

Bereshit as Subject in Genesis 1:1: A Philological Reassessment

Allen Donow¹

Independent researcher

Abstract

This article re-examines Genesis 1:1 through a strictly philological lens, asking whether Biblical Hebrew permits a subject-initial reading in which *berē šît* functions as a nominal subject. The argument distinguishes grammar from theology and tests the proposal against attested Biblical Hebrew patterns in subject-initial clause structure, direct-object marking, coordination, asyndeton, and onomastic plausibility. The central claim is limited: a subject-initial parse with *berē šît* is grammatically licit but distributionally under-attested in the presently surveyed corpus. No exact parallel to the Gen 1:1 object chain has yet been identified in the Hebrew Bible, though a set of near-misses helps define the issue more sharply. The article does not claim proof of authorial intent; rather, it argues that the subject-reading remains linguistically admissible and deserves consideration within the range of possible readings of the consonantal text.

1. Introduction

Genesis 1:1 opens the Hebrew Bible with a clause whose first word—*בראשית* (*berē šît*)—is syntactically contested and exegetically consequential. In the unpointed script of the oldest Hebrew witnesses, the form can be construed in more than one way. Later Masoretic vocalization regularized one reading, and major ancient versions likewise favored a clarified construction. This article asks a narrower question than the history of interpretation usually does: **does Biblical Hebrew permit Genesis 1:1 to be read with *berē šît* as a nominal subject, without violating attested clause patterns and coordination behavior?**

The approach here is descriptive and corpus-based. Biblical Hebrew is treated as an ancient linguistic corpus, not as a prescriptive rulebook. The argument therefore rests on attested usage: first, the licensing of subject-initial clauses in prose; second, the behavior of direct-object series, especially the distribution of *'et*, the placement of *waw* within lists, and the role of asyndeton; and third, the limited but relevant fact that phrase-like forms can function nominally in Hebrew onomastics. The aim is not to prove authorial intent, but to test whether the proposed reading is grammatically admissible.

The claim advanced is modest. Biblical Hebrew grammar does not preclude a clause that begins with a nominal subject, and such clauses serve recognizable discourse functions. More specifically, the object-series in Gen 1:1 exhibits a licensed but distributionally under-attested coordination profile: its individual components are attested separately, even though no exact parallel to the full Gen 1:1 fingerprint has yet been located. This remains compatible with a reading in which אֱלֹהִים functions as a category object while the following pair is definite.

The argument remains deliberately limited. It brackets theology, does not claim proof of authorial intention, and **concludes only that a subject-initial reading with *berē šît* is grammatically licit though distributionally under-attested in the presently surveyed corpus.** Because Genesis 1:1 stands at the head of Scripture, clarifying that grammatical possibility matters not only for the syntax of

¹ This article was prepared with analytical and drafting assistance from ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5 Thinking). All final interpretations, claims, and responsibility remain with the author.

v. 1 itself, but also for how vv. 2–3 are related and how later interpretive traditions should be evaluated.

2. Subject-initial licensing in Biblical Hebrew

Biblical Hebrew often favors verb-first order in running narrative, but it also employs subject-initial clauses for recognizable discourse purposes such as topic shift, scene entry, evaluation, and emphatic assertion. The point at issue here is not whether S-initial order is common, but whether it is grammatically licensed. On that narrower question, the evidence is clear.

A few examples illustrate the pattern. **וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֶהָב** (“And Rebekah said,” Gen 27:6) and **וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֶהָב** (“Now Israel loved,” Gen 37:3) show subject-first clauses in narrative progression. **וַיִּשְׁבּוּ דָוִד יוֹשֵׁב** (“David was staying...”) illustrates an S + participial frame used for scene-setting. **וַיְהוֹה אֱלֹהֵי אַחִיָּהָ** (“And YHWH said to Ahijah,” 1 Kgs 14:5) shows the same pattern with a divine subject, while **וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה שָׁמַיִם עֲשָׂה** (“YHWH made the heavens,” 1 Chr 16:26) provides a concise declarative example with a nominal subject preceding the verb.

Book- or unit-initial clauses also favor S-initial framing more readily than running narrative. Thus **אִישׁ עוֹץ בְּאֶרֶץ עוּז** (“There was a man in the land of Uz,” Job 1:1a) and **וָאֲנִי בְּתוֹךְ הַגּוֹלָה** (“And I was among the exiles,” Ezek 1:1a) show that S-initial structures can function as incipits or new-unit markers. These do not erase the broader VSO tendency of Biblical Hebrew prose, but they do show that subject-first order is an available and meaningful option at discourse boundaries.

The relevance for Gen 1:1 is limited but important: beginning the clause with a nominal subject is not blocked by Biblical Hebrew syntax in principle. The real question, therefore, is not whether an S-initial reading is possible at all, but whether the specific object-chain that follows can support it.

3. The object chain in Genesis 1:1

The syntactic burden of the proposal lies not only in allowing **בְּרֵאשִׁית** (*berē'šît*) to stand as a subject, but in treating what follows as a coordinated object chain under **בָּרָא**. On that reading, the sequence is parsed as three objects: **אֱלֹהִים, אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ**. The question is therefore not whether Biblical Hebrew prefers such a pattern, but whether its coordination system permits it.

The evidence shows that Biblical Hebrew does not employ a single rigid template for lists. The conjunction **waw** may appear before every item, only before the last, in grouped pairs, or irregularly; likewise, adjacent items may stand in **asyndeton**, with no conjunction between them. Thus **Gen 1:12** has a category series with final-only **waw** and an asyndetic break between the first two items: **דָּשָׁא · וְעֵץ עֹשֶׂה־פְּרִי עֵשֶׂב מְזֵרִיעַ זֵרַע · עֵשֶׂב מְזֵרִיעַ זֵרַע** (“grass, seed-bearing herb, and fruit-bearing tree”). **Gen 31:10** likewise shows a three-item class list with final-only **waw**: **עֲקָדִים · נִקְדָּיִם · וּבְרִידִים** (“ring-streaked, speckled, and grizzled”). These are not exact parallels to Gen 1:1, but they demonstrate that Hebrew list structure is flexible enough to allow final-only **waw** and early asyndeton.

Within direct-object series proper, fully definite chains marked by repeated 'et are common. **Gen 1:21** reads: **וְאֶת־כָּל־עוֹף־כַּנָּף · וְאֶת־כָּל־נֶפֶשׁ הַחַיָּה ... וְאֶת־כָּל־נֶפֶשׁ הַגְּדֹלִים · אֵת־הַתַּיִנוֹת הַגְּדֹלִים**; **Gen 1:25** is similar: **אֵת־חַיַּת־הָאָרֶץ · וְאֵת־הַבְּהֵמָה · וְאֵת־כָּל־רֶמֶשׂ אֲרָצוֹת · אֵת־חַיַּת־הָאָרֶץ · וְאֵת־הַבְּהֵמָה**. The same pattern appears in personal lists such as **Gen 6:10**, **אֶת־חַם · וְאֶת־חֶם · וְאֶת־חֶם**, which is an **apposition control**, and in larger family or household lists such as **Josh 2:13**. These examples show that repeated 'et before definite objects is perfectly ordinary.

Mixed marking is also attested, though not in the precise shape required for Gen 1:1. In **Gen 30:35**, the

sequence **את־העם אשר אתו · ואת־הצאן · ואת־** shows two 'et-marked items followed by a third definite item without 'et. Similarly, **Gen 32:7 [Heb. 32:8]** has **את־הבקר · והגמלים**, where the last item is definite but unmarked by 'et. These cases matter because they show that mixed object-marking is not itself impossible in Biblical Hebrew. What they do not show is the exact Gen 1:1 profile: an initial unmarked/category object followed by two definite 'et-marked objects, with **asyndeton** between items 1 and 2 and **waw** only before the last item.

Apposition must also be distinguished from simple coordination. Some superficially similar passages are not true parallels because they involve a head term followed by naming appositives. Thus **Gen 6:10** — **שלושה בנים, את־שם את־הם ואת־יפת** — is best read as “three sons, namely Shem, Ham, and Japheth,” not as a mixed object chain. Likewise **Exod 1:11**, **ויבן ערי מסכנות לפרעה את־פתם ואת־רעמסס**, gives a category head (“store-cities”) followed by names. These controls are important because Gen 1:1 lacks the usual cues of apposition. On the proposed reading, **אֱלֹהִים** is not a summary head coextensive with “the heavens and the earth,” but a category term distinct from the definite pair that follows.

The search was conducted at **two levels**. At the broader **Tier 1** level, the question was whether Biblical Hebrew attests any **single-clause direct-object chain** that mixes **indefinite** and **definite** noun phrases, even in a simpler two-item pattern. Such a case would have shown that mixed definiteness within one object spine is at least available in principle. At the narrower **Tier 2** level, the question was whether any clause matches the specific Gen 1:1 fingerprint: **an unmarked/category first object followed by two definite 'et-marked objects, with asyndeton between items 1–2 and final-only waw before the last**. In the present sweep, **no clear hit** was found at either level.

The result is therefore limited but clear. First, Biblical Hebrew coordination does allow the **individual components** relevant to Gen 1:1: final-only **waw**, early **asyndeton**, repeated 'et, and mixed marking of a different kind. Second, the specific combination required here remains unmatched in the presently surveyed corpus: **an unmarked/category first object followed by two definite 'et-marked objects, with asyndeton between the first and second items and final-only waw before the last**. A subject-initial reading of Gen 1:1 is therefore not blocked by object-series grammar, but the resulting chain remains **distributionally under-attested**.

The components are attested; the mixed-definiteness object spine is not clearly paralleled; the full Gen 1:1 fingerprint remains unmatched.

The question now narrows further. If the clause frame is licit and the object chain is not excluded in principle, the remaining issue is whether **בראשית** can plausibly bear nominal force. That is the limited task of the next section.

4. Onomastic plausibility

If the clause frame is licit and the object chain is not excluded in principle, the remaining question is narrower: can **בראשית** plausibly bear **nominal** force? The claim here is limited. Onomastics cannot prove that **berē šit** is a name in Gen 1:1. It can, however, test the stronger objection that such a reading is grammatically impossible in principle.

Biblical Hebrew onomastics does allow **phrase-like material** to lexicalize as names. Most relevant are names built from **prepositional bases**, since these are closest in form to **בראשית**. Examples such as **בְּצִלְאֵל** and **בְּסוּדְיָה** show that preposition-initial or phrase-like material can be lexicalized as a proper name rather than remaining only a freely compositional phrase. This does not mean that every such

form is a name, nor does it deny the ordinary historical analysis of בראשית as בראשית + ב; it means only that Hebrew naming practice does not exclude nominal force for a form with that surface shape.

The force of the onomastic argument is therefore modest but real. It does not demonstrate that בראשית must be a name or title in Gen 1:1. It does show that a nominal value for a phrase-like, preposition-initial form is not excluded by Hebrew naming practice. The objection that berē'šît cannot possibly function nominally is therefore too strong. At most, one may say that such a reading is unusual and must be judged in combination with the syntax and coordination profile already discussed.

That returns the argument to its proper limit: **onomastics keeps the reading in play; it does not settle it.**

5. Elohim in Genesis 1:1–3: Homograph Resolution and Discourse Shift

One question remains. On the reading proposed here, אֱלֹהִים in Gen 1:1 is construed as the **first object** of בראשית, whereas from Gen 1:3 onward the same written form appears as the **subject** of the creative verbs. This is not a grammatical contradiction, because אֱלֹהִים is a familiar **homograph** in Biblical Hebrew: it may denote “**gods/powers**” as a common plural, or **Elohim/God** as a proper singular.

On the present reading, Gen 1:1 takes the form in the first sense, as an **unmarked category object**, followed by the two definite objects אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם and וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ. From Gen 1:3 onward, however, the same form is reintroduced as **subject**, and the accompanying **3ms** verbal agreement cues the proper-singular reading, *Elohim*. Biblical Hebrew does not require an orthographically identical form to keep the same grammatical role or semantic value across clause boundaries.

The point is limited but important: the proposal does not depend on making אֱלֹהִים mean the same thing throughout Gen 1:1–3. It depends only on the claim that the form may be read **as a common-plural object in v.1** and **as the proper-singular subject in v.3**, with the shift signaled by syntax, agreement, and normal discourse reorientation.

6. Replication and limits

The argument of this article remains intentionally testable. The corpus search was conducted at two levels. At the broader **Tier 1** level, the question was whether Biblical Hebrew attests any **single-clause direct-object chain** mixing **indefinite** and **definite** noun phrases. At the narrower **Tier 2** level, the question was whether any clause matches the specific Gen 1:1 fingerprint: **an unmarked/category first object followed by two definite 'et-marked objects, with asyndeton between items 1–2 and final-only waw before the last**. In the present sweep, no clear hit was found at either level.

That negative result should be stated carefully. It does **not** show that the Gen 1:1 reading is ungrammatical. What it shows is that the proposed pattern is **distributionally under-attested** in the currently surveyed corpus. At the same time, the sweep did recover the relevant **components** separately: subject-initial clause frames, repeated 'et marking, final-only **waw**, early **asyndeton**, and several kinds of near-miss coordination. The absence of the full fingerprint therefore narrows the claim without eliminating it.

A SHEBANQ-based export workflow, extended through CSV aggregation and script-based screening, proved useful in identifying candidate verses and exposing the limits of the underlying annotation

model. In particular, visible object series may be encoded either as a single complex Objc phrase or as material distributed across linked clauses. For that reason, database results were treated here as a **screening layer**, not as direct proof. The strongest conclusion that the evidence presently supports is therefore methodological as well as grammatical: **the reading remains admissible, but not yet paralleled by a clear corpus match.**

Conclusion

This article has argued a limited point. Biblical Hebrew does not exclude a reading of Genesis 1:1 in which **בראשית** functions as a nominal subject. Subject-initial clause frames of the relevant sort are licensed, though non-default. The coordinated object chain required by the proposal is not forbidden by Hebrew list behavior, though its full feature stack remains **distributionally under-attested** in the presently surveyed corpus. Hebrew onomastics, finally, shows that phrase-like prefixed forms can bear nominal force, so the name-value of **berē'šît** cannot be dismissed as impossible in principle.

The result is therefore neither proof nor mere speculation. It is a constrained philological conclusion: a subject-initial reading of Gen 1:1 with **berē'šît** as nominal subject is **grammatically licit**, though **distributionally under-attested**, and should remain within the range of serious possibilities for the consonantal text. The argument does not establish authorial intent and does not compel a theological conclusion. It does, however, show that the standard dismissal of the reading as grammatically impossible is too strong.

The issue, then, is not whether the reading can be ruled out in advance, but whether philology should continue to reckon with it. On the evidence presently available, the answer is yes.