

# A Literary Translation of Genesis 1

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The creation narrative in Genesis 1 begins with these words:

בראשית ברא אלהים  
את השמים ואת הארץ

When God began to create  
the sky and the land . . .

The usual translation, ‘the heavens and the earth,’ obscures the concreteness of the terms in context. The point will be obvious, I think, by the end of this post. Anyone who loves Hebrew and the language of the Bible will enjoy the following journey.

On ‘day one,’ God calls ‘light’ into being, names it ‘day,’ and separates it from ‘darkness,’ which he names ‘night.’

ויאמר אלהים  
יהי אור  
ויהי אור  
וירא אלהים את-האור כי-טוב  
ויבדל אלהים  
בין האור ובין החשך  
ויקרא אלהים לאור יום  
ולחשך קרא לילה  
ויהי ערב  
ויהי בקר  
יום אחד

A literary translation that brings out the web of congruent parallelisms woven through the series of fiats in the larger narrative by concordant translation technique has something to commend it.

יהי אור

Let there be light.

יהי רקיע בתוך המים  
ויהי מבדיל  
בין מים למים

Let there be a vault in the midst of the waters,  
and let it be a point of separation  
between the waters.

יקוו המים מתחת השמים

אל-מקוה<sup>1</sup> אחד  
ותראה היבשה

Let the waters under the sky be collected  
into one collection point,  
and let dry land appear.

תדשא הארץ דשא

Let the land turn green with green things.

יהי מארת ברקיע השמים  
להבדיל בין היום ובין הלילה

Let there be points of light in the vault of the sky,  
to separate the day from the night.

ישרצו המים  
שרץ נפש חיה  
ועוף יעופף על-הארץ  
על-פני רקיע השמים

Let the waters swarm  
with swarms of living beings,  
and let fowl fly across the land,  
across the face of the sky's vault.

תוצא הארץ  
נפש חיה למינה  
בהמה ורמש  
וחיתו ארץ למינה

Let the land bring forth  
living beings of every kind,  
cattle, crawling things,  
and land beasts of every kind.

נעשה אדם  
בצלמנו כדמותנו  
וירדו בדגת הים  
ובעוף השמיים  
ובבהמה ובכל חית<sup>2</sup> הארץ  
ובכל-הרמש הרמש על-הארץ

Let us make a human kind  
in our image, after our likeness,  
and let them hold sway over the fish of the sea,

<sup>1</sup> מקום emended to מקוה. Cf. LXX.  
ובכל emended to חית.

over the fowl of the sky,  
over the cattle, over all the land beasts,  
and over the crawling things that crawl on the land.”

The text continues:

ויברא אלהים  
את-האדם בצלמו  
בצלם אלהים  
ברא אתו  
זכר ונקבה  
ברא אתם

“And God created  
the human kind in his image;  
in the image of deity  
he created it;  
he created them  
male and female.

ויברך אתם אלהים  
ויאמר להם אלהים  
פרו ורבו  
ומלאו את-הארץ וכבשוה  
ורדו בדגת הים  
ובעוף השמים  
ובכל חיה הרמשת על-הארץ

God blessed them,  
and God said to them,

“Be fruitful and multiply,  
fill the earth and occupy it;

hold sway over the fish of the sea,  
over the fowl of the sky,  
and over every beast that crawls on the land.

To observe:

- (1) The sequence of prefixed מ nouns: מבדיל, מקוה, and מארת.
- (2) The sequence of segholate nouns: דשא, שרץ, and רמש. נפש might also be listed.

(3) The sequence of על-פני, על-הארץ, and על-השמים prefixed arguments to verbs of motion: על-הארץ, על-השמים, and על-פני.

(4) The sequence of double jussives:

ויהי then יהי

ותראה then יקוו

ויעופף then ישרצו

וירדו then נעשה

(5) The sequence of double specifications, in which the article is first absent and then present: ארץ (v. 10) then הארץ; אדם then האדם.

I've read a truckload of commentary on Genesis 1 over the years. I don't remember any commentary pointing out these basic structural features of the composition. The translation I offer is not without peculiarities, but it has the advantage of preserving the noted structural features in the target language.

I consistently translate ארץ by 'land.' No other translation comes close to doing this. When it is done, the centrality of land to the narrative is evident. 'Land' is the habitat par excellence of God's creatures, though not the only one.

A web of parallelisms forms the warp and woof of Genesis 1, including many parallelisms not highlighted in this post. Concordance in translation is a means of preserving the fine grain of the source text in a target language. In practice, of course, all kinds of compromises are necessary.

Genesis 1 is not poetry in the strict sense, but it makes use of a web of semantic and grammatical parallelisms just the same.

Were you able to read the un-vocalized Hebrew without faltering? If so, you know a fair bit of Hebrew. If not, more study is needed.

For an un-vocalized edition of the Tanakh – a great pedagogical tool – go [here](#). To be sure, the added *matres lectionis* and punctuation are annoying from a scholar's point of view.