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BOB BECKING & MARJO C.A. KORPEL,
TO CREATE, TO SEPARATE OR TO CONSTRUCT: AN ALTERNATIVE FOR A RECENT PROPOSAL AS TO THE INTERPRETATION OF מִפְּרָאָת בְּרֵאשִׁית IN GEN 1:1–2:4a
TO CREATE, TO SEPARATE OR TO CONSTRUCT: AN ALTERNATIVE FOR A RECENT PROPOSAL AS TO THE INTERPRETATION OF בְּרֵאָם IN GEN 1:1–2:4a

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Where does it all come from?” The quest for the origin of cosmos, earth, and life belongs to the perennial exercises of homo sapiens. In the beginning of the Book of Genesis, the Israelite concept on the origin of “all things created” is displayed. In this hymnic text, the Hebrew verb בְּרֵאָם plays a pivotal role in describing the acts of God. The Greek rendition ἐποίησεν, “he created,” as well as the Vulgate “in principio creavit Deus” have given rise to the misconception that in Genesis the idea of a creatio ex nihilo is spelled out. Removing this common misconception, however, does not solve the main question: what concept of the origin of the world is portrayed in Gen 1:1–2:4a; hereafter, for the sake of simplicity, “Genesis 1”?

Recently, Ellen van Wolde has proposed that in Genesis 1 the verb בְּרֵאָם has to be translated “to spatially separate” instead of “to create.” She arrived at this conclusion by applying linguistic, exegetical, and comparative methods. For instance, she compares the

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concept of origin in Genesis 1 with seven other creation stories from the ancient Near East that describe the first step of the construction of the cosmos as the separation of heaven and earth by a deity. She presents her proposal to translate בָּרַך with “to separate,” as a new discovery which will revolutionize HB (or Old Testament) scholarship. If she is correct, translations, dictionaries, commentaries, biblical theologies would all be in need of revision.

In this article we would like to test her proposal. We would like to question her claims in regards on the newness of her proposal, its linguistic and philological presuppositions, its exegetical adequacy, and the strength of her religio-historical comparison.

2. History of Research on בָּרַך Meaning “Separate”

Van Wolde is not the first modern scholar to propose the meaning “to separate” for the Hebrew verb בָּרַך. The famous Hebräisches Handwörterbuch of 1810 by Wilhelm Gesenius offers the following: “der erste Begriff scheint: hauen, aushauen [zu bedeuten],” and Gesenius refers to the Arabic verb bry “to cut off.” After that, he goes on to attribute the meanings “bilden, schaffen, hervorbringen” to the Qal of the verb in Classical Hebrew. Only in the Piel the original meaning of “to cut off, chisel, shape” would have been preserved (Isa 17:15, 18; Ezek 21; 19; 23:47). For the Niphal he assumes the meaning “to be born” in Ezek 21:30 and Ps 102:19. In the first edition of his grammar Gesenius elucidates his point of view. In the Piel the “sinnliche Bedeutung” (literal meaning) has been preserved and in Qal the “tropische” (metaphorical). As an example he refers to בָּרַך, with the meaning of “schaffen” for Qal, and “hauen, aushauen” for Piel. He still relates the root to Arabic bry “to cut off.” In his monumental Thesaurus, Gesenius maintains and elaborates this view, but he criticises those who think that (on the basis of the supposed original meaning of “to cut off”) the concept of creatio ex nihilo would be absent in Genesis 1. The use of the verb בָּרַך in many other texts in the HB proves—in his view—that it always designates the production of something new. For the idea of the creatio ex nihilo he refers to 2 Macc 7:28; Heb 11:3; Rom 4:17; Ibn Ezra and Maimonides.

On the well-deserved authority of Gesenius many authors repeated that the basic meaning of בָּרַך would have been “to cut” or

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3 Ibn Ezra, for instance, suggested that the verb has to do with cutting or setting a boundary.
4 W. Gesenius, Hebräisch-Deutsches Handwörterbuch über die Schriften des Alten Testaments mit einschluß der geographischen Namen und chaldäischen Wörter beym Esra und Daniel, Theil 1 (Leipzig: Vogel, 1810), 120.


6 G. (=W.) Gesenius, Thesaurus philologicus criticus linguae hebraeae et chaldaeae Veteris Testamenti (Lipsiae: Vogel, 1829), 236.
“to separate.” Like Brongers and Dantinne, Raymond Van Leeuwen and Nick Wyatt compare Gen 1:1 to the Babylonian Enûma Elish epic and arrive at the same conclusion. The latest edition of Gesenius’ dictionary cautiously mentions the possibility of translating “to cut” under the lemma אָדָם, only referring to Bernhardt in

7 S.R. Driver, The Book of Genesis: With Introduction and Notes (4th ed., London: Methuen, 1905), 3, without any reference to dictionaries or other Semitic languages: “The root signifies to cut … so probably the proper meaning of אָדָם is in fashion by cutting, to shape.” Samuel Driver was one of the editors of A Hebrew and English Lexicon that was based on Gesenius’ lexicon; E. König, Hebräisches und aramäisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament, (2nd – 3rd ed., Leipzig: Dieterich, 1922), 47: “heraushauen, schaffen,” with explicit reference to Gen 1:1; although not specifically referring to אָדָם, the Dutch theologian Noordmans stated confidently “to create is to separate, not to form,” O. Noordmans, Herscheping Beknopte dogmatische handleiding voor godsdienstige toespraken en besprekingen, (Zeist: Nederlandsche Christen Studenten Vereeniging, 1934), 70; H.A. Brongers, De Scheppingstradities bij de profete (Amsterdam: H.J. Paris, 1945), 17: “These data only leave one conclusion: ‘to create’ here [i.e. Gen 1:1] has the meaning of to split, making separation. The work is done with existing material: in the beginning there was chaos.” (our ET); J.P.M. van der Ploeg, “Le sens du verbe Hébreu אָדָם: Étude sémasiologique,” le Musiion 59 (1946), 143–157; Dantinne also refers to the similarities with ancient Near Eastern creation stories and bases his theory for אָדָם “to cut” merely on the occurrences of the verb where it might be from the verb אָדָם III, namely Josh 17:15, 18; 1 Sam 2:23; Ezek 21:24; 23:47, see E. Dantinne, “Création et separation,” le Musiion 74 (1961), 441–451, esp. 446: “בָּרָא is ‘to separate, to cut, to carve, to make by carving like a sculptor’, and finally ‘to create’,” and for this he explicitly refers to Gesenius’ Thesaurus and the 1883 edition of his Handwörterbuch and to Driver; P. Beauchamp, Création et séparation: Étude exégétique du chapitre premier de la Genèse (Paris: Éditions Cerf, 1969), who mentions Dantinne on p. 234, where he admits that there might be an original meaning “separate” but that research into etymology is not always fitting on the level of words in their particular context. In his opinion it certainly does not fit in the context of Genesis 1; D.J.A. Clines, The Theme of the Pentateuch (JSOTSup, 10; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1978), 74: “Genesis 1 depicts creation as largely a matter of separation and distinction;” K.H. Bernhardt, הָרָא, ThWAT, Vol. 2, 773, who refers for this meaning only to Dantinne.

8 See above, footnote 7.

9 R.C. Van Leeuwen, הָרָא, NIDOTTE, vol. 1 (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 731f., referring to HALAT, Dantinne and Clines and viewing it as accenting “in a punning way” the manner in which God gives order to his creation; N. Wyatt, Space and Time in the Religious Life of the Ancient Near East (Biblical Seminar, 85; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 72–73: “Hebrew בּוֹרָא: the basic idea is of cutting in two (echoing the conflict myth …) the primordial soup (1:2) is the raw material of the heavens and the earth; (…) There is the merest echo of the old conflict tradition, but the common assessment that this indicates the ‘demythologization’ of the narrative is excessive.”
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ThWAT, who on his part referred only to Dantinne. In other words, Ellen van Wolde has many predecessors. This being so, two questions arise: (1) What is so specific in her proposal? (2) Why has recent scholarship abandoned the path designed by Gesenius? We will come to both questions after a little detour.

3. AN ETYMOLOGICAL DETOUR AND THE CURRENT CONSENSUS

It is worth noting that in the 17th edition of Gesenius’ Handwörterbuch—edited by Franz Buhl—the idea of an original meaning “to cut off” was abandoned on the basis of further research on the matter. Now “schaffen, hervorbringen” is the basic meaning of the Qal of הביב I and “abholzen, zerhauen” (Piel in Josh 17:15, 18; Ezek 23:47 and perhaps Ezek 21:24) is relegated to הביב II, whereas הביב III in the Hiphil in 1 Sam 2:29 is seen as doubtful, but perhaps meaning “fett machen, mästen.”

It had been recognized meanwhile that the Arabic root <br, “to create” is probably an Aramaic (or Hebrew?) loanword which was confused early on with Arabic brw/bry “to cut off, form by cutting.” In Classical Arabic the phonetic difference between various forms of these verbs is slight and in unvocalized texts invisible. Already the early Arabic lexicographers noticed the confusion of the two roots. Because the existence of a Hebrew root <b̄r is a slight and in unvocalized texts invisible. Already the early Arabic lexicographers noticed the confusion of the two roots. It seems likely that a similar confusion has taken place in the few places where הביב Piel occurs. There are more examples of this type of confusion of the weak consonants š and ה at the end of verbal forms.

10 HAHAT, vol.1, 172, with the remark “n. anderen trennen.”
12 See A. Jeffery, The Foreign Vocabulary in the Qur’ain (GSRP, 79; Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), 75–76, with earlier literature.
15 See, for example, F.R. Blake, A Resurvey of Hebrew Tenses (Roma:
Gesenius-Buhl refers to several South-Arabic dialects in which the root \( br \) means “to build, make, give birth.”\(^{16}\) Van Wolde did not consider the alternative possibility that \( br \) may belong to the semantic field of “building; constructing.” We will come back to this alternative below, especially since it is connected to Egyptian, Babylonian and Ugaritic texts and concepts that describe creation with verbs meaning “to build.”\(^{17}\) In any case, it is significant that the Old Greek translation of the HB (LXX), the oldest translation we have, mostly chooses \( κτιστέω \), “to found, build” which only secondarily means “to create,” as its rendering of \( בָּרַא \) Qal.\(^{18}\) It never means anything like “to separate.” In his still valuable study of the verb \( בָּרַא \) Paul Humbert maintained that \( בָּרַא \) III in the sense of “to shape by cutting, to chip away” (“tailler, couper”) is related to Arabic \( bry \).\(^{19}\) As a result of these and other investigations, most modern dictionaries distinguish three different Hebrew roots \( בָּרַא \).

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\(^{18}\) See T. Muraoka, *Hebrew/Aramaic Index to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1998), 30. However, in Gen 1:1 LXX renders with \( ἐποιήσεν \), “he made.”

with a strong tendency to render the Qal of the verb with “to create.”

Ellen van Wolde deviates from the current consensus not by going back to the arguments of Gesenius, but by means of a thorough linguistic analysis of the instances of בָּרָא in Genesis 1. She eventually argues for a translation “to separate.” In her discussion of the question whether the meaning of the verb בָּרָא is synonymous with that of the verb בָּדֵד (also present in Genesis 1), she arrives to the conclusion that there is a semantic specification. בָּרָא indicates an act in which, out of an originally homogenous entity, two or more entities are “created” through a process of “splitting.” In our view, the English verb “to differentiate” would have been a more adequate indicator.

4. Semantic Considerations

Etymologizing is an interesting intellectual exercise, and in the case of ancient “dead” languages sometimes inevitable, but it often produces unreliable results. Ellen van Wolde quite correctly follows the advice of James Barr that contextual semantics should always take precedence over etymology. Although we agree with this approach, we disagree in certain aspects of her work.

4.1. Separation of Two Objects: Notes on the Absent Preposition

A Hebrew verb with the meaning “to separate” requires at least one preposition, like וב or בְּ, as can be observed with the verb בָּדֵד. It could be argued that there are texts where a preposition is not required. However, this is the case only when בָּדֵד is used in the meaning of “to select.” Otherwise “separate” has to be taken as

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20 See appendix.
21 Van Wolde, “Why the verb בָּרָא does not mean ‘to create’ in Genesis 1,” 19–22; Van Wolde, Reframing Biblical Studies, 197-200.
23 In her recent book, Van Wolde, Reframing Biblical Studies, 200, she seems to be aware of this implication.
24 See, e.g. Gen 1:4, God separated between הקדש the light and between the dark; Exod 26:33, the curtain will separate the Holy Place from הקדש the Most Holy Place. Other examples: Lev 20:24; Num 16:9, Isa 56:3.
25 E.g., Deut 4:41; Ezra 10:16; 1 Chron 23:13. In all texts using בָּדֵד without a preposition a meaning “separate, split in two” does not suit the object(s) or the textual context.
“split, cleave.” In that case, however, the text of Gen 1:1 would mean that heaven and earth are each split into two halves. As noted above, Van Wolde seems to propose the translation “to separate” in the meaning of “differentiate” or “to separate between,” and not “to split, to cleave” as rendition for שָׁבַע. If Ellen van Wolde had consistently translated שָׁבַע with “to differentiate,” there would have been fewer problems with her proposal (though our other arguments against it would, nevertheless, remain). Now she occasionally has to include (or to add) a preposition in her translations. The absence of a preposition modifying שָׁבַע in Genesis 1, can easily be explained by assuming that the idiom הָא ... שָׁבַע can be rendered with “to differentiate ... into.”

This assumption, however, creates another problem. In the interesting Mesopotamian texts that Ellen van Wolde claims that parallel the concept of “separation,” prepositions are present. The Sumerian Song of the Hoe contains the following line:

\[\text{an ki-ta ba-re-de1 saq na-an-ga-an-sum2}\]

and not only did he [=Enlil] hasten to separate heaven from earth.\(^{28}\)

In this text the adverbial case marker “ta” (in “ki-ta”) indicates the ablative with separating force, hence “from.”\(^{29}\) A comparable feature is present in the late bilingual text from Uruk:

\[\text{dUTU an ki-ta ba[a]-ra-bad-rá-a-ta}\]
\[\text{e-nu-ma ıa-ma-it-[i] K[i]-tim ] is-su-ra}\]

Utu, when the heavens were made distant from earth\(^{30}\)

\(^{26}\) Cf. Lev 1:17; Lev 5:8, the wings of a bird are separated partly from the body of the bird. A similar verb is עֶלֶבָּה, “to cleave.” It is used in Exod 14:16 for God dividing the Sea, and in Gen 7:11, for the wells of the great floods that are split open.

\(^{27}\) She avoids the inclusion of separative prepositions in her final translations. See Van Wolde, “Why the verb שָׁבַע does not mean ‘to create’ in Genesis 1,” 21–22.

\(^{28}\) See http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk.


In the late Babylonian version the preposition itti, “from,” is used. In the other texts that Van Wolde refers to, prepositions or an ablative are present. These remarks imply that the Mesopotamian concept of origin can be labelled as “separating A from B,” which is different from “differentiating into A and B”—as Ellen van Wolde assumes for Genesis 1, and therefore are of no use as comparative material in an argument on the interpretation of Genesis 1.

4.2. The Participle of אֱלֹהִים

One of Van Wolde’s arguments for the translation אֱלֹהִים, “to separate,” is her idea that the abstract noun “Creator” is never described in the HB with an active participle of אֱלֹהִים.31 Her position here depends on an article by Florentino García Martínez, who argued that in the HB God only is called creator with participles of other verbs like יְצַר, עַשֵׁה and בָּרָה.32 Van Wolde accepted the argument of García Martínez, but did not critically assess its validity.33

The participle of בָּרָה is used at least 13 times in the HB to describe God as creator.34 This happens, not only in phrases like “creator of heaven” and “creator of earth,” but also in a more abstract sense, “your creator” (Isa 43:1) and “creator of Israel” (Isa 43:15). Most interesting is the text of Isa 45:7:

7aA

ניָצָר אֵוַר בָּרָה וְשֵׁך

he who forms light and creates darkness,

7aB

עִנָּשׁ שְׁלֹם בָּרָה רֵא

who makes peace and creates evil

It is quite clear that בָּרָה is paralleled here by the verb עִנָּשׁ and indicating that the three verbs are part of the same semantic field and that their meaning is interconnected. Van Wolde, however, prefers a different, more theological, explanation. God would—in

31 Van Wolde, “Why the verb בָּרָה does not mean ‘to create’ in Genesis 1,” 20.
33 Like García Martínez, she failed to complete the list of examples with the participle of נָבֵה (Gen 14:18, 22; Deut 32:6).
34 The participle occurs in the following texts: Isa 40:28 (creator of the ends of the earth); 42:5 (creator of the heavens); 43:1 (your creator); 43:15 (creator of Israel); 45:7 (creator of darkness and creator of evil); 45:18 (creator of heaven); 57:19 (creator of praise on man’s lips); 65:17 (creator of new heavens and a new earth), 18 (I am the creator, creator of Jerusalem as a delight); Amos 4:13 (creator of wind); Qoh 12:1 (your creator).
her view—not create darkness and evil, he just separated them from (missing preposition) respectively light and peace.\textsuperscript{35} However, in the monotheistic theology of Deutero-Isaiah this dualistic idea is untenable, for the one God has taken over all expertise from the many gods (cf. Isa 44:24; 45:5–6). So, he is able to give both rain and drought (1 Kings 17–18), he kills and makes alive, he wounds and heals (Deut 32:29).\textsuperscript{36} One should not try to eliminate such theologially “problematic” ideas by proposing forced renderings. The context of Isaiah 45 shows that “evil” should be understood as YHWH’s former punishment for Israel’s trespasses. Second Isaiah argues that the devastation of Jerusalem and the exile that afflicted the Israelites did not come to them from any other deity, but from the same God who once made a covenant with them.\textsuperscript{37} 

All in all, Van Wolde’s argument based on the assumed absence of the participle of the verb בָּרָא, turns out to be quite weak. Moreover, by focusing on the meanings of active participles, it brings up the question of why the more reflective form “separator” or “differentiator”—as per her proposal—is absent in the HB.

### 4.3. Separation or Creation of the Sea-monsters?

One of Van Wolde’s arguments for the rendering of בָּרָא as “to separate” is connected to Gen 1:21.\textsuperscript{38} According to Van Wolde the sea-monsters were living in the waters beneath the earth and therefore they had to be separated from the creatures living in the upper waters, the waters of the sea. Two remarks need to be made here.

(1) There seems to be an anomaly in her argument. First, she states that in the preceding verse—a text containing the divine resolution to bring into being the watery part of the animal kingdom. Later on she remarks that “the tanninim al-

\textsuperscript{35} Van Wolde, “Why the verb בָּרָא does not mean ‘to create’ in Genesis 1,” 6, 19–20; Van Wolde, Reframing Biblical Studies, 186.

\textsuperscript{36} Also the “bad” or “unpleasant” functions were taken over in the image of the one God, cf. M.C.A. Korpel, A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine (Ugaritische und Biblische Literatur, 8; Münster: Ugarit–Verlag, 1990).


\textsuperscript{38} Van Wolde, “Why the verb בָּרָא does not mean ‘to create’ in Genesis 1,” 13–14; Van Wolde, Reframing Biblical Studies, 191-92.
ready existed.”39 This is a strange observation both in view of the non-mention of these sea-monsters in v 20, as well as in view of the fact that v 20 only narrates the divine resolution and not yet its formal implementation.

(2) Her remark that the sea-monsters were living in the waters beneath the earth is hardly convincing in view of the evidence she presents.40 There are, however, other texts in the HB, where these sea-monsters are depicted as marine animals living and swarming in the sea.41 This second concept is reinforced by ancient Near Eastern mythological texts.42 Even if two competing views would have existed in ancient Israel, it would be premature to connect Genesis 1 exclusively with one of them. This implies that her statement is in need of elaboration and cannot be taken as an undisputable argument.

4.4. Could הָרֵם Qal Mean “to Separate” in Other Biblical Texts?

Van Wolde’s proposal would be strengthened if one could argue that there are in the HB texts other than Genesis 1 in which the verb הָרֵם could have no other meaning than “to separate; differen-

40 Van Wolde, “Why the verb הָרֵם does not mean ‘to create’ in Genesis 1,” 12–13, esp. her footnote 23; Van Wolde, Reframing Biblical Studies, 191-92. She only mentions three texts: Isa 51:9–10, where the thwmm/htwmm are only mentioned in v 10, which clearly refers to the pathway through the Red Sea, and does not give any indication about the habitat of the tnyn in v 9. In the text mentioned from Psalm 74 (Van Wolde refers to vv 13–14) the thwmm/thwmm do not occur, and in the final text Ps 148:7 the tnynm are only paralleled by the thwmm. Both are addressed to praise the lord *from the earth* (not: from beneath the earth). It is striking that they are addressed in a parallel “you sea monsters and *all* tehomot.” The comparison with the similarly structured vv 3, 9, 11 and also v 2 proves that tnynm and thwmm are synonymous and addressed here as animated creatures. This makes it quite impossible to take the thwmm in this text as the dwelling-place of the preceding tnynm.

41 Isa 27:1; Ezek 32:2; Ps 74:13; Job 7:12; Ps 148:7 are difficult to interpret in this connection. In Ezek 29:3, הָרֵם has to be taken as a symbol for the crocodile, living in the river Nile. For Rahab see Ps 89:9–10; Job 26:12. See also the pertinent entries in K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, P.W. van der Horst (eds.), Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible (Second Extensively Revised Edition, Leiden: E.J. Brill/Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans 1999), hereafter, DDD.

42 See, e.g., Ugaritic tunannu. Ugaritic texts too show that Tunannu (also called Leviathan, both in Hebrew as well as in Ugaritic) is one of the monstrous helpers of the Sea god that live in the sea; see G.C. Heider, “Tannin,” in: DDD, 834–36.
There is, however, no text in the HB where it can be proved that the author (or a translator) still had knowledge of a previous meaning “to separate.” To the contrary, the authors of texts that preceded and followed (temporally) Genesis 1 apparently assumed הרを作 to have a meaning related to “construct, build” etc. The Greek translators of the HB often rendered with ἐκθέω, “to found, build, create” for הרを作 as well as with ποιεῖ, “to make, build, create.”

Florentino García Martínez has shown that for the first time an abstract הָגוּיָה “creative act” is attested in Ben Sira. In Qumran, the writers also were acquainted with abstract words like הָרוּת, “creation,” and הָרוּת, “creatures.” In all these cases, there is no possibility to connect the nouns to an earlier notion of הרを作, “to separate.” Second Isaiah often calls יהוה the creator. For instance, the deity is “the creator of the ends of the earth” (Isa 40:28), referring to Isa 40:22b, where יהוה is described as the one who stretches out the heavens and spreads them like a tent, and 40:26, יהוה created (הָרוּת) the stars and calls them by name (40:26); this is repeated in Isa 42:5, he is the creator of the heavens, the one who stretches them out; and he is the creator of Jacob (Isa 43:1) and the creator of Israel (Isa 43:15). A rendering “separator” is impossible in all these texts—note that there is only one object in all these cases and the (required) prepositions are missing; see above 4.1.

The idea of God as the creator is further developed by Third Isaiah. He promises that God will create a new heaven and a new earth (Isa. 65:17), and in the next chapter (Isa 66:22) he will make (עש) this new heaven and new earth. יהוה is described as the creator of praise on the lips of mourners in Israel (Isa. 57:18–19). The context breathes joy and it would be very odd if God instead would make a separation between rejoicing and joy, between Jerusalem and the people. According to Amos, God is the one who formed the mountains and the creator of the wind (Amos 4:13). Psalm 102:18 parallels a generation to come with a people still yet to be created (הָרוּת Niphal). What sense would this text make if it were translated, “a people that has to be separated”? The message of the verse is that these new generations will praise the Lord. Another late text in which God creates something “new” is Jer 31:22. The vision of hope is here that “mothers in Israel will stretch their arms around their children.” This is a gesture of joyful reunion, certainly not separation.

The only case that requires some analysis is Num 16:30. Here הרを作 seems to be paralleled by בָּקָל Niphal, “to be split, split open” in v 31. The NEB translation renders the first line of the verse as

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43 As in the case of Gen 1:1.
44 García Martínez, “Creation in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 48–70.
follows, “but if the Lord makes a great chasm, and the ground opens its mouth ....”\textsuperscript{46} However, most modern dictionaries, translations and commentaries prefer to translate \( יָכַּר \) as “to create a creation, to create something totally new.”\textsuperscript{47} The use of \( יָכַּר \) in Qumran supports this rendering. The fact that God is seen as “creating something new,” does not imply (cf. Jer 31:22) the concept of a \textit{creatio ex nihilo}.

### 4.5. Is \( יָכַּר \) Always Connected with Two of More Objects?

In the HB the verb \( יָכַּר \) occurs about 55 times. The position advanced by Van Wolde requires that \( יָכַּר \) be accompanied by two or more objects, but this is seldom the case. There is no need to discuss all these 55 passages; a few observations and examples suffice. The verb is often used with just a single object. For instance, God created man from the face of the ground (Gen 6:7) which is paralleled by “man and beast and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have \textit{made} them.” The synonymous parallelism suggests that \( יָכַּר \) only can have a meaning of “create, form, make.”

Deut 4:32, Isa 45:12, and Mal 2:10 convey also the idea that God created man on earth.\textsuperscript{48} He would create a cloud over Zion (Isa 4:5); he created all that is called by his name (Isa 43:7); he is the creator of the evil smith (Isa 54:16)—and he is the creator of the ravager (Isa 54:16); he is the creator of the fruit of man’s lips (Isa 54:19). A very difficult text to cope with when rendering “to separate, divide” is Ps 51:10, “create in me a clean heart, O God,” paralleled by “and put a new and right spirit in me.” Isa 41:18–20 describes a vision of God’s new creation. He will open rivers on the bare tracks, he will put plants in the wilderness, and men will see it and understand that “the hand of \textit{YHWH} has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it.” The translation “separate” is not appropriate also, because \( יָכַּר \) summarizes the previous enumeration of God’s work, described with the verbs \( יָכַּר \) “open (rivers),” \( יָכַּר \) “make (pools of water),” \( יָכַּר \) “put (cedars, acacias, myrtles, pine-trees),” and \( יָכַּר \) “set (junipers, ashes, cypresses)” in vv 18–19. Furthermore, the object is a single suffix feminine.

\textsuperscript{46} A similar rendering is given by H.E. Hanson, “Num XVI 30 and the Meaning of \textit{bārā’},” VT 22 (1972), 353–359; J. Milgron, \textit{Numbers} (JPS Commentary; Philadelphia: JPS, 1990), 137 with n. 63, who refers for this rendering not only to an earlier article by Hanson, but also to Ibn Ezra. See also Van Leeuwen, “\textit{אָרָבָּר},” 731–32.

\textsuperscript{47} See e.g. RSV; ASV; JPS; NJB; Ph.J. Budd, \textit{Numbers} (WBC, 5; Waco: Word, 1984), 188; B.A. Levine, \textit{Numbers 1–6} (AB, 4a; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 417; H. Seebass, \textit{Nummer} (BKAT, 4/2; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2003), 168, 171, 200; HALAT, 150; HAHAT, 175; as well as DCH, vol. 2, 263.

\textsuperscript{48} In Isa 45:12 this is paralleled by the utterance that he also made the earth and his hands stretched out the heavens; in Mal 2:10 it is paralleled by the statement that all Israelites have just one (heavenly) father.
4.6 בָּרָא in Poetic Parallelism

Within the HB, the verb בָּרָא often occurs in parallelism. In the HB, בָּרָא is paralleled by בָּרִיא, "to make," וַיַּשֵּׁש, "to form," וַיַּשֵּׁש, "to stretch out (like a tent)," said of the object heaven, וַיַּשֵּׁש, "to establish" (Ps 51:12). These instances of word-pairing strongly suggest that the verb בָּרָא is in the same semantic field as verbs that refer to construction activities.

4.7. Preliminary Conclusion

Our observations suggest that Van Wolde’s proposal to translate בָּרָא in Genesis 1 as “to separate (from)” or “to differentiate (into)” has no firm ground in grammar, semantics or linguistics.

5. THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF בָּרָא: AN ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL

We would like to offer an alternative to Van Wolde’s proposal. To do so, we wish to address the question of the meaning and significance of בָּרָא from the perspective of a more historical approach. It is worth noting that in the HB, the verb בָּרָא is used only in relatively late texts. In an older text such as Gen 14:19, 22, the word בָּרָא is used, a verb meaning both “to beget” and “to create.” This verb has old roots in the West Semitic languages, in which it could be used to denote divine or human actions. In Ugaritic

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50 Gen 5:1; Isa 41:20; 43:7; 45:7, 12, 18; Amos 4:13.

51 Isa 43:1, 7; 45:7, 18; Amos 4:13.

52 Isa 42:5; 45:12.

50 Thus, the human king Kirtu cries out in a lament: “No, I want sons to sire [’apy], many boys I want to beget! [’am id] (KTU 1.14:II.4–5); and of the goddess “Anatu it is said that he she devised/created (tqny) bad thoughts in her heart” (KTU 1.17:VI. 41–42).
texts, the verb is attested in epithets of the Canaanite god Ilu and his wife Athiratu. This epithet is reflected in both in the HB and in epigraphic material. In Genesis 14, El is called ʼאתחורא, “Creator of heaven and earth,” both by the Canaanite priest Melchizedek (Gen 14:19) and by Abram (Gen 14:22). The epithet “El the Creator of the earth” is also attested in a Phoenician inscription of the eighth century, on a sixth century BCE Hebrew ostraca from Jerusalem, and on a Punic inscription of the second century BCE. Elsewhere the god Baal-of-heaven took over El’s title and was called qnh dy ʼr ʼh “Creator of the earth.” It seems likely that the Canaanites regarded Ilu/El responsible for the separation of the primordial Flood, though this is not explicitly said or described by the verb qny. Ilu/El is the one who dwells at the springs of the Two Rivers.

We assume that, gradually, the formula involving the ambiguous verb ḫq̄n, which might suggest procreation, became obsolete. The concept that YHWH/God was the creator of heaven and earth, however, was repeated time and again. Apparently, the theological need to refer to creation in a way that sharply contrasted it to any human activity arose in connection with concepts of divine holiness or otherness. Against this background, a specification of the meaning of the verb ḫq̄n Qal became one to be used exclusively with YHWH as grammatical

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54 Ilu is designated as qny, “the Creator” (of the gods), several times. It is not warranted to regard this merely as a term for progenitor because also Ba’lu, who was his son-in-law, designates Ilu as qnyn “our Creator” (KTU 1.10:III.5); see also KTU 1.3:V.9, qny w’adn ʾilm “Creator and Lord of the gods.” As mother of the gods, the goddess Athiratu is called qnyt ʾilm, “Creatress of the gods” (KTU 1.4:1.23; III.26, 30, 35; IV.32; 1.8:II.2.).


57 KAI 129:1.

58 KAI 244:3.


60 In this connection it is interesting to note that the Israelite personal name ʼאתחורא is attested only between the 10th and 8th century BCE, see the paragraph on the name ʼאתחורא below footnote 66.

61 See, apart from Gen 1:1, Exod 20:11 (שִׁמְעָה); Isa 40:22 (כָּלָה); 42:5 (כִּי); 45:18 (כָּלָה, שָׁמַשׁ, כָּלָה); Zech 12:1 (כָּלָה, שָׁמַשׁ, כָּלָה); Ps 8:4 (כָּלָה); 134:3 (כָּלָה); Prov 3:19f. (כָּלָה, שָׁמַשׁ); Neh 9:6 (כָּלָה), etc.
subject. In view of the parallel material mentioned above, it is not unlikely that originally this verb meant something like “to construct, build.”

It is difficult to establish a date for the theologically motivated specification of "to form, shape." One may argue for a pre-exilic date for this semantic/theological shift on the grounds of three texts, namely Amos 4:13; Deut 4:32 and Jer 31:22. But the date of each of these texts, is disputed. Scholars have not only expressed doubt about the pre-exilic date of all three texts but also advanced a post-exilic date. We cannot embark here in a full discussion on the dating of these texts, but we may note that the specified use of "to form, shape" is widely attested in exilic and postexilic texts, especially in Deutero-Isaiah.

Traces of this shift can be found elsewhere in the HB. For instance, Ezekiel 28 clearly presupposes a tradition which is more or less parallel to Genesis 2. But, significantly, in contrast to the author of the garden-narrative who uses "to form, shape" (Gen 2:7–8, 19), "to make" (Gen 2:18), and "to build" (Gen 2:22) to describe God’s work of creation, Ezek 28:13, 15 uses...

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This procedure of replacing “old” terms for creating may also have been applied to Ps 89:13 where MT reads:

17:66

the north and the south, you have created them.

The so-called Job-stele from Sheikh Sa’d (13th century BCE) proves that at a certain moment (YHWH)-El took over the mountain Zaphon (“north”) as a divine abode from Baal. (YHWH)-El was described at that time as ‘il qny spn “Ilu the Creator/Owner of the Zaphon.”67 This observation gives rise to the assumption that Ps 89:13 is reframing “traditional” creation language that used the verb קְנָה with a more contemporary concept that uses בָּרָא.

In 1 Chron 8:21 a Benjaminite man is mentioned, named Be-rayah, בְּרָיָה. Scholars agree on its meaning: “YHWH created (the child).”68 It is hardly imaginable that the parents would have named their son “YHWH separated (the child)” unless it would mean something “YHWH differentiated (the child from the mother—that is, distantiating a primary unity)” as Van Wolde might suggest. However, the name can be seen as a later parallel to אלקָנָה, “El created (the child).” The name Elqanah only occurs in relatively early texts. It seems quite likely that this is related to the theological change of verbs for God’s creation work. The more anthropomorphic בָּרָא “to build,” קְנָה with the meaning of “to beget, bear, create,” and יַשְׁתָּה “to shape (like a potter),”69 would have been exchanged then for בְּרָא—a verb for building that had become obsolete in everyday Hebrew and therefore was a suitable choice if one wanted to avoid an anthropomorphism. If that is true, it would explain why a man named בְּרָיָה only occurs in a quite late text like 1 Chronicles and that this name is not attested in 10th to 8th century inscriptions, whereas more anthropomorphic names like אלקָנָה, “YHWH made (the child),”70 and יַשְׁתָּה do occur in those times.71

In other words, the preference for בָּרָא is a case of a theologically motivated preference for a “neologism,” meant to avoid anthropomorphism.

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66 See also Mettinger, The Eden Narrative, 85–98.
68 See, e.g., M. Noth, Die israelitischen Personenname im Rahmen der gemeinsomiti schen Namengebung (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1928), 171; J.D. Fowler, Thes phoric Personal Names in Ancient Hebrew: A Comparative Study (JSOTSup, 49; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 92.
69 For more equivalents see Van Leeuwen, “arranty”, 730.
71 HAE, 1.101.
ropomorphisms that were also current in Canaan. However, the theological concept behind the choice of בָּרָע ולָשׁוֹן has not been the concept of a *creatio ex nihilo*. The HB shares three modes of creation with other religions in the ancient Near East: creation through the word alone, creation as making (metaphors of the builder, smith or potter) and *creatio continua*. These modes were not experienced as mutually exclusive. The only mode of creation attested in the ancient Near East which was eventually rejected in Israel was that of procreation. Therefore, the more theological term בָּרָע ולָשׁוֹן was needed, instead of the ambiguous בָּרָע ולָשׁוֹן.

6. DOES IT MATTER?

Yes, it does. And yet, at the same time, it does not. The postexilic Priestly Writer who was responsible for the final redaction of Genesis 1 was probably acquainted with the Babylonian creation myth Enuma Elish, which was soberly re-enacted during every New Year festival in the Babylonian cult. It was a major component of the religion of the Babylonian enemy who had destroyed the temple in Jerusalem shortly before. In that mythological narrative, not discussed by Van Wolde, the Babylonian creator god Marduk first defeats the sea monster Tiamat. This has given rise to theories that also in Israel the work of the creator was preceded by a combat between God and the monstrous Sea. Some passages quoted

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73 For the reason that the verb בָּרָע ולָשׁוֹן is used in Gen 1:1–2:4 alongside other verbs like הָעַשׂ, see the discussion of the structure of the text and the deliberate use at the beginning and end of creation (days one and five and six, as well of the inclusion of the entire passage of Gen 1:1–2:4, by Smith, *Priestly Vision*, 48. Furthermore, in Gen 1:1 it is used to describe creation as a whole (heaven and earth), and in Gen 1:21 it is used for the sea monsters that were considered bad deities outside Israel. Here, they are described as mere creations of God. Finally creation of man is described by the verb בָּרָע ולָשׁוֹן which emphasizes human beings as special creations of God, and gives them their special, but restricted place, above all other creatures.


75 Her name is etymologically related to Hebrew תַּיוָת, the primordial Flood also known from Canaanite sources. This is the word used in Gen 1:2 and in Ugaritic texts describing the creator El whose name is also used for the God of Israel in the HB. See B. Alster, “Tiamat,” in *DDD*, 867–69.

76 In its classical formulation by H. Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Ur-
above lend some support to such an assumption. However, in our opinion this is exactly what the Priestly Writer could no longer accept. He was one of the first thinkers who wanted to demythologize the concept of creation, as his treatment of sun and moon as mere “lights” (Gen. 1:14–18) demonstrates—they were important divine beings elsewhere in the ancient Near East.

In Genesis 1 the creative work of God does not start with the cleaving of the skull of a sea monster,77 or the dividing of its flesh,78 or splitting its body like a stockfish,79 as material for the making of heaven and earth,80 but with the words הֵֽוֹלֶֽאָלַֽהַּ, “let there be light,” which meant the end of darkness (Gen 1:3).81 At this stage there was no need of sun, moon, and stars to illuminate the rough clump that would be divided only later on (Gen 1:6–10).82 There was light breaking through the primordial darkness. The division of light and darkness (Gen 1:4) is described by a different verb (יבּרָה Hiphil),


77 En. El. IV.131: “He turned back to where Tiamat lay bound, he straddled the legs and smashed (Akkadian SDUĆ ‘u) her skull.”

78 “He (= Marduk) gazed at the huge body (of the slain deity), pondering how to use it, what to create (zâzu D-stem) from the dead carcass” (En. El. IV.136). The praesens used here suggests to translate “(how) he would divide the clump.”

79 “He split it apart like a stockfish” (En. El. IV.137). The verb used here is הֵפוּ, not הָדוּ ‘u.

80 “With the upper half he constructed the arc of sky” (En. El. IV.136). The actual making of heaven is described with the verb בָּנוּ which basically means “to build.” In En. El IV.145 the making of the earth is described by the verb קָנַּ ו D.


82 In Gen 1:2 the Israelite view on the desolate state of the primordial earth is described with the words לאִבֵּי לאִבֵּי, which have a parallel in the Akkadian of Ugarit. Cf. D.T. Tsumura, “Nabalkatu[τ] tu-a-bi-[u] and tohû wâbôhû,” UF 19 (1987), 309–315. The equation with the Akkadian verb nabalkatu shows that a disorderly, infertile state is described.

The circumstance that the newly created הֵֽוֹלֶֽאָלַֽהַּ had to be renamed in Gen 1:10 might indicate that הֵֽוֹלֶֽאָלַֽהַּ in Gen 1:1–2 should be understood in the more narrow sense of “ground, soil,” a meaning also attested in other parts of the Bible.
not by ֶלַשׁ. Moreover, the separation of light and darkness is not the same as creating heaven and earth.

The decision of the Priestly Writer to break away from the then current explanations of the existence of the cosmos required a neologism. It was one of the first attempts to abandon an animated concept of the cosmos and was meant to avoid the concept of a combat between God and primordial monsters as the starting point of the orderly world.

The position of the Priestly Writer mattered. It made possible a detached view of nature which eventually would open the road to modern science. And yet one may say, that it does not matter very much anymore. Let us imagine for a moment that the author of Genesis 1 would have given an account of the cosmos coming into being in terms of modern astronomy. Nobody would have understood her or his account. Genesis 1 expresses the idea of an initially good creation in terms that still cling to ideas current in a world long past. Writers of that era realized the impossibility of describing the divine properly in human language. For that reason the HB ended up several different concepts of creation, just as other religions in the ancient world included different creation stories side by side. The final redactors of the HB (and of other religious texts in antiquity) indicated that there is more than one possibility to approach the inconceivable. Van Wolde’s solution would lead us back to an exclusively mythological view on creation, which is neither convincing nor acceptable in the light of the evidence, as we have tried to show.

In sum and to place our discussion within the general frame of the theological approach of the author of Genesis 1, this text reflects Priestly theology. This is a temple oriented theology. Just as the temple in Jerusalem had been built by human hands, YHWH is imagined as having “constructed” the cosmos as his temple. To avoid an anthropomorphic confusion the verb ֶלַשׁ was used instead of the verb ָנַה.

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83 Van Wolde also accepts a semantic difference between the two verbs. See “Why the verb ֶלַשׁ does not mean ‘to create’ in Genesis 1,” 20–21; Van Wolde, Reframing Biblical Studies, 197-200.
84 Cf. Smith, Priestly Vision, 69–70.
**APPENDIX: TABLE WITH CURRENT VIEWS ON THE MEANING OF THE HEBREW VERB ברי**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>הָרָא</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LHA (Zorell), 126–127</td>
<td>“creavit, procreavit” … “ar. bara’a ab aram. mutatum”</td>
<td>Piel « cecidit, secavit instrumento »</td>
<td>“pinguis, robustus fuit”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KBL, 146f.</td>
<td>“asa. בָּרָא build”</td>
<td>“[ar. bariya] be extraordinarily fat”</td>
<td>“[ar. bry] form by cutting”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCH, vol. 2, 258f.</td>
<td>“to create (alw. of God)” (with parallels דָּעֵשׁ and רָצִי)</td>
<td>“be fat”</td>
<td>“cut, cut down, cut out”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIDOTTE, vol. 1, 728–736</td>
<td>“create, separate as by cutting”</td>
<td>“fatten”</td>
<td>“clear out (trees), cut, destroy”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alonso Schökel, <em>Diccionario Bíblico-Hebreo-Español</em>, 1994, 134</td>
<td>“creer, dar el ser, sacar de la nada, hacer, producir, fundar, formar, plasma”, listing the synonyms דָּעֵשׁ and רָצִי</td>
<td>“cebar”</td>
<td>“roturar, cortar, despedazar”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Klein, <em>Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language</em>, 1987, 82</td>
<td>“to create”</td>
<td>“to be fat”</td>
<td>“to cut down (a forest)”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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It is quite strange that NIDOTTE discerns between three different roots of בָּרָא and nevertheless adds the meaning “cut” of בָּרָא III also to בָּרָא I. Apparently, this is caused by the fact that the three lemmata were written by three different authors. In the first lemma the meaning “cut” seems to be based on the Genesis commentary by Westermann, who on his part referred for this meaning to Van der Ploeg and Dantinne.