

An Alternate Translation of Genesis 1:1

In the Bible believing community, most folk believe that God created the sky, the earth, and everything that lives in them. However, some believe in a young earth, which God created during six days, about six thousand years ago. I shall call this the traditional view.

Whereas others believe in an old earth, which already existed when God created Eden during six days, about six to ten thousand years ago. I shall call this the alternate view.

The traditional view and the alternate view both believe the Bible, and both appeal to Genesis chapter 1, verses 1 through 4.

The opening lines of the Holy Bible have astounded folk across many cultures for more than three millennia. In most English Bible versions, the Book of Genesis chapter 1 begins thusly:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep....
And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light....
And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. *ESV*

This text clearly asserts an intelligent Creator God, who is sovereign over matter and space, over land and sea, over history and time. As a result, these statements challenge polytheists, intrigue philosophers, and bemuse atheists, to this day.

In the following lines of Genesis, this Creator God, during the space of six literal days, prepares a home for human beings whom he creates, and with whom he communicates.

Historically, English Bible readers have understood these lines to affirm that the Creator God made the sky and the earth in one day, about six thousand years ago. Thus, to them the biblical text seems to teach the following:

1. There was nothing.
2. God created everything in six days.
3. The new earth was dark and empty.
4. God created light.
5. God created everything else on earth.

In the past two centuries, with the rise of modern science, the sky and earth now have every appearance of being millions or billions of years old, not only thousands. Thus, modern science teaches the following:

1. Once, there was nothing.
2. But suddenly, matter and energy happened.

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3. Life evolved on earth over billions of years.
4. Ignorant people imagined that a God or gods made everything.
5. Science informed are no gods (or no Bible God).

However, there is another way in which to understand and to translate the first lines of Genesis in the Bible.

The **New Revised Standard Version**, updated in the 2021, reads:

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep... Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light... And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

By changing "In the beginning" to "When God began to create," this translation seems to teach the following:

1. The Sky and earth were already there.
2. The old earth was or became dark and empty.
3. God cause light to shine on day 1.
4. God created everything else on earth in five days.
5. The Bible and science can agree on this.

But which translation is right? "In the beginning, God created..." Or "When God began to create"?

Here we have to turn to the original language, and examine Genesis 1:1 in Hebrew language. If you are a grammar geek, then you will enjoy this.

:הָאָרֶץ וְאֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת אֱלֹהִים בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרֵאשִׁית → *Bè-ré'shît bârà' 'Elohîm 'ét hâ-shâmayîm wè-'ét hâ-'ârèts.*

The traditional translation, "In the beginning", is one word in Hebrew: "*Bè-ré'shît*". This word has three parts: (1) a noun: *ro'sh* which means 'head', (2) an abstract ending: *î't* which makes it mean 'beginning', and (3) a prefix *bè* which has no specific meaning. Please notice that there is no definite article, there is no 'the' in the Hebrew.

When the Jews translated verse 1 into Greek, in the third century BCE, they wrote "In beginning" (Ἐν ἀρχῇ, *En arché*), not "In the beginning" (Ἐν τῇ ἀρχῇ, *En té arché*).

Hebrew nouns can take several different **prefixes**. Here are the most common ones:

bè = locality or instrument: 'at' or 'with'. (Hebrew: ב, Arabic: ب).

hâ = definite article: 'the'. (ה, ח)

kè = comparison: 'like'. (כ, כ)

lè = existence or direction: 'to'. (ל, ל)

mi = source: 'from'. (מ, מ)

wè = conjunction: 'and'. (ו, ו)

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By prefixing *bè* to *ré'shît*, the noun functions as a kind of temporal adverbial phrase meaning, “when (something) began”.

Bè-ré'shît occurs in four other verses of the Hebrew Bible, all of them in the Book of Jeremiah. For example, Jeremiah 26:1 in English reads, “At the beginning of the reign of King Jehoiakim,” which can be translated as, “When King Jehoiakim began to reign.” Notice that the English here says, “*the* beginning of”. But there is no article “the” in the Hebrew, and the noun “beginning” is followed by another noun, “reign”.

Construct: Here is a rule of Hebrew grammar. When a Hebrew noun is modified by another noun that follows immediately, the first noun never has a definite article “the”. And the English connector word “of” does not exist in Hebrew, at all. When this happens, we call the first noun a “construct noun.”

For example, the English phrase “the word of the prophet” in Hebrew is simply, “word the prophet.” So, in Jeremiah 26:1, the Hebrew reads, “At-beginning reign Jehoiakim.” Here, too, “beginning” is a construct noun.

This phrase can be translated “When King Jehoiakim began to reign.” Likewise, in Genesis 1, verses 1 and 2 can be translated as the NRSV does: “When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos.”

This situation explains why “young earth” creationists appeal to the traditional translation of Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning, God created.” This is because they believe that God created the sky and the earth on day one of the creation week.

Whereas “old earth” creationists prefer the alternative translation, “When God began to create”. This is because they believe that the creation week began when the sky and earth already existed.

That is to say some creationists allow their belief about the earth’s age to determine the meaning of Scripture, rather than allowing Scripture first to inform their belief.

In conclusion, the alternative translation has several advantages over the traditional translation:

First, the alternative better expresses Hebrew grammar than does the traditional.

Second, it explains how the angels were already present when God created the earth.

Third, it is more consistent with observed geologic ages and with known human history.

And fourth, it affirms the six day creation of earth, as does the traditional.

But wait! There are **four problems** with the Alternative translation.

Problem 1. Some folk observe that in Genesis 1:1, there is no noun following “beginning.” Instead, the following words are the clause “God created.” So this cannot be a construct noun meaning “when God began to create.”

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In reply, we can observe that construct nouns can occur with subject verb clauses. For example, Hosea 1:2, the NRSV reads, “When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said...” Whereas the Hebrew reads, “Beginning Yahweh spoke to Hosea.”

Problem 2. Others observe that Genesis 1, verses 2, 3 and 4 begin with the conjunction “and”. This seems to make verses 1 and 2 separate sentences.

But in Genesis chapters 1 through 6, there are 140 verses, and 126 of those verses begin with the prefix *wè*. This is normal Hebrew. Although *wè* can be a conjunction “and,” it often serves as a clause marker which is best not translated in English.

Furthermore, most Hebrew sentences consist of two halves, separated by a tiny mark called *’atnah*. In those 140 sentences, 135 of them have an *’atnah*, and most of the second halves begin with *wè*, which is a clause marker, and not always a conjunction “and.”

Problem 3. In Genesis 1:1, “beginning” may still be a definite noun, not a construct noun. In Hebrew, when you attach a prefix to a noun that has a definite article *hâ*, the prefix’s consonant replaces the *h* but the noun is still definite. For example, if “the beginning” were *hâ-ré’shît*, then by adding *bè* the word becomes *bâ-ré’shît*, “in *the* beginning.”

But when that happens, the prefix keeps the article’s vowel *â*. But Genesis 1:1, the prefix’s vowel is *è*, not *â*. (*bè-ré’shît*, not *bâ-ré’shît*). Therefore, there was no definite article, and *ré’shît* remains a construct noun: “beginning (of)”.

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

Problem 4. The 40 Bible versions found on biblehub.com all have the traditional wording in Genesis 1:1. Can so many versions be wrong?

Well, they are not wrong, they are only traditional. Bible publishers have two objectives.

First, they seek to sell Bibles. And since their primary market remains traditional Protestants, publishers prefer traditional translations.

Second, Bible publishers seek to avoid controversy. Therefore, they shun translations which most of their market would not find acceptable.

This is not to say that Bible publishers are deceitful. After all, their primary goal remains that of bringing the life-giving Word of God to every community in the world.

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