

ELOHIM: The Most Important Word in the Bible

Exploring the Bible not only helps you discover “ancient meanings” of biblical words, but it also teaches you “exploring skills” that can be applied to all words. Today we are going to explore one of the most important stories in the Bible – *the Story of Creation* (Genesis 1:1-2:4a). *Christianity, Judaism, and American Democracy* would not exist without this story. It defines the most important word in the Bible -- “God.”

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

How Words Work

A word consists of symbols with an attached bundle of associations which are a product of the Source's culture, historical time period, geographical location, and personal experiences.

This is the first BHC Linguistic Model you will learn to use. In the verse above, the word “God” consists of the symbols “G + o + d.” They are letters of the English alphabet. Without an attached “bundle of associations” the symbols “God” would not mean anything.

The “Source” of the words in the verse above is the 1769 Authorized King James Version of the Bible. The Title Page has the following information:

Holy Bible

Containing the Old and New Testaments

Authorized King James Version

Red Letter Edition

Translated out of the original tongues

and with previous translations diligently compared and revised

Self-Pronouncing

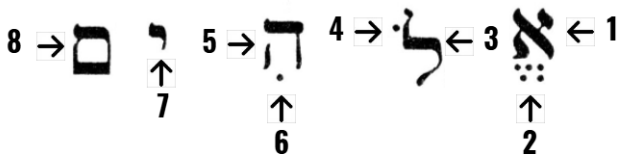
The Source is “the group of translators” who made the English translation above. They corrected an earlier translation as they translated Hebrew words (original tongues). The Hebrew word they translated “God” is below.

אלהים

Translators have the following five options for working with Hebrew words: **transliterate**, **translate**, **create contextual meanings**, **omit it**, or **insert a completely different word or phrase**. Bible translators use all five options in making their versions of the Bible. I will use **transliterations** to show you choices translators made when they were working with **Key Words** – *important words in belief systems*.



← Hebrew is read from Right to Left



Write transliteration read from Left to Right.

/ + E + L + O + H + I + Y + M
See BHC Hebrew-English Transliterator.

on the right. You can download a full size PDF version from the BHC website (see link at bottom of page).¹

#1 is found in **Column B on Line 1**.

Column C has the English letter. Because the letter is silent, we use “/”.

#2 is found in **Column J Line 38**.

Column K has the equivalent English letter – “E”.

Columns A, E, and I are Line Numbers. Now use the information below to see the rest of the Hebrew letters and symbols of the Hebrew word in the graphic above:

- #3 is B-15 ● #4 is J-42 ● #5 is B-6
- #7 is B-11 ● #8 is F-17.

Translation: When we translate a Hebrew word, we convert the meaning of

Transliteration: This is Transliteration Model. The Hebrew word we are working with is at the top. Notice that Hebrew is read from Right to Left, so letter #1 is on the opposite side of the page than English. Follow the numbers and they will show you how the letters and symbols form the Hebrew word. As you can see, they are not all written on a straight line. But we follow the rules of English to write the transliteration. The note at the bottom refers to the graphic

The BHC Hebrew-English Transliterator (c) Jim Myers; revised 2005

A	B	C	D*	E	F	G	H*	I	J	K
↓	Hebrew Letters	English Equivalent	Name / Holiday	↓	Hebrew Letters	English Equivalent	Name / Holiday	↓	Hebrew Vowel	English Equivalent
1	א	/ Silent	Aleph 1	17	ם	M	Final Mem	33	-	A Patah
2	ב	B	Bet 32	18	נ	N	Nun 223	34	ַ	A Qametz
3	ו	V	Vet 19	19	ן	N	Final Nun	35	ֶ	A Hateph-Patah
4	ג	G	Gimel 52	20	ס	S	Samech 251	36	ִ	E Seghol
5	ד	D	Dalet 65	21	ע	\ Silent	Ayin 261	37	ֵ	E Sereh
6	ה	H	Hey 75	22	פ	P	Pey 288	38	ֹ	E Hateph-Seghol
7	ו	V	Vav 84	23	ף	F	Fey 39	39	ֻ	e or silent Sheva
8	ז	Z	Zayin 85	24	ך	F	Final Fey	40	ִ	I Hiriq
9	ח	C	Het 93	25	צ	Tz	Tzade 301	41	וּ	O Holem Vav
10	ט	T	Tet 121	26	ץ	Tz	Final Tzade	42	וּ	O Holem
11	י	Y	Yod 125	27	ק	Q	Qof 311	43	וּ	O Hateph-Qametz
12	כ	K	Kaf 149	28	ר	R	Resh 327	44	וּ	U Qibbutz
13	כּ	Kh	Khaf 149	29	ש	S	Sin 348	45	וּ	U Sereq
14	ך	K	Final Kaf	30	שׁ	Sh	Shin 356			
15	ל	L	Lamed 167	31	ת	T	Tav 385			
16	מ	M	Mem 180	32	:	End of Verse	Soph-pasuk			

Biblical Heritage Center, Inc.
PO Box 714
Cleburne, TX 76033
<https://biblicalheritage.org>

¹ <https://www.biblicalheritage.org/bible-study-tools.html>

the Hebrew word to English. We do this by looking up the Hebrew word in a Lexicon that has English meanings. I recommend **A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament** by William L. Holladay (Editor). It is available on Amazon.

ELOHIM

אלוהים & אלהים: I. אלוה (ca. 60×), אלה
Dt 32₁₇, 2K 17₃₁ Kt, Hb 1_{11f}, Dn 11₃₈ †;
most oft. in Jb (41×): — 1. a God/god Ps
18₃₂, kōl-^{elōah} any god Dn 11₃₇, lō^{elōah}
non-god(s) Dt 32₁₇; — 2. the true God
Jb 34.

A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament; page 16 col. b.

The arrow points to the Hebrew word we transliterated. The word before it is the root word. The English translations of the root word are in bold type below it: **a God/god, any god, non-god**, the true God.

The translations for the Hebrew word under the arrow are given beneath the words in the graphic and take much more space. Here are its translations: **gods, God of gods, sons of gods, God, god, goddess**.

As you can see above, Elohim has been translated by many different English words in the Bible. This creates a problem for new Explorers of the Bible. However, I believe an even bigger and more serious problem is most Bible readers are completely unaware of the fact that someone or a group picked one without revealing that other words could have been chosen. Aviya Kushner is Jewish woman whose mother is a very skilled translator of ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian languages, as well as Hebrew. Aviya was raised in a home where discussions about the Hebrew text of the Bible took place at every meal in her home. She wrote a book called **The Grammar of God: A Journey Into the Words and Worlds of the Bible**. Below she shares her experience of reading an English translation for the first time when she took a college course.

Studying at the University of Iowa, a mecca for young writers with the oldest graduate writing program in the country, was a dream. Whitman, Dickinson, Emerson, Thoreau, Melville. I enrolled in those courses. I did not expect that a year later, the professor, Marylynne Robinson, would offer a class in the Bible, and that I would take it, too. This meant reading the Bible in English — something I had never done; I had grown up in a Jewish community, reading it in Hebrew. In fact, **reading the Christian Bible was widely considered taboo** in the small religious town where I grew up.

At first, **when I seemed surprised or even shocked by what we read or discussed in class**, my facial expressions would betray me, and the professor would ask: *“Why are you so surprised?”* I would say, *“I would have to explain so much to you about Hebrew for you to understand why this translation is surprising.”* She would say, *“Try.”*

The name of God is never written out by religious Jews. Instead, it’s changed slightly, so that **elohim** becomes **elokim**. In Jewish tradition, **any paper with God’s name on it must be treated with respect, as if it were a part of a human body.** If I write God’s name in my classmate’s notebook, according to Jewish tradition she would never be able to throw her notebook out. **She’d need to bury it.**

The meaning of **elohim** becomes even more complicated when we consider the grammar of it. **The word is both a plural and a singular noun**, like **“deer”** in English. But **a multipart view of God is foreign to a Jewish reader steeped in the idea of one God, indivisible despite the multiplicity of names.** I realize, listening only to the name of God and not to whether God is singular or plural that grammar, **basically evaporates in translation.** No one is asking: *Why God’s name is not **eloha**, the singular; or “whether it is possible that God is not singular **but multiple in number.***

Some of the most politically charged issues of our time are rooted in biblical translation. The commandment *“Thou shalt not kill,”* for instance, is not nearly as straightforward in Hebrew as it is in English. In biblical Hebrew, there is a gaping difference between the verb **“to kill”** — **laharog** -- and the verb **“to murder”** -- **lirtzoach**; **the Hebrew word used in the Ten Commandments is “murder,”** yet **the commandment is frequently mistranslated “Thou shalt not kill.”** This word choice matters because there are acceptable forms of killing in the Bible (such as self-defense).

As I read and reread familiar passages in translation, **wondering what effect one word choice might have over another**, I realized that defining “murder” is both **an ancient and a contemporary question.** Many of us are still talking about *what constitutes a just war; when, if ever, the death penalty is acceptable; and when, exactly, life begins.* When life starts and what murder means are **moral questions** but **also questions of language**, because they involve defining the exact

boundaries of individual words. **When the Bible was translated, these questions of language became questions of translation.**²

Aviya makes a very good case for why Bible readers must be aware of the full range of options translators had, when they chose one for their translation. My job is to be your guide and make you aware of things like this as we Explore the Bible. In the Key Word we are exploring, Elohim in the first story in Genesis, we were glad there was another option – **Contextual Meaning**. Below is another Linguistic Model we use.

Context

Words must be examined in the context of the words which precedes and follows them; which include any part of a discourse that can throw light on the Source’s meanings: sentences, paragraphs, chapters, footnotes, etc.

In the case of Elohim in this exploration, the context is the first ten chapters of Genesis, plus other sections that throw light on the Sources meanings.

The graphic on the right includes all the information about the word Elohim: (1) the Hebrew word, (2) the Transliteration, (3) Translation options from the lexicon, and (4) the Contextual Meaning of Elohim.

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Hebrew Word</u></p> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: 1.2em;">אלהים</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Transliteration</u></p> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: 1.2em;">ELOHIM</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Translations</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;">God, god, gods, goddess & goddesses.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Contextual Meaning</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The unnamed entity that created the Skies, Dry Land, and their hosts. 2. An entity that is unlike humans, and compared with all else, is incomprehensible. 3. An entity that used the TOV Standard to measure things He created or made.
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Many words can be translated by using a lexicon, but some words require “**contextual meanings**.” Below is the contextual meaning of Elohim.

1. The unnamed entity that created the Skies, the Earth, and all their hosts.
2. An entity that is unlike humans, and compared with all else, is incomprehensible.
3. An entity that used the TOV Standard to measure what He created or made.

I will cover how we created it later, but you will need it to complete the next module. We will refer back to this module many times. *I will end with two quotes related to this study.*

² *The Grammar of God* by Aviya Kushner © 2015; Spiegel & Grau, New York, NY; pp. xxiii, xxx.