

Translations of Genesis 1:1–5

1. King James Bible, 1611 [The Unbound Bible < <http://unbound.biola.edu/>>]

1. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
2. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.
3. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.
4. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.
5. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

2. Jewish Publication Society, 1917

1. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
2. Now the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.
3. And God said: 'Let there be light.' And there was light.
4. And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness.
5. And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.

3. Jewish Publication Society, 1999

1. When God began to create the heaven and the earth —
2. the earth being unformed and voice, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water —
3. God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.
4. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness.
5. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day.

4. Robert Alter

1. When God began to create heaven and earth,
2. and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God’s breath hovered over the waters,
3. God said, “Let there be light.” And there was light.
4. And God saw the light, that it was good, and God divided the light from the darkness.
5. And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And it was evening and it was morning, first day.

5. Everett Fox

1. At the beginning of God’s creating of the heavens and the earth,
2. when the earth was wild and waste,
darkness over the face of Ocean,
rushing-spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters —
3. God said: Let there be light! And there was light.
4. God saw the light: that it was good.

God separated the light from the darkness.

5. God called the light: Day! And the darkness he called: Night!
There was setting, there was dawning: one day.

6. Robert Elliott Friedman

1. In the beginning of God's creating the skies and the earth —
2. when the earth had been shapeless and formless, and darkness was on the face of the deep, and God's spirit was hovering on the face of the water —
3. God said, "Let there be light." And there was light.
4. And God saw the light, that it was good, and God separated the light and the darkness.
5. And God called the light "day" and called the darkness "night." And there was evening, and there was morning: one day.

7. Latin Vulgate < <http://unbound.biola.edu/>>]

1. In principio creavit Deus cælum et terram.
2. Terra autem erat inanis et vacua, et tenebræ erant super faciem abyssi : et spiritus Dei ferebatur super aquas.
3. Dixitque Deus : Fiat lux. Et facta est lux.
4. Et vidit Deus lucem quod esset bona : et divisit lucem a tenebris.
5. Appellavitque lucem Diem, et tenebras Noctem : factumque est vespere et mane, dies unus.

8. Luther, German Translation 1545 < <http://unbound.biola.edu/>>]

1. Am Anfang schuf Gott Himmel und Erde.
2. Und die Erde war wüst und leer, und es war finster auf der Tiefe; und der Geist Gottes schwebete auf dem Wasser.
3. Und Gott sprach: Es werde Licht! Und es ward Licht.
4. Und Gott sah, daß das Licht gut war. Da schied Gott das Licht von der Finsternis
5. und nannte das Licht Tag und die Finsternis Nacht. Da ward aus Abend und Morgen der erste Tag.

9. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 7:228–233, 1667

One foot he centred, and the other turn'd
Round through the vast profundity obscure,
And said, Thus far extend, thus far thy bounds,
This be thy just Circumference, O World.
Thus God the Heav'n created, thus the Earth,
Matter unform'd and void.

Genesis 1:1

וְהָאָרֶץ	וְאֵת	הַשָּׁמַיִם	אֵת	אֱלֹהִים	בָּרָא	בְּרֵאשִׁית
<i>ha-aretz</i>	<i>ve-et</i>	<i>hashamayim</i>	<i>et</i>	<i>elohim</i>	<i>bara</i>	<i>Bereyshit</i>
and the earth	*	the heavens	*	God's	creating of	In the beginning of

* The word *et* in Hebrew precedes a direct object and is not translated into English. The first letter of *et* is *aleph*, which is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and the second letter of *et* is *tav*, which is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Thus, this little word, which is not translated into English, spans all of creation from the beginning in *aleph* to the end in *tav*. In Yiddish *tav* is pronounced *saf* or *sof*, which means “end.”

Duality in this first sentence and the mystery of creation

1. The first letter of the Torah is *bet*, which has the numerical value two.
2. The first three letters of *Bereyshit* are echoed by the three letters of the second word *bara*.
3. In order for the King James translation to be correct, *Bereyshit* would have to be *Berishonah*. As Rashi points out, if the verse means “In the beginning God created ...,” then this is contradicted by the existence of the waters in verse 2. When were the waters created?
4. Compare translations #3–6 on pages 1 and 2 of this handout with the other translations. What is the scriptural basis of the former translations? They are based on a conjecture of Rashi that the first sentence in the Masoretic text could contain a grammatical error. He advocates changing the second vowel in *bara* so that verse 1 reads as *Bereyshit baro Elohim*, which is the construct form “In the beginning of God’s creation.” The construct form occurs when two or more nouns appear after each other as in *beth sefer* = *bayit shel sefer* meaning a “school” (literally, a “house of a book”), or *beth cholim* = *bayit shel cholim*, meaning a “hospital” (literally, a “house of sick people”).
5. The third word *elohim* is a plural form. This plural form does not agree with the singular form of *bara*. Christians interpreted *elohim* as the tripartite form of God (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost). Daniel Berlin pointed out that the word for gods is *eylim*. We add the *heh* to convert *eylim* / gods to *elohim*, meaning our God, the Jewish God, the letter *heh* being the letter of God and of the divine—perhaps representing the breath — which God used to convert *Avram* to *Avraham* and *Sarai* to *Sarah*.
6. The nontranslated word *et* appears twice. Here is an interpretation expressed in a long sentence showing that all of the Torah is present at each instant and in each word. Perhaps the first *et* denotes the movement of creation from beginning to end, and the second *et* denotes the movement of creation from the end to the beginning, thus completing the circle, just as we link the last letter of the Torah, the *lamed* in *Yisrael*, with the first letter of the Torah, the *bet* in *Bereyshit*, to spell *lamed-bet* = *lev*, meaning “heart,” a linkage reminding us that the Torah is a scroll called *Etz Chayim*, the tree of life, recalling the tree of life in the Garden of Eden,

- about which we read the following in Gen. 3:24: “And He expelled the human, and He had the cherubs and the flame of a revolving sword (*hacherev hamit-hapechet*, literally, ‘the turning-itself-upside-down sword’) reside at the east of the garden of Eden to watch over the way to the tree of life.”
7. The fifth word *hashamayim* is a dual form, not a plural form, like *yadayim*, meaning “hands,” or *eynayim*, meaning eyes. Should *hashamayim* be translated as “the heaven” (as in translations #1–4, 7–9 on pages 1–2) or “the heavens” (as in #5) or as “the skies” (as in #6), avoiding the religious connotation of heaven? If *hashamayim* is a dual form, then it is a pair of what? Is its root *mayim*, another dual form meaning “water” and appearing in verse 2? Do the two *mems* with which *mayim* begins and ends denote two oxygen atoms and does the *yod* in the middle denote a hydrogen atom, so that *mayim* stands for H₂O?
 8. There are two objects of creation, the heavens and the earth, which stand in opposition to each other.
 9. Other readings (see book):
 - a) *Bereyshit* created God with the heavens and the earth.
 - b) Rashi: For the sake of (*be*) [the Torah and Israel, which in Jeremiah 2:3 and Proverbs 8:22 bear the name of] *reyshit*, God created the heaven and the earth.
 - c) In his head (*berosh*) God will create himself (*yitbara*) [along] with the heaven and the earth.
 10. *Bereyshit* = *Bara shit* = “He created six,” which the *Zohar*, the primary text of Jewish mysticism, interprets as the hexagram of creation. This yields: “He created six; Elohim created the heavens and the earth” or “By means of the six [points] [that] He [the “Mysterious Unknown” (?)] had created, Elohim created the heavens [signified by the ascending triangle of the hexagram] and the earth [signified by the descending triangle of the hexagram].” Reference: Leonora Leet, *The Secret Doctrine of the Kabbalah: Recovering the Key to Hebraic Sacred Science*, Rochester, VT: Inner Tradition, 1999.
 10. The fractal nature of *Bereyshit*: level of letters, level of words, level of the text. See page 60 of my lecture notes. The major themes of the creation story and the story of the Garden of Eden are speech and sexuality. God creates the universe through speech. Sexuality enters through the Kabbalistic interpretation of the fractal nature of *Bereyshit*: the letter *resh* inside the letter *bet* = the word *rosh* / head inside the word *bayit* / house = the divine act of sexual intercourse that created the universe, corresponding to the human way of creating life.
 11. *Bereyshit Rabbah* 1:1: “The Holy One, blessed be He, ... looked into the Torah and created the world.”

[W]ith the proper methods of interpretation, one can unlock the mysteries of all being. Every crownlet of every letter is filled with significance, and even the forms of letters are hints to profound meaning. To understand creation, one looks not to nature but to the Torah; the world can be read out of the Torah, and the Torah read from the world.

Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory*

Genesis 1:1–5

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ
Bereyshit bara elohim et hashamayim ve-et ha-aretz
In the beginning of God's creating of and the earth

בַּיּוֹם הַיְהוּדִי הָיָה תוֹהוּ וָחֹשֶׁךְ עַל פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ
vehaaretz ha-yetah vavohu vechosech al pney tehom veruach
and the earth was shapeless and darkness on the face of deep and breath
[or wind or spirit]

אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֵף עַל פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם
elohim merachefet al pney hamayim
of God is hovering on the face of the water or waters

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר וַיְהִי אוֹר
va-yomer elohim yehi or va-yehi or
and said God let there be light and there was

וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאוֹר כִּי טוֹב וַיַּבְדֵּל
va-yera elohim et ha-or ki tov vaybdel
and saw God that the light good and separated

אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאוֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ
elohim בין האור ובין החושך
God the light between the darkness and between

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאוֹר יוֹם וּלְחֹשֶׁךְ לַיְלָה
vaykara elohim la-or yom ulchoshch laylah
and called God to the light day to the darkness

וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד
vayehi erev vayehi boקר yom אחד
and evening and morning and there was one day

There is no punctuation in the Torah scroll. I removed the punctuation that I found it in the online version of verses 1–5 <<http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0.htm>>.

The artistry and mystery of creation

1. Verbs: in verse 1 there is the past tense (*bara* / “created”); in verse 2 there is the past tense (*ha-yetah* / “was”), then no verb after “darkness,” then the present tense (*merachefet* / “hovers”); in verses 3–5 we see a typical Torah construction known as the *conversive vav*, which reverses past and future tenses: *va-yomer* / “he said,” *va-yehi* / “and there was,” *va-yar* / “and he saw,” *va-yiqra* / “and he called”. In verse 3 the verb is subjunctive (*yehi or* / “let there be light”), which is not expressed in English but is expressed in the Latin Vulgate (*Fiat lux*) and in Luther’s Bible (*Es werde Licht*).
2. In line 2 *vehaaretz* / “and the earth” is feminine although it does not have a feminine form.
3. In verse 2 the untranslatable phrase *tohu vevohu* / “shapeless and formless” is a poetic doublet echoing itself. Although the phrase describes a place that is shapeless and formless, the phrase *tohu vevohu* is anything but shapeless and formless.
4. In verse 2 *tohu* / “shapeless” is echoed by *tehom* / “deep.”
5. In verse 2 *al pney* / “on the face of” appears twice with *panim* / “face” a plural form. The Hebrew says “on the face of deep” (no “the” before “deep”) but “on the face of the waters.”
6. In verse 2 *hamayim* / “the waters” echoes *hashamayim* / “the heaven” in verse 1.
7. In verse 2 *ruach* / “breath” or “wind” or “spirit” is echoed by *merachefet* / “hovers” (as a bird hovers over her nest).
8. In verse 2 *ruach elohim* / “breath of God” or “breath from God” is a construct form
9. In verses 2–5, there are many long-o sounds: *tohu* / “formless”, *choshech* / “darkness”, *tehom* / “deep,” *va-yomer* / “and said,” *or* / “light,” *tov* / “good,” *boqer* / “morning.”
10. In verse 4 how does God separate the light from the darkness?
11. In verse 5 why does God name the light day and the darkness night? Is this a effort by human to conceptualize creation? By naming the darkness, God or humans try to tame it.
12. In verse 5 who named the night *erev* and the morning *boqer*?
13. In verse 5 *yom* is used first for daytime and then for the entire day.
14. In verse 5 the last phrase is *yom echad* / “one day” as in translations #2, 5–7, not “the first day” or “a first day” as in #1, 3–4, 8.