

## Chapter One: Translating “Backwards”

### A. Why retrotranslation is needed

(1) *Who God is, what God does, and what God wants for us* is what this series on *God, Sky and Land* is all about. We will be looking for answers to these three questions in the Old Testament book of Genesis. But there is a problem. Genesis was written in Hebrew several thousand years ago, and addressed to people who lived in a world very different from the world in which we now read the Bible. If we are to understand correctly their answers to our three questions, we have to re-enter that world and comprehend what their words meant them—and we will have to do this in English for the obvious reason that most of us do not read Biblical Hebrew. Their world was different from ours in ways far beyond what most of us assume to be the case. This is particularly true in regard to *what God does*. The difference is less stark in regard to *who God is* and *what God wants*.



(2) Those who originally listened to the Genesis account of *what God does* heard of a God who began to create by confining the pre-creation waters “above” and separating them from the waters “below.” In so doing God created a protected space. Within this space God separated out the land so crucial to the continued existence of all human beings. To the ancient Hebrews *land* meant far more than real estate; it established their identity. Protecting it, cultivating it, settling it, fighting for it, was a central motif of their existence. It was the *land* of their fathers, the *land* of their birth. It was their *homeland* (and still is). The fact that the present-day State of Israel is called “the land of Israel” is no accident; it is a modern-day expression of a very ancient truth.

(3) When the first audience heard the words, “To begin with, God created the sky and the land,” concepts of the universe, the solar system, and planet earth were still hundreds of years in the future. So the people could only picture the vault of the sky overhead, with the sun moving over the land during the day and the moon during the night. The only “land” they knew was fixed in place and, as God had promised (Ps. 104:5), would never be moved. Their land as part of the surface of a sphere spinning in space would have been utterly inconceivable.

(4) We come to Genesis expecting to hear how God created our planet, Earth, how it was formed and when—and, perhaps, whether or not it circled the sun in an inchoate state for millennia before being shaped and fitted for us. We expect to be told when the stars (the rest of our universe) were created—stars that for us are faraway suns like our own. So when we hear the words, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” we tend to expect information about the origin of everything, including a universe with constellations, galaxies, stars and planets; a solar system; and a blue planet swathed in clouds, the third one out from the sun and held in its orbit around the sun by gravity—our Earth.



## **B. The uniqueness of retrotranslation**

(1) Retrotranslation gives overarching importance to what the only Hebrew text we have, actually originally meant. It takes for granted that the text did mean something by the words it used and the way it used them. Thus, a retrotranslation of Genesis 1 is based on a “close reading” of the text, paying particular attention to its various peculiarities. One example is that the text uses a cardinal number (“one”) for the first Creation day, but ordinal numbers (“second,” “third,” etc., for the other days. Another example is the indication that something does not exist until it is mentioned, and does exist thereafter. “Water” for instance, is explicitly described as existing prior to the Creation process. By contrast, the “greater light” and “lesser light” did not exist until they were “made” on the fourth day.

(2) In determining the intended meaning of the words the author’s own usage takes priority. Thus in Genesis 1 the word “sky” (*shemayim*) means either the entire visual vault or some portion of it, because the author explains that God named the vault “sky”; “land” (*’erets*) means the dry ground, because the author informs us that God named the dry ground “land.”

## **C. The requirements of retrotranslation**

(1) Words are the medium of the translation process, but no word in one language precisely matches the meaning of a word in another. Furthermore, words change their meaning over time making more difficult the absolutely critical determination of *what this ancient word actually meant in its original context*.

(2) Translators tend to follow precedent rather than doing “zero-based” translation. Many of our most familiar Bible phrases were first translated hundreds of years ago and many of the words have changed their meanings since then.

(3) Retrotranslation carefully avoids English words that convey to twenty-first century readers concepts that to the best of our knowledge were not part of the world of Genesis 1 (like heliocentrism).

(4) Retrotranslation is not paraphrase; it is the most literal translation. Every word in the original text is meticulously reproduced in intelligible (if sometimes awkward!) English.