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SEMANTICS AND THE SEMANTICS OF הָרָה:
A REJOINDER TO THE ARGUMENTS ADVANCED
BY B. BECKING AND M. KORPEL
SEMANTICS AND THE SEMANTICS OF ברא: A REJOINDER TO THE ARGUMENTS ADVANCED BY B. BECKING AND M. KORPEL

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In The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures in the winter of 2010 Bob Becking and Marjo Korpel (BK) published a response\(^1\) to Ellen van Wolde’s analysis of בָּרָא in Genesis 1:1–2:4a meaning “to spatially separate” instead of “to create.”\(^2\) The present article discusses questions of semantics, BK’s criticisms, and their proposal to read בָּרָא as “to construct.”\(^3\)

1. SOME DIFFICULTIES IN THE COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF בָּרָא “TO CREATE”

The common understanding of the verb בָּרָא “to create” is more problematic than is often thought. There are a series of problems.

(1) The first is the lexical problem that the Piel form of the verb בָּרָא clearly refers to “cutting” in Josh 17:15, 18, and Ezek 21:24. The question, then, is: How does this verb’s Piel meaning of “to cut” relate to its Qal meaning “to create”? Most Biblical Hebrew dictionaries solve this problem by distinguishing two or three homonymous roots: בָּרָא I “to create” (Qal and Niphal), בָּרָא II “to consume food” (Hiphil), בָּרָא III “to cut, clear” (Piel), and some of them follow Gesenius’ 1835 Thesaurus and 1883 Handwörterbuch in

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\(^{1}\) B. Becking and M. C. A. Korpel, “To Create, to Separate or to Construct: An Alternative for a Recent Proposal as to the Interpretation of בָּרָא in Gen 1:1–2:4a,” JHS 10 (2010), article 3.

\(^{2}\) E. J. van Wolde, Reframing Biblical Studies: When Language and Text Meet Culture, Cognition and Context (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 184–200; “Why the Verb בָּרָא Does Not Mean ‘To Create’ in Genesis 1.1–2.4a,” JOT 34.1 (2009), 1–21. BK refer incorrectly throughout their article to Van Wolde, “Why the Verb בָּרָא Does Not Mean ‘To Create’ in Genesis 1,” whereas the correct title is “…in Genesis 1.1–2.4a.”

\(^{3}\) The first, synchronic part of this article (sections 1-5) is written by Ellen van Wolde, the second, diachronic part (section 6) by Robert Rezetko. Together they take responsibility for the entire article.
his hypothesis of a historical semantic development of the root from “to separate, divide” to “to create.”

(2) Another problem has been noticed and presented by Hendrik Brongers, as follows. In the traditional theological view, the fact that God is the only subject of the verb יָשָׁע in the Hebrew Bible has led to the conclusion that this exclusive relation to God is the verb’s most defining feature. And to express God’s unique creative act at the very beginning, his wonderful creation of something completely new. If this were true, Brongers argues, one has to explain why in Genesis 1:1–2:4a the verb יָשָׁע is not used as a distinguishing activity for God, since the verb יָשָׁע appears even more prominently in the description of God’s creative activities than the verb יָשָׁע does in Genesis 1:1–2:3. In addition, those who take יָשָׁע to designate an exclusive idea of creation have to explain why sometimes, for example, in v. 21 (“God יָשָׁע the big Tanninîm”) and v. 25 (“God יָשָׁע the wild animals of the earth”), or in v. 26 (“let us יָשָׁע human beings”) and v. 27 (“God יָשָׁע the human beings”), the verbs are used interchangeably. The same is true for Gen 5:1;; 6:7;; Isa 43:7;; 45:12;; and Amos 4:13. Numerous also are biblical texts in which the verb יָשָׁע is used in a meaning with no reference whatsoever to what is commonly called creatio prima: Exod 34:10;; Num 16:30;; Isa 45:7;; 48:6-7;; 57:19;; 57:17-18;; Jer 31:22;; and Ps 51:12. And Brongers concludes: “All these occurrences can be understood as a proof that יָשָׁע has a much less exclusive meaning than is commonly assumed. It is true that יָשָׁע always has יְהוָה or Elohim as its subject and that it never occurs with an accusative of material. Yet the fact that the verb is repeatedly mentioned in one breath with verbs like יָשָׁע and יָשָׁע and the fact that it is used in contexts in which the verb יָשָׁע could have been used,

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4 See KB/HALAT: יָשָׁע I “schaffen” (Qal and Ni.); יָשָׁע II “mästen” (Hi.); יָשָׁע III “abholzen” (Pi.); יָשָׁע IV = יָשָׁע I “essen,” יָשָׁע II denom. of יָשָׁע (1 Sam 17:8). HALOT: יָשָׁע I “create” (Qal and Ni.); יָשָׁע II “make oneself fat” (Hi.); יָשָׁע III “cut down, clear” (Pi.); יָשָׁע IV = יָשָׁע I “consume food;” יָשָׁע II denom. of יָשָׁע (1 Sam 17:8). Gesenius’ 18.Auflage: יָשָׁע I “schaffen” (Qal and Ni.); יָשָׁע II “mästen” (Hi.); יָשָׁע III “zurechtschneiden” (Pi.); יָשָׁע IV = יָשָׁע I “essen,” יָשָׁע II denom. of יָשָׁע (1 Sam 17:8). THWAT (W. H. Schmidt) יָשָׁע I “schaffen” (Qal and Ni.); יָשָׁע II “mästen” (Hi.); יָשָׁע III “abstrauen” (Pi.). DCH: יָשָׁע I “create” (Qal and Ni.); יָשָׁע II “be fat, fatten” (Hi, perh. Ni. Ps 104:30); יָשָׁע III “cut, cut down, cut out” (Pi.); יָשָׁע IV “eat” = יָשָׁע I. NIDOTTE (R. C. Van Leeuwen): יָשָׁע I “create, separate (as by cutting)” (Qal); “be created” (Ni.); יָשָׁע III “cut” (Pi.). For Gesenius’ views and literature, see BK, 3, nn. 4–6.


6 Brongers, De scheppingstradities, 14.
cause that one should be very careful drawing too far-reaching conclusions.

(3) In addition to these reservations expressed by Hendrik Brongers in 1945, we can say that the common understanding that the verb אָרָה is exclusively used with God as subject, is only true for the Qal forms but not for the Piel and Hiphil forms. And, of course, it is also logically incorrect to deduce from the premise “God is the only subject of the verb אָרָה in the Hebrew Bible” that this exclusive relation to God is the verb’s most defining feature. Although אָרָה does not appear with the mention of material out of which something is created, it is regularly collocated with verbs that do. “More significantly, brš’in is used of entities that come out of preexisting material: e.g., a new generation of animals or humans, or ‘a pure heart’ (Ps 104:29-30; 102:18[19]; 51:10[12]).” In addition, S. Lee has shown convincingly in his survey of the 48 occurrences of אָרָה in the Hebrew Bible that the concept of novelty has been wrongly connected with this verb.

(4) Another point is that if אָרָה were the exclusive term for the creation of the heaven and the earth one might wonder why in Exodus 20 the Sabbath is twice defined in relation to God’s creation of the heaven and the earth, in which God’s creation is resumed by אָרָה and not שׁבַּת. A similar question might be posed with regard to Gen 14:19, 22 where God is twice mentioned as “the creator of heaven and earth” (אֱלֹהִים בָּרָהנְךָ שָׁמַיִם וְאָרֶץ), in which not אָרָה but שָׁבַת is used to designate God as the creator of heaven and earth.

(5) Not only does Genesis 1:1–2:4a contain seven times the verb אָרָה and seven times the verb שָׁבַת to express divine actions of making, also outside this text the verb שָׁבַת is often used to describe creation. God is in the Hebrew Bible called both אָרָה, traditionally translated “creator,” and שָׁבַת, traditionally translated “maker,” and Mark S. Smith points to the usage of the verb שָׁבַת

7 Brongers, De scheppingstradities, 15–16 (translated from the Dutch).
9 S. Lee, “Power Not Novelty: The Connotations of אָרָה in the Hebrew Bible,” A. G. Auld (ed.), Understanding Poets and Prophets: Essays in Honour of George Wishart Anderson (JSOTS, 152; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 199–212 (211): “As a result, we may now draw the final conclusion that a consistent understanding of the verb אָרָה does not point definitively to the connotations of YHWH’s sovereign power and control.”
10 The same is true for Deut 32:6, Ps 139:13, and Prov 8:22 where God is called the creator, again with the noun מִלְכוֹת.
11 In Gen 3:1; Pss 95:5; 100:3; 119:73; Prov 8:26; Job 9:9; 31:15; and Neh 9:6.
12 אָרָה: Isa 40:28; 42:5; 43:15; 45:7, 18; 57:19; 65:17, 18 (x2); Qoh 12:1.
for the Israelite deity that is reflected in the Hebrew personal names Asael, Asayah, and Yaasiel, all denoting “God made/created.”

(1)–(5) Based on these distributional linguistic data, one can raise the question whether the often presupposed distinctive features of בָּרָא have been well defined; they necessitate a new examination.

(6) Apart from these linguistic questions, there are some textual problems with the common understanding of “to create” as well. The first problem regards Gen 1:1. When v. 1 is understood as a summary of the events described in vv. 6-10, a position taken by most biblical scholars, what is the consequence for the meaning of בָּרָא in v. 1? Since vv. 6-10 describe God’s actions with regard to the heaven and the earth as both making (עשָה) and dividing (בלל Hiphil), the verb בָּרָא in v. 1 should signify at least both “to create” and “to divide.” A related question is how we can understand the difference in meaning between the verbs בָּרָא, עָשָׁה, בָּלָל, and בָּלָל.

(7) Still another textual problem is Gen 1:21, commonly translated “God created the great sea monsters, and all the living creatures of every kind…and all the winged birds of every kind.” However the previous verse showed that the sea monsters were already present, and not made by God (cf. also Isa 51:9-10; Ps 74:13-14; 148:7, texts that entail the same notion of pre-existent sea monsters). So, if the sea monsters were already present, how then could the verb בָּרָא in v. 21 indicate that God creates these animals?

(8) In Num 16:30 the word combination בָּרָא בָּרָא cannot possibly express “create creation.” “And Moses said: ‘If these men die as all men do, it was not YHWH who sent me. But if YHWH creates creation בָּרָא Qal + noun בָּרָא and the ground opens its mouth, and swallows them up, and they go down alive into Sheol, you shall know that these men have despised YHWH.” How is YHWH’s creation related to the opening of the ground? (For the explanation of Num 16:30 with בָּרָא meaning “to separate,” see below.)

(9) Also in Exod 34:10 the verb בָּרָא Qal is difficult to understand in its sense of “to create” (see commentaries). God offers his covenant to Moses: “I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will do wonders that have not been בָּרָא נַעַשׁ on all the earth or in any nation.” Two possibilities have been suggested by biblical scholars: either בָּרָא is used synonymously with נַעַשׁ, both expressing “making,” or the two verbs express different meanings. (For the explanation of Exod 34:10 with בָּרָא meaning “to separate,” see below.)

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13 M. S. Smith, The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 224, n. 61.
(10) Another well-known text in which the verb בורא Qal is difficult to understand in its sense of “to create” is Isa 45:6–7: “I am the former (-BEGIN) of light and the creator (בורא) of darkness. I am the maker (ת EFFER) of good and the creator (بورא) of evil.” Did God create darkness? If a reference to Genesis 1 is presupposed in Isaiah 45, this would be impossible, as in Genesis 1 darkness is pre-existent. And did God create evil, at least according to Isaiah 45? (See below for an analysis.)

(1)–(10) These linguistic and textual questions gave rise to renewed linguistic, textual, and comparative research of the verb בורא in Genesis 1:1–2:4a.14

The main problem hovering in the background of such a study is, how can Biblical Hebrew linguists and biblical scholars make a verifiable or falsifiable semantic analysis of Hebrew words in general and of the word בורא in particular? Semantic questions in biblical scholarship have been resolved within the field of ancient or classical Hebrew itself and/or in relation to cognate Semitic languages, often with considerable results. Yet in the last half century general linguistics has greatly developed. At the beginning of the 20th century structural linguistics arose in Europe, while in the fifties American linguists started to develop generative linguistics. Both are autonomous or context-independent linguistic approaches that intend to explain universal innate patterns in language. The last quarter of the 20th century showed a growing interest and expertise in culture, cognition, and context dependent linguistics.15 Should not the latter linguistic approaches to semantics be more fully appreciated in modern biblical studies, especially because they are not aimed at universal structures, but at specific time- and place-related language usages? At least it is our idea that Biblical Hebrew semantics can greatly profit from such linguistic approaches. The following example might help to illustrate the difference a new approach can make to biblical semantics.

2. A SEMANTIC DETOUR: COGNITIVE CROSS-LINGUISTIC STUDIES OF VERBS EXPRESSING “SEPARATION-EVENTS”

Recently linguists examined languages in 28 typologically and genetically diverse languages from all over the world including all kinds of words used to express the events that involve a “separation in the material integrity of an object/unit.” The results of these studies were published in Cognitive Linguistics 18.2 (2007) and Cognition 109 (2008). For example, in English separation events are ex-

14 Van Wolde, Reframing Biblical Studies, 184–200; “Why the Verb.”
15 For a survey of developments in cognitive linguistics see Van Wolde, Reframing Biblical Studies, 29–33.
pressed by verbs such as break, cut, clip, carve, chop, deal, hack, half, saw, slash, slice, split, tear, cut off, cut down, clear out. All these verbs, not only in English but also in other languages, construe the process of separation in distinct ways.

In many languages verbs designating the temporal process of separation include the instrument; thus in English cut entails a knife, clip a pair of scissors, saw a saw; so, with these languages one can construe the cutting-event as a tool-related action. Compare, for example, the difference between English, German, French, Italian, and Spanish “cut hair” and Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, and Dutch that express the hairdresser’s activity as “clip hair.” One might wonder whether these differences in language reflect distinct (historical) habits in hairstyling.

In some languages (but not in others) verbs designating the temporal process of separation include the surface or space; e.g., English clear in “The forests were being cleared (from trees).” In some languages, the verbs that designate the temporal process of separation include energetic movement as in English chop. In some languages the semantic category of agentivity plays an important role.16

Most languages know the distinction between reversible and non-reversible separation events.17 Consider, for example, the distinction in English between reversible separation such as “opening a teapot” and “pulling apart paper cups” and verbs expressing non-reversible separation such as “chopping a carrot” or “tearing a robe.”

Languages differ in whether information about the state-change (the separation) is typically located in a single verb, as in the English verbs cut, clear, and chop, or is spread out across a number of constituents such as additional verbs, affixes or particles. For example, in English the beginning or inchoative state is included in the verb break off.

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16 Ameka and Essegbey describe the African language Ewe in which the category of agentivity is determinative. They distinguish four classes: highly agentive verbs (dzá “slash,” si “cut,” kpa “carve”), agentive verbs (tso “cut,” së “cut”), non-agentive verbs (lâ “snap off,” dze “split”), and highly non-agentive verbs (î “tear,” and others). The highly agentive verbs describe events involving agents only and, therefore, do not occur in the intransitive, while agentive verbs express separations that occur spontaneously. On the other hand, highly non-agentive verbs do not lexicalize agents at all. Non-agentive verbs can describe separations that require an instrument. See F. K. Ameka and J. Essegbey, “Cut and Break Verbs in Ewe and the Causative Alternation Construction,” Cognitive Linguistics 18.2 (2007), 241–50.

Even the semantic categories of very closely related languages appeared not to be the same. Asifa Majid, Marianne Gullberg, Mi-riam van Staden, and Melissa Bowerman present an extensive analysis of four closely related Germanic languages, namely English, German, Dutch, and Swedish. One and the same approach for the synchronic comparison of word meaning in these languages demonstrates that even though these languages are closely related, there are differences in the number of categories, their exact boundaries, and the relationships of the terms to one another.

Consider the cognate verbs break (English), brechen (German), breken (Dutch), and bräcka (Swedish). English break is indifferent to how the effect was brought about, and it is also used to describe the destruction of a wide variety of objects, such as sticks, ropes, plates, and yarn. Brechen, breken, and bräcka, in contrast, all pick out a much more circumscribed set of events. German brechen and Dutch broken are used primarily for breaking long thin things by hand, i.e. snapping events. Swedish bräcka, on the other hand, is a rare verb used mainly for separating or cracking brittle, two-dimensional objects. The semantic category picked out by German brechen and Dutch broken exists in Swedish also, but it is not associated with the cognate term bräcka, but rather with an entirely different verb, bryta.

In sum, language users construe the same events in distinct ways. The language the native speakers are using enables them to express their experiences, perceptions, and ideas in accordance with a number of culture- and context-bound categories. In order to understand the semantic values of lexical terms, linguists have to take into account these categories, their exact boundaries, and the relationships of the terms to one another—all of which are to be analyzed in their own specific contexts of use.

We will compare these modern semantic insights to biblical semantic studies of the verb שבע and to BK’s semantic discussion and will signal a series of inadequacies in these biblical semantic approaches.

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19 In English there are two large clusters of terms, one to designate breaking events, the other to designate cutting events. In German, however, there are three large clusters: a large breaking cluster, a cutting cluster, and a separate tearing cluster. Dutch has four distinct clusters: breaking, tearing, cutting-with-a-single-blade, and cutting-with-scissors. Swedish has five clusters for categorizing cutting and breaking events: a large breaking cluster, snapping, cutting-with-a-single-blade, cutting-with-scissors, and tearing. See Majid, Gullberg, Van Staden, and Bowerman, “How Similar are Semantic Categories.”
3. Differences Between Earlier Semantic Studies of the Verb הָבָּר “Separate” and Van Wolde’s Proposal

3.1 Biblical Studies that Consider the Possibility of meaning “to Separate”

In modern biblical scholarship the following authors have suggested that the meaning of the verb הָבָּר is “to cut,” “to separate,” or “to divide.” Wilhelm Gesenius was the first and he set the tone by explaining that the verb הָבָּר signifies “to separate, cut, tailor, make as a sculptor” and from there “to produce, make” and, finally, “to create.” Samuel Driver took the next step: “The root signifies to cut (see, in the intensive conjug., Josh. xvii. 15, 18; Ez. xxiii. 47): so probably the proper meaning of הָבָּר is to fashion by cutting, to shape.”

Hendrik Brongers paid extensive attention to Genesis 1:1–2:3; however, he did not describe the meaning of the verb הָבָּר as such, but the concept of creation in Genesis 1:1–2:3, including all verbs and verses. In his view, in this text creation entails separation or division: “God’s creative activity can best be described as ‘arrangement.’”

Johannes van der Ploeg argued that to cut a stone, wood, bones, implies that one gives it a new form, in a sense a new life. That is why, in his opinion, it does not come as a surprise that in Hebrew the terms הָבָּר Qal “to create” and הָבָּר Piel “to cut” are combined. The idea of cutting, modeling, forming gave (according to Gesenius’ views and literature, see BK, 3, nn. 4–6.


Brongers, De scheppingstradities, 16–18.


Van der Ploeg, “Le sens du verbe,” 151: “Nous avons vu que chez plusieurs peuples l’idée de «couper» a plusieurs fois donné naissance à une généalogie sématique qui a abouti au sens de «créer». En taillant la pierre, le bois, l’os, on lui donne une forme nouvelle, et d’une certaine façon un être nouveau. Il n’est donc point étonnant de voir se rejoindre en hébreu הָבָּר (qal) = créer, et הָבָּר (pî’el) = couper, découper. On peut en conclure que l’élément bar a primitivement signifié couper.”
ing to Van der Ploeg) birth to בָּרָא’s highest meaning: production out of nothing. Therefore, בָּרָא Qal expresses: creatio ex nihilo.25

Émile Dantinne offered the most extensive analysis of the verb בָּרָא, starting from the difficulty that in five biblical texts the meaning “to create” is less certain. In three of them, Josh 17:15 and 18 and Ezek 23:47, the verb clearly signifies “to cut.”26 “Pour exprimer l'idée de créer, même, peut-être, ex nihilo, les anciens Hébreux ont employé un mot auquel s'associe la notion de séparer, si souvent formulée explicitement dans le récit de la Création. בָּרָא’, c'est « séparer, couper, tailler, produire en taillant, comme un sculpteur », de là, « fabriquer, faire », et, finalement, « créer ».”27

The difference between Enuma Elish and Genesis is, according to Dantinne, that Genesis speaks of creatio ex nihilo, whereas Enuma Elish speaks of Marduk’s division out of chaos; hence, in Genesis 1 the word בָּרָא has evolved from separation to creatio ex nihilo.28

Karl-Heinz Bernhardt follows Dantinne in that he considers the verb בָּרָא’s fundamental meaning to be “to separate,”29 yet in

25 Van der Ploeg, “Le sens du verbe,” 153, 155, 157: “L'idée de couper, modeler, former, a donné naissance à celle de créer dans son plus haut sens de productio ex nihilo, et cela se comprend, car « former » est une idée plus universelle que « bâtir » et plus spirituelle, ou plus métaphysique, si l'on veut, que procréer….Lorsque Jahvé créa quelque chose sans qu'il y eût d'objet ou de matière préexistante, il la créa nécessairement ex nihilo….Il est vrai que dans plusieurs textes le verbe bārā' est employé promiscue avec בָּשֵׁש, לַעֲשָׁה, etc. Mais il ne s'ensuit pas que bārā' avait donc ce fondamentalement le même sens. Le parallélisme poétique exigeait souvent l'usage de plusieurs mots à la fois, et la tendance sémitique à la verbosité faisait le reste. Dans toute production, quelque chose de nouveau reçoit l'être. Quand Jahvé produit quelque chose, il le fait d'une façon proportionnée à sa toute-puissance, et si besoin est, il la tire du néant. C'est le sens du verbe בָּרָא.”

26 É. Dantinne, “Création et séparation,” Le Muséon 74 (1961), 441–51 (447): “La connexion de la racine בָּרָא avec l'idée de séparer n'est pas seulement prouvée par son emploi, au pl él, avec le sens de couper, dans Jos., xvi, 15 et 18, ainsi que dans Ez., xxiii, 47. Il y en a d'autres indices: 1) L'existence, en hébreu, en plus de בָּרָא, d'autres racines comprenant les consonnes ב et ר, avec des dérivés évoquant les idées de couper, de découper, de partager, de traverser….2) La même racine, ou des racines apparentées, exprimant la notion de séparation dans d'autres langes sémitiques.”

27 Dantinne, “Création et séparation,” 446.


his following study of the textual occurrences of בָּרָא in the Hebrew Bible, he argues that its meaning is restricted to describing God’s creative actions. Claus Westermann also bases his view of בָּרָא on Dantinne. Although the title of Paul Beauchamp’s 1969 study of Genesis 1, Création et séparation, might suggest the idea that he shares the view that the verb בָּרָא signifies “to separate,” he actually relates the concept of separation to the verb בָּלָל only, and not to בָּרָא, as well as to the seven-day structure and the story composition.

Van Leeuwen is critical with respect to common biblical theological explanations of the term בָּרָא. He concludes that “OT בָּר’ (pi.) is predicated of humans, but in q. and ni. its subject or implicit agent is always God. While the pi. signifies (resultative) ‘cut’ exclusively, the q. signifies ‘create’ with the exception of Num 16:30, ‘cut.’ Consequently, the semantic development from ‘cut’ to ‘create’ described by Claus Westermann (99, after F. Delitzsch and others) is a natural one. By ‘cutting,’ a particular shape is given to an object that, as it were, comes into being.”

We took so much time and space to describe previous scholarship in order to demonstrate that all biblical scholars who considered the verb בָּרָא to mean “to separate, cut, or divide” subsequently understand this process of separation in one way only, namely as “to cut a particular shape,” “to fashion by cutting,” “to shape,” or “to create.” The metaphorical imagery that prevails in


31 C. Westermann, Genesis 1: Teilband 1: Genesis 1–11 (BKAT 1/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1974).

32 Van Leeuwen, “בר,” 731: “In the past, biblical theologians, eager to discover theological significance in individual words, have overloaded בָּר’, create, with semantic freight in three respects. First, it was commonly emphasized that this vb. is predicated only of Israel’s god as subject; second, that בָּר’ never appears with explicit mention of material out of which something has been ‘created’; third, that בָּר’ was a uniquely nonmetaphorical, nonanthropomorphic vb. for creation, since it was predicated only of Israel’s god. Upon these linguistic foundations theological arguments concerning the uniqueness and incomparability of Yahweh’s creative activity were erected. These points (and theological pronouncements founded upon them) are, however, somewhat misleading.”

these views is that of a sculptor: God, who like a Michelangelo, sculptures the universe.

The above described cognitive cross-linguistic studies (section 2) elucidate a serious semantic shortcoming in these biblical semantic studies that all limit the idea of [SEPARATION] or [CUTTING] to separation in the sense of [FASHIONING] or [PRODUCTION]. That is to say, these scholars take it for granted that אבר expresses a first stage in a conceptual process that starts with cutting and ends with creation. This explains why the scholars in earlier times (e.g., Van der Ploeg, Dantinne) kept on trying to keep this meaning of אבר in line with the notion of creatio ex nihilo. Although this approach disappeared in later literature (e.g., Westermann, Van Leeuwen), scholars nevertheless associated the concept of separation with “the making of.” Yet, from a linguistic point of view, the idea that separation should be understood as fashioning is only one of the possibilities. The question is, therefore, in what way does the verb אבר construe the process of separation in Biblical Hebrew?

3.2 The verb אבר and its expression of the process of separation

The only way to answer this question is to start with a semantic analysis of the clearest usages of the verb אבר in the Hebrew Bible and analyze the texts with an open mind.

(1)–(5) The texts that are most clear are the Piel usages of the verb אבר in Joshua 17 and Ezekiel 21 and 23. The Piel of אבר expresses in Josh 17:15, 18 not “to cut down trees,” but “to make an empty space by cutting down trees.” Ezekiel 21:24 contains the verb אבר twice to designate “to cut out a spot.” Ezekiel 23:47 evokes “to cut down” adulteresses, to clear the place of them. The Piel or intensive form of אבר thus figures in a spatial domain and

34 BK, 3, wrongly refer to the Piel use of אבר in Isa 17:15; they mean, of course, Josh 17:15.

35 Joshua 17:15: “‘If you are a numerous people,’ Joshua answered them, ‘go up to the forest country and clear (אבר) an area for yourselves there, in the territory of the Perizzites and the Rephaim, seeing that you are cramped in the hill country of Ephraim.’” Joshua 17:17-18: “But Joshua declared to the House of Joseph, to Ephraim and Manasseh: ‘You are indeed a numerous people, possessed of great strength; you shall not have one allotment only. The hill country shall be yours as well; true, it is forest land, but you will clear it (אבר) and possess it to its farthest limits.’” Ezekiel 21:24: “The word of YHWH came to me: ‘And you, O mortal, choose two roads on which the sword of the king of Babylon may advance, both issuing from the same country; and cut out (אבר) a spot; at the head/top of the road to the city cut out (אבר) a spot.’” Ezekiel 23:46-47: “For thus said YHWH God: ‘Summon an assembly against them, and make them an object of horror and plunder. Let the assembly pelt them with stones and cut them down (אבר) with their swords; let them kill their sons and daughters, and burn down their homes.’”
designates the temporal process of [SEPARATION IN THE SPATIAL INTEGRITY OF A UNIT IN ORDER TO MAKE SPACE] in which the act itself is marked as intensive, i.e. “cutting” or “clearing” violently.

(6) Another text with a clear usage of אָבַר Qal “to cut,” “to separate” is Num 16:30. Here it is followed by the accusative noun בִּשׁוֹעַ, “something separated.” Humbert, Milgrom, and Van Leeuwen translate it as “chasm.” In Num 16:30 אָבַר Qal is used in reference to YHWH to indicate that he is performing the action subsequently specified by the ground’s opening of the mouth, including notions such as lips that spread out, a throat that swallows up without any previous chewing, so that the men who despised YHWH go down alive into Sheol. Hence, the collocation בִּשׁוֹעַ designates a spatial separation. YHWH distances himself from these men, by sending them into the underground, where they have to stay apart from the Israelites.

(7)–(13) Van Wolde studied the seven occurrences of the verb אָבַר in Genesis 1:1–2:4a. Her conclusions are that Gen 1:1 describes the very first act that God separates or sets apart the heaven(s) and the earth; that Gen 1:27a (twice אָבַר) does not express God’s creation of the human being, but that God is setting the human being apart, on a place spatially distant from him, namely on earth; that Gen 1:27b indicates that God separates the human being into two sexes, each connected with its own life sphere; that in Gen 2:3 God, after having finished the six creation days, sets the seventh day apart from the other six days, and declares it holy; and that, finally, Gen 2:4a resumes the story with “These are the begettings of the heaven and the earth in their being separated,” thus forming an inclusio with Gen 1:1. Thus, the setting apart of the spatial domains and their inhabitants is considered to be crucial for the understanding of Genesis 1:1–2:4a, and as important as the creation of the inhabitants of these spatial realms and as the temporal arrangement in a week (six days plus Sabbath).

Based on these thirteen occurrences, the following hypothesis with regard to the verb אָבַר Qal has been formulated: the verb אָבַר Qal functions in the cognitive domain of space and designates the

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36 Numbers 16:30: “And Moses said: ‘If these men die as all men do, it was not YHWH who sent me. But if YHWH makes a separation (אָבַר Qal + noun בִּשׁוֹעַ) and the ground opens its mouth, and swallows them up, and they go down alive into Sheol, you shall know that these men have despised YHWH.’”


38 Van Wolde, Reframing Biblical Studies, 184–200; “Why the Verb.”
temporal process of [SEPARATION IN THE SPATIAL INTEGRITY OF A UNIT IN ORDER TO SET OBJECTS OR PHENOMENA APART, TO SET THEM AT A DISTANCE, OR TO MAKE SPACE WITHIN THE SPATIAL UNIT], which is shortened into [SEPARATION IN THE MATERIAL OR SPATIAL INTEGRITY OF A UNIT]. Whereas the intensive form or Piel of בָּרָה expresses that this act is performed intensively or even violently, or with an instrument that requires force or violence, the Qal form of בָּרָה expresses this temporal process neither intensively nor violently. The latter can, dependent on the context of use, be translated “to divide, separate, set apart, disconnect.” The translation “to differentiate” is not recommended because it entails more abstract notions such as “distinguishing, making a distinction between.”

Above, two other texts were mentioned that create difficulties when the word is understood to designate “to create,” namely Exod 34:10 and Isa 40:21-26. These texts will be reconsidered in the light of this new hypothesis.

In Exod 34:10 God offers his covenant to Moses: “I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will work wonders that have not been set apart on all the earth or in any nation.” Starting from the view that each word construes an event in its own way, the two verbs לְעָשָׁהּ and בָּרָה are considered to express distinct meanings. Exodus 34:10-16 describes the two sides of the covenant: a positive side, the loyalty between God and Israel, and a negative side, the attitude towards the other nations, who are to be driven out. The positive side is described in v. 10 as מִלְאָם “wonders.” These amazing deeds of Israel’s God vis-à-vis Israel set the Israelites apart from the other nations. Obviously, wonders are unifying them as much as they are dividing them from the other people. This is what is described in v. 10: the making of the wonders and the disjunctive effect with regard to other nations. Hence, the approximate translation: “I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will work wonders that have not been set apart on all the earth or in any nation.” This view is confirmed by the idea of covenant, נְעָה רְחֵית. It might be compared with the pre-Islamic Arabic understanding of covenant, which stresses both the loyalty to the deity as well as the disjunction and distance to the people excluded from the covenant, and so also the biblical covenant can be conceived of as both binding and separating: the people of Israel are closely connected to their deity and separated from the other nations and their deities. These two sides are exactly described in Exod 34:10-16.

Another text is Isa 40:21-22, 26 where in v. 26 the verb בָּרָה Qal figures in the larger metaphorical context of the making of the heaven and the earth. Verses 21-22 describe how God founded (סָסָה) the earth, spread out (טָשָׁע) the heavens like a veil, stretched out the heavens like a tent to dwell in. It shows God as the one who is enthroned above the vault of the earth from where he can see the inhabitants as grasshoppers, so large is the distance between heaven and earth. This distance prefigures the difference in his
power (vv. 23-24: he brings potentates to naught; makes rulers on earth as nothing) and his incomparability (v. 25). This entire image is concluded in v. 26 “Lift high your eyes and see: Who separated the heavens?” This verse does not merely describe “the making of these things,” since this has been metaphorically conceived as the founding of the earth and as the spreading out of the heavens. Reference is made to the distance between the two cosmological realms in analogy to the distance in power between God above and human beings below and is expressed by בָּרָא, “Lift up your eyes and see: Who separated these?”

Comparable also is Isa 4:5: “YHWH will בָּרָא Qal ‘spread out’ a cloud over the whole shrine and meeting place of Mount Zion” (cf. Ps 105:39 and Job 26:9 where the same concept of “spreading out a cloud” is expressed by the verb מֵרָא). Futato showed that the word בָּרָא designates cloud mass, cloud cover, or undifferentiated cloud and often includes the notion of extent or expanse.39 The verb בָּרָא designates this spreading out (imagine someone who spreads out his or her arms) of a blanket of clouds. Here again a spatial notion is entailed, in which בָּרָא denotes a temporal process that starts with unity and proceeds to extensiveness. This use of the verb with regard to the spreading out of the heavens occurs more often in Isaiah, namely in Isa 42:5: “Thus said the deity YHWH who separated (בָּרָא) the heavens and spread them out, who beat out (מָשְׁאַר) the earth and what brings it forth.” Notice here the plural suffix used for the heavens, and in contrast the beating out of the earth which is construed with the singular. This use of בָּרָא meaning “spreading out” can also be compared to the use in the Akkadian text The Dream of Lugalbanda (line 333), which describes how Lugalbanda made a bed: “He spread out, bàra, a linen sheet.”40 Another text in Isaiah, Isa 45:16-18, can be understood similarly. Here God, designated בָּרָא אֲלַלָּלי, is described as the one “who spread out/set apart the heavens (בָּרָא), who formed the earth and made it, who established/founded it. He did not set it (the earth) apart (בָּרָא) tohú, but formed it for habitation.”

In short, the novelty of Van Wolde’s proposal is to understand the verb בָּרָא Qal “to separate” within the cognitive domain of space. It is considered to be a spatial concept, not a concept that figures in the domain of construction. Also new with respect to previous scholarship is that she does not consider the verb בָּרָא to express the first step in a process that necessarily ends up with

creation. And different from other biblical scholars she has not limited her explanation of the verb אָרַב to v. 1 of Genesis 1 only, but is (to the best of her knowledge) the first scholar to apply this spatial view of אָרַב to Gen 1:21, 27; 2:3-4.

4. OTHER SEMANTIC QUESTIONS: PREPOSITIONS, COGNATE LANGUAGES, PARALLELISM, AND METAPHORS

4.1 Verbs and Prepositions

So far we discussed a first inadequacy in the biblical semantic approaches to the verb אָרַב, namely the idea that separation can be understood in one way only, namely “to fashion by cutting.” A second semantic shortcoming is noticeable in BK’s remarks in section 4.1 and regards the collocation of verbs of separation with the preposition מִן “from, out of.”

A Hebrew verb with the meaning “to separate” requires at least one preposition, like מִן or מִ, as can be observed with the verb גָּבַהוּ. It could be argued that there are texts where a preposition is not required. However, this is the case only when כָּל is used in the meaning of “to select.” Otherwise “separate” has to be taken as “split, cleave.” (BK, 7)

In the spatial domain, events involving a [SEPARATION IN THE MATERIAL OR SPATIAL INTEGRITY OF A UNIT] are expressed in Biblical Hebrew by verbs that express “to separate” or “to cut” in distinct ways. The following four verbs are most used: בָּשָׂל (x42), בָּשֵׂע (x51), בָּטַל (x56), מָדַר (x27) (numbers DCH). The verb בָּשְׂע is always used without a preposition; the verb בָּטַל is often used with the preposition מִ מ “into,” but is also used without a preposition. The verb בָּשָׂל is mainly used with the preposition מִ “between,” but also with the prepositions מִ מ “into,” מ “in,” and מ מ “from.”

Let us first look more carefully at one of these four verbs, namely the verb מָדַר. It occurs 27 times in the Hebrew Bible, of which 9 times are with the preposition מ, 4 times with the preposition מ, and 12 times without a preposition. Each of these usages are, of course, to be studied extensively within the spatial and metaphorical conceptualization of the text. Thus, מָדַר is used with מ in Gen 2:10 in a geographical domain to describe the river that branches out from Eden, whereas in Gen 10:5, 32 it is used in the ethnic domain to describe the people who separate themselves from other people, and in Judg 4:11 it is used in the human domain to describe someone who separates himself from another. Each of these four texts expresses a distinct spatial mental image, that might or might not differ from the mental image expressed by מָדַר with the preposition מ, especially when two parties are involved. This is, for example, the case in Ruth 1:17. Interestingly, the verb מָדַר is also often used without a preposition, e.g., in 2 Sam 2:23 where Saul
and Jonathan: “never parted in life or in death,” in Gen 30:40 where Jacob “separated the sheep,” or in Hos 4:14 where daughters-in-law “separated” (“turn aside” NJPSV). Other occurrences of רבוד without a preposition are Deut 32:8; Pss 22:15; 92:10; Prov 16:28; 17:9; 18:1; 19:4; and Job 4:11; 41:9.

Another example of a “separation verb” that figures in various collocations, is the verb הֵתָר. It is used six times with מִן, five times with לָא, once with לְשׁוֹנ, and six times without a preposition.

Therefore, one cannot automatically conclude that in order to express the concept of [SEPARATION], a verb necessarily should be collocated with the preposition מִן “from”; it all depends on the way the act of separation is construed. BK have reached conclusions on the basis of far too insufficient research.

This second semantic shortcoming can be summarized as follows. To make assertions about collocations, an analysis of complete data sets is a first condition to be met. In fact, what is needed is a complete semantic analysis of the lexical fields of “cut” and “separate” in a way similar to the earlier described linguistic studies and to lexical semantic studies such as those presented by Malul and Zanella.41 Such an analysis would not only include the four most used verbs of separation, but all others too.42 To be included are profound linguistic studies of prepositions, and the way they construe the spatial environment. A similar linguistic analysis is needed for words that express “making, creation, shape, form, fashion,” in short “words of creation.” And, finally, a profound study of fixed word combinations, such as collocations with prepositions, is necessary. It is time for biblical scholarship not to draw linguistic conclusions on hap-snap reference to biblical texts and on semantic assumptions that are not valid anymore in modern linguistic research.

4.2 Cognate Languages and Texts in Cognate Languages

A third semantic shortcoming in BK’s discussion is visible in their discussion of Sumerian and Babylonian languages and texts.

The Sumerian Song of the Hoe contains the following line: “and not only did he [=Enlil] hasten to separate heaven from earth.” In this text the adverbial case marker “ta” (in “ki-ta”) indicates the ablative with the separating force, hence


42 In addition to the four Hebrew verbs of separation mentioned above, the full study would have to look also at: כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר, כות, גור, גואר, צו, גואר.
“from.” A comparable feature is present in the late bilingual text from Uruk: “…Utu, when the heavens were made distant from the earth.” In the late Babylonian version the preposition itti, “from,” is used. In the other texts that Van Wolde refers to, prepositions or an ablative are present. These remarks imply that the Mesopotamian concept of origin can be labelled as “separating A from B,” which is different from “differentiating into A and B”—as Ellen van Wolde assumes for Genesis 1, and therefore are of no use as comparative material in an argument on the interpretation of Genesis 1. (BK, 8–9)

First of all, Van Wolde’s view is that the verb הָרָא labels [SEPARATION IN THE SPATIAL INTEGRITY OF A UNIT] and BK’s idea of differentiation does not fully cover that view. Second, BK presuppose, according to this explanation, that cognate languages use comparable grammatical constructions. The earlier described cross-linguistic studies of terms of “cutting” and “breaking” have demonstrated that this is an incorrect assumption. Languages construe events in different ways. Even words that are etymologically related (e.g., English break, German brechen, Dutch breken, and Swedish bräcka) can be used in completely different grammatical constructions and can have known different semantic evolutions. Thus an English text containing the verb “break” is translated in Swedish not with bräcka but by another term that covers the idea of English “break” best. Thus the Sumerian and Akkadian texts that open their creation stories with the beginning of the universe use the term bād and parāsu respectively to designate the separation of the heaven and the earth,43 whereas Gen 1:1 uses the term הָרָא to express the very same notion of separation because in Biblical Hebrew this term covers the idea of “breaking open a unity, separating, setting apart” best. Similarly, the Samaritan Hymn IV 13, discussed below, expresses the notion of separation as “God נֶפֶשׁ ‘spreads out’ and makes מָכַט ‘space’ between the waters of the tehom and the heavenly vault.” And the very same concept is designated by the verb הָרָא in Isa 42:5, “Thus said the deity YHWH who separated the heavens and spread them out,” and in Isa 45:16-18, “who set the heavens apart/spread out the heavens.” And this is exactly what is expressed in Gen 1:1 by the verb הָרָא, “to separate, set apart, make space.”

An example of differences in grammatical constructions of cognate languages is the following. In English one could say “clear off” in a clause such as “he cleared off the biggest trees,” but also in a (rude) command to someone, meaning that this person should leave. In both cases, a plot is freed from the presence of something (“trees”) or someone (“you”). This grammatical collocation is not the same in cognate languages such as French, Dutch, or German.

43 See Van Wolde, “Why the Verb.”
BK compare grammatical constructions of verbs of separation in Sumerian and Akkadian and conclude from these constructions that Biblical Hebrew should have used the same grammatical constructs to express the same idea of separation. Their lack of proper semantic reasoning is amazing.

4.3 Participle and Parallelism

BK, 9, are right in their critique that the participle ברא of בָּרָא is used as an abstract noun to describe God. They are also right that Van Wolde depended in her view on Florentino García Martínez. This does not mean, of course, that the noun בָּרָא expresses “creator.” It still depends on the semantic analysis what meaning should be attached to this nominalized participle. BK choose to support their view in relation to Isa 45:7: “I am the former (תָּמִיץ) of light and בָּרָא of darkness. I am the maker (творה) of good and בָּרָא of evil.”

First, if a reference to Genesis 1 is presupposed in Isaiah 45, the meaning of בָּרָא “create” would be impossible, since in Genesis 1 God did not create darkness, but made light and separated this light from the pre-existent darkness. Analogously Isa 45:7 would describe that darkness and evil did already exist, but that God formed light and set it apart from pre-existent darkness, that he made good and set it apart from pre-existent evil. The participle בָּרָא would then express this spatial divine action as a durative activity.

The main argument BK offer to support their view is that of parallelism:

It is quite clear that בָּרָא is paralleled here by the verb תועה and תוער indicating that the three verbs are part of the same semantic field and that their meaning is interconnected. (BK, 9)

The fact that words belong to the same semantic field, does not imply that they express the same or an interconnected meaning. On the contrary, words that figure in one semantic field construct events—that are referentially related—in different ways. In other words, a semantic domain is the collection of words that refer to an event or to events that are related in reality or in the thought of reality, yet the way these words conceptualize this event or these events can be completely different. The use of the notion of parallelism in biblical scholarship bears the risk of mixing sense with reference. Say the words תוער, בָּרָא, and תועה all belong to the se-

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44 BK translate the first person forms in Isa 45:7 incorrectly with third person forms. They translate: “He who forms light and creates darkness, who makes peace and creates evil.”

45 It is difficult to understand how BK’s own proposal of בָּרָא meaning “to construct” would fit Isa 45:7: “I am the former of light and the constructor of darkness? I am the maker of good and the constructor of evil?”
mantic field of “creation.” The events referred to are those of “making something new that did not exist before.” Words conceptualize these events in different frameworks of thinking, in various metaphorical complexes. Thus can conceive of this event as “a completely new making of” in a general non-metaphorical framework of thinking. The verb conceives of the creation event as “the forming out of pre-existing material,” within the pottery framework. The verb conceptualizes the creation of the earth as the founding or setting on pillars, whereas the verb conceptualizes the creation of the heavens as the spreading out of an expanse (similar to that of a tent). And the verb conceptualizes the act of creation in terms of spatial separation, as the setting apart of phenomena. Consequently, the particular nuances of meaning and the semantic overlap and difference between the various words in a semantic domain ask for a much more nuanced view than that offered by BK. The danger of the concept of parallelism is that one brings the meanings of the paralleled terms a priori into one line. One considers the meanings of paralleled terms to be interconnected and thus misses the variation in metaphorical constructions of meaning.

A full discussion of all texts in which occurs in the Hebrew Bible falls outside the scope of this response article. Too often BK’s textual explanations on pages 11–13 reflect the same—in our view—wrong semantic assumptions in regard to parallelism, the idea of semantic domain, the fact that they do not take into account metaphorical frameworks of thinking, etc. It is time now to discuss BK’s own hypothesis. Before doing so, however, an excursus on the etymology of the verb is offered, since etymological arguments are often used in the discussion—also by BK—to support the view that means “to create” (or using BK’s terminology: “to construct”).

5. EXCURSUS: ETYMOLOGY OF THE VERB

5.1 BK’s Etymological Detour

BK base their criticism of Van Wolde’s proposal partly on etymology. In particular, their etymological argumentation is grounded on (1) Arabic and (2) Greek.

(1) With regard to Arabic, they state:

It has been recognized meanwhile that the Arabic root br`, “to create” is probably an Aramaic (or Hebrew?) loanword which was confused early on with Arabic brw/bry “to cut off, form by cutting.”

In Classical Arabic the phonetic difference between various forms of these verbs is slight and in unvocalized

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46 In BK, 5, n. 12 they refer only to A. Jeffery, The Foreign Vocabulary in the Qur’an, 75–76, published in 1938.
texts invisible. Already the early Arabic lexicographers noticed the confusion of the two roots. Because the existence of the Hebrew root הָרָב <brw/y, “to cut in half,” may be assumed on the basis of the well-known idiom הָרָב יִרְבּוּ בְּרֵי, literally “to cut a covenant,” and the noun יִרְבּוּ “covenant, treaty, contract,” it seems likely that a similar confusion has taken place in the few places where הָרָב Piel occurs. There are more examples of this type of confusion of the weak consonants נ and ה at the end of verbal forms. (BK, 5)

From an etymological perspective one can hardly call this solid argumentation, for the following reasons.

(a) BK assume a possible confusion of the weak consonants נ and ה in Hebrew that caused the confusion in Arabic. However, there is another possibility to consider, namely that the Arabic brw/bry “to cut off, form by cutting” is based on Hebrew סְרָבָּה.

(b) In classical Arabic there is indeed a small phonetic distinction between br’ and brw/bry, but in unvocalized texts the difference between the two is visible in imperfect verb forms. Only in perfect forms the two forms cannot be distinguished.

(c) BK fail to notice that in Arabic the word bar’a expresses “to be liberated, i.e. separated,” ‘abra’a “to separate,” barà “to tailor, cut.” Actually, recent studies of the Arabic root br’ have shown a more complex picture than that offered by the few older dictionaries consulted by BK. Joas Wagemakers shows that in pre-Islamic Arabic the root br’ is mainly used in contexts of distancing and liberation. In an extensive study of the Arabic term

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47 To substantiate their claim they refer in BK, 5, n. 13 to three old Arabic-English/French dictionaries: E. W. Lane (1863); R. Blanchère (1967); J. Penrice (original 1873, reprinted in 1976) (cf. BK, 5, n. 13, for bibliographical references).

48 BK offer without any arguments the same solution, that is the confusion of the weak consonants נ and ה, as a “likely explanation” of the difference in meaning between Hebrew סְרָבָּה Qal and Piel.

49 In practice, of course, manuscripts can be difficult to read and, because of handwriting or transmission problems, these forms may not always be easily detectable.


51 See, for instance, the use of the term br’ in the concept al-walā’ wa-l-barā’t, roughly translatable as “loyalty and disavowal,” in which one shows loyalty to other members in their own group, while disavowing
barā’a in Quranic passages, Uri Rubin demonstrates that barā’a is a proclamation of the unilateral repudiation of all the treaties which Muhammad signed with former allies. The word barā’a itself expresses disconnection and is used to describe that Muhammad has to state publicly that he no longer has a connection with those tribes that had helped him before to defeat the enemy. In contrast, in Quranic passages that relate to creation, the standard expression for “to create” is kh-l-q, a word which expresses “to divide, apportion” or “to create.” In Classical Arabic dictionaries the verb barā’ is translated “separate,” whereas the verb bara’a is commonly understood to express “to create, to form out of nothing,” in which the understanding of Gen 1:1 as creatio ex nihilo seems to have exerted its influence. The nouns bāri’ and khāliq are used in the Quran to designate “the creator.”

(d) Also in the Quran we find images of the creation of the heavens and the earth that fit the “separation” idea of Gen 1:1, namely Sura 21, verse 30. Pickthall translates this passage as follows: “Have not those who disbelieve known that the heavens and the earth were of one piece, then We parted them, and We made every living thing of water? Will they not then believe?” The Quran translation by Arberry presents most clearly the antonymous word pair that lies at the heart of this verse: “Have not the unbelievers then beheld that the heavens and the earth were a mass all sewn up, and then We unstitched them and of water [We] fashioned every living thing? Will they not believe?” The Arabic word ratqan, the noun derived from the verb rataqa “to sew,” is used here as an antonym of fataqa “to separate, take apart, unsow,” and is rendered by Arberry as “unstitched” (Fa-fataqānāhumā, “we have them both unstitched”). In this metaphor, the heaven and earth were first of one piece, then the tailor-God unstitched or unsowed it into pieces, and fashioned of water every living thing.

(e) In BK’s reference to more recent studies of South-Arabic dialects that would confirm Gesenius-Buhl’s thesis that several

outsiders. The first concept is expressed by wly, “to be loyal to,” the second concept is expressed by br’, “to distance, disavow” (Wagemakers, “Transformation of a Radical Concept,” 81–83). “Central to al-Maqdisi’s (i.e. Salafist) ideology is the concept of al-walā’ wa-l-barā’, which refers to the complete loyalty (walā’ or muwālāt) that Muslims should show to God, Islam, and other Muslims, while expressing disavowal (barā’) of and staying away from everything else” (Wagemakers, “Defining the Enemy,” 351). On the origins of al-walā’ wa-l-barā’, see Kohlberg, “Barā’a in Shi’i Doctrine.”

Rubin, “Barā’a: A Study.”


South-Arabic dialects know the root *br*, “to build, make, give birth,” it becomes apparent from BK, 6, n. 16 that this is only partially true, “The Mehrite and Soqotrite verbs Buhl adduced for the meaning of ‘to give birth,’ however, are nowadays seen as derivatives of the root *brw/bry* ‘to cut off, separate.’”  

(f) BK fail to mention other cognate Semitic languages that clearly oppose their position (see below).

(g) David Cohen, who has dealt extensively with etymology, is disqualified without much ado. Is this because he attributes to לזר the meaning “to cut, tailor, separate”? In sum, BK’s etymological argumentation with regard to Arabic appears to be biased and their references to relevant literature are highly selective.

(2) The second element in BK’s etymological argumentation regards the relationship between Biblical Hebrew and Septuagintal Greek.

In any case, it is significant that the Old Greek translation of the HB (LXX) mostly chooses κτιζων, “to found, build” which only secondarily means “to create,” as its rendering of לזר Qal. (BK, 6)

Very recently, Michael O’Connor wrote on the Septuagint and the verbs used to express creation in Ben Sira. He explains that the common word for “to create” in the Septuagint is κτιζω; it is used 60 times. The Greek version of Ben Sira contains this verb κτιζω 23 times, and in 15 cases the Hebrew text is extant. In these 15 texts, 6 times κτιζω represents the Hebrew verb לזר “to divide, apportion.” In his semantic analysis of the usages of לזר in Ben Sira, O’Connor demonstrates that this verb is used both in the sense of “to divide, division, portion” (Ben Sira 14:9 [x3]; 16:16; 33:13; 41:21; 42:3; 45:22) and in the sense of “to create” (Ben Sira 31:13; 38:1; 39:25; 40:1). These results allow him to conclude that the Septuagint’s κτιζω expresses either “to divide, apportion” or “to create.” So, BK’s conclusion with regard to Greek is much less certain than suggested.

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55 Cohen mentions also South-Arabic *ḥbrw* “tailler en pièces” and Ethiopian *bārdīw belā* “être dispersé, se dissoudre” (D. Cohen, *Dictionnaire des racines sémitiques ou attestées dans les langue sémitiques: Fascicule 2: TN - GLGL* [Louvain: Peeters, 1994], 82).

56 BK, 5–6, n. 15: Cohen “appears to be confused by the previous discussion. On extremely flimsy evidence he too attributes to *BR* the meaning ‘couper, tailler, séparer.’ As a matter of fact, Cohen knows that his reference to Punic *br* is dubious, but proposes it nevertheless.”

5.2 Etymological Studies and בָּרָד

Various etymological studies of Hebrew בָּרָד have been made that offer valuable information. Samson Hirsch is one of the first to mention the notion of “leaving a unity” that lies at the heart of all cognate terms בָּרָד, בָּר, בָּרֲד, בָּרַד, מִבָּר, מִבָּרֲד, מִבָּרַד. 58 G. Johannes Botterweck describes the root br and its etymological development from the hypothetical and rarely attested origin of “making of noise” into the widely attested meaning of “to form” and “to separate.” 59 Émile Dantinne presents a great number of Hebrew verbs—אֲבָר, אֶבָּר, אָבָר, בָּר, בָּרָד, בָּרַד, מִבָּר, מֵבָּרֲד, מַבָּרֲד, מֵבָּרַד—in which the biconsonantal items בָּר and מֵבָּר express the notion of cutting or separating. 60

Cohen’s Dictionnaire des racines sémitiques, The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, Von Soden’s Akkadisches Handwörterbuch, and The Concise Dictionary of Akkadian indicate that the biconsonantal item br (and pr) expresses in Akkadian the notion of separation: bāri means “between, among,” barītu(m) “intervening space, interval,” bāru “open country,” bēru “distant, remote” (e.g., bēru ina šamē “the linear distance—between stars—in heaven”), bēru(m) “selected,


60 Dantinne, “Création et séparation,” 447.
double hour (i.e. twelfth part of the day),” bēru(m) “to choose, select,” bīri “between,” bīrā “between, among,” bīritu(m) “interval, separation, cutting,” bīrītu “between,” bīru “interval, pause after a march,” and parāsu(m) “cut, separate, decide.”61 The meaning of the verb barû A has evolved in Akkadian into “to look upon, to observe, to look attentively.”62

In contrast, the etymological relation between Hebrew בָּרָע and Akkadian banû is very weak. The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary distinguishes banû A and banû B, and describes banû A as “to build, construct, form,” which is applied to buildings, statues, etc. and with reference to a deity it mainly indicates “to create” in relation to the creation of humankind or of gods, and banû B is described as “to grow, beget.”63 In modern Assyriology it is known for a fact that the traditionally presupposed equivalence between Hebrew בָּרָע and Akkadian banû “to build, beget” is problematic, and should be discarded.64

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62 Malul, Knowledge, Control and Sex, analyses the relation between verbs of separation and their relation to knowledge and seeing in Biblical Hebrew and in Sumerian and Akkadian. He makes an inventory of verbs of separation, such as בָּרָע, בָּר, בָּרַץ, בָּר, בָּרֶץ, בָּרִי, בָּרַי, בָּר, and demonstrates that all of them clearly connote the idea of knowledge one way or the other. The verbs בָּר, בָּרַץ, בָּרַי, and בָּרֶץ also occur in contexts of refining metals, which convey the connotation of separation and removal of the dross, and Malul points to Sumerian and Akkadian equivalents (Malul, Knowledge, Control and Sex, 106, n. 28). “Thus, they reflect a kind of concrete process which, when applied to the process of knowledge, is understood to take place in the abstract sense within one’s mind.…Finally, note also the interesting use of such roots as בָּר, בָּרַץ, בָּרַי, and others, where knowledge is attained by cleaving and breaking and thus bringing to light what has been ‘buried’ somewhere” (Malul, Knowledge, Control and Sex, 144).


64 See S. Anthonioz, L’eau, enjeux politiques et théologiques, de Sumer à la Bible (VTS, 131; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 584: “ Aussi la racine hébraïque בָּר, bēre, a-t-elle été (traditionnellement) posée comme équivalente de l’akkadien banû. De fait, l’équivalence peut être établie sur le plan sémantique à tous ses niveaux, puisque les notion liées de construc-
To conclude, the etymology of אב that BK present falls short. In contrast, a number of etymological studies of אב show that it is very well possible that אב is etymologically related to Akkadian words that express the idea of “division” and “separation.” The usages of pre-Islamic Arabic *br* designating the acts of distancing and disconnection, and the occurrences of the Septuagint’s ἀρμακτιος designating either “to divide, apportion” or “to create” confirm this option, too.

Are there any other linguistic and/or textual witnesses? Yes, there are. First, the Qumran Aramaic fragment of 4QEn 1 VI (= 1 Enoch 13:6–14:16) which contains the line "ליאו הלא עלם בוא א, "So he has divided/decree and made and divided/separated" (translation J. T. Milik). Second, there are the texts of an important group in Hellenistic Judaism, the Samaritans. The texts of the Samaritan liturgy are particularly instructive, because cosmology and the view of God as creator play an important role. God is very often described in these texts as “the creator of the world,” וּבֹרָד הָדוֹלְמָה, and with the collocation פָּעַלּוֹ דָּלֶּמָה. Equally frequent is the expression of the idea that God created everything, וּבֹרָדָה דָּלֶּמָה. In all these Samaritan creation texts, the divine act of creation is expressed either by פָּעַלּוֹ or בָּרוֹד, but never by בָּרִי. Hans-Friedrich Weiss made an analysis of how in Samaritan cosmology two main groups of texts are distinguishable. The first group of texts relate their view of creation to Genesis 1 and understand the creation of the world as God’s battle against the powers of chaos. The second group has its origins in Greek–Hellenistic philosophy. To the former belong, among others, Hymns IV 13 and V 3:

**Hymn IV 13**

**Hymn V 3**

65 The same concept of separation is expressed in Syriac by the verb *barrî* “to separate, liberate,” and by the adverb *bar* “outside” (C. Brockelman, *Lexicon Syriacum* [2nd edition; Hildesheim: Olms, 1966]). So far the verb *bārā* does not occur in Phoenician, nor in Ugaritic (Lambert, “Technical Terminology,” 189).


67 Weiss, *Untersuchungen zur Kosmologie*, 130.

In Hymn V 3 God reveals the dry material by putting the waters of the *tehôm* aside. Hymn IV 13 is even more explicit, and Weiss translates it as follows: “Die Wasser der Tehom hält er zurück, und die Wasser der (Himmels-)Feste hält er hoch. Er hat ausgebreitet (מָקַל) zwischen ihnen einen Raum (טֵן) für die, die ihn lieben.” 69 Cowley explains the meaning of מָקַל in Samaritan texts as follows: “‘...to be or make wide...’ impf. מָקַל...spread open...; imperat. מָקַל spread out...space.’” 70 The metaphoric image presented in Hymn IV 13 is in line with the beginning of Genesis 1 and describes the making of the space between the waters of the *tehôm* and the heavenly vault. And this is exactly what is expressed in Biblical Hebrew by the verb בָּרָא, “to separate, set apart, make space,” in the view of Van Wolde. 71

6. THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF בָּרָא: BK’S ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL

6.1 Summary of BK’s Arguments

On pp. 14–18, 20, BK seek “to address the meaning and significance of בָּרָא from the perspective of a more historical approach” (BK, 14). They argue that God creates with בָּרָא in late texts such as Genesis 1–2 (postexilic Priestly Writer; 1:1–2:4a) and Chronicles (personal name “Beraiah,” בֵּרָאיה; 1 Chr 8:21) in order to avoid anthropomorphism (the attribution of human characteristics to the deity). Older texts have terms such as בָא “to build,” יָצָא “to form, shape,” יָצִיעַ “to make,” and גָּנָה “to beget, bear, create,” words that may connote procreation. Consequently the change in language relates to a theological shift in thinking over time, from older texts that use anthropomorphic language about God to later texts that refer to creation in a way that sharply contrasts God’s activity to human activity. Therefore they also suggest the translation “to construct, build” for בָּרָא rather than “to create” or “to separate.”

BK offer the following items of support for their alternative proposal regarding the meaning of בָּרָא in Gen 1:1–2:4a:

(1) In Israel’s preexilic period cognates of the Hebrew verb בָּרָא are unattested in Semitic languages (e.g., Akkadian, Aramaic, Phoenician, Ugaritic, and also epigraphic Hebrew) which mainly use instead cognates of Hebrew בָּא and גָּנָה in contexts of creation (e.g., Akkadian *banū*, Ugaritic *qny*) (BK, 5–7, 14–15, 17). Although they do not explicitly state that the root בָּרָא was an absolutely late development, speaking instead about a “shift” in meaning or usage

69 Weiss, Untersuchungen zur Kosmologie, 131.
71 Van Wolde, Reframing Biblical Studies, 184–200; “Why the Verb.”
(“semantic/theological shift”) in biblical books dating to the exilic and postexilic periods, an implication of their discussions of the etymology of יִבְנָה and especially the antiquity of old(er) terms such as יַנְּקָה and its cognates in other Semitic languages seems to be that the root יָבֵּן made a relatively late(t) entrance into Biblical Hebrew.

(2) In Biblical Hebrew the verb יָבֵּן is used only in relatively late texts (e.g., Genesis 1:1–2:4a, Deutero-Isaiah) whereas earlier texts have verbs such as יִשָּׁשָׂה, יָבִּין, and יָנָה (e.g., Gen 2:4b-25; 14:19, 22) (BK, 14–18).

(3) The verb יָבֵּן appears nevertheless in several biblical texts (Deut 4:32; Jer 31:22; Amos 4:13) possibly dating to the preexilic period although “the date of each of these texts [=verses]...is disputed” and “[s]cholars have not only expressed doubt about the pre-exilic date of all three texts [=verses] but also advanced a postexilic date” (BK, 16).

(4) The distribution of Israelite personal names supports the lateness of the root יָבֵּן, such that for example the name יָבְנָלֵנָה is found in relatively early texts whereas in a late book like Chronicles we find the name יָבַד (1 Chr 8:21) (BK, 15, n. 60, 17).

(5) The shift in vocabulary from early biblical texts (with יָבֵּן, יִשָּׁשָּה, יָנָה, and יָנָה) to late ones (with יָבֵּן) relates to a change in thought about the concept of creation (BK, 15–20). Thus BK conclude their article with this statement: “In sum and to place our discussion within the general frame of the theological approach of the author of Genesis 1, this text reflects [postexilic] Priestly theology. This is a temple oriented theology. Just as the temple in Jerusalem had been built by human hands, YHWH is imagined as having ‘constructed’ the cosmos as his temple. To avoid an anthropomorphic confusion the verb יָבֵּן was used instead of the verb יָנָה” (BK, 20).

Close scrutiny of each of these points exposes a number of general difficulties with BK’s argumentation. These include incomplete, and therefore misleading, citations of data for the vocabulary of “creation” in Biblical Hebrew; unstated assumptions about the dates of origin of biblical sources and books and their relative chronological relationships to one another; and confident acceptance and assertion of points of view that are disputed among biblical scholars. Related specifically to the second, third, and fourth points, in the following remarks we will demonstrate that the linguistic distribution and opposition of certain verb lexemes and Israelite personal names in the Hebrew Bible do not support BK’s “more historical approach.”
6.2 Critique of BK’s Argument Based on Verb Lexemes

A first significant piece of evidence that BK cite in support of their broader historical argument is the biblical distribution of הָבַּר and other verb lexemes such as הָבֵאת, יִשְׂרָאֵל, and הָבְּנָה. They make the following statements, for example:

It is worth noting that in the HB, the verb הָבַּר is used only in relatively late texts. In an older text such as Gen 14:19, 22, the word הָבְּנָה is used, a verb meaning both “to beget” and “to create.” (BK, 14)

We assume that, gradually, the formula involving the ambiguous verb הָבְּנָה, which might suggest procreation, became obsolete. Against this background, a specification of the meaning of the verb הָבַּר I in the Qal stem emerged in the language. As a result of this specification, the verb הָבַּר I Qal became one to be used exclusively with יְהוָה as grammatical subject. It is difficult to establish a date for the theologically motivated specification of הָבַּר. One may argue for a pre-exilic date for this semantic/theological shift on the grounds of three texts, namely Amos 4:13; Deut 4:32 and Jer 31:22. But the date of each of these texts, is disputed. Scholars have not only expressed doubt about the pre-exilic date of all three texts but also advanced a postexilic date. We cannot embark here in a full discussion on the dating of these texts, but we may note that the specified use of הָבַּר is widely attested in exilic and post-exilic texts, especially in Deutero-Isaiah. (BK, 15–16)

Traces of this shift can be found elsewhere in the HB. Ezekiel 28…Ps 89:13. (BK, 16–17)

In other words, the preference for הָבַּר is a case of a theologically motivated preference for a “neologism,” meant to avoid anthropomorphisms that were also current in Canaan. The only mode of creation attested in the ancient Near East which was eventually rejected in Israel was that of procreation. Therefore, the more theological term הָבַּר was needed, instead of the ambiguous הָבְּנָה. (BK, 17–18)

The following table displays the full distribution in the Hebrew Bible of the verb הָבַּר and also the related verbs הָבֵאת, יִשְׂרָאֵל, and הָבְּנָה, when they have the deity as their subject.²²

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²² A few remarks of explanation: First, a complete study would also have to include the verbs פֹעֶל, עָשָׂה, וּמָלַשׁ, וּסָמָח, וּמָסַר, וּיְדֵו, וּסָמַר, וּמְדַבֵּר, and שְׁמֹנָה, פֹעֶל, עָשָׂה, וּמָלַשׁ, וּסָמָח, וּמָסַר, וּיְדֵו, וּסָמַר, and פֹעֶל, עָשָׂה, וּמָלַשׁ, and שְׁמֹנָה, פֹעֶל, עָשָׂה, וּמָלַשׁ, but their exclusion from the present study does not affect the result. Second, הָבַּר II (Hiphil; 1 Sam 2:29) and הָבַּר III (Piel; Josh 17:15, 18; Ezek 21:24 [x2]; 23:47) are excluded from the table. Third, the designation of J and P verses in the table follows M. Noth, A History of Pentateuchal Traditions (trans. B. W. Anderson; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 17–19, 28–32, 35–36, 262–76. Finally, in all these cases the deity is
the subject, but the objects vary significantly. In this context it is unnecessary to discuss in detail the objects affected by the deity. What is immediately noticeable is that the verbs discussed here overlap semantically and often different verbs are used for the same type of object, e.g., both בָּרֵא and בָּרָא for heaven(s). The verbs are used in relation to both concrete and metaphorical objects that include the universe, earth, and their adjuncts (e.g., mountains, wind); people, groups of people, and their adjuncts (e.g., eyes, hearts); animals; places and buildings; various kinds of things (e.g., pottery, throne); a number of abstract entities (e.g., people’s destinies, wondrous deeds, salvation, kingdom); and the generic origins of everything.
To begin we should restate the basic claim of BK: early biblical texts use (anthropomorphic) verbs such as הנָה, רֵי, and מִתָּה, whereas late biblical texts (especially P) use the (non-anthropomorphic) verb בָּרָה. Does the biblical data substantiate this hypothesis?

Some biblical sources, excluding P (Priestly source/redaction) since it is the issue of debate, seem to support BK’s argument. Thus they say “the specified use of בָּרָה is widely attested in exilic and postexilic texts, especially in Deutero-Isaiah” and “[t]races of this shift can be found elsewhere in the HB…Ezekiel 28…Ps 89:13” (BK, 16). One might also mention in support of their thesis the following texts that they do not specifically cite: III Isaiah (65:17-18), Malachi (2:10), Qoheleth (12:1), and several potentially late Psalms (104:30; 148:5). This is modest support for BK’s thesis. But much other evidence challenges it.

First, בָּרָה is used in possibly early texts. BK remark: “One may argue for a pre-exilic date for this semantic/theological shift on the grounds of three texts, namely Amos 4:13; Deut 4:32 and Jer 31:22. But the date of each of these texts is disputed” (BK, 16). They cite secondary literature in support of both options (BK, 16, nn. 63–64), that these verses could be either preexilic or postexilic, and we could easily multiply additional references in support of

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73 All together in synoptic Samuel–Kings//Chronicles we find the following situation: 2 Sam 7:11 נָה // 1 Chr 17:10 בָּרָה; 2 Sam 7:27 בָּרָה // 1 Chr 17:25 בָּרָה; 1 Kgs 8:16 בָּרָה // 2 Chr 6:5 בָּרָה. The more anthropomophic verb נָה in undisputed postexilic 1 Chr 17:10 is interesting when compared to the more generic נָה in 2 Sam 7:11.
both options. But it should also be pointed out that J (the “Yahwist”; Gen 6:7; Exod 34:10; Num 16:30), I Isaiah (4:5), and several potentially early Psalms (51:12; 89:13, 48; 102:19), also use רָצַע.

Second, קַעַד, רָצַע, וְהָנָא are used in possibly late texts. BK hint at the continued use of these verbs in late texts (BK, 15, n. 61), but the entire set of data and the full implications of this observation are not given. So, for example, III Isaiah has both רָצַע (65:17, 18 [s2]) and רָצַע (64:7), Zechariah has only רָצַע (12:1), and one possibly late Psalm has only רָצַע (104:26). We will look below at the interesting cases of Proverbs 8 and Chronicles.

Third, BK remark that traces of the shift from the use of the early verbs to the use of רָצַע (“replacing ‘old’ terms for creating”) can be seen, for instance, in Ezekiel 28 and Ps 89:13. In the context of their discussion (BK, 16) it seems that they wish to date this change to around the time of the exile. It is interesting to observe in this regard that some books typically associated with the time of the exile have both רָצַע and one or more of the other verbs, albeit in different proportions: II Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel. On the other hand, Lam. 3:5 uses the “anthropomorphic” verb חֲבָר for the deity’s actions. Furthermore, other texts that are not normally associated with the exile, but rather are considered either preexilic or postexilic as the case may be, attest the so-called early verbs and late verb רָצַע: J, Deuteronomy, I Isaiah, III Isaiah, Amos, Psalms 51, 89, 102. If the time of the exile represents a sort of transitional period in the linguistic and conceptual portrayal of the deity’s actions, then the “mixture” in these various texts requires explanation.

Fourth, a particularly interesting passage that is not mentioned by BK is Proverbs 8. Verses 22-31 say:

22 The LORD created me (חֲבָר) at the beginning of His course as the first of His works (מָעְשֵׂים) of old. 23 In the distant past I was fashioned (נָבָא), at the beginning, at the origin of earth. 24 There was still no deep when I was brought forth (נָבָא), no springs rich in water; 25 Before the foundation of the mountains were sunk, before the hills I was born (נָבָא). 26 He had not yet made (שָׁס) earth and fields, or the world’s first clumps of clay. 27 I was there when He set (נָבָא) the heavens into place; when He fixed the horizon upon the deep; 28 When He made the heavens above firm, and the fountains of the deep gushed forth; 29 When He assigned (נָבָא) the sea its limits, so that its waters never transgress His command; when He fixed the foundations of the earth, 30 I was with Him as a confidant, a source of delight every day, rejoicing before Him at all times, 31 rejoicing in His inhabited world, finding delight with mankind. (NJPSV)

This is not the place for a detailed discussion of this passage. The following observations, however, are pertinent to the present discussion. First, Proverbs 1–9 and 30–31 are usually considered
the youngest parts of the book, later than chapters 10–29, and
having a Persian and/or Hellenistic origin, and this applies in par-
ticular to chapter 8, which some view as a response to Greek phi-
losophy. Second, the verbs used of Wisdom’s genesis (by Yah-
weh) in Prov 8:22-31 describe it in the language of birth, using
and the even more anthropomorphic verb הילל “to be brought forth
[through labor pains]”; Prov 8:24-25, twice. In short, the likely
date of this passage, its choice of vocabulary, and its highly anthr-
opomorphic portrayal of the deity do not square easily with BK’s
historical explanation of בראת. So, in summary, the distribution in
Biblical Hebrew of the verb lexemes studied here does not tally
well with the historical approach suggested by BK.

6.3 Critique of BK’s Argument Based on Proper Names

A second significant piece of evidence that BK cite in support of
their broader historical argument is the biblical distribution of
Israelite personal names such as בֵּרֵאשִׁי (point 4, above). They make the following statements, for example:

- We assume that, gradually, the formula involving the am-
biguous verb הבנה, which might suggest procreation, became ob-
solete (BK, 15). In this connection it is interesting to note that
the Israelite personal name הַבֵּרֵאשִׁי is attested only between the
10th and 8th century BCE… (BK, 15, n. 60)

- In 1 Chron 8:21 a Benjaminite man is mentioned, named Be-
rayah, בָּרֵאשִׁי. Scholars agree on its meaning: “YHWH created
(the child),”…However, the name can be seen as a later par-
allel to הָבֵרֵאשִׁי, “El created (the child).” The name Elqanah only
occurs in relatively early texts. It seems quite likely that this is
related to the theological change of verbs for God’s creation
work. The more anthropomorphic הבנה “to build,” הבנה
with the meaning of “to beget, bear, create,” and הבנה “to shape (like
a potter),” would have been exchanged then for הבנה—a verb
for building that had become obsolete in everyday Hebrew and
therefore was a suitable choice if one wanted to avoid an anth-
ropomorphism. If that is true, it would explain why a man
named בָּרֵאשִׁי only occurs in a quite late text like 1 Chronicles
and that this name is not attested in 10th to 8th century in-
scriptions, whereas more anthropomorphic names like

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74 See, for example, M. V. Fox, Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with In-
troduction and Commentary (AB, 18A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 6. See
also the more recent summary in A. Lenzi, “Proverbs 8:22-31: Three
Perspectives on Its Composition,” JBL 125 (2006), 687–714 (especially
688–89).

75 HALOT 311.

76 See, for example, Fox, Proverbs 1–9, 279–89.
“YHWH made (the child),” and אלקָנָה do occur in those times. (BK, 17)

Israelite personal names that embed the name of the deity are known as theophoric names (“bearing a god”). The most common divine epithets in Israelite theophoric names are the hypocoristics (“pet-names”) יְהֹוָה and אל. These names illustrate the beliefs that the name-giver or name-bearer has about the deity, making a declaration about or expressing a petition to him/her, such as giving thanks for a child or expressing hope for his/her blessing. Consequently it is not surprising that a large number of names in the Hebrew Bible refer in some way to a child’s genesis in relation to the deity.

The following table summarizes the most obvious and/or frequent theophoric personal names in Biblical Hebrew that associate the deity with the progeniture of a child. For each name the root, Hebrew name, English equivalent, and a complete set of references are given. Following the table we will draw some conclusions about the significance of these names in relation to BK’s historical explanation of בָּרָא.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Root</th>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>בָּרָא</td>
<td>בֵּרָאוּ</td>
<td>Beraiah</td>
<td>1 Chr 8:21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>אֶלָּקָנָה</td>
<td>Elkanah</td>
<td>Exod 6:24; 1 Sam 1:1, 4, 8, 19, 21, 23; 2:11, 20; 1 Chr 6:8, 10, 11 (x2), 12, 19, 20, 21; 9:16; 12:7; 15:23; 28:7</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


78 For less common names related to other roots see the resources cited in the previous footnote, e.g., Fowler, *Theophoric Personal Names*, 92–94, 176, 284–86.

79 These names are usually rendered in English as “God/Yahweh has made/built/created” (perfect) and “God/Yahweh makes/builds/creates” (imperfect), and “work/creation of Yahweh” in the case of the final four items.


81 Noth, *Die israelischen Personennamen*, 20–21, 172; Fowler, *Theophoric Personal Names*, 84, 92, 111, 359; HALOT 60.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Root</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elpaal</td>
<td>אלפל</td>
<td>Jezer</td>
<td>Gen 46:24; Num 26:49 (x2); 1 Chr 7:13&lt;sup&gt;83&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Izry</td>
<td>יירי</td>
<td>Izri</td>
<td>1 Chr 25:11&lt;sup&gt;84&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benua</td>
<td>בתו</td>
<td>Benaiah</td>
<td>2 Sam 20:23; Ezek 11:13; 41:13; Ezra 10:25, 30, 35, 43; 1 Chr 4:36; 11:22, 31; 27:14; 2 Chr 20:14&lt;sup&gt;85&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benua</td>
<td>בתו</td>
<td>Benaiah</td>
<td>2 Sam 8:18; 23:20, 22, 30; 1 Kgs 1:8, 10, 26, 32, 36, 38, 44; 2:25, 29, 30 (x2), 34, 35, 46; 4:4; Ezek 11:1; 1 Chr 11:24; 15:18, 20, 24; 16:5, 6; 18:17; 27:5, 6, 34; 2 Chr 31:13&lt;sup&gt;86&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bunah</td>
<td>בנה</td>
<td>Bunah</td>
<td>1 Chr 2:25&lt;sup&gt;87&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bunni</td>
<td>בני</td>
<td>Bunni</td>
<td>Neh 11:15&lt;sup&gt;88&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Binnui</td>
<td>בניו</td>
<td>Binnui</td>
<td>Ezra 8:33; 10:30, 38; Neh 3:24; 7:15; 10:10; 12:8&lt;sup&gt;89&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bani</td>
<td>בני</td>
<td>Bani</td>
<td>2 Sam 23:36; Ezra 2:10; 10:29, 34, 38; Neh 3:17; 8:7; 9:4 (x2), 5; 10:14, 15; 11:22; 1 Chr 6:31; 9:4&lt;sup&gt;90&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buni</td>
<td>בנוי</td>
<td>Buni</td>
<td>Neh 9:4; 10:16&lt;sup&gt;91&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bunu</td>
<td>בנע</td>
<td>Bunu</td>
<td>2 Chr 26:6&lt;sup&gt;92&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ibneiah</td>
<td>רוב</td>
<td>Ibneiah</td>
<td>1 Chr 9:8&lt;sup&gt;93&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>לֵנָא</td>
<td>Ibniah</td>
<td>1 Chr 9:8&lt;sup&gt;94&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>לֵנָא</td>
<td>Jabneel</td>
<td>Josh 15:11; 19:33&lt;sup&gt;95&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>לַעַשָּׁה</td>
<td>Eleasah</td>
<td>Jer 29:3; Ezra 10:22; 1 Chr 2:39, 40; 8:37; 9:43&lt;sup&gt;96&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>לִשָּׁה</td>
<td>Asahel</td>
<td>2 Sam 2:18 (x2), 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 30, 32; 3:27, 30; 23:24; Ezra 10:15; 1 Chr 2:16; 11:26; 27:7; 2 Chr 17:8; 31:13&lt;sup&gt;97&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>לֵשָּׁה</td>
<td>Asiel</td>
<td>1 Chr 4:35&lt;sup&gt;98&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>לֵשָּׁה</td>
<td>Asaiah</td>
<td>2 Kgs 22:12, 14; 1 Chr 4:36; 6:15; 9:5; 15:6, 11; 2 Chr 34:20&lt;sup&gt;99&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>לַעַשָּׁה</td>
<td>Jaasiel</td>
<td>1 Chr 11:47; 27:21&lt;sup&gt;100&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>לַעַשָּׁה</td>
<td>Jaasu/ai</td>
<td>Ezra 10:37&lt;sup&gt;101&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>לַעַשָּׁה</td>
<td>Maasiah</td>
<td>Jer 21:1; 29:21, 25; 37:3; Ezra 10:18, 21, 22, 30; Neh 3:23; 8:4, 7; 10:26; 11:5, 7; 12:41, 42&lt;sup&gt;102&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>לַעַשָּׁה</td>
<td>Maasai</td>
<td>1 Chr 6:25&lt;sup&gt;103&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>לַעַשָּׁה</td>
<td>Maasai</td>
<td>1 Chr 9:12&lt;sup&gt;104&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>לֵנָא</td>
<td>Baasiah</td>
<td>1 Chr 6:25&lt;sup&gt;105&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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On the basis of this table several significant first impressions are that (1) there are many more theophoric personal names related to the progeniture of children than BK mention in their article, and, more importantly, (2) these appear most often in undisputed postexilic

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95 HALOT 383–84.


101 Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen*, 28, 206; HALOT 423; hypocoristic of שְׁלַשָּׁה, Q: שְׁלַשָּׁה.


texts where, according to BK, they should not be found. Instead, their discussion treats only יִשְׂרָאֵל and יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲלָכַנְנָה, with a short reference to “more anthropomorphic names like שָׁעַהוֹת [in inscriptions]” (see the quotations above). Furthermore, it is interesting to chart the distribution of all these names, which in their view are presumably “more anthropomorphic” than יִשְׂרָאֵל:

- **Pentateuch**: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers 4
- **Former Prophets**: Joshua, Samuel, Kings 45
- **Latter Prophets**: Ezekiel, Jeremiah 9
- **Writings**: Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles 107

Thus, whereas “in a late book like Chronicles we find the name יִשְׂרָאֵל,” it is not true that “more anthropomorphic” names like the ones they mention, שָׁעַהוֹת אֲלָכַנְנָה, are found principally in so-called early texts, since these kinds of names clearly predominate in the late books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles, and in fact they occur more often there than in all the rest of the books of the Hebrew Bible combined. This viewpoint is affected very little even if we eliminate some of the indistinct (e.g., הָיָה) and abbreviated (e.g., התנִי) forms in the table above, though we do not feel that this is necessary. 106

A few more specific remarks are in order. First, with regard to the Pentateuch, BK are concerned mainly with יִשְׂרָאֵל in Genesis 1:1–2:4a, and they point out that “[i]n an older text such as Gen 14:19, 22, the word חֵן is used” (BK, 14). So also, they say, whereas אֲלָכַנְנָה is used in the late book of Chronicles (1 Chr 8:21), יִשְׂרָאֵל is used in “relatively early texts” that date “between the 10th and 8th century BCE.” However, they seem not to notice that in Exod 6:24, a Priestly text, another אֲלָכַנְנָה is mentioned, a descendant of Levi and a son of Korah. The significance of this is that although BK’s late Priestly Writer uses יִשְׂרָאֵל in Genesis 1:1–2:4a, apparently he did not feel compelled to suppress the mention of a person having the name אֲלָכַנְנָה in Exod 6:24. We will look below at the purported historical settings of the people with the theophoric personal names given in the table above.

Second, as a possible illustration of the shift in thinking from the preexilic to the postexilic period, BK cite the book of Ezekiel, and chapter 28 in particular. They say:

Traces of this shift can be found elsewhere in the HB. For instance, Ezekiel 28 clearly presupposes a tradition which is more or less parallel to Genesis 2. But, significantly, in contrast to the author of the garden-narrative who uses רוּחַ “to form, shape” (Gen 2:7–8, 19), יִשְׁעֶה “to make” (Gen 2:18), and בָנָה

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“to build” (Gen 2:22) to describe God’s work of creation,
Ezek 28:13, 15 uses אֲבָדַה (BK, 16–17).

In the framework of BK’s historical argument it is interesting
to observe that elsewhere in the book of Ezekiel, and in the book
of Jeremiah which is also associated with the exile, several “more
anthropomorphic” names are mentioned: (וַתִּבָּנוּ (Ezek 11:1, 13;
41:13), (וַתִּמְרִית (Jer 21:1; 29:21, 25; 35:4; 37:3), and
אַלָּלֵית (Jer 29:3).

Third, above we mentioned the frequency of “more anthro-
pomorphic” names in the late writings of Ezra, Nehemiah, and
Chronicles. These data clearly contradict BK’s historical explana-
tion of אֲבָדַה. The “more anthropomorphic” names are actually
more widely used in “late” rather than “early” writings. Thus, inso-
far as Israelite personal names are concerned, BK’s argument that
there was a theological shift in thinking over time is supported by
usage neither in the Priestly source/redaction (i.e. אַלָּלֵית in Exod
6:24) nor in the undisputed late biblical books of Ezra, Nehemiah,
and Chronicles.

Related to the previous point we should remark briefly on the
purported historical settings of the people that are mentioned in
the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles. Most of the theo-
phoric personal names given in the table above occur in genealogi-
cal lists. Those mentioned in Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 Chronicles
9 are situated in the (early-)postexilic period. In contrast the people
mentioned in other chapters of Chronicles are situated in the
preexilic period. Consequently in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah,
and Chronicles, whether in terms of their status as late biblical
writings or the historical periods about which they speak, it is im-
possible to trace a line of development from “early” to “late” writ-
ings. Finally, it is interesting to observe that the storyline in 1 Chr
8:21 in fact situates “late” אֲבָדַה in Israel’s preexilic period.

The biblical data presented above cast a shadow over BK’s
“more historical approach” to the distribution and use of אֲבָדַה in
Biblical Hebrew. We have offered here detailed (but not comprehen-
sive) discussions of several significant pieces of evidence that
they cite: the distribution of certain verb lexemes and Israelite pe-
sonal names. A careful look at the other points they offer in sup-
port of their alternative proposal (see above) highlights other flaws
in their argumentation and demonstrates further that their thesis is

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107 The issue of the historical antiquity and reliability of the biblical gene-
alogies is outside the parameters of this article and in any case the mat-
ter does not affect the present discussion. On the genealogies in 1 Chron-
icles 1–9 see J. T. Sparks, The Chronicler’s Genealogies: Towards an Understand-
ing of 1 Chronicles 1–9 (Society of Biblical Literature, Academia Biblica, 28;
Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), and the summary of recent
research given in R. K. Duke, “Recent Research in Chronicles,” CBR 8
untenable insofar as the Hebrew Bible is concerned. This does not come as a surprise since much linguistic data of Biblical Hebrew\textsuperscript{108} and the notion of (anti-)anthropomorphism in biblical literature\textsuperscript{109} are far less diachronically stratified than BK would have us believe. In conclusion, BK’s proposal that “late” \( \text{בֵּית} \) replaced “more anthropomorphic” \( \text{כָּל} \), and so on in “late” biblical writings, is not supported by the actual Biblical Hebrew data and must be rejected.

7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Van Wolde has argued that the verb \( \text{חָפֹץ} \) should be construed to mean “to separate” rather than “to create.” In reply Becking and Korpel countered that Van Wolde’s arguments were inadequate and that in fact \( \text{חָפֹץ} \) is best rendered “to construct.” In this article we have bolstered Van Wolde’s earlier arguments by means of a critical review of earlier biblical studies, by a reflection on biblical semantics, and by additional support from various semantic studies, especially biblical and extra-biblical treatments of verbs expressing “separation-events,” and etymological studies, as well as by external confirmation in Samaritan texts. Thus we have shown also that Becking and Korpel’s arguments against Van Wolde’s proposal and in support of their own are themselves deficient. In particular, their alternative proposal that \( \text{חָפֹץ} \) means “to construct” is challenged by a more complete analysis of biblical data than BK provided in their rejoinder. In conclusion, Van Wolde’s proposal that \( \text{חָפֹץ} \) in Genesis 1:1–2:4a means “to spatially separate” remains a viable explanation for the semantics of this verb.

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