



Have We Misunderstood Genesis 1:1?

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Abstract

Arguing that the Hebrew does not support the traditional translation of Genesis 1:1, a growing number of scholars are proposing a retranslation of the verse that undercuts the idea of an absolute beginning of the universe and a creation out of nothing. Dr. Wilson shows that this retranslation is unwarranted and unworkable.

Introduction

The traditional translation of Genesis 1:1 is well known, “**In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.**” It is called the traditional translation because it has been *the* dominant rendering of Genesis 1:1 since the Greek Septuagint, the first major translation of the Hebrew **Bible** [<http://answersingenesis.org/bible/>] (into Greek), produced by Jewish scholars in the third century BC. Does the traditional translation describe the absolute beginning of the universe? Does

it communicate the idea that the heavens and the earth were created out of nothing? Throughout history, Jews and Christians have overwhelmingly said, “Yes!”

However, a growing number of Hebrew scholars are now saying, “No!” For many of them, their reason for doing so is not based upon their interpretation of this verse, but their retranslation of it. Considering the historical weight of the traditional translation, what is the compelling evidence for this change? Did earlier translators misunderstand the Hebrew text? Have there been new developments in the understanding of Hebrew grammar that would cause modern scholars to reject what past scholars and translators affirmed?

The Other Translation

In order to answer these questions, let us first lay out this retranslation of Genesis 1:1, the “dependent-clause” translation. It renders Genesis 1:1, along with 1:2 and 1:3a, in a manner similar to the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) version of 1985, “1 When God began to create heaven and earth—2 the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—3a God said, ‘Let there be light.’”¹ According to this dependent-clause translation, it is not possible to interpret the idea of an absolute beginning of the universe or a **creation** [<http://answersingenesis.org/creation/>] out of nothing since the rendering treats the earth in Genesis 1:2 as being in existence before **God** [<http://answersingenesis.org/god/>]’s first act of creation, light. This change in translation produces a change in interpretation. No longer is Genesis 1:1 the first act of creation. Rather, in this rendering Genesis 1:1, along with Genesis 1:2, describe the context in which the first act of creation takes place: the creation of light in Genesis 1:3

Proponents of the dependent-clause translation argue that according to the grammar of the Hebrew, Genesis 1:1 should be understood as a type of substantival clause.² In both English and Hebrew, a substantival clause is an entire clause that functions like a noun. For instance, in the sentence, “I know you are watching me,” the clause “you are watching me” is functioning as a

direct object of the main verb “know,” a function usually reserved for nouns and pronouns. These proponents contend that the clause “God created the heavens and the earth” in Genesis 1:1 can function like an object of a preposition if we take the first part of the verse to be “In the beginning of.” This treatment of the passage could in a sense be rendered as “In the beginning of God creating the heavens and the earth . . . ,” or “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth” Employing this same grammatical principle, the JPS renders the verse with a dependent clause, “When God began to create heaven and earth” What makes the dependent-clause translation more preferable to the traditional translation with its historical preponderance? Is this type of substantival clause a grammatical construction that was unfamiliar to the ancient translators?

The most recent editions of the respected Hebrew grammars by Gesenius and Joüon together list over 200 examples of these types of substantival clauses in Biblical Hebrew,³ which tells us that they are not a minor nuance of the language. Not surprisingly, the ancient translators of the Septuagint (Greek), the Vulgate (Latin), and the Targums (Aramaic), amongst others, recognized these types of grammatical constructions and frequently translated them as relative clauses. Yet, none of these translations recognized Genesis 1:1 as one of these constructions. Instead they rendered the verse in the traditional manner, as an independent clause.

The False Dilemma

However, proponents of the dependent-clause translation also point out that in Genesis 1:1 the article *the* in the phrase “in the beginning” is not explicit in the Masoretic pointing of *rēšît*, the Hebrew word for “beginning.” (The original Hebrew text had only consonants, which was perfectly understandable to Jewish readers. The Masoretes were the Jewish scribes working roughly from AD 400–1000 who preserved the oral reading of the Hebrew text by adding vowel points, accents, and other markings to it.) Their argument then follows that given the absence of the article, *the*, the only other option for understanding Genesis 1:1 is that it is the type of substantival clause just

described. Again, is this a grammatical clue that the ancient translators missed? Did they not know that the article *the* is not in the Hebrew?

According to the historical evidence, the answer to both questions is, "No." Consider the Septuagint, again the very first translation of the Hebrew Bible. It preserved the same reading as the Masoretic text by not including the article "the" in its translation of the verse. However, if the only other option for understanding Genesis 1:1 is that it is a type of substantival clause, why didn't the Septuagint translators render the verse accordingly? We have already mentioned that they were very familiar with these types of grammatical constructions and frequently rendered them as relative clauses. Perhaps there does not have to be an explicitly marked "the" in the pointing of *rēšît* for us to understand Genesis 1:1 as an independent clause starting with "In *the* beginning." In fact, there are good reasons to conclude just that.

In both English and Hebrew, the word *beginning* is not a typical noun. It is a relator noun, which means it needs extra information to complete its meaning. Think about other English relator nouns like front, back, middle, left (side), right (side), and end. By themselves, these words don't communicate much. The front of what? The middle of what? The beginning of what? Usually these relator nouns are joined to other nouns to give them that needed, extra information: the end of the couch, the left (side) of the couch, the back of the couch, etc. However, there are instances in both English and Hebrew where relator nouns stand alone with clear meaning, that is without another noun like "couch" connected to it grammatically. In such cases, the relator nouns get their extra information from their contexts. For instance, at the conclusion of a movie, the phrase "the end" stands alone and is contextually related to the event of watching the movie. We don't need the words "of the movie" to be added to words "the end" to know what is being communicated on the screen. In Hebrew, the word *rēšît* ("beginning") stands alone in Genesis 1:1 and Isaiah 46:10 as does the similar word *rōš* ("beginning") in Proverbs 8:23 and Isaiah 40:21, where it refers to the beginning of creation. The context of these passages gives us that extra information.⁴

In Hebrew, when relator nouns stand by themselves, they are frequently found with or without the article *the*. Consider the following prose verses from the NAS using the Hebrew relator nouns right (side), *yāmîṅ*, and left (side), *səməl*,⁵ where [the] indicates a missing “the” in the Hebrew.

2 Samuel 2:19 Asahel pursued Abner and did not turn to the right or to the left from following Abner.

Numbers 20:17b We will go along the king's highway, not turning to [the] right or [the] left, until we pass through your territory.

2 Chronicles 3:17a He erected the pillars in front of the temple, one on [the] right and the other on the left,

In 2 Samuel 2:19 the words “right” and “left,” standing by themselves, are explicitly marked with the article “the” in the Hebrew. However, in Number 20:17b, the words “right” and “left,” standing by themselves, are not marked with the article even though they are used in the same manner as “right” and “left” in 2 Samuel 2:19. The article “the” is implied from the context.

In 2 Chronicles 3:17a the word “right” is not marked with the article “the” in the Hebrew, but the word “left” is! Again, the first “the” is implied from the context. Interestingly, the Septuagint, following the literal Hebrew, does not render the first “the” even though it is implied from the context, but does render the second “the” because it is clearly marked in the Hebrew.⁶ Often the Septuagint is very literal in its translations, as it is with 2 Chronicles 3:17a, so it is not surprising that its literal translation of Genesis 1:1 does not include an article with “beginning.”

These verses help to demonstrate that when relator nouns stand alone, their contexts still communicate an implied “the” even though such nouns are not marked with an explicit article. Thus, just because the article “the” is not reflected in the vowel pointing of the Hebrew text, it does

not mean that we cannot or should not translate the Hebrew relator noun *rēšît*, with its prefixed preposition, as “In the beginning,” nor does it mean that we cannot translate Genesis 1:1 as an independent clause as the most popular English translations all do (e.g., KJV, NKJV, NAS, NIV, ESV, HCSB, Geneva, NLT, RSV).

The Awkward Grammar

The traditional understanding of Genesis 1:1 is grammatically easy, and the most basic principle for understanding any language is to follow the ease of the grammar.

If, however, Genesis 1:1 is a specific type of substantival clause, as proponents of the dependent-clause translation argue, then it makes the reading of the Hebrew very difficult. As a substantival clause, Genesis 1:1 is not simply a dependent clause connected to Genesis 1:3, like the JPS translates it. It is actually a grammatical part of the main clause in Genesis 1:3. Such is the nature of substantival clauses in Biblical Hebrew; they are participating elements in their main clause. Genesis 1:1 would be a prepositional phrase modifying the main clause verb of Genesis 1:3. It would be like rendering the two verses as, “In the beginning of God creating the heavens and the earth, God said, ‘Let there be light.’” The main problem with this grammatical reading is Genesis 1:2. Genesis 1:2 inserts three clauses between the supposed prepositional phrase of 1:1 and its supposed main clause in 1:3. In other words, an entire verse, marked as such by the Masoretes, separates a prepositional phrase from the main clause verb it modifies. Such a construction is grammatically awkward in Hebrew *and* in English!

Conclusion

Here is the main take-away. The dependent-clause understanding of Genesis 1:1 is not grammatically easy; it is difficult and awkward. The traditional understanding of Genesis 1:1 is grammatically easy, and the most basic principle for understanding any language is to follow the

ease of the grammar. The ancient translators were just as familiar with the grammatical issues as we are today, and they followed the ease of the grammar by rendering the passage in its most normal, traditional sense. So the main question should not be, "Is there something in the Hebrew that the ancient translators missed?" That answer is clearly, "No." The better, more humble question should be, "Is there something in the Hebrew we have missed?" The traditional understanding of Genesis 1:1 is trustworthy. In the absolute beginning God did indeed create the heavens and earth out of nothing, and as the rest of the chapter and Exodus 20:11 teach, He did it supernaturally by His word in six literal days.

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Answers in Depth



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Footnotes

1. This translation was a major shift from the JPS version of 1917, which rendered the verse as "IN THE beginning God created the heaven and the earth." The all-caps is theirs.

2. This type of substantival clause is more technically called a genitive substantival clause. In a genitive substantival clause an entire clause (the *rectum*) is in grammatical relation to a single noun (the *regens*). (See the most recent edition of the Hebrew grammar by Paul Joüon § 129p-q.) In the case of Genesis 1:1, the entire clause “God created the heavens and the earth” would be in grammatical relation to the single noun “beginning” if it were a genitive substantival clause. Some proponents of the dependent-clause translation understand this grammatical relation to be like a relative clause. Others understand the relation to be non-relative.
3. See GKC § 130d; 155d-n and Joüon § 129p-q; 158a-d.
4. In his commentary on Genesis, the Medieval Jewish scholar Moses ben Naḥman (Ramban) makes a similar argument concerning the use of *rēšit* in Genesis 1:1 and Isaiah 46:10.
5. When the Hebrew words *yāmîn* and *səməl* are used as relator nouns, they frequently refer to the right or left side of a person or thing. For a few examples see 2 Samuel 2:21; 2 Kings 23:8; and Zechariah 4:3 in the NAS and Nehemiah 8:4 in the NIV.
6. The Septuagint does not put the article in the same place as the Hebrew, but it is clear that the translators were rendering it in the Greek.

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