

**UNDERSTANDING THE BEGINNING OF GENESIS:
JUST HOW MANY BEGINNINGS WERE THERE?**

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The first word of the Hebrew Genesis, as traditionally vocalized, means literally: *In a beginning*. However, tradition has its meaning and translated as: *In the beginning*. The literal meaning is considered as contradicting reality. Therefore, Rashi, the noted medieval commentator, suggested a syntactic solution that maintains the traditional meaning. However, this syntactic solution, as is shown later, requires a change in the vocalization of the second word of Genesis. This paper argues that we should accept the traditional, Masoretic vocalization along with its literal meaning, and explores the consequences of that literal meaning.

A POSSIBLE MISTRANSLATION AND MISUNDERSTANDING

The most commonly given English translation of Genesis 1:1, *b'reshit bara elokim et hashamayim v'et ha'arets*, is: *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth*. This translation, however, may be wrong. This potential mistranslation is not restricted to English. The same potential mistranslation occurs in every direct translation of the Bible, not only in English, that I have seen and understood.

The problem is that the first word, *b'reshit*, is translated as: *In the beginning*, with a definite article. If the meaning were, in fact, *In the beginning*, the first word would have been vocalized slightly differently, with a *qamatz* vowel underneath the *bet*, to make the word *bareshit*. What we have, however, is *b'reshit* with a *shva* underneath the *bet*, meaning *In a beginning*. Put differently, the vowel underneath the *bet* is *shva*, serving as an indefinite article, instead of *qamatz* serving as a definite article.

The Bible, in its traditional written form, has neither vowel signs, punctuation marks, nor paragraph and chapter divisions. Thus, the Bible does not provide the

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vowels that distinguish the two meanings of the first word, Thus, the first sentence, as found in the Bible, is בראשית ברא אלקים את השמים ואת הארץ.

As has already been stated, the vocalization that has been handed down by tradition, and documented in vocalized versions of the Bible, is the one that has the first word spoken and written as *b'reshit*, with the indefinite article. *B'reshit* is the vocalization that is used in every synagogue and in every standard and scholarly text of the Hebrew Bible. It is also the reading I have heard in synagogues on Simhat Torah, the holiday of Rejoicing of the Torah, and on Shabbat B'reshit, the sabbath following Simhat Torah, when the annual Torah-reading cycle begins anew with chapter one of Genesis.

It should be noted that it is not just the translation that may be wrong. It appears, at least today, that even native speakers of Hebrew, in Israel, understand the word *b'reshit* as meaning *in the beginning* and are surprised when I point out that it really means *in a beginning*. Once over the initial surprise, they agree with me. This observation is by a random sampling of more than a dozen native Hebrew speaking Israeli relatives and friends. Perhaps, this understanding has been caused by familiarity with the Bible's translation into other languages. This understanding has been captured even in the standard multi-volume Even-Shoshan dictionary of the Hebrew language², whose first entry for *b'reshit* is *bat'hila*, *barishona*, both with definite articles. It is not totally surprising that native speakers might understand differently from what they hear themselves say, because English has many expressions that literally mean other than what people believe they mean, e.g., *up to par*, which should be *down to par* given its origins in the game of golf.

A SYNTACTIC SOLUTION

I am not the first to note the problem of the meaning of the first word of the Bible. It was noted as early as the 11th Century by Rashi, who provided a grammatical solution. That is, he treated what is normally considered the first sentence as a relative clause modifying what is normally considered the second sentence. In Rashi's treatment, the traditional first sentence is treated as a relative clause, having been vocalized as *b'reshit b'ro elokim et hashamayim v'et ha'aretz*, leading into the traditional second sentence *v'ha'aretz hay'ta tahu vavohu v'hoshekh 'al-p'ney t'hom v'ruah elokim m'rahefet 'al-p'ney hamayim*.

(Gen. 1:2), now considered the main clause modified by the relative clause. Under this vocalization, the relative clause (Gen. 1:1) can be translated as: *In the beginning of God's creation of the heavens and the earth*, leading into the main clause (Gen. 1:2), translated as: *the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep, [and] God's wind hovered on the face of the waters.*

This different division into sentences is not a problem. Since there is neither vocalization nor punctuation in the Bible as written, there are no sentence-ending markers. Thus, the division into sentences is also something determined by tradition. Here, *b'reshit b'ro elokim* is a construct form in which the definite article would show up only in the last word, and only if that last word were not a proper noun. Since in this case, the last word, *elokim*, is a proper noun, the definite article is only implied.

The primary support offered for this interpretation is that the traditional first sentence now has a grammatical construction that is identical to that found in the so-called second creation narrative that begins in the second half of Genesis 2:4, *b'yom 'asot hashem elokim eretz v'shamayim*. This narrative can be translated as: *on the day of-the-name God's making earth and heavens.*

There is one main reason to discount Rashi's interpretation. It requires a change from the traditional vocalization of **בָּרָא**, from *bara* to *b'ro*. This interpretation is taken to avoid a problem arising from the traditional vocalization of **בְּרֵאשִׁית** as *b'reshit* and to avoid having to vocalize it differently, as *bareshit*. Thus, Rashi offers one change in vocalization to avoid another change in vocalization. Who is to say which change is more acceptable, especially in a tradition that devoutly adheres to traditional vocalizations?

The grammatical approach to solving the problem arose from an attempt to keep to the understanding that God is talking about *the* beginning of the universe. That is, a syntactic change is accepted to preserve the understood semantics.

Nahum Sarna's recent conversational translation, adopted by the Jewish Publication Society¹, is: *When God began to create heaven and earth, ...* Sarna thus skirts the issue entirely by converting *beginning* to a verb form, thus avoiding the need for any article.

A SEMANTIC SOLUTION

The thrust of this paper is basically: Let us see what happens if we keep the traditional vocalizations and understand it as written. That is, let us see the implications of the semantics of the text as it is written.

So, let us now accept that the first sentence of Genesis says *b'reshit bara elokim et hashamayim v'et ha'aretz*, and that it means what can be translated into English as: *In a beginning, God created the heavens and the earth*. There are several advantages to doing so:

1. This interpretation fits the traditional vocalization.
2. God is indeed literally talking about more than one creation. The first creation is that of the universe on day one. Then there are a myriad of creations of light, night, day, the earth, oceans, plants, animals, and finally human beings, created in God's own image.
3. This interpretation of multiple creations solves the age-old question of where Cain's wife (Gen. 4:17) comes from. At the time she is mentioned, there had been only four people mentioned, Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel. Cain had killed Abel. There was no mention of any sister. Besides, would Cain marry his sister? Perhaps God is describing with Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel, only one representative creation among many. Another of these creations could easily provide a proper and unrelated woman for Cain to marry. Indeed, this interpretation is more appealing than to conjecture that Cain married a previously unmentioned sister.
4. This interpretation provides the other creations that can explain the existence of the people who might want to kill Cain for having murdered Abel (Gen. 4:14) and of the people for whom Cain built a city (Gen. 4:17).

Interestingly, the Midrash speculating about the great flood in Noah's time, remarks that there were many creations. *Rabbi Abbahu said: "The Almighty created many worlds and destroyed them ... until our present world was formed."*

CONCLUSIONS

I have noted a problem with the translation and understanding of the first sentence of the Bible. A literal translation and understanding says that the creation of the universe described in Genesis was only one of possibly many creations.

This literal meaning was considered contradicting reality and thus, incorrect. Rashi attempted a syntactic solution to resurrect what is believed to be the intended understanding. I have argued that we should accept the literal semantics, for it answers some other questions about Genesis, namely from where did the other people that are mentioned in the text come.

In addition, the literal meaning of multiple creations might be God's clue to solve some mysteries in cosmology. For all the details, please see the full report, from which this published paper was derived, at:

http://se.uwaterloo.ca/~dberry/FTP_SITE/tech.reports/breshit.pdf

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Rabbi Richard Agler, Richard Arenstrup, Jody Bar-On, Yael Berry, Dr. James Diamond, Mihaela Gheorghiu, Dr. Jack Goldberg, Dr. Leah Goldin, Prof. Uzzi Ornan, Dr. Christian Reipl, Prof. Edward M. Reingold, Prof. Theodor Seidl, Prof. Gerald Schroeder, Dr. Richard Schwartz, Ursula Thoene, and the editorial board of the Jewish Bible Quarterly for discussions, answering grammatical questions, or pointing me to relevant literature. I especially thank Rabbi Ari Cartun for very detailed remarks on an earlier draft of this paper and Dr. Judith Romney Wegner, who strongly disagrees with me, for spirited discussions and very detailed remarks on an earlier draft of this paper. Finally, I thank Prof. Johannes Floss for showing me the problem.

NOTES

[1] JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh (New York, NY: Jewish Publication Society, 1999).

[2] Even-Shoshan, A. The New Dictionary: Complete Treasury of the Hebrew Language (Jerusalem: Kiryat-Sefer, 1983).