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A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

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ברא in Josh. xvii. 15, 18, and Ezek. xxi. 24,  
xxiii. 47.

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In these four verses the Piel of ברא occurs five times. It occurs nowhere else in the sacred Hebrew. These five instances are of interest mainly as evidence on the question whether the current Hebrew word for "create" has any more primitive signification, which requires to be considered in determining its scope.

When we think of God as originating anything, we may or may not, at the same time, think of the mediate processes, the secondary causes, if such exist, through which he originates it. When we think of divine origination apart from all mediate processes and second causes, we have in mind substantially the notion denoted by the Qal, the Niphal and the substantive of the Hebrew root ברא. These words are indeed employed in many instances in which the origination is from preëxisting materials, and through the agency of second causes; but in these instances the word calls attention, not to the preëxisting materials and the secondary causes, but to the fact that the origination is distinctively divine.

It will hardly be disputed that this usage is absolutely uniform. Gesenius, indeed, in three instances, assigns to the Niphal the meaning "to be born," or "to be begotten." In Ezek. xxi. 35 (xxi. 30, Eng.) he would, apparently, translate the language concerning the Ammonite, "I will judge thee in the place where thou *wast born*, in the land of thy nativity." But, not to criticize this translation in any other particular, the passage becomes far more graphic and not a whit less clear if we assign to ברא its usual sense, and make the meaning to be, "I will judge thee in the place where *God originated thee*, in the land of thy nativity." Similarly, when it is said of the King of Tyrus, Ezek. xxviii. 13, "in the day thou *wast created*," the meaning "in the day when God originated thee" is not less forcible or appropriate than the meaning "when thou *wast begotten*." And the same is equally true of the expression in Ps. civ. 30, "Thou sendest forth thy spirit, they are *created*." There is no exception to the statement that in the Qal, the

Niphal and the substantive בראה, once used, this root describes distinctive divine origination.

Are we to rest content with this, therefore, as the proper meaning? Or are we to look for some more ultimate signification, from which this is derived?

The current answer to this question is that we must look for such a meaning,—the meaning commonly settled upon being “to cut,” “to cut out,” and hence “to fashion.”

If this were held as a mere etymological conjecture, it would hardly be worth while to dispute it. If ברא originally meant “to carve,” that would not change the fact that its current meaning in the sacred Hebrew is “to originate divinely.” One might hold that the word had primarily a physical signification, and yet hold that that signification has practically vanished from view beneath the meaning to the conveying of which the word has become set apart. One might distinctly recognize divine origination as the true and only meaning of the word, and yet curiously note the probability that the word which the Hebrew Bible has selected to express this idea is a word which once meant “to whittle.”

But it is one thing thus to accept this etymology as the plausible conjecture which, perhaps, it is; and quite another thing to regard it as a fact well enough attested to compel us to modify our definitions of the words of this root, and our opinions as based thereupon. In the question whether God's originating of heaven and earth is from nothing, this supposed primitive notion of carving or cutting out has been made to do duty in a great variety of forms. It is likely to play a yet more important part in the question how far the Old Testament conceptions, of any given date, are to be regarded as gross and materialistic, or how far they are to be understood as being on the same spiritualistic plane with those of the New Testament. An etymology which might be accepted as a mere matter of curious conjecture, does not thereby acquire a title to be counted as positive evidence in important matters. We raise the question, not whether the etymology in question is true or false, but whether it is well enough attested to justify the basing of important conclusions upon it. As a part of the answer to this question, we are to examine the five instances in which the Piel of ברא occurs in the sacred Hebrew.

Apart from these five instances, the evidence commonly cited to prove that ברא primarily means to cut, is certainly of the most slender description. It is composed mostly of particulars which might have some validity to confirm other proof, if there were any other proof for them to confirm, but which, standing alone, are too weak to support themselves.

Of this sort, for instance, is the presumption that the idea of divine origination is too refined an idea to have been primitively expressed;

and that men must, therefore, have reached this idea through physical images, and must have expressed it at first in terms which had been previously employed in a physical meaning. Certainly, it is not always true that the conception of immaterial things is preceded by, and dependent upon, physical images. Children and savages do abstract thinking as really as civilized men. There is no absurdity in supposing that some early Semites got into their minds, with great distinctness, the idea that God, in originating things, may act differently from men, and somehow came to associate with this idea a pair of syllables which they had not hitherto appropriated for any other purpose, and thus found themselves in possession of the group of words which centre in the root ברא. And if this presumption is thus not very strong in favor of any physical origin of the word, it is immeasurably weaker as in favor of this particular physical origin of it, since it may be possible to devise many other hypotheses, each as plausible as this.

Gesenius finds evidence of the primitive meaning "to cut," in the existence of the adjective כריא, and the corresponding Hiphil, of which he says: "To feed, to eat, to grow fat, from the idea of cutting up food." Now if it were proved that כריא is from this verb ברא, and that the verb means, "to carve," we might accept this explanation, in the absence of any better guess by which to harmonize the violent incongruity of the two meanings. But it can hardly be taken as very weighty proof either that the words belong to the same root, or that the supposed common root primarily denotes the operation of cutting. Many scholars, certainly, regard the words as belonging to different roots.

The fact that the initial syllable כָּ or כֶּ occurs in a few other words which mean to *separate*, or *break*, or something of that sort, might be of value in filling the gaps of a wall of evidence which was otherwise complete, but can hardly be counted unless there be such a wall, with the gaps in it to fill.

The Arabic analogies, though of the nature of remote evidence, might yet be decisive if the Hebrew usage were too scant to judge from; but the Hebrew usage, in this case, extends to nearly sixty instances. Again, the Arabic analogies might be decisive as between two conflicting interpretations of the Hebrew usage, or as complementing a strong body of evidence from that usage, in any given direction; but here there is no conflict of usage, and no evidence from Hebrew usage to complement, unless it be found in the instances in which the Piel is used.

Finally, the fact that בר, *son*, has the same letters as the first two radicals of ברא may be harmonized equally with the supposition that the original signification of the root is that of cutting, or with any one of several other suppositions.

It appears, then, that the decision of the whole question turns upon

the usage of the Piel of בָּרָא. If this affords evidence of weight, and of a certain character, in favor of the alleged primary physical meaning, its evidence may possibly be so supplemented and confirmed by the other items of evidence, as to become very strong, perhaps even decisive. But if this source of evidence is found to be empty, then all the others are empty.

Professor Green, in his larger Hebrew Grammar, page 102, counts the Piel of this verb as an intensive: "בָּרָא to create, as God, Pi. to form with pains and labour, as man." This notion is at least a possible one, and is equally so whether we suppose the meaning of the Piel to have been derived from that of the Qal, or that of the Qal from that of the Piel, or each from some more primitive meaning of the root. But if all the instances of the Piel which occur are such as may derive their meaning directly from the well-known meaning of the Qal, this would seem to be the preferable explanation.

בָּרָא, in the Qal, expresses divine origination. The creation of the heavens and the earth is the instance of divine origination which has mainly attracted the attention of mankind. In our thoughts of creation two conceptions are especially prominent, namely, the reducing of chaos to order, and the construction of the world and its contents. Evidently, a derivative from the verb which expresses these ideas might appropriately describe men as reducing confused elements to order, or as constructing plans or objects.

We turn now to the direct consideration of the instances. The events recorded in Joshua are substantially the following. Certain cities which fell within the proper boundary of Manasseh, to the South, were given to Ephraim. In compensation there were assigned to Manasseh, six cities of Issachar and Asher, with the territory surrounding them. These lay mostly on eminences in the valley of Jezreel, and in the valleys opening from Jezreel, toward Jordan and toward the Mediterranean. This was, in theory, a good arrangement for both Ephraim and Manasseh; but practically it was discounted by the fact that the Canaanite lowlanders had chariots of iron. In the circumstances, the tribe of Joseph remonstrated with Joshua, saying that they had but one lot, which was not enough for them, because they were a great people whom God had blessed hitherto. "And Joshua said unto them: 'If thou art a great people get thee up toward the forests and *make a clearing for thyself there* (וַיִּבְרְאוּ לָהֶם אֲרָצוֹת) in the land of the Perizzite and the Rephaim, since the mountain country of Ephraim is narrow for thee.'" The men of Joseph rejoined that the mountain country was not altogether theirs, and that the men of Beth Shean and the Jezreelite valley had chariots of iron, which rendered that part of their possessions quite unavailable. "And Joshua said to the house of Joseph, to Ephraim and to Manasseh, saying: 'Thou art a great people, and great strength is thine: thine will not be one lot; for a mountain district will

be thine, since it is a forest and *thou wilt make it a clearing* (וַיִּבְרָאֶת), and its outlets will be thine since thou wilt bring the Canaanite into possession, because he has chariots of iron, because he is strong.'"

Now, however men may differ here as to the cast of the events, or the translation, or as to whether the forest here spoken of is literal forest, or a figure of speech for the Perizzites and Rephaim, there is no doubt in the mind of any one that this word בְּרָאֶת, 2d pret. sing. masc. Piel of בָּרָא is here used in the sense of *making a clearing* in a forest. It is also evident that if בָּרָא means *to cut*, its intensive meaning, *to cut by the wholesale*, would be quite appropriate to the kind of cutting by which a forest is cleared. It is equally manifest that if the speaker on this occasion was a man who was accustomed to think of God's creating the world as his clearing away of the elements of chaos and confusion, and reducing them to order, he might very appropriately have exhorted the boastful tribe of Joseph to cease complaining, and show their greatness by creating habitable country out of that part of their assigned territory which was then unfit for their habitation. This meaning fits the context at least as well as the other.

It is further evident that the thing here mainly intended is the clearing, and not the cutting process by which the clearing is effected. The Septuagint and Vulgate both distinctly recognize this. The Septuagint translates ἐξζάμαρον and ἐξζαμαρτίεζ. The Vulgate translates, not, as is often asserted, by *succido*, "to cut down," but by the phrases, "succide tibi spatia," "succides tibi atque purgabis ad habitandum spatia."

The instance in Ezek. xxiii. 47 is substantially parallel. In it the fate of Aholah and Aholibah is thus described: "And an assembly shall hurl stone upon them, and [shall proceed to] *clear them off* (וַיִּבְרָא אֶתְהֶן) with their swords; their sons and their daughters they shall kill, and their houses they shall burn with fire." Here, as in the instances in Joshua, it is easy to explain בְּרָא as meaning to hack or to cut down. But if there is any cutting here, no stress is laid upon it. The stress is laid upon the clearance that is to be made of all the kindred of the two harlots. The prominent thought is of the bringing of order out of disorder, through these severe measures.

In the parallel passage in Ezek. xvi. 40, "And they shall bring up upon thee an assembly, and they shall stone thee with stones, and slaughter thee with their swords, and burn thy houses," &c., the verb is בְּהַקֵּי, which occurs nowhere else, and whose meaning will follow the meaning assigned to בְּרָא in the passage in hand.

The punishment here described is like that assigned to apostacy in Deut. xiii. 10, 15, 16, in which the person who has been guilty is to be put to death by stoning, but in the case of an apostate city, the inhabitants and cattle are to be slain with the sword, and the spoil heaped up in the midst of the city, and burned along with the houses.

Ezek. xxi. 24 may be thus translated: "Now do thou, O son of man, set for thee two ways for the sword of the king of Babylon to enter: from one land let both of them go forth: and *construct* (ברא) a hand (or, by hand), at a head of a way of a city *construct*: a way thou wilt set for a sword to enter Rabbath of the sons of Ammon and Judah that is fortified in Jerusalem." Then the text speaks of the king of Babylon stopping at the junction of two roads, to decide, by divination, along which he will pursue his conquests.

There are differences of opinion as to the syntax and the meaning of this, but they do not affect the use here made of ברא. The view taken by Schröder may answer the purpose as well as any. He supposes that the prophet is "to place before himself on a table or tablet a sketch of the nature mentioned." On this tablet he is to construct a "hand," that is a finger-post or something of that kind, at the head of the two ways in the sketch. The thing described by ברא is this constructing process. It is easy to connect with it the idea of cutting, by saying that the "hand" or the sketch itself was to be engraved on the tablet. It is equally easy to derive the idea of construction, on the part of man, from that of the divine creative construction.

Substantially the same analysis will apply, if we suppose that the prophet is directed to construct an actual monument of some sort at the junction of two actual roads. We can connect the idea of cutting with his act, by supposing that the monument is to be hewn out of wood or stone, but, as in the former interpretation, it is the construction, and not the cutting process, which is essential to the writer's meaning.

On the evidence, it is not claimed that the current etymology of ברא is disproved. But it is claimed that this etymology is not solidly enough grounded to make it a safe basis for important arguments.