Linguistic Traits of Hebrew Relator Nouns and Their Implications for Translating Genesis 1:1

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Abstract
In the debate over the proper translation of Genesis 1:1, one of the key issues is whether the first word of the verse, בְּרֵאשִׁית, is in the absolute or construct state. If בְּרֵאשִׁית is in the construct state, then it is in construct with the verb בָּרָא, and the ensuing clause of Genesis 1:1, and the verse should be rendered with a dependent clause. This rendering is known as the dependent-clause translation of Genesis 1:1 found in such versions as the NRSV, NJV, and NAB. If בְּרֵאשִׁית is in the absolute state, then it is not in construct with בָּרָא, and the ensuing clause, and the verse should be rendered with an independent main clause. This rendering is known as the traditional translation of Genesis 1:1 found in such versions as the KJV, NAS, NIV, and ESV. In this article, the author defends the traditional translation of Genesis 1:1 by arguing that בְּרֵאשִׁית, properly understood, is a Hebrew relator noun. According to the author, since בְּרֵאשִׁית is a Hebrew relator noun, it will have a relative meaning at the lexical level, but will still function as a noun in the absolute state at the grammatical level. This trait of being lexically relative yet grammatically absolute, which is possible with Hebrew relator nouns, also explains why בְּרֵאשִׁית not pointed with a definite article in Hebrew even though it is rendered with one in the traditional translation.

Keywords: absolute, construct, relative meaning, absolute meaning, relator noun, lexically relative, grammatically absolute, nomen regens, nomen rectum, definite, definite article, anarthrous

Introduction
For many centuries and almost a couple millennia, a traditional translation and interpretation of Genesis 1:1 have led Christian and Jewish scholars to conclude that God created the world out of nothing.¹ According to this tradition, Genesis 1:1 introduces God’s first creative act with an independent main clause. Genesis 1:2 then describes this first creative act as being in an incomplete state. The rest of the Genesis narrative then describes how God shaped, filled, and added to that initial creation. Since Genesis 1:1 does not describe anything as being in existence before the initial creation other than God, many interpreters have logically concluded that God created the world from nothing. Although it is not explicitly stated, the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo is a logical and theological conclusion of the traditional translation and interpretation of Genesis 1:1 (Matthews 1996, 141; Sarna 1989, 5; Skinner 1951, 13; Waltke 1975, 217).² Again, the translation renders Genesis 1:1 as an independent main clause, and the interpretation makes Genesis 1:1 the first creative act. This traditional translation, however, is not always utilized.

For nearly a thousand years a small group of proponents have argued for a different translation of Genesis 1:1.³ According to this view, Genesis 1:1 should be rendered with a dependent clause and should be subordinate to either Genesis 1:2a or Genesis 1:3.⁴ Furthermore, within this last century, this dependent-clause translation of Genesis 1:1 has gained a larger following, and some translational traditions have even updated older versions to reflect it. Consider the following examples:

Protestant Translational Tradition
1In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. 3And God said, “Let there be light” (RSV, 1952)

Jewish Translational Tradition
1IN THE beginning God created the heaven and the earth. 2Now the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters. 3And God said: ‘Let there be light.’ (JPS, 1917)

¹ All biblical citations from the original languages, including the passages from the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, are provided by BibleWorks 6.0, [CD ROM] (2003).
² Many scholars of varying positions refer to this reading of the passage as the traditional translation and interpretation. Westermann, however, contends that this interpretation is not traditional. See Westermann (1999, 95).
³ The Medieval Jewish scholars Rashi (d. 1105) and Ibn Ezra (d. 1164) are the first known proponents of this alternate translation.
⁴ If the dependent clause of Genesis 1:1 is subordinate to Genesis 1:3, then Genesis 1:2 is usually treated parenthetically. Cf. the Protestant Translational Tradition.
When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, “Let there be light” (NJV, 1985)

Catholic Translational Tradition

In the beginning God created heaven, and earth. And the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God moved over the waters. And God said: Be light made. (DRA, 1899)

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light.” (NAB, 1970)

This change in translation produces a change in interpretation. No longer is Genesis 1:1 the first act of creation. Rather, Genesis 1:1, along with 1:2, describe the context in which the first act of creation takes place: the creation of light in Genesis 1:3. According to this interpretation then, the elements of Genesis 1:2 were already present before God began creating. Thus, one can logically conclude that since these elements, which God utilized in his later work of creation, were in existence before God’s first act of creation, the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo is not implicit in the text. Orlinsky, a proponent of the dependent-clause translation and a translator of the NJV, states,

The implications of the new, correct rendering [of Genesis 1:1 as a dependent clause] are clear. The Hebrew text tells us nothing about “creation out of nothing” (creatio ex nihilo), or about the beginning of time; it has nothing to say about the order of creation, so far as heaven, earth, darkness, deep, wind, or water are concerned. Indeed, the last four elements are not even described as having been created by God; the text merely asserts that these elements were present when God began to create the universe. What, then, constituted the first act of creation, if it wasn’t any of heaven, earth, darkness, etc.? The text, once again gives us the answer directly, in verse 3: “(when God began to create the heaven and the earth . . .) God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.” In other words, the first thing God did when he created the world was to create light. Naturally, there are those who are upset by this old-new interpretation. “When did time begin?” they ask. “Who existed in the beginning? Who created the darkness and the water and the deep? And is there no longer any beginning? And what happens to the theological concept of creatio ex nihilo?” And so on. Now every scholar or committee of scholars that assumes the responsibility of producing an authorized translation of the Bible for members of a religious group is aware of the difficulties that may arise as a consequence of the translation achieved for such “delicate” passages as Genesis 1:1–3. But the reply by the biblical scholar to such questions can only be: We know only what the Hebrew text of the Bible tells us. If the ancient Hebrew writer did not think about these things, or if he did, did not care to bother his readers with them, it is not for us to read into his text what he did not put into it; and anyone who does this is simply not being faithful to his biblical Hebraic source. (Orlinsky 1966, xv)

As is clear in the case of Genesis 1:1, translation affects interpretation, and interpretation affects theology; yet, what is the reasoning for this alternate translation?

Thesis

In the debate over the proper translation of Genesis 1:1, the major issue is whether the word בְּרֵאשִׁית is in the absolute or construct state. If בְּרֵאשִׁית is a construct, then it is in construct with the verb וָּלוֹא and the ensuing clause of Genesis 1:1, and the verse should be rendered with a dependent clause. Naturally, this is the argument of the dependent-clause translation. If בְּרֵאשִׁית is an absolute, then it is not in construct with וָּלוֹא and the ensuing clause, and the verse should be rendered with an independent main clause. This is the argument of the traditional translation.

However, proponents of the dependent-clause translation raise two main linguistic challenges to the possibility of the traditional translation: one at the lexical level, the other at the grammatical level.

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8 This is the Douay-Rheims American Edition (DRA). Unlike the later NAB, the DRA is translated mostly from the Vg rather than Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. See Bruce (1970, 113).

9 For an early modern treatment of this view, see Skinner (1951).

7 This would make the ensuing clause of Genesis 1:1 a genitive substantival clause with בְּרֵאשִׁית functioning as its nomen regens. See Joion and Muraoka (2008, § 129p.)

8 Lane also states, “The question whether verse 1 is a complete sentence or only a dependent clause is centered in the syntactical interpretation of the first word, בָּרָא. If the noun בָּרָא is in the absolute state, verse 1 contains a complete thought and is an independent clause or sentence. If, on the other hand, it is in the construct state, verse 1 is not a complete thought and forms a temporal clause which must be completed by either verse 2 or 3.” Lane (1983, 66).

9 The term “grammar” can have several meanings that are both narrow and broad. This article uses the term “grammar” in its narrow sense according to following definition given by Miriam Webster’s online dictionary: “The study of classes of words, their inflections, and their functions and relations in the sentence.”

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First, at the lexical level, they challenge that the word בְּרֵאשִׁית always has a relative meaning, the beginning of. Since its meaning is always relative, its rendering in Genesis 1:1 cannot be in the absolute state, but must be in the construct state. Second, at the grammatical level, they challenge that if בְּרֵאשִׁית in Genesis 1:1 were in the absolute state and also definite, in the beginning, the word be pointed with an articular gamets תְּבֵא, rather than with a vocal sheva. Since, however, בְּרֵאשִׁית is pointed with a vocal sheva, it is further evidence that the word is in the construct state. Both of these linguistics challenges do raise serious objections to the traditional translation. This article, however, contends that the traditional translation of Genesis 1:1 is linguistically possible because בְּרֵאשִׁית in Genesis 1:1 is functioning as a lexically relative yet grammatically absolute Hebrew relator noun.

The Lexical Level

The Relative Meaning of בְּרֵאשִׁית

Before exploring the linguistic traits of Hebrew relator nouns, one must first understand the lexical dilemma that proponents of the dependent-clause translation charge against the traditional translation. When they argue that בְּרֵאשִׁית has a relative meaning, they are describing its tendency to be semantically related to another word or concept. Skinner states, “The [independent-clause] construction seems to me, however, opposed to the essentially relative idea of תְּבֵא.—its express reference to that of which it is the beginning” (Skinner 1951, 13, n.1). Simpson also states, “But the Hebrew בְּרֵאשִׁית seems to mean ‘in the beginning of’ rather than in the beginning, and this requires that vs. 1 should be taken with vs. 3—on vs. 2 see below—and rendered, ‘In the beginning of God’s creating the heavens and the earth, God said, etc.’” (Simpson and Bowie, 1952, 466). Finally, Orlinsky adds, “The very first word, בְּרֵאשִׁית, as every student of biblical Hebrew knows, means ‘In declaring from the beginning, the end, and from before, that which has not been done.

In this verse, the word תְּבֵא is in the absolute state and seems to be both lexically and grammatically comparable to the use of בְּרֵאשִׁית in Genesis 1:1. In addition, many modern bible translations render the word בְּרֵאשִׁית in Isaiah 46:10a as “from the beginning,” not “from the beginning of.” Thus, Isaiah 46:10a seems to demonstrate that the word can have an absolute meaning.

However, scholars of the dependent-clause translation argue that even though the occurrences of תְּבֵא in Isaiah 46:10a and Genesis 1:1 may appear to be grammatically parallel, בְּרֵאשִׁית in Isaiah 46:10a has a lexically relative meaning. Therefore, it cannot function as a lexical parallel to the alleged absolute meaning of בְּרֵאשִׁית in Genesis 1:1. Humbert states, "On constate donc qu’au sens proprement temporel le substantif rēšît ne figure qu’une seule fois à l’état absolu: Es. 46:10. La possibilité théorique de

10 Thus, it is in construct with אֲרֵב and the ensuing clause of Genesis 1:1, which again creates a dependent clause.
11 Since there is no morphological difference between the construct and absolute forms of תְּבֵא, one must use the pointing of the preposition ב to determine whether תְּבֵא may be absolute or construct. (Cf. Neh 12:44 where the absolute form of תְּבֵא is pointed with an articular gamets. Unfortunately this example can only be a morphological parallel to תְּבֵא and not a lexical or grammatical parallel since it is not a temporal use of the word.)
12 The rectum of the alleged construct chain, אֲרֵב and the ensuing clause of Genesis 1:1, would, through context, already make the regens תְּבֵא, definite, so no article would be needed to indicate definiteness. Thus, if תְּבֵא is in the construct state, the lack of the articular gamets is expected.
13 This article, which defends the traditional translation, rejects the notion that תְּבֵא has an absolute meaning. As will be seen further on, it is not necessary for תְּבֵא to be absolute in meaning in order to be grammatically absolute.
14 König states, “Denn auch andere Adverbia stehen im absoluten Sinne, wie ich durch eine eingehendere Untersuchung festgestellt habe. Man vergleiche nur mérēshîth (Des. 46 10) im absoluten Sinne = „von Uranfang an.“” (For other adverbs, without the article, are in the absolute sense as I have found through a more thorough investigation. One need only compare mérēshîth [Isa 46:10] in the absolute sense = “From the very beginning.”) (König 1919, 130). Wenham also states, “Nor can it be shown that תְּבֵא may not have an absolute sense. It may well have an absolute sense in Isaiah 46:10, and the analogous expression תְּבֵא in Prov 8:23 certainly refers to the beginning of all creation. The context of תְּבֵא standing at the start of the account of world history makes an absolute sense highly appropriate here” (Wenham 1987, 12). See also Matthews (1996, 137 n. 99, 138 n. 103).
15 Cf. NASB, NIV, NJPS, NAV, NRSV.
16 This is the only other passage in the Bible in which the temporal use of תְּבֵא is grammatically absolute.
construire absolument un réšīt temporel existe donc, mais ce passage mérite d’être considéré de plus près. D’abord, guidés par un sûr instinct, les LXX y traduisent mērēṣīt par ἀναγγέλλων πρότερον τὰ ἔσχατα, c’est à dire qu’ils entendaient mērēṣīt adverbialement («d’avance») et, au fond, relativement (=d’avance par rapport à autre chose), et non point au sens vraiment absolu de «au commencement».

Ensuite, dans le TM lui-même, il y a un rapport de corrélation évidente entre mērēṣīt et aharīt qui undiquent terminus a quo et terminus ad quem d’un certain laps de temps (cp. aussi le couple rēḥ… aharīt dans Job 8,7; 42,12; Eccl. 7,8), temps conçu de façon passablement concrète d’ailleurs vu le parallélisme de aharīt avec ašēr lō’ na’asū. Or qui dit corrélation dit relation, impicite à tout le moins : par conséquent le sens même de réšīt dans Es. 46,10 est au fond relatif, même si la construction ne l’est pas et si réšīt est à l’état absolu. Le passage Es. 46,10 ne peut donc pas être légitimement invoqué en faveur d’un sens temporel absolu de berēšīt dans Gen 1,1 qui reste donc, finalement, sans exemple. (Humbert 1955, 86–87)²⁷

According to Humbert the word תֵּימֵנַשׁ in Isaiah 46:10a still refers to the beginning of something; which makes it relative in meaning.¹⁶

The strength of Humbert’s argument is that because תֵּימֵנַשׁ in Isaiah 46:10a has a relative meaning, there is no parallel evidence that תֵּימֵנַשׁ in Genesis 1:1 has an absolute meaning. Thus, based upon the weight of the evidence, the word should have a relative meaning in Genesis 1:1 as well. If בִּרְאָשִׁית is lexically relative, then according to proponents of the dependent-clause translation, it should be rendered as “In the beginning of,” and should be in construct with the verb אֲבֹרְאָשׁ and the ensuing clause of Genesis 1:1. If the word is in construct with the verb בִּרְאָשִׁית and the ensuing clause, then Genesis 1:1 should be rendered as a dependent clause. If this line of reasoning is sound, then the evidence as a whole seems to support the dependent-clause translation.

However, there seems to be some faulty reasoning from proponents of both translational positions. Proponents of the traditional translation who argue that תֵּימֵנַשׁ in Genesis 1:1 has an absolute meaning, hoping to sustain their argument that the word is grammatically absolute, have done themselves a disservice. How can a word like תֵּימֵנַשׁ, if it is rendered as “beginning,” have an absolute meaning? How can it refer to a beginning that is unrelated to anything? The very nature of the word requires that it refer to the beginning of something. If it refers to the beginning of something, then its meaning is relative to that something. A beginning that is unrelated to anything is the beginning of nothing, and it is thus not a beginning. On the other hand, proponents of the dependent-clause translation, who argue that the relative meaning of תֵּימֵנַשׁ requires the word to be in grammatical construct, have also done themselves a disservice because the evidence only demonstrates that תֵּימֵנַשׁ has a relative meaning. It does not demonstrate that a relative meaning requires the word to be rendered as “the beginning of.” In fact, the Isaiah 46:10a passage is still a strong parallel to Genesis 1:1 since the verse demonstrates that the word תֵּימֵנַשׁ can be relative in meaning yet grammatically absolute. As stated previously in the thesis of this article, the word תֵּימֵנַשׁ is actually one of several types of Hebrew relator nouns, and when its usage is compared to that of other relator nouns, the evidence demonstrates that it is common for a relator noun like תֵּימֵנַשׁ to be both lexically relative and grammatically absolute.

Defining and Identifying Relator Nouns

Before demonstrating that relator nouns can be lexically relative and grammatically absolute, one must first define what a relator noun is and identify examples of them. In an article dealing with adpositions, DeLancey describes relator nouns in the following manner:

Relator noun categories are frequently the topic of discussion, and sometimes extended controversy, as to whether they are nouns or adpositions. For all the confusions that they seem to engender, relator nouns are not an unfamiliar phenomenon to anyone, being easily recognized in such unexotic languages as French and English. Since each of these languages

¹⁷ The translation is, “We note therefore that in the strictly temporal sense, the substantive ῥέσιτ still appears one time in the absolute state: Isaiah. 46:10. The theoretic possibility of constructing a temporal ῥέσιτ in an absolute manner exists therefore, but this passage merits closer consideration. First of all, guided by instinct, the LXX translate μερήσιτ by ἀναγγέλλων πρότερον τὰ ἔσχατα, that is to say that they understood μερήσιτ adverbially [‘from before’ and, at the end, relatively [= from before in relation to another thing], and not at all in the absolute sense of “in the beginning.” Then, in the MT itself, there is a correlation connection evident between μερήσιτ and aḥarīt that indicates a terminus a quo and a terminus ad quem of a certain lapse of time [cf. also the pair ῥέσιτ… aḥarīt in Job 8:7; 42:12; Eccl. 7:8], time conceived in a fairly concrete fashion as seen elsewhere in parallelism to aḥarīt with ašēr lō’ na’asū.Now what says correlation says relation, all the less implicit: consequently, the sense even of ῥέσιτ in Isaiah 46:10 is relative in the end, even if the construction is not relative and even if ῥέσιτ is in the absolute state. The passage Isaiah 46:10 cannot be therefore legitimately called upon in favor of the absolute temporal sense of berēšīt in Genesis 1:1, which remains, therefore, without example.” Lane goes so far as to argue that the translation “declaring the end from the beginning” in Isa 46:10a is inaccurate. See Lane 1963, 67.

¹⁸ Even Ridderbos, a proponent of the traditional translation, grants Humbert this claim; however, he still argues that תֵּימֵנַשׁ has an absolute meaning in Genesis 1:1. See Ridderbos 1958, 218.
has a robust and thriving adposition category, relator nouns constitute a relatively marginal category, but a number of them are quite frequent in occurrence and encode fairly basic concepts: à côté de, on top of, in front/back of, etc. Such constructions can be a source of new prepositions, e.g. English atop < on top of, beside < by side of. In languages which invest less in a lexical category of adpositions, relator nouns may constitute a substantial and important category.

(DeLancey 2005, 190)

In general, relator nouns are nouns that are semantically dependent upon other words to complete their meanings. They can also be grammatically dependent upon those words—usually by means of the preposition “of” in English or the construct state in Hebrew. This dependency explains why relator nouns, by nature, have a relative meaning.

Once relator nouns are defined, they are easy to identify. English words, such as front, back, middle, side, end, and beginning are all relator nouns because their meanings are relative to other words or concepts in a sentence. For instance, if the word “book” is lexically and grammatically related to these English relator nouns, then their meanings become relative to and dependent upon that word: the front of the book, the back of the book, the middle of the book, the side of the book, the end of the book, the beginning of the book. Without the word “book” these relator nouns would be empty of meaning: The front of what? The back of what? The middle of what? The side of what? The end of what? The beginning of what?

Relator nouns are easily identifiable in Hebrew as well. They include such words as הבוא, אחרון, ראש, שמאל,プラス, and אחרון. They exhibit the common traits of relator nouns in that they are also lexically relative to other words or concepts to complete their meanings. Again, because of their relative nature, these nouns are most commonly found in grammatical construct with other words. The following analysis demonstrates these traits in the Hebrew relator nouns.

**The relator nouns הבוא and אחרון.**

The relator nouns הבוא and אחרון describe spatial relationships between themselves and the things to which they are semantically related, referring to the front, הבוא, or the back, אחרון, of the related word or concept. In the following examples they are lexically and grammatically relative to such words as מִשְׁכָּן, בָּרָא, אֹהֶל, וַתָּקֵם, פָּנֶה, פָּרֹכֶת, וְאָחוֹר, and בָּרָא.

Exodus 26:12

פָּרֹכֶת המִשְׁכָּן אַחֲרֵי הֶ谎言ֶנֶס יִהְיוּ בָּרוֹאָה הַמִּשְׁכָּן לְעָרָיָם.

And the leftover excess in the curtains of the tent, the half of the curtain that is left over, will run over the back of the tabernacle.

Exodus 26:9b

ומֵיתֵי בָּרָאָה הַמִּשְׁכָּן אַחֲרֵי הִשְׁמַעְתֶּשׁ אָבִין לעָרָיָם.

And you shall double over the sixth curtain to the opposite of the front of the tent.

Leviticus 4:6

כִּי נָטַע חֹלְכֵים בַּמִּשְׁכָּן לְעָרָיָם סֵפֶר וְאָז אָמְרוּ אָשֶׁר מִלְתּוֹ׃

And the priest shall dip his finger into the blood, and seven times he shall sprinkle the front of the veil of the sanctuary before the LORD.

Ezekiel 41:21

וְהָיָה כְּפָנִים טְהֵרָה וְאָזֶה הָיָה מַשָּׂא הַמֶּשֶׁחֶת שְׁמוּאֵל.

The door frames of the temple and the front of the sanctuary were square, the appearance of one being like the appearance of the other.

Ezekiel 47:1a

וַתָּקֵם קִרְפֶּס הַמִּשְׁמַעְתֶּשׁ אָבִין מֵאָבִין לְעָרָיָם.

And he returned me to the opening of the temple, and behold, waters were coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east because the front of the temple was facing eastward.

In his description of relator nouns, DeLancey states that there is sometimes controversy over whether relator nouns should be categorized as prepositions. With respect to הבוא and אחרון, one may ask whether these words should also be categorized as prepositions. The question, however, would fail for two reasons. First, there are already lexically similar prepositions, הבוא and אחרון, that probably developed from these relator nouns. Second, although the relator nouns הבוא and אחרון and the prepositions הבוא and אחרון have very similar, almost interchangeable, meanings, the relator nouns can also be used in instances in which they do not need to be grammatically related to another word. The prepositions do not function in this manner.

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19 This trait explains why proponents of the dependent-clause translation argue that מִשְׁמַעְתֶּשׁ has a relative meaning and should be translated with the preposition “of,” making it relative to the word הבוא and the ensuing clause of Genesis 1:1.

20 Although Hebrew relator nouns are usually in construct with the words to which they are semantically related, some are grammatically linked to their related words by the preposition ב. Cf. 2 Kings 23:13; Ezekiel 10:3; Joshua 15:21; Nahum 2:10; 3:3.

21 The following examples of relator nouns have been translated as literally as possible to bring out their relative meanings.

22 Cf. 2 Chronicles 13:13–14.
The relator nouns עיר and בית.

The relator nouns עיר and בְּ also describe spatial relationships between themselves and the things to which they are semantically related, referring to the outside, עיר, or the inside, בְּ, of the related word or concept. In the following examples they are lexically and grammatically relative to such things as בְּ, בַּיִת, פָּרֹכֶת, עִיר, מַחֲנֶה, and בְּ.

Exodus 33:7b

ויָדֹעָה פֵּדַע בָּעִיר יִּשְׂרָאֵל מֵחָרָב אֶת הָעָם אֶל שְׁנֵי מָנוֹת.  

And it will be that everyone who seeks the LORD shall come out to the tent of meeting, which is outside of the camp.

2 Chronicles 32:3

שָׁלֹוה יְבַיֵּי לַחֲמֵי אֲרֻמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶשְׁתָּנָן לעָרָה מַעְרֵיהוֹת.  

And he consulted with his princes and mighty men to shut up the waters of the springs which were outside of the city, and they helped him.

Exodus 26:35a

שֹׁמַעְתָּ אֲרֵיחְלָה מַעְרֵי הַלְּוֹא.  

And you shall place the table outside of the veil.

Exodus 26:33a

אֶת הַפִּסְדוֹת יִנְשֹׁאָה יִשָּׂא לֶבַרְחָה אֵת אָרֹן הַעָלָה.  

And you shall place the curtain under the hooks, and you shall bring into there the ark of the testimony inside of the veil.

1 Kings 7:31a

וַיִּשָּׂא אֶל מַעֲשַׂה אֵל אֶל מַעֲשַׂה אֵל בְּכַפַּר הַכֹּל הַיָּמִין.  

And its opening inside of the capital and above was a cubit.

23 For more examples of עיר related to מַעֲשַׂה, see Exodus 29:14; 33:7 (2x); Leviticus 4:12, 21; 6:4; 8:17; 9:11; 10:4, 5; 13:46; 14:3; 16:27; 17:3; 24:14, 23; Numbers 5:3, 4; 12:14, 15; 15:35, 36; 19:3, 9; 31:13, 19; Deuteronomy 23:11, 13.

24 For more examples of עיר related to עִיר, see Genesis 19:16; 24:11; Leviticus 14:40, 41, 45, 53; Numbers 35:5; 1 Kings 21:13; 2 Chronicles 33:15.

25 For more examples of בְּ related to מַעֲשַׂה, see Exodus 27:21; 40:22.

26 For more examples of בְּ related to מַעֲשַׂה, see Exodus 26:33a.  

27 The relator noun עיר does not share a similar lexical meaning with any preposition; hence, it is more frequently used than בְּ. Cf. Lev 17:3, where the preposition בְּ is used to refer to the inside of the מַעֲשַׂה; whereas, the relator noun עיר is used to refer to the outside of the המַעֲשַׂה.

28 Cf. Ezekiel 7:15 where both the relator noun בְּ and the preposition לְ refer to the inside of the מַעֲשַׂה, with the exception being that בְּ, as a relator noun, is not grammatically linked to מַעֲשַׂה, but לְ, as a preposition, is.

29 For more examples of יָמִין and שָׁמַעְתָּ referring to the leftside or rightside of a thing or person, see Genesis 48:17; Exodus 14:22, 29; Judges 3:15, 16, 21; 7:20; 20:16; 2 Samuel 16:6; 20:9; 1 Kings 2:19; 7:39; 22:19; 2 Chronicles 18:18; Psalm 109:6, 31; Ecclesiastes 10:2; Jeremiah 22:24; Ezekiel 10:3; 39:3; Zechariah 3:1; 4:11; 11:17.

30 Although יָמִין and שָׁמַעְתָּ are grammatically constructed to a pronoun, the antecedent of the pronoun is אָדָם (cf. also 1 Chronicles 6:24; 2 Samuel 2:21).
Zechariah 4:3

And there were two olive trees beside it, one on the right side of the bowl and the other on the left side of it.

1 Chronicles 6:24

And his brother, Asaph, was standing by the right side of him, Asaph the son of Berechiah son of Shimea.

2 Samuel 2:21a

And Abner said to him, “Turn yourself to the right side of you or to the left side of you and I take one of the young men for you.”

The words יָמִין and יָמִין do not always act as relator nouns. They can also refer to the actual left hand or the right hand of a person, in which instances they are regular nouns. The previous verses, however, demonstrate that the nouns also act relationally, referring to the right side or left side of a thing or person. Unlike prepositions, these relator nouns can also be used in sentences in which they are not grammatically related to another word.

The relator nouns יש ית and הירך.

The relator nouns יש and הירך describe temporal relationships between themselves and the things to which they are semantically related, usually referring to the beginning, יש, or the end הירך, of the related word or concept. In the following examples, they are lexically and grammatically related to such things as days, eras, years, תחנה, and יא.

Judges 7:19a

And Gideon, and the one hundred men with him, came into the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch.

Ezekiel 40:1a

In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, in the beginning of the year on the tenth day of the month,

Deuteronomy 11:12

a land for which the LORD your God cares, the eyes of the LORD your God are continually upon it; from the beginning of the year until the end of the year.

Ecclesiastes 7:8

The end of a matter is better than the beginning of it, and patience of spirit is better than pride of spirit.

Amos 8:10

And I will turn your festivals into mourning and all your songs to dirges, and I will put sack cloth upon all loins and baldness upon all heads, and I will make it as the mourning of an only child, and the end of it will be as a day of bitterness.

These verses demonstrate that temporal relator nouns are less restrictive in their lexical relationships than spatial relator nouns. For instance, in Ecclesiastes 7:8, the word to which הירך is semantically and grammatically related, יא, does not have a specific meaning. Thus, the meaning to which הירך is actually related is communicated in the context of the passage instead of by the word to which it is grammatically linked. Also in Amos 8:10, the pronominal suffix ־ of the relator noun הירך seems to be an inclusive reference to the end of all the events described in Amos 8:8–10. Thus, even though הירך is grammatically related to the suffix, it is semantically related to the series of events expressed in the context. Since הירך can be semantically related to a series of events, it seems plausible that

31 This verse and the previous seem to show that the prepositions ינ and ינ are interchangeable in meaning when used with ינ, ינ, and ינ.

32 Cf. Genesis 48:14; Judges 5:26; Psalms 21:9; 26:10; 74:11; 89:14; 26; 138:7; 139:10; 141:11; Song of Solomon 2:6; 8:3; Isaiah 48:13; Daniel 12:7, but also cf. Genesis 48:17; Judges 3:15, 21; 7:20; 20:16; 2 Samuel 20:9; Psalm 73:23; 121:5; Jeremiah 22:24; Ezekiel 39:3 where the nouns ינ and ינ are actually in construct with the word ינ.

33 N.b. especially how the two relator nouns further define the less-specific relator noun ינ in Nehemiah 8:4. Cf. also 1 Kings 7:39 where the relator nouns further define the less-specific relator noun ינ.

34 For more examples of ינ referring to the beginning of something, see Exodus 12:2; Numbers 10:10; 28:11; Lamentations 2:19. For more examples of הירך referring to the end of something see Genesis 49:1; Numbers 23:10; 24:14; Deuteronomy 4:30; 32:20; Psalms 37:38; 73:17; Proverbs 14:12; 16:25; Isaiah 2:2; 47:7; Jeremiah 5:31; 23:20; Lamentations 1:9; Ezekiel 23:25; 38:16; Daniel 8:19; 11:4; Hosea 3:5; Amos 4:2; 9:1; Micah 4:1. N.b. especially Numbers 24:26; Job 8:7; 42:12, where הירך and הירך occur together as an antonymous, relator noun pair.

35 N.b. the use of הירך in this sentence.

36 N.b. the use of הירך in this sentence as well.

37 The relator nouns הירך, הירך, and הירך may be semantically and implicitly related to this word when no other concept is specified in the context of their passages (cf. Genesis 1:1; Isaiah 41:4; 26; 46:10; 48:16).

38 N.b. that the same applies to the relator noun הירך.

39 Cf. also Isaiah 47:7; Jeremiah 5:31.
may function in a similar manner in Genesis 1:1.

**The relator noun רֵאשִׁית.**

The relator noun רֵאשִׁית also describes temporal relationships between itself and the things to which it is semantically related, usually referring to the beginning of the related word or concept. In can be lexically and grammatically relative to such things or people as אוֹד (Deuteronomy 11:12), אָחוֹר (Job 8:7; 42:12), וּנְאָצוּ (Proverbs 111:10; Proverbs 4:7), לְמָדַר (Proverbs 1:17), וּכְלִי (Proverbs 8:22), וּמֵחוֹת (Proverbs 17:14), וּפֶר (Ecclesiastes 7:8), וּמָכָל (Jeremiah 26:1; 27:1; 28:1; 49:34), and מַחֲנֶה (Micah 1:13).

Thus, רֵאשִׁית is a relator noun, and it most likely has a relative meaning, even in Genesis 1:1.

The semantic dependence of the words אוֹד, וּנְאָצוּ, לְמָדַר, וּכְלִי, וּמֵחוֹת, וּפֶר, וּמָכָל, and מַחֲנֶה is what makes them relator nouns, and all of the cited examples demonstrate this trait. In most contexts these relator nouns would be empty of meaning if they were not semantically related to another word or concept. For example, if the relator noun רֵאשִׁית is what makes them relator nouns, and in the following examples referring to the front, back, or in the place of the prepositions "of." The relator nouns אָחוֹר, לְמָדַר, מֵחוֹת, וּפֶר, and מָכָל are semantically relative to such things or people as אוֹד, אָחוֹר, לְמָדַר, מֵחוֹת, and מָכָל.

**Grammatically Absolute Relator Nouns**

Although relator nouns in general are both lexically relative and grammatically absolute, they do not have to be grammatically linked to another word. The most notable English example is the use of the relator noun "end" at the conclusion of a story. No English speaker argues that because the word "end" is relative in meaning, the phrase “The End” must be relative in form as well and changed to “The End of.” Furthermore, when reading the phrase “The End” at the completion of a book or movie, the English speaker does not ask, “The end of what?” The meaning to which the relator noun “end” is semantically related is implicit in context of the event. Thus, in English, relator nouns can be both lexically relative and grammatically absolute. Similarly, relator nouns in Hebrew can also be both lexically relative and grammatically absolute.

In other words, these Hebrew relator nouns, even though they are relative, can stand alone and are not required to be rendered with the preposition "of."

**The relator nouns בַּיִת and אָחוֹר.**

The relator nouns בַּיִת and אָחוֹר can be relative in meaning and grammatically absolute, while still referring to the front, back, or the inside, אָחוֹר, of a related word or concept. In the following examples they are lexically, but not grammatically, relative to such things as בַּיִת, אָחוֹר, מַחֲנֶה, עִיר, or מַחֲנֶה.

2 Samuel 10:9a

וַיָּכָב אֲבֹת רֵאשִׁית אֶלָּךָו מַחֲנֶה מַכָּל

And Joab saw that the front of the battle was against him from the front and from the back.

1 Chronicles 19:10a

וַיָּכָב אֲבֹת רֵאשִׁית אֶלָּךָו מַכָּל בַּיִת אָחוֹר

And Joab saw that the front of the battle was against him front and back.

2 Chronicles 13:14a

וַיָּכָב אֲבֹת רֵאשִׁית אֶלָּךָו מַכָּל בַּיִת אָחוֹר

And Judah turned, and beheld the battle was against him front and back.

Ezekiel 2:10a

וַיָּשֶׂם אֲבֹת חָכָם לָךְ אֶלָּךָו פְּדָעָה מִפָּנֵי

And he spread it out before him, and it was inscribed on the front and the back.

In 2 Chronicles 13:14 both nouns are clearly acting in the place of the prepositions בַּיִת and אָחוֹר, which are also in relation to רֵאשִׁית in 13:13. However, even though the two nouns are relative in meaning to רֵאשִׁית they are grammatically absolute. In other words, they have a relative meaning, but are not rendered with the preposition “of.”

**The relator nouns בַּיִת and אָחוֹר.**

The relator nouns בַּיִת and אָחוֹר can be relative in meaning and grammatically absolute, while still referring to the outside, בַּיִת, or the inside, אָחוֹר, of a related word or concept. In the following examples they are lexically, but not grammatically, relative to such things as בַּיִת, אָחוֹר, מַחֲנֶה, עִיר, and אֲרוֹן.

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40 That is, of course, without the pronominal suffix נַא.
41 רֵאשִׁית is also paired with the relator noun אָחוֹר in Job 42:12; Ecclesiastes 7:8; Isaiah 46:10.
42 בַּיִת and אָחוֹר are semantically relative to מַכָּל in Ezekiel 2:9.
Deuteronomy 23:13–14a

And there shall be a place for you outside of the camp, and you will go out to there on the outside, and there will be a spade for you among your tools, and it will be, when you sit down outside, that you will dig with it.

Genesis 19:16b–17a

And they brought him out and put him outside of the city, and it came about, when they brought them to the outside, that one said, “Flee for your life,

2 Chronicles 3:17a

And he placed the pillars in front of the temple, one on the right side and one on the left side.

1 Chronicles 6:29

The sons of Merari, their brothers, were upon the left side, Ethan son of Kishi, son of Abdi, son of Malluch,

2 Samuel 2:19

And Asahel pursued after Abner and he did not turn to go to the right side or the left side from going after Abner.

In 2 Kings 12:10a the relator nouns שְׂמֹאל and יָמִין further define the less specific relator noun בַּיִת, just as they do in Nehemiah 8:4. However, in 2 Kings 12:10a the relator nouns are grammatically absolute; whereas, in Nehemiah 8:4 they are in grammatical construct. Also in 2 Chronicles 3:17 the phrase in which the relator nouns שְׂמֹאל and יָמִין are used is nearly identical to the phrase in Zechariah 4:3. However, in 2 Chronicles 3:17 the relator nouns are grammatically absolute; whereas, in Zechariah 4:3 they are in grammatical construct. Finally, in 1 Chronicles 6:29 the grammatically absolute relator noun שְׂמֹאל is semantically related to יָמִין in 1 Chronicles 6:18, but in 1 Chronicles 6:24 its antonym שְׂמֹאל is in grammatical construct with the pronoun whose antecedent is also שְׂמֹאל. Thus, rendering the relator nouns in 2 Kings 12:10a; 2 Chronicles 3:14; and 1 Chronicles 6:29 with the preposition “of” would be grammatically incorrect.

The relator nouns שְׂמֹאל and יָמִין.

The relator nouns שְׂמֹאל and יָמִין can be relative in meaning and grammatically absolute, while still referring to the left side, שְׂמֹאל, or the right side, יָמִין, of a related word or concept. In the following examples they are lexically, but not grammatically, relative to such things and people as מִזְבֵּחַ, מִזְבַּח, and מַחֲנֶה.

The relator nouns שְׂמֹאל and יָמִין are both semantically related to the word בַּיִת. In Deuteronomy 23:13–14a and 1 Chronicles 6:24 the relator nouns are semantically related to בַּיִת, as in the phrase שְׂמֹאל יָמִין. When the relator nouns שְׂמֹאל and יָמִין are used in 2 Kings 12:10a and 2 Chronicles 3:17, they are grammatically absolutes, but lexically, they are related to מִזְבֵּחַ.

In all of the example passages in which a temporal שְׂמֹאל is used in the absolute grammatical state, the LXX translates the word with the Greek equivalent ἀρχή. The relator nouns שְׂמֹאל שְׂמֹאל and יָםִין יָמִין are used in the absolute grammatical state, but lexically, they are not grammatically related to the word בַּיִת.

Also, in Ezekiel 7:15 מַחֲנֶה מַחֲנֶה and מַחֲנֶה מַחֲנֶה are semantically related, not grammatically, related to the word מַחֲנֶה. The preposition בַּיִת is also semantically related to מַחֲנֶה. Again, however, the preposition cannot be grammatically independent. Thus, the grammatically absolute and lexically relative מַחֲנֶה is used in its place and does not need to be translated with the preposition “of.”
Proverbs 8:23\(^{48}\)

From everlasting I have been established, from the 

Ecclesiastes 3:11b\(^{49}\)

Moreover, he has set eternity in their heart so that man will not find out the work which God does from 

Isaiah 40:21\(^{50}\)

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been declared to you from the beginning? It is I, the LORD, the first and the last. I am He.

Isaiah 41:4\(^{51}\)

Who has done and made this, calling the generations from the beginning? It is I, the LORD, the first and the last. I am He.

Isaiah 41:26a\(^{52}\)

Who has declared it from the beginning that we might know and that we might say from former times, “You are righteous.”

Isaiah 48:16a\(^{53}\)

Draw near to me, listen to this, for from the beginning I have not spoken in secret. From the time of its being there, I am.

Isaiah 46:10a\(^{54}\)

declaring from the beginning, the end, and from before, that which has not been done,

Ecclesiastes 10:13\(^{55}\)

The beginning of the words of his mouth are folly and the end of the words of his mouth are evil madness.

These verses demonstrate that even temporal relator nouns can also be grammatically absolute even though they are lexically relative. However, even the meanings to which they are semantically related do not have to be explicitly stated in the verse; rather, the context of the passage as a whole supplies the general concept to which these nouns are semantically related.

The relator noun רֵאֶשֶׁת.

In Isaiah 46:10, the relator nouns רֵאֶשֶׁת and רֵאֶשֶׁת are grammatically absolute, but semantically related to a meaning that is implicit in the passage. As Humbert notes, the meanings of the words are semantically related to an unspecified laps de temps (lapse of time).\(^{56}\) Like the English phrase “The End,” where the meaning of the relator noun is relative to a meaning implicit in the context of the event, the relator nouns רֵאֶשֶׁת and רֵאֶשֶׁת are relative to a meaning implicit in the context of Isaiah 46:10a. This implicit relationship in meaning is not lost on Hebrew speakers. Ramban, a Medieval Jewish rabbi, states, “But there is the verse [Isa 46:10] ‘Declaring the end from the beginning’ (mè-rê’shîth), and if he constructs (the word mè-rê’shîth) with dâbhâr (thing) understood, here too [in Gen 1:1] it can be constructed (with a word understood) in the same way” (Newman 1960, 33).\(^{57}\) Thus, the passage of Isaiah 46:10a demonstrates that the noun רֵאֶשֶׁת can be grammatically absolute and lexically relative to a meaning that is implicit in the context of the

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\(^{48}\) יְשַׁעְרָה may be semantically related to such implicit concepts as הַמֶּלֶךְ, “time,” or הָכְלָל, “everything,” which is used to refer to all of creation in Jeremiah 10:16. The text is not specific about the meaning to which יְשַׁעְרָה is semantically related; nevertheless, the meaning communicated by the verse as a whole is clear.

\(^{49}\) יְשַׁעְרָה may be semantically related to the words הַמֶּלֶךְ or הָכְלָל in Ecclesiastes 3:11a. In general יְשַׁעְרָה may be semantically related to such an implicit concept as רָמָז, “thing or matter” (cf. Ecclesiastes 7:8).

\(^{50}\) יְשַׁעְרָה may be semantically related to the events described in Isaiah 41:2, 3, and/or 25. In general יְשַׁעְרָה may be semantically related to such an implicit concept as רָמָז, “thing or matter.”

\(^{51}\) The text gives no specifics about the thing to which יְשַׁעְרָה is semantically related; however, in general it may be semantically related to such implicit concepts as הָכְלָל, “time,” הַמֶּלֶךְ, “everything,” or רָמָז, “thing or matter.”

\(^{52}\) יְשַׁעְרָה may be semantically related to the events described in Isaiah 41:2, 3, and/or 25. In general יְשַׁעְרָה may be semantically related to such an implicit concept as רָמָז, “thing or matter.”

\(^{53}\) יְשַׁעְרָה may be semantically related to the events described in Isaiah 48:14. In general יְשַׁעְרָה may be semantically related to such an implicit concept as רָמָז, “thing or matter.”

\(^{54}\) יְשַׁעְרָה seems to be semantically related to the word רָמָז. The parallelism suggests that רָמָז has been elided in the second colon.

\(^{55}\) Cf. Ecclesiastes 7:8 where the two relator nouns are in grammatical construct, but are still lexically relative to something that is unspecified.

\(^{56}\) Rashi, one of the first proponents of the dependent clause translation, also understands Isaiah 46:10a in the same sense (Rashi 1946, 2). Even the old Karaites scholars ‘Ali ben Suleîmân and Ibn Janâh contemplate the relative nature of רֵאֶשֶׁת and the implicit meaning to which it is semantically related in Genesis 1:1 (Skoss 1928, 93 n. 1.2).
passage. It is a perfect parallel to the traditional translation of בְּרֵאשִׁית in Genesis 1:1.

Lexical Conclusion

The preceding evidences demonstrate two things concerning relator nouns as a whole. First, contrary to the views of some scholars, a relative meaning for a relator noun does not require a “relative” construction or translation—i.e. “in the beginning of.” Relator nouns can be lexically relative yet grammatically absolute. This phenomenon is typical of relator nouns and is neither a lexical nor a grammatical anomaly. Second, with respect to temporal relator nouns, the words or concepts to which they are semantically related do not have to be explicitly stated in the context of the passage. Like the English phrase “The End,” the relator noun’s context can supply the relational meaning implicitly. In the case of Genesis 1:1, the context tells the reader that the concept to which בְּרֵאשִׁית is semantically related may be the universe, time, or the event of creation (“In the beginning of all things,” “In the beginning of time,” or “In the beginning of the creation event”). It may be that the related concept is not specified because Genesis 1:1 describes, all at the same time, the beginning of the universe, time, and the creation event. Readers of the Hebrew and the traditional English translation of Genesis 1:1 can easily understand the “beginning” to be semantically related to such implicit concepts in the text.

The Grammatical Level

The absence of the definite article

Before returning to the linguistic traits of Hebrew relator nouns, one must also understand the grammatical dilemma that proponents of the dependent-clause translation charge against the traditional translation. As stated earlier, if בְּרֵאשִׁית is grammatically absolute and definite in meaning, one would also expect the word to be pointed with an articual qamets, rather than with a vocal shewa. However, if בְּרֵאשִׁית is in construct with and the ensuing clause of Genesis 1:1, then one would expect בְּרֵאשִׁית to be anarthrous and pointed as it is: with the vocal shewa.

To cite further evidence for this charge, proponents of the dependent clause translation frequently use Hosea 1:2a as a grammatical parallel, where the anarthrous noun בְּרֵאשִׁית is in construct with the verb דִּבֶּר and the ensuing clause. The passages states,

בְּרֵאשִׁית דִּבֶּר... בְּרֵאשִׁית

When the LORD first spoke to Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, “Go, get yourself a wife of whoredom,” (NJPS)

The strength of this example is that the structure of the passage is very similar to Genesis 1:1, and the nomen regens of the construct chain, בְּרֵאשִׁית, is nearly identical to בְּרֵאשִׁית in meaning. Furthermore, almost all modern translations render Hosea 1:2a with a dependent temporal clause, and some are nearly identical in structure to the dependent-clause translation of Genesis 1:1. For example the NIV renders Hosea 1:2a as “When the LORD began to speak through Hosea,” the NJV renders Genesis 1:1 as “When God began to create heaven and earth.”

In order to show that an anarthrous בְּרֵאשִׁית in Genesis 1:1 can still be grammatically absolute and definite in meaning proponents of the traditional translation frequently use König’s argument (König 1919. 130 n. 1), that בְּרֵאשִׁית is a type of temporal noun that is often anarthrous when functioning as an

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58 Wenham also seems to recognize the word’s relationship to a meaning implicit in the context. He states, “In temporal phrases בְּרֵאשִׁית is most often used relatively, i.e., it specifies the beginning of a particular period, e.g., ‘From the beginning of the year’ (Deut 11:12) or ‘At the beginning of the reign of’ (Jer 26:1). More rarely, as in Genesis 1:1, it is used absolutely, with the period of time left unspecified; only the context shows precisely when is meant, e.g., Isa 46:10, ‘Declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times (פָּרָשָׁה) things not yet done’ (Wenham 1987, 13–14).

59 Skinner states, “But [the traditional translation] is not in accordance with the usage of בְּרֵאשִׁית” (Skinner 1951, 13.) The cited examples of relator nouns demonstrate this statement to be incorrect.

60 Even if בְּרֵאשִׁית refers to the beginning of the world, or the cosmological first cause of the world, its meaning is still relative to that event. As a relator noun, בְּרֵאשִׁית is empty of meaning until it is semantically related to something in the sentence or context, whether that thing is explicitly or implicitly stated.

61 As a relator noun, בְּרֵאשִׁית must be semantically related to another word or concept. This semantic relationship makes relator nouns naturally definite, like the natural definiteness of cardinal numbers (see GK §134). Even if, on the rare occasion, the word or concept to which the relator noun is related is itself indefinite, the relator noun would still be definite because of its inherent semantic dependency. Consider Eccl 7:8, where the relator nouns בְּרֵאשִׁית and בָּרָא are in construct with and semantically related to the indefinite word בָּרָא. Even though בָּרָא is indefinite, modern translations still render the relator nouns in this passage with definite articles. Thus, if בְּרֵאשִׁית is a relator noun, it must be definite in meaning.”

62 Fn 11.

63 Fn 12.

64 N.b. the construct form of the noun בְּרֵאשִׁית in this passage.


66 Cf. ESV, JPS, NASB, NIV, NKJV, NRSV, et al., but n.b. NAB, which seems to follow the rendering of the Vg.

67 In Genesis 1:1 the NIV follows the traditional translation.

68 Scholars who use König’s argument are the following: Heidel (1951, 92); Hasel (1971, 158–159); Westermann (1990, 96); Waltke (1975).
adverbial expression of time, like אָרָא, רֹאשׁ, and לָם.

Thus, if תְּחִלָּה is functioning in this manner in Genesis 1:1, then it would not have to be pointed with the articular γάμετ. König’s argument, however, should be rejected for two reasons. First, it is fraught with many problems and doesn’t necessarily explain why these types of words are frequently anarthrous. Second, there is a better explanation for why תְּחִלָּה is pointed with a vocal שֵׁבָא that is more reflective of the relator noun classification.

The complications of König’s argument.

As König argues, the word תְּחִלָּה can certainly be classified as a temporal noun; however, many problems arise when he classifies it with other types of temporal nouns. First, temporal nouns like אָרָא and עָלָם are not lexically analogous to תְּחִלָּה and שֵׁה. The former nouns frequently refer to specific moments or periods in time: the beginning of something. The latter refer to indefinite periods of time. For instance, the temporal noun עָלָם almost always refers to an unspecified, immeasurable period of past time, and the temporal noun שֵׁה always refers to an unspecified, immeasurable period of past or future time. Thus, a possible explanation for why both עָלָם and שֵׁה can be both anarthrous and grammatically absolute is that they are lexically indefinite; an article would seem to imply a lexically definite meaning. Thus, these nouns cannot be used as examples to explain why a definite תְּחִלָּה in Genesis 1:1 can be both anarthrous and grammatically absolute.

König and the proponents of his argument might then counter that the word תְּחִלָּה in Genesis 1:1 also has a lexically indefinite meaning like that of עָלָם and שֵׁה, but in all its temporal uses, whether in construct or absolute (Isaiah 46:10), תְּחִלָּה always has a definite meaning, and נָא and שֵׁה never do. Furthermore, as a relator noun, the meaning of תְּחִלָּה is always semantically related to another word or concept, which makes the word naturally definite even if it is not grammatically related to another word. Anyone who might argue that תְּחִלָּה has an indefinite meaning in Genesis 1:1 would have to argue that it has a non-relative meaning, which seems antithetical to the relator noun concept.

Second, proponents of the dependent-clause translation challenge König’s argument. They counter that the examples with which he compares are all taken from poetic texts which do not frequently use the definite article. Brown states,

In addition, all the examples of related words used absolutely but without the article (מִדְּרוֹשׁ in Isa 40:21; 41:4, 26; 48:16; נִצְפֶּדֶם in Isa 46:10; מֵמוֹלָם in Isa 46:9) are culled from poetic texts, which by nature tend to “omit” the articles for nouns considered definite. Thus, on methodological grounds alone the comparison of poetic texts with Genesis 1 is problematic when used to argue for the absolute function of בְּרֵאשִׁית in Gen 1:1. Indeed, the absence of the article still supports the interpretation of בְּרֵאשִׁית as a construct. [emphasis mine] (Brown 1993, 64)

Even though opponents raise this objection, proponents of König’s argument rarely cite prose examples, even though they do exist and are a counter this challenge. However, if תְּחִלָּה and עָלָם are not semantically analogous to עָלָם and שֵׁה, then there are no other prose examples with which to compare תְּחִלָּה. Isaiah 46:10 is a great parallel verse in which תְּחִלָּה is grammatically absolute, definite in meaning, and anarthrous, but a proponent of the dependent-clause translation can easily argue that the word would have a definite article if it were not in a poetic passage.

Third, since the temporal nouns תְּחִלָּה and עָלָם almost always refer to the beginning of something, they are much more comparable to the temporal relator noun הָיוֹת, which at times is semantically interchangeable with תְּחִלָּה. The word’s semantic proximity to תְּחִלָּה and עָלָם makes it a better methodological candidate for grammatical comparison. However, this is a problem for König and the proponents of his argument because even though הָיוֹת is often grammatically absolute, it always functions in this manner with the article, not without. Thus, according to this bit of evidence, the lexically comparable תְּחִלָּה should also have the article when it is grammatically absolute. The

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69 Cf. שֵׁה (Isaiah 40:21; 41:4, 26; 48:16; Proverbs 8:23, Ecclesiastes 3:11); עָלָם (Micah 5:1; Habakkuk 1:12); תְּחִלָּה (Genesis 3:22; 6:3, 4; Psalm 90:2; Proverbs 8:23).
70 See Brown, Driver, and Briggs (1907) and Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm (1994–1999), s.v. נָא.
71 Even when it has the definite article, the word עָלָם has an indefinite meaning (cf. 1 Chronicles 16:36; Nehemiah 9:5; Psalms 41:14; 106:48).
72 Although most modern scholars do not make this argument for the traditional translation, this may have been the view of the targumic translators of Genesis 1:1 and the LXX translators of Isaiah 46:10.
73 See fn 62.
74 In order to counter this charge, Heidel suggests that the text of Genesis 1 may itself be more poetic than prosaic (Heidel 1951, 92 n. 41). However, no other proponents of the traditional translation seem to make this argument.
75 Cf. נָא Nehemiah 12:46; עָלָם Genesis 3:22; 6:4; 13:15; Exodus 3:15; et al.
77 Genesis 13:3; 41:21; 43:18; 20, Judges 1:1; 20:18; 2 Samuel 17:9; Nehemiah 11:17; Isaiah 1:26; Daniel 8:1; 9:21.
evidence as a whole demonstrates the weakness of König’s argument, which makes the plausibility of the traditional translation weak as well. However, there is a better explanation for why a lexically definite and grammatically absolute בְּרֵאשִׁית is not pointed an articular qamets.

Relator Nouns and the Hebrew Definite Article

The previous lexical discussion has already established that הַתָּיוֹן is a relator noun. As shown earlier, the relator noun classification demonstrates that relator nouns, like הַתָּיוֹן, can be grammatically absolute even though they are relative in meaning. This classification, however, can also explain why הַתָּיוֹן is pointed with a vocal shewa instead of an articular qamets.

Because relator nouns are relative in meaning to another word or concept, they are definite in meaning by nature. The following verses will demonstrate, however, that when they function as grammatical absolutes they can frequently be found with or without the article in passages of both prose and poetry. Consider the use of the relator nouns הַתָּיוֹן and בַּיִת.

Ezekiel 7:15

The sword is on the outside and the plague and famine are on the inside so that in the field, one will die by the sword, and in the city another will be devoured by famine and plague.

Lamentations 1:20b79

my organs are in turmoil, my heart is turned within me for I have certainly rebelled. On the outside the sword makes childless, on the inside it is like death.

In these verses הַתָּיוֹן and בַּיִת are paired together, like they are in other passages,80 and both are semantically related to the word בַּיִת. However, in both instances one relator noun is pointed with the article, but the other is not, even though both nouns are grammatically absolute and definite in meaning. Thus, the grammar of the passages demonstrates that a relator noun can be grammatically absolute and definite in meaning, but still be anarthrous.

Deuteronomy 23:13–14a81

And there shall be a place for you outside of the camp, and you will go out to there on the outside, and there will be a spade for you among your tools, and it will be when you sit down on the outside, you will dig with it,

In this example the relator noun בַּיִת in the first clause of verse 13 is semantically and grammatically related to מַחֲנֶה and is clearly definite in meaning. However, in the latter half of verses 13 and 14, בַּיִת is grammatically absolute, but still relative in meaning to מַחֲנֶה. However, in its grammatically absolute form, בַּיִת is anarthrous even though it is definite in meaning. Again, the evidence demonstrates that an anarthrous relator noun can be grammatically absolute and definite in meaning.

The relator nouns בַּיִת and בַּיִת can also function in the same manner. Consider the following uses.

2 Samuel 2:21a

And Abner said to him, “Turn yourself to the right side of you or to the left side of you and I will take one of the young men for you.”

2 Samuel 2:19

And Asahel pursued after Abner and he did not turn to go to the right side or the left side from going after Abner

Numbers 20:17b

We will go the way of the king; we will not turn to the right side or the left side until we cross your territory.

Numbers 22:26

And the messenger of the Lord passed on further, and stood in the narrow place in which there is not a way to turn to the right side or the left side.

In these examples, the relator nouns בַּיִת and בַּיִת are used with the verb עִיר to describe turning from the path either to the right side or the left side

78 See fn 62.
79 There are a couple of reasons to translate the verse in this manner. First, Lamentations 1:19 suggests that the speaker of this passage is referring to the inside and the outside of a city during a siege, not the inside of a house. Second, the parallel language of Ezekiel 7:15 (cf. also Deuteronomy 32:25) matches the situation described in Lamentations 1:19–20 exactly. There are those who die by the sword outside of the city and those who perish of famine inside. Although Lamentations 2:21 does describe death by the sword in the streets, the more technical form הַתָּיוֹן is used in the passage rather than simply בַּיִת.
80 Genesis 6:14; Exodus 25:11; 37:2; 1 Kings 7:9.
81 The words “on the” are added to the translation to bring out the definiteness of the word בַּיִת.
of oneself (cf. 2 Samuel 2:21). The Numbers passages, however, demonstrate that this word pair, when used in the same way with the same verb, can be grammatically absolute and definite in meaning even though both words are anarthrous.82

1 Kings 7:39a

And he placed the stands, five on the side of the temple on the right side and five upon the side of the temple on its left side.

2 Chronicles 3:17a

And he placed the pillars in front of the temple, one on the right side and one on the left side.

Finally, both of these examples demonstrate that even though אחור and ימין are used in exactly the same manner, ימין is grammatically definite and אחור is not. Both, however, are definite in meaning, which again suggests that relator nouns can be both grammatically absolute and definite in meaning, yet anarthrous in form.

In addition to these passages, there are a number of verses in which a definite and grammatically absolute relator noun can be either articulated or anarthrous. The relator nouns אחור and ימין are always anarthrous when they are grammatically absolute (2 Samuel 10:9; 1 Chronicles 19:10; 1 Chronicles 13:14; Psalm 139:5; and Ezekiel 2:10). The relator nouns אחר and ימינו can be pointed with the article when they are grammatically absolute (Genesis 9:22; 19:17; 24:31; 39:11; Exodus 21:19; Leviticus 18:9; Deuteronomy 24:11; 25:5; Judges 12:9; 19:25; 2 Samuel 13:18; 2 Kings 4:3; 2 Kings 10:24 Ezra 10:13 Job 31:32; Psalm 41:7; Proverbs 22:13; 24:27 Song of Solomon 8:1; Ezekiel 41:9, 17, 25; Hosea 7:1), but there are other passages in which they are anarthrous (Genesis 6:14; Exodus 12:46; 25:11; 37:2; Leviticus 14:41; Deuteronomy 23:13, 14; 32:25; 1 Kings 6:6, 15, 16; 7:9; Isaiah 33:7; Lamentations 1:20; Ezekiel 7:15; 40:5, 19; 46:2; 47:2). The relator nouns אחר and ימינו can also be pointed with an article when they are grammatically absolute (Genesis 13:9; 2 Samuel 2:19; 1 Chronicles 6:29; 2 Chronicles 3:17; Nehemiah 12:31; Ezekiel 1:10), but mostly they are anarthrous (Genesis 24:49; Numbers 20:17; 22:26; Deuteronomy 2:27; 5:32; 17:11, 20; 28:14; Joshua 1:7; 17:7 19:27; 23:6; 1 Samuel 6:12; 1 Kings 7:39, 49; 2 Kings 12:10; 22:2; 2 Chronicles 3:17; 4:6, 7, 8, 34:2; Job 23:9; 30:12; Psalm 142:5; Proverbs 4:27; Isaiah 54:3). Finally, the temporal relator nouns אחר and ימינו are almost always anarthrous when they are grammatically absolute (Psalm 37:37; Proverbs 8:23; 23:18; 24:14; 24:20; Ecclesiastes 3:11; 10:13; Isaiah 40:21; 41:4, 26; 46:10; 48:16; Jeremiah 29:11).83

Grammatical Conclusion

The preceding evidences demonstrate that relator nouns can be anarthrous when they are grammatically absolute. The reason for this is because they are in a grammatical state of flux. On the one hand, they are in an almost implicit grammatical construction with a related thing or concept,84 yet on the other hand, they are grammatically absolute with a definite meaning. Because these nouns are lexically dependent on another word or concept to complete their meaning, like a noun in grammatical construct, one would expect grammatically absolute relator nouns to be anarthrous. However, because they have a definite meaning when they are grammatically absolute, one would also expect them to have the definite article. Thus, it is not surprising that grammatically absolute relator nouns can occur with or without the article. With respect to the relator noun אחר in Genesis 1:1, if it is grammatically absolute, it does not have to be pointed with an articual qamets, even though it could be. Such is the nature of relator nouns in this grammatical state of flux.

Conclusion

Once אחר is correctly identified as a relator noun, a better methodology can be used for collecting and analyzing the lexical and grammatical data. This article has shown that when the word אחר is compared with other types of relator nouns, the lexical evidence demonstrates that it can be grammatically absolute even if it is lexically relative. Thus, the challenge put forth by opponents that

82 Numbers 20:17 and Deuteronomy 2:27 describe very similar happenings where the Israelites request a nation’s permission to travel through their land, and they swear not to deviate to their left or to their right from the path. However, Numbers 20:17 uses the verb התיון to describe not turning to one’s left or right, and Deuteronomy 2:27 uses the verb ראו. These parallel verses suggest that the act of turning, or not turning, to one’s left or right can be described by both verbs. The examples from 2 Samuel suggest that the relator nouns אחר and ימינו when used either with התיון or ראו are definite in meaning even though they are anarthrous.

83 One could argue that in some cases, in which ימינו is grammatically absolute, it should be rendered as “future” rather than “end,” which would mean that the word is not being used as a relator noun (cf. Psalm 37:37; Proverbs 23:18; 24:14; 20; Jeremiah 29:11). However, ימינו is often semantically related to a person and is used as a reference to the latter days of that person’s life (Numbers 23:10; Job 8:7; 42:12; Proverbs 5:11; 19:20; Jeremiah 17:11). Thus, in the cases where ימינו is grammatically absolute, but implicitly related to a person, it still functions as a relator noun even though it could be rendered as “future.”

84 This is Brown, Driver, and Briggs’s (1907) description of ימינו in Isaiah 46:10. It is absolute, but implicitly it is the end of a phase of history. See Brown, Driver, and Briggs’s (1907), s.v. "אני."
because בְּרֵאשִׁית is lexically relative, it must be rendered in the construct state in Genesis 1:1, does not stand up to scrutiny.

Furthermore, this article has shown that בְּרֵאשִׁית is again compared with other types of relator nouns, the grammatical evidence demonstrates that it can be anarthrous even though it is grammatically absolute. Thus, the challenge put forth by opponents that because בְּרֵאשִׁית is not pointed with an articular qamets, the word is in the construct state, also does not stand up to scrutiny.

Both the lexical and grammatical evidences of Hebrew relator nouns demonstrate that בְּרֵאשִׁית can be in the absolute state in Genesis 1:1, which would render the verse as an independent clause. This is the traditional translation of the passage, which allows Genesis 1:1 to be interpreted as the first act of creation. However, the grammatical and lexical evidences only demonstrate that the traditional translation is itself linguistically possible. Syntactical evidence presented in a forthcoming article will demonstrate that the traditional translation of Genesis 1:1 is not only linguistically possible, it is the only reasonable translation of the first verse of the Bible.

References


**Bibliography**


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Linguistic Traits of Hebrew Relator Nouns and Their Implications for Translating Genesis 1:1


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