

## The Untranslatable “אֵת” (ET)

by Rob Vanhoff

Have you ever heard a Bible teacher say that the “et” (אֵת) is a mysterious, untranslatable word that holds all sorts of hidden meanings? I have. And at one time I believed it because I didn’t have the proper framework for evaluating the claims I was hearing. In this short article I hope to explain to you the facts of the matter so you will not be misguided like I was.

The first book of the Bible (reading from right to left) opens with:

בראשית ברא אלהים אֵת השמים וְאֵת הארץ  
*the earth – and he heavens – God created In-beginning*  
*In the beginning God created (אֵת) the heavens and (אֵת) the earth...*

If you look in an interlinear Bible [which I’ve attempted to imitate above. Looks good on my screen; apologies if it looks crazy on yours.], you will see that this strange word אֵת (underlined above) has no translation below it. In other words, the אֵת appears to be untranslatable! If it could be translatable, then my interlinear Bible would have a word directly below it!

Sounds compelling, huh?

When you add to this observation the fact that א (aleph) and ת (tav) are the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet, the interpretive possibilities really begin to open up. After all, Yeshua Himself said, “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” which is taken by some to mean that *He is the Alef-Tav (אֵת)*.<sup>1</sup>

### But is it True?

Well, is it true that this mysterious word אֵת (et) is untranslatable? One way to approach this is to look at two ancient translations of Genesis 1:1, into Greek and into Aramaic.

The LXX (from roughly 250 B.C.) reads:

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν

*In the beginning, God made the heaven and the earth.*

At first glance, we see that there is no translation of the word אֵת. Here is what the Hebrew text with interlinear Greek would look like:

בראשית ברא אלהים אֵת השמים וְאֵת הארץ  
τὴν γῆν – καὶ τὸν οὐρανὸν – ὁ θεὸς ἐποίησεν Ἐν ἀρχῇ

Notice the dashes where the אֵת should be. Seems to be true: the אֵת is untranslatable.

But here we need to make a crucial distinction. What Hebrew accomplishes with the אֵת (as the definite direct object marker), Greek accomplishes with the accusative case. The lexical form (nominative) of “heaven” in Greek is οὐρανός, with the *sigma* ending. To indicate that it is the object of the verb rather than the subject, it is changed to οὐρανὸν, ending with the *nu*. The same thing happens with the word for “earth.” So, while the Hebrew אֵת is not translated

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1. To see my short piece on this topic view my paper *Seven Steps to the “Alef-Tav” Bible*: <http://www.torahresource.com/pdf-articles/seven-steps-to-the-aleph-tav.pdf>

into Greek as a separate particle, it is most certainly recognized and encoded in the nouns themselves. In Hebrew, there is no way to know whether the heavens or the earth are *subjects* or *objects* in the sentence. That's why Hebrew uses the אַת. In Greek, the noun itself is changed to make the exact same distinction.

The Aramaic example is easy. Onkelos, Ps Yonatan, and even the Peshitta translates the אַת into its Aramaic form: ית. So in Aramaic, instead of *Alef-Tav* we have *Yod-Tav*. The function is the same: an indicator of the definite direct object in a sentence.

I don't want to type each of them in, so I'll give you the Peshitta, with the ית underlined: ברשית ברא אלהא ית שמיא וית ארעא.

### What about English?

In English we see no אַת either. But unlike Greek, where the nouns are modified to accomplish the purpose of the Hebrew אַת, the English nouns are not modified. Why not?

**English accomplishes by word order** what Hebrew accomplishes with אַת, what Aramaic accomplishes by ית, and what Greek accomplishes by modifying (declining) the noun. **The Hebrew אַת is translated into English by word order.**

How would you react if I said the opening line of Scripture is: *In the beginning the heavens and the earth created God...?*

You wouldn't accept this as the meaning of Scripture.

That's because in English, *word order matters*. The sentence, *The dog bit the man* has the same exact words as, *The man bit the dog*. Only the word order has changed. Contrast this with Hebrew, where word order does not matter if we have the "ET": We could say, *The dog bit ET the man*, or, *ET the man bit the dog*. In both of these sentences, it is the dog doing the biting and the man being bitten. **The "ET" marks the definite direct object.**

I first encountered this "mysterious untranslatable אַת" in Chuck Missler's persuasive talks, many years ago. And I've heard it cycle around occasionally. It is not sound. I hope my description has helped you understand why the אַת "ET" is what it is, and why it is neither "untranslatable" nor "untranslated"!