

In A Beginning, Not In The Beginning

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In A Beginning, Not In The Beginning

Since we're right at the beginning of the Torah reading cycle, I thought we'd take a look at the very first word of Torah which, when translated incorrectly, causes a lot of trouble.

The first word says: "In A beginning (B'reishit)." It's very specific. If it were "In the beginning" it would have been Bareishit. This one mistranslation has created a world of ridiculous theology that doesn't match up with what the Torah, itself, transmits. Let's take a look.

At the beginning of Genesis we have SEVERAL creation stories:

1. Genesis 1:1-2:4: God creates containers (e.g., land, sky, water) and then fills those containers (animals, stars/sun/moon, fish) and then creates Adam and Eve equally. It's very orderly, no emotions except for God's satisfaction at the creations.
2. Genesis 2:5-3:24: This is the narrative of adolescent rebellion against a parent. God gives them this nice garden and they still go ahead and test the boundaries and are kicked out. This is the one with the snake and Eve being created after Adam.
3. Genesis 4:1-25: This is the Wisdom Literature account of creation. (Who else's creation story would include the world's first murder?) Wisdom literature is also seen in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job. To them, there's no order, the righteous suffer and the wicked get off the hook.
4. Genesis 5: The genealogy that traces the course of humanity from Adam to Noah (i.e., a bridge between the Adam/Eve narratives and the Noah narrative).
5. Genesis 6:1-8: This version of creation sounds for all the world like a pagan myth (deities sleeping with human women). Someone must really have wanted it in the book and lobbied hard for it. Of all the creation stories this is the one that really doesn't fit.
6. Genesis 6:9-9:28: The story of Noah and the flood. (This story intertwines two versions of the tale, but that's a discussion for another day.)

So we have six creation stories all in a row. Thus, the first word of the Torah makes sense. It's "in A beginning" because we're going to have six stories.

Discussion Questions

1. How would creationists change their tune (or would they) if they knew what the Torah actually says? What would scientists say? Which is closer to the archeological record...one creation or a series of creations in which species develop and then die out?
2. How would feminists react if they knew that of all the creation stories, only #2 suggests that Eve is created after Adam is? In the others, it's all even.
3. Every word in Torah had someone fighting for it, lobbying to have it included. Who might have been lobbying for each of these different stories? What stories might not have made the cut?
4. You might have wondered who saddled us with that terrible translation. That would be either the Geneva translation (the one Shakespeare used) or the King James. They were both probably translating from a faulty Latin translation. How much trouble could we have avoided if they knew Hebrew?

As always, looking forward to your answers and insights!