

God's Partners in Torah

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The ancient rabbinic Sages taught that the people of Israel must consider themselves “God’s partner in the work of creation” (BT, Shabbat 119b and elsewhere). Often overlooked is that reading the Torah’s opening demands a similar type of partnership. The reason for this is that the opening of the Torah contains impenetrably difficult syntax. Let us consider the very first verse: בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ. If we were to translate this verse literally, and absolutely retaining the order of the words, we would understand it along these lines: “In the beginning of, he-created God (did), heavens and earth . . .” This is a far cry from the affecting cadence of the majestic King James Bible’s translation, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” The question is, given the difficult syntax, what does this verse “actually” mean?

It’s traditional for Jewish readers to begin with Rashi, whose first efforts to understand the verse are midrashic in nature. Sensing the difficulty in making sense of the verse, Rashi breaks the first word into two constituent parts: the prefixed ב (bet), followed by the word ראשית (*reshit*). Whereas we typically learn to associate a prefixed bet as meaning either “in” or “with,” Rashi prefers another legitimate understanding, בשביל (*bishvil*), “for the sake of.” But for the sake of what? Well, Rashi would read the verse, “For the sake of *reshit*, God created the heavens and the earth. But Rashi does not leave it that way. He quickly launches into midrashic discourse: “for the sake of *reshit* . . . as long as one understands that Hebrew word as being a reference to Torah!” How does he get there? Rashi notes the presence of the word *reshit* in Proverbs 8:22: “YHWH created me at the beginning of His (God’s) way” (*reshit darko*). Who is speaking in this verse? Modern scholarship regard this as Personified Wisdom announcing that God created Wisdom (חכמה *hokhma*) at the onset of God’s creation of the world. But the rabbis see in the word not a reference to an abstract “Wisdom” (personified or not) but to Torah: “there is no occurrence of the word ‘wisdom’ (in Scripture) that is not actually a reference to Torah” (e.g.,

Tanhuma Vayelehk 2). That we might consider such a statement as hyperbolic should in no way diminish our appreciation for the midrashic hermeneutic through which the Sages find “Torah,” writ large, in the Book of Proverbs. Deftly employing a different midrashic move, Rashi understands this as expressing a tautology: *reshit* = wisdom = Torah, and if this is so in Proverbs, it is just as true in Genesis. Thus Rashi “moves” the presence of *reshit* in Proverbs 8 in its rabbinic understanding as “Torah” to Genesis 1 and resolves the syntactic problem by interpreting the first verse: “for the sake of Torah, God created the heavens and the earth.” Now, it goes without saying that you are not likely to find such a translation in any English Bible. But it must be admitted that from a rabbinic perspective, the interpretation is both elegant in its resolution of the syntax and informative in teaching an essential rabbinic truth: Torah is the most precious thing in God’s entire universe and in fact, in this view, God created the entire universe for its sake!

Deft? Surely! But not unusual for the Sages; in fact, Rashi quickly follows this midrashic interpretation with another one that employs the very same technique. In this second interpretation, Rashi notes the presence of the word ראשית (*reshit*) in yet another verse (Jeremiah 2:3): “Israel is holy to the LORD, /The first fruits of God’s harvest.” By now you already know the routine: Rashi “plucks” the word *reshit* from Jeremiah, though this time with the associative meaning of “Israel,” and transfers it to Genesis, and—the syntactic problem again being resolved—interprets: “for the sake of Israel, God created the heavens and the earth.”

In only a very few words, Rashi has reassured his Jewish readers that while the Christian and Muslim worlds may dwarf the Jewish world in population and power, in fact God created the entire universe for the sake of Israel and Torah! And again, it matters not a whit that such interpretations do not comport with our sense of what the words “actually” mean, in these two interpretations Rashi is living in the world of midrash, where

different rules apply.

Having offered two different midrashic resolution of the syntactic problem of Genesis 1:1, Rashi then turns his attention to what he terms, “the plain sense of Scripture.” Rashi is an [innovator](#) here: as he states in his famous [comment](#) on Genesis 3:8, he is interested in interpreting both according to midrash and *peshat* in his effort to provide what Professor Edward L. Greenstein has [described](#) as “the fullest possible accounting of the language of Scripture.” As Rashi makes his transition to the verse’s plain sense, he signals the shift to the reader: “If you have come to explain this passage according to its plain meaning, this is how you should explain it.” In other words, while the syntactic problem of Genesis 1:1 still remains, the *peshat* approach demands a different accounting. This time Rashi’s attention turns to the verb ברא (“He [God] created”) and notes as well that the preceding word בראשית (*bereshit*) does not really meaning “in the beginning,” but rather “in the beginning of . . .” In this understanding of the verse’s syntax (that grammarians regard as incorporating a noun in “construct formation,” typically to a noun that follows it), Rashi senses that the verse means “at the beginning of . . . something . . . God created or did . . . something.” Thus, we can ask: at the beginning of what, and what was it that God did? Rashi’s understanding that the word *reshit* typically means “the beginning of” leads him to wonder whether or not we are really served well by regarding the word that follows it (*bara*) as a conjugated verb, since as we already know it should be followed by a noun! This leads Rashi to interpret, “this is how you should explain it: ‘In the beginning of the creating (*beri’at*) of heaven and earth—and the earth was howling waste, and darkness [was on the face of the deep] . . . —then God said, “Let there be light!”’” Thus, Rashi chooses to read ברא (*bara*) as a gerund (“creating”) instead of a conjugated verb; and incidentally demonstrates that the first sentence of Scripture does not actually occur until verse three (“God said ‘let there be light!’”). Moreover, a bit later Rashi follows this interpretation by stating that the gerund (*beri’at*, “creating”) is probably better understood as a verbal noun that grammarians call an “infinitive” (here ברוא, *bero*). This means he reads the beginning of the Torah as starting with a two-verse long subordinate clause that does not conclude until verse three. That this interpretation likely reflects as close to the *peshat*, plain meaning of the opening of the Torah as we can get, lead

the translators of the NJPS Tanakh translation to render:

When God began to create heaven and earth—2 the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—3 God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.

To make the point clearer, we might consider Everett Fox’s translation in the Schocken Bible, “At the beginning of God’s creating of the heavens and the earth . . . God said: Let there be light! . . .”

All in all, Rashi has provided three readings of the opening of the Torah, two rooted in rabbinic midrash and one rooted in an effort to elucidate the plain meaning of Scripture. But attempts to access the multivalent understanding of the Torah’s opening only begin with Rashi, by no means do they conclude with him. Were we to continue our investigation into the meaning of Genesis 1 by consulting other commentaries typically found in a [rabbinic Bible](#) (Rashbam, R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, R. David Kimhi, etc.), the elusiveness of Scripture and our inability to pin it down to one theoretically precise meaning would become even more apparent. And this elusiveness brings us right back to our initial observation about being God’s partners as we read Torah. In our brief journey to understand the opening of Genesis, we see that Torah can’t “mean” anything without its human readers, for even at this relatively early stage of our investigation we have three meanings from which to choose! On its own it’s like the proverbial falling tree in the forest — who knows if it makes any noise unless there is someone to hear it? And this means we need to take our responsibility as Torah readers with the utmost seriousness, to closely read Scripture as best we can (and, I might add, in [Hebrew!](#)) and to engage Torah in the fullness of both its midrash and *peshat*. God has begun God’s own Torah with an invitation to unlock its mysteries and delight in its pleasures—may the new cycle of Torah readings that begin with this week’s Parshat Bereishit see us all accept this invitation with open arms and a willing heart.