THE EARTH OF GENESIS 1:2
ABIOTIC OR CHAOTIC?
PART I

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Introduction

The famous German scholar Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932), well-known advocate of Formgeschichte, tried to demonstrate that the battle in which Yahweh defeated the sea monster of the chaos was related to the Hebrew account of creation in Genesis 1. He assumed that the Babylonian creation account, with its Chaoskampf or battle between the creator-god and the powers of the chaos, was the basis for the mythical imagery that appears in the Bible.¹

Since the discovery of the Ugaritic myths, the existence of a conflict between Yahweh and the sea dragons (Leviathan and Rahab in poetical texts of the OT) has been widely accepted.² This Canaanite conflict motif has been related to the biblical creation story as “a missing link” which supports the apparent Chaoskampf in Gen 1:2. Frequently, the Chaoskampf that appears in the Babylonian Enuma elish and the Ugaritic Baal myth is considered the main foundation of any cosmogony in the Ancient Near East (ANE).³ For instance, J. Day assumed that Gen 1:2 is a demythologization of the original Chaoskampf myth of ancient Canaan.⁴ R. J. Clifford and J. J. Collins have proposed that Genesis 1 begins with a mythical combat between the dragon


⁴Day, 53.
of chaos and the divine sovereign.⁵

Gunkel stated that the Hebrew term ṭḥŏm in Gen 1:2 had a Babylonian background.⁶ He suggested that ṭḥŏm derived directly from Tiamat, the Babylonian goddess of the primordial ocean in the Enuma elish. Since Gunkel’s statement, many scholars have assumed some kind of direct or indirect connection between the Babylonian Tiamat and the Hebrew ṭḥŏm.⁷ Many have accepted that the Hebrew ṭḥŏm in Gen 1:2 has a mythological foundation in Tiamat, the goddess of the Enuma elish, in which Marduk the storm god fights and defeats Tiamat the sea dragon, thus establishing the cosmos.⁸

The expression ṭōhû wābōhû, “emptiness and waste,” in Gen 1:2 is often considered a reference to this primordial “chaos,” in strict opposition to “creation.” The phrase is taken to refer to the earth in an abiotic or lifeless state, with no vegetation, animals, or human beings.⁹

Gunkel also posited the theory, later supported by other scholars, that the rūḥā ʾlōhîm in Gen 1:2c corresponds to the winds that Marduk sends against Tiamat, thus assuming that it is an expression that describes the primordial chaos.

The object of this three-part article is to discover whether in Gen 1:2 there is any evidence for the mythological battle between the creator-god and the powers of the chaos, Chaoskampf, such as Gunkel and many other scholars maintain.¹⁰ If we found such evidence, we would need to take heed


¹⁰See for example, B. K. Waltke, Creation and Chaos (Portland, OR: Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1974). This author points out that there are three main
to Gunkel’s affirmation: “If it is the case, however, that a fragment of a
cosmogonic myth is preserved in Genesis 1, then it is also no longer allowable
to reject the possibility that the whole chapter might be a myth that has
been transformed into narrative.” But if, on the contrary, there is no linguistic
or biblical foundation for that assumption, the creation account would no
longer be a myth or compilation of myths similar to those of ANE literature.
The creation story would then be a true, reliable, literal, and objective account
of the origin of life on this planet.

To achieve this goal, these articles about the earth described in Gen 1:2
will analyze the Hebrew terms tōhû wābōhû, t'hôm, and rûah 'lōhîm in the
OT and their equivalents in the ANE literature.

### The Hebrew Text of Gen 1:2

\[
\text{Wāhā'ās hā́y̱ṯa tōhû wābōhû ẇ̱ḥ̱ḥ̱ēḵ ā́l ~ p̱ṉé t'hôm} \\
\text{w̱ṟu̱a̱ẖ 'ḻōẖî̱m m̱ṟa̱ẖe̱p̱eṯ ā́l ~ p̱ṉé ẖa̱mm̱ā̱y̱î̱m}
\]

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was
over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was
hovering over the waters (NIV).

Gen 1:2 is formed by three circumstantial clauses:

1. \(Wāhā'ās hā́y̱ṯa tōhû wābōhû\): “Now the earth was formless and empty”
2. \(ẇ̱ḥ̱ḥ̱ēḵ ā́l ~ p̱ṉé t'hôm\): “darkness was over the surface of the deep”
3. \(w̱ṟu̱a̱ẖ 'ḻōẖî̱m m̱ṟa̱ẖe̱p̱eṯ ā́l ~ p̱ṉé ẖa̱mm̱ā̱y̱î̱m\): “and the Spirit of God
   was hovering over the waters.”

In Semitic languages a circumstantial clause describes a particular con-
dition. Verse 2 presents three clauses that describe three circumstances
or conditions that existed at a particular time, which is defined by the verb

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interpretations of Gen 1:1-3 within Protestant thinking. These he calls the theory of the
postcreation chaos (or theory of the restitution), in which chaos occurred after the original
creation; the theory of the initial chaos, according to which chaos occurred in connection
with creation; and the theory of the precreation chaos which he himself defends, according
to which chaos occurred before the original creation (18, 19); and other authors such as: A.
P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 106-107, 723; V. P. Hamilton,
*The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 117. As can
be seen, the explanation and interpretation of Gen 1:2 are founded on chaos, whether
before, during, or after creation.


12For a discussion of the function of the circumstantial phrase in Hebrew, see W.
form of the three clauses. In this verse the three coordinated clauses begin with a waw followed by a noun that functions as the subject of the clause. The theme of the verse 2 is the earth; this is the great central theme, not only in the rest of Genesis 1, but also of the whole Bible. The earth is the center and object of biblical thought.

The exegesis of Gen 1:2 has been considered by scholars such as M. Alexandre, P. Beauchamp, V. P. Hamilton, D. Kidner, S. Niditch, A. P. Ross, N. M. Sarna, L. I. J. Stadelmann, G. von Rad, G. J. Wenham, C. Westermann, and E. J. Young.

Clauses describing concomitant circumstances are introduced by the conjunction of accompaniment. ... When the circumstances described are past or future, a finite form of a verb is employed. For the past a perfect aspect is used, e.g., 'the earth having been a formless void' (Gen 1:2) (R. J. Williams, Hebrew Syntax: An Outline, 2d ed. [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976, 1992]), 83. In this case the verb hâyâ is in Qal perfect 3 feminine singular hâytâ. As C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch point out: "The three statements in our verse are parallel; the substantive and participial construction of the second and third clauses rests upon the hâyâ of the first. All three describe the condition of the earth immediately after the creation of the universe" (Commentary on the Old Testament, trans. J. Martin [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986], 1:49).

For further bibliographical references on Gen 1:1-3 from 1885/86 to 1966, see C. Westermann, Genesis I-11: A Commentary, trans. J. J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 75-76.

So Keil and Delitzsch, 1:48.


Hamilton, 108-117.

D. Kidner, Genesis (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1967), 44-45.

S. Niditch, Chaos to Cosmos (Atlanta: Scholars, 1985), 18.

Ross, 106-107.


Westermann, 102-111.

The Semichiastic Structure of Gen 1:2

The Hebrew text of Gen 1:2 presents an incomplete antithetical chiastic structure (i.e., a quasi- or semichiastic antithetical structure, because it lacks the section $A'$ which is antithetical to $A$) marked by the following linguistic and semantic parallelism:

$A \text{Whd%-es hvti} t~hi \text{wib}&2: \text{“Now the earth was formless and empty”}$

$B \text{whósek ál ~ p'né} t\homo: \text{“darkness was over the surface of the deep”}$

$B' \text{wrùah 'lòhím m'rahepet ál ~ p'né hammàyim: “and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”}$

The grammatical, semantic, and syntactic chiastic parallelism is clearly defined by the microstructures $B \backslash \backslash B'$ ($\backslash \backslash$ stands for antithetic parallelism) in which the expression “over the surface” ál ~ p'né is repeated. Grammatically speaking, this expression is a preposition + plural masculine noun construct (prep. + p.m.n.cstr.).

The grammatical and semantic parallel ál ~ p'né t'hom // ál ~ p'né hammàyim represents a second example of paired words, t'hom // ham-màyim that appears in Ezek 26:19 and Ps 104:6; and mayim // t'hom that appear in Ezek 31:4; Hab 3:10; Jonah 2:6; Ps 33:7; 77:17; Job 38:30. Notice also the parallelism between mayim // t'hom and rùah in Exod 15:8. The antithetic concept is clearly indicated by the opposite or contrasting pair of words hósék “darkness” \rùah 'lòhím “Spirit of God.” The noun hósék is grammatically a masculine singular (m.s.n.), and rùah 'lòhím is a feminine singular noun construct (f.s.n.cstr.) plus a masculine plural noun (m.p.n.). However, they present an exact syntactic correspondence and parallelism. Both have the same syntactic function, that of a subject.

Another syntactic aspect is important in this antithetic chiasm: the construct relation in ál ~ p'nética t'hom and ál ~ p'néhâmàyim. This aspect of the Hebrew syntax is of great importance to the significance and the semantic and etymological origin of t'hom, as will be seen in the second part of this article.

A particular type of parallelism used in prose is the gender-matched parallelism. Gen 1:2 is an example of this type of parallelism, since it represent
the gender-matched pattern: Feminine + masculine // masculine + feminine // feminine + masculine. 32

Tohû wâbôhû in the Old Testament and the Literature of the Ancient Near East

Before specifically considering this point, we must briefly analyze the Hebrew terms hâ’ares and hâ’yta in Gen 1:2. The most used Egyptian term for “earth” is t3. The antithesis for this term is the formula pt-t3, “heaven” and “earth,” by which it makes reference to the whole cosmos. The usual hieroglyphic symbol t3 represents a flood plain with grains of sand all around. In Sumerian and Akkadian there is a distinction between “earth” (ki or eresu) and “country” (kur, kalam, or matu). In Akkadian eresu means “earth,” in opposition to “heaven.” “Heaven and earth” (šamû eresu) means the universe. In Ugaritic ış means “earth, ground, inferior world.” The earth is also opposed to “heaven” and the clouds. 33 Ugaritic literature also gives an extraordinary example of a pair of words, ars // thm.t, chiastically related as in Gen 1:2: tant šm’m m ars // thmt ’m nk bkbm. 34

The pair of words ères // thbom also reveals an example of inclusive structure in the six days of the creation, where ‘l – p’nè thom before the first day (Gen 1:2) matches ‘l – p’nè hâ’ares after the sixth (Gen 1:29). 35

The Hebrew ères occupies the fourth place among the most frequent nouns in the OT. The term appears 2,504 times in Hebrew and another 22


33TDOT, 1:388-392.


35Kselman, 164. For this type of inclusion or construction see D. N. Freedman’s "Prolegomenon" to G. B. Gray, The Forms of Hebrew Poetry (New York: KTAV, 1972), xxxvi-xxxvii. However, according to D.T. Tsumura the nature of the relationship between hâ’ares “earth” and thtom “abyss, ocean” in Gen 1:2 is a hyponym. According to Tsumura, in modern linguistics, the relationship of meaning is called hyponym which sometimes is explained as inclusion. (i.e., what is referred to in the term A includes what is referred to in the term B). The former is preferred over the latter because a relationship of sense exists among lexical items rather than a relationship of reference. Thus the hyponym can be used also in a relationship between terms that have no reference. In Tsumura’s own words: “Our term ‘hyponym’ therefore means that the sense [A] of the more general term ‘A’ (e.g. ‘fruit’) completely includes the ‘sense’ [B] of more specific term ‘B’ (e.g. ‘apple’), and hence what ‘A’ refers to includes what ‘B’ refers to. In other words, when the referent [B] of the term ‘B’ is a part of/belongs to the referent [A] of the term ‘A’, we can say that ‘B’ is hyponymous to ‘A,’ ("A ‘Hyponymous’ Word Pair: IŞ and thm (f) in Hebrew and Ugaritic" [Bib 69 (1988): 258-269, esp. 259-260]). Therefore, in Gen 1:2 there is a hyponym in which thbom “ocean” is a part of the hâ’ares “earth.”
times in the Aramaic sections. The word ēres designates: (1) cosmologically, the earth (in opposition to heaven) and solid ground (in opposition to water); (2) physically, the soil on which humans live; (3) geographically, certain regions and territories; (4) politically, certain sovereign regions and countries. In the most general sense, ēres designates the earth that together with the "heaven," šāmāyim, comprises the totality of the universe. "Heaven and Earth" is an expression designating the whole world (Gen 1:1; 2:1, 4; 14:19, 22; etc.).

In addition to a bipolar view of the world, there is also a tripolar view: for instance, heaven-earth-sea (Exod 20:11; Gen 1:10, 20 and others); heaven-earth-water beneath the earth (Exod 20:4; Deut 5:8). But what is important to the OT is not the earth as part of the cosmos but what lives on it (Deut 33:16; Isa 34:1; Jer 8:16; etc.): its inhabitants (Isa 24:1, 5-6, 17; Jer 25:29-30; Ps 33:14; etc.), nations (Gen 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; Deut 28:10; etc.), and kingdoms (Deut 28:25; 2 Kgs 19:15; etc.). Thus the term "earth" may designate at the same time—as it does in other languages—the earth and its inhabitants (Gen 6:11; etc.). In its physical use, ēres designates the ground on which human beings, things, dust (Exod 8:12), and reptiles (Gen 1:26; 7:14; 8:19; etc.) are.36

The verb hāyā (to be) that appears in Gen 1:2 as hāyta in Qal perfect 3 f.s. is translated by the majority of the versions as "was" but may also be translated "became," as it appears in some versions. However, the syntactic order and the structure of the clause do not allow this translation here. The syntactic order in Gen 1:2 (first the subject and then the verb) is used to indicate the addition of circumstantial information and the absence of chronological or sequential occurrence. For that reason the translators of the LXX translated hāyta as "was" and not as "became."37 Besides, the Hebrew letter waw that appears at the beginning of Gen 1:2 is a "circumstantial waw" because it is joined to the subject "the earth" and not to the verb. Therefore it is better translated as "now." The translators of the LXX, who were very careful in the translation of the Pentateuch, translated it in that way.

The initial state of the earth in Gen 1:2 is described as tōhū wābōhū. This expression is translated into English as "formless and empty" (NIV). In the Greek versions it is translated as αορατος και ακατασκευαστος, "invisible and unformed" (LXX); κενωμα και ουθεν, "empty and nothing" (Aquila); θεν και ουθεν "nothing and nothing" (Theodotion); and αργων


37F. Delitzsch comments that the perfect preceded by the subject is the most usual way of describing the circumstances in which the subsequent account takes place (A New Commentary on Genesis [Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1978], 1:77).
καὶ αδιακριτὸν, “unproductive and indistinguishable” (Symmachus).38

_Etymology and Usage of ṫōhû in the OT_

_Tōhû_ is a masculine singular noun (m.s.n.) that means “formlessness, confusion, unreality, emptiness, . . . formlessness of primaevum earth in Gen 1:2”;

39 “wasteland, solitude or emptiness”;

40 “emptiness, waste, desert, chaos, confusion”;

41 “Wüste, Öde, Leere, . . . Gen 1:2 es ‘bedeutet die öde Wüste, und ist als Grundbegriff zur Schöpfung gebraucht’;

42 “caos, lo que no tiene forma ni medida, informe, inmensidad. Lo desmesurado; formulación clara y directa de la negación: nada, la nada, vacío, el vacío, nulidad, . . . caos informe en Gen 1:2.”

The term _tōhû_ appears 20 times in the OT, 11 of them in Isaiah. The different uses of the term can be classified, according to Westermann, in three groups that go from the concrete meaning of “desert” to the abstract “emptiness”:

1 “Desert,” the terrible and barren desert that leads to destruction: Deut 32:10; Job 6:18; 12:24 = Ps 107:40; (2) “Desert or devastation that threatens”: Isa 24:10; 34:11; 40:23; Jer 4:23; “the state that is opposed to the creation and precedes it”: Gen 1:2; Isa 45:18; Job 26:7. 3; (3) “Nothing”: 1 Sam 12:21 (2x); Isa 29:21; 40:17; 41:29; 44:29; 45:19; 49:4; 59:4. 45

The first and third groups are simple enough to define and describe. In the first, _tōhû_ is “earth, desert ground” (Deut 32:10), the “untilled land” where caravans die (Job 6:18), a “barren ground without roads” where people wander (Job 12:24; Ps 107:40). Therefore, the term refers to the desert as a “barren ground

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43L. A. Schökel, _Diccionario Bíblico Hebreo-Español_ (Madrid: Trotta, 1994), 792. Translation: “Chaos; what has no shape or measure: shapeless, immensity, the excessive; a clear and direct formulation of the negation: nothing, the nothingness, empty, the emptiness, nullity, . . . shapeless chaos in Gen 1:2.”

44See A. Even-Shoshan, _A New Concordance of the Old Testament_ (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1990), 1219. The 20 texts are: Gen 1:2; Deut 32:10; 1 Sam 12:21 (2x); Job 6:18; 12:24; 26:7; Ps 107:40; Isa 24:10; 29:21; 34:11; 40:17, 23; 41:29; 44:9; 45:18-19; 49:4; 59:4; Jer 4:23.

45Westermann, 102-103.
or land.” In the third group tōbū refers to a situation in which something that ought to be there is lacking. It is used in an abstract sense in which it appears in parallel with other nouns such as épēs, “nothing” (Isa 41:29), riq, “empty” (Isa 49:4), and “empty arguments” (Isa 59:4, NIV). In these passages tōbū is better understood as “lack or emptiness” rather than “nothing.”

Of special interest to this study are the uses of tōbū in Westermann’s second group, where the word describes the situation or condition of places such as the planet earth, land (region), or city. In Isa 24:10 we have qiryat-tōbū, referring to the “desolate or deserted” state of a city, almost equivalent to the term šammā in v. 12, which refers to the desolation of a city: “The ruined city lies desolate; the entrance to every house is barred” (NIV).

In Job 26:7, Westermann thinks ʿal tōbū is directly opposed to the creation, though he does not translate it as chaos. But the expression ʿal tōbū is parallel to the expression ʿal beli mā “a place where there is nothing.” Therefore, in this context a possible translation of tōbū would be “a desert-like or empty place.”

Westermann points out that in Isa 45:18 1ō tōbū is in direct opposition to the creation. However, here tōbū is in parallelism with lāšebet, Qal infinitive construct (Qal inf. cstr.), “to be inhabited” (NIV), from the verb yāšāb “to dwell.” The text does not indicate anything about a chaotic state in the earth: “he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited” (NIV). Instead, tōbū in this text also means “a desert, an uninhabited place.” Thus this verse may be better translated as “[earth] not to be a desert or uninhabited place” he created it, to be inhabited he formed it. In other words, this verse explains that God

46E. J. Young translates tohū in Isa 44:9 as “unreality” and explains that the word “suggests an absence of all life and power” (The Book of Isaiah, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972], 3:172).

47Westermann, 103.


49Westermann, 103.

50BDB, 442; Holladay, 146.

51Isa 45:18f: lō tōbū brāḥ // Isa 45:18g: lāšebet yṣārāh. We can verify that it is a structure in parallel panels which is marked by the following microstructure:

A lō tōbū [Earth] not to be a desert or uninhabited place
B brāḥ he created it
A’ lāšebet to be inhabited
B’ yṣārāh he formed it

We observe a clear antithetical parallelism between A \ \ A’, lō tōbū “[Earth] not to be a desert or uninhabited place” // lāšebet “[Earth] to be inhabited.” As Watson points out when referring to the parallel types of words: “antonymic word-pairs are made up of words opposite in meaning and are normally used in antithetic parallelism” (131). At the same time, there is a synonymous parallelism between B // B’, brāḥ “he created it” //
did not create the earth to be uninhabited or desert but to be inhabited. Gen 1:2 can be understood in the same sense, that God created the earth to be inhabited, but “it was still desert or uninhabited” during the initial stage of the creation though it was in no sense in a chaotic state.

In Isa 45:19 the term tōbhû has been interpreted in two ways: concrete (locative) and abstract. The syntax is always understood in the same way: tōbhû as an adverb that modifies the verbal clause baqqēšûnî, as part of the direct speech. The Tg. Isa. analyzes tōbhû in the same way: “Buscad en vano (lrynju) mi temor!” However, its meaning and grammatical function must be analyzed by considering the parallel structure of the complete verse. Therefore, from the literary structure in parallel panels, B’ tōbhû is parallel with B bimeqôm ēres hōšēk “in a land of darkness” (NIV). In Tsumura’s words: “Tōbhû without a preposition directly corresponds either to ēres hōšēk or to hōšēk. . . . In this case, the term tōbhû, corresponding directly to hōšēk ‘darkness,’ probably means ‘desolation.’” To conclude, we must point out that in the Targums, the Talmudic and the Midrashic literature tōbhû is interpreted as “waste, desolation; vanity, idleness.”

*Thw in Ugaritic Literature

Once we have analyzed the etymology and the usage of tōbhû in the OT, we consider its etymology and usage in the Ugaritic literature. Until recently,

\( yfsdr\) “he formed it.” In Watson’s words: “synonymous word-pairs comprise a large class with a broad spectrum. . . . Its components are synonyms or near-synonyms and therefore almost interchangeable in character” (ibid.).


54Isa 45:19a: lō’ bassēter dibharti // Isa 45:19c: lō’ ēmarṭî l'zerâ ‘ya uqôb. Isa 45:19b: bimeqôm ēres hōšek // Isa 45:19d: tōbhû baqqēšûnî. We can observe that it is a structure in parallel panels that is marked by the following microstructures:

A lō’ bassēter dibharti ‘I have not spoken in secret

B bimeqôm ēres hōšek ‘from somewhere in a land of darkness

A’ lō’ ēmarṭî l’zerâ ‘ya uqôb ‘I have not said to Jacob’s descendants

B’ tōbhû baqqēšûnî ‘Seek me in vain’ (NIV)

The syntactical and morphological parallelism is evident between A \ A’ in the negative sentence, and the tense and the person of the verb, lō’ dibharti negative+Pi’el perfect 1 common singular // lō’ ēmarṭî negative+Qal perfect 1 common singular. Meanwhile, there is a semantical parallelism between B // B’, ēres hōšek // tōbhû, with the same nouns as in Gen 1:2 (for a linguistic study of the different types of biblical parallelisms, see Berlin, 32-58).

55Tsumura, 362-363.

56M. Jastrow, A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature (New York: Title, 1943), 1651.
recently, the etymology of ṭōḫū was explained in the light of the Arabic ṭīḥ, waterless desert, trackless wilderness. However, as Tsumura points out, the Arabic term, with a second weak consonant h, does not explain the final long ū of the Hebrew ṭōḥū.

The Ugaritic term equivalent to the Hebrew ṭōḥū is the ṭhw nominal form that appears only once in the Ugaritic literature, in the cycle of Baal and Mot as follows:

\[ \text{pnps.nps.lbm} \text{ [15] } \text{ṭhw} \]
\[ \text{“But my appetite is an appetite of lions (in) the waste,} \]
\[ \text{ḥm.ḥrlt.ḥnhr} \text{ [16] } \text{ḥym} \]
\[ \text{“as just the longing of dolphin(s) is in the sea.”} \]

Del Olmo Lete presents the following translation of the same text: “Tengo, si, el apetito del león de la estepa, o la gana del tiburón (que mora) en el mar.” In the context of the two lines of Ugaritic text, ḫlm.ṭhw “of a lion in the steppe [desert]” corresponds to Ḫnhr.ḥym, “of a shark in the sea,” since ṣps and ḫrlt are a well known idiomatic pair. Del Olmo Lete maintains that the Ugaritic term ṭhw is a cognate of the Heb ṭōḥū. Considering the evidence presented, we can affirm that the Ugaritic term ṭhw is a cognate of the Heb ṭōḥū and both have a common meaning: “desert.” They are probably nouns with a common Semitic root, *ṯhw. In relation to this, Huehnergard points out that the text or alphabetical form ṭhw is probably */tuhwu/ “wasteland.”

58Klein, 692.


62G. Del Olmo Lete, Mitos y Leyendas de Canaán (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1981), 214. Translation: “I have, yes I do, the appetite of a lion on the steppe, the longing of a shark (who lives) in the sea.”

63On p. 635 Del Olmo Lete says: “ṭhw: n.m., ‘estepa, desierto’ (cf. heb. ṭōḥū; cf. Gibson, 159).”

64Dietrich, Lorentz and Sanmartín, 1.18 IV 25, 36-37, 55, 58. Del Olmo Lete notes that ṭhw “steppe, desert” is antonymous to ṭm, “sea.”

Etymology of "bhw

*"bhw is similar to *tōhū because it is a m.s.n. which means "emptiness" of primeval earth", 

"emptiness (// formlessness, + earth) . . . formlessness and emptiness", 

"Heb. bōhū 'vacuité, vide'; Arab. *bəhw- 'espace dégagé, trouée, etc.', bahiya 'être vide, désert', bahi 'vide, désert'; 

"void, waste", 

"emptiness, chaos"; 

"Leere, Øde"; 

"vacío, caos, caos informe."

The term *bōhū appears only 3 times in the OT, always with *tōhū: Gen 1:2; Isa 34:11; Jer 4:23. Its meaning will be considered in the section on the usage of phrase *tōhū wā*bōhū. In the Targums, as well as the Talmudic and the Midrashic literature, Jastrow finds that *bōhū is interpreted as "chaotic condition; always with גא\n
*Bhw in the Ancient Near Eastern Literature

The etymology of *bōhū has been explained through the Arabic bahiya, "to be hollow, empty." This Arabic term is used to describe the "empty" state of a store or house that has little or nothing in it. Therefore, its meaning is more concrete than abstract, "nothing, empty."

Albright suggested that the Akkadian term bûbûtu, "emptiness, hunger," comes from *bubbutu and is possibly a cognate of the Heb *bōhū. However, the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary does not list "emptiness" as a meaning of bûbûtu A. It translates the term as: "famine, starvation, want, hunger, sustenance."

BDB, 96.

D.J.A. Clines, ed., The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 2:97; in the Qumran materials we find the variant 1QM 17.


Holladay, 34.

Klein, 65.

Koehler and Baumgartner, 107.

Schockel, 102. Translation: "empty, chaos, shapeless chaos."

Jastrow, 142.

According to Klein, *bōhū comes from the root of בחם, Arabic babw, "hollow, empty" (65).

E. W. Lane, An Arabic-English Lexicon (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1863; reprinted 1968), 269f.


CAD, B:301-302.
and Von Soden suggests “hunger” as a possible meaning of būbūtu. Neither of these Akkadian terms is a cognate of Heb bōhū.\(^78\)

It has been also suggested that the term bōhū is related to Phoenician divine name βασιλεία the goddess of “night.”\(^79\) Tsumura indicates that it is phonologically possible to propose an original “Canaanite” form */bāhwu/ for both Heb bōhū and Phoenician */bāh(a)wū/, which was apparently represented in Greek script as ba-a-u.\(^80\) But he adds that there is no evidence that the Hebrew term had any connection with the Phoenician divine name, except for its possible origin in a common root, *bhw.\(^81\) Likewise, Cassuto, after indicating that the word is found in the earlier Canaanite poems, adds: “but there is no connection apparently with the Mesopotamian goddess Ba-ū.”\(^82\)

Recently Görg suggested that tōhū and bōhū must be explained by the Egyptian terms tb3 and bb3.\(^83\) This proposal is highly speculative since no hendiadys of these terms in is known.\(^84\)

In conclusion, taking into account available evidence, although there is no final etymological explanation, the Heb bōhū seems to be a Semitic term based on the root *bhw and is probably a cognate of Arabic bahiya, “to be empty.”

\(^*\) Thw and *bhw in the OT

Albright’s affirmation that the clause tōhū wābōhū means “chaos” and


\(^79\) Albright, 366, n. 7.

\(^80\) Tsumura, The Earth and the Waters, 22. This author proposes the following evolution of the original form for the Heb bōhū: */bāhwu/ > /būhū/ > /būnu/ > /bānu/ > /bōhū/. But he immediately adds the possible origin of bōhū in an original form */bāhwu/ from a Ugaritic example written syllabically (ibid., n. 26).

\(^81\) Ibid.


\(^84\) Hendiadys is defined as: “The use of two substantives, joined by a conjunction, to express a single but complex idea. The two words may be collocated, be joined by a copula or be in apposition. Hendiadys is used very often in Hebrew. . . . The important aspect of hendiadys is that its components are no longer considered separately but as a single unit in combination” (Watson, 324-325). Such is the case of tōhū wābōhū in Gen 1:2. E. A. Speiser explains: “The Heb. pair tōhū wābōhū is an excellent example of hendiadys, that is, two terms connected by ‘and’ and forming a unit in which one member is used to qualify the other” (Genesis, AB [New York: Doubleday, 1962], 5, n. 2a).
that tōhū refers to a watery chaos is shared by many modern scholars, including Cassuto. According to most modern scholars, the expression tōhū wābōhū in Gen 1:2 is understood as the primeval “chaos, confusion, disorganization” and is, therefore, in direct opposition to creation. On the other hand, Börner-Klein points out that tōhū wābōhū describes the state of the earth immediately after God had created the world. From the LXX and the ancient Greek versions, as well as the Qumran materials, he concludes that the phrase refers to a created, yet shapeless earth.

To complete the study we must consider Isa 34:11 and Jer 4:23, where tōhū and bōhū appear. In Isa 34:11 tōhū and bōhū appear in parallel expressions: qaw ~ tōhū “the measuring line of thw” (NIV) // 'abnē ~ bōhū “the plumb line of bbw” (NIV). This passage clearly refers to an uninhabited place. Basic


86See Alexandre, 77; Beauchamp, 162-163; Hamilton, 108; Kidner, 44; Niditch, 18; Ross, 106; Sarna, 6; Stadelmann, 12; Wenham, 15; Westermann, 103; Young, 33-34.

87D. Börner-Klein, “Tohu und bohu: Zur Auslegungsgeschichte von Gen 1,2a,” Henoch 15 (1993): 3-41. Börner-Klein analyzes the LXX, Origen, Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion, which use a variety of images to translate the clause: “the earth was invisible,” “uncultivated,” “a desert,” “an empty space,” “nothing.” His study of Qumran materials renders the following interpretations: “a desolate country,” “vanity” and “empty.” Rabbinic literature interprets the clause as a negative principle, primeval matter that God already found at creation, i.e., a substratum of the creatio ex nihilo, created matter but shapeless yet. In a Karaite commentary on Genesis he found the idea of an empty earth, without buildings. His study included Christian Bible commentaries that develop similar concepts in opposition to Aristotle’s doctrine of the eternity of the world.


89Isa 34:11a: wirēšūbā qā'at wqippōd // Isa 34:11b: w'yanšōp w'ōrēb yišk'ēnū ~ bāh; Isa 34:11c: w'nādā 'āleḥā qaw ~ tōhū // Isa 34:11d: w'ābnē ~ bōhū. The structure in parallel panels is marked by the following microstructures:

A wirēšūbā qā'at wqippōd The desert owl and screech owl will possess it
A' w'yanšōp w'ōrēb yišk'ēnū ~ bāh the great owl and the raven will nest there
B w'nādā 'āleḥā qaw ~ tōhū ... the measuring line of chaos
B' w'ābnē ~ bōhū and the plumb line of desolation (NIV)

There is a semantic and syntactic synonymous parallelism between A // A', wirēšūbā qā'at wqippōd “The desert owl and screech owl will possess it” // w'yanšōp w'ōrēb yišk'ēnū ~ bāh “the great owl and the raven will nest there.” In both cases, at a semantic level, the lines refer to birds. On the syntactic level, there is also a subject+verb (+suffix) // subject+verb (+suffix) parallelism, but with the components of the clauses inverted. Likewise, there is semantic and syntactic synonymous parallelism between B // B', w'nātā
to the understanding of Isa 34:11 as a land uninhabited by human beings is the grammatical and semantic parallelism of the verbs וָּנַח, “take possession of,” וָּאְסְרַה, “will possess it”; and לָבַשׁ “live in, settle,” וָּאֵל “will dwell,” in Isa 34:11a and Isa 34:11b. Besides, an exegesis of the immediately preceding verse, Isa 34:10cd, clearly shows the meaning of Isa 34:11: an uninhabited land. In Young’s words: “the land will become a desolation and waste so that it can no more receive inhabitants.” Therefore, in Isa 34:11 we do not find linguistic or exegetical evidence for any chaotic situation.

Jer 4:23 contains the following parallel structure:

A ָּאֵל et ָּהַשָּׁמְיָמִים I looked at the earth,
B ָּהָקִינֵהוּ ָּתָּבְּזוּ ָּוָּבָּבְּוּ ָּוָּבִיהוּ and it was formless and empty;
A' ָּאֵל ָּהַשָּׁמְיָמִים and at the heavens,
B' ָּוָּהָּי and their light was gone (NIV).

It has often been stated that Jer 4:23-26 describes a return to the primitive chaos. But this point of view is highly influenced by the traditional exegesis of the expression ָּתָּבְּזוּ ָּוָּבָּבְּוּ as “chaos” in Gen 1:2 and not on the analysis of the context of Jer 4:23. In vv. 23-26, each of the verses begins with ָּאֵל,

ָּאֵל qaw - ָּבְּזוֹ “the measuring line of chaos” // ָּאֵל qaw - ָּבָּב “and the plumb line of desolation.” In both lines we find the same nouns that appear in Gen 1:2, ָּבְּזוֹ and ָּבָּב. Finally, both nouns are in a construct relation (on grammatical, semantic, and syntactic parallelism, see Berlin, 31-102).

90BDB, 439; Holladay, 145.
91BDB, 1014-1015; Holladay, 371.
92Isa 34:10cd: ָּמֶּדִּר ָּלָּדֹּר te'hr[b ָּקַנְּשָּׁה n'shîm ָּיְמִנִּי ָּיְמִנִּי ָּבְּוָּחַב “From generation to generation it will lie desolate; no one will ever pass through it again” (NIV). Thus Isa 34:10d interprets Isa 34:10c and 34:11 in a definite semantic parallelism to: ָּמֶּדִּר ָּלָּדֹּר te'hr[b, “From generation to generation it will lie desolate.”
93Young indicates that the prophet Isaiah uses the language of Gen 1:2 (Book of Isaiah, 2:438).
94There is an antithetical semantic parallelism between A // A', ָּאֵל et ָּהַשָּׁמְיָמִים “I looked at the earth” // ָּאֵל ָּהַשָּׁמְיָמִים “and at the heavens.” These are the basic components of the Hebrew conception of the bipartite structure of the universe, earth and heavens. There is also a grammatical and semantic parallelism between B // B’, ָּהָּקִינֵהוּ ָּתָּבְּזוּ ָּוָּבְּזָּוּ and it was formless and empty” // ָּוָּהָּי and their light was gone.” This parallelism can be observed at a grammatical level between the nouns ָּבְּזוֹ and ָּבָּב in 4:23b, and ָּיְר in 4:23d, both are m.s.n.; at a semantic level, both concepts imply the lack of something, both on the earth (“formless and empty”) and the heavens (“light”).
95For example, Holladay affirms that Jeremiah “envisages a ‘de-creation’ of the cosmos, the world again become the chaos before creation began” (W. L. Holladay, Jeremiah [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986], 1:164; see also W. McKane, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986], 1:106-107).
"I saw," and the word *whinnēh*, "and behold," is repeated in each verse. The exegesis of verse 23 is completed and confirmed by the interpretation of verses 25-26, which are translated: "I looked, and there were no people; every bird in the sky had flown away. I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert; all its towns lay in ruins before the Lord" (NIV).

There is a precise positive-negative syntactic parallelism$^{96}$ between the vv. 23 and 25-26, "I looked at the earth" (4:23a) // "I looked and there were no people" (4:25a); "I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert" (4:26a) and "and at the heavens" (4:23c) // "every bird in the sky had flown away" (4:25b). Therefore, v. 23a, "I looked at the earth," is interpreted in vv. 25a-26a, "I looked, and there were no people"; "I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert." Likewise, v. 23c, "and at the heavens" is also interpreted by v. 25b, "every bird in the sky had flown away." Therefore, the earth or land of Jer 4:23 was uninhabited, with no human beings on it; "there were no people." It was also arid and unproductive: "the fruitful land was a desert." On the other hand, the heavens of Jer 4:23 are empty, without light ("their light was gone") and without birds ("every bird in the sky had flown away").$^{97}$

The interpretation of *tōbū wābōhū* in the Targums also helps solve the difficulties inherent in the interpretation of Gen 1:2. On Gen 1:2 the Tg. Neof. reads as follows, according to two translators: Díez Macho and G. Anderson.

Y la tierra estaba tebi' y behi' deshabitada de hombres y bestias y vacía de todo cultivo de plantas y árboles.$^{98}$

Now the earth was tebi' and behi'[meaning it was] desolate (ṣdy) with respect to people and animals and empty (ryqy) in respect to all manner of agricultural work and trees.$^{99}$

On his translation of Tg. Neof. Anderson says:

This text first reproduces the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew pair *tōbū wābōhū* and then interprets them. The first term, *tōbū*, is interpreted to mean an absence of faunal life; the second term, *bōhū*, the absence of

$^{96}$See Berlin, 53-57.

$^{97}$Jer 4:23a: rāḥīṯ 'et—ḥāʾāres // Jer 4:25a-26a: rāḥīṯ *whinnēh* 'en hāʾālam ... rāḥīṯ *whinnēh* hakkarmel hammīdōr; Jer 4:23c: wʿēl—ḥasšāmāyim // Jer 4:25b: wʿ kol—ḏp hasšāmāyim nāḏālā. The following microstructures are evident.

A rāḥīṯ 'et—ḥāʾāres I looked at the earth
B wʿēl—ḥasšāmāyim and at the heavens

A' rāḥīṯ *whinnēh* 'en hāʾālam ... rāḥīṯ *whinnēh* hakkarmel hammīdōr I looked, and there were no people ... I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert
B' wʿ kol—ḏp hasšāmāyim nāḏālā every bird in the sky had flown away (NIV).


floral life. No longer do tōhū wābōhū connote a primeval substrate “chaos.” Rather they simply describe the earth in an unfinished state. The earth was not created as a state of chaos; rather it is simply devoid of the living matter which will be created in days 3, 5 and 6. Exegesis has brought order to the unordered. All other targums follow this general exegetical direction.100

In brief, the expression tōhū wābōhū refers to a “desert-uninhabited” (Isa 34:11; Jer 4:23) and “arid or unproductive” (Jer 4:23) state.101 Neither text gives any linguistic or exegetical evidence to support the existence of a situation of mythic chaos in the earth.

*Thw and *bhw in the Ugaritic Literature

Several studies have pointed to the similarity between the Heb tōhū wābōhū and the Ugaritic tu-a-bi{ú(?)}.102 Tsumura proposes a possible explanation of the morphological correspondence between the Hebrew expression tōhū wābōhū and the Ugaritic tu-a-bi{ú(?)}.103 It is, therefore, possible that the Ugaritic tu-a-bi{ú(?) and the Hebrew tōhū wābōhū are two versions of the same idiomatic expression in the Northwestern Semitic.104

However, scholars such as J. Huehnergard have proposed a different morphological relation, considering the Hebrew expression tōhū wābōhū as an equivalent of the Ugaritic tu-a-pi{ku(?)},105 since the verb form *hpk, “to upset or overthrow,” is identified in the Ugaritic alphabetical texts.106 In this way, both interpretations tu-a-bi{ú(?) and tu-a-pi{ku(?) are possible from a phonological and morphological point of view.

Conclusion

To conclude, considering OT and ANE literature, the expression tōhū

100Ibid.

101See also Tsumura, The Earth and the Waters, 41.

102See, for example, J. C. de Moor, “El, the Creator,” in The Bible World: Essays in Honor of Cyrus H. Gordon, ed. G. Rendsburg et al. (New York: KTAV, 1980), 183, and n. 58; Tsumura, Earth and the Waters, 24.

103According to Tsumura, the first half of the syllabic orthography, tu-a, probably represents /tuba/ since in the Ugaritic syllabic orthography the grapheme <a> can be used as a syllable /ba/. In the second half of the syllabic orthography, bi-{ú}, if the second sign is correctly restored, it can represent /bibú/ since the grapheme <ú> of the syllabic orthography is used in syllables /bu/ (ibid.)

104Ibid.

105UVST, 84, 121, 315, 322.

106Ibid.; Gordon, 392a nº 788; Dietrich et al., 1.103:52. Sumerian: BAL = Akkadian: nabal-ku-tu = Hurrian: tap-su-ku-um-me = Ugaritic: tu-a-pi{ku(?)}. 
To conclude, considering OT and ANE literature, the expression תֹּהֵו וָבֹּהִו in Gen 1:2 must be interpreted as the description of a "desert, uninhabited, arid and unproductive" place. The earth of Gen 1:2, which "was" הָאָּמֶה תֹּהֵו וָבֹּהִו, refers to the earth in an "empty" state with no vegetation, animals, or people. Hence the title of this series of articles: "The Earth of Genesis 1:2: Abiotic or Chaotic." The concept that appears in Gen 1:2 is an abiotic concept of the earth; i.e., Gen 1:2 describes an earth in which there is no life; it presents the absence of life—vegetable, animal, and human. That life appears in the following verses of Genesis 1 by the fiat of God. The Hebrew idiomatic expression תֹּהֵו וָבֹּהִו refers to an earth that is "uninhabited and unproductive," owing to the absence of life, of fauna, and of flora at this stage of the creation. At a later stage the earth will be "inhabited and productive." In no case does the phrase describe a chaotic state of the earth as the result of mythical combats between the gods of the myths and legends of Israel’s neighbors.

The main reason why the author describes the earth as תֹּהֵו וָבֹּהִו is to inform the audience that the earth “is not yet” the earth such as they know it. Westermann puts it this way: “Creation and the world are to be understood always from the viewpoint of or in the context of human existence.” In other words, it is necessary to use literary language and figures common to the audience to communicate to human beings the theme of creation. Therefore, the author uses in this verse language originating in his life experience (desert, empty, uninhabited, unproductive places) to explain the initial situation or condition of the earth.

The words of Westermann summarize well the findings on Gen 1:2:

There is no sign of either personification or mythological allusion in the biblical use of תֹּהֵו. . . . The course of the debate about the mythical explanation of תֹּהֵו indicates clearly that the arguments for a mythical background are becoming weaker and weaker. The discussion can now be considered closed.\(^{109}\)

\(^{107}\)See also N. H. Tur-Sinai, The Book of Job: A New Commentary (Jerusalem: Kiryath Sepher, 1967), 381: “in Gen 1:2 . . . [תֹּהֵו] describes the barrenness of the earth before anything grew on it.”

\(^{108}\)Westermann, 104.

\(^{109}\)Westermann, 103.