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## VOLUME 10, ARTICLE 3

**BOB BECKING & MARJO C.A. KORPEL,  
TO CREATE, TO SEPARATE OR TO CONSTRUCT:  
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2:4a**

## 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

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

“Where does it all come from?” The quest for the origin of cosmos, earth, and life belongs to the perennial exercises of *homo sapiens*. In the beginning of the Book of Genesis, the Israelite concept on the origin of “all things created” is displayed. In this hymnic text, the Hebrew verb בָּרָא plays a pivotal role in describing the acts of God. The Greek rendition ἐποίησεν, “he created,” as well as the Vulgate “in principio creavit Deus” have given rise to the misconception that in Genesis the idea of a *creatio ex nihilo* is spelled out.<sup>1</sup> Removing this common misconception, however, does not solve the main question: what concept of the origin of the world is portrayed in Gen 1:1–2:4a; hereafter, for the sake of simplicity, “Genesis 1”?

Recently, Ellen van Wolde has proposed that in Genesis 1 the verb בָּרָא has to be translated “to spatially separate” instead of “to create.”<sup>2</sup> She arrived at this conclusion by applying linguistic, exegetical, and comparative methods. For instance, she compares the

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., G. May, *Schoepfung aus dem Nichts: Die Entstehung der Lehre von der Creatio Ex Nihilo* (Arbeiten Zur Kirchengeschichte, 48; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1978), and the interesting essays in M. Treschow, W. Otten, W. Hannam (eds), *Divine Creation in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought: Essays Presented to the Rev'd Dr Robert D. Crouse* (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, 151; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> E.J. van Wolde, “Why the verb בָּרָא does not mean ‘to create’ in Genesis 1,” *JSOT* 34 (2009), 3–23; E.J. van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies: When Language and Text Meet Culture, Cognition, and Context* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 184–200.

concept of origin in Genesis 1 with seven other creation stories from the ancient Near East that describe the first step of the construction of the cosmos as the separation of heaven and earth by a deity. She presents her proposal to translate **ברא** with “to separate,” as a new discovery which will revolutionize HB (or Old Testament) scholarship. If she is correct, translations, dictionaries, commentaries, biblical theologies would all be in need of revision.

In this article we would like to test her proposal. We would like to question her claims in regards on the newness of her proposal, its linguistic and philological presuppositions, its exegetical adequacy, and the strength of her religio-historical comparison.

## 2. HISTORY OF RESEARCH ON **ברא** MEANING “SEPARATE”

Van Wolde is not the first modern scholar to propose the meaning “to separate” for the Hebrew verb **ברא**.<sup>3</sup> The famous *Hebräisches Handwörterbuch* of 1810 by Wilhelm Gesenius offers the following: “der erste Begriff scheint: hauen, aushauen [zu bedeuten],” and Gesenius refers to the Arabic verb *bry* “to cut off.” After that, he goes on to attribute the meanings “bilden, schaffen, hervorbringen” to the Qal of the verb in Classical Hebrew. Only in the Piel the original meaning of “to cut off, chisel, shape” would have been preserved (Isa 17:15, 18; Ezek 21; 19; 23:47). For the Niphal he assumes the meaning “to be born” in Ezek 21:30 and Ps 102:19.<sup>4</sup> In the first edition of his grammar Gesenius elucidates his point of view. In the Piel the “sinnliche Bedeutung” (literal meaning) has been preserved and in Qal the “tropische” (metaphorical). As an example he refers to **ברא**, with the meaning of “schaffen” for Qal, and “hauen, aushauen” for Piel. He still relates the root to Arabic *bry* “to cut off.”<sup>5</sup> In his monumental *Thesaurus*, Gesenius maintains and elaborates this view, but he criticises those who think that (on the basis of the supposed original meaning of “to cut off”) the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* would be absent in Genesis 1. The use of the verb **ברא** in many other texts in the HB proves—in his view—that it always designates the production of something new. For the idea of the *creatio ex nihilo* he refers to 2 Macc 7:28; Heb 11:3; Rom 4:17; Ibn Ezra and Maimonides.<sup>6</sup>

On the well-deserved authority of Gesenius many authors repeated that the basic meaning of **ברא** would have been “to cut” or

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<sup>3</sup> Ibn Ezra, for instance, suggested that the verb has to do with cutting or setting a boundary.

<sup>4</sup> W. Gesenius, *Hebräisch-Deutsches Handwörterbuch über die Schriften des Alten Testaments mit einschluß der geographischen Namen und chaldäischen Wörter beyrn Esra und Daniel*, Theil 1 (Leipzig: Vogel, 1810), 120.

<sup>5</sup> W. Gesenius, *Ausführliches grammatisch-kritisches Lehrgebäude der hebräischen Sprache*, (Leipzig: Vogel, 1817), 242.

<sup>6</sup> G. (=W.) Gesenius, *Thesaurus philologicus criticus lingvae hebraeae et chaldaeae Veteris Testamenti* (Lipsiae: Vogel, 1829), 236.

“to separate.”<sup>7</sup> Like Brongers and Dantinne,<sup>8</sup> Raymond Van Leeuwen and Nick Wyatt compare Gen 1:1 to the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* epic and arrive at the same conclusion.<sup>9</sup> The latest edition of Gesenius’ dictionary cautiously mentions the possibility of translating “to cut” under the lemma ברא I, only referring to Bernhardt in

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<sup>7</sup> S.R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis: With Introduction and Notes* (4th ed., London: Methuen, 1905), 3, without any reference to dictionaries or other Semitic languages: “The root signifies *to cut* ... so probably the proper meaning of ברא is *to fashion by cutting, to shape*.” Samuel Driver was one of the editors of *A Hebrew and English Lexicon* that was based on Gesenius’ lexicon; E. König, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, (2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Leipzig: Dieterich, 1922), 47: “heraushauen, schaffen,” with explicit reference to Gen 1:1; although not specifically referring to ברא, the Dutch theologian Noordmans stated confidently “to create is to separate, not to form,” O. Noordmans, *Herscheping: Beknopte dogmatische handleiding voor godsdienstige toespraken en besprekingen*, (Zeist: Nederlandsche Christen Studenten Vereeniging, 1934), 70; H.A. Brongers, *De Scheppingstradities bij de profete* (Amsterdam: H.J. Paris, 1945), 17: “These data only leave one conclusion: ‘to create’ here [i.e. Gen 1] has the meaning of to split, making separation. The work is done with existing material: in the beginning there was chaos.” (our ET); J.P.M. van der Ploeg, “Le sens du verbe Hébreu ברא: Étude sémasiologique,” *le Muséon* 59 (1946), 143–157; Dantinne also refers to the similarities with ancient Near Eastern creation stories and bases his theory for ברא “to cut” merely on the occurrences of the verb where it might be from the verb ברא III, namely Josh 17:15, 18; 1 Sam 2:23; Ezek 21:24; 23:47, see E. Dantinne, “Création et séparation,” *le Muséon* 74 (1961), 441–451, esp. 446: “BâRâ is ‘to separate, to cut, to carve, to make by carving like a sculptor’, and finally ‘to create’,” and for this he explicitly refers to Gesenius’ *Thesaurus* and the 1883 edition of his *Handwörterbuch* and to Driver; P. Beauchamp, *Création et séparation: Étude exégétique du chapitre premier de la Genèse* (Paris: Éditions Cerf, 1969), who mentions Dantinne on p. 234, where he admits that there might be an original meaning “separate” but that research into etymology is not always fitting on the level of words in their particular context. In his opinion it certainly does not fit in the context of Genesis 1; D.J.A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (JSOTSup, 10; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1978), 74: “Genesis 1 depicts creation as largely a matter of separation and distinction;” K.H. Bernhardt, “ברא,” *ThWAT*, Vol. 2, 773, who refers for this meaning only to Dantinne.

<sup>8</sup> See above, footnote 7.

<sup>9</sup> R.C. Van Leeuwen, “ברא,” *NIDOTTE*, vol. 1 (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 731f., referring to HALAT, Dantinne and Clines and viewing it as accenting “in a punning way” the manner in which God gives order to his creation; N. Wyatt, *Space and Time in the Religious Life of the Ancient Near East* (Biblical Seminar, 85; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 72–73: “Hebrew *bārâ* : the basic idea is of cutting in two (echoing the conflict myth (... ) the primordial soup (1:2) is the raw material of the heavens and the earth; (... ) There is the merest echo of the old conflict traditon, but the common assessment that this indicates the ‘demythologization’ of the narrative is excessive.”

*TbWAT*, who on his part referred only to Dantine.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Ellen van Wolde has many predecessors. This being so, two two questions arise: (1) What is so specific in her proposal? (2) Why has recent scholarship abandoned the path designed by Gesenius? We will come to both questions after a little detour.

### 3. AN ETYMOLOGICAL DETOUR AND THE CURRENT CONSENSUS

It is worth noting that in the 17th edition of Gesenius' *Handwörterbuch*—edited by Franz Buhl—the idea of an original meaning “to cut off” was abandoned on the basis of further research on the matter. Now “schaffen, hervorbringen” is the basic meaning of the Qal of ברא I and “abholzen, zerhauen” (Piel in Josh 17:15, 18; Ezek 23:47 and perhaps Ezek 21:24) is relegated to ברא III, whereas ברא II in the Hiphil in 1 Sam 2:29 is seen as doubtful, but perhaps meaning “fett machen, mästen.”<sup>11</sup>

It had 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.”<sup>12</sup> In Classical Arabic the phonetic difference between various forms of these verbs is slight and in unvocalized texts invisible. Already the early Arabic lexicographers noticed the confusion of the two roots.<sup>13</sup> Because the existence of a Hebrew root ברה < *brw/y*, “to cut in half,” may be assumed on the basis of the well-known idiom כרת ברית, literally ‘to cut a covenant’, and the noun ברית “covenant, treaty, contract,”<sup>14</sup> it seems likely that a similar confusion has taken place in the few places where ברא Piel occurs. There are more examples of this type of confusion of the weak consonants א and ה at the end of verbal forms.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> HAHAT, vol.1, 172, with the remark “n. anderen trennen.”

<sup>11</sup> W. Gesenius, F. Buhl, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament* (17<sup>th</sup> ed; Leipzig: Vogel, 1915), 113–114.

<sup>12</sup> See A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary in the Qur'an* (GSRP, 79; Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), 75–76, with earlier literature.

<sup>13</sup> E.W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, vol. 1 (London: Williams & Norgate, 1863), 178, 197; R. Blachère, *Dictionnaire Arabe-Français-Anglais*, vol. 1 (Paris: G.P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1967), 493f., 589–591; J. Peñrice, *Dictionary and Glossary of The Koran* (Minneola: Dover Publications, 1976; orig. 1873), 15f.: *br'* “create; absolve; cure; free oneself.” This is only as an active participle known in the meaning of “Maker, Creator,” as a designation of God.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Gen 15:17 and Jer 34:18–19, as already suggested by W. Gesenius, *Hebräisches und chaldäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament*, besorgt von F.E.C. Dietrich, Erster Theil (Leipzig: Vogel, 1857), 141. See for the concept of cutting Å. Viberg, *Symbols of Law: A Contextual Analysis of Legal Symbolic Acts in the Old Testament* (ConBOT, 34; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1992), 52–69.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, F.R. Blake, *A Resurvey of Hebrew Tenses* (Roma:

Gesenius-Buhl refers to several South-Arabic dialects in which the root *br*' means "to build, make, give birth."<sup>16</sup> Van Wolde did not consider the alternative possibility that ברא may belong to the semantic field of "building; constructing." We will come back to this alternative below, especially since it is connected to Egyptian, Babylonian and Ugaritic texts and concepts that describe creation with verbs meaning "to build."<sup>17</sup> In any case, it is significant that the Old Greek translation of the HB (LXX), the oldest translation we have, mostly chooses κτισθαι, "to found, build" which only secondarily means "to create," as its rendering of ברא Qal.<sup>18</sup> It never means anything like "to separate." In his still valuable study of the verb ברא Paul Humbert maintained that ברא III in the sense of "to shape by cutting, to chip away" ("tailler, couper") is related to Arabic *bry*.<sup>19</sup> As a result of these and other investigations, most modern dictionaries distinguish three different Hebrew roots ברא

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Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1951), 83–84. See also D. Cohen, *Dictionnaire des racines sémitiques ou attestées dans les langues sémitiques*, fasc. 2 (Louvain: Peeters, 1994), 80–81, who 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, despite C.R. Krahmalkov, *Phoenician–Punic Dictionary* (OLA, 90; Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 125, who construes the word with an adjective meaning "corpulent, healthy," related to ברא II, therefore.

<sup>16</sup> This is confirmed now by A. Jamme, *Sabaean Inscriptions from Mahram Bilqis (Márib)* (PAFSM, 3; Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1962), 430; A. Avanzini, *Glossaire des inscriptions de l'Arabie du Sud, 1950–1973*, Vol. 2, (Quaderni di semitistica, 3; Istituto di linguistica e di lingue orientali, Università di Firenze: Firenze: 1980), 176–77; A. Beeston *et al.*, *Sabaic Dictionary (English – French – Arabic)* (Louvain/Beirut: Peeters/Liban, 1982), 30; S.D. Ricks, *Lexicon of Inscriptional Qatabanian* (Studia Pohl, 14; Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1989), 32–33; J.C. Biella, *Dictionary of Old South Arabic: Sabaean Dialect* (HSS, 25; Chico: Scholars Press, 1982 [paperback edition Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2004]), 54. The Mehrite and Soqotrite verbs Buhl adduced for the meaning of "to give birth," however, are nowadays seen as derivatives of the root *brw/y* "to cut off, separate."

<sup>17</sup> Cf. J.C. de Moor, *The Rise of Yahwism: The Roots of Israelite Monotheism* (BETL, 91; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 47, 59–60, 71.

<sup>18</sup> See T. Muraoka, *Hebrew/Aramaic Index to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1998), 30. However, in Gen 1:1 LXX renders with ἐποίησεν, "he made."

<sup>19</sup> P. Humbert, "Emploi et portée du verbe *bārā* (créer) dans l'Ancien Testament," originally published in 1947, reprinted in: P. Humbert, *Opuscules d'un hébraïsant* (Mémoires de l'Université de Neuchâtel, 26; Neuchâtel: Secr. de l'Université, 1958), 146–165 (146).

with a strong tendency to render the Qal of the verb with “to create.”<sup>20</sup>

Ellen van Wolde deviates from the current consensus not by going back to the arguments of Gesenius, but by means of a thorough linguistic analysis of the instances of **ברא** in Genesis 1. She eventually argues for a translation “to separate.” In her discussion of the question whether the meaning of the verb **ברא** is synonymous with that of the verb **הבדיל** (also present in Genesis 1), she arrives to the conclusion that there is a semantic specification. **ברא** indicates an act in which, out of an originally homogenous entity, two or more entities are “created” through a process of “splitting.”<sup>21</sup> In our view, the English verb “to differentiate” would have been a more adequate indicator.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. SEMANTIC CONSIDERATIONS

Etymologizing is an interesting intellectual exercise, and in the case of ancient “dead” languages sometimes inevitable, but it often produces unreliable results. Ellen van Wolde quite correctly follows the advice of James Barr that contextual semantics should always take precedence over etymology.<sup>23</sup> Although we agree with this approach, we disagree in certain aspects of her work.

##### 4.1. Separation of Two Objects: Notes on the Absent Preposition

A Hebrew verb with the meaning “to separate” requires at least one preposition, like **מן** or **בין**, as can be observed with the verb **בדל**.<sup>24</sup> It could be argued that there are texts where a preposition is not required. However, this is the case only when **בדל** is used in the meaning of “to select.”<sup>25</sup> Otherwise “separate” has to be taken as

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<sup>20</sup> See appendix.

<sup>21</sup> Van Wolde, “Why the verb **ברא** does not mean ‘to create’ in Genesis 1,” 19–22 ; Van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies*, 197–200.

<sup>22</sup> By way of comparison: the originally homogenous labour of human beings for survival has been differentiated into a multitude of different occupations, see basically Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations: A Selected Edition*, Kathryn Sutherland (ed.), Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 2008.

In her recent book, Van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies*, 200, she seems to be aware of this implication.

<sup>23</sup> J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: OUP, 1961); J. Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968).

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g. Gen 1:4, God separated between (**בין**) the light and between the dark; Exod 26:33, the curtain will separate the Holy Place from (**מן**) the Most Holy Place. Other examples: Lev 20:24; Num 16:9, Isa 56:3.

<sup>25</sup> E.g., Deut 4:41; Ezra 10:16; 1 Chron 23:13. In all texts using **בדל** without a preposition a meaning “separate, split in two” does not suit the object(s) or the textual context.

“split, cleave.”<sup>26</sup> In that case, however, the text of Gen 1:1 would mean that heaven and earth are each split into two halves. As noted above, Van Wolde seems to propose the translation “to separate” in the meaning of “differentiate” or “to separate *between*,” and not “to split, to cleave” as rendition for **ברא**. If Ellen van Wolde had consistently translated **ברא** with “to differentiate,” there would have been fewer problems with her proposal (though our other arguments against it would, nevertheless, remain). Now she occasionally has to include (or to add) a preposition in her translations.<sup>27</sup> The absence of a preposition modifying **ברא** in Genesis 1, can easily be explained by assuming that the idiom **את ... ברא** can be rendered with “to differentiate ... into.”

This assumption, however, creates another problem. In the interesting Mesopotamian texts that Ellen van Wolde claims that parallel the concept of “separation,” prepositions are present. The Sumerian *Song of the Hoe* contains the following line:

an ki-ta ba<sub>9</sub>-re<sub>6</sub>-de<sub>3</sub> saĝ na-an-ga-ma-an-šum<sub>2</sub>

and not only did he [=Enlil] hasten to separate heaven from earth<sup>28</sup>

In this text the adverbial case marker “ta” (in “ki-ta”) indicates the ablative with separating force, hence “from.”<sup>29</sup> A comparable feature is present in the late bilingual text from Uruk:

<sup>d</sup>UTU an ki-ta b[a]-ra-bad-rá-a-ta

*e-nu-ma ša-mu-ú it-t[í] K[í-tim ] is-su-ru*

Utu, when the heavens were made distant from earth<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Lev 1:17; Lev 5:8, the wings of a bird are separated partly from the body of the bird. A similar verb is **בקע**, “to cleave.” It is used in Exod 14:16 for God dividing the Sea, and in Gen 7:11, for the wells of the great floods that are split open.

<sup>27</sup> She avoids the inclusion of separative prepositions in her final translations. See Van Wolde, “Why the verb **ברא** does not mean ‘to create’ in Genesis 1,” 21–22.

<sup>28</sup> See <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>.

<sup>29</sup> See M.-L. Thomsen, *The Sumerian Language: An Introduction to Its History and Grammatical Structure* (Mesopotamia: Copenhagen Studies in Assyriology, 10; Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag), 2001, §§ 460–646; D.O. Edzard, *Sumerian Grammar* (HdO, I/71; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003). On Sumerian cosmology see J.J.A. van Dijk, “Le motif cosmique dans la pensée sumérienne,” *ActOr* 28 (1964), 1–59; Å. Sjöberg, “In the Beginning,” T. Abusch (ed.), *Riches Hidden in Secret Places: Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Memory of Thorkild Jacobsen* (Winona Lake Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 229–47.

<sup>30</sup> SpTU 3 [= E. von Weiher (bearb), *Spätbabylonische Texte aus Uruk* (Ausgrabungen der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft in Uruk-Warka, 10; Berlin: Mann, 1983)], 67 I:9–10.

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.

#### 4.2. The Participle of ברא

One of Van Wolde’s arguments for the translation ברא, “to separate,” is her idea that the abstract noun “Creator” is never described in the HB with an active participle of ברא.<sup>31</sup> Her position here depends on an article by Florentino García Martínez, who argued that in the HB God only is called creator with participles of other verbs like עשה, יצר, and פעל.<sup>32</sup> Van Wolde accepted the argument of García Martínez, but did not critically assess its validity.<sup>33</sup>

The participle of ברא is used at least 13 times in the HB to describe God as creator.<sup>34</sup> This happens, not only in phrases like “creator of heaven” and “creator of earth,” but also in a more abstract sense, “your creator” (Isa 43:1) and “creator of Israel” (Isa 43:15). Most interesting is the text of Isa 45:7:

יוצר אור ובורא חשך 7aA

he who forms light and creates darkness,

עשה שלום ובורא רע 7aB

who makes peace and creates evil

It is quite clear that ברא is paralleled here by the verb עשה and יצר indicating that the three verbs are part of the same semantic field and that their meaning is interconnected. Van Wolde, however, prefers a different, more theological, explanation. God would—in

<sup>31</sup> Van Wolde, “Why the verb ברא does not mean ‘to create’ in Genesis 1,” 20.

<sup>32</sup> F. García Martínez, “Creation in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in G.H. van Kooten (ed.), *The Creation of Heaven and Earth: Re-interpretations of Genesis 1 in the Context of Judaism, Ancient Philosophy, Christianity, and Modern Physics*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2005), 49–70.

<sup>33</sup> Like García Martínez, she failed to complete the list of examples with the participle of קנה (Gen 14:18, 22; Deut 32:6).

<sup>34</sup> The participle occurs in the following texts: Isa 40:28 (creator of the ends of the earth); 42:5 (creator of the heavens); 43:1 (your creator); 43:15 (creator of Israel); 45:7 (creator of darkness and creator of evil); 45:18 (creator of heaven); 57:19 (creator of praise on man’s lips); 65:17 (creator of new heavens and a new earth), 18 (I am the creator, creator of Jerusalem as a delight); Amos 4:13 (creator of wind); Qoh 12:1 (your creator).

her view—not create darkness and evil, he just separated them *from* (missing preposition) respectively light and peace.<sup>35</sup> However, in the monotheistic theology of Deutero-Isaiah this dualistic idea is untenable, for the one God has taken over all expertise from the many gods (cf. Isa 44:24; 45:5–6). So, he is able to give both rain and drought (1 Kings 17–18), he kills and makes alive, he wounds and heals (Deut 32:29).<sup>36</sup> One should not try to eliminate such theologically “problematic” ideas by proposing forced renderings. The context of Isaiah 45 shows that “evil” should be understood as YHWH’s former punishment for Israel’s trespasses. Second Isaiah argues that the devastation of Jerusalem and the exile that afflicted the Israelites did not come to them from any other deity, but from the same God who once made a covenant with them.<sup>37</sup>

All in all, Van Wolde’s argument based on the assumed absence of the participle of the verb **ברא**, turns out to be quite weak. Moreover, by focusing on the meanings of active participles, it brings up the question of why the more reflective form “separator” or “differentiator”—as per her proposal—is absent in the HB.

#### 4.3. Separation or Creation of the Sea-monsters?

One of Van Wolde’s arguments for the rendering of **ברא** as “to separate” is connected to Gen 1:21.<sup>38</sup> According to Van Wolde the sea-monsters were living in the waters beneath the earth and therefore they had to be separated from the creatures living in the upper waters, the waters of the sea. Two remarks need to be made here.

- (1) There seems to be an anomaly in her argument. First, she states that in the preceding verse—a text containing the divine resolution to bring into being the watery part of the animal kingdom. Later on she remarks that “the *tanninim* al-

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<sup>35</sup> Van Wolde, “Why the verb **ברא** does not mean ‘to create’ in Genesis 1,” 6, 19–20; Van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies*, 186.

<sup>36</sup> Also the “bad” or “unpleasant” functions were taken over in the image of the one God, cf. M.C.A. Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (Ugaritische und Biblische Literatur, 8; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1990).

<sup>37</sup> For similar views, see G.A.F. Knight, *Deutero-Isaiah: A Theological Commentary on Isaiah 40–55* (New York: Abingdon, 1965), 133–135 (134: “But to DI any form of dualism is merely ridiculous, in the light of Yahweh’s continued declaration that he alone is God and that apart from him there is nothing else (vs. 6);” U. Berges, *Das Buch Jesaja: Komposition und Gestalt* (Freiburg: Herder, 1998), 398; J. Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40–55: A Literary-Theological Commentary* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 268–272. For the deliberate polemic of Second Isaiah against the view of Gen 1:3 on the creation of light, see now M.S. Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 72–73.

<sup>38</sup> Van Wolde, “Why the verb **ברא** does not mean ‘to create’ in Genesis 1,” 13–14; Van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies*, 191–92.

ready existed.”<sup>39</sup> This is a strange observation both in view of the non-mention of these sea-monsters in v 20, as well as in view of the fact that v 20 only narrates the divine resolution and not yet its formal implementation.

- (2) Her remark that the sea-monsters were living in the waters beneath the earth is hardly convincing in view of the evidence she presents.<sup>40</sup> There are, however, other texts in the HB, where these sea-monsters are depicted as marine animals living and swarming in the *sea*.<sup>41</sup> This second concept is reinforced by ancient Near Eastern mythological texts.<sup>42</sup> Even if two competing views would have existed in ancient Israel, it would be premature to connect Genesis 1 exclusively with one of them. This implies that her statement is in need of elaboration and cannot be taken as an undisputable argument.

#### 4.4. Could ברא Qal Mean “to Separate” in Other Biblical Texts?

Van Wolde’s proposal would be strengthened if one could argue that there are in the HB texts other than Genesis 1 in which the verb ברא could have no other meaning than “to separate; differen-

<sup>39</sup> Van Wolde, “Why the verb ברא does not mean ‘to create’ in Genesis 1,” 13; Van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies*, 191-92.

<sup>40</sup> Van Wolde, “Why the verb ברא does not mean ‘to create’ in Genesis 1,” 12–13, esp. her footnote 23; Van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies*, 191-92. She only mentions three texts: Isa 51:9–10, where the *thwmwt* are only mentioned in v 10, which clearly refers to the pathway through the Red Sea, and does not give any indication about the habitat of the *tnyn* in v 9. In the text mentioned from Psalm 74 (Van Wolde refers to vv 13–14) the *thwm/thwmwt* do not occur, and in the final text Ps 148:7 the *tnynym* are only paralleled by the *thwmwt*. Both are addressed to praise the lord \*from the earth\* (not: from *beneath* the earth). It is striking that they are addressed in a parallel “you sea monsters and \*all\* *tehomot*.” The comparison with the similarly structured vv 3, 9, 11 and also v 2 proves that *tnynym* and *thwmwt* are synonymous and addressed here as animated creatures. This makes it quite impossible to take the *thwmwt* in this text as the dwelling-place of the preceding *tnynym*.

<sup>41</sup> Isa 27:1; Ezek 32:2; Ps 74:13; Job 7:12; Ps 148:7 are difficult to interpret in this connection. In Ezek 29:3, תנין has to be taken as a symbol for the crocodile, living in the river Nile. For Rahab see Ps 89:9–10; Job 26:12. See also the pertinent entries in K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, P.W. van der Horst (eds.), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Second Extensively Revised Edition, Leiden: E.J. Brill/Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans 1999), hereafter, *DDD*<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., Ugaritic *tunannu*. Ugaritic texts too show that Tunannu (also called Leviathan, both in Hebrew as well as in Ugaritic) is one of the monstrous helpers of the Sea god that live in the sea; see G.C. Heider, “*Tannin*,” in: *DDD*<sup>2</sup>, 834–36.

tiated.” There is, however, no text in the HB where it can be proved that the author (or a translator) still had knowledge of a previous meaning “to separate.” To the contrary, the authors of texts that preceded and followed (temporally) Genesis 1 apparently assumed **ברא** to have a meaning related to “construct, build” etc. The Greek translators of the HB often rendered with  $\kappa\tau\iota\zeta\omega$ , “to found, build, create” for **ברא** as well as with  $\pi\omicron\iota\epsilon\omega$ , “to make, build, create.”<sup>43</sup> Florentino García Martínez has shown that for the first time an abstract **בריאה** “creative act” is attested in Ben Sira. In Qumran, the writers also were acquainted with abstract words like **בריאה**, “creation,” and **בריאות**, “creatures.”<sup>44</sup> In all these cases, there is no possibility to connect the nouns to an earlier notion of **ברא**, “to separate.” Second Isaiah often calls YHWH the creator. For instance, the deity is “the creator of the ends of the earth” (Isa 40:28), referring to Isa 40:22b, where YHWH is described as the one who stretches out the heavens and spreads them like a tent, and 40:26, YHWH created (**ברא**) the stars and calls them by name (40:26); this is repeated in Isa 42:5, he is the creator of the heavens, the one who stretches them out; and he is the creator of Jacob (Isa 43:1) and the creator of Israel (Isa 43:15). A rendering “separator” is impossible in all these texts—note that there is only one object in all these cases and the (required) prepositions are missing; see above 4.1.

The idea of God as the creator is further developed by Third Isaiah. He promises that God will create a *new* heaven and a *new* earth (Isa. 65:17), and in the next chapter (Isa 66:22) he will make (**עשה**) this new heaven and new earth. YHWH is described as the creator of praise on the lips of mourners in Israel (Isa. 57:18–19). The context breathes joy and it would be very odd if God instead would make a separation *between* rejoicing and joy, *between* Jerusalem and the people. According to Amos, God is the one who formed the mountains and the creator of the wind (Amos 4:13). Psalm 102:18 parallels a generation to come with a people still yet to be created (**ברא** Niphal). What sense would this text make if it were translated, “a people that has to be separated”? The message of the verse is that these new generations will praise the Lord. Another late text in which God creates something “new” is Jer 31:22. The vision of hope is here that “mothers in Israel will stretch their arms around their children.”<sup>45</sup> This is a gesture of joyful reunion, certainly not separation.

The only case that requires some analysis is Num 16:30. Here **ברא** seems to be paralleled by **בקע** Niphal, “to be split, split open” in v 31. The NEB translation renders the first line of the verse as

<sup>43</sup> As in the case of Gen 1:1.

<sup>44</sup> García Martínez, “Creation in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 48–70.

<sup>45</sup> See B. Becking, *Between Fear and Freedom: Essays on the Interpretation of Jeremiah 30–31* (OTS, 51; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 225.

follows, “but if the Lord makes a great chasm, and the ground opens its mouth ....”<sup>46</sup> However, most modern dictionaries, translations and commentaries prefer to translate **ברא בריאה** as “to create a creation, to create something totally new.”<sup>47</sup> The use of **בריאה** in Qumran supports this rendering. The fact that God is seen as “creating something new,” does not imply (cf. Jer 31:22) the concept of a *creatio ex nihilo*.

#### 4.5. Is **ברא** Always Connected with Two of More Objects?

In the HB the verb **ברא** occurs about 55 times. The position advanced by Van Wolde requires that **ברא** be accompanied by two or more objects, but this is seldom the case. There is no need to discuss all these 55 passages; a few observations and examples suffice. The verb is often used with just a single object. For instance, God created man from the face of the ground (Gen 6:7) which is paralleled by “man and beast and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have *made* them.” The synonymous parallelism suggests that **ברא** only can have a meaning of “create, form, make.” Deut 4:32, Isa 45:12, and Mal 2:10 convey also the idea that God created man on earth.<sup>48</sup> He would create a cloud over Zion (Isa 4:5); he created all that is called by his name (Isa 43:7); he is the creator of the evil smith (Isa 54:16)—and he is the creator of the ravager (Isa 54:16); he is the creator of the fruit of man’s lips (Isa 54:19). A very difficult text to cope with when rendering “to separate, divide” is Ps 51:10, “create in me a clean heart, O God,” paralleled by “and put a new and right spirit in me.” Isa 41:18–20 describes a vision of God’s new creation. He will open rivers on the bare tracks, he will put plants in the wilderness, and men will see it and understand that “the hand of YHWH has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it.” The translation “separate” is not appropriate also, because **ברא** summarizes the previous enumeration of God’s work, described with the verbs **פתח** “open (rivers),” **שׂים** “make (pools of water),” **נָתַן** “put (cedars, acacias, myrtles, pine-trees),” and **שׂים** “set (junipers, ashes, cypresses)” in vv 18–19. Furthermore, the object is a single suffix feminine.

<sup>46</sup> A similar rendering is given by H.E. Hanson, “Num XVI 30 and the Meaning of *bārā*,” *VT* 22 (1972), 353–359; J. Milgrom, *Numbers* (JPS Commentary; Philadelphia: JPS, 1990), 137 with n. 65, who refers for this rendering not only to an earlier article by Hanson, but also to Ibn Ezra. See also Van Leeuwen, “**ברא**,” 731–32.

<sup>47</sup> See e.g. RSV; ASV; JPS; NJB; Ph.J. Budd, *Numbers* (WBC, 5; Waco: Word, 1984), 188; B.A. Levine, *Numbers 1–6* (AB, 4a; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 417; H. Seebass, *Numeri* (BKAT, 4/2; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2003), 168, 171, 200; HALAT, 150; HAHAT, 175; as well as DCH, vol. 2, 263.

<sup>48</sup> In Isa 45:12 this is paralleled by the utterance that he also made the earth and his hands stretched out the heavens; in Mal 2:10 it is paralleled by the statement that all Israelites have just one (heavenly) father.

#### 4.6 ברא in Poetic Parallelism

Within the HB, the verb ברא often occurs in parallelism.<sup>49</sup> In the HB, ברא is paralleled by עשה, “to make,”<sup>50</sup> יצר, “to form,”<sup>51</sup> נטה, “to stretch out (like a tent),” said of the object heaven,<sup>52</sup> בון, “to establish” (Ps 51:12). These instances of word-pairing strongly suggest that the verb ברא is in the same semantic field as verbs that refer to construction activities.

#### 4.7. Preliminary Conclusion

Our observations suggest that Van Wolde’s proposal to translate (את) ברא in Genesis 1 as “to separate (from)” or “to differentiate (into)” has no firm ground in grammar, semantics or linguistics.

### 5. THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF ברא: AN ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL

We would like to offer an alternative to Van Wolde’s proposal. To do so, we wish to address the question of the meaning and significance of ברא from the perspective of a more historical approach. It is worth noting that in the HB, the verb ברא is used only in relatively late texts. In an older text such as Gen 14:19, 22, the word קנה is used, a verb meaning both “to beget” and “to create.” This verb has old roots in the West Semitic languages, in which it could be used to denote divine or human actions.<sup>53</sup> In Ugaritic

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<sup>49</sup> Invoking parallelism to elucidate meaning in Biblical Hebrew and other ancient oriental literary works is by no means obsolete scholarship, as Van Wolde boldly suggested in a Dutch Newspaper (Trouw 16 October 2009, quire 2, 28). To cite only a few recent works demonstrating the opposite: W.G.E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques* (JSOTSup, 26; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 114–159; W.G.E. Watson, *Traditional Techniques in Classical Hebrew Verse* (JSOTSup, 170; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 104–312; A. Wagner (ed.), *Parallelismus membrorum* (OBO, 224; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 2007); A. Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (rev. and expanded ed., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008). See also A.R. White, “Synonymous Expressions,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 8 (1958), 193–207; K.C. Bahl, *Studies in the semantic structure of Hindi: Synonymous nouns and adjectives with karanā* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974); A. Kahlmann, *Traitement automatique d’un dictionnaire de synonymes: étude de sa structure: méthode de contrôle et de perfectionnement*, (Stockholm: Göteborgs Offsettryckerim, 1975); I. Falk, C. Gardent, E. Jacquy, F. Venant, “Grouping Synonyms by Definitions,” *Recent Advances in Natural Language Processing* (2009), <http://arxiv.org/abs/0909.3445v1>.

<sup>50</sup> Gen 5:1; Isa 41:20; 43:7; 45:7, 12, 18; Amos 4:13.

<sup>51</sup> Isa 43:1, 7; 45:7, 18; Amos 4:13.

<sup>52</sup> Isa 42:5; 45:12.

<sup>53</sup> Thus, the human king Kirtu cries out in a lament: “No, I want sons to sire [*’aqny*], many boys I want to beget! [*’am ’id*] (KTU 1.14:II.4–5); and of the goddess “Anatu it is said that he she devised/created (*tqny*) bad thoughts in her heart” (KTU 1.17:VI. 41–42).

texts, the verb is attested in epithets of the Canaanite god Ilu and his wife Athiratu.<sup>54</sup> This epithet is reflected in both in the HB and in epigraphic material. In Genesis 14, El is called **קנה שמים וארץ**, “Creator of heaven and earth,” both by the Canaanite priest Melchizedek (Gen 14:19) and by Abram (Gen 14:22). The epithet “El the Creator of the earth” is also attested in a Phoenician inscription of the eighth century,<sup>55</sup> on a sixth century BCE Hebrew ostrakon from Jerusalem,<sup>56</sup> and on a Punic inscription of the second century BCE.<sup>57</sup> Elsewhere the god Baal-of-heaven took over El’s title and was called *qnh dy ‘r’h* “Creator of the earth.”<sup>58</sup> It seems likely that the Canaanites regarded Ilu/El responsible for the separation of the primordial Flood, though this is not explicitly said or described by the verb *qny*. Ilu/El is the one who dwells at the springs of the Two Rivers.<sup>59</sup>

We assume that, gradually, the formula involving the ambiguous verb **קנה**, which might suggest procreation, became obsolete.<sup>60</sup> The concept that YHWH/God was the creator of heaven and earth, however, was repeated time and again.<sup>61</sup> Apparently, the theological need to refer to creation in a way that sharply contrasted it to any human activity arose in connection with concepts of divine holiness or otherness. Against this background, a specification of the meaning of the verb **ברא** I in the Qal stem emerged in the language. As a result of this specification, the verb **ברא** I Qal became one to be used exclusively with YHWH as grammatical

<sup>54</sup> Ilu is designated as *qny*, “the Creator” (of the gods), several times. It is not warranted to regard this merely as a term for progenitor because also *Ba’lu*, who was his son-in-law, designates Ilu as *qny* “our Creator” (KTU 1.10:III.5); see also KTU 1.3:V.9, *qny w’adn ‘ilm* “Creator and Lord of the gods.” As mother of the gods, the goddess Athiratu is called *qnyt ‘ilm*, “Creatress of the gods” (KTU 1.4:I.23; III.26, 30, 35; IV.32; 1.8:II.2.).

<sup>55</sup> KAI 26:A.III.18; see H. Niehr, *Ba’alšamem: Studien zu Herkunft, Geschichte und Rezeptionsgeschichte eines phönizischen Gottes* (OLA, 123; Louvain: Peeters, 2003), 56–59.

<sup>56</sup> Edited by N. Avigad, “Excavations in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, 1971,” *IEJ* 22 (1972), 195–96; see F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp et al (eds), *Hebrew Inscriptions: Texts from the Biblical Period of the Monarchy with Concordance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 240–43; Van Wolde, “Why the verb **ברא** does not mean ‘to create’ in Genesis 1,” 13.

<sup>57</sup> KAI 129:1.

<sup>58</sup> KAI 244:3.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. M.S. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1994). 225–234.

<sup>60</sup> In this connection it is interesting to note that the Israelite personal name **אלקנה** is attested only between the 10th and 8th century BCE, see the paragraph on the name **בראיה** below footnote 66.

<sup>61</sup> See, apart from Gen 1:1, Exod 20:11 (**עשה**); Isa 40:22 (**נטה**); 42:5 (**ברא**); 45:18 (**ברא**, **עשה**, **כון**); Zech 12:1 (**יסד**, **נטה**); Ps 8:4 (**עשה**, **כון**); 134:3 (**עשה**); Prov 3:19f. (**כון**, **יסד**); Neh 9:6 (**עשה**), etc.

subject. In view of the parallel material mentioned above, it is not unlikely that originally this verb meant something like “to construct, build.”<sup>62</sup> It is difficult to establish a date for the theologically motivated specification of **בָּרָא**. 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.<sup>63</sup> 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 post-exilic date.<sup>64</sup> We cannot embark here in a full discussion on the dating of these texts, but we may note that the specified use of **בָּרָא** is widely attested in exilic and postexilic texts, especially in Deutero-Isaiah.

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<sup>65</sup> who uses **יָצַר** “to form, shape” (Gen 2:7–8, 19), **עָשָׂה** “to make” (Gen 2:18), and **בָּנָה** “to build” (Gen 2:22) to describe God’s work of creation, Ezek 28:13, 15 uses

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<sup>62</sup> See above. Cf. Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds*, 387.

<sup>63</sup> Cf., for instance, Humbert, *Opuscles*, 149–50, 160; A. Angerstorfer, *Der Schöpfergott des Alten Testaments: Herkunft und Bedeutungsentwicklung des hebräischen Terminus br’ (baru) “schaffen,”* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1979), on the pre-exilic texts: 49ff., 224–25.

<sup>64</sup> On Amos 4:13 see e.g. D.S. Simundson, *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah* (Abingdon O.T. Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 191. On Deut 4:32 e.g. E. Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch* (BZAW, 189; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), 108. On Jer 31:22 see, for instance, W. McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) vol. 2, 805; Becking, *Between Fear and Freedom*, 216–225.

<sup>65</sup> In view of the recent discussion on the emergence of the Pentateuch/Torah, we prefer to avoid the label Yahwist; see, e.g., C. Levin, *Der Jahwist* (FRLANT, 157; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1993); J.C. Gertz, K. Schmid, M. Witte (eds.), *Abschied vom Jahwisten. Die Komposition des Hexateuch in der jüngsten Diskussion* (BZAW 315; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002); J. van Seters, “In the Babylonian Exile with J. Between Judgment in Ezekiel and Salvation in Second Isaiah,” B. Becking and M.C.A. Korpel (eds.), *The Crisis of Israelite Religion. Transformation of Religious Tradition in Exilic and Post-Exilic Times* (OTS, 42; Leiden: Brill 1999), 71–89; J.-L. Ska, *Introduction à la lecture du Pentateuque. Clés pour l’interprétation des cinq premiers livres de la Bible* (Bruxelles: Éditions Lessius), 2000, 298–99; K. Schmid, “Die Unteilbarkeit der Weisheit. Überlegungen zur sogenannten Paradieserzählung und ihrer theologischen Tendenz,” *ZAW* 114 (2002), 21–39. The category “garden-story”—see also E.J. van Wolde, *A Semiotic Analysis of Genesis 2–3. A Semiotic Theory and Method of Analysis to the Story of the Garden of Eden* (SSN, 25; Assen-Maastricht: Van Gorcum 1989—parallels Mettinger’s label “Eden narrative,” T.N.D. Mettinger, *The Eden Narrative. A Literary and Religio-historical Study of Genesis 2–3* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns), 2007.

ברא.<sup>66</sup> This procedure of replacing “old” terms for creating may also have been applied to Ps 89:13 where MT reads:

צפון וימין אתה בראתם

the north and the south, you have created them.

The so-called Job-stele from Sheikh *Sa’d* (13th century BCE) proves that at a certain moment (YHWH)-El took over the mountain Zaphon (“north”) as a divine abode from Baal. (YHWH)-El was described at that time as *’il qny spn* “Ilu the Creator/Owner of the Zaphon.”<sup>67</sup> This observation gives rise to the assumption that Ps 89:13 is reframing “traditional” creation language that used the verb קנה with a more contemporary concept that uses ברא.

In 1 Chron 8:21 a Benjaminite man is mentioned, named Be-rayah, בראיה. Scholars agree on its meaning: “YHWH created (the child).”<sup>68</sup> It is hardly imaginable that the parents would have named their son “YHWH separated (the child)” unless it would mean something “YHWH differentiated (the child from the mother—that is, distantiating a primary unity)” as Van Wolde might suggest. However, the name can be seen as a later parallel to אלקנה, “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 בנה “to build,” קנה with the meaning of “to beget, bear, create,” and יצר “to shape (like a potter),”<sup>69</sup> would have been exchanged then for ברא—a verb for building that had become obsolete in everyday Hebrew and therefore was a suitable choice if one wanted to avoid an anthropomorphism. If that is true, it would explain why a man named בראיה only occurs in a quite late text like 1 Chronicles and that this name is not attested in 10th to 8th century inscriptions, whereas more anthropomorphic names like עשהיהו, “YHWH made (the child),”<sup>70</sup> and אלקנה do occur in those times.<sup>71</sup>

In other words, the preference for ברא is a case of a theologically motivated preference for a “neologism,” meant to avoid anth-

<sup>66</sup> See also Mettinger, *The Eden Narrative*, 85–98.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. De Moor, *Rise*, 148–191.

<sup>68</sup> See, e.g., M. Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen im Rahmen der gemeinsemitischen Namengebung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1928), 171; J.D. Fowler, *Theophoric Personal Names in Ancient Hebrew: A Comparative Study* (JSOTSup, 49; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 92.

<sup>69</sup> For more equivalents see Van Leeuwen, “ברא,” 730.

<sup>70</sup> J.H. Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions* (HSM, 31; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 60, 7 times; J. Renz, W. Röllig, *Handbuch der althebräischen Epigraphik* (HAE, Vol. 2/2; Darmstadt: WBG, 2003), 454, 10 times, see the discussion of the name at 16.68, p. 351.

<sup>71</sup> HAE, 1.101.

ropomorphisms that were also current in Canaan. However, the theological concept behind the choice of **ברא** has not been the concept of a *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>72</sup> The HB shares three modes of creation with other religions in the ancient Near East: creation through the word alone, creation as making (metaphors of the builder, smith or potter) and *creatio continua*. These modes were not experienced as mutually exclusive. 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 **ברא** was needed, instead of the ambiguous **קנה**.<sup>73</sup>

## 6. DOES IT MATTER?

Yes, it does. And yet, at the same time, it does not. The postexilic Priestly Writer who was responsible for the final redaction of Genesis 1 was probably acquainted with the Babylonian creation myth Enuma Elish, which was soberly re-enacted during every New Year festival in the Babylonian cult.<sup>74</sup> It was a major component of the religion of the Babylonian enemy who had destroyed the temple in Jerusalem shortly before. In that mythological narrative, not discussed by Van Wolde, the Babylonian creator god Marduk first defeats the sea monster Tiamat.<sup>75</sup> This has given rise to theories that also in Israel the work of the creator was preceded by a combat between God and the monstrous Sea.<sup>76</sup> Some passages quoted

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<sup>72</sup> See Humbert, *Opuscles*, 156f.; Angerstorfer, *Schöpfergott*, 224f.; M.S. Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 49–59.

<sup>73</sup> For the reason that the verb **ברא** is used in Gen 1:1–2:4 alongside other verbs like **עשה**, see the discussion of the structure of the text and the deliberate use at the beginning and end of creation (days one and five and six, as well of the inclusion of the entire passage of Gen 1:1–2:4, by Smith, *Priestly Vision*, 48. Furthermore, in Gen 1:1 it is used to describe creation as a whole (heaven and earth), and in Gen 1:21 it is used for the sea monsters that were considered bad deities outside Israel. Here, they are described as mere creations of God. Finally creation of man is described by the verb **ברא** which emphasizes human beings as special creations of God, and gives them their special, but restricted place, above all other creatures .

<sup>74</sup> See A. Zgoll, “Schauseite, verborgene Seite und geheime Deutung des babylonischen Neujahrsfestes: Entwurf einer Handlungstheorie von ‘Zeigen und Verbergen,’” B. Streck (ed.), *Die gezeigte und die verborgene Kultur* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007), 165–190; K. Sparks, “Enuma Elish and Priestly Mimesis: Elite Emulation in Nascent Judaism,” *JBL* 126 (2007), 629–32 (625–48).

<sup>75</sup> Her name is etymologically related to Hebrew **תהום**, the primordial Flood also known from Canaanite sources. This is the word used in Gen 1:2 and in Ugaritic texts describing the creator El whose name is also used for the God of Israel in the HB. See B. Alster, “Tiamat,” in *DDD*<sup>2</sup>, 867–69.

<sup>76</sup> In its classical formulation by H. Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Ur-*

above lend some support to such an assumption. However, in our opinion this is exactly what the Priestly Writer could no longer accept. He was one of the first thinkers who wanted to demythologize the concept of creation, as his treatment of sun and moon as mere “lights” (Gen. 1:14–18) demonstrates—they were important divine beings elsewhere in the ancient Near East.

In Genesis 1 the creative work of God does not start with the cleaving of the skull of a sea monster,<sup>77</sup> or the dividing of its flesh,<sup>78</sup> or splitting its body like a stockfish,<sup>79</sup> as material for the making of heaven and earth,<sup>80</sup> but with the words וַיְהִי אֹרֶךְ, “let there be light,” which meant the end of darkness (Gen 1:3).<sup>81</sup> At this stage there was no need of sun, moon, and stars to illuminate the rough clump that would be divided only later on (Gen 1:6–10).<sup>82</sup> There was light breaking through the primordial darkness. The division of light and darkness (Gen 1:4) is described by a different verb (בָּדַל Hiphil),

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*zeit und Endzeit: eine religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung über Gen 1 und Ap Job 12* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1895). See Ph.J. Hefner, “God and Chaos: The Demiurge versus the Ungrund,” *Zygon* 19 (1984), 469–85; H. Rechenmacher, “Gott und das Chaos: ein Beitrag zum Verständnis von Gen 1,1–3,” *ZAW* 114 (2002), 1–19.

<sup>77</sup> En. El. IV.131: “He turned back to where Tiamat lay bound, he straddled the legs and smashed (Akkadian *parā'u*) her skull.”

<sup>78</sup> “He (= Marduk) gazed at the huge body (of the slain deity), pondering how to use it, what to create (*zāzu* D-stem) from the dead carcass” (En. El. IV.136). The praesens used here suggests to translate “(how) he would divide the clump.”

<sup>79</sup> “He split it apart like a stockfish” (En. El. IV.137). The verb used here is *hepū*, not *parā'u*.

<sup>80</sup> “With the upper half he constructed the arc of sky” (En. El. IV.136). The actual making of heaven is described with the verb *banū* which basically means “to build.” In En. El. IV.145 the making of the earth is described by the verb *kānu* D.

<sup>81</sup> See M.S. Smith, “Light in Genesis 1:3—Created or Uncreated: A Question of Priestly Mysticism?” in: C. Cohn e.a. (eds), *Birkat Shalom Studies in the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Literature, and Postbiblical Judaism Presented to Shalom M. Paul on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns), vol. 1, 2008, 125–34; B.K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 183–86.

<sup>82</sup> In Gen 1:2 the Israelite view on the desolate state of the primordial earth is described with the words תָּהוּ וּבִהוּ, which have a parallel in the Akkadian of Ugarit. Cf. D.T. Tsumura, “*Nabalkutu*[t], *tu-a-bi-[ú]* and *tôhû wābôhû*,” *UF* 19 (1987), 309–315. The equation with the Akkadian verb *nabalkutu* shows that a disorderly, infertile state is described.

The circumstance that the newly created אָרֶץ had to be renamed in Gen 1:10 might indicate that אָרֶץ in Gen 1:1–2 should be understood in the more narrow sense of “ground, soil,” a meaning also attested in other parts of the Bible.

not by **ברא**.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, the separation of light and darkness is not the same as creating heaven and earth.

The decision of the Priestly Writer to break away from the then current explanations of the existence of the cosmos required a neologism. It was one of the first attempts to abandon an animated concept of the cosmos and was meant to avoid the concept of a combat between God and primordial monsters as the starting point of the orderly world.

The position of the Priestly Writer mattered. It made possible a detached view of nature which eventually would open the road to modern science. And yet one may say, that it does not matter very much anymore. Let us imagine for a moment that the author of Genesis 1 would have given an account of the cosmos coming into being in terms of modern astronomy. Nobody would have understood her or his account. Genesis 1 expresses the idea of an initially good creation in terms that still cling to ideas current in a world long past. Writers of that era realized the impossibility of describing the divine properly in human language. For that reason the HB ended up several different concepts of creation, just as other religions in the ancient world included different creation stories side by side. The final redactors of the HB (and of other religious texts in antiquity) indicated that there is more than one possibility to approach the inconceivable. Van Wolde's solution would lead us back to an exclusively mythological view on creation, which is neither convincing nor acceptable in the light of the evidence, as we have tried to show.

In sum and to place our discussion within the general frame of the theological approach of the author of Genesis 1, this text reflects 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.<sup>84</sup> To avoid an anthropomorphic confusion the verb **ברא** was used instead of the verb **בנה**.

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<sup>83</sup> Van Wolde also accepts a semantic difference between the two verbs. See "Why the verb **ברא** does not mean 'to create' in Genesis 1," 20–21; Van Wolde, *Reframing Biblical Studies*, 197–200.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Smith, *Priestly Vision*, 69–70.

**APPENDIX: TABLE WITH CURRENT VIEWS ON THE  
MEANING OF THE HEBREW VERB ברא**

ברא	I	II	III
LHA (Zorell), 126–127	“creavit, procreavit” ... “ar. <i>bara’a</i> ab aram. mutuatum <sup>85</sup> ”	Piel « cecidit, secavit instrumento »	“pinguis, robustus fuit”
KBL, 146f.	“asa. ברא build”	“[ar. <i>bariya</i> ] be extraordinarily fat”	“[ar. <i>bry</i> ] form by cutting”
HALAT, Bd. 1, 146	“ar. <i>bara’a</i> schaf-fen (Gott), asa. <i>br’</i> “bauen”, soq. gebären, asa. <i>mbr’</i> “Bau”	“ar. <i>warija</i> sehr fett sein”	“ar. <i>barā</i> zurechtschneiden, ph. הברא Bildhauer (...) pi: “abholzen, roden”
HAHAT, Bd. 1, 172–173	“ar. <i>bara’a</i> schaf-fen (v. Gott), asa. BR’ bauen”	“mästen”	“ar. BRY : <i>barā</i> ; zurechtschneiden (...) Pr.: (den Wald) lichten, roden; übertr. Zerhauen”
DCH, vol. 2, 258f.	“to create (alw. of God)” (with parallels עשה and יצר)	“be fat”	“cut, cut down, cut out”
NIDOTTE, vol. 1, 728–736 <sup>85</sup>	“create, separate as by cutting”	“fatten”	“clear out (trees), cut, destroy”
Alonso Schökel, <i>Diccionario Bíblico-Hebreo-Español</i> , 1994, 134	“crear, dar el ser, sacar de la nada, hacer, producir, fundar, formar, plasma”, listing the synonyms עשה and יצר	“cebar”	“roturar, cortar, despedazar”
Klein, <i>Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language</i> , 1987, 82	“to create”	“to be fat”	“to cut down (a forest)”

<sup>85</sup> It is quite strange that NIDOTTE discerns between three different roots of ברא and nevertheless adds the meaning “cut” of ברא III also to ברא I. Apparently, this is caused by the fact that the three lemmata were written by three different authors. In the first lemma the meaning “cut” seems to be based on the Genesis commentary by Westermann, who on his part referred for this meaning to Van der Ploeg and Dantine.