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# The Meaning of Genesis 1:1

IT MAY be surprising to some students of the Bible that the translation and meaning of the opening words of the Bible are disputed. For 2,000 years the first verse of the Bible has been officially translated into Western languages with the familiar words, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." Now three authorized versions of the Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Protestant communities translate the first verse of the Bible differently.

In 1962 the New Jewish Version (N.J.V.) appeared with the translation, "When God began to create the heaven and the earth . . ." \* The *New American Bible* (N.A.B.) of Roman Catholics, which appeared in 1970, reads, "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth. . . . Then God said . . ." † The Protestant *New English Bible* (N.E.B.) of 1972 reads, "In the beginning of creation, when God made heaven and earth the earth was without form and void. . . ." ‡

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Translations using the word *when* no longer have a complete sentence at the end of verse 1. Accordingly, verse 1 is taken as a dependent or subordinate clause. Verse 2 is then conceived as a parenthesis, and verse 3 becomes the main clause of the sentence.<sup>1</sup> Among the implications of the innovative translations indicated above<sup>2</sup> are the following: (1) Genesis 1:1 cannot be conceived of as stating or implying creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*); (2) nothing is stated about the beginning of time; (3) heaven and earth, darkness, deep, and water already exist when God begins His creative activity; and (4) the first creative act of God is the creation of light.<sup>3</sup> Because of their radical significance for the understanding of the nature and meaning of Creation as portrayed in Genesis 1, these implications necessitate a careful analysis of the cogent arguments used for the translation of the first words of the Bible.

The first question to consider is whether the first Hebrew word (*bereshith*) has the meaning "in the beginning" or "when." Reasons included for selecting the temporal term "when" include (1) the vowels of the first word supposedly point to the construct state and (2) the temporal "when" construction is employed again in Genesis 2:4.<sup>4</sup> Regarding this supposed parallel to Genesis 2:4, it should be pointed out that the Hebrew does not use the word *bereshith* in 2:4 but *beyôm*, "in (on) the day,"<sup>5</sup> followed by an infinitive. In

## I. Lexical and Gram- matical Consider- ations

Genesis 1:1, on the other hand, the verb following the first word is no infinitive. The received text (Masoretic text) points it as a Qal perfect.<sup>6</sup> In short, the supposed parallel to Genesis 2:4 falls far short of being relevant. The words are not only different, even the grammatical forms lack identity. Attempts that are made to reprint the Hebrew text to fit this theory demonstrate the weakness of the new translations.

Many scholars have suggested that the first word in Genesis 1 is in the construct state.<sup>7</sup> P. Humbert argued on

statistical-lexical grounds that this is the case. Other scholars have shown to the contrary that his method is defective<sup>8</sup> and that on reinvestigation his conclusion is not supported by the data in the Old Testament.<sup>9</sup> For example, Isaiah 46:10 tells us that God declares the end "from the beginning" (*mere'-shîth*). This case is instructive, for, as N. H. Ridderbos points out, it shows that the word can be used in an absolute state with a temporal meaning, just as in Genesis 1:1.

The lack of the article in the pointing of the Hebrew is not a sound reason for adopting the translation "when." Several scholars have rightly emphasized that time designations in adverbial expression do not need the article<sup>10</sup> and still are considered to be in the absolute state. Accordingly, the translation "in the beginning God created . . ." has full lexical and grammatical support.

In addition, all ancient versions (Septuagint, Vulgate, Aquila, Theodotion, Symmachus, Targum Onkelos) construed the first word of the Bible to be in the absolute state and Genesis 1:1 as an independent main clause. Further-

more, the ancient Greek and Samaritan transliterations supply additional evidence that verse 1 of Genesis was an independent main clause, and the first word was understood to be in the absolute state.<sup>11</sup> It has, moreover, been suggested that the ancient Masoretes, who supplied the Hebrew text with vowels and accents, supplied the first word in Genesis with the disjunctive accent *tiphha*, evidently construing it as an absolute.<sup>12</sup>

In considering the lexical and grammatical arguments, the following conclusions emerge: (1) the renderings of Genesis 1:1 in the versions indicated in the introduction lack adequate lexical and grammatical support. (2) The traditional translation "In the beginning God created" has the support of word studies, grammar, Masoretic pointing and accentuation, all ancient versions, and Greek and Samaritan transliterations. (3) "Moses could not have used any other construction to denote the first word as in the absolute state, but he could have opted for a different construction to indicate clearly the construct state."<sup>13</sup>

E. A. Speiser suggests that the syntax of the entire first paragraph provides "a more valid argument" than the grammatical one.<sup>14</sup> He and H. M. Orlinsky argue that the Hebrew order of subject-verb in the first clause of Genesis 1:2 makes it a parenthetic clause<sup>15</sup> instead of that with a noun-clause sense as the classical Hebrew grammar of Gesenius-Kautzsch identifies it.<sup>16</sup> This argument is not very strong. The subject-verb (perfect form) order does not support the idea that verse 2 is parenthetic. It is not true that a consecutive statement would have begun with the verb before the noun as Speiser and Orlinsky suggest,<sup>17</sup> because there are examples of the same inversion of word order in Genesis 1:15; 3:1; Isaiah 1:2, as A. Heidel has shown.<sup>18</sup> The inversion of word order still keeps this a type of clause that follows the pattern of the two subsequent noun clauses of verse 2. The inversion of word order rather indicates an emphasis on the subject,<sup>19</sup> and provides, in U. Cassuto's words, a "decisive objection"<sup>20</sup> against the translation embodied in the new versions.

## 2. *Syn- tactical Consider- ations*

Syntactically, Genesis 1:2 contains three noun clauses, all describing states of being existing contemporaneously with the action expressed in the previous verse.<sup>21</sup> Or to state it differently, verse 2 describes the state of the earth during the time when the activity of verse 1 was ended and that of verse 3 began.

These syntactical considerations have implications for the meaning and purpose of the first verse of the Bible. They militate against the view of those who suggest that verse 1 is a grand summary,<sup>22</sup> heading, superscription, or the like<sup>23</sup> of all that follows in the first chapter of the Bible. Syntactical considerations have led the famous Hebrew scholar C. Keil to point out, "That this verse is not a heading merely, is evident from the fact that the following account of the course of creation commences with *waw* (and), which connects the different acts of creation with the fact expressed in verse 1, as the primary foundation upon which they rest."<sup>24</sup> The *waw*, "and," of verse 2 is copulative and with the noun in an emphatic position followed by the verb leads to a

meaning that may be rendered as follows: "And (as far as) the earth (is concerned it) was . . ." <sup>25</sup> This points to a link between verses 1 and 2 that is rightly acknowledged by other scholars, <sup>26</sup> just as there is a link between verses 2 and 3.

In short, syntactical considerations support the translation "In the begin-

ning God created. . . . And the earth was . . .," suggest strongly that verse 1 is an independent or main clause, and indicate that verse 2 contains three noun clauses that describe the state of being of the earth contemporaneous to the action of verse 1 and prior to the activities mentioned in the verses that follow.

Various suggestions <sup>27</sup> have been put forth in support of the new translations on the basis of supposed parallels from ancient Near Eastern texts. <sup>28</sup> Nearly all of the ancient Near Eastern Creation stories begin with the "when" sentence structure. Therefore, it is implied the Hebrew Creation story is also to begin with "when." On grounds of method one wonders whether the Biblical story should indeed be read through the eyes of pagan myths. Is it not sound methodologically to read it in terms of its own Hebrew and Biblical context rather than to superimpose extraneous concepts from the outside?

There is ample data from Sumerobabylonian myths that begin with "when" (which in the case of the Sumerian language is *udda* and the Babylonian one is *enūma* or *inūma* and mean literally "on the day that" or simply "when" <sup>29</sup>), to indicate their lack of correspondence to the first word of Genesis 1. The Sumerian and Akkadian

### 3. **Parallel Considerations**

terms correspond to the Hebrew *beyôm*, "in (on) the day" (cf. chap. 2:46), but not to *bere'shîth*, "in the beginning," in Genesis 1:1. The famous dictum of H. Gunkel still holds true: "The cosmogonies of other people contain no word which would come close to the first word of the Bible." <sup>30</sup> In fact, Genesis 1:1 has no parallel in ancient Near Eastern literature.

If the author of Genesis 1 would have wished to write "when," then he could have chosen language to do so. The fact that he chose *bere'shîth*, "in the beginning," indicates that he wanted to say something else. His idea appears to be that "in the beginning," at the commencement of time, God created "heaven and earth" and that this creation was then in a condition different from the present one. This different condition is described in verse 2. Next God transformed this different condition into the one depicted in the creative acts that follow.

In the Hebrew language an author can use long and complicated sentence structures or short sentences. Each pericope may be characterized by one or the other stylistic pattern. Just as Genesis 2:4ff has a particular stylistic uniqueness, so the first chapter of the Bible shows its own stylistic characteristic. <sup>31</sup> The style of Genesis 1 is characterized by the consistent use of short sentences: "And God saw that . . . was good" (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 25, 31); "and there was evening and there was morning, . . . day" (1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31). The implication of this stylistic uniqueness militates against a syntactical construction of verses 1-3 that makes these verses into a long and complicated sentence structure that even such a critic as

### 4. **Stylistic Considerations**

J. Wellhausen rejected as "desperate." <sup>32</sup>

In short, stylistically Genesis 1:1 is an independent or main clause, verse 2 consists of three noun clauses, and verse 3a is also an independent or main clause.

Let us summarize our observations. The meaning of Genesis 1:1 emerges on the basis of the combined efforts of lexical, grammatical, syntactical, comparative, and stylistic considerations. The innovative translations fall short in the area of *each* of the above considerations. Thus they lack the support of each.

Genesis 1:1 contains four major thoughts: First, God is the Creator. God is the subject of the sentence. He is the

one who engaged in creative activity. In the freedom of His will and being He established creatively "heaven and earth." Second, God has created heaven and earth "in the beginning." Heaven and earth do not go back into indefinite timelessness. There was a time when "heaven and earth" were not. God's creation has a definite beginning from which point of time onward it has existence. Third, God has created. The meaning of *bāra*, "created," indicates in this context an absolute creation by an effortless, free, unhindered, and sovereign creative act. This word is often linked to creation out of nothing as is also "in the beginning." It indicates "that God is not in need of pre-existent matter for his creation."<sup>33</sup> Fourth, the antonymic pair "heaven(s) and earth" is the object of the special verb "create." This pair is frequently used elsewhere in the OT and expresses one idea: The organized cosmos and its surrounding heavenly sphere. Accordingly, verse 1 does not seem to speak of the creation of the entire universe in its totality, but of the cosmos and its surrounding heavenly sphere. In such special Creation God has given this world its unique and full meaning, as well as a history that moves on into the future. ■■

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† From the *New American Bible*; P. J. Kenedy & Sons, New York, 1968.

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed discussion of the various positions is provided by Gerhard F. Hasel, "Recent Translations of Genesis 1:1," *The Bible Translator* 22 (October, 1971), pp. 154-167, with extensive discussion of scholarly literature. The following articles published in the same issue shortly later should be noted: R. L. Raymond, "Does Genesis 1:1-3 Teach Creation Out of Nothing?" *Scientific Studies in Special Creation*, ed. W. E. Lammerts (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1971), pp. 9-21; H. Shanks, "How the Bible Begins," *Judaism* 21 (1972), pp. 51-58.

<sup>2</sup> Nonauthorized translations had adopted the innovative translation of Genesis 1:1-3 earlier: T. J. Meek in *The Bible: An American Translation* (1931); James Moffatt, in *The Bible: A New Translation* (1924). The late E. A. Speiser translated

Genesis for the Anchor Bible (1964). The latter was also a member of the N.J.V. translation committee.

<sup>3</sup> The editor in chief of the N.J.V., H. M. Orlinsky, provides this list in "The New Jewish Version of the Torah," *JBL* 82 (1963), 253.

<sup>4</sup> H. M. Orlinsky, ed., *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah* (Philadelphia, 1969), p. 49; *Genesis. A Commentary* (Anchor Bible), translated and edited by E. A. Speiser (Garden City, 1964), p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> W. Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon zum AT* (Leiden, 1974), p. 383; W. L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the OT* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1971), p. 131.

<sup>6</sup> In order to maintain the new translation, translators and interpreters have changed the verb of verse 1 into the infinitive construct *berō*. So, recently, Orlinsky, *Notes*, p. 50; Speiser, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> So, H. Ewald, J. Skinner, H. Budde, W. F. Albright, E. A. Speiser, P. Humbert, H. M. Orlinsky, etc.

<sup>8</sup> C. Westermann, *Genesis* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1967), p. 133.

<sup>9</sup> N. H. Ridderbos, "Genesis 1:1-2," *Oudtestamentische Studien* 12 (1958), 218; W. Eichrodt, "In the Beginning. A Contribution to the Interpretation of the First Word of the Bible," *Israel's Prophetic Heritage. Essays in Honor of J. Muilenburg*, eds. B. W. Anderson and W. Harrelson (New York, 1962), p. 4; H. Junker, "In Principio Creavit Deus Coelum et Terram. Eine Untersuchung zum Thema Mythos und Theologie," *Biblica* 45 (1964), 486-490.

<sup>10</sup> E. König, *Historisch-Comparative Syntax der Hebräischen Sprache* (Leipzig, 1897), p. 287; O. Procksch, *Die Genesis* (3d ed.; Leipzig, 1924), p. 440; A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (2d ed.; Chicago, 1963), p. 92; W. H. Schmidt, *Die Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschrift* (2d ed.; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1967), p. 74 n. 4.

<sup>11</sup> For details, see Hasel, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-159.

<sup>12</sup> F. Delitzsch, *Die Genesis* (Leipzig, 1852), *ad loc.*; Procksch, p. 440; E. J. Young, *Studies in Genesis One* (Philadelphia, 1964), p. 5; W. R. Lane, "The Initiation of Creation," *Vestus Testamentum* 13 (1963), 66, n. 1.

<sup>13</sup> B. K. Waltke, "The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (1975), 224.

<sup>14</sup> Speiser, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*; Orlinsky, *Notes*, p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford, 1970), #141i, 142c.

<sup>17</sup> Speiser, *loc. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Heidel, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>19</sup> R. J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline* (Toronto, 1967), p. 96, #572.

<sup>20</sup> U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem, 1961), vol. I, p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> Raymond, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-19.

<sup>22</sup> Recently argued again by Waltke, pp. 225-228.

<sup>23</sup> See Schmidt, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-95.

<sup>24</sup> C. Keil, "Genesis," *Commentary on the OT* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1949), I, p. 46.

<sup>25</sup> Similarly Ridderbos, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

<sup>26</sup> Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p. 94; D. Kidner, *Genesis* (Chicago, 1967), p. 44: "By all normal usage the [second] verse is an expansion of the statement just made, and its own two halves are concurrent."

<sup>27</sup> For detail, see Hasel, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-165.

<sup>28</sup> A. L. Oppenheim, ed., *The Assyrian Dictionary* (Chicago, 1960), Vol. VII, p. 159ff.; W. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (Wiesbaden, 1965), Vol. I, p. 383f.

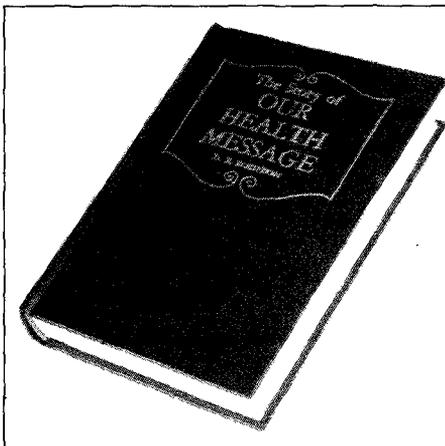
<sup>29</sup> Heidel, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>30</sup> H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (7th ed.; Göttingen, 1966), p. 101.

<sup>31</sup> On the stylistic argument, see Schmidt, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-95; Westermann, *op. cit.*, p. 135; Hasel, pp. 165-167.

<sup>32</sup> J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (Meridian ed.; Cleveland, 1965), p. 387 n. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p. 179.



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