

The complex layering of words or letters within words provides a rich, if puzzling, dynamic. Are we going too far in following such routes? We are looking at what is there in the Hebrew text and we remain within the strict rules stated at the outset. We are listening to what the text tells us and unpacking its meaning. Nothing in the Hebrew has been changed and every clue is pursued. It remains to be seen if the pieces will fit together and to test the results.

Some of our findings are fragments: single letters or pairs of letters. In isolation, little weight can be attached to their possible meanings or references. However, in combination with our other findings, these fragments can help build a picture. The fragments as such are neither accepted nor rejected. Instead, they are treated as possible pieces of a greater whole.

Much is hidden “in the beginning”. The unique use of the word *beresheith* in Scripture, the difficulty in grasping its precise meaning, and its place at the head of Scripture and as the title of the opening book to the *Torah*, all invite attention. One commentator describes *beresheith* as having a “fractal structure” (that is, a complex pattern reproduced at every level) that foreshadows the structure of the *Torah*.<sup>75</sup> We have examined thirteen different components: words that can be found within the first word with their various distinct meanings, as well as the symbolism of four Hebrew letters that stand on their own or modify one or more of those words.<sup>76</sup>

We have found a God who cares. As Psalm 23 puts it: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” However, we are left with tensions and contradictions. Close relationship is desired but the shedding of blood is required by covenant. How is this to be without the Jerusalem temple? Close relationship suggests informality and dynamism, yet covenant is fixed and formal in nature. We have responsibilities toward the Creator but it is difficult to meet them. If covenant sacrifice is the solution to the great divide between Creator and creation, it produces its own problems.

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<sup>75</sup> Ellis, Richard S (1997) "The Book of Leviticus and the Fractal Geometry of Torah," *Conservative Judaism*, 50.1, 27–34.

<sup>76</sup> In *Tikunei Zohar*, a commentary on the book of Genesis, each of its 70 sections starts with a different interpretation of the word *beresheith*. This is primarily by using pairs of letters generated from the word both directly and by a transformational process. Using the numerical values of words, the Vilna Gaon claimed that the first word *beresheith* contains allusions to all 613 commands of the Mosaic Law. As our approach is much stricter, we do not face such overwhelming quantity of allusion!

We glimpse a Creator intimately involved with His creation. The components looked at in *beresheith* show us how God founds His family. He reaches out across the divide. There is giving and receiving but there is uncertainty as to the nature of the transaction. Dualities become apparent and confront us.

The Hebrew word for “in the beginning”, with its complexity and the different ways its component parts can be unpacked, is itself only the beginning. Its patterns and puzzles, with their half glimpsed resolutions, encourage us to look further and press on with our voyage of discovery. *Beresheith* has revealed both the gulf between Creator and creation, and the outline of a solution. It has shown a dynamic that is rooted in the beginning and that is still underway, that is complete but not yet completed.

Far from being some grand, vague statement, Genesis 1:1 contains many specifics: the Creator seeks relationship and in a specific way; the head of the house has particular characteristics associated with him; and so forth. The Creator is not sending us an anodyne greeting card with His opening words. But is there a key to unlock what lies before us?

## Step Five: The Arrow

The second word. The nature of God's continuing creative engagement with His creation. His plan for history.

**P**salm 19 states that “The heavens declare the glory of God”. The Psalm goes on to tell us that the word of God restores the soul, makes the simple wise, rejoices the heart, enlightens the eyes and is sweeter than honey. Sadly, this is not a common experience, even for those who earnestly study it. Yet, there can be a real hunger to know the Creator. This enquiry aims to encourage the reader to pursue God, and all the more as we discover how He pursues us and at what cost.

A rhythm is emerging, the outlines of a key. The message of Genesis 1:1 goes beyond what can be seen on the surface and its components form a discernible architecture. The message is encoded, but it is not unbreakable. Our task is to uncover the code that is folded into the opening statement about creation and to unfold it as carefully as possible. The declaration of the Bible's first verse concerns creation and the glory of God revealed in creation. But does it give understanding of the Creator's intent for His creation and for us and can we grasp such a matter?

With step five we turn to the second word, a word we have already come across within the first word: creation. The Bible proceeds to its second word and already it repeats itself. Is this mere repetition or something more?

## Component n: creation for the second time

The second word in the Bible is *barah*, meaning 'creation'.

n)      **ברא** *bet-reish-aleph Barah*

*Barah* was contained in the first word and discussed under component (b). The repetition suggests the need to look closely at what is happening with this word *barah*. It highlights both the act of creation and the figure of the son, who is contained within *barah* when the final letter *aleph* is removed. Standing at the head of the whole Bible gives huge emphasis to both the act of creation and to the word for son and ties them firmly together. They set the rhythm for the heartbeat.

In the first chapter of Genesis, on the sixth day of creation and after He has created humanity and given Adam instructions, God looks and sees all that He had made and "behold, it was very good". Then, on the seventh day, He rests.

Is this the end of God's involvement with His creation, the end of His role in our story? No: we know from the rest of the book that He remains very involved. Is it the end of God's creative acts? No: although some translations muddy this, the root term *barah* for creation or the act of creating is only used infrequently after the creation account in Genesis of God's activity. But it is so used. Even the form of the first two Hebrew words suggests something ongoing in the Creator's act of creation; it is not only "in the beginning".

The repetition of the word *barah* in the first verse of the Bible points to these subsequent creative acts by the Creator. It demonstrates that God has not retired from His creation. Having set the mechanisms of the created world in motion, his activity does not end. In looking at the opening statement of the Bible, we are not, so to speak, jammed up in the initial burst of creation. The second *barah* invites a broader perspective in considering the beginning.

The question of the role of the Creator is not restricted to origins – how did things start – or of working through set processes. Like the parent who remains engaged with their children, the question is one of relationship now. And as with the parent who remains engaged, this makes the matter far more pressing, indeed far more hazardous. A set order of creation does not continue operating within given rules, left to run – or run down – by its Creator. Nor does He simply control creation or suffuse it, nor is He identical with it or in some sense

subordinate to it or its rules. The Creator is not safely off the scene, nor is He part of the scenery.

Something else is going on here, which does not correspond with those human philosophies – whether Eastern or Western, modern or ancient – that derogate the role of the Creator. The repetition of the word *barah* in the first words of Genesis helps us grasp what this ‘something else’ is. It shows that there is a history to the Creator’s engagement with creation and thus a history to creation written in terms of that engagement. The Creator cannot be restricted to being only the First Cause of creation. If there are subsequent applications of His creative power, then to understand creation we have to understand the nature of that ongoing engagement.

The word *barah* is repeated in Genesis 1:1 before the heavens and the earth are mentioned at all. This gives primacy to the act(s) of creation and to the time dimension, as against the physical dimensions: that which is created. To understand the latter we must first look to the former. Only looking at the created, physical world is insufficient to gain understanding of creation.

*Barah* is used in terms of the Creator action in seven distinct ways. In creation week – the first seven days described in Genesis 1 – it is used:

- of the heavens and the earth, their contents and the forces of the cosmos
- of animate life
- of human beings.

With the completion of the physical creation, God moves to a different kind of creation which involves His interaction with humanity and our education and development. Subsequent to Genesis 1, *barah* is used of:

- Israel
- a new people
- righteousness
- a new heavens and a new earth, including a new Jerusalem.

Let us look briefly at these last four kinds of creation.

First, *barah* is used of the creation of God’s chosen people – Jacob, Israel – in Isaiah 43:1 and 15 and Isaiah 65:18. The Bible refers to God’s creative miracles in respect of Israel at Exodus 34:10, Isaiah 4:5

and 41:20 and to a negative miracle (that is a punishment) at Numbers 16:30. In any event, God is involved in His creative power with Israel, His chosen people.

Second, *barab* is used of “a people yet to be created who may praise the Lord” (Psalm 102:18/19) and of “everyone who is called by My Name” in Isaiah 43:7. Whether these references are to a new or renewed Israel or to a wider group is a matter for debate. The Psalm may suggest a distinction between Israel (already created and benefiting from God’s ongoing creative miracles) and the people who, at the time of writing, had yet to be created. God is involved, or in future will be involved, in His creative power with those who praise Him and those who are called by His name. Possibly, this looks beyond Israel.

Third, *barab* is used of righteousness, in Psalm 51:10 when the Psalmist cries out “Create in me a clean heart, O God”, in Isaiah 45:8 when the Lord says He has created salvation and righteousness and in Isaiah 57:19 when the Lord creates the praise of the lips. God responds in His creative power to those who cry out to Him for righteousness.

Fourth, *barab* is used of the new or renewed creation at Isaiah 65:17 and 65:18. Indeed, the two appearances of the word *barab* within the first two words of Genesis – *Beresbeith barab* – give an inkling of this new creation. As with the need for a new beginning, there will be need for a new heaven and a new earth. The reason why is also hinted at in Genesis 1.

We see the Lord’s intense ongoing creative engagement with humanity, but not all of humanity. The Creator’s selective use of His creative power is, so to speak, His arrow through time, His plan. The Creator and His creation are separate and the Creator now focuses His creative power from the general to the specific. The initial act of creation was purposeful and the subsequent focus must be also. In that case, the nature of His creative involvement, shown by the later uses of the word *barab*, indicates His plan for creation. What’s it all about? The Bible’s first verse both describes the initial creation and hints at the plan and purpose of it all. The repetition of the word *barab* tells us that there is more and gives us an arrow to follow.

As discussed in step one, *barab* means creation from nothing. This is distinct from making or forming something from something else. In the Bible, God mostly makes and rarely creates. We make things, and in Genesis 1 God made – *asab* – the expanse, made the two great lights, and made the stars in the creation account. That is to say, He formed them from pre-existing material. In terms of the appearance of human

beings on the scene, both the words for make and for create are deployed in the Genesis account. God uses pre-existing material and then injects something new to create human life on the sixth day. Whatever that something new is, it could not be shaped or formed from pre-existing material. It needs the creative power of God.

The distinction between God's acts of creation and acts of making tells us how significant and remarkable each such creative act is. These acts include the creation of Israel and the creation of a clean heart and of praise in those who seek Him. These acts tell us how involved God is with us. It is startling to think that the creation of a clean heart in a human being is a greater act of God than the making of the stars in the universe. God shows His concern for us as the pinnacle of creation.

The Creator has a purpose for His creation and He acts purposefully in pursuit of that. There is a plan and in that plan lies our fulfilment and the fulfilment of all creation. For example, when Psalm 96 declares "Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth" and "Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice" (verses 1 and 11), the picture is of all creation rejoicing before the Lord, led by us.

A Divine plan begins to be revealed, but its implications are disturbing. If God is still actively involved with His creation, then the problem of the pain and confusion of the world becomes more pressing. Can He not put it right? Where is God's creative power to be seen and why is He selective in its use? And how does this interact with our role?

After verses 1 and 2, the account in Genesis 1 repeatedly uses the composition that God says "let there be" and then "it was so". The involvement of God with His creation entails the Creator speaking and a response to that: His creation listens and responds obediently. There is a moral character to the action, even before the creation of humanity. With humanity this is carried further and with Israel and the giving of the His Law to Israel further still. His word is given and we can choose obedience to it, or not. The focus of God's creative power on Israel directly continues the creation saga and the moral framework of Genesis 1. Stories of origin in other cultures set the moral framework for subsequent events. The distinctive of Genesis is that this framework is laid out across the fault-line of the absolute distinction between the all-powerful Creator and His creation.

Concomitant to God's engagement with His creation is our obedience: that is, we have the choice to align and engage with His purpose and engage with Him, or not. It follows that there is the possibility for disobedience. Our potential can be fulfilled, or not.