

Creation Story or Origin Story: Revisiting Day One (Genesis 1:1-5)¹

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It is a privilege to contribute to this festschrift in honor of Drs. May Burt Persaud and Winston Dwarka Persaud and their faithful service to the gospel of Jesus Christ by their scholarship and teaching at Wartburg Theological Seminary and beyond. From first being their student to nineteen years of teaching together, I am deeply grateful for the many ways that our lives have intersected as colleagues, friends, and family. In the offering of this essay, I want to express particular gratitude to May, who introduced me to the joy of reading Hebrew and Aramaic for the purpose of interpreting Scripture in ways that open God's word to a world in need of good news.

While I was a PhD student at St. Mary's College of the University of St. Andrews, I got a little ribbing from colleagues because of what I was working on: the first five verses of Genesis. "Giere doesn't get very far in the Bible." I have moved beyond the first five verses since then, but in this essay, I'd like to return there: to the beginning. Genesis 1:1-2:

וַיְהִי עַתָּה בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרֵאשִׁית הַיּוֹם
וַיְהִי עַתָּה בְּרֵאשִׁית הַיּוֹם
וַיְהִי עַתָּה בְּרֵאשִׁית הַיּוֹם

I want you to see Genesis 1:1-2 in Hebrew. Though obvious, the original language of the text is different from our own. No two languages have a one-to-one relationship. Translation is not plug-n-play. Every translation is an interpretation. Decisions need to be made to render ideas from one language to another. This work is always approximate and is at least as much art as it is science. When we are talking about translation, we are talking about a cross-cultural movement: a journey from one language, culture, and world into another.

Moving forward I am focusing on how we render into English the first letter of the Bible: ב (bet). The first letter of the Bible is the second letter of the alpha-bet. Perhaps I really *don't* get very far in the Bible.

Focus on the first letter is nothing new. Among ancient rabbinic interpreters, there is a good deal of discussion about why God would begin the Torah with the second letter of the alphabet rather than the first. One of these threads suggests that God began

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with the letter *bet* because (reading from right to left), the ב opens to the future.²

The prompt for taking another look at the first letter of the Bible is a recent revision of one of the main translations in use throughout the English-speaking world. There are a handful of translations that are favorites among English-speaking Christians. The one I am referencing is the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV), which for over twenty-five years has been the *de facto* authorized version for study and worship among mainline Christians in North America.

A brief bit of background is helpful. The first version in this line was called the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV), which was published under the stewardship of the National Council of Churches in the USA in 1952. The RSV was and remains known for its care for representing the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek antecedents faithfully, though without the poetic sensibilities of the *King James Version*. The *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) was then published in 1989.³ Among the commitments of the revisers

1. An earlier version of this essay was delivered at the author's installation as the Benz Chair in Scripture at Wartburg Theological Seminary, October 10, 2025.

2. *Bereshit Rabbah* 1.10.

3. For a detailed history of the RSV and the NRSV, see Harry M. Orlinsky and Robert G. Batcher, *A History of Bible Translation and the*

of the RSV was prioritizing more inclusive language when referring to people, reflecting a shift in contemporary English language away from gender exclusive language.⁴ Attention was also given to advancements in textual criticism, especially with the New Testament; observations from the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament texts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls were also incorporated.

The most recent version, the *New Revised Standard Version updated edition* (NRSVue), is a joint project of the National Council of Churches and the Society of Biblical Literature. The revision process began in 2017 and culminated with the digital publication of the NRSVue in December 2021 with the analog version released the old-fashioned way on paper in early 2022 (emblematic of our times and technologies!). According to the preface of the NRSVue, this update included “12,000 substantive edits and 20,000 total changes, which include alterations in grammar and punctuation.”⁵

Consider Romans 14:15 as one example of the kind of shifts made from 1952 to 2021:

RSV (1952): If your *brother* is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.

NRSV (1989): If your *brother or sister* is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.

NRSVue (2021): If your brother or sister is *distressed* by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.

A move toward gender inclusivity comes when the Greek ὁ ἀδελφός σου, which the RSV translates literally as “your brother,” is expanded to “your brother or sister” in the NRSV. This move understands that the Greek use of “brother” is intended to be expansive. Greek being an articulated and gendered language regularly uses the masculine with the intention that it include all people, not unlike the generic use of “man” or “mankind” in English intending all.⁶ In addition to the move to expand gendered language in Romans 14:15, the NRSVue tends to the rendering of the Greek verb λυπεῖται, which can refer to injury of body or distress of mind. While the RSV and NRSV lean into the physical by rendering it “injured,” the NRSVue leans more toward the mind by rendering it as “distressed.” Given that Paul is talking about tending to the ethos of the community and not a food fight, this shift in the NRSVue better captures the spirit of Paul’s intent: the

North American Contribution (Atlanta: Scholars, 1991).

4. To be clear, language changes are slow, and they are not linear. Usage changes in fits and starts. This particular shift toward gender inclusivity is still in flux, perhaps now more than other times during the last forty years.

5. “Preface,” *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition* (Friendship Press, 2021).

6. For a discussion of these complex shifts in the history of the English language, see: Anne Curzan, *Gender Shifts in the History of English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). See also the discussion by Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Stauss regarding revising English archaic generalized usage in older translations to be “gender accurate,” in *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

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food you choose to eat should not cause or exacerbate division.

I have yet to find the work of another or to attempt myself a systematic, critical read of the NRSVue’s 12,000 substantive edits. Like the shift in Romans 14:15, I welcome most of the changes that I’ve examined. A few not so much. One of these is Genesis 1:1.

While the problematic change is in v.1, it is important when considering the change to include v.2.

RSV (1959): ¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

NRSV (1989): ¹ In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

NRSVue (2021): ¹ When God began to create the heavens and the earth, ² 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.

As you can see, there are a couple small but significant changes here:

- “In the beginning” in the RSV and NRSV shifts to “When God began” in the NRSVue.
- Between the RSV and the NRSV, the period at the end of v.1 is replaced with a comma.

To see the change in fullest contrast, compare the RSV with the NRSVue. In the RSV rendering, verse one is an unequivocal claim that God created the whole. Heaven and earth here is an example of hendiadys, which is a sexy way of saying a whole by using two terms. Heaven and earth are creation as whole, at this

point in the narrative a whole in potentiality. There isn't anything beyond heaven and earth, and nothing exists prior to God's creating. God is the creator of it all.

In the NRSVue rendering, verse one is a temporal setup to verse two. While God is also creator here, God is creating out of something that already exists. "When God began to create... the earth was..." The state of things was a dark, chaotic mess (v.2).

So the question: Is Genesis 1 a creation story or an origin story?

Consider the origin story for a moment. Tech companies and bands originate in garages. Peter Parker became Spiderman after being bitten by a radioactive spider. It turns out that Anakin Skywalker in walking life-support is Darth Vader. The thing about the origin stories is that they are stories of emergence. Origin stories emerge out of stuff (time, place, events) that is already in motion. By contrast, the creation story in its purest form begins with nothing and emerges from nothing.

So, back to Genesis 1:1 for a moment.

The first word of Genesis is: *בְּרֵאשִׁית* (*b'reshit*). The first letter *ב* (*bet*) is a preposition most often meaning something along the lines of "in" or "with," though it can also mean "along" or "through." Occasionally and in the right grammatical circumstances, it can mean "when." The rest of the word, *רֵאשִׁית* (*reshit*) comes from the *רֶשֶׁת* (*r'sh*), which means "head" and also metaphorically "beginning." Recall how "from head to toe" can mean from beginning to end.

Without spending too much ink on each letter of the first word of the Bible, suffice it to say that "In the beginning God created..." and "When God began to create..." are both viable options for rendering the first word into English.

To my knowledge, the first decision to use "when" in an English translation of *בְּרֵאשִׁית* was in 1985 with the updated English translation of the Tanakh called the *New Jewish Publication Society version* (NJPS), a version used by Conservative Jewish communities as well as many Reformed Jewish communities in North America.

It is worth noting the comments of Jon D. Levenson, now professor emeritus at Harvard, in his introduction and notes on Genesis in the *Jewish Study Bible* (2004), which uses the NJPS. Commenting on Genesis 1:1, he writes:

A tradition over two millennia old sees 1:1 as a complete sentence: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' In the 11th century, the great Jewish commentator Rashi made a case that the verse functions as a temporal clause. This is, in fact, how some ancient Near Eastern creation stories begin—including the one that starts at 2:4b. Hence the translation, When God began to create heaven and earth.⁷

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Levenson, rather matter of factly, acknowledges that over two millennia of interpretive tradition are disregarded in favor of Rashi's eleventh century CE comment and contemporary Ancient Near Eastern Scholarship that assumes that the author(s) of Genesis 1 would have echoed other ANE stories.

The great rabbi Schlomo Yitzchaki (c.1040-1105 CE), known as Rashi, was a renowned sage and scholar.⁸ His interpretive work, though nearly a thousand years old, continues to be consulted as a top authority on biblical and talmudic interpretation. As such, his insight that the *bet* that begins the book of Genesis could be translated as "when" is to be taken seriously. As with many Hebrew texts, there is significant ambiguity. Rashi helps us to see this and that it is true of scripture from the very first letter of the text.

Levenson's statement about Genesis 1 that tries to corroborate Rashi's observation by suggesting that this reading of *bet* as "when" is a good choice because what their Ancient Near Eastern neighbors were doing with their creation stories is unconvincing. Consider that there is solid scholarly consensus that the creation story in Genesis 1 grew out of the time when the Hebrews were in captivity in Babylon (589-537 BCE) with the first creation story bearing fingerprints or resonances with Ancient Near Eastern stories from in and around Babylon. In v.2, we hear of "the deep," which is the rendering of the Hebrew word *תְּהוֹם* (*t'hom*). Though impossible to say with absolute certainty, the linguistic resonance between *תְּהוֹם* and the name of the primeval Babylonian goddess Tiamat (of *Enuma Elish* fame), who was the salt-water goddess and who her son, Marduk, cut in half to create the world. If there is this resonance between *תְּהוֹם* and Tiamat, one can imagine that the authors of the first creation story were not merely mimicking the stories of their neighbors but distinguishing their story of the creative activity of the God of Israel from the stories of their neighbors. Likely evidence of this is that Tiamat as *תְּהוֹם* is merely an element of the primordial chaos of v.2.⁹

The implication that the author(s) of the creation story in Genesis 1 would have been mimicking their neighbors, Levenson's argument for translating it "when God began..." does not take

8. A.k.a., Abraham ibn Ezra.

9. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, uses the same logic as this with the development of Leviathan.

7. Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Michael Fishbane, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 13.

into account that it is as, or even more, likely for a captive people to subvert the narratives of their captors.

Umberto Cassuto (1883-1951)—once chief rabbi of Florence and also among twentieth century Jewish scholars a pioneer in the implementation of historical-critical methods with a focus on Ugaritic language and texts—was a theologian, a rabbi, and a comparativist.

Cassuto's observation is syntactical. (I'm going to make this point as quickly as possible. I promise.) In short, because of the word order (subject-verb) at the beginning of v.2, Cassuto makes the convincing argument that v.1 is an independent sentence, and that with the shift in subject in v.2, it is its own idea, distinct from the declaration of v.1¹⁰

Together Cassuto's syntactical observation and the idea that a captive people would be unlikely to simply mimic their captors suggests that the better reading of Genesis 1:1-2 is:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
The earth inchoate was formless and void, darkness
covered the face of the deep, and a wind from God
hovered over the waters.¹¹

I want to draw in one other point here in favor of this rendering. It could and has been suggested that “In the beginning God created” is a retroactive superimposition of the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* or creation out of nothing upon the Hebrew text. In reality, prior to the birth of Jesus and the advent of Christianity, the idea of creation out of nothing was around within Second Temple Judaism. A couple examples:

From Isaiah, specifically Deutero-Isaiah (chs.40-55), commonly understood to have been written toward the end of the Babylonian Exile, which is roughly the dating of the First Creation Story.

The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator (אֱלֹהִים) of the ends of the earth. (Isa 40:28)
And
I form light and create (אֶבְרָא) darkness,
I make weal and create (אֶבְרָא) woe;
I the LORD do all these things. (Isa 45:7)

In these two excerpts from Deutero-Isaiah the idea of creation out of nothing is present. In 40:28, the phrase “ends of the earth”

10. “It follows, therefore, that the first verse is an independent sentence that constitutes a formal introduction to the entire section, and expresses at the outset, with majestic brevity, the main thought of the section: that in the beginning, that is, at the commencement of time, in the remotest past that the human mind can conceive, God created the heavens and the earth. How He created them will be related in detail further on. Following the principle that one should ‘first state the general proposition and then specify the particulars, the Bible will now pass in review before us all the component parts of the universe, one by one, and tell us, concerning each one, that it was created by the word of God.” U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part I, From Adam to Noah (Genesis I–VI 8)*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1998), 20.

11. Author's translation.

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intends the furthest reaches of creation.¹² If the Lord created the ends of the earth, presumably that also includes everything in between. In 45:7, the poet-prophet of Deutero-Isaiah expresses perhaps the most radical inclusio that is even more elemental than 40:28. Light and dark both originate in the Lord, as well as weal and woe. While both light *and* darkness are cause for pause, weal and woe are even more so. The choice to use “weal” and “woe,” which is consistent in the RSV, NRSV, and the NRSVue, is archaic English usage and, more importantly, conceals more than it reveals. The Hebrew words here are שָׁלוֹם (*shalom*) and רָעָה (*ra*), which are better rendered peace and evil. In Isa 45:7, the Hebrew verb אֶבְרָא (*br*), is used with both darkness and evil, making this verse perhaps the most radical statement of Israel's monotheism, and this echoing from the mid- to late-sixth century BCE.

From the Septuagint (Old Greek - c. mid-third century BCE), the translators rendered the Hebrew of Genesis 1:1-2 into Greek as:

Gen 1:1 Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν. ² ἡ δὲ γῆ ἦν ἄορατος καὶ ἀκατασκευάστος, καὶ σκότος ἐπάνω τῆς ὑβύσσου, καὶ πνεῦμα θεοῦ ἐπεφέρετο ἐπάνω τοῦ ὕδατος.

The LXX translators clearly render v.1 as an independent sentence—a statement of the whole. The most recent and very good translation of the LXX into English¹³ reads:

Gen 1:1 In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth. 2 Yet the earth was invisible and unformed, and darkness was over the abyss, and a divine wind was being carried along over the water.

It is quite clear from this translation that Jews in north Africa,

12. See the use of the “ends of the earth” as poetic reference to the edges of a whole. See Isa 41:9 and Job 28:24.

13. New English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS)

probably specifically in Alexandria, in the third century BCE understood the Hebrew to be “In the beginning...”¹⁴

Finally, I turn our attention to the apocryphal book 2 Maccabees, a mid- to late-second century BCE text that tells stories of the Maccabean Revolt.¹⁵ The Jews of Palestine rose up against the tyrannical rule of the Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who had (among many other nasty things) desecrated the temple in Jerusalem. So, among the stories in 2 Maccabees, there is a story of a righteous mother. Filled with a “noble mind/spirit” (7:21), she teaches her seven sons about life and the fabric of creation. She teaches them:

2 Macc 7.28 (RSV) I beseech you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. Thus also mankind comes into being.

Suffice it to say, the idea of, and given the mother’s teaching in 2 Maccabees, the commitment to the idea of creation out of nothing is alive and well prior to the advent of Christianity. Of course, *creatio ex nihilo* is not the only narrative of creation in the air. But, it is prominent enough to think that it is also represented by the text of Genesis 1:1.

Creation story or origin story: So what?

Who gives two hoots about how we translate Genesis 1:1? Why do we care about how Genesis 1:1 is rendered in the early twenty-first century CE?

Two closing points:

It matters that Genesis 1 is a creation story not merely an origin story. The cosmos didn’t emerge out of stuff sitting around in some cosmic garage. All matter, space, and time originate with the Triune God. God’s sovereignty is unmatched. Darkness, evil, suffering, and death are not independent cosmic rivals of God. From the existence of the cosmos to the breath of a bullfrog, all life, all things are contingent upon the Triune God’s creative fiat.

Also, the heartbeat of the Christian faith rests on God’s capacity and will to bring life from death. As much as the old creation, the new creation in Christ depends on God creating out of nothing. Death is real. We are all destined for the compost heap.

Christ’s resurrection from the dead was a creation out of nothing. The promise of new creation, of new life in Christ is creation

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out of nothing. To quote Regan Prenter’s classic text on Luther’s theology of the Holy Spirit, *Spiritus Creator*: “There is in reality no difference between the first creation and the second creation because in both cases it is actually a creation out of nothing.”¹⁶ The same can be said, of course, about the Spirit’s persuasive work of creating faith by the hearing of the Gospel.

It is critical that we not lose sight of the importance of how we translate and understand Genesis 1:1. This essay has shown grammatically that this verse can be, though not unambiguously, translated as: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Examination of certain texts that predate the emergence of Christianity, shows that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was in the air well before Jesus’ birth. In short, the idea of creation out of nothing was not a Christian invention. It was a viable reading of Gen 1:1 throughout the Second Temple Period. As such, the text of Genesis 1:1 plays a critical role in our understanding of who God reveals God’s self to be. God creates out of nothing. This matters for the creation of the cosmos, for the promised new creation in Christ, and for the Spirit’s creation of faith (trust in Christ) in the hearts of us sinners.

14. Note how Cassuto’s observation about the change of subject at the outset of v.2 is maintained in this early rendering into Greek.

15. Primarily 167-160 BCE.

16. Regan Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, John M. Jensen, trans. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1953), 185.