

THE PREACHER'S HEBREW COMPANION TO

Genesis 1–11

THE PREACHER'S HEBREW COMPANION SERIES

Genesis 1–11

A Selective Commentary for
Meditation and Sermon Preparation



Brian R. Doak



**THE PREACHER'S
HEBREW/GREEK COMPANION SERIES**

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**HENDRICKSON
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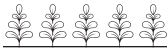
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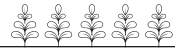
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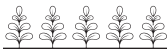
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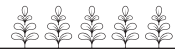
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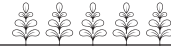
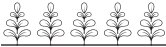
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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

Overview

Like many preachers, you may wish you could use the biblical languages in your sermon preparation, but the task seems daunting. Perhaps you lack confidence in your language skills—especially if it's been a long time since you studied Greek or Hebrew—and when you turn to technical commentaries, you feel overwhelmed. Or perhaps you simply don't have the time to do the laborious work of digging into the original-language texts. To help you overcome these challenges, we designed this series, the Preacher's Hebrew Companion (as well as its New Testament counterpart series, the Preacher's Greek Companion). In collaboration with the series authors, our goal as series editors is to gently guide you, the busy preacher, through the Hebrew text of select biblical passages in a way that will empower you to integrate original-language exegesis and homiletics. Our prayer is that you will find this book and the other volumes in this series spiritually and intellectually encouraging as well as pleasant to use. We hope your use of the series will make your sermon preparation a more profound and satisfying process and will invigorate your preaching.

Structure


Each volume in this series includes the following three features for a given biblical book (or portion of a book):


-  **a curated selection of passages** we believe many preachers would likely choose to preach on from the biblical book (or portion of the book) in question; **or, for shorter biblical books, the entire book**, broken up into manageable passages
-  all the basic **lexical and grammatical tools** you need (whatever your Hebrew skill level may be) **to work through and meditate on the Hebrew text** of these passages in a way that strengthens your sermon preparation and empowers you to preach more effectively
-  **succinct, select comments** intended to help you responsibly and effectively bridge the gap between reading the Hebrew text and delivering a sermon on it

The Preacher's Hebrew Companion is not a traditional commentary series, as is reflected in its title and subtitle: "*Companion*" (not "Commentary") and "*Selected Passages for Meditation and Sermon Preparation*." That is, we conceived this series as a *supplement* to the wealth of fine commentaries that already exist, not as a replacement for any of them. We recommend using this series alongside traditional commentaries, which by design include helpful information that is not covered in ours.

The Selection of Passages

Each volume in the Preacher's Hebrew Companion series provides the Hebrew text of **approximately ten to twelve passages** from a particular biblical book (or portion thereof):

 In addition to having expertise in Hebrew and exegesis, our series authors typically have extensive preaching experience or are full-time preachers by vocation. Unless the biblical book in question is short enough to be included in full, they chose **passages** they think **preachers would most likely desire to preach**. In order to encourage preaching through the biblical book in an "expository" rather than a thematic manner, these passages are presented in canonical order. That said, for longer books (such as Isaiah or Matthew), we encouraged authors to choose passages that highlight or represent important themes found in the book; for such books, however, the chosen passages are still presented in canonical order. The curated, limited number of passages in each series volume allows you, if you wish, to use the passages as the basis for a "ready-made" sermon series of whatever length suits your schedule (e.g., for a series consisting of, say, four, seven, ten, or twelve sermons). Alternatively, you might choose to preach a series using some of the passages in a volume and then supplement these with passages from the biblical book in question that are not found in the volume.

 The aims of the series guided our decisions about passage length. On the one hand, we encouraged authors to choose **passages that are not too long**, so that the portions of text won't be daunting to you if your Hebrew skills are rudimentary; nor do we want you to be overwhelmed by wading through dozens of verses in Hebrew. For this reason, our ideal length for most passages has been approximately ten verses. On the other hand, in order to do justice to the natural boundaries of longer passages, we have taken care not to artificially truncate such texts. Consider, for example,

the account of the crossing of the Red Sea (Exod 14–15) or the story of the raising of Lazarus (John 11). Although these texts are far too long to be included in full in a volume in this series, each constituent part of these texts is vital to understanding their narrative development and message. For such passages, we asked authors to focus—as a preacher might typically do when delivering a sermon on a lengthy passage—on what they consider to be the most salient verses from the passage. Accordingly, we have provided the Hebrew text for only these verses, with the author summarizing the other verses (in English).

- ✎ Finally, when authors deemed it helpful (especially for longer biblical books), they have indicated, on the first page devoted to each passage, the **larger literary unit to which the passage belongs**,¹ thus helping you see the passage in question as part of a larger whole rather than as an isolated pericope. In cases where this larger literary context is indicated, we encourage you to pick up a Bible and read and dwell on this context while using this volume to work through the passage.

The Presentation of Each Passage

This volume helps you work through each passage it contains by presenting the Hebrew text of the passage along with the lexical and grammatical information you need in order to dig into this original-language text. Designed to be highly accessible, this format is intended (1) to enable you to work through the text in manageable chunks and according to your abilities, regardless of your skill level in Hebrew; (2) to simultaneously facilitate both study and devotion; and (3) in conjunction with the author’s commentary, to help you bridge the gap, as easily and seamlessly as possible, between the original-language text and preaching.

More specifically, this volume contains the following five sections for each passage:

- ✎ A **brief introduction** to the passage—typically comprising only a few sentences—is included in order to set the stage for the passage and highlight its important themes.
- ✎ For ease of reading and to encourage you to slow down and contemplate the text, the passage is typically divided into subunits. For each of these subunits, we provide the **Hebrew text** of each clause or phrase, along

1. Occasionally, such a literary unit is coterminous with the passage itself.

with **transliteration** (as a pronunciation help for those whose Hebrew is at a rudimentary level) and the author's **translation**.²

Next, each clause or phrase from the subunit is presented in an inter-linear fashion, notably with a **contextual gloss (or multiple contextual glosses) and parsing for each word**.³ For example:

1a	בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים		
	In the beginning, God created		
בְּרֵאשִׁית	in beginning of/ when . . . began	CST W/ PREP בְּ	noun
רֵאשִׁית	<i>bā·rē'·šīt</i>		
בָּרָא	(he) created	QAL PF 3MS	verb
בָּרָא	<i>bā·rā'</i>		
אֱלֹהִים	God	ABS	noun
אֱלֹהִים	<i>ē·lō·hīm</i>		


This formatting allows you to easily analyze each word in the clause or phrase (by helping you on the level of semantics and morphology) and to perceive how the words work together as a whole (by helping you on the level of syntax).

A key feature of each volume in this series is the inclusion of **concise comments** to accompany some clauses and phrases. These have two primary goals: (1) to enable you to understand and exegete the text more deeply than might be possible from reading it in English, and (2) to equip

2. The Hebrew text used in this series has been taken from the Michigan-Claremont-Westminster Electronic Hebrew Bible, a popular electronic version based on the BHS that has been revised by its creators on the basis of comparison with the Leningrad Codex. This electronic text is in the public domain and has been made available courtesy of the J. Alan Groves Center for Advanced Biblical Research. For simplicity's sake, whenever there is a *ketiv-qere*, only the *qere* has been presented (without being marked as such). Interested readers should feel free to consult critical editions, such as the BHS, to see where instances of *ketiv-qere* or other text-critical issues occur.

3. The glosses are the author's own and intentionally err on the "literal" end of the spectrum, in order to help you apprehend the basic meaning(s) of each word in context. The parsings have been supplied by the team at Hendrickson. Naturally, some words can plausibly be parsed more than one way in context; in such cases, the parsing provided is the one we deemed to make the most sense, but other parsings could have been listed instead.

you with insights into the original-language text that will be of direct value for your preaching. To help you focus and not become overwhelmed with too much information, we encouraged our authors to comment only on those clauses and phrases for which they thought doing so would accomplish these two goals. In addition, because the volumes in this series are not only language aids but—ultimately and more importantly—preaching aids, we asked authors to highlight those features in the Hebrew text that bring out key themes, rhetorical and theological emphasis, narrative development, character development, connections with other biblical texts, and the like. Although noting various other features in the Hebrew text may have been intrinsically interesting from a grammatical perspective or helpful for strengthening your language skills, authors have generally refrained from commenting on such features when doing so would not be likely to aid you in moving from text to sermon in any substantial way.⁴ In short, an author’s brief, select comments are intended—in conjunction with the volume’s language aids—to provide you both with *focus* and with *space* to slow down, meditate, wonder, and mature in your understanding and experience of the text, as you form your own judgments on it and prepare to proclaim the divine word to your hearers. The author’s comments are not intended to circumscribe the possible interpretive options with one single answer (especially for texts whose interpretation is the particular subject of debate among Christian believers). Rather, they are meant to stimulate your thinking, to help you see features of the text (and connections with other texts) that you may not have perceived before, and to prompt you to ask questions that may not have previously occurred to you.


 Each passage ends with a brief section titled “**From Text to Sermon,**” in which our authors, building on their comments, suggest ways you can move from working through the Hebrew text to the task of homiletics, highlighting potential points of emphasis or particular insights you may wish to share with your audience. In this way, the authors provide you with possible ways to bring the text to life for your audience (e.g., types

4. Another way we have kept the presentation streamlined and uncluttered, so that you can achieve maximum focus, is by intentionally keeping source citations to a minimum. Authors’ comments on a given passage are the fruit of their scholarly research on the passage, their personal reflection on it, and their experience preaching and teaching it. They cite secondary sources only when they draw a specific insight from one particular source or wish to point you to a particularly helpful resource for further reading. As stated above, we naturally encourage you to also use traditional commentaries (which typically provide more documentation) in your study and sermon preparation.

of illustrations you might use). Because individual preachers (and each of our series authors) bring their own particular skills, perspectives, backgrounds, and oratorical approaches to bear on the homiletical task, and because every biblical text has its own unique features, we encouraged our authors to structure the “From Text to Sermon” section as a free-form series of short paragraphs whose content and emphases are guided by their own personal judgment about what is most helpful for a variety of preachers in different places, cultures, and times. The remarks in this section are always grouped according to rubrics (in the form of inline headers); but rather than restrict authors with a “one-size-fits-all” set of rubrics, we allowed them to create their own rubrics and even, if helpful, to vary these rubrics across passages within their volume in light of the unique features and emphases of each passage.⁵ We view the resulting diversity of approaches and emphases across this series (and even within a given volume) as a strength, and we hope this aspect of the series will encourage you to use your own judgment about how to preach each passage in a way that best suits you and your listeners, being sensitive to the promptings and guidance of the Spirit of God.


Audience and Theological Perspective

Since our hope is that many different kinds of people will find the volumes in this series useful, we have designed the Preacher’s Hebrew Companion to be helpful to a broad spectrum of Christian preachers:

 Our intention is that the series will be **useful and accessible to a large and diverse group of preachers serving a variety of communities throughout the world**. For this reason, we encouraged authors to exercise sensitivity and broad-mindedness in their comments and particularly when writing the “From Text to Sermon” section, in which they could run the risk of being too culturally specific. In particular, we asked authors that any sermon illustrations they included in this section generally be as universal as possible or that, instead of providing specific illustrations, they point to themes from the passage you may wish to illustrate in one way or another. That said, because specificity is essential for good communication, we also allowed authors to suggest—when they deemed


5. That said, we suggested the following possible rubrics to authors as starting points to consider: theological themes, themes for application and illustration, integrating the broader historical and literary context, learning from the language, and (as deemed helpful and not reductionistic) “the big idea” of the passage.


it particularly helpful—concrete, culturally specific examples as springboards to help you think about examples that will be relevant for your own context.


 We asked our authors to express any **theological perspectives** in a way that is **consistent with the beliefs stated in the Apostles' Creed**. Because this series aims to meet the needs of Christian preachers of various theological viewpoints, we encouraged a diversity of theological perspectives within these bounds across the volumes in the series. In addition, because the series has a joint focus on exegesis (close attention to what a specific text says) and homiletics (how to preach said text), we advised authors when making any theological comments to let these flow naturally from the text at hand, rather than using the text as a springboard to discuss issues that would more properly fall under the rubric of systematic theology. Although we asked authors to avoid reading any given passage through the lens of a theological system grounded in other biblical texts, we also strongly encouraged them to discuss allusions to other biblical passages or other innerbiblical literary connections if they felt that doing so would help you understand the message of the text at hand and know how to preach it more effectively.

Acknowledgments

We would like to offer our heartfelt gratitude to the following individuals, who have played a central role in the creation of this series:

 Arley Kangas and Marco Resendes, for their excellent work on various aspects of the making of these volumes, especially transliterating, parsing, proofreading, and generating the indexes.

 Phil Frank, for his expert typesetting and for patiently working with us, in our capacity as series editors, to achieve the desired formatting and aesthetic for these volumes.

 The series authors, for joining us in this unique project and for sharing our vision and lending their considerable skills to the task. These volumes are the result of a fruitful collaboration between the Hendrickson team and the series authors (with both parties contributing to the content). We are truly grateful for the opportunity to have worked on this project together.

All of us—the series editors, the series authors, and the team at Hendrickson—pray that the volume you now hold in your hands will empower and encourage

you to work through the Hebrew text of the Bible in order to deepen your sermon preparation and strengthen your proclamation of the word of God. We nurture a deep respect and appreciation for the challenging work that you as a preacher do on the “front lines,” and we recognize the many challenges (logistical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and more) that you encounter on a weekly, indeed a daily, basis. We are honored to come alongside you and support you in your important labors, and we pray that your use of this book will bear much fruit for the kingdom of God.

JONATHAN G. KLINE
SEAN M. McDONOUGH

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

The grand story of salvation begins in Genesis. If Christians believe that God has divinely ordained the canon of Scripture, and even the order of the books, then they must also affirm this: God wanted us to hear Genesis first. And so we do. In particular, the first eleven chapters of Genesis, sometimes called the “primeval history,” set a grand stage for all that is to come, defining the order of the created world before God, the status of humans in God’s image, and the fallout of our struggle to survive in a broken world. The stunning interplay we find here between the cosmic and the personal, the universal and the particular, already anticipates the ultimate paradox and power of Christian faith, expressed most supremely in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. God and human. A savior who dies. Ultimate power and lowly weakness.

Because the opening chapters of Genesis are so familiar, we need to slow down and try to encounter them in a new way; otherwise, we run the risk of letting our eyes merely skim over the pages, certain that we already know the stories and the themes and the lessons. But do we already know them? We may not. Are we willing to take a risk to learn something new? Sometimes. But it is hard. Engaging with the text in ancient Hebrew forces us to truly focus, and as we linger over God’s words, we will be changed and we will learn. We will find that creation of the natural world and people, so majestically described in the iconic opening phrase of the book, is a continual process in Genesis. We will learn that our most shameful, base desires—to kill, to dominate, to boast, to make idols—already have a mysterious origin in our spiritual ancestors. We will also rediscover that our most wonderful longings—for God, for meaningful work, for acceptance, for knowing—have their origin in the divine order of all things. Genesis 1–11 tells the story of our own choices and our own world today.



I started working on this volume in 2020, during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, a time of global anxiety and change. These anxieties and changes were personal and professional for me as well—one of my closest friends and colleagues (Javier Garcia), who had been among the first to read parts of this book in progress, died in 2021, and my role as a professor in the classroom shifted to administrative and leadership responsibilities at my university. My wife and I battled surgeries and setbacks of various normal kinds, and our daughters seemed

to grow up too quickly before our eyes. As I worked on this project, I saw my own family, my own personality, and my own struggle reflected in these early chapters of Genesis, and I was reminded that it is Scripture that best tells the story of my own life.

I am so honored and grateful that my friend and colleague since our time as students at Harvard together, Jonathan Kline, reached out to me to undertake this project, and I thank him for his patience and help. His work as an editor made this volume much better than it would have been otherwise.

I dedicate this book to the memory of Professor Javier A. Garcia (1987–2021): “The believer . . . lauds the Creator, the Redeemer, God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for the bodily presence of a brother” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* [London: SCM, 2015 (orig. 1954)], 9).

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

1	first person	indef	indefinite
2	second person	INF	infinitive
3	third person	INTERR/interr	interrogative
ABS	absolute	JUSS	jussive
ADJ	adjective	M	masculine
ADV	adverb	NIPH	Niphal
ATTR	attributive	P	plural
C	common	PASS	passive
COHORT	cohortative	PF	perfect
CONJ/conj	conjunction	PRED	predicative
CST	construct	PREP/prep	preposition
DEF. ART.	definite article	PRON/pron	pronoun
demonstr	demonstrative	PTCP	participle
F	feminine	S	singular
HIPH	Hiphil	SUBST	substantive
HITH	Hithpael	SX	suffix
HOPH	Hophal	w/	with
IMPF	imperfect	WAYY	wayyiqtol
IMPV	imperative		

NOTE: All verse numbers in this volume refer to the Hebrew text; when the English verse numbering differs, it is listed in brackets following the Hebrew numbering.



GENESIS 1:1–5

THE FIRST ACTS OF CREATION



The Bible begins at the beginning—with the creation of the world. Repeated readings of this powerful text, especially in its original language, yield new meanings and possibilities. The text is at once bold and enigmatic. Some of the terminology requires explanation far beyond what a single term in translation can convey, while in other cases the declarations are simple and profound and stand without comment: “Let there be light!”



1a

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים

*bārēšit bārā' 'ēlohîm***In the beginning, God created**

1b

אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

*'et haššāmayim wə'et hā'āreš.***the heavens and the earth.**

1a

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים

In the beginning, God created

בְּרֵאשִׁית	in beginning of/ when . . . began	CST W/ PREP בְּ	noun
רֵאשִׁית	<i>bā·rē'·šit</i>		
בָּרָא	(he) created	QAL PF 3MS	verb
בָּרָא	<i>bā·rā'</i>		
אֱלֹהִים	God	ABS	noun
אֱלֹהִים	<i>'ē·lō·hîm</i>		

בְּרֵאשִׁית has most frequently been translated “In the beginning,” and indeed there is reasonable evidence supporting the accuracy of this translation. Others have opted to read the preposition בְּ here as temporal: “When God began . . .” This translation draws attention to the fact that the grammar in Hebrew doesn’t quite say “in *the* beginning” (presumably בְּרֵאשִׁית in Hebrew). All translations are inherently interpretations; theological affirmation clearly plays a role in one’s interpretative process here, as God’s status as creator *ex nihilo* would be strongly affirmed by “In the beginning . . .” but left open to question with “When God began . . .” In the latter rendering, the text describes not the very first spark of time before which there was nothing—notice the (potentially) physical elements

already there in v. 2—but rather a moment when God began creating a particular set of things. Even so, the creation of what we understand as time itself (in the form of light and dark, the sun and other celestial bodies) occurs later, in vv. 3–5, 14–19, so one need not fear losing all elements of the *ex nihilo* theology either way.

The first two words of Genesis, בְּרָאָה and בְּרָאָה, involve wordplay—both begin with the same three letters in Hebrew (*bet, resh, aleph*)—and the first seven words of Scripture form a pleasing poetic balance:

bərēšit bārā’ ʾēlohīm
’ēt haššāmayim wə’ēt hā’āreš

The verb בָּרָא appears for the most part to be a special term related to divine action, describing only God’s own acts of creating; both humans and God can עָשָׂה (“make, do, act”), יָצַר (“fashion, mold”), and בָּנָה (“build”), but only God can בָּרָא. The language of God as “creator” (using this verb בָּרָא) plays a prominent role in Isa 40–55, where the prophet encourages his community to remember that the same God who created them can create new things in their world.

The term for “God” here in Gen 1, אֱלֹהִים, is at once a generic term for a deity (formed on the common Semitic base word for “deity,” אֵל), yet also with a flourish—the plural ending ים. . . What does the plural mean? Some attribute the form to Israel’s God’s status above and beyond every other (i.e., the “plural of majesty”), and Christians will obviously see a hint at multiplicity within divine unity (the Trinity). Notice also the first-person plural address uttered by אֱלֹהִים in 1:26 and 11:7.

1b	אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ:		
	the heavens and the earth.		
	אֵת (direct object marker)	---	particle
	אֵת <i>’ēt</i>		
	הַשָּׁמַיִם the heavens/skies/ air above	ABS W/ DEF. ART.	noun
	שָׁמַיִם <i>haš·šā·mayim</i>		
	וְאֵת and (+ direct object marker)	---	particle
	אֵת <i>wə·’ēt</i>	W/ CONJ ׀	
	הָאָרֶץ the earth/land below	ABS	noun
	אָרֶץ <i>hā·’ā·reš</i>	W/ DEF. ART.	

The paired terminology for “heavens” (שָׁמַיִם) and “earth” (אֲרֶץ) here and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible describes what is high and low, the totality of things—not necessarily a Christian conception of “heaven” as an otherworldly place. שָׁמַיִם can describe the place where birds fly and the place where God is; אֲרֶץ can describe the land on which one stands or even the underworld as a place where the dead rest.



2a

וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ
wəhā'āreṣ hāyətā tōhū wāvōhū

And the earth was all chaos and chaotic,

2b

וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם
wəhōšek 'al-pənê tēhôm

with darkness over the face of the sea,

2c

וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:
wəru'ah 'ēlōhîm mərəḥefet 'al-pənê hammāyim.

and the breath of God rippled across the face of the waters.



2a

וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ

And the earth was all chaos and chaotic,

וְהָאָרֶץ	now/and the earth	ABS	noun
אָרֶץ	<i>wə·hā·'ā·reṣ</i>	W/ CONJ ׀ + DEF. ART.	
הָיְתָה	(it) was	QAL PF 3FS	verb
הִיא	<i>hā·yā·tā</i>		
תֹהוּ	wasteland/chaos/void	ABS	noun
תְהוֹ	<i>tō·hū</i>		
וָבֹהוּ	and wasteland/ chaos/void	ABS W/ CONJ ׀	noun
בֹהוּ	<i>wā·vō·hū</i>		

Mystery surrounds the state of the uncreated אָרֶץ. The term תֹהוּ, rendered here as “chaos,” elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible describes a wasteland (Deut 32:10), something that is useless or unprofitable (1 Sam 12:21), and that which makes justice go astray (Isa 29:21). The word paired with it, וָבֹהוּ, rendered here as “chaotic,” appears only one other time—in Jer 4:23, perhaps quoting Gen 1:2—and it is probably not an independent term

with its own meaning but rather a wordplay on תהו. Common translations, such as “formless and void,” do not capture the fact that בְּהוּ plays off the word תהו, while others, such as Robert Alter’s elegant “welter and waste,” capture the sound repetition nicely (see Alter 1997:3). “Chaos and chaotic” may also convey the idea that what the text describes is not technically “nothing”; rather, we have a spirit or wind from God, darkness, and a saltwater sea (תְּהוֹם, on which see below).

2b וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם			
with darkness over the face of the sea,			
וְחֹשֶׁךְ	and darkness	ABS	noun
חֹשֶׁךְ	<i>wə·hō·šek</i>	W/ CONJ ך	
עַל-	over/upon/above	---	prep
עַל	<i>ʿal-</i>		
פְּנֵי	face/surface of	CST	noun
פְּנֵה	<i>pə·nê</i>		
תְּהוֹם	sea/saltwater/deep	ABS	noun
תְּהוֹם	<i>tə·hôm</i>		

In the Hebrew Bible, the term חֹשֶׁךְ is used with roughly the same range of meaning that “darkness” has in English. Many times, חֹשֶׁךְ indicates the darkness of natural patterns, i.e., the darkness of night that alternates with the day, or even the darkness of night invoked by divine punishment (e.g., Exod 10:15; Ezek 32:8). At other points, חֹשֶׁךְ takes on a physical, personified quality, as in 2 Sam 22:12: “He [God] set חֹשֶׁךְ around him as a canopy . . .” In most cases, darkness is quite undesirable—it is a place where prisoners sit (Isa 42:7) and where people go to be forgotten (Isa 45:7), and it is a spiritual or intellectual state where people lack guidance (Mic 3:6; Eccl 2:13).

פְּנֵי (in construct, פְּנֵי) idiomatically refers to a “surface,” though its primary (bodily) reference is to the human face.

תְּהוֹם is at once a technical term for a saltwater sea (as opposed to a freshwater lake, stream, and so on) and a broader indication of the waters of the “deep” that is, waters that are presumed to be far underground, welling up as though from the core of the earth (e.g., Gen 7:11; Deut 8:7). In the Semitic Akkadian language of the Babylonian creation story called Enuma Elish (perhaps composed roughly during the same time period in which the book of Genesis took written form), one of the primary characters is named “Tiamat,” which is the Akkadian term for “saltwater

sea” that is equivalent to Hebrew תְּהוֹם. In that story, Tiamat threatens the cosmic order, forcing a conflict with another deity (Marduk), who must defeat her with gruesome acts of violence. We could read the invocation of תְּהוֹם here in Genesis as a direct challenge to the Babylonian myth: the very next verse indicates that God dismisses the chaos of the uncreated disorder with mere words. No battle. No opposition. No other gods.

2c וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:			
and the breath of God rippled across the face of the waters.			
וְרוּחַ	and wind/spirit/breath of	CST	noun
רוּחַ	<i>wə·rû·ah</i>	W/ CONJ ך	
אֱלֹהִים	God	ABS	noun
אֱלֹהִים	<i>‘ē·lō·hîm</i>		
מְרַחֶפֶת	hovered/fluttered/flushed	PIEL PTCP FS	verb
רָחַף	<i>mə·ra·ḥe·fet</i>		
עַל-	over/upon/above	---	prep
עַל	<i>‘al-</i>		
פְּנֵי	(the) face/surface of	CST	noun
פְּנֵה	<i>pə·nê</i>		
הַמַּיִם:	the waters	ABS	noun
מַיִם	<i>ham·māyim</i>	W/ DEF. ART.	

The “breath” or “spirit” of God, רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים (also referred to as רוּחַ יְהוָה in some contexts), is a creative, powerful force in the Old Testament—inspiring dream interpretation (Gen 41:38), warfare (repeatedly in Judges), art/design (Exod 31:3), prophecy and visions (Ezek 11:5), and more. Here at the beginning of creation, this divine breath, spirit, or wind “ripples,” “flashes,” or “hovers” over the water. The verb רָחַף (at the base of the unique form מְרַחֶפֶת) is quite rare in the Bible; in its two other appearances (Deut 32:11; Jer 23:9), this verb describes the way a mother eagle will “hover over” (or perhaps “rustle up”?) her young, and the way a person’s bones might “shake” or “quiver” when the person is in a state of being totally dismayed or even drunk. As a physical image, one might think of being out on a boat in the middle of a lake or out on the open ocean, feeling a breeze—perhaps frighteningly strong, perhaps gentle—rippling through one’s clothes and across the water. Here the common term for “water,” מַיִם, could be read as poetically interchangeable with תְּהוֹם in the previous clause.



3a

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים
wayyō'mer 'ēlōhîm

And God said,

3b

יְהִי אֹר
yəhî 'ôr

“Let there be light!”

3c

וַיְהִי־אֹר:
wayahî-'ôr.

—and there was light.

4a

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב
wayyar' 'ēlōhîm 'et-hā'ôr kî-tôv

And God saw the light, that it was good,

4b

וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ:
wayyavdēl 'ēlōhîm bēn hā'ôr ûvên haḥōšek.

and God divided between the light and the darkness.

5a

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים | לְאֹר יוֹם
wayyiqrā' 'ēlōhîm lā'ôr yôm

And God called the light “Day,”

5b

וּלְחֹשֶׁךְ קָרָא לַיְלָה
walahōšek qarā' lāylā

and the darkness he called “Night.”

5c

וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב
wayəhî-'erev

And it was evening,

5d

וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר

wayəhî-vôqer

and it was morning,

5e

יוֹם אֶחָד׃

yôm 'ehād.

day one.



3a

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים

And God said,

וַיֹּאמֶר and (he) said
אמר *way·yô·mer*

QAL WAYY 3MS

verb

אֱלֹהִים God
אֱלֹהִים *ě·lô·hîm*

ABS

noun

3b

יְהִי אֹר

“Let there be light!”

יְהִי let there be/may (it) be
היה *yə·hî*

QAL JUSS 3MS

verb

אֹר light
אֹר *’ôr*

ABS

noun

The succinctness of this first divine proclamation is loaded with meaning: God’s creative acts are unopposed, quick, and simple. Indeed, readers of Hebrew can see that in the original language the first command is only two words (comprising three syllables total); whereas in English the standard rendition, followed here, is four words (comprising four syllables). A more idiomatic translation such as “Light—now!” or “Let’s have light!” would better capture the brevity. That said, the English rendering “let there be” for יְהִי, which continues throughout this first chapter for God’s

creative pronouncements, offers the archaic and dignified feel of a king making a decree.

3c	וַיְהִי־אֹר:		
—and there was light.			
וַיְהִי־ הִיה	and there was <i>wa·yā·hî-</i>	QAL WAYY 3MS	verb
:אֹר: אֹר	light <i>'ôr</i>	ABS	noun

The result of creation follows the command with equal brevity. The distance on the page between **וַיְהִי אֹר** and **וַיְהִי־אֹר** speaks volumes: nothing intervenes between God's pronouncement and its accomplishment. The presence of the darkness and the potential for an allusion to Babylonian mythology in the word **הַחֹשֶׁךְ** has set up at least the possibility that a battle could follow—perhaps early listeners to a passage like this in biblical Israel might have expected just such a battle, based on other ancient creation stories. None occurs.

4a	וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב		
And God saw the light, that it was good,			
וַיֵּרָא ראה	and (he) saw <i>way·yar'</i>	QAL WAYY 3MS	verb
אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהִים	God <i>‘ē·lō·hîm</i>	ABS	noun
אֶת־ את	(direct object marker) <i>'et-</i>	---	particle
הָאֹר אֹר	the light <i>hā·'ôr</i>	ABS W/ DEF. ART.	noun
כִּי־ כִּי	that/for/because/since <i>kî-</i>	---	conj
טוֹב טוֹב	good/pleasant <i>tôv</i>	MS PRED	adj

Genesis 1 repeats this pattern of God’s seeing (ראה) followed by the proclamation of goodness (טוב). In English, “good” is a rather broad term; the usage of טוב in Hebrew is similar, as טוב can indicate health, physical attractiveness, positive emotional or spiritual impressions, or upright behavior. Note that Gen 1 does not include a term opposite to טוב, such as רע/רעה (“bad, evil”). The first sense that anything is other than טוב occurs in 2:9, with the presence of the “tree of ורע טוב [good and evil],” and in 2:18, where God declares that it is “not good [לא־טוב] that the man should be alone.”

4b וַיִּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ:			
and God divided between the light and the darkness.			
וַיִּבְדֵּל	and (he) divided/separated	HIPH WAYY 3MS	verb
בדל	<i>way·yav·dēl</i>		
אֱלֹהִים	God	ABS	noun
אֱלֹהִים	<i>‘ē·lō·hîm</i>		
בֵּין	between	---	prep
בֵּין	<i>bēn</i>		
הָאֹר	the light	ABS	noun
אֹר	<i>hā·’ôr</i>	W/ DEF. ART.	
וּבֵין	and between	---	prep
בֵּין	<i>û·vên</i>	W/ CONJ ׀	
הַחֹשֶׁךְ:	the darkness	ABS	noun
חֹשֶׁךְ	<i>ha·ḥō·šek</i>	W/ DEF. ART.	

The verb בדל is common in texts dealing with priestly and ritual concerns, often indicating the separation that should occur between opposed concepts, such as clean and unclean or holy and unholy (e.g., Lev 10:10; Ezek 22:26), and divisions between groups of people (Num 8:14; Neh 9:2). Here, “night” and “day” are both named and then the text moves on without any comment on the superiority of either natural state.

5a

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים | לְאוֹר יוֹם

And God called the light “Day,”

וַיִּקְרָא	and (he) called/named	QAL WAYY 3MS	verb
קרא	<i>way·yiq·rā'</i>		
אֱלֹהִים	God	ABS	noun
אֱלֹהִים	<i>‘ē·lō·hîm</i>		
לְאוֹר	to the light	ABS W/ PREP לְ + DEF. ART.	noun
אור	<i>lā·‘ôr</i>		
יוֹם	day	ABS	noun
יוֹם	<i>yôm</i>		

יוֹם most frequently indicates a single or specific day (e.g., “the third day,” “on this very day,” etc.), especially when paired with a number. In the plural, יוֹם can indicate many days or even years. In this clause, יוֹם describes what seems to be the concept of a “day” as opposed to “night,” which is mentioned in the next clause.

5b

וַלְחֹשֶׁךְ קָרָא לַיְלָה

and the darkness he called “Night.”

וַלְחֹשֶׁךְ	and to the darkness	ABS W/ CONJ וְ + PREP לְ + DEF. ART.	noun
חֹשֶׁךְ	<i>wə·la·hō·šek</i>		
קָרָא	he called/named	QAL PF 3MS	verb
קרא	<i>qā·rā'</i>		
לַיְלָה	night	ABS	noun
לַיְלָה	<i>lāy·lā</i>		

5c

וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב

And it was evening,

וַיְהִי־	and it was	QAL WAYY 3MS	verb
היה	<i>wa·yō·hî-</i>		
עֶרֶב	evening/dusk	ABS	noun
עֶרֶב	<i>‘e·rev</i>		


The sequence of evening first, and then morning, may have some significance—though readers are left to guess what that might be. In some areas of the world (e.g., in many parts of the West), the day “begins” with the morning and ends in the evening, while Jewish tradition (based on this verse) considers a day to begin and end at sunset. The author seems unconcerned with the question of how “day” and “night” or “evening” and “morning” would have any significance without the sun to mark that passing on earth.


5d	וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר			
	and it was morning,			
	וַיְהִי־ הִיה	and it was <i>wa·yô·hî-</i>	QAL WAYY 3MS	verb
	בֹּקֶר בֹּקֶר	morning/dawn <i>vô·qer</i>	ABS	noun

5e	יּוֹם אֶחָד:			
	day one.			
	יּוֹם יּוֹם	day <i>yôm</i>	ABS	noun
	:אֶחָד: אֶחָד	one <i>’e·hād</i>	ABS	cardinal number




As you meditate on this passage and contemplate how you might teach or preach it to others, consider the following areas of emphasis.

 **Historical and Literary Context.** When thinking about the broader historical and literary context, you might find it helpful to read some of the other creation stories that circulated in ancient Israel. Although doing so may seem counterintuitive, this can be a fascinating way of considering how the biblical account challenged other, competing stories in its historical context—and also how it might challenge us today in a world of confusing and competing narratives about life and its meaning. For example, try reading the Babylonian “Enuma Elish” story, or an Egyptian narrative such as the “Memphite” creation story (both are available in several translations through simple searches online). What themes and plot points do you notice in these other stories? For example, in Enuma Elish, stunning violence and a titanic struggle precede the creation event, and humans are created as an afterthought out of the blood of a dead rebel god—to serve as slaves. How might an early Israelite audience have experienced the narrative of Gen 1 compared to a story like this? Readers might also notice that the Bible has other creation stories, too, some of which emphasize different themes from the ones present in Gen 1 (e.g., note the images of violence associated with creation in Ps 74 and Job 26). Ancient Israelites apparently had many images with which to think about the mystery and grandeur of God’s creation; why does the Bible begin, then, exactly with the imagery found in Gen 1?

 **Bridge to the Gospel.** As a bridge to the preaching of the gospel in the New Testament, notice the repetition of the word “good” in Gen 1. Our word “gospel” derives ultimately from the Greek term *euangelion*, “good news” or “happy proclamation.” Sin and human corruption are of course also prominent themes we will find in Gen 1–11, not to mention throughout the Bible. Why begin exactly this way, with this proclamation of the fundamental goodness of creation? Notice also the way that the opening of John 1 quotes (in Greek) the Bible’s first phrase, “in the beginning,” and later in John (ch. 20) and in Acts 2 God’s spirit or wind (compare with God’s רִיחַ, “spirit” or “breath” or “wind,” in Gen 1:2) changes Jesus’ disciples forever.

Some significant Hebrew words in Gen 1 to consider for deeper exploration could include ברא, “create,” a verb only used to describe God’s creative activity, and the often-repeated terms for “light” (אור), “darkness” (חֹשֶׁךְ), “day” (יוֹם), and “night” (לַיְלָה). Compare, for example, with the way the poet in Ps 139 uses these terms in an intimate manner to speak of personal creation.

 **Illustrations.** As we think about how to illustrate the themes of Gen 1 with more contemporary literature, we might consider a poem like T. S. Eliot’s famous *Four Quartets* and its meditation on how the past and future are woven together. In Isa 40–55, the prophet repeatedly uses the language of creation to talk about *new* creation—specifically, the way God will recreate Israel as a new nation after their painful experience in exile. In the story of the Passover in Exod 12, God tells the Hebrew slaves that they are to reorient time itself, declaring the day of their freedom to be the first day of the year. And at the Bible’s conclusion, in the book of Revelation, the language of the Garden of Eden comes back with full force: the tree of life returns, and humans are invited back to the place they once called home. These biblical invocations of creation demand that we always ask: What is God creating in my community today? How can I recognize and affirm God’s creative movements in my own life and in the lives of those around me? In film, consider watching Terrence Malick’s 2011 *The Tree of Life* and exploring not only the experimental imagery used to show creation but also the dual themes of “law” and “grace” set alongside these creation themes.