

## Translating Grammatical Number in the Creation Account

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The way Hebrew number features are conveyed in translation has a certain emotive bearing on readers of the account. Poetic licence uses number amongst other features to convey a metaphorical atmosphere, and translators should be aware of the danger of importing inappropriate atmosphere into a text.

Sometimes the atmosphere enters or increases with the age of a translation. Thus the King James (Authorized) Version of the Bible by its very age imports a poetic element into the narrative, which then may give readers the impression that it is some kind of fairy-tale, beyond rational experience. For this reason many have regarded Genesis 1 quite wrongly as 'poetic', whereas in the Hebrew original the style is matter-of-fact and prosaic, except in Genesis 1:27, which verse alone is in Hebrew poetic form.

Part of the responsibility for this 'poetic' atmosphere lies in the use of plural forms in English, where a Hebrew plural was woodenly translated as an English plural, a procedure which is regarded by linguists as slipshod.

There are some nine nouns in the creation account which are in the plural in Hebrew. They are listed in Table 1.

This extended list is given, to show that some plurals are to be regarded as referentially multiple, while others are grammatically plural but semantically singular, mass or ambivalent. The five which fall into the latter category are:

*Elohim*, *yammim* (ambivalent), and *shamayim*, *mayim*, *toledoth* (mass or singular).

Of these, *Elohim* may be dispensed with briefly, since scholars are agreed that in this context it must be translated 'God' and not 'gods'. But while treating of this noun it is necessary to deal with the question of the nature of its plurality.

Theophilus of Antioch (115–181 AD) is said to have introduced the term 'Trinity',<sup>1</sup> but it was Tertullian (145–220 AD) who supported the doctrine from Genesis 1:26, pointing out that the expression '*let us make man*' indicates a plurality in line with the plural form *Elohim*.<sup>2</sup>

During the nineteenth century a number of scholars began to offer an explanation of this plural other than the trinitarian solution. They described it as a 'plural of greatness',<sup>3</sup> but this is difficult to maintain so far back in linguistic history, for lack of evidence. Even royal plurals are not attested unequivocally before the European Medieval period.

These scholars appear to have overlooked the fact that *Elohim*, when it is intended to mean the singular Creator God and when it is a subject, is always accompanied by a singular verb-form. It may be referred to by singular or plural pronouns. In respect of the pronouns, it remains ambivalent, but this very fact implies a semantic tri-unity.

However, when it comes to translations into English,

Plural Noun	Hebrew Script	Traditional Translation	References (verses)
<i>Elohim</i>		God, gods	Frequent
<i>shamayim</i>		heavens	1:1, 8, 9, 14, 15, 17, 20, 30; 2:1, 4
<i>mayim</i>		waters	1:6 (x3), 7 (x2), 9, 10, 20, 21, 22
<i>yammim</i>		seas	1:10, 22
<i>me'oroth</i>		lights	1:14, 15, 16
<i>kokabim</i>		stars	1:16
<i>degath</i>		fish	1:26, 28
<i>tanninim</i>		whales, monsters	1:21
<i>toledoth</i>		generations	2:4

Table 1. The nine nouns in the creation account which are in the plural in Hebrew.

TRANSLATION	DATE	<i>shamayim</i>		
King James Version	1611	all 'heavens' except 1:30 'air'		
Darby	1881	all 'heavens'		
Revised Version	1885	all 'heaven' except 1:30 'air'		
Revised Standard Version	1952	all 'heaven' except 1:8 'heavens', 1:30 'air'		
Berkeley Version	1959	all 'heaven' except 1:1; 2:1,4 'heavens', 1:30 'air'		
Amplified Bible	1962	all 'heavens' except 1:10 'air', 1:15 'sky'		
New English Bible	1970	all 'heaven'		
King James II Bible	1971	all 'heavens' except 1:30 'air'		
Living Bible	1971	1:8, 9, 14/15, 17 'sky'; 1:20, 30 'air'		
Good News Bible	1976	1:1; 2:1, 4 'universe'; 1:8, 9, 14, 15, 17 'sky'; 1:20 'air'		
New American Standard Bible	1978	all 'heavens' except 1:8 'heaven', 1:30 'sky'		
New King James Version	1982	all 'heavens' except 1:8 'heaven', 1:30 'air'		
New International Version	1985	all 'sky' except 1:1; 2:1, 4 'heavens', 1:30 'air'		
International Children's Bible	1986	all 'sky' except 1:20, 30 'air'		
TRANSLATION	DATE	<i>mayim</i>	<i>yammim</i>	<i>toledoth</i>
King James Version	1611	all 'waters'	'seas'	'generations'
Darby	1881	all 'waters'	'seas'	'histories'
Revised Version	1885	all 'waters'	'seas'	'generations'
Revised Standard Version	1952	all 'waters'	'seas'	'generations'
Berkeley Version	1959	all 'waters'	'seas'	'generations'
Amplified Bible	1962	all 'waters'	'seas'	'history'
New English Bible	1970	all 'waters' except 1:6 'water'	'seas'	'story'
King James II Bible	1971	all 'waters'	'seas'	'generations'
Living Bible	1971	1:2, 6a Vapors'; 6b, 22 'oceans'; 7a Vapor'; 7b, 9, 10 'water'	1:10 'seas' 1:26 'oceans'	'summary of events'
Good News Bible	1976	all 'water'	'seas'	'that is how'
New American Standard Bible	1978	all 'waters'	'seas'	'account'
New King James Version	1982	all 'waters'	'seas'	'history'
New International Version	1985	all 'water'	'seas'	'account'
International Children's Bible	1986	all 'water'	'seas'	'story'

Table 2. Table of translations of four Hebrew plurals.

the question of poetic overtones concerns the other four semantically ambivalent nouns. In lexicons, *shamayim*, *mayim* and *toledoth* are listed as 'plural only',<sup>4,5</sup> which should alert us to the fact that English singulars 'heaven' and 'water' are represented in Hebrew only by apparent plural forms.

In English, nouns such as 'water', 'sea' and 'air' are called 'mass nouns'. They only use plural forms for special purposes, sometimes emotive and sometimes to do with classes and diverse kinds, as is 'two oils are present in this mixture', where the meaning is 'two kinds of oil'.

In many non-European languages, no plural exists for mass nouns, or else they are only plural in form. In some languages they carry a mass prefix, and in others no noun can be pluralized.<sup>6</sup>

In Table 2 I have taken 14 Bible translations and set out the rendering of the four words into English in the relevant verses in Genesis. It will be seen that the later translations tend to move towards the singular in these words.

We should also note that

- (a) in the Greek original of 2 Peter 3:5–6 we find the singular *hudatos*, 'of water', where Genesis 1 is being referred

to; and

- (b) the Septuagint translates Hebrew *mayim* as singular *hudor*, 'water', everywhere in Genesis 1 except verse 10. However, in that verse it is preceded by a whole sentence **added to the text of verse 9**, involving a plural *sunagogas*, 'gatherings together', and in verse 10 another plural, *sustemata*, 'systems', which are not found in the Hebrew original. The latter word is supposed to represent Hebrew *miqweh*, 'gathering' (singular). It seems the Greek translators acted rather freely with the text at this point.

Many of these translations were produced on the assumption that when God created the earth it contained the oceans we know today. This ignores the effect of Noah's Flood. In the light of the expression in 1:9, 'in one place', a case can be made out for one single ocean covering something less than fifty percent of the earth's surface. The way we understand this then affects our understanding of *yammim*, 'sea(s)', in 1:10.

It is interesting to note that *yammim* was not always translated 'seas' in the King James Version. In six instances,

all poetic,<sup>7</sup> it is rendered as ‘sea’, either in compound or as part of a phrase. If the Hebrew plural *yammim* can be rendered ‘sea’ in 1611 English, there is surely no objection to rendering it as ‘sea’ in the prose passage of 1:10. In any case one cannot assume that the word refers to the divided oceans of today. However, the main objection to ‘seas’ is that it imports a poetic, non-prosaic flavour.

Finally, the plural implication in ‘generations’ forces into the text a notion of sons and grandsons, suggesting a future-oriented human family significance which is absent in the original Hebrew *toledoth*.<sup>8</sup> This word derives from a verb *y-l-d*, ‘produce’, but includes both literal and figurative uses. Thus it is rendered in lexicons as ‘account’.

The use of the English word ‘generations’ restricts the meaning to a human family tree, whereas it also applies to ‘productions’ of a literary kind. Its meaning is thus ambivalent in itself and depends on contextual features. In Genesis 2:4 many scholars have correctly regarded it as referring to what precedes it, though they then nullify this insight by insisting that it is misplaced and should be moved to the beginning of chapter 1.

However, the deictic feature ‘*elleh*’ is the only textual feature which can indicate the direction of reference, whether cataphoric or anaphoric. In both Leviticus and Numbers, this deictic is used anaphorically to extend over a large area of text, and if this is typical of Moses’ style, then verse 2:4a is in the right place and refers anaphorically to all the previous text.

There being no family trees in Genesis 1:1 and 2:3, the word *toledoth* cannot have a literally plural meaning, but must take its meaning ‘account’ and apply to the whole creation history. For this reason, the translations of the Amplified Bible, the Living Bible, the Good News Bible, the New American Standard Version and the New International Version are the most accurate. The use of ‘story’ by the New English Bible and the International Children’s Bible is to be deplored, since in modern English this word implies fiction, and the use of plurals as in the other translations is misleading because of poetic overtones.

A case could also be made out for translating *toledoth* in Genesis 2:4a as ‘origin’. (‘This is the origin of heaven and earth’).<sup>9</sup> However, this would go against the trend in later uses of *toledoth* in Genesis, where ‘origin’ is not applicable, and ‘account’ is more appropriate.<sup>10</sup>

In sum, it may be argued that the use of pluralization in translating at least five of the plural nouns in the creation account in Genesis tends to mislead the reader into regarding the narrative as a story, not to be taken quite literally as history. This tendency is increased by the use of ancient words like ‘firmament’ instead of ‘expanse’ etc., where such words have changed in meaning or become obsolete and now convey incorrect impressions.

It is suggested that, where the King James Version is still read out, some attention should be paid to ‘giving the sense’ as Ezra did as recorded in Nehemiah 8:8. This procedure does not only apply, however, to the King James

Version, for as can be seen from Table 2, several modern translations continue to use ‘poetic’ plurals where this is not warranted by the original Hebrew.<sup>11</sup>

## REFERENCES

1. Roberts, A. and Donaldson, J. (eds), 1989. **The Ante-Nicene Fathers**, Eerdmans, Vol. II, p. 101, column 1.  
Incidentally, creationists may wish to note that Theophilus pointed out, even at that early date, that the week is not deducible from heavenly bodies, yet was then known in the pagan world, hence can only have come by revelation from God.
2. Roberts, A. and Donaldson, J. (eds), 1989. Against Praxeas. **The Ante-Nicene Fathers**, Eerdmans, Vol. III, Chapter XII, p. 606, column 2.  
Tertullian also appeals to Genesis 3:22, ‘one of us’.
3. Brown, F., Driver, S. R., Briggs, C. A. and Gesenius, 1978. **The New Hebrew and English Lexicon**, Associated Publishers and Authors, Lafayette, Indiana, *ad loc*, p. 43, column 2, where the term ‘intensive’ and p. 44, column 1, ‘poetic’ is relevant.
4. Brown *et al.*, Ref. 3, p. 410, column 1.  
This shows *toledoth* as ‘*n.f.pl*’, that is, as tantamount to the ‘plural only’ designation of *shamayim* and *mayim*.
5. Taylor, C. V., 1994. Who wrote Genesis? Are the *Toledoth* Colophons? **CEN Tech. J.**, 8(2):204–211.
6. For example, my Ph.D. thesis surveyed a Central African language, where words like ‘water’, ‘heaven’, ‘milk’ etc. had no plurals, while most nouns could be pluralized. In the Second World War I studied Japanese, which does not pluralize but depends on context for number.
7. The six instances are: Genesis 49:13, Judges 5:17, Job 6:3, Psalms 8:8; 46:2; 78:27.
8. Taylor, Ref 5.  
It is argued there that *toledoth* in Genesis refers to what precedes rather than what follows.
9. Davidson, B., undated. **Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon**, Macdonald Publishing Company, *ad loc*, p. 317, column 1.
10. Taylor, Ref. 5, and Footnote 8.
11. Hargreaves, C, 1993. **A Translator’s Freedom**, Sheffield Academic Press, Chapter 6, p. 137.  
An interesting discussion of beauty versus clarity in translation may be found here.

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