

Bereshit as Word: Genesis 1:1 and the Theological Plausibility of Creative Speech

Allen Donow¹

Independent researcher

Abstract

This article develops one theological trajectory opened by the Bereshit-subject reading of Genesis 1:1. It does not argue that the pointed Masoretic form *bʿrē šīt*, parsed as “in/at the beginning,” lexically means “word,” nor that the proposed designation **Bereshit** is a lexical synonym for *dābār*, *memrā*, or *logos*. Nor does it argue that Genesis 1:1 by itself proves Christian Logos theology. Its claim is narrower and more disciplined: if the consonantal sequence בראשית, here designated **Bereshit** for the proposed reading, is read as the nominal or onomastic subject of *baraʾ*, then **Bereshit** may be theologically construed as the mode of God’s creative speech, the named form of divine self-expression by which creation comes to be.

The argument proceeds under philological and theological constraint. It first distinguishes lexical meaning from theological construal. It then examines the speech-pattern of Genesis 1, the biblical “word of YHWH” as effective divine agency, the Jewish Word/Memra trajectory as reverential and mediating language, and the Christian Logos trajectory culminating in John 1. The article argues that a Bereshit-as-Word reading is most plausible as a Christian theological development of the broader Bereshit-subject proposal. It is not a grammatical proof of Christology, but it offers a coherent way for Christian theology to receive Genesis 1:1 as naming God’s creative Word in act.

Introduction: Why Bereshit as Word?

The first three studies² in this project established a sequence of inquiry. The first asked whether Genesis 1:1 may be read with the unpointed consonantal sequence בראשית, here designated **Bereshit**, as a nominal or onomastic subject in a subject-initial clause. That study did not claim that the pointed Masoretic form *bʿrē šīt*, parsed as “in/at the beginning,” functions as the subject. The second asked whether such a reading was historically conceivable before later stabilization through translation, vocalization, commentary, and doctrinal memory. The third asked what theological construal becomes plausible if the grammatical and historical objections are set aside. That study proposed the broad category of God’s originating creative agency.

Terminology note. In this article, Bereshit refers to the proposed nominal or onomastic construal of the consonantal sequence בראשית. By contrast, *bʿrē šīt* refers to the received Masoretic vocalization normally parsed as a prepositional expression, “in/at the beginning.” The article’s Word-language is therefore theological and functional, not lexical.

The present article narrows that theological field. Among the possible registers for understanding *Bereshit*—Name, Principle, Wisdom, Word/Memra, Logos, or creative agency—this study follows the Word trajectory in particular. Its question is not whether the proposed designation Bereshit lexically

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² The three prior studies are: (a) *Bereshit as Subject in Genesis 1:1: A Philological Reassessment of the Unpointed Consonantal Text*; (b) *From Openness to Stabilization: Genesis 1:1 in the Masoretic, Versional, Rabbinic, and Christian Traditions*; and (c) *Bereshit as Subject in Genesis 1:1: Theological Plausibility under Philological Constraint*.

means “word” in Hebrew. It does not. Nor is the question whether Genesis 1:1 explicitly teaches the later Christian doctrine of the Logos. It does not do that either. The question is more precise: if *Bereshit* is read as subject, can it be understood theologically as the mode of God’s creative speech?

That question arises naturally from the texture of Genesis 1 itself. The chapter repeatedly presents creation as effected through divine speech: “And God said.” Creation is not only narrated as an act of divine power; it is narrated as an act of divine address. God speaks, and reality is ordered. Light appears, boundaries are established, creatures emerge, and creation receives form through the effective word of God. A *Bereshit*-subject reading therefore invites a theological possibility: the opening word of Scripture may name the creative speech that the chapter then unfolds.

The proposal remains bounded. It does not turn *Bereshit* into a synonym for *dābār*, *memrā*, or *logos*. It does not collapse Jewish Memra traditions into Christian Logos theology. It does not claim that John 1 is a grammatical commentary on Genesis 1:1. Instead, it argues that if *Bereshit* is subject, then Christian theology may plausibly receive it as a designation of God’s creative Word in act. The result is a Christian theological trajectory grounded in philological restraint, respectful of Jewish interpretive categories, and open to the theological depth of Scripture’s first word.

1. Method: Lexical Meaning and Theological Construal

The first methodological requirement is clarity about what the article is not claiming. The pointed Masoretic form *bʿrē šīt*, parsed as “in/at the beginning,” does not lexically mean “word.” Nor does the proposed designation **Bereshit** function as a lexical synonym for “word.” The ordinary Hebrew term for “word,” “matter,” or “thing” is *dābār*. In Aramaic, the relevant term for “word” is *memrā*. In Greek, the term central to Christian Logos theology is *logos*. These are not interchangeable lexical items, and no responsible argument should pretend that **Bereshit** simply means what they mean.

The claim is therefore not lexical equivalence. It is theological construal. If **Bereshit** functions as the subject of *baraʾ*, then it names the agency by which creation occurs. Since Genesis 1 immediately unfolds creation through divine speech, the subject-reading allows **Bereshit** to be understood as the named form or mode of that creative speech. The distinction is important. The article does not say, “**Bereshit** means Word.” It says, “If **Bereshit** is subject, then it may function theologically as the designation of God’s creative Word in act.”

This distinction protects the argument from two opposite errors. On one side, it prevents a forced lexical claim. The proposal does not depend on redefining the received Masoretic form *bʿrē šīt* or treating **Bereshit** as a lexical synonym for *dābār*, *memrā*, or *logos*. On the other side, it prevents theological timidity from ignoring the literary and canonical force of the chapter. Genesis 1 is saturated with divine speech. The repeated formula “And God said” is not ornamental. It is the narrative mode through which creation is ordered, distinguished, and actualized.

The method is therefore functional before it is ontological. The article asks what *Bereshit* does in the clause if read as subject. It creates. It stands at the threshold of the chapter that immediately depicts creation by divine speech. Within that textual field, *Bereshit* can be understood not as an abstract “beginning,” nor as a second creator, but as the mode of God’s effective speech. It is God’s creative self-expression named at the threshold of Scripture.

This method also requires theological restraint. A Christian reading may receive *Bereshit* through the Logos trajectory, but it may not claim that Genesis 1:1 by itself states the full content of John 1 or later Nicene doctrine. The movement from *Bereshit* to Word to Logos is a theological trajectory, not a

grammatical necessity. It is a way of receiving the text under Christian confession, not a way of bypassing philology.

The governing distinction can be stated simply: *Bereshit* is not lexically “word,” but under the subject-reading it may be theologically construed as the mode of God’s creative speech.

2. Genesis 1 and the Pattern of Creative Speech

Genesis 1 is the natural starting point for a *Bereshit*-as-Word trajectory because the chapter presents creation through divine speech. After the opening clause, the repeated formula “And God said” structures the emergence of created order. Light appears by divine command. The expanse is established by divine command. Waters are gathered, vegetation appears, lights are appointed, living creatures emerge, and humanity is addressed within a world ordered by speech.

This does not mean that speech is separate from God. In Genesis 1, divine speech is not an independent power beside the Creator. It is God acting by speaking. The word is effective because it is God’s word. The speech does not persuade preexistent matter, negotiate with rival forces, or depend on some external mechanism. It commands, and creation responds. The theological force lies in the identity between divine will and effective utterance: what God speaks, God accomplishes.

Under the stabilized temporal reading of Genesis 1:1, the opening clause identifies God as Creator, and the following verses narrate the ordering of creation through speech. Under the *Bereshit*-subject reading, the opening clause may be heard differently. *Bereshit* would not merely set the time of creation. It would name the creative agency through which creation comes to be. Genesis 1:3 and following would then unfold that agency narratively through the repeated pattern of divine speech.

This makes the Word trajectory especially plausible. If *Bereshit* is subject, the question becomes: what kind of subject creates? The answer supplied by the surrounding chapter is not an angel, a demiurge, or an independent intermediary. The chapter’s own idiom points toward divine speech. Creation happens because God speaks. Therefore, *Bereshit*, if subject, may be read as the threshold designation of God’s creative speech before that speech is narrated in successive commands.

The point should be made carefully. The text does not say, “*Bereshit* is the Word.” Nor does it define *Bereshit* analytically. But biblical openings often work by compression. They introduce realities in dense form before the narrative unfolds their meaning. On this reading, Genesis 1:1 names the agency; Genesis 1:3 and following displays its operation. *Bereshit* creates; then God says. The movement is not contradiction but unfolding.

This also explains why “creative speech” is a better term than “word” if left undefined. “Word” can sound like a static noun, a term, or a verbal unit. “Creative speech” emphasizes action. It names God’s effective self-expression: speech that does not merely describe reality but brings reality into ordered existence. If *Bereshit* is the mode of that speech, then the first word of Scripture may be heard as the title of divine utterance in its world-originating act.

3. The Word of YHWH as Effective Agency

The broader Hebrew Bible confirms that divine word-language is not merely informational. The word of YHWH comes, commands, warns, judges, promises, and accomplishes. It is not reducible to sound or vocabulary. It is the event of divine address, the form in which God’s will becomes active in history.

Psalms 33:6 is especially important for this trajectory: “By the word of the LORD the heavens were

made.” This verse does not replace God with the word, nor does it divide God from His own utterance. Rather, it identifies the word as the effective means of divine creation. The heavens are made by the word of YHWH because YHWH creates by speaking. The word is divine agency in verbal form.

Isaiah 55:10–11 adds another essential dimension. God’s word does not return empty. It accomplishes what God purposes and succeeds in the thing for which God sends it. Here again, the word is not mere message. It is mission-bearing speech. It is sent, it acts, and it accomplishes. This is not yet Christian Logos theology, but it is a strong biblical foundation for understanding the divine word as effective agency.

The prophetic formula “the word of YHWH came” also belongs within this pattern. The word comes to prophets not as private insight but as divine initiative. It confronts the hearer with God’s own claim. In many prophetic contexts, the word judges, summons, interprets events, and announces what God will do. The word is therefore not only content to be reported; it is a mode of divine presence and authority.

This biblical pattern strengthens the Bereshit-as-Word proposal. If *Bereshit* is subject, and if the subject is to be understood as God’s creative agency rather than a rival being, then the “word of YHWH” tradition supplies a natural theological register. God’s word is from God, expresses God, accomplishes God’s will, and remains inseparable from God’s own authority. That is precisely the kind of category needed for a monotheistically constrained reading of *Bereshit* as creative speech.

The proposal may therefore be stated in functional terms: *Bereshit* designates the divine word at the moment of creation. It is not “word” by lexical definition, but it may be “Word” by theological function. It names God’s effective self-expression as world-originating speech.

4. Jewish Word/Memra Trajectories: Respectful and Descriptive Use

A Christian theological trajectory must handle Jewish Word/Memra material with care. The Targumic Memra³ should not be treated as though it were simply Christian Logos theology in Aramaic dress. Nor should it be presented as a hidden Christian doctrine embedded within Jewish tradition. That would be historically careless and theologically disrespectful. The Jewish Memra tradition belongs first within Jewish interpretive practice, reverential speech, and the handling of divine presence, action, and manifestation.

The importance of Memra for this article is therefore limited but real. Memra means “word,” and in the Aramaic Targums it can function as a reverential way of speaking about God’s action, presence, or manifestation, especially in contexts where direct anthropomorphic language about God might be softened or mediated. In such usage, Memra does not require a second deity. It provides a way of speaking about the one God’s effective relation to creation and history while preserving reverence for divine transcendence.

This matters for the Bereshit-as-Word proposal because it shows that Word-language could function within Jewish monotheistic discourse as more than ordinary speech and less than a rival god. The Word may manifest divine agency without becoming an independent creator. It may disclose divine presence without compromising divine unity. It may mediate divine action without requiring ontological separation from God.

At the same time, Memra must not be overused. It does not prove that ancient Jewish interpreters read the consonantal sequence בְּרֵאשִׁית as Bereshit, a subject to be identified with the divine Word. It does

³ <https://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10618-memra>

not prove that Genesis 1:1 originally contained a doctrine of divine hypostasis. It does not authorize collapsing Jewish and Christian categories into one system. Its value is more modest: it demonstrates that Jewish tradition possessed a reverential Word-register in which God's action could be named, mediated, and manifested without abandoning monotheism.

For Christian theology, this creates an important bridge, but not a takeover. The Christian Logos trajectory may be conceptually related to Jewish Word/Wisdom/Memra patterns, but it develops them in a distinct direction. Christianity identifies the Word personally and christologically; Jewish Memra language does not require that move. A respectful Christian article should therefore say: Jewish Memra tradition shows the intelligibility of divine Word-agency within Jewish monotheism; Christian Logos theology receives and transforms the broader Word trajectory through confession of Christ.

This distinction allows the article to honor Jewish material without using it as mere evidence for Christian conclusions. Jewish Word/Memra tradition is not a stepping-stone that disappears once John 1 arrives. It remains a distinct and important witness to the breadth of ancient Jewish ways of speaking about God's effective self-expression.

5. John 1 and the Christian Logos Trajectory

The Christian theological trajectory reaches its clearest form in John 1. The Gospel opens with deliberate resonance: "In the beginning was the Word." The phrase evokes Genesis, but it does not merely repeat Genesis. It rereads creation through the Logos. The Word is with God, is God, and is the one through whom all things came to be. In Christian confession, the creative Word is not merely an impersonal utterance but the personal self-expression of God.

This does not mean that John 1 proves the Bereshit-subject reading. John is not offering a grammatical analysis of unpointed Hebrew. Nor does the Gospel claim that the consonantal sequence בְּרֵאשִׁית should be read as **Bereshit**, a proper-name or title-like subject in Genesis 1:1. The relationship is theological and receptional, not strictly grammatical. But if the Bereshit-subject reading is granted on prior philological grounds, then John 1 becomes newly significant. It gives Christian theology a powerful way to receive the opening of Genesis: creation through God's own Word.

The movement from Genesis 1 to John 1 is not arbitrary. Genesis presents creation through divine speech. Psalm 33 says the heavens were made by the word of YHWH. Isaiah 55 describes God's word as sent and accomplishing. Jewish Memra tradition shows that Word-language could speak reverentially of divine action and manifestation. John 1 gathers that field of meaning and makes a distinctive Christian claim: the Word through whom creation came to be is personally related to God and personally revealed.

In this Christian trajectory, the Word is not a second deity. Classical Christian theology does not understand the Logos as a rival god beside the Father. Rather, the Word is from God, with God, and sharing in the divine identity while relationally distinguished. This matters for the Bereshit proposal because the same monotheistic guardrail remains in force. A Bereshit-as-Word reading is not an opening to polytheism. It is a way of naming God's own creative speech, which Christian theology then understands through the Logos.

The distinctive Christian move is personal enactment. In Genesis 1, divine speech creates and orders. In the prophets, the word of YHWH comes and accomplishes. In Jewish Memra tradition, the Word may function as reverential divine agency or manifestation. In John 1, the Word is not only spoken, sent, or manifested; the Word becomes flesh. Christian theology therefore receives creative speech as personal

self-expression. Creation and incarnation are not identical acts, but they are joined by the identity of the Word. The one through whom all things came to be is the one who enters history.

For this article, that Christian claim should be presented as theological development, not as grammatical extraction. Genesis 1:1, even under the subject-reading, does not by itself yield the incarnation. But it may open a threshold. If *Bereshit* names God's creative agency, and if Genesis 1 unfolds that agency as speech, then Christian Logos theology can receive *Bereshit* as the name-form of divine creative speech at the beginning of Scripture. John 1 then becomes not an imposed foreign doctrine, but a Christian articulation of a Word-pattern already deeply at home in the biblical account of creation.

6. Bereshit as the Mode of God's Creative Speech

The constructive proposal can now be stated directly. If *Bereshit* is read as the subject of Genesis 1:1, then *Bereshit* may be understood theologically as the mode of God's creative speech. It is not a second deity, not an independent intermediary, and not a lexical synonym for "word." It is the named form of God's effective self-expression in the act of creation.

The term "mode" is useful because it avoids unnecessary ontological overclaiming. To call *Bereshit* the mode of creative speech is not to define its metaphysical essence. It is to describe how it functions in the proposed reading. It is God's creative speech under a designated form. It names the divine efficacy that Genesis 1 then narrates through repeated acts of speaking.

This proposal preserves continuity with the broader *Bereshit* project while giving the Christian trajectory a sharper focus. In the broader theological synthesis, *Bereshit* could be understood through several registers: Name, Principle, Wisdom, Word/Memra, Logos, or creative agency. In the present article, Word becomes the controlling register. Name and Principle remain relevant, but they are subordinated to creative speech. *Bereshit* is a Name insofar as it designates; it is a Principle insofar as it stands at the origin; but it is Word insofar as it names God's effective speech bringing creation into being.

This also clarifies the relation between the opening clause and the rest of Genesis 1. On this reading, Genesis 1:1 does not merely announce that creation happened "in the beginning." It names the divine agency by which creation comes to be. Genesis 1:3 and following then reveal that agency narratively: God speaks, and creation responds. The chapter moves from compressed designation to unfolding speech.

Christian theology can receive this as a Logos trajectory. The creative speech of Genesis is not merely verbal command; it is divine self-expression. John 1 identifies that self-expression personally as the Logos. The Christian reading therefore does not need to say that *Bereshit* lexically means Logos. It may say instead that *Bereshit*, under the subject-reading, is theologically consonant with the Logos: the Word through whom all things came to be.

The strength of this proposal lies in its restraint. It does not claim that Genesis 1:1 alone proves Christian doctrine. It does not claim that Jewish readers must accept a Christian conclusion. It does not treat Memra as proto-Christian evidence. It simply argues that a Christian theological reading of *Bereshit* as creative Word is plausible, coherent, and deeply rooted in the biblical pattern of divine speech.

7. Limits and Falsifiers

The Bereshit-as-Word proposal depends on several limits. If those limits are ignored, the argument becomes too strong and therefore less credible.

First, the proposal fails if it requires either the pointed Masoretic form *bʿrē šît* or the proposed designation **Bereshit** to mean “word” lexically. It does not. The article’s claim is theological and functional, not lexical.

Second, the proposal fails if it treats Genesis 1:1 as an explicit statement of Johannine Christology. John 1 may be a profound Christian reception of Genesis, but Genesis 1:1 does not by itself state the full doctrine of the Logos.

Third, the proposal fails if it collapses Jewish Memra into Christian Logos theology. Memra must be treated as a Jewish interpretive and reverential category in its own right. Its relevance is that it demonstrates the intelligibility of divine Word-agency within Jewish monotheistic discourse, not that it secretly contains later Christian doctrine.

Fourth, the proposal fails if it introduces a second creator. The Word must be understood as God’s own effective self-expression, not as a rival being alongside God.

Fifth, the proposal fails if theology replaces philology. The Word trajectory is available only if the prior grammatical and historical arguments remain viable. If the Bereshit-subject reading of the consonantal text were shown to be grammatically inadmissible, this theological development would lose its base.

These limits do not weaken the argument. They make it more precise. The article is not trying to prove everything. It is trying to identify a disciplined Christian theological trajectory: if *Bereshit* is subject, then it may be received as God’s creative Word in act.

Conclusion

A Bereshit-as-Word reading is not a lexical claim. The pointed Masoretic form *bʿrē šît* does not mean ‘word’ in Hebrew, and the proposed designation **Bereshit** is not a lexical synonym for *dābār*, *memrā*, or *logos*. Nor is it a claim that Genesis 1:1 explicitly teaches later Christian Logos doctrine. The proposal is more careful: if the consonantal sequence בְּרֵאשִׁית, here designated **Bereshit**, is read as subject, then it may be theologically understood as the mode of God’s creative speech, the named form of divine self-expression through which creation comes to be.

This reading fits the structure of Genesis 1, where creation is repeatedly enacted through divine speech. It resonates with the broader biblical pattern in which the word of YHWH comes, commands, judges, promises, and accomplishes. It can respectfully acknowledge Jewish Word/Memra traditions as evidence that divine Word-agency is intelligible within Jewish monotheistic discourse. And it can be received within Christian theology through the Logos trajectory of John 1, where the creative Word is confessed personally and christologically.

The result is not proof but plausibility. *Bereshit as Word* offers a focused Christian theological development of the broader Bereshit-subject proposal. It preserves the necessary distinctions: lexical meaning is not theological function; Jewish Memra is not simply Christian Logos; Genesis 1:1 is not a concealed dogmatic formula; and the Word is not a second deity. Under those constraints, the first word of Scripture may be heard not only as a temporal marker, nor only as a name or principle, but as the threshold designation of God’s creative speech: the Word by which creation begins.

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