

Genesis 1:1 – In What Beginning?!

Description



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בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

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“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” King James Version of Genesis 1:1

Is this the best way to translate the opening clause of Genesis? It's certainly how the vast majority of English translations have done it since [Wycliffe's translation](#) back in the 14th century. But, of course, the fact that something is standard doesn't mean it is correct. A few more recent translations have rendered the verse, "When God began to create heaven and earth." To my knowledge, this first showed up [Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures](#) published by Jewish Publication Society (1985), but it is also the wording used by Robert Alter in his [The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary](#), which has been considered by some to be the most significant translation of the Hebrew Bible since the KJV.

Obviously, there is no one correct way to translate and it's extremely difficult (and often impossible) to capture all the nuances of a text in a translation. Thankfully, we aren't stuck with only one translation and, when translations differ on a phrase, it doesn't mean that one is entirely right and the other entirely wrong. Differing translations sometimes each capture something in the text that other translations miss while missing something that others capture. But this also doesn't mean that we can just combine every nuance from every translation and think we better understand the text. The only way to really measure to what extent a translation is accurate is to compare it to the original. Furthermore, comparison to the original is also the only way to know which nuances accurately reflect the text when we have discrepancies in the meaning of different translations.

Take the two main translations we're looking at:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. (KJV – and most other translations)

When God began to create heaven and earth (JPS-1985 and Alter)

Focusing on the first phrase, what is the difference in meaning here? There are several differences. First, "In the beginning" is commonly interpreted as though we have a particular and definite point of time being referenced; that is, "the beginning" (in a cosmic sense) and that in that cosmic beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. On the other hand, the phrase "When God began to create heaven and earth" conveys something quite different. The time being referred to is tethered to an event – the creation of heaven and earth. And the word "began" here is used to refer to the beginning of that event – the beginning of the process of creating heaven and earth. As you can see, these two translations convey two very different ideas regarding the "beginning." One speaks of "THE beginning" as a distinct period of time that can be referred to merely by saying "the beginning." The other translation lacks this notion, but communicates that it is the beginning "of" something. Another way to understand this nuance is to take note of the fact that in the KJV-type translation, the creation of the heaven and the earth is something that takes place within a larger time known as "the beginning" while in the JPS/Alter translation, it is just the reverse; the "beginning" is the initial slice of time within the process of God creating heaven and earth.

There are other differences as well, such as the fact that, in most translations (following the KJV), Genesis 1:1 is a complete sentence in itself while in the alternative translation, Genesis 1:1 is the beginning of a sentence that continues on into the next verse. But for this post, let's just focus on the first phrase. What is the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:1 describing? Is it talking about a definite period of time called "the beginning" in which God created the heaven and the earth? Or, is it

talking about the time when God began to create heaven and earth? (As a side note, there are other issues in translating this verse such as whether the word translated “create” really means “create,” but that’s for another post).

Let’s look at the Hebrew. And don’t worry if you don’t know Hebrew; I’ll do my best to communicate the issues so that you can understand it even if your only language is English.

Hebrew (it reads from right to left):

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Transliteration (the sounds of the Hebrew written out in English characters):

bʔrʔšît bʔrʔ ?lîhîm ʔt haššʔmayim wʔʔt hʔʔreʔ

The first word here is bʔrʔšît (pronounced “be-ray-sheet” – the “be” having a short “e” sound like “best”). The “bʔ” part is a common prefix that means “in” or “when” (among other meanings). The basic meaning of “rʔšît” (ray-sheet) is “beginning” but this word is in a construct state, which means that it is describing the beginning “of” something rather than simply being “the beginning” – full stop. This aspect is more clearly captured by the JPS and Robert Alter translations. But if the word means “in the beginning of [something],” what is the “something”? The context makes it pretty obvious that it is the beginning of “God creating the heavens and the earth” (to use terms from common translations). This also means that Genesis 1:1 is not a complete sentence in itself, but is instead the first clause of a longer sentence that continues into the next verse. To illustrate the relationship between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:2, here is Genesis 1:1-3 in Robert Alter’s translation:

When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God’s breath hovering over the waters, God said, “Let there be light.” And there was light. – [*The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*](#)

There is certainly more to consider, even when translating just the first Hebrew word of Genesis... but this is supposed to be a blog post, not a book... so I should stop here and leave the rest for future posts. ?