

GENESIS I – IN THE BEGINNING

TEXT VS. TRANSLATION

The first verse of Genesis tells: בְּרֵאשִׁית
בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

As far as Hebrew is concerned, this verse opens with an embarrassing syntax. According to the rules of Hebrew grammar the first word, בְּרֵאשִׁית, as vocalized, is but the first member of a two-nouns collocation, whose second member is absent. A “normal” syntactical sequence of this sort, namely a “construct state”, is widely considered a particular semitic combination, the first noun of which, the *nomen regens*, is typically defined by the second noun, the *nomen rectum*, therefore it has no definite article. Such is, for example, רֵאשִׁית אוֹנִי, “the beginning of my strength” (Gen 49:3), whose second member plays the rôle of the qualifier.¹ Obviously, רֵאשִׁית, “beginning” is qualified by the second noun, the *nomen rectum*: אוֹנִי “my strength”. Similarly, in Gen. 1:2, in the locution וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים, “the spirit of God”, where אֱלֹהִים, “of God”, defines the nature of the spirit, רוּחַ, that hovers above the waters. The opposite of the construct state is the “absolute state”, *i.e.*, a noun that stands alone: וַיְהִי עֶרֶב, “and it was evening” (v. 5).

Having no definite article, בְּרֵאשִׁית fulfills only the first condition of a construct state: indefiniteness and close connection with the following word. As such, it contains a certain anomaly: though having the form of a *nomen regens*, our בְּרֵאשִׁית is alone, with no following noun to form with it a “construct state”. What actually follows is a verb in the perfect: בָּרָא, “(God) created”. In such a case, בָּרָא may exist and even function as an adverb of time: “in the beginning”. Under one grammatical condition: it must bear the article: בְּרֵאשִׁית, “in *the* beginning” (= בְּהֵרֵאשִׁית). But in our locution, בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא, does not fulfill this condition either.²

Nevertheless, all the ancient versions treated the word as a temporal adverb and the entire verse as an independent sentence, an overture of the story of creation which is to be told in detail in the following verses:

Septuagint: ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν.

Vulgate: In principio creavit Deus caelum et terram.

Peshitta: בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

Onqelos: בקדמין ברא יוי ית שמיא וית
ארעא

Obviously, these translations make very good sense, being faithful to the spirit of the verse, although they do not render meticulously the original. They rather adapt it to their own literary habits, ignoring the *punctum neuralgicum*, the form of בְּרֵאשִׁית. So did modern English translations: “In the beginning”.

Jewish Medieval commentators were utterly unsatisfied with this parsing of the verse. Living in the linguistic atmosphere created by the Arab grammarians, who assimilated the ancient Greek philosophy of language to the cultural environment of their times, medieval Jews were very much concerned with grammar. Accordingly, they asserted that the rules of construct state do not allow such a perception of the verse. The 12th century Rashi represents the grammatical approach. Leaning on several locutions such as יהוה קנני ראשית דרכו, “the Lord created me at the beginning of his work” (Prov. 8:22), he claimed that only a noun can follow the word ראשית, as if the scripture was saying: בראשית בריאת שמים וארץ, והארץ היתה תהו ובהו וחשך על בריאת, פני תהום ויאמר אלהים יהי אור “the Creation” as the second member (*nomen rectum*) of the construct state בראשית בריאת, in itself a *nomen regens* (בריאת), with שמים as *nomen rectum*. Complicated, but not unusual.³

Rashi stressed that the passage does not teach about the order of God’s actions, otherwise the scripture would have said: בראשונה ברא אלהים, which would fit the translation “in the beginning God created...”. בראשונה, is in the “absolute state”, in other words an unconnected form. As such, it has the ability to serve as an adverbial: “am Anfang”. But the verse says בְּרֵאשִׁית. And as we all know, no Jewish commentator, especially in the middle ages, would accept any assumption challenging the correctness of the Holy Scripture, including its vocalization. Accordingly, Rashi suggested to maintain the construct state invoking other passages in the Bible, where construct state locutions occur with a finite verb instead of a second noun: תַּחֲלַת דְּבַר-יְהוָה בְּהוֹשֵׁעַ, וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-הוֹשֵׁעַ, “at the beginning of the Lord’s speaking to Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea” (Hos 1:2), etc. As תַּחֲלַת is semantically equal with ראשית, which in fact means: “when the Lord first spoke to Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea”, this phrase is a good parallel to our passage. In this very note, Genesis 1:1 is construed as a temporal clause “when God began to create the heavens and the earth”, subordinated to verse 3: וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהי אור וַיְהי־אור, “God said: ‘Let there be light’, and there was light”. According to this perception, verse 2 is a parenthesis describing the pre-creation chaos. God’s very first act was the creation of the Light: “In the beginning of God’s creating the heavens and the earth, (the earth was formless and void, and darkness was

upon the face of the deep, and the spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters), and God said ‘Let there be light’, and there was light”.

Of nearly the same opinion (with slight differences) was his contemporary Ibn Ezra, another famous commentator. He too considered בראשית a construct state form connected to the following verbal phrase.

Another prestigious commentator, David Qimchi, contemporary with the above, was of a different opinion. He said clearly בראשית איננו סמוך, *i.e.*, “*ראשית* is not a case of construct state”. He proves his claim putting forward cases in which ראשית is in the absolute state, such as: מגיד מראשית א, “I foretell the end from the beginning, and from the start, things that had not occurred” (Isa 46:10).

[parenthesis: Biblical Hebrew literature, especially its elevated style, like proverbs, poetry, prophecy, is often arranged into dual parallel utterances. Scholars call this arrangement *parallelismus membrorum*. For example, Exodus 15:2 has זה אלי ואנוהו, “This is my God, and I will enshrine Him, the God of my father, and I will exalt Him”. And so hundreds of verses, like Numbers 24:5 which says: מה־טבו אהליך יעקב משכנותיך, “how fair are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel”. The second hemistich repeats the idea expressed

in the first one in a different wording. Sometimes the second member of the parallel is opposed to the first one, like Proverbs 10:1: בן חכם ישמחה־אב ובן כסיל תוֹגת אמו “A bright son brings joy to his father, and a dull son is his mother’s sorrow”. There are many categories of similar parallel dispositions.]

This arrangement enables us to understand the meaning of an utterance, or its grammatical status. And this is why Qimchi positions מראשית, “from the beginning” in the absolute state, in parallel with the following ומקדם, “from the start”, both having no related noun to define them.

Very clever indeed. One gets the impression that either of them made great efforts to justify a cumbersome syntactic expression, by scanning the scriptures in search of similar occurrences.

The question with which we are confronted is whether we can assume that the verse, as it is, does have a linguistic *raison d’être* in its ancient context, but could not be accepted any longer in a latter context. If the answer is affirmative, then we may accept “Am Anfang schuf Gott Himmel und Erde” as a paraphrase conceived in order to make matters acceptable. It follows all the old translations, Septuagint, Vulgate, Onqelos, which all open with the same adverbial: “In the beginning”, whether articulated or not according to habits of the respective language.

One may say that this is more an interpretation than a literal translation, but after all what was the translator's aim, if not to make the holy text understood by his contemporaries?

Sometimes translators agree to minor anomalies. Verse 5, for example, ends with the cardinal number: וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד, “and there was evening and there was morning, one day”, in contrast with the rest of the days, which are numbered by ordinal numbers, as is the rule: second, third, fourth, etc. “Day one” is the translation of the Septuagint (ἡμέρα μία), the Vulgate (*dies unus*), the Peshitta (ܝܘܡܐ ܘܚܕܐ), Onqelos (יום 1), and even of the modern RSV, ASV: “one day”. Other translations adapt the passage to the congruence rule and render אֶחָד as “first”. Such is the Aramaic Palestinian Targum: יום 1, and also the Modern JPS: “a first day”. Luther adds the article: “der erste Tag”, and so do KJV and NRSV “the first day”. It is difficult to ascertain whether the reason of this conversion from the irregular cardinal number to the regular ordinal one is adaptation to the rest of the verses, in the scholarly jargon *harmonization*. In any case, the first recorded adaptor was the second century CE Aquila, who rendered the word as ἡμέρα πρώτη, “first day”. This is a bit strange, as this person is known for his literal renderings. According to the legend, Aquila was a relative of Hadrian and converted to Judaism.⁴ He was believed to be a disciple of Rabbi Aqiva.⁵ Only fragments of his

translation have survived in what remains of fragmentary documents found in the Cairo Geniza, and in the remains of what once was known as the Hexapla of Origen. He has his followers, of course, as we have seen, in the medieval Aramaic Targums and in the modern translations. Rashi too was alert to the problem, and resorts to a homily, he found in the Midrash, while Qimhi turns to logic: ולא אמר יום ראשון לפי שאין ראשון בלא שני, ועדיין (the text) did not say “the first day”, since there is no ‘first’ without ‘second’, and the second day had not been created yet”. In other words, as long as the chain of days of the creation was not existent yet, there is no reason to put this day in the head of an inexistent sequence.

Very clever, indeed - as an excuse, of course.

By the way, the same phenomenon occurs in chapter 2:11-13, where the four rivers that issued from Eden are listed.

2:10 וַיִּצְאָ מֵעֵדֶן הַנְּהָרוֹת אֶת־הַגֵּן וּמִשָּׁם
יָפְרָד וְהָיָה לְאַרְבַּעָה נְהָרוֹת:
2:11 שְׁם הָאֶחָד פִּישׁוֹן הוּא הַסּוּבֵב אֶת כָּל־אֲרָץ
הַחֹיִלָּה אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם הַזֶּהָב:
2:12 וְהָיָה הָאֶרֶץ הַהִוא טוֹב שָׁם הִבְדִּילָהּ וְאָבִן
הַשֵּׁהָם:
2:13 וְשֵׁם־הַנְּהָר הַשֵּׁנִי גִיחוֹן הוּא הַסּוּבֵב אֶת
כָּל־אֲרָץ כּוּשׁ:
2:14 וְשֵׁם הַנְּהָר הַשְּׁלִישִׁי חִדְקֵל הוּא הַהֹלֵךְ קִדְמַת
אֲשׁוּר וְהַנְּהָר הָרְבִיעִי הוּא פָּרָת:

Speaking about harmonization one cannot overlook the Septuagint plus at the end of v. 6: καὶ ἐγένετο οὕτως, “and it was so”. This phrase does not exist in any other version, and seems to be an addition in the spirit of the verses 7, 9, 11, 15, 20, 24 and 30, where it renders וַיְהִי־כֵן. Both BHK³ and BHS insist on adding וַיְהִי־כֵן in v. 6, in order to align it with the rest. On the other hand, MT does have the ending וַיְהִי־כֵן in verse 7, but the Septuagint lacks it. Faithful to the Septuagint, both editions instruct the reader to delete וַיְהִי־כֵן. One may understand the system of the Septuagint. A Greek mind seeks for regularity. וַיְהִי־כֵן occurs as a conclusion of what God commanded. Such a verse opens with וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, “God said”, and concludes with וַיְהִי־כֵן. The following verse is the fulfillment of the command, which pleased God: וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב, “and God saw that this was good”. A verse that does not correspond to the system is to be adjusted. Obviously, this regularity is in conflict with the Semitic way of relating matters, of which Hebrew is a branch. Consequently, the Greek text is regular, while the Hebrew one demands regulation.

I shall deal with only one more example from Chapter 1, given its particular character.

I refer to verse 9: וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִקְוּ הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶל־מְקוֹם אֶחָד וַתֵּרָא הַיַּבְשָׁה וַיְהִי־כֵן, “and God said ‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered into one

place, and let the dry land appear, and it was so”. NRSV properly renders מְקוֹם as “place” and so do all the translations, except the Septuagint, which has συναγωγή, “assembly”. Apparently, the latter is an adaptation to the following (v. 10) וַלְמַקְוֵה הַמַּיִם, “to the gathering of the waters”, although very much recommended as primary version by modern commentators, including the third edition of BHK. In fact, we could find support to their guidance in a small remain of Genesis from Qumran, which displays]מקוה[in this spot (4QGen^{h1}).⁶ Fortunately for the Masoretic text, another piece of parchment from Qumran (4QGen^b) has אל מקום אחד as well.⁷

Arguably, one may infer from the above that at the turn of the first millennium BC, two or more different versions of the same text co-existed, none of them having priority over the other in terms of reception.