, the sun, moon, stars, water, storms, and so forth as individual gods with magical powers

ⁱⁱⁱ "trees of fruit making fruit" were understood by Rashi to be trees that were themselves edible fruit. Gerald Schroeder, following Rashi, argues that earth's failure to produce trees that continually bear fruit

was a deliberate rebellion against God – a bridge too far for me. As with Rashi's interpretation, I see nothing in the text to suggest that the earth was (or could be) in any way portrayed as a moral agent. Indeed, such a suggestion seems counter to the anti-pantheistic polemic of the story.

^{iv} In no sense can these two verses be taken as a claim that the author of Genesis understood the mechanisms of science much less making a scientific claim. If, as do most, we understand the author to have been divinely inspired, then any such claim must have been entirely unconscious, known only to God.