



The Restrictive Syntax of Genesis i 1¹

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Abstract

Although many Hebraists have departed from the traditional understanding of בראשית in Gen i 1 as an independent phrase with grammatical reference to “THE beginning,” it is a view that continues to thrive, and is reflected by the majority of modern translations. Even advocates of the dependent phrase position (e.g., “when God began”) struggle with a precise and compelling linguistic analysis. In this article I offer a linguistic argument that will both provide a simpler analysis of the grammar of Gen i 1 and make it clear that the traditional understanding of a reference to an ‘absolute beginning’ cannot be derived from the grammar of the verse. Instead, the syntax of the verse, based on well-attested features within biblical Hebrew grammar, dictates that there were potentially multiple ראשית periods or stages to God’s creative work.

Keywords

Genesis i 1, syntax, Hebrew

1. Introduction

In his brief article on the “plain meaning” of Gen. i 1-3, Orlinsky concludes with the assertion that “[t]he work of a translator of the Bible is very much like the work of an archaeologist, and uncovering the plain meaning of a biblical passage requires the skill of a scientific investigator” (pp. 208-209). In this scientific spirit, I offer here a linguistic argument that Gen. i 1, provided in (1), is a restrictive relative clause, the nature of which implies that the traditional understanding of an explicit reference to an ‘absolute beginning’ is grammatically ill-founded.

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The option summarized in (2a) is often accompanied by the argument that the noun *rē'šīt* need not have the definite article to be semantically determined. As a determined, absolute noun used for temporal designation, the phrase would then refer to the “the beginning,” i.e., the first point in time. This is the analysis behind the majority of translations since the Reformation period, and is represented by the KJV and most English translations (2b).

At the heart of this first position is the assumption that, since *bārē'šīt* can be used without the definite article and still refer to a specific “beginning,” it need not have the definite article to refer to the “absolute beginning” in Gen. i 1. One problem with this position is that other instances of *rē'šīt* used as support are in poetry, whereas Genesis i is prose (its “poetic” features notwithstanding). The linguistic nature of biblical Hebrew prose leads us to expect an article on items that are definite and not in construct; this is clearly not the case with *bārē'šīt*. An equally significant problem concerns the English (and other Indo-European languages’) use of the lexeme “beginning” (I will return to this last point below, where I discuss the issues of referentiality and identifiability).

The second option, summarized in (3a) with a representative translation in (3b), views *rē'šīt* as an indeterminate noun that is the nomen regens in construct with a finite verb as the nomen rectum.

(3a) *rē'šīt* is a grammatically and semantically indefinite noun in the construct state, used adverbially for temporal designation relative to a separate main event.⁶

(3b) *When* God *began* to create heaven and earth (NJPS, emphasis added; cf. NAB, NRSV)⁷

However, Hebraists who adopt this view must explain the awkwardness of the sequence construct.noun—finite.verb (i.e., “in.beginning.of he.created”).

⁶ See Humbert for the initial twentieth-century study of the use of *bārē'šīt* used in a non-absolute temporal sense; see also, among others, Rashi; Ibn Ezra; Skinner 1910; Ewald 1848; Speiser (p. 12), Sarna (p. 5), Lipiński (pp. 522-523), and particularly Brown (pp. 64-65) for discussion of the arguments about the word since Humbert’s article.

⁷ While both the NRSV and NAB use the sequence “in the beginning when . . .,” it is significant that the NAB places a comma before “when,” making explicit a non-restrictive reading for the relative clause; the NRSV lacks the comma. Many of the translations that use the traditional “in the beginning” in the main text also include “when God began to create” in the footnotes; I do not cite them because I take the choice of which to use in the main text as indicative of their grammatical analysis of the passage, and the footnote as a textual nod to a well-known alternative.

Perhaps the best-known attempt is Rashi's: he suggests that *bārē'šit bārā'* is analogous to *bārē'šit bārō'*, with the perfect verb of the text understood as or likened to an infinitive construct. But this is an analogy and not a grammatical analysis. In fact, only one grammatically sound explanation of the syntax of a noun in construct with a verb has surfaced: such sequences are unmarked relative clauses (cf. Anderson, p. 21; Gibson, p. 12).⁸ This "construct-relative" option makes better sense of the fact that the noun in *bārē'šit* lacks the article, and builds upon known Hebrew grammar.

From a strict grammatical perspective, though, the problem with this analysis is that the construct relationship typically holds between two nominal items, not a noun and verb. With recent work on the syntax of Hebrew relative clauses, we are now able to nuance the construct-relative option so that it more transparently accords to known Hebrew grammar, and in the process we may add one feature of the relative clause in Gen. i 1 that has previously not been identified: its restrictive nature.

2. Salient Features of Relative Clauses in Biblical Hebrew

Three features of Hebrew relative clause formation must be recognized to analyze Gen. i 1. The first is the option to omit an explicit relative word. Unmarked relatives, often labeled 'asyndetic' or 'bare' relatives in reference grammars,⁹ are common in the Hebrew Bible. The structure of such relative clauses is best illustrated by comparison with marked relative clauses, as in (4) and (5), where the Ø in (5) indicates the absence of an overt relative word.¹⁰

⁸ The common proposal that the word *rē'šit* can be in construct with the verb *bārā'* itself, or with the whole verbal clause, is not supportable. First, aside from the few examples like Gen. i 1, nouns are in construct with *other nouns*. Since this would be an otherwise unattested grammatical construction for biblical Hebrew grammar, grammatical economy dictates that if one can base an explanation of these construction upon other known constructions, and preserve the basic feature of the construct relationship as a nominal construction, this avenue is to be greatly preferred. The relative analysis of Gen. i 1 succeeds on this methodological point, since a relative word "nominalizes" a clause, making it an appropriate candidate for serving as the *nomen rectum* in a construct relationship.

⁹ See GKC, pp. 485-489; WOC, p. 338; Meyer, pp. 96-98; JM, pp. 593-595; Gibson, pp. 10-12.

¹⁰ For representative examples of bare relative clauses (from a variety of stages of the language, and in both poetry and prose), see Gen. xv 13; Exod. iv.13; ix.4; xiv 11; xv 17(2x); xviii 20; Lev. vii 35; Num. vii 13(2x); Deut. xxxii 11; Josh. vii 21; Judg. viii 1; 1 Sam. Vi 9; 1 Kgs. xiii 2; Isa. i 30; vi 6; Jer. ii 6; Ezek. xxii 24; Hos. iv 14; Jon. i 10; Mic. v 2; Hab. i 5; Zeph. ii 1; Zech. vi 12; Mal. ii 16; Pss. v 5; lxxiv 2(2x); cxviii 22; Prov. viii 32; Job i 1; iii 3; xviii 21; Eccl. x 5; Lam. i 14; iii 1; Ezra i 5; Neh. viii 10; 2 Chr. xv 11.

- (4) Jer. xlii 3 *wayagged-lānū yhw̄h 'ēlohēkā 'et-badderek 'āšer nēlek-bāh*
and let Yhwh your God tell us the way that we should walk in
- (5) Exod. xviii 20 *wəhōda 'tā lāhem 'et-badderek yēləkū bāh*
and you shall make known to them the way \emptyset they should walk in

The examples in (4) and (5) illustrate that unmarked relatives in biblical Hebrew may appear in the same syntactic environments as marked relatives. The unmarked relative clause in (5) modifies an antecedent in the accusative and contains an element resuming the head, just as the marked relative clause in (4) does. What is particularly enlightening about example (5) is that, like Gen. i 1, a noun is formally adjacent to a verb but the two are not in an immediate subject-predicate relationship.

The second relevant feature of relative clauses for the analysis of Gen. i 1 is that the head may be in construct with the relative clause proper, as in (6).¹¹

- (6) Lev. xiii 46 *kol-yamē 'āšer hannega 'bō*
all the days that the disease is in him

In (6), the head noun phrase being modified by the 'āšer relative clause is unambiguously in the construct form. This construct—relative construction also occurs with unmarked relatives, as in (7).¹²

- (7) Jer. xlviii 36 *'al-kēn yitrat 'āšā 'ābādū*
therefore the abundance \emptyset it [Moab] made has perished

These details taken together—that the head may be in construct with the relative clause, even when there is no overt relative word—provide us with a grammatically transparent analysis of Gen. i 1 as well as the similar constructions in Hos. i 2, Isa. xxix 1, Lev. xxv 48, 1 Sam. xxv 15, and Jer. xlviii 36 (7): the noun preceding the verb is not in construct with the verb itself, but with the unmarked relative clause. Thus we may connect the syntax of these verses with the more common syntax of examples like that of (6).

¹¹ On the construct state and unmarked relatives, see GKC, p. 488; WOC, pp. 155-6; JM, p. 472; Gibson, p. 12.

¹² See, for example, Exod. iv 13; Lev. vii 35; Deut. xxxii 35; Jer. xxxvi 2; Mic. v 2; Pss. iv 8; lvi 4, 10; Job iii 3; vi 17; xviii 21; Lam. i 21; 1 Chr. xxix 3; 2 Chr. xx 22; xxiv 11; xxix 27; xxxi 19. Linguistically, the head in this type of relative clause is not technically in construct with the unmarked relative clause, but rather with the null relative operator (i.e., covert relative word). For discussion, see Holmstedt, pp. 107-112, 255.

Furthermore, we see in Akkadian the same syntactic structure, in which the head is in construct with an unmarked relative clause. Compare the unmarked Akkadian relative clause in (8a) to the marked version in (8b).¹³

- (8a) *bīt ēpušu imqut*
the house \emptyset I built collapsed
- (8b) *bītum ša ēpušu imqut*
the house that I built collapsed

In the unmarked relative (8a) the head is in the bound form, whereas in the the marked relative (8b) the head is in the free form. This is an attested Semitic phenomenon, but it has not been recognized within Hebrew studies as the simplest grammatical analysis for Gen. i 1.

Perhaps most important, there is the third feature of biblical Hebrew relatives that builds on the two already mentioned, and it has been wholly missing from the discussion. In my comprehensive study of relative clauses in the Hebrew Bible, I concluded that when the head of the relative clause is in the construct form, the relative clause is always *restrictive* (Holmstedt, pp. 119-25).¹⁴ In order to illustrate this contrast, compare the pair of examples in (9) and (10).

- (9) Num. xxii 26 *wayya' amōd bəmāqōm šār 'āšer 'ēn-derek lintōt yāmīn ūšəmo' l*
 and he stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn right or left
- (10) Gen. xlix 29 *wayyittənēhū 'el-bēt hassōhar maqōm 'āšer-'āsūrē (Kt) hammelek 'āsūrīm*
 and he put him into the round house, the place where the king's prisoners were confined

The head, “a narrow place,” in (9) is not in construct with the relative clause, and the relative clause is also non-restrictive (i.e., it simply provides additional, non-crucial information about the head). In contrast, the head, “place,”

¹³ Huehnergard, §19.3; von Soden, §166.

¹⁴ Ewald came very close to this analysis. With regard to nouns in construct with 'āšer clauses, he writes that “the noun to which the relative particle corresponds being quickly combined with it in the construct state, the relative itself takes a greater share in the meaning of the noun [= restrictive relative? RDH], and becomes more closely intertwined with the whole adverbial expression” (p. 215). The fact that later grammarians overlooked this insight, or neglected to refine it, is surprising, although Ewald's perceptiveness is not (it is indicative of his entire work). Inexplicably, both WOC (p. 156) and JM (p. 471) classify the construction in Gen. i 1 as “non-relative”.

in (10) is in construct with the following relative, which is clearly a restrictive modification.

A similar conclusion about restrictiveness was drawn with regard to unmarked relative clauses in biblical Hebrew: they, too, are always restrictive.¹⁵ In order to illustrate this feature, let us first consider English examples (11). (Note that in English, non-restrictive clauses are marked prosodically by an intonational pause after the head, whereas such a pause is absent in restrictive clauses).

- (11a) English Non-restrictive: The teachers, who(m)/^{*}that/^{*}Ø the minister disciplined, are now on strike.
 (11b) English Restrictive: The teachers who(m)/that/Ø the minister disciplined are now on strike.

The non-restrictive relative in (11a) indicates that “the teachers” are on strike, regardless of whether they have been disciplined; the comment about discipline inside the relative serves as an aside, giving the reader additional information simply deemed to be noteworthy. Not so for the same information when presented in a restrictive relative, as in (11b): in this case, “the teachers” can only apply to a subset that is established by the relative, that is, of all potential teachers, only those having previously been disciplined are on strike.

Crucially for our discussion of Gen. i 1, the examples in (11) demonstrate that while we can achieve a restrictive reading with any of the English relative strategies (“who(m),” “that,” and unmarked/Ø), we cannot achieve a non-restrictive reading for relatives introduced by *that* or for unmarked/Ø relatives. Now consider the Hebrew relatives in (12).

- (12a) Hebrew Marked Non-restrictive: Deut. vi 12 *hiššāmer lakā pen-tiškah 'et-yhwh 'āšer hōšī 'ākā mē'eres mišrayim*
 watch yourself lest you forget Yhwh, who brought you out of the land of Egypt
 (12b) Hebrew Marked Restrictive: Gen. i 7 *wayyabdēl bēn hammayim 'āšer mit-tahat lārāqia' ūbēn hammayim 'āšer mē'al lārāqia'*

¹⁵ See, for example, Gen. xv 13; xxvi 10; xxix 25; xlii 28; xliii 18; xlix 27; Exod. iv 13; xiv 11; Lev. vii 35; Deut. xxxii 35; 1 Sam. xiv 21; Isa. i 30; xxx 9; xli 24; xlii 16; lxiii 19; lxx 1; Jer. ii 8, 11; xxxvi 2; Ezek. xiii 3; Jon. i 10; Mic. v 2; Hab. i 5, 6, 8, 14; ii 5; Pss. iv 8; v 5; vii 16; viii 9; ix 16, 18; xii 6; xvii 1; xviii 3, 44; xxv 12; xxxiii 12; xxxv.8; lvi 4, 10; lviii 5; lxx 5; lxxiv 2; lxxxi 6; cxiii 5; cxviii 22; cxix 136; cxxix 6; cxli 9; Job vi 17; xviii 21; xxix 16; xxxvi 27; Prov. viii 32; Lam. i 14; Neh. viii 10; 1 Chr. xii 24; xv 12; xvi 15; 2 Chr. i 4; xv 11; xx 22; xxiv 11; xxix 27.

and he divided between the water that was under the firmament and the water that was above the firmament

(12c) Hebrew Unmarked Restrictive: Ps. vii 16 *bôr kârâ wayyahpârêbû wayyippôl bôšahat yip'âl*

he made a cistern, he dug it out, and fell into the pit Ø he made

(vs. *he fell into the pit, he had made)

Two observations based on these three examples are relevant. First, the relatives in (12) establish that biblical Hebrew, like English, utilizes a semantic contrast between restrictive and non-restrictive readings for relative clauses (most but not all languages of the world contain the restrictive/non-restrictive contrast, so it is necessary to establish this feature). Second, the examples in (12) suggest that, similar to English, a constraint on relative interpretation was operative in biblical Hebrew: we can achieve either restrictive or non-restrictive readings when the relative clause is marked, but only a restrictive reading for unmarked/Ø relative clauses.

Why is the issue of restrictiveness salient to the analysis of Gen. i 1? The restrictiveness of a relative clause relates to the identifiability of the referent of the head constituent. If a relative clause is restrictive, it provides information about its head that is necessary to identify the exact referent; a non-restrictive relative presents additional information about its head that is not crucial for identifying one particular referent.

3. Genesis i 1—an Unmarked, Restrictive Relative Clause

With the three features of biblical Hebrew relative clauses that I have now discussed, that the head may be in construct, that the relative word may be covert, and that both of these two strategies produce restrictive relative clauses, we may return to Gen. i 1. A restrictive reading for the clause *bərē'šît bārā' 'olōhim 'et haššamayim wə'et hā'āreṣ* means that the *rē'šît* specified is not semantically absolute but relative to the event provided by the restrictive relative clause. Thus, any translation or semantic reading of a translation that would identify *rē'šît* in Gen. i 1 as “the beginning” would fail to recognize the significance of relative clause syntax.

It is important to note in this regard the problems with using the English combination of the noun “beginning” and the temporally-nuanced relative word “when” in translating Gen. i 1. The first problem is with the default interpretation for English “the beginning”. While most heads in English naturally take either restrictive or non-restrictive relative clauses, there are some

that do not (or, at least, they do not do so easily). For instance, proper names rarely take restrictive relatives, as in (13).

- (13a) I saw Benjamin, who studies daily.
 (13b) *I saw Benjamin who studies daily.¹⁶

Likewise, certain phrases that are typically associated with a distinct phenomenon or event, such as “the beginning,” prohibit a restrictive reading. Consider the contrasts between (14) and (15), where the “?” indicates marginal interpretability.

- (14a) On the day when I wrote this paper I had a cold.
 (14b) ?On the day, when I wrote this sentence, I had a cold.
 (15a) ?In the beginning when God created the cosmos he had a cold.
 (15b) In the beginning, when God created the cosmos, he had a cold.

While “the day” with a relative clause can easily produce a restrictive reading, a non-restrictive reading is questionable, and vice versa for the phrase “the beginning”. In the case of “the beginning,” the restrictive reading is further hindered by the use of the temporal relative word “when.” As a relative word of the *wh*-variety (e.g., which, who, where), “when” never forces a restrictive reading, and thus in conjunction with the phrase “the beginning” (when it is not further qualified, e.g., “of the horse race”), the default to a non-restrictive reading is strengthened. The contrast is even greater when the restrictive relative complementizer “that” is substituted for “when” in (16) in order to force a restrictive reading.

- (16) ?In the beginning that God created the cosmos...

Using the restrictive “that” with “the beginning” is only marginally interpretable. So once again, the English phrase “the beginning,” unless it is followed by modifiers (e.g., “of the game”) or occurs within a clear discourse context

¹⁶ McCawley qualifies this condition by stating that it “relates only to proper nouns that are used as proper nouns. A proper noun that is used as a common noun can host a restrictive relative as well as any inherently common noun can: The Harry Smith who took your phonetics course last year has transferred to Cornell” (p. 481, n. 12). The same qualification applies to biblical Hebrew: Esth 1:1: *wayəbī bimē ’āḥaswērōš hū’ ’āḥaswērōš hammōlek mēhōddū wə’ad-kūš* ‘and it was in the days of Ahasuerus (he is the Ahasuerus who rules from India to Kush)’.

(e.g., description of a football game) defaults to a semantic interpretation that reads it as identifiable without immediate context and carrying an absolute reference: in *the* beginning (i.e., of all time). But this is precisely the reading that a restrictive relative clause prohibits. So it appears that semantic complexities of the target language are at the heart of the continued resistance to relative analysis of *rē'sīt* (i.e., identifiability *relative to the immediate context, referentiality relative to the information that follows, and relative clause syntax*).¹⁷ The problem lies in target language issues and theological objection.¹⁸

Admittedly, the implication of my analysis is significant. If *rē'sīt* is the head of an unmarked, restrictive relative clause, then Gen. i 1 as a whole can serve only one grammatical function: it is a stage-setting prepositional phrase, providing a temporal frame of reference only for what follows. Importantly, the temporal reference is relative to the event provided in the matrix clause (either v. 2 or v. 3). To reflect this linguistic analysis, a translation based on the one in (17) would be accurate.

(17) In the initial period that/in which¹⁹ God created the heavens and the earth...

¹⁷ This same argument applies to the oft-cited example of *rē'sīt* in Isa. xlvii 10; it certainly need not be taken as a reference to the absolute beginning, but is better understood as a relative beginning. That is, God declares the outcomes of events at their onset.

¹⁸ Von Rad's comment illustrates the force of the theological lens when it comes to Gen. i 1-3: "We do not follow the old conjecture that v. 1 is not to be understood as an independent sentence but as the introductory clause to v. 2 or even to v. 3... Syntactically perhaps both translations are possible, but not theologically. One must not deprive the declaration in v. 1 of the character of a theological principle" (p. 48). And although I disagree strongly with the position, Lim's comment is admirably forthcoming concerning theologically presupposition: "Ultimately, in spite of all the arguments given by all the different sides, it boils down to the reader's personal preference and presuppositional pool concerning his or her understanding of God. In other words, a person's view of God determines his or her translation... [O]n theological grounds, option one [i.e., the non-relative option; RDH] makes the best sense in light of its context." (p. 306).

¹⁹ While the relative word "that" provides the least ambiguity in the translation, since it forces a restrictive reading, it is admittedly awkward despite being grammatical. For most speakers and readers, perhaps the use of "in which" for a translation of Gen. i 1 is more natural—and it still restrictive. But the use of "in which" comes with the proviso that we not impose the syntax of English "in which" constructions onto Hebrew relative clauses: the preposition "in" in English "in which" reflects "piep-piping," i.e., the preposition belongs within the relative and raises with the relativized noun, e.g., *I rode in the car* becomes *the car in which I rode*. In English, piep-piping involving phrases such as *in which*, *with which*, etc., is always legitimate, but it is never legitimate in biblical Hebrew. When a preposition precedes the relative word in biblical Hebrew (e.g., *bā' āšer*, *kā' āšer*), the preposition belongs to the higher clause, not to the relative clause. See Holmstedt 2002, p. 96.

The literary significance of analyzing Gen. i 1 as a restrictive relative is that the syntax dictates, by the very nature of restrictive relatives (i.e., they serve to identify their head over against other possible referents and define it), that there were potentially multiple *rē'šît* periods or stages to God's creative work.²⁰ Put another way, the grammar of Gen. i 1 points forward only; it does not comment about whether this basic creative event was unique or whether there were others like it (see Andersen 1987). Grammatically, the introduction to Genesis simply indicates that it is this particular *rē'šît* from which the rest of the story as we know it unfolds.

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²⁰ See Sailhamer 1996, pp. 38-45; Walton, p. 68.

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