

SOME NOTES ON TRANSLATING **וְאֵת הַכּוֹכָבִים** IN GENESIS 1:16

COLIN L. HOUSE
Berrien Springs, MI 49103

Gen 1:16 in the Hebrew text and as it is typically translated into English is as follows (vowel pointing of the Hebrew here and throughout this article appears only in connection with **וְאֵת, אֵת,** and other variations of this crucial expression):

<i>Hebrew</i>	<i>Typical Translation</i>
וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים	And God made
אֶת־שְׁנֵי הַמָּאֹרֹת הַגְּדֹלִים	the two great lights
אֶת־הַמָּאֹר הַגָּדֹל לְמַמְשֶׁלֶת הַיּוֹם	the greater light to rule the day
וְאֶת־הַמָּאֹר הַקָּטָן לְמַמְשֶׁלֶת הַלַּיְלָה	the lesser light to rule the night
וְאֵת הַכּוֹכָבִים	and [he made] the stars [also].

The final clause “and [he made] the stars [also]” is of interest because of the presence of **וְאֵת**. Since this is usually thought of as one of the variations of the untranslatable Hebrew object marker, it would appear that either the original author wished to include the stars within the parameters of the creation week or this clause is a redactional appendage.

1. *Examination of Genesis 1:16*

The Context

The appropriate starting point in a discussion of the final clause of Gen 1:16 is the immediate context. Vss. 14 and 15 ask for, and the three clauses in vs. 16 preceding **וְאֵת** introduce, the creation of “the two great light sources.” But, can these light sources be referred to as “great” if no other light sources were available for comparison? Were they “great” because they dominated the writer’s, a pre-existent, or an immediately created environment? The following verses, concentrating on the purpose and position of the two great light sources, refer neither to the form nor to the function of “the stars.” Furthermore, as no light sources previously existed “to give light upon the earth” and “to divide between light and darkness,” and, as the function of the stars is apparently independent of

“the two great light sources,” the stars’ possible pre-existence to the parameters of 1:16 cannot be ignored.

Because of the apparent age of the universe and the difficulty, therefore, in its having come into existence within the parameters of 1:16 when it is argued that **וְאֵת הַכּוֹכָבִים** was original and accusative (supported by LXX και τούς ἀστέρων), the modern exegetes usually then address the inadequacies of ancient-Near-Eastern cosmology. However, if redaction is favored on the basis of contextual anomalies, it should be understood that other sections of Gen 1:1-2:4a could be equally anomalous. For example, when reference is made to the populating of the waters with small aquatic creatures, no mention is made of sea monsters (1:20), but in the completion of the jussive (1:21) the latter are of primary importance among the allegedly newly created.

Specificity

The nomenclature in Gen 1:16 is also interesting. Although “day,” “night,” and “stars” are specifically referred to, neither of the great light sources—sun and moon—is named. In contrast to the presence of the three *specific* designations, these two great light sources are referred to simply as “the greater light” and “the lesser light.”

2. The Hebrew Object Marker

Further examination of 1:16 reveals that apparently three variations for the sign of the direct object are used in this verse: **־אֵת**, **־וְאֵת**, and **וְאֵת**. After an exhaustive study of the use of the object marker in Genesis, I have found that **־אֵת** is used in approximately 70% of the occurrences, **־וְאֵת** in 20%, and **אֵת** (which does not occur in Gen 1:16) and **וְאֵת** (the term in the last clause of Gen 1:16) only in about 5% each. Although these distinctions could be seen as the recording of mere Masoretic oral tradition, if the terms are indeed synonymous, then it would seem that similar statistics should be expected for each form. However, as the forms without **ֵת** generally introduce the initial accusative, and those with **ֵת** introduce additional direct objects, statistical similarity or identity could be expected (but does not exist) between those forms of **אֵת** with **ֵת** (**־וְאֵת**, **וְאֵת**) and those without **ֵת** (**־אֵת**, **אֵת**).

Given the assumption that the Masoretes faithfully recorded current pronunciation and that their tradition had been correctly

transmitted to them, these differences may not have been coincidental. It may also be possible that Masoretic leveling within the Hebrew text was not applied to variations of the object markers.

Object-Marker Ambiguity

A basic question that we must now raise concerning the Hebrew object markers is whether there is evidence that these markers are used exclusively as signs of the accusative. Or, put another way, can they be confused with other Hebrew words? The following examples of usage in other passages of Genesis will be illuminating:

(1) **אֶת־**. In Gen 4:1, three similar phrases are recorded: **אֶת־חַוָּה**, **אֶת־קַיִן**, and **אֶת־יְהוָה**. No ambiguity is possible in the first two phrases; but in the final phrase, because **אֶת** is preceded by the indefinite **אִישׁ** but followed by the definite **יְהוָה**, **אֶת־** is taken as the preposition “with,” rather than as the marker for the accusative. Apposition is generally between two substantives in the same state. Therefore, the phrase is usually translated, “I have brought forth a man *with the help of the LORD*,” rather than “I have brought forth *the LORD*.”

(2) **וְאֶת־**. In Gen 14:2, the list is given of the kings who opposed the rule of the Eastern Federation. Although it is syntactically and grammatically possible to use both **וְאֶת־** and **וְאֶת־** as object markers, when the context is examined they both must be the preposition “with.” Also in 37:2, no ambiguity is possible. Again, the first two occurrences of **וְאֶת־** and the occurrence of **וְאֶת־** are to be translated as prepositions, otherwise Joseph’s brothers are animals.

(3) **וְאִתּוֹ**. In Gen 9:9–10, God states with whom he will establish his covenant. In the occurrences of **וְאִתּוֹ** and **וְאִתּוֹ** toward the close of vs. 9 and beginning of vs. 10, because the immediately preceding **אִתּוֹ** is now used with a suffix (**אִתּוֹכֶם**), both of those following terms are clearly the preposition “with,” rather than signs of the accusative. Furthermore, Gen 46:15 (RSV) and 44:2 (NIV) both translate **וְאִתּוֹ** as the preposition “with.”

From the foregoing examples, it would appear that all three variations of the object marker used in Gen 1:16 are capable of ambiguity and of being translated by the preposition “with.” (The fourth variation, **אֶת**, is equally capable of ambiguity and is also translated by “with,” but as it is not within the purview of 1:16, I have omitted discussion of it here.)

Object-Marker Etymology

How could such ambiguity with regard to the Hebrew object markers have arisen? It would appear that the Hebrew object

marker **תָּא** was directly related to the Akkadian object marker *attu*, while the Hebrew preposition **תָּא** was directly related to the Akkadian preposition *itti*. Akkadian syllable boundaries would express the words as *at-tu* and *it-ti*. When the forms were shortened by deleting the endings *u* and *i*, the radical *t* was no longer required to start the second syllable, giving the short forms *at* and *it*, respectively. Both these words were taken over into Hebrew as **תָּא** (and **תָּאָ**) and are unambiguously distinguished only with the addition of suffixes to the preposition; the original vowel *i* and the doubled radical *t* then return: **אֶתְּכֶם**, etc.

To add further to the confusion, in the consonantal text only context could distinguish between **תָּאָ**, **תָּאָתְּ**, **תָּאָתְּ** and the preposition **תָּא**; and, as we have seen, adding a **י** does not necessarily clarify. However, the presence of the *Maqqeph* may be the indicator that in the spoken language the vowel *Ṣere* had been shortened to *Seḡol*. Pronunciation today uses the shortened form *because* of the *Maqqeph*, whereas the *Maqqeph* was most probably used by the Masoretes to express a shortened vowel form in their oral tradition.

3. Similar Use Within Genesis

It may be that in Gen 1:16, **תָּאָתְּ** should not be seen as the third untranslatable object marker, but as the preposition “with.” As demonstrated in 9:10 (see above), the presence of the **י** with **תָּא** (without the *Maqqeph*) does not automatically rule out the possibility of **תָּאָתְּ** being the preposition.

If it is argued that 9:10 is strictly the **י** conjunctive with the preposition, but 1:16 is either the **י** conjunctive or the preposition **תָּא** (but not both), it should be remembered that other combinations with **תָּא** exist where either one or the other of the combined elements is redundant to our way of thinking, but was acceptable in Semitic systems—e.g., **מֵאֵת**. This combination is hardly ever expressed as the sum of the elements **מִן** and **אֵת**—“from with.”

Because of its relatively small use, the presence of **תָּאָתְּ** should alert the hearer/reader to a possible special situation. Even more than with the other forms, which frequently confuse the object marker and the preposition, the context of each use of **תָּאָתְּ** should be closely examined to determine whether this form of the term is mere stylistic variation, possible copyist error, or truly indicative.

Analysis of 1:16 reveals that **תָּאָתְּ** separates two articular substantives: **הַלִּילָה** and **הַכּוֹכָבִים**. Does this happen anywhere else in Genesis, and could this be a clue to the use of **תָּאָתְּ** in 1:16?

Genesis 1:1

In Gen 1:1 we find the following in Hebrew text and typical translation:

בראשית	In the beginning
ברא אלהים	God created
את השמים	the heavens
ואת הארץ	and the earth.

Just as in 1:16, וְאֵת separates two articular substantives. For some time, it has been seen that וְאֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם (אֵת) forms a *merismus*. The heavens are not to be thought of as separated from the earth, and God is not creating one without the other; they are an inseparable unit. Rather than an untranslatable object marker, וְאֵת could be seen as the bonding agent, possibly being translated as “together with,” or as the NIV does for 44:2, “along with.” English does not, of course, demand that both elements of וְאֵת be translated. “With” would be sufficient; “together” and “along,” although they add flavor, are basically redundant.

Rather than God’s creating the heavens, הַשָּׁמַיִם, as distinct from the earth, הָאָרֶץ, a recognition of וְאֵת as the preposition underscores the author’s physical and conceptual horizons. Whether or not his cosmic or even global view corresponds to that of modern science is irrelevant. The important matter is that the expression וְאֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם represents his conceptual parameters, within which everything is contained.

Therefore, 1:1 could be translated as follows:

In the beginning
God created
 the heavens (together) *with* the earth.

Genesis 3:24

Gen 3:24 in Hebrew text and typical English rendition may be set forth as follows:

... וישכן	And he placed ...
את־הכרובים	the cherubim
... ואת־להט־החרב	and the flaming sword ...
... לשמר את־דרך	to guard the way ...

Again, וְאֵת separates two articular substantives. Even though וְאֵת is followed by the apparently indefinite “flame,” להט is part of

a construct chain, the final element of which (הַחֶרֶב) is articular; therefore, both substantives are definite.

English translations obscure the close correspondence between להט החרב and הכרבים. While the function of the sword is obvious, the function of the cherubim is more obscure unless they are in some manner connected to the function of the sword. Were these cherubim mere observers rather than guardians, or were they also guardians of the way?

Ancient-Near-Eastern use of הכרבים would support the guardian concept; and seeing החרב and הכרבים as another inseparable unit, like השמים וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ of 1:1, illuminates the passage immensely. The cherubim and the flaming sword are not two unconnected entities, but are inseparable. We need not think of a flaming sword suspended in mid-air and cherubim floating aimlessly about, as Renaissance paintings so fancifully depicted.

Gen 3:24 now can be read as follows:

**He placed . . .
the cherubim *with* the flaming sword . . .
to guard the way . . .**

The cherubim were placed as guardians in the entranceway to the garden *because* they were equipped with the flaming sword.

Genesis 49:31

The passage in Gen 49:31, wherein Jacob refers to the burial of Abraham and Sarah and of Isaac and Rebekah, furnishes a still further illustration of the usage of וְאֵת in a prepositional sense. The Hebrew and a typical English rendering is as follows:

שמה קברו	There they buried
אֶת־אברהם	Abraham
וְאֵת שרה אשתו	and Sarah his wife;
שמה קברו	There they buried
אֶת־יצחק	Isaac
וְאֵת רבקה אשתו . . .	and Rebekah his wife . . .

Although none of the substantives in this passage is articular, they all are definite because they are personal names. Since both Sarah and Rebekah died before their respective husbands, and since both Abraham and Isaac were subsequently buried in the cave of Machpelah, use here of the suggested preposition “with” as a

translation of תָּאָרִי imbues the passage with excellent historical sense.

Gen 49:31 can thus be translated:

There they buried
Abraham with Sarah his wife;
There they buried
Isaac with Rebekah his wife . . .

Abraham was not merely buried “there,” but he was placed *with* his beloved Sarah. Likewise, Isaac was not merely buried somewhere in the cave, but was placed *with* his incomparable Rebekah.

4. *The Translation of Genesis 1:16*

It would appear from Gen 9:10, 44:2, and 46:15 that תָּאָרִי can, and sometimes must, be translated as the preposition “with,” rather than being considered as the object marker. Possible ambiguity demands that each context where תָּאָרִי is used must be examined closely to determine the word’s best syntactical function and etymology.

Our examination of similar uses of תָּאָרִי within Genesis has demonstrated a syntactical possibility: Whenever two definite substantives joined by תָּאָרִי are found in a clause already introduced by the object marker, the context should be closely examined to determine whether תָּאָרִי would be better translated by the preposition “with.”

Following the example of 1:1, 3:24, and 49:31, we conclude that 1:16 should probably be translated as follows:

And God made
the two great lights;
the greater light to rule the day,
the lesser light to rule
the night *with* the stars

It would appear that תָּאָרִי הַכּוֹכָבִים was original rather than redactional. Just as the greater light would fit into the already existing “light” part of the “day,” the lesser would fit into the already existing “*night with the stars.*” Just as the “light” part of the day, having been created at the beginning of the pericope, pre-existed the greater light source, so too the stars pre-existed this

new, large, dominating figure of the night sky—the lesser light source.

The translation of תִּאֲרָךְ as the preposition “with” removes the anomaly of the stars being created on the fourth day of the creation week. It follows that the issue of the creation of the stars is not necessarily a specific topic within the horizon of the creation pericope of Gen 1:1-2:4a.