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

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The first word of the Hebrew text of Genesis "בראשית" as traditionally vocalized means literally "*In a beginning.*" However, tradition gives it the meaning and translation "*In the beginning.*" The literal meaning is considered as contradicting reality. Therefore, Rashi 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 implications of that literal meaning.

A POSSIBLE MISTRANSLATION AND MISUNDERSTANDING

The most commonly given English translation of Genesis 1:1, *b'reshit bara elohim et hashamayim v'et ha'aretz*, is: *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth*. This translation, however, may be wrong. If so, the misunderstanding is not restricted to renderings into English but may occur in direct biblical translations into every language that I have seen and understood.

The problem is that "*b'reshit*" is translated "*In the beginning.*" 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,*" making the word "*ba*reshit.*" What we have, however, is a "*shva*" under the "*bet,*" making the word "*b'reshit,*" meaning "*In a beginning.*" That is, the "*qamatz*" serves as a definite article, while a "*shva*" would serve as an indefinite article.

In its traditional written form, the Bible has no vowel signs to distinguish between these two possible readings. 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. This is the vocalization that is used in every standard and scholarly

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text of the Hebrew Bible and in every synagogue. I have heard it on Simhat Torah and on Shabbat B'reshit when the annual Torah-reading cycle begins anew with the first chapter of Genesis.

It should be noted that it is not just translations that may be wrong. It appears, at least today, that even in Israel those whose mother tongue is Hebrew 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 reading perhaps derives from familiarity with the Bible's translations into other languages. Even in the standard multi-volume Even-Shoshan dictionary of the Hebrew language,[1] the first entry for "*b'reshit*" is "*bat'hila*, *barishona*" [in the beginning], both with definite articles. It is not totally surprising that native speakers of Hebrew might understand differently from what they hear themselves say, because English has many expressions that literally mean other that what people believe they mean, such as "head over heels", which should be "heels over head" when its intent is to describe someone flipping through the air, either literally or figuratively.

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; vocalized as *b'reshit **b'ro** elohim et hashamayim v'et ha'aretz.* It leads into the traditional second sentence, *v'ha'aretz hay'ta tohu vavohu v'hoshekh `al-p'ney t'hom v'ruah elohim 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, 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* (1:2).

This different division into sentences is not a problem. In the original text there is no mark to show where a sentence ends, and the division is also something determined by tradition. Here, *b'reshit b'ro elohim* 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 is is the proper noun "*elohim*" 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 elohim eretz v'shamayim*. This narrative can be translated as *on the day of the Lord 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 "ברא″ from "*bara*" to "*b'ro*." This interpretation is taken to avoid a problem arising from the traditional vocalization of "בראשית″ as "*b'reshit*" and to avoid having to vocalize it different-ly, as "*bareshit*." Thus, Rashi offers one change in vocalization to avoid another change in vocalization. Who is to say which change is more accepta-ble, especially in a tradition that devoutly adheres to traditional vocaliza-tions?

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 un-iverse. That is, a syntactic change is accepted to preserve the understood se-mantics.

Nahum Sarna's recent translation[2] 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 elohim 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 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 the origin of Cain's wife (4:17). 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 (4:14) and of the people for whom Cain built a city (4:17).

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: Whence came the other people that are mentioned in the text?

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 paper is derived.[3]

NOTES

1. A. Even-Shoshan, *The New Dictionary: Complete Treasury of the Hebrew Language* (Jerusalem: Kiryat-Sefer, 1983).
2. JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh (New York, NY: Jewish Publication Society, 1999).
3. http://se.uwaterloo.ca/~dberry/FTP_SITE/tech.reports/breshit.pdf