

Recognizing Differences Between Hebrew and English Bible Stories

*The **stories** behind words **provide** their **meanings**.
Knowing the **stories** behind the words of Jesus **reveal his meanings**,
if you do not know his stories **your brain will link your meanings to his words**.
Those are **facts!***

The stories of Jesus were “**Hebrew stories**,” not “**English stories**” ([see previous email](#)). A person’s language affects “**the way a person thinks**.” I not only speak American English; I think in American English too.

*Jesus not only spoke Hebrew; **he thought in Hebrew**.*

How are they different? There is an **arc** to English stories and English translations of the Bible. They have a beginning, followed by a storyline, and a clear ending. Often a problem is involved, the storyline deals with how to solve it, and by the ending the problem is solved. One thing many Christian stories have above all is **certainty**.

Hebrew readers *rarely find tidy stories with logical A to Z progressions* in the Bible. Biblical Hebrew is *beautifully unruly, often ambiguous, multiple in meaning, hard to pin down and events are not always written in the order in which they occur*. Just because an event is written about after another event does not mean it chronologically follows it.¹

In addition, **an action** is regarded as being either **completed** or **incompleted**. Hebrew, therefore, *knows of no past, present, or future tenses*, and there is “*no early and no late*” in the Torah. So, with an ancient Hebrew text that repeats, and sometimes seems to contradict itself, **a willingness to consider various possibilities is essential**. But for readers of English translations, many translators “added the familiar arc of English stories,” thereby covering up many of those “**beautifully unruly things**” and replacing them with “**Christian certainty**.”

*Hebrew thinking must be applied to the books of the “Old Testament”
because that where most of Jesus’ sacred narratives are found.*

Language is not simply words. *Language is an opening into a way of thinking, a view of the world, a naming of its neighborhoods.*

Grammar is a universe. *The tiniest parts of grammar tell a story. It is impossible to read a word without its neighbors. You have to see the first line in its relationship to the to the lines that follow it. It is not easy to make a language come alive for someone who does not speak that language. It is a challenge to rename the seemingly familiar and name the completely unfamiliar.*² Examples of those challenges are found in the Genesis 1:1 (King James Version).

*In the beginning **God** created the **Heavens** and the Earth.*

The two underlined words are so familiar to Christian readers that the just suggesting they may mean something else sounds crazy. In addition to that, when they hear about things Hebrew speaking observant Jews won't do, that sounds crazy too. For example, what would you do if I asked you to write "God" on a piece of paper for me? Every Christian I know, would be happy to write it on a piece of paper.

The Hebrew word translated "God" is transliterated "elohim." *Transliterated* means the Hebrew letters and symbols are converted to English letters. In Jewish traditions today, any paper with the Hebrew word for "elohim" on it, must be treated with respect and could not be thrown out – *it would have to be buried*. Instead of writing "elohim," an observant Jew would probably write "elokim." Jews were the same way in the time of Jesus.

"Heavens" is a translation of the Hebrew word transliterated "shamayim." In Genesis 1, it is *the name of a "solid dome-like structure located beneath the surface of a deep shoreless body of water."* "Skies" is a much accurate description of "shamayim."

Modern readers also face problems created by **Archbishop Stephen Langton**, **Rabbi Isaac Nathan ben Kalonymus**, and **Robert Estienne** (a printer). Langton inserted chapter breaks into the entire biblical text. Kalonymus and Estienne inserted verse markers.³ Below is Genesis 2:4 from the *King James Bible*.

"*These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.*"

- What is different about the two underlined phrases above? In the first phrase "heavens is first," while in the second phrase the "earth is first."
- The **time reference** in the first phrase is "when they were created," while in the second it is "in the day that the LORD God made."

The Torah scroll that we have today came down to us from Ezra the Scribe. He was born and trained to be a scribe in Babylon. After completing his work on the Torah scroll, he carried it to Jerusalem in 458 BCE. He was skilled at working with Babylonian cuneiform tablets. When several tablets were needed to record a story, *to preserve the sequence they were read in, "titles" and "catch lines" were used. They were taken from the first words of the first tablet and repeated at the end of each subsequent tablet.*⁴ Now let's apply this to the first two stories in Genesis.

- Genesis 1:1 has the heavens and of the earth (marks the beginning of the story).
- Genesis 2:4a has the heavens and of the earth (marks the end of the story).
- Genesis 2:4b has the earth and the heavens (marks the beginning of the next story).

The insertion of chapter and verse markers **destroyed the original contexts** of *the first and second stories in Genesis*. This is reinforced by the fact that chapter one ends with completion of Day Six and Day Seven is in chapter two. In the Jewish culture, a week has seven days. I will continue this discussion in my next email.

Shalom,
Jim Myers

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¹ *The Grammar of God* by Aviya Kushner © 2015; Spiegel & Grau, New York, NY; pp. xxiii, xxx.

² *The Grammar of God*; p. 100.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapters_and_verses_of_the_Bible

⁴ *New Discoveries in Babylonia about Genesis* by Air Commodore P. J. Wiseman, C.B.E. Marshall, Morgan & Scott, LTD. London; Edinburgh; p. 44.