Aʀⱼ

Genesis 1:1 and the Doctrine of *Creatio Ex Nihilo* (Part 1):
A Lexical Analysis of the Phrase אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ

Dr Josh Wilson, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church, Park Hills, Missouri, and Adjunct Professor at Missouri Baptist University, International Reformed Baptist Seminary, and Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary

Abstract

In the debate over the proper interpretation of Genesis 1:1, the key issue is over the meaning of the compound phrase אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ. If the phrase is a merism, a literary device in which a whole is referred to by two of its parts, then the phrase, as a whole, communicates a tertiary meaning that is different from the individual meanings of its two parts. If the phrase communicates a tertiary meaning, then the word אֶרֶץ of the compound phrase in Genesis 1:1 would be unrelated in meaning to the word אֶרֶץ in Genesis 1:2. The two verses then would exhibit a semantic discontinuity where Genesis 1:1 would be better understood as a title or summary to the creation narrative, and Genesis 1:2 would be better understood as the opening of the narrative. This view is known as the summary-statement, or titular, interpretation. In the summary-statement interpretation, there is no explanation for the origin of the material in Genesis 1:2, thus undermining the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. However, if the compound phrase does not communicate a tertiary meaning, or at least does not always communicate a tertiary meaning, then the word אֶרֶץ in Genesis 1:1 could be related in meaning to the word אֶרֶץ in Genesis 1:2. The two verses then would exhibit a semantic continuity where Genesis 1:1 would be better understood as the opening of the creation narrative, and Genesis 1:2 would be better understood as a description of the state of that opening. This view is known as the traditional interpretation. In the traditional interpretation, the origin of the material in Genesis 1:2 is described in Genesis 1:1, thus undergirding the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. In this article, the author defends the traditional interpretation of Genesis 1:1 by analyzing the meaning of the compound phrase אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ and by showing that certain characteristics of the merism label, like the tertiary meaning, cannot and should not be applied to the phrase. The author also individually analyzes the words אֶרֶץ and שָׁמַיִם to show that together the individual meanings of the two words can communicate a meaning that proponents of the summary-statement interpretation incorrectly describe as tertiary. However, the author then shows that such a meaning is not always applicable to the compound phrase, as in the case of Genesis 1:1.

Keywords: *creatio ex nihilo*; compound phrase; word pair; collocation; merism; "organized universe"; tertiary meaning; parallel bicola; cosmological container

Introduction[1]

The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* has been the foundation of creation theology in the Christian church for centuries, nearly two millennia, and Genesis 1:1 has been the cornerstone verse of this doctrine.[2] Even in this modern era, scholars continue to use this passage as the first and main verse in their defense of the doctrine. In his best-selling book *Systematic Theology*, Grudem states,

> The Bible clearly requires us to believe that God created the universe out of nothing. (Sometimes the Latin phrase *ex nihilo*, "out of nothing" is used; it is then said that the Bible teaches creation *ex nihilo*.) This means that before God began to create the universe, nothing else existed except God himself. This is the implication of Genesis 1:1, which says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (Grudem 2020, 338–339)

Also Feinberg, in his work *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*, focuses extensively on Genesis 1:1 to express a similar sentiment. Consider this excerpt:

> While it is not absolutely impossible that God created prior to Genesis 1, there is no evidence that this is so. Thus, if Gen 1:1 is the start of God's creative activity, it seems that this initial creative act was done *ex nihilo*. The verse says he created the heavens and the earth, a typical Hebrew way to refer to all there is. But if in the beginning God created everything, nothing could have existed before Gen 1:1 from which to make the heavens and the earth. (Feinberg 2001, 544)

However, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not just important for a theology of creation, it is important for theology proper as well. Without the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, the potential exists for the Creator God to be perceived as a being lesser than that which can be imagined. Grudem goes on to state,

---

[1] All biblical citations from the original languages are provided by *BibleWorks 6.0.* [CD ROM] (2003). Unless specified, all translations are this author's own.

[2] Irenaeus (2nd century) is one of the earliest church fathers to use Genesis 1:1 to argue that God created the world *ex nihilo*. See Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 2.10.4 (see Against Heresies in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (1885–1887) 1994. A case might be made that the Shepherd of Hermas (1st century) utilized Genesis 1:1 in this manner as well. See Shepherd of Hermas *Mandate* 1.1.1 (see Commandments in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (1885–1887) 1994..

However, were we to deny creation out of nothing, we would have to say that some matter has always existed and that it is eternal like God. This idea would challenge God's independence, his sovereignty, and the fact that worship is due to him alone: if matter existed apart from God, then what inherent right would God have to rule over it and use it for his glory? And if some parts of it were not created by him, then what confidence could we have that every aspect of the universe will ultimately fulfill God's purposes? (Grudem 2020, 340)

In his book *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition: Recovering Trinitarian Classical Theism*, Carter describes how the loss of *creatio ex nihilo* undermines nearly all Christian doctrine:

The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* will affect every single doctrine about nature, humanity, sin, salvation, the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the nature and mission of the church, and eschatology. This is because accepting or rejecting *creatio ex nihilo* affects the nature of God, and the nature of God affects every single doctrine about the "all things" studied by theology "in relation to God." The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* marks off the kind of difference that perdures (1) between God and the world, (2) between uncreated and created being, and (3) between the relations among the three Persons of the Trinity (the processions) and the relation between the Persons and creation (the missions). Without the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, we do not even have an actual doctrine of creation, at least not in the sense meant by historic Christian orthodoxy. (Carter 2021, 238)

Even the early-church theologian Tertullian saw this dilemma nearly two millennia earlier, when he wrote,

For when [Hermogenes] denies that Matter was born or made, I find that, even on these terms, the title Lord is unsuitable to God in respect of Matter, because it must have been free, when by not having a beginning it had not an author. The fact of its past existence it owed to no one, so that it could be subject to no one.[3]

If the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is so important to the theology of God, and if Genesis 1:1 is so foundational to this doctrine, then a right and proper interpretation of this verse is necessary and vital for a correct theological understanding of the Creator God.

For numerous centuries a traditional interpretation of Genesis 1:1 has led Christian and Jewish scholars to conclude that God created the world out of nothing. According to this tradition, Genesis 1:1 introduces God's first creative act. Genesis 1:2 then describes this initial creation as being in an incomplete state. The rest of the Genesis narrative then describes how God shaped, molded, and added to it. The narrative then culminates in Genesis 2:1–3 with God's consummation of the complete and ordered universe. Since Genesis 1:1 does not describe anything as being in existence before the initial creation other than God Himself, interpreters logically conclude that God created the world from nothing. Although it is not explicitly stated, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is then an inherent theological reading of the Genesis 1 narrative. This is the logical and theological conclusion of what is known as the traditional interpretation of Genesis 1:1.[4] However, within this last century or so this traditional interpretation of Genesis 1:1 has been rigorously questioned.[5]

Many scholars now argue that Genesis 1:1 should not be interpreted as the first act of the creation narrative. They instead argue that the first verse of the Bible should be interpreted as an introductory summary or title of the creation narrative.[6] Scholars of this summary-statement interpretation argue that a semantic discontinuity necessarily exists between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2.

These scholars explain this semantic discontinuity from two different, yet compatible, perspectives. One perspective focuses on the Hebrew phrase אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ in Genesis 1:1. Scholars argue that this phrase is always used in the Hebrew Bible as a merism describing the complete and ordered universe, and because Genesis 1:2 is a description of the earth in an incomplete and unordered state, Genesis 1:2 cannot then logically be a description of the product created in Genesis 1:1 (Driver 1904, 3; Gunkel 1997, 179). Other scholars go so far as to argue that the merismic phrase takes on a tertiary meaning that distinguishes it from the meaning of its individual words that comprise it (Waltke 2007, 179).[7] Thus, a semantic discontinuity necessarily exists between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, and only the summary-statement interpretation can explain this dilemma.

---

[3] Tertullian, *Against Hermogenes* 3, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* ((ANF 3:479).

[4] Many scholars of varying positions refer to this reading of the passage as the traditional translation and interpretation. See Mathews (1996, 141); Sarna (1989, 5); Skinner (1951, 13); Waltke (1975, 217). Westermann (1990, 95), however, contends that this interpretation is not traditional.

[5] The focus of this article is upon the traditional interpretation of Genesis 1:1. For a detailed analysis of the traditional translation of Genesis 1:1 see Wilson (2018a, b).

[6] Franz Delitzsch was among the first modern scholars to argue this position. See Delitzsch (1888, 72–81).

[7] The *Today's English Version* takes this view further and *translates* Genesis 1:1 as "In the beginning, when God created the universe." Of course, as a whole the *Today's English Version* renders Genesis 1:1 with a dependent clause.

The other perspective focuses on the description of the earth in Genesis 1:2. According to many of these same scholars, Genesis 1:2 is a description of a chaos that is contrary to creation. God cannot create something that is contrary to creation. Such a notion does not make sense; it is a logical contradiction (Childs 1960, 42; Gunkel 1997, 103; von Rad 1963, 49). Because of this problem, the chaotic scene of Genesis 1:2 cannot be a description of the product created in Genesis 1:1 either. Thus, again, a semantic discontinuity necessarily exists between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, and again, only the summary-statement interpretation can explain this dilemma.[8]

Thus, the proponents of the summary-statement interpretation do not reckon Genesis 1:1 to be the first act of creation. According to this reading, the phrase "in the beginning" is not a reference to a specific point in time before creation, and it does not temporally precede Genesis 1:2. Rather, in the beginning is a description of the context in which all of creation takes place, and Genesis 1:2 is a description of the context prior to the first act of creation, the creation of light in Genesis 1:3. Speaking of Genesis 1:1, Waltke, a major proponent of this interpretation, states, "If verse 1 is a summary, then 'in the beginning' must refer to the first six days of creation, not time prior to creation. The six days constitute 'the beginning'" (Barr 1998, 58; Waltke 2007, 180). Commenting on Genesis 1:2, he states, "The negative state of the earth reflects a situation in which the earth is not producing life. Chronologically, this must describe the state of the earth prior to verse 1…" (Waltke 2001, 60).[9] Light therefore, created in Genesis 1:3, is interpreted to be the first act in the creation narrative, and there is thus no explanation for the origin of the elements in Genesis 1:2.[10] Naturally then, this change in interpretation causes most proponents of the summary-statement interpretation to reject the longstanding tradition that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is a theological reading of the Genesis 1 narrative.[11]

No verse is more central to the overall doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* than Genesis 1:1, and consequently, few doctrines are more central to the theology of God. Without any explanation of the origin of the elements in Genesis 1:2, the summary-statement interpretation leaves the Genesis 1 narrative wide open to a theological reading in which *eternal* matter coexists with the *eternal* God prior to creation.[12] Concerning Genesis 1:1, Brown aptly states, "[M]ore than simply syntactical precision is at stake; there are also deep-seated theological conflicts over the way in which God is to be viewed in relation to the cosmos" (Brown 1993, 62).

Once this centerpiece verse has been removed, the foundation for the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* erodes quickly, and opposing scholars are free to reinterpret other creation passages in light of this erosion.[13]

Thesis

In the debate over the proper interpretation of Genesis 1:1, the major issue concerns the relationship between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, more specifically the relationship between the word אֶרֶץ in Genesis 1:1 and the word אֶרֶץ in Genesis 1:2. Does the word אֶרֶץ in Genesis 1:1 correspond in *meaning* to the word אֶרֶץ in Genesis 1:2.? Does the word אֶרֶץ in Genesis 1:1 correspond in *state* to the אֶרֶץ of Genesis 1:2? Proponents of the traditional translation answer both questions in the affirmative, while proponents of the summary-statement interpretation answer both in the negative.[14] The heart of the debate in answering the former question is in the meaning of the compound phrase אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ in Genesis 1:1. The heart

[8] The two perspectives are neither exclusive nor incompatible. Rather, they offer two different means for achieving the same goal: semantic discontinuity between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. Since both perspectives are compatible, some scholars use both to argue for semantic discontinuity. See Gunkel (1997, 103); Waltke (1975, 217–221). However, others scholars are still able to achieve semantic discontinuity by arguing for one perspective and against the other. For example, Young (1959, 142), in order to defend the summary-statement interpretation, argues that the phrase, "heavens and earth" in Genesis 1:1 is a description of the complete and ordered universe. However, he argues against interpreting Genesis 1:2 as a description of a chaos contrary to creation (Young 1959, 144–145).

[9] The two excerpts from Waltke further demonstrate the semantic discontinuity between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. Genesis 1:2 temporally precedes the time frame of Genesis 1:1. Thus, there is also a temporal discontinuity between the two verses.

[10] For an early treatment of this interpretation, see Driver (1904) and Gunkel (1997).

[11] Some of the proponents of the summary-statement interpretation who reject the idea that *creatio ex nihilo* is a logical and theological inference of the Genesis 1 narrative are the following: Barr (1998, 59–60); Delitzsch (1888, 79); Gunkel (1997, 104); Waltke (2007, 180); Westermann (1990, 109).

[12] This does not mean that all proponents of either view believe such is inherent in the narrative.

[13] Consider for example Waltke, whose summary-statement interpretation of Genesis 1:1 causes him to reinterpret other creation passages also foundational to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. With respect to John 1:1–3 and Hebrew 11:3 he states, "When the writer of Hebrews says, 'the universe was formed at God's command' (11:3), he must have excluded the dark abyss [Genesis 1:2], for it existed apart from and before God's commands. John says, 'Through [the Word (Jesus Christ)] all things were made' (John 1:3), but are darkness and the abyss [Genesis 1:2] ever conceptualized as 'made' in the Bible? The inspired author of Job represents the primeval sea as bursting forth from the womb of the earth and God as wrapping the sea in thick darkness (Job 38:8–9), but no clear biblical text testifies to the origins of chaos [Genesis 1:2] or of the Serpent, nor to the reason for their existence" (Waltke 2007, 180–181).

[14] Barr (1998, 58) and Waltke (2001, 60), summary-statement proponents, also argue that Genesis 1:2 temporally precedes the time frame of Genesis 1:1. Thus, according to their view, there is also no temporal continuity between the two verses.

of the debate in answering the latter question is in the meaning of the compound phrase תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ in Genesis 1:2. The focus of this article will be limited to answering the former question by analyzing the compound phrase אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ in Genesis 1:1. Through lexical analysis, this article will demonstrate that the traditional interpretation of Genesis 1:1 is a better reading of the text than the summary-statement interpretation.

A Lexical Analysis of the Phrase אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ

One of the strongest evidences favoring semantic continuity between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 is the two occurrences of the Hebrew word אֶרֶץ at the end of 1:1 and the beginning of 1:2. The two identical words literally occur back-to-back in the text. Such close proximity between these two words, strongly suggests that they correspond to one another. Such a correspondence then suggests that the two verses share a semantic continuity between one another. This is the plainest and simplest reading of the text. However, even though there is a proximal correspondence between the two identical words, proponents of the summary-statement interpretation argue that the אֶרֶץ in Genesis 1:1 and the אֶרֶץ in Genesis 1:2 do not and cannot correspond to one another in *meaning*.

Because the אֶרֶץ of Genesis 1:1 occurs in the compound phrase אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ, summary-statement proponents raise two main objections against its correspondence in meaning to the אֶרֶץ of 1:2. First, many argue that the phrase אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ is a merism, "[a] poetic technique by which a whole is referred to by either its two major parts or two extremities" (Murphy 2003).[15] Since the phrase is a merism, the אֶרֶץ of Genesis 1:1 cannot correspond to the אֶרֶץ of 1:2 because the אֶרֶץ of 1:1, being compounded with the word שָׁמַיִם, has a different meaning from the word אֶרֶץ in isolation. Waltke, a proponent of the summary-statement interpretation, explains this concept in the following manner:

> Verse 1 is the prologue to the entire narrative. This understanding becomes apparent with a proper understanding of the expression "heaven and earth." Linguists refer to such a construction as a collocation or a syntagm: two or more words that when combined yield a tertiary meaning. Two parts hydrogen combined with one part oxygen produce "water," a very different substance than gases in isolation. *Butterfly* is quite different from *butter* and *fly*, and the "free and easy" (i.e., marked by informality and without restraint) is not the same as either word

in isolation. Moreover, the frequently used biblical compound phrase "heaven and earth" is a merism, a statement of opposites, that elsewhere indicates the totality of the organized universe (i.e., "the cosmos"). (Waltke 2007, 179)

Since the word pair communicates a "tertiary meaning," then the meaning of the compounded אֶרֶץ of Genesis 1:1 is as unrelated in meaning to the individual אֶרֶץ in 1:2 as the compounded "butter-" in butterfly is to the individual word "butter." Thus, even though the two words in Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 are identical and occur one right after the other, they do not have the same meaning and cannot correspond to one another.

Second, summary-statement proponents also argue that the phrase אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ refers to the "totality of the organized universe." Since the אֶרֶץ of Genesis 1:2 describes a universe that is incomplete and not yet organized, then it cannot correspond with the אֶרֶץ of Genesis 1:1 which, combined with שָׁמַיִם, describes a universe that *is* complete and organized. Consider the following quotes from Young and Waltke:

> At the same time the word הָאָרֶץ does not have precisely the same connotation which it bore in verse one. In the first verse it went with the word הַשָּׁמַיִם to form a combination which designates the well-ordered world and universe that we now know. In verse two, however, it depicts the earth as being in an uninhabitable condition. (Young 1961, 168)

> If this understanding [of אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ], based on its extensive and unambiguous usage in the creation account itself and elsewhere, is allowed, then Genesis 1:2 cannot be construed as a circumstantial clause. Logic will not allow us to entertain the contradictory notions: God created the organized heavens and earth; the earth was unorganized. (Waltke 1975, 219)

If it is impossible for the אֶרֶץ of Genesis 1:1 to correspond to the אֶרֶץ of 1:2 in meaning, then the probability that there is semantic continuity between the two verses is less likely, which is favorable to the summary-statement interpretation.[16]

These objections against the proximal correspondence of the two occurrences of the word אֶרֶץ also raise ancillary questions. First, is the merism label appropriate for the compounded word pair אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ in Genesis 1:1? Aside from the characteristics that come with the merism label, are there any other lexical or contextual indicators suggesting the ancient Hebrews understood the compounded form of the word אֶרֶץ to have such a

---

[15] s.v., "merismus." This is not to say that the text of Genesis 1 is poetry. It is clearly prose. However, even though a merism can be described as a "poetic technique" it is used in both prose, poetry, and other literary types.
[16] Oddly enough, Wenham, a proponent of the traditional interpretation, makes a similar argument when he states, "The very different contexts show that it is wrong to identify the sense of ארץ in v[erse] 1 with its sense in v[erse] 2 too precisely" (Wenham 1987, 15).

distinctly different meaning from the word אֶרֶץ in isolation? Second, although it is clearly evident that the ancient Hebrews used the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם to refer to the "organized universe," does the word pair always have this meaning? Are there any indicators which suggest that at times it communicates a different meaning? Answering these questions will help to determine the lexical validity of both the traditional and summary-statement interpretations, and considering the major theological implications of both, these issues demand this investigation.

Is the Merism Label Appropriate for the Word Pair?
The characteristics of the merism

Although the label of merism is frequently applied to the compounded word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם in Genesis 1:1, knowing the characteristics of a merism is important for understanding the implications that come with the label. In his extensive study on the use of the merism in biblical Hebrew, Krašovec summarizes its typical characteristics in the following statement:

> Firstly, merism is the art of expressing a totality by mentioning the parts, usually the two extremes, concerning a given idea, quality or quantity; consequently polar expression is the most usual form of merism. Secondly, merism is substitution for abstract words "all", "every", "always" etc. Thirdly, the mentioned parts have figurative or metaphorical sense; literal interpretation proves to be in many cases totally incongruous. Fourthly, merism should not be confounded with antithesis, for in contrast to merism in antithesis opposed extremes do not express the same aspects of the same idea in its totality, but opposite aspects of the same idea in their mutual exclusion. (Krašovec 1983, 232)[17]

Since a merism is a rhetorical device that communicates the whole by naming the parts, it essentially communicates a tertiary[18] meaning: a meaning that is distinct from the meanings of the individual words that comprise the merism. Krašovec does not explicitly state that when a word pair is used in a merism, it takes on a tertiary meaning, but the concept is strongly implied in his observations. Other scholars who have studied or commented on the use of merisms in biblical Hebrew also implicitly describe this characteristic of a tertiary meaning. Honeyman states,

> Merismus, which is a figure of speech akin in some respects to synecdoche, consists in detailing the individual members, or some of them—usually the first and last, or the more prominent—of a series, and thereby indicating either the genus of which those members are species or the abstract quality which characterises the genus and which the species have in common. (Honeyman 1952, 13–14)

Thus, the meaning of a merism is not expressed in the meanings of the individual species, but in the tertiary genus or its abstract quality to which the species belong. Finally, Watson, in his description of the merism, similarly states, "It is the total concept that is important; the components are not significant in isolation. Merismus, then, is an abbreviated way of expressing a totality" (Watson 1984, 321). Thus, one of the major, and one could say implicit, characteristics of a merism is the tertiary meaning.

The concept of the tertiary meaning in a merism has two major implications for the meanings of the individual words that make up this rhetorical device. First, since a merism takes on a tertiary meaning, the meanings of the individual words then cannot together communicate what the tertiary meaning of the merism does. If the meanings of the individual words could together communicate the same idea that the tertiary meaning communicates, then there would be no need for a tertiary meaning. Second, since the meanings of the individual words cannot communicate the tertiary meaning of the merism, the meanings of the individual words in the merism must be displaced with an almost zero value in order to yield to the tertiary meaning expressed by the merism.[19] Without this displacement in the meanings of the individual words, there would be a semantic cacophony within the merism. These two implications can be observed in some of the known merisms of English and Hebrew.

In the English expression "the people come from near and far," the word pair near/far is properly used as a merism since it has all the merismic characteristics that Krašovec observes. First, "near and far" is an expression in which the word pair are two parts of a given idea. The individual words are opposite ends of a spatial spectrum, but together they express the totality of that spectrum. Second, the word pair is used to express the idea of "everywhere." Third, the meanings of the individual words in the word pair cannot together communicate the tertiary meaning of the merism; thus, the tertiary meaning expressed in their collocation displaces their

---

[17] Krašovec's fourth observed characteristic distinguishes the merism from any antithetic parallelism where the word pair would work in opposition instead of in unity. Thus, this characteristic does not further define what a merism is, but rather what it is not and cannot be.

[18] Again, this is the adjective that Waltke uses to describe the new meaning expressed by the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם in compound (Waltke 2007, 179).

[19] This second implication is Krašovec's third observation of the merism.

individual meanings. The collocation of the word pair is not communicating the idea that the people come from only near and only far, even though the individual meanings of the words do communicate such a concept. Rather, whatever else is between the spatial spectrum of the near and the far is also included in the new, tertiary meaning that the word pair communicates as a merism. Thus, the expression "the people come from near and far" uses the tertiary concept of a merism to communicate the idea that the people came from everywhere.

In a Hebrew example, the word pair לַיְלָה/יוֹם also functions as a frequent merism. First, the word pair is itself a polar expression and is often used to express the duration ("all the time") of an action within a usually undefined period of time.[20] Second, the compound form of the word pair occurs in parallel with other, singular words that express the meaning of "all," "every," or "always."[21] Third, since the meaning of the compounded word pair can be expressed in parallel with the meaning of other words that express the concept of "all," "every," or "always," the meanings of the individual words are displaced in order to express the tertiary idea of "continuously" or "all the time." Again, the collocation of the words express the tertiary idea, not the individual meanings of the words themselves.[22] Thus, the merism in Nehemiah 1:6, which says, "I am praying before you today, day and night," אָנֹכִי מִתְפַּלֵּל לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם יוֹמָם וָלַיְלָה, communicates the tertiary idea of "I am praying before you today continuously," אָנֹכִי מִתְפַּלֵּל לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם תָּמִיד.[23] Again, the individual meanings in the word pair לַיְלָה/יוֹם are displaced since they together cannot communicate the same concept as the tertiary meaning of the merism.

As noted before, Waltke and other scholars of the summary-statement interpretation argue that the merism label, along with the implications of the tertiary meaning, should also be applied to the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם in Genesis 1:1. Indeed, many of Waltke's statements regarding the word pair are very similar to Krašovec's own observations. Consider the following excerpts:

Cyrus Gordon noted that pairs of antonyms often mean "everything" or "everyone." For example, in English, the expression "they came great and small" means that everybody came." The Hebrew language is filled with such antonymic pairs called merisms. For example, the psalmist says that the blessed

man meditates in God's law "day and night," that is, "all the time." So here, "the heavens and the earth" are antonyms to designate "everything," and more specifically "the organized universe, the cosmos" (Waltke 1975, 218).

Moreover, the frequently used biblical compound phrase "heaven and earth" is a merism, a statement of opposites, that elsewhere indicates the totality of the organized universe (that is, "the cosmos"). Similarly, the merism "day and night" means "all the time," and "summer and winter" means "year round" (Waltke 2007, 179).

These statements mirror Krašovec's first and second observations. Another of Waltke's statements matches Krašovec's third observation in which the meanings of the individual words in a merism are displaced. Consider the following excerpt:

A merism is a statement of opposites to indicate totality. For instance, "day and night" means "all the time." In such usage the words cannot be understood separately but must be taken as a unity. Just as the English expression "part and parcel" cannot be understood by studying *part* and *parcel* as independent terms, so the merism of the Hebrew words *heavens* (šāmayim) and *earth* (ʾereṣ) cannot be understood by studying the words separately but only by studying the unit. As a unit this refers to the organized universe. (Waltke 2001, 59, n. 18)

Again, the merism label implies first of all that the meanings of the individual words of the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם cannot communicate the meaning of the "organized universe," and second, their meanings must be displaced with a separate and distinct tertiary meaning. However, conflicting data from the Hebrew Old Testament suggests that when the word pair communicates the meaning of the "organized universe," the individual words of the word pair do not lose their individual meanings.

Conflicting data

There is no doubt that the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם does communicate the idea of the "organized universe." This is especially evident in Exodus 31:17b, which states,

כִּי־שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שָׁבַת וַיִּנָּפַשׁ׃

For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.

---

[20] For the word pair in compound, see Exodus 13:21; Leviticus 8:35; Joshua 1:8; 1 Kings 8:29, 59; 1 Chronicles 9:33; 2 Chronicles 6:20; 4:9; Nehemiah 1:6; Psalm 1:2. For the word pair in parallel bicola, see Psalms 22:3; 42:9; 88:2 (cf. Authorized Version, Revised Standard Version, et al. 88:1); 91:5; 121:6; Isaiah 21:8; Hosea 4:5.

[21] 1 Samuel 25:16; Psalm 42:4; Isaiah 34:10; 60:11; Jeremiah 14:17; Lamentations 2:18.

[22] Even though the compound phrase has these characteristics, it does not always have the same value or meaning as "continuously." In certain instances, the parts of the phrase take on a literal meaning, in which case the phrase is not acting as a merism (cf. Genesis 1:18; 8:22; Jeremiah 33:20, 25).

[23] Cf. Isaiah 60:11.

If the merism label is appropriate for this word pair, then in the contexts in which it functions as a merism, its individual words, שָׁמַיִם and אֶרֶץ, should never be treated as if they have individual meanings because the individual meanings of words in a merism are displaced. Nevertheless, this is exactly what happens in some contexts.

There are at least two instances in the Hebrew Bible in which the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם precedes a clause or colon in which one or both of the individual words and their meanings are treated individually. One instance is found in the passage of Psalm 115:14–16,[24] which states,

<div dir="rtl">

14 יֹסֵף יְהוָה עֲלֵיכֶם עֲלֵיכֶם וְעַל־בְּנֵיכֶם:
15 בְּרוּכִים אַתֶּם לַיהוָה עֹשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:
16 **הַשָּׁמַיִם שָׁמַיִם לַיהוָה וְהָאָרֶץ נָתַן לִבְנֵי־אָדָם:**

</div>

[14]Let the LORD add unto you, unto you and your sons.
[15]Be blessed of the LORD, the maker of the heavens and the earth.
[16](*For* the heavens are the LORD's heavens, but the earth he has given to the sons of man.)

In 115:15 the compound form of the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם communicates the meaning of the "organized universe," just as it does in Exodus 31:17. In 115:16 the individual words of the word pair and their individual meanings are being used in contrasting parallelism to describe the individual realms of dominion that the LORD has assigned to Himself and to man. The parallel form of the word pair in 115:16 is not being used as a merism since the individual meanings of the words are retained for the purpose of contrast.[25] However, the individual meanings of שָׁמַיִם and אֶרֶץ in the bicola of 115:16 refer back to and treat שָׁמַיִם and אֶרֶץ in 115:15 as words with individual meanings.[26] If the word pair in 115:15 is being used as a merism to communicate the idea of the "organized universe," then it is quite anomalous for the very next verse to treat its individual members as if they had individual meanings. The strict application of the merism label cannot explain this anomaly.

The second instance occurs in the passage of Isaiah 45:18. The word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם acts in a similar manner to that of Psalm 115:15–16. In the Isaiah passage, however, the word pair is not in compound, but is in parallel bicola, another way in which the merism concept is communicated.[27] Indeed, the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם is frequently used in both compound[28] and parallel bicola[29] to communicate the meaning of the "organized universe."[30] The Isaiah passage states,

<div dir="rtl">

כִּי כֹה אָמַר־יְהוָה

בּוֹרֵא הַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים
יֹצֵר הָאָרֶץ וְעֹשָׂהּ הוּא כוֹנְנָהּ
לֹא־תֹהוּ בְרָאָהּ
לָשֶׁבֶת יְצָרָהּ
אֲנִי יְהוָה וְאֵין עוֹד:

</div>

For thus says the LORD,
"The one who created the Heavens, He is God
The one who formed the earth and made it, He established it
He did not create it formless
He formed it to be inhabited
I am the LORD, and there is no other."

In this passage the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם , in parallel bicola, communicates the meaning of the "organized universe." However, both the pronominal suffixes in the second colon and the entirety of the third and fourth cola refer back to and treat the word אֶרֶץ as a word with individual meaning. The context suggests that the word pair is not a merism. However, the meaning that the word pair communicates is the same as that of the compounded word pair in Exodus 31:17, which proponents of the summary-statement interpretation would argue *is* a merism. Thus, the use of the word pair in Isaiah 45:18 also seems to be anomalous to the strict application of the merism label.

Again, if the meanings of the individual words in a merism are displaced by the tertiary meaning, then the individual words should not be treated as words with individual meanings. The evidence from these two verses, however, suggest that the strict

---

[24] For an Aramaic example of this phenomenon see Jeremiah 10:11.
[25] Again, Krašovec's fourth characteristic explains that word pairs cannot be merisms if they are being used in antithetic parallelism (Krašovec 1983, 232).
[26] Avishur (1984, 260) refers to this textual phenomenon, in which identical word pairs are used together in two differing ways, as "[p]airs in syndetic parataxis [or compound form], and parallelism." He states, "The simplest and clearest form of integration is the one that has two modes of pairing, where in the first one, the components are paired in syndetic parataxis followed by parallelism, (in succession and proximal one to the other or at times at specific spaced intervals), which have the pair components in parallel cola. This phenomenon occurs both in prose and poetry, with the prose evincing a congruent symmetry, rather than parallelism." Along with Psalm 115:15–16, he lists many other examples of word pairs acting in this manner.
[27] In fact, the merismic studies of Honeyman (1952, 11–18), Krašovec(1983, 231–239), and Watson (1984, 321–324), all discuss and analyze the merism as a device of poetic parallelism.
[28] Genesis 14:19, 22; Exodus 31:17; Deuteronomy 4:26; 30:19; 31:28; 2 Kings 19:15; 2 Chronicles 2:11; Psalms 115:15; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; Isaiah 37:16; 65:17; 66:22; Jeremiah 32:17; Joel 4:16; Haggai 2:21.
[29] Psalm 102:26; Proverbs 3:19; Isaiah 44:24; 48:13; 51:13, 16; Jeremiah 10:12; 51:15; Zechariah 12:1.
[30] Waltke's argument focuses on the compound form of the word pair. He states, "In all its uses in the Old Testament, this phrase [אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ] functions as a compound referring to the organized universe" (Waltke 2001, 59). However, the argument also extends to the uses of the word pair in parallel bicola since it also communicates the same meaning as the word pair in compound.

application of the merism label to the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם cannot account for the entirety of the data. However, these verses are not the only problematic data for the merism argument. Again, the merism label also implies that the meanings of the individual words in the word pair cannot together communicate the meaning of "organized universe"—otherwise there would be no need for a tertiary meaning. However, a study of the individual words of the word pair suggests that their individual meanings actually can together communicate this "tertiary" meaning.[31]

The meaning communicated by the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם

Before any study of the individual words in the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם can proceed, a more concrete picture of what the word pair actually communicates is necessary. Without a more literal understanding of this alleged tertiary meaning, it is impossible to determine whether or not the individual words in the word pair can or cannot communicate it. As stated earlier, Waltke argues that the meaning communicated by the compounded form of the word pair is that of the "organized universe." However, the term "universe" is too abstract, and the modern reader's perception of the term is vastly different from that of the ancient reader's. Furthermore, with such an abstract, undefined meaning, there is no verifiable means of determining whether or not the individual words in the word pair can communicate it.

Two verses from the book of Exodus, however, can help create a more objective and controlled understanding of what the word pair does communicate when it is in compound or parallel bicola. Both are from the book of Exodus, and both use differing vocabulary to communicate the same idea of the "organized universe." The first, which has already been noted, is from Exodus 31:17. Again, it states,

כִּי־שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שָׁבַת וַיִּנָּפַשׁ׃

For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.

In this verse the compounded word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם is used to look back to and summarize the creation account in Genesis 1:1. The word pair clearly communicates the same meaning that summary-statement proponents would apply to the compounded word pair in Genesis 1:1. The second verse is the almost parallel passage of Exodus 20:11. It states,

כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת־יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּם וַיָּנַח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי

For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the seas and all that is in them, and he rested on the seventh day.

In this verse the tripartite phrase אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּם is also used to look back to and summarize the creation account in Genesis 1:1. It too communicates the same meaning that is communicated in Exodus 31:17. However, in Exodus 20:11 all the individual members of the tripartite phrase retain their individual meanings and communicate the concept of the "organized universe" in a more literal manner.

In Exodus 20:11 the individual meanings of the words in the tripartite together describe the ancient Hebrews' conception of the "organized universe" as a set of containers and their contents.[32] However, in Exodus 20:11 the meanings of the individual words אֶרֶץ and שָׁמַיִם only refer to the containers of the "organized universe" and not the contents;[33] whereas, the meaning of the compounded word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם in Exodus 31:17 refers to both the containers *and*

---

[31] Waltke argues that since the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם creates a tertiary meaning, any study of its individual words is "erroneous." See Waltke, (1975, 218), Waltke (2001, 59 n. 18), and Waltke (2007, 279). (In this last citation, Waltke does not explicitly state that study of the independent words is not possible; however, he does state that the tertiary meaning of the word pair is separate from the meanings of the individual words in isolation.) Again, if the meanings of the individual words cannot communicate what the word pair in collocation can, there really is no reason to study the words individually. However, a study of the individual words actually helps to explain how and why the word pair can communicate the meaning of "organized universe" even though it may not have some merismic characteristics.

[32] The use of the tripartite phrase in Nehemiah 9:6 demonstrates that the meanings of the words in the tripartite phrase of Exodus 20:11 must be understood literally. Furthermore, it confirms the Hebrews' conception of the universe as a set of containers and their contents. The verse states,

אַתָּה־הוּא יְהוָה לְבַדֶּךָ אַתְּ עָשִׂיתָ אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם שְׁמֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכָל־צְבָאָם הָאָרֶץ וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיהָ הַיַּמִּים וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר בָּהֶם וְאַתָּה מְחַיֶּה אֶת־כֻּלָּם וּצְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם לְךָ מִשְׁתַּחֲוִים

You are He. You alone are LORD. You made the heavens, the heavens of the heavens and all their hosts, the earth and all that is upon it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them, and the host of the heavens worship you.

Unlike the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם, the tripartite phrase never communicates the concept of the whole of creation without the mention of the contents that fill the containers. If the tripartite phrase does not mention the contents, then the individual members of the phrase only refer to the literal containers (cf. Psalm 135:6).

[33] The phrase וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּם refers to the contents of these containers.

their contents. Thus, if the individual meanings of the word pair can communicate the meaning of "organized universe," they must include the concepts of both the containers and their contents individually.

The cosmological identities of the word אֶרֶץ

In Exodus 20:11, the literal meaning of the word אֶרֶץ is used in the tripartite phrase to describe a cosmological container separate and distinct from its own contents and from the other cosmological containers of the שָׁמַיִם and the יָם. In this verse the cosmological range of the word אֶרֶץ is limited to the container of the "dry land," יַבָּשָׁה, which is in contradistinction to the container of the "sea," יָם.[34] The יָם is a container for such things as "fish," דָּג, and "sea monsters", תַּנִּין,[35] while the אֶרֶץ, or יַבָּשָׁה, is a container for "man", אָדָם and the "animal of the field," חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה. Thus, the ancient Hebrews' conception of the world included distinctions between differing cosmological containers and distinctions between these containers and their contents. Consider the following verses:

Genesis 1:10a[36]

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לַיַּבָּשָׁה אֶרֶץ וּלְמִקְוֵה הַמַּיִם קָרָא יַמִּים

And God called the dry land "earth," and the gathering of the waters He called "sea".

Genesis 1:22

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים לֵאמֹר פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמִלְאוּ אֶת־הַמַּיִם בַּיַּמִּים וְהָעוֹף יִרֶב בָּאָרֶץ:

And God blessed them saying, "Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the waters of the sea, but let the birds multiply on the earth."

Genesis 1:28

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמִלְאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְכִבְשֻׁהָ וּרְדוּ בִּדְגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל־חַיָּה הָרֹמֶשֶׂת עַל־הָאָרֶץ:

And God blessed them, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the heavens, and every animal that creeps upon the earth."

Genesis 9:2a

וּמוֹרַאֲכֶם וְחִתְּכֶם יִהְיֶה עַל כָּל־חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ וְעַל כָּל־עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר תִּרְמֹשׂ הָאֲדָמָה וּבְכָל־דְּגֵי הַיָּם

But your fear and your terror will be upon every animal of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, and in everything which will creep on the ground and in all the fish of the sea.

Nehemiah 9:6

אַתָּה־הוּא יְהוָה לְבַדֶּךָ אַתָּ עָשִׂיתָ אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם שְׁמֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכָל־צְבָאָם הָאָרֶץ וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיהָ הַיַּמִּים וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר בָּהֶם וְאַתָּה מְחַיֶּה אֶת־כֻּלָּם וּצְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם לְךָ מִשְׁתַּחֲוִים:

You are He. You alone are Lord. You made the heavens, the heavens of the heavens and all their hosts, the earth and all that is upon it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them, and the host of the heavens bow down to you.

In nearly every cited passage there is both a clear distinction between the container of the אֶרֶץ and the other cosmological containers and a clear distinction between the אֶרֶץ and its contents. Only in Genesis 1:10 is there no distinction between the container and the contents since in the context of the passage the contents are not yet created.

Even though the word אֶרֶץ, in a limited sense, can refer to the container of the יַבָּשָׁה, in contradistinction to the container of the יָם, it can also refer to a much larger cosmological container. The word אֶרֶץ also describes a cosmological container that encompasses all the realms, or containers, that are under the container of the שָׁמַיִם. Thus, the cosmological range of the word אֶרֶץ can also encompass both the container of the יַבָּשָׁה and the container of the יָם. In this sense, the word אֶרֶץ functions very much like the english word "earth" when referring to planet earth.[37] Consider the following verses:

Genesis 1:2

וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמָּיִם:

Now the earth was formless and void with darkness upon the face of the deep and the Spirit of God hovering above the surface of the waters.

Psalm 104:5–6

⁵ יָסַד־אֶרֶץ עַל־מְכוֹנֶיהָ בַּל־תִּמּוֹט עוֹלָם וָעֶד:
⁶ תְּהוֹם כַּלְּבוּשׁ כִּסִּיתוֹ עַל־הָרִים יַעַמְדוּ־מָיִם:

⁵He established the earth upon its foundations, it will not be moved forever.
⁶He has covered it with the deep like a garment, the waters were standing above the mountains.[38]

---

[34] See also Psalm 95:5; Jonah 1:9; and Haggai 2:6 for other examples of this antithesis at the cosmological level. Ottosson (1978, 397), adds, "Along with the bipartite division, there is also a tripartite division of the universe into heaven, earth, and sea (water) in the OT. In Genesis 1:10, *'erets* is defined as "the dry land," and forms the antithesis to the gathering together of the water, that is, to the sea."

[35] Genesis 1:21; Job 7:12; Psalm 74:13; Isaiah 27:1; Ezekiel 32:2.

[36] Cf. Jonah 1:9; Psalm 95:5.

[37] Harrison (1988) states, "While used in most of the senses of *'aḏāmâ 'ereṣ* often indicated the earth as a planet rather than as soil or ground." This description does not mean that the ancient Hebrews readers had the same conception of the planet as that of the modern reader. It simply means that their word for earth, אֶרֶץ, like the English word "earth," can encompass more than just *terra firma*.

[38] For an explanation of the difference in gender between the pronominal suffix and its antecedent, see Hakham (2003).

Psalm 148:7[39]

הַלְלוּ אֶת־יְהוָה מִן־הָאָרֶץ תַּנִּינִים וְכָל־תְּהֹמוֹת׃

Praise the Lord from the earth, *you* sea monsters and all depths.

Amos 9:6b

הַקֹּרֵא לְמֵי־הַיָּם וַיִּשְׁפְּכֵם עַל־פְּנֵי הָאָרֶץ יְהוָה שְׁמוֹ׃

The One who calls the waters of the sea and pours them out upon the surface of the earth, the Lord is his name.

By describing both the יָם and the תְּהוֹם, "deep," as parts of the container of the אָרֶץ, these passages demonstrate this larger cosmological dimension of the word. Other studies on the ancient Hebrews' conception of the אָרֶץ also recognize this larger, cosmological dimension of the word. For instance, Stadelmann (1970, 3) states,

> What we designate "the universe," they [the Hebrews] regarded as two separate entities:
>
>> The heavens are the heaven of the Lord,
>> But the earth has he given to mankind.
>
> By earth[, אָרֶץ,] here is to be understood everything under the heavens, including the seas:
>
>> Praise the Lord from the earth;
>> Sea-monsters and all the deeps.[40]

Janzen (1992) also states,

> Somewhat ambivalent in this structure [of the universe] is the place of the sea(s) or water(s), the deep, and the underworld. The seas can be spoken of as familiar reality, in which the fish and other water creatures swarm (Gen 1:20, 22, 26, etc.) and on which humans move in ships (Ps 104:25–26; 107:23; Prov 30:19; Ezek 27:9). As such, the sea forms part of the earth, i.e., the flat surface below juxtaposed to the heavens above.

Thus, when used to make cosmological references, the word אָרֶץ can have two meanings. It can refer to the cosmological container of only the יַבָּשָׁה, or it can refer to the larger container that encompasses both the יַבָּשָׁה and the יָם. Ottosson (1978, 393) writes,

> The Heb. *'erets* combines the same nuances of meaning as the related words discussed above [in the etymology section]: "earth" in the cosmic sense as an antithesis to "heaven," "land" in antithesis to "sea,"….

Schmid (1997, 173) also writes, "(a) *'ereṣ* indicates

(1) cosmologically: the earth (in contrast to heaven) and the dry land (in contrast to the waters).…"

When the larger cosmological dimension of the word is communicated, the container of the אָרֶץ is no longer in contradistinction to the container of the sea, יָם, since the יָם is now a part of this larger container. Rather, the container of the אָרֶץ is in contradistinction to the container of the שָׁמַיִם. Thus, in a literal sense, the שָׁמַיִם are a container for all the contents above, and the אָרֶץ is a container for all the contents below. Rather than being a container for just man and beast, the אָרֶץ is also a container for the fish, the sea monsters, and everything else that can be classified as under the שָׁמַיִם.

Again, the word אָרֶץ in Exodus 20:11 is used literally in a tripartite phrase that communicates the same meaning that the compounded word pair אָרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם communicates in Exodus 31:17. Since the word can also communicate the idea of the larger cosmological container that encompasses the contents of the יַבָּשָׁה and the יָם, then the tripartite phrase אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּם could be replaced with the bipartite phrase אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּם. The two words of the bipartite phrase then would still retain their individual meanings, and the phrase would still communicate the same meaning as that of the compounded word pair in Exodus 31:17.[41]

However, even though the word אָרֶץ can describe the larger cosmological container that is in contradistinction to the שָׁמַיִם, there is still a distinction between it and its contents, much like there is a distinction between the smaller container of the יַבָּשָׁה and its contents. This distinction is shown in the following passages.

Deuteronomy 10:14

הֵן לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ הַשָּׁמַיִם וּשְׁמֵי הַשָּׁמָיִם הָאָרֶץ וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּהּ׃

Behold, to the Lord your God belong the heaven and the heavens of the heavens, the earth and all that is in it.

Psalm 104:24[42]

מָה־רַבּוּ מַעֲשֶׂיךָ יְהוָה כֻּלָּם בְּחָכְמָה עָשִׂיתָ מָלְאָה הָאָרֶץ קִנְיָנֶךָ׃

How great are your works, Lord. You made all of them in your wisdom; the earth is full of your possessions.

---

[39] The inclusion of the sea monsters, תַּנִּין, (cf. Genesis 1:21) as dwellers of the אָרֶץ demonstrates that in a larger cosmological sense, the אָרֶץ is a container for both the יָם and its contents.

[40] Stadelmann (1970, 126) also states, "The earth was regarded as a vast plain, occupied partly by the sea, partly by continents studded with mountains, furrowed by rivers, and dotted with lakes."

[41] The bipartite phrases in Genesis 2:1 and Jeremiah 51:48 communicate the same meaning that the word pair in Exodus 30:17 communicates; however, the words of the bipartite phrase retain their individual literal meanings.

[42] The context of the chapter discusses the Lord's creation of the אָרֶץ, the larger cosmological container, and his dealings with it. The following verses, 25–26, talk about the יָם and its creatures making them apart of all the creatures of the אָרֶץ that are in the Lord's care (104:27–30).

Psalm 148:7[43]

הַלְלוּ אֶת־יְהוָה מִן־הָאָרֶץ תַּנִּינִים וְכָל־תְּהֹמוֹת:

Praise the LORD from the earth, *you* sea monsters and all depths.

Isaiah 34:1b

תִּשְׁמַע הָאָרֶץ וּמְלֹאָהּ תֵּבֵל וְכָל־צֶאֱצָאֶיהָ:

Let the earth and all its fullness hear, the world and all its produce

Micah 1:2a

שִׁמְעוּ עַמִּים כֻּלָּם הַקְשִׁיבִי אֶרֶץ וּמְלֹאָהּ

Hear, nations, all of you. Listen, earth and its fullness.

In these passages the distinction between container and contents is maintained even when the word אֶרֶץ refers to the larger cosmological container of all that is under the שָׁמַיִם.

The word אֶרֶץ, however, can also express another cosmological meaning. There are other instances in the Hebrew Old Testament in which there is no distinction between the container and the contents of the אֶרֶץ. In these instances, the word אֶרֶץ communicates the meaning of both.[44]

Genesis 6:11

וַתִּשָּׁחֵת הָאָרֶץ לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וַתִּמָּלֵא הָאָרֶץ חָמָס:

Now the earth was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence.

Exodus 19:5b

וִהְיִיתֶם לִי סְגֻלָּה מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים כִּי־לִי כָּל־הָאָרֶץ:

And you will be my possession from all the peoples, for the all the earth is mine.

Psalm 89:12

לְךָ שָׁמַיִם אַף־לְךָ אָרֶץ תֵּבֵל וּמְלֹאָהּ אַתָּה יְסַדְתָּם:

The heavens are yours. Moreover the earth is yours, the world and its fullness. You have established them.

Psalm 115:15–16

[15] בְּרוּכִים אַתֶּם לַיהוָה עֹשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:
[16] הַשָּׁמַיִם שָׁמַיִם לַיהוָה וְהָאָרֶץ נָתַן לִבְנֵי־אָדָם:

[15]Be blessed of the LORD, the maker of the heavens and the earth.
[16](*For* the heavens are the LORD's heavens, but the earth he has given to the sons of man.)

Isaiah 54:5b

וִהְיִיתֶם לִי סְגֻלָּה מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים כִּי־לִי כָּל־הָאָרֶץ:

And you will be my possession from all the peoples, for the all the earth is mine.

Other scholars also recognize this added cosmological dimension of the word. Stadelmann (1970, 2) states,

Since the concept of an external world seems to be a Greek abstraction, unknown, at all events, to the Semites, it is not surprising that the Bible does not distinguish container from contents, or, conversely, the living from its environment. Thus, for example, space never appears as an inert, lifeless receptacle; it is the sea where fish swim, the ground on which beasts tread, the land belonging to such and such people, the heavens where the winds are stored, the snow and hail are kept.

Schmid (1997, 175) also states,

To be sure, the OT is not concerned with the earth as part of the cosmos so much as with that which fills the earth ('ereṣ ûmᵉlōʾāh, Deut 33:16; Isa 34:1; Jer 8:16, etc.), its inhabitants (Isa 24:1, 5f., 17; Jer 25:29f.; Psa 33:14, etc.), peoples (Gen 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; Deut 28:10, etc.), kingdoms (Deut 28:25; 2 Kgs 19:15, etc.), and the like. Thus the term "earth" in some passages can indicate—as in other languages—both the earth and its inhabitants (Gen 6:11, etc.).

Thus, if the word אֶרֶץ can communicate the meaning of both container and contents, then by itself, it can refer to an entire half of all that is said to be created in Exodus 20:11, and as a consequence half of all that is said to be created in Exodus 31:17. In other words, אֶרֶץ can refer to one half of the "organized universe."

The cosmological identities of the word שָׁמַיִם

Much like the word אֶרֶץ, the word שָׁמַיִם also communicates the idea of a cosmological container separate and distinct from its contents. In many passages the word is depicted as a container for the host of the heavens, צְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם, such as the sun, שֶׁמֶשׁ, moon יָרֵחַ, stars כּוֹכָבִים, and the angels/messengers, מַלְאָכִים.[45] Consider the following examples:

---

[43] The container of the אֶרֶץ is depicted first, but its contents are distinctly described in verses 7–12.
[44] Cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs (1907, s.v. "אֶרֶץ") which has under definition 1.c., "*earth*=inhabitants of earth."
[45] For more uses of the phrase צְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם and its relation to the sun, moon, stars, and angels, see Deuteronomy 4:19; 17:3; 1 Kings 22:19; 2 Kings 17:16; 21:3, 5; 23:4, 5; 2 Chronicles 18:18; 33:3, 5; Nehemiah 9:6; Psalm 33:6; Isaiah 34:4; 45:12; Jeremiah 8:2; 19:13; 33:22; Daniel 8:10; Zephaniah 1:5. See also the article by Tsumura (1997),which includes all of these as the inhabitants of the heavens.

Nehemiah 9:6

אַתָּה־הוּא יְהוָה לְבַדֶּךָ אַתָּה עָשִׂיתָ אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם שְׁמֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכָל־צְבָאָם הָאָרֶץ וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיהָ הַיַּמִּים וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר בָּהֶם וְאַתָּה מְחַיֶּה אֶת־כֻּלָּם וּצְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם לְךָ מִשְׁתַּחֲוִים:

You are He. You alone are LORD. You made the heavens, the heavens of the heavens and all their hosts, the earth and all that is upon it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them, and the host of the heavens worships you.

Psalm 33:6

בִּדְבַר יְהוָה שָׁמַיִם נַעֲשׂוּ וּבְרוּחַ פִּיו כָּל־צְבָאָם:

By the word of the LORD were the heavens made and by the breath of His mouth all their hosts.

Psalm 148:1[46]

הַלְלוּ יָהּ הַלְלוּ אֶת־יְהוָה מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם הַלְלוּהוּ בַּמְּרוֹמִים:

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens! Praise Him from the heights!

Isaiah 34:4

וְנָמַקּוּ כָּל־צְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם וְנָגֹלּוּ כַסֵּפֶר הַשָּׁמָיִם וְכָל־צְבָאָם יִבּוֹל כִּנְבֹל עָלֶה מִגֶּפֶן וּכְנֹבֶלֶת מִתְּאֵנָה:

All the host of the heavens will decay, and the heavens will be rolled up as a scroll. And all their hosts will droop as a drooping leaf from a vine as a drooping fig tree.

Isaiah 45:12

אָנֹכִי עָשִׂיתִי אֶרֶץ וְאָדָם עָלֶיהָ בָרָאתִי אֲנִי יָדַי נָטוּ שָׁמַיִם וְכָל־צְבָאָם צִוֵּיתִי:

I made the earth and I created man upon it. I, with my hand, stretched out the heavens and commanded all their hosts.

Jeremiah 2:12

שֹׁמּוּ שָׁמַיִם עַל־זֹאת וְשַׂעֲרוּ חָרְבוּ מְאֹד נְאֻם־יְהוָה:

"Be desolate, heavens, concerning this. Bristle with horror and be wasted," declares the LORD.

In all of these passages there is a clear distinction between container and contents.

Now just as the word אֶרֶץ can refer to the smaller container of the 'dry land,' יַבָּשָׁה, which is a part of the larger cosmological אֶרֶץ, so too the word שָׁמַיִם can refer to the smaller container of the "firmament," רָקִיעַ, which also seems to be only a part of a larger cosmological שָׁמַיִם. Unfortunately, since ancient Hebrews were incapable of interacting with the שָׁמַיִם, there is not as much data regarding the details of its physical makeup. Most word studies, however, do agree that with the word שָׁמַיִם there is some kind of semantic distinction between the realm of the רָקִיעַ, the phenomenological sky, which contains the sun, moon, and stars, and the realm of the מְכוֹן שֶׁבֶת, God's abode,[47] which contains the angels/messengers and anything else that is above the רָקִיעַ.[48] However, as Bartelmus has noted, when the word שָׁמַיִם is used, it can be very difficult to distinguish which of the two realms is implied in the context of a passage (Bartelmus 1978, 226). Nevertheless, in the Hebrew Old Testament the word שָׁמַיִם also seems to refer to a single, overall cosmological container, that encompasses both the containers of the רָקִיעַ and the מְכוֹן שֶׁבֶת.[49] Again, this lexical phenomenon is much like the meaning of the word אֶרֶץ, which also encompasses both of the realms of the יַבָּשָׁה, and the יָם. Thus, just as the אֶרֶץ can be a container for all the contents that exist below the שָׁמַיִם, the שָׁמַיִם can be a container for all the contents that exist above the אֶרֶץ, including the contents that exist above the רָקִיעַ. However, these lexical similarities between the two words do not end here.

Just as there are instances in which there is no distinction between the container and the contents of the אֶרֶץ, there are also instances in which there is no distinction between the container and the contents of the שָׁמַיִם. Consider the following verses:[50]

---

[46] The contents of the שָׁמַיִם are described in verses 1–6 marking a clear distinction between container and contents.

[47] This is the phrase that is most frequently used to refer to God's dwelling place. See 1 Kings 8:39, 43, 49; 2 Chronicles 6:30, 33, 39. However, the phrase מְעוֹן קָדֵשׁ can also refer to His dwelling place. See Deuteronomy 26:15; 2 Chronicles 30:27; Psalm 68:5; Jeremiah 25:30.

[48] See Brown, Driver, and Briggs (1907) and Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm (2001), s.v. "שָׁמַיִם." See also Blacker and Loewe (1975, 70); Bartelmus (1978, 15:223); Austel (1980, 2:2407); and Tsumura (1997, 4:160).

[49] Note especially that the word שָׁמַיִם encompasses both these realms in Psalm 148:1–6. Other scholars also recognize this all-inclusive nature of the word. Stadelmann (1970, 180) states, "All these luminaries are said to be located in the expanse of the 'firmament,' which seems to be included in the general concept of 'heaven.' The term *šmym* (heaven) designates the space above the earth, including the atmosphere, the region of the clouds, the heavenly vault, the firmament, and that which exists above the firmament." Reddish (1992, 3:90) states, "Whereas the firmament referred specifically to the canopy covering the earth, heaven often had a broader meaning, referring to all that was above the earth, including the firmament." Finally Muller 1988, 4:1113) states, "The term heavens refers to all that is above the earth; the air and the clouds, the firmament, and the spaces above the firmament."

[50] Some of the examples most likely do refer to the smaller שָׁמַיִם, the רָקִיעַ, rather than the larger, all-encompassing שָׁמַיִם (cf. Psalm 19:2), but such examples still demonstrate that the word שָׁמַיִם does function like the word אֶרֶץ in that it can refer to both container and its contents.

1 Chronicles 16:26

כִּי כָּל־אֱלֹהֵי הָעַמִּים אֱלִילִים וַיהוָה שָׁמַיִם עָשָׂה׃

For all the gods of the peoples are worthless, but the LORD made the heavens.

Psalm 8:4

כִּי־אֶרְאֶה שָׁמֶיךָ מַעֲשֵׂי אֶצְבְּעֹתֶיךָ יָרֵחַ וְכוֹכָבִים אֲשֶׁר כּוֹנָנְתָּה׃

When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon, and the stars which you established,

Psalm 19:2

הַשָּׁמַיִם מְסַפְּרִים כְּבוֹד־אֵל וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיו מַגִּיד הָרָקִיעַ׃

The heavens recount the glory of God, and the firmament declares the works of His hands.

Psalm 136:5

לְעֹשֵׂה הַשָּׁמַיִם בִּתְבוּנָה כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ׃

To the One who made the heavens with understanding, for his mercy is forever.

Psalm 115:16

הַשָּׁמַיִם שָׁמַיִם לַיהוָה וְהָאָרֶץ נָתַן לִבְנֵי־אָדָם׃

(*For* the heavens are the LORD's heavens, but the earth he has given to the sons of man.)

In some of these passages the word שָׁמַיִם may only refer to the רָקִיעַ or the מְכוֹן שֶׁבֶת; nevertheless, if the meaning of the word שָׁמַיִם can include both the container and the contents when referring to these smaller containers, it is logical to assume that it can have this meaning when referring to the larger cosmological container (cf. 1 Chronicles 16:26; Psalm 115:16; Psalm 136:5) especially considering that its normal antonym אֶרֶץ functions in the same manner.

Therefore, just as the word אֶרֶץ can refer to the container and the contents of all that is below the שָׁמַיִם, it seems as if the word שָׁמַיִם can also refer to the container and the contents of all that is above the אֶרֶץ. Thus, the word שָׁמַיִם, by itself, can refer to the other half of all that is said to be created in Exodus 20:11, and as a consequence all that is said to be created in Exodus 31:17. In other words, it can refer to the other half of the "organized universe."

If the individual words of the word pair can truly communicate these meanings, then the characteristic tertiary meaning is unnecessary. The individual meanings that can be applied to the words אֶרֶץ and שָׁמַיִם, when they are in compound or parallel bicola may together refer to the "organized universe." This

understanding of the word pair makes better sense of the previously mentioned data that conflicts with the strict application of the merism label. It also makes better sense of the following data, which also conflicts with the merism label.

More conflicting data

There are also at least two passages in which one individual word of the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם seems to refer to the container and its contents, while the other seems to refer to just the container. In all of these passages, however, the meaning communicated by the clause or cola in which the word pair occurs is that of the "organized universe." In a sense, if the word pair is a merism, then these passages only contain half of it. The first is from Deuteronomy 10:14, which states,

הֵן לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ הַשָּׁמַיִם וּשְׁמֵי הַשָּׁמָיִם הָאָרֶץ וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּהּ׃

Behold, to the LORD our God belong the heavens and the heavens of the heavens, the earth and all that is in it.

In this verse the word שָׁמַיִם refers to the cosmological container and its contents, but the word אֶרֶץ only refers to the container. The phrase וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּהּ refers to the contents of the אֶרֶץ. Nevertheless, the meaning communicated by the word שָׁמַיִם and the phrase הָאָרֶץ וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּהּ is that of the "organized universe." However, it seems that in this verse only half of the merism is being used, while the other half is not acting like the other component of a merism. Nevertheless, the meaning communicated is the same as that of the compounded word pair in Exodus 31:17: the "organized universe." Unfortunately the strict application of the merism label cannot account for this anomalous piece of data, but according to the previous discussion, the data fits perfectly.

The second passage is from Isaiah 42:5,[51] which also states,

כֹּה־אָמַר הָאֵל יְהוָה
בּוֹרֵא הַשָּׁמַיִם וְנוֹטֵיהֶם
רֹקַע הָאָרֶץ וְצֶאֱצָאֶיהָ
נֹתֵן נְשָׁמָה לָעָם עָלֶיהָ
וְרוּחַ לַהֹלְכִים בָּהּ׃

Thus says the God, the LORD,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and its offspring,
who gives breath to the people upon it,
and spirit to those who walk upon it,

---

[51] See also Jeremiah 10:12 and 51:15 where the next verses (10:13 and 51:16) seem to refer back to the individual words of the word pair.

In this passage the word שָׁמַיִם also refers to the container and the contents; whereas, the word אֶרֶץ only refers to the container, and the word וְצֶאֱצָאֶיהָ refers to its contents. Furthermore, the last two cola of the verse treat the word אֶרֶץ as if it had an individual, literal meaning. Nevertheless, the meaning communicated by the individual word שָׁמַיִם and the phrase הָאָרֶץ וְצֶאֱצָאֶיהָ is that of the "organized universe," the same meaning communicated by the compounded word pair in Exodus 31:17. These two passages further demonstrate that the strict application of the merism label to the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם cannot account for the entirety of the data. However, by recognizing that the individual words of the word pair can communicate the meaning of "organized universe," the entirety of the data can be accounted for and properly explained. Should then the merism label be dropped?

The verdict on the merism label

If the data from the Hebrew Old Testament shows that the individual words of the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם can retain their individual meanings when they are in compound or parallel bicola, is the word pair then really a merism? Furthermore, if the data shows that the meanings of the individual words can together communicate the concept of the "organized universe," is the word pair then really a merism? The answer may be both yes and no. On the one hand, the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם is a polar expression that does indicate a totality, which is a common characteristic of merisms. On the other hand, as the evidence has shown, the individual words of the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם together make up that totality. They are the most prominent parts of the whole because they are the two halves that comprise it. This phenomenon explains the conflicting data. Thus, in one sense the word pair is different from most merisms. This difference, however, should not disqualify the word pair from being labeled as a merism, for nearly every study on the merism includes this word pair as an example.[52] However, based upon the evidence and the uniqueness of this word pair, summary-statement proponents should not use the merism label to argue that the compounded אֶרֶץ of Genesis 1:1 cannot correspond to the isolated אֶרֶץ of Genesis 1:2. The close proximity of the two identical words suggests that they do correspond to one another, and the merism label does not negate that correspondence.

Does the Word Pair Always Communicate this Meaning?

Though the preceding investigation demonstrates that the merism label cannot prevent traditional proponents from arguing that the אֶרֶץ of Genesis 1:1 corresponds with the אֶרֶץ of 1:2, the evidence still suggests that the word pair does frequently refer to the "organized universe." Waltke even argues that the word pair has this meaning in all its uses.[53] According to the traditional interpretation, the word pair cannot have this meaning because the אֶרֶץ of Genesis 1:2, which refers back to the אֶרֶץ of Genesis 1:1, clearly does not describe a universe that is in any way organized or complete. The previous discussion, however, suggests that when the word pair occurs in collocation, it may have another meaning as well.

The previous study of the individual words שָׁמַיִם and אֶרֶץ demonstrates that individually they can refer to either the container and its contents or to the larger cosmological container alone. The former explains how the individual meanings of the two words can together communicate the idea of the "organized universe." However, if the two words by themselves can refer to either the container or both the container and its contents, then it is possible that the two words maintain these same aspects even when they are in collocation. In other words, there should be examples where the word pair in compound or parallel bicola only refers to the containers and not to both the containers and the contents.

Not surprisingly, the word pair actually does act in this manner when it is in collocation, and there are three ways in which it does so. First, like the tripartite phrase in Exodus 20:11, the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם can be used in a bipartite phrase where the meanings of the words שָׁמַיִם and אֶרֶץ only refer to the all-encompassing cosmological containers, but not the contents. Consider the following examples:

Genesis 2:1

וַיְכֻלּוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ וְכָל־צְבָאָם:

And God completed the heavens and the earth and all their hosts.

Jeremiah 51:48a

וְרִנְּנוּ עַל־בָּבֶל שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר בָּהֶם

Shout over Babylon, heavens and earth and all that is in them.

---

[52] Note especially again Murphy's short definition which describes a merism as, "A poetic technique by which a whole is referred to by either its two major parts or two extremities. Thus, 'heavens and earth' refers to the entire cosmos, and 'mountains and valleys' refers to the total terrain." (Murphy 2003, s.v., "merismus.")

[53] Waltke (2001, 59): "In *all* [(emphasis mine)] its uses in the Old Testament (cf. Gen. 2:1, 4; Deut. 3:24; Isa. 65:17; Jer. 23:24), this phrase functions as a compound referring to the organized universe." As noted earlier, Waltke limits his claim to the use of the word pair in compound. However, previous discussion showed that it can also extend to the word pair in parallel bicola.

In these examples the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם only refers to the cosmological containers. Thus, it does not communicate the same meaning that the word pair communicates in Exodus 31:17. Surprisingly, even Waltke agrees with this assessment in his comments on Genesis 2:1. He states,

1. **the heavens and the earth were completed.** The concluding summary statement [in Genesis 2:1] underscores that the creator has perfectly executed his will with regard to the first triad[, the first three days of creation].

 the vast array. This refers to the second triad[, the second three days]. (Waltke 2001, 67)

The summary statement in 2:1 is a janus, functioning both as an inclusio (an envelope) with verse 1:1 and introducing the epilogue. Here "the heavens and the earth" refers to the first three days of creation that feature the essential spheres of the cosmos. "All their vast array" refers to the manifold forms of creation housed in these spheres, such as luminaries in the heavens, birds in the sky, fish in the sea, and "creepy-crawlies," animals, and human beings on the land (Waltke 2007, 186).

In these citations, Waltke acknowledges two things. First, he acknowledges that there is a distinction between container and contents; although, he uses the terms "spheres" and "inhabitants."[54] Second, Waltke also acknowledges this distinction exists in Genesis 2:1 where the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם does not refer to the containers and the contents, the "organized universe," but to the containers alone. Thus, even Waltke applies a different meaning to the word pair in Genesis 2:1 than he applies to the word pair in Genesis 1:1.

Second, in Isaiah 45:12 the word pair is used in parallel bicola; however, the word pair only refers to the cosmological containers and not their contents.

Isaiah 45:12

אָנֹכִי עָשִׂיתִי אֶרֶץ וְאָדָם עָלֶיהָ בָרָאתִי
אֲנִי יָדַי נָטוּ שָׁמַיִם וְכָל־צְבָאָם צִוֵּיתִי:

I myself made the earth, and I created man upon it.
I with my hands stretched out the heavens, and commanded all their host.

Thus, again the word pair does *not* communicate the same meaning that it does in Psalm 102:26; Proverbs 3:19; Isaiah 44:24; 48:13; 51:13, 16; Jeremiah 10:12; 51:15; and Zechariah 12:1, where the word pair is used in parallel bicola to communicate the same meaning as the compounded word pair in

Exodus 31:17. Rather, the word pair in Isaiah 45:12 communicates the same meaning as the compounded word pair in Genesis 2:1 and Jeremiah 51:48. It only refers to the containers of the שָׁמַיִם and the אֶרֶץ.

Third, in other instances in which the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם is governed by a preposition, the word pair again only refers to the containers and not the contents. Consider the following examples:

2 Samuel 18:9b

וַיֶּחֱזַק רֹאשׁוֹ בָאֵלָה וַיֻּתַּן בֵּין הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבֵין הָאָרֶץ וְהַפֶּרֶד אֲשֶׁר־תַּחְתָּיו עָבָר:

And his head was held strong in the oak, and he was left between the heavens and the earth, while his mule which was under him passed on.

1 Kings 8:23b[55]

וַיֹּאמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵין־כָּמוֹךָ אֱלֹהִים בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְעַל־הָאָרֶץ מִתָּחַת

And he said, "LORD, God of Israel, there is no god like you in the heavens above and upon the earth beneath."

2 Chronicles 6:14[56]

וַיֹּאמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵין־כָּמוֹךָ אֱלֹהִים בַּשָּׁמַיִם וּבָאָרֶץ

And he said, "LORD, God of Israel, there is no god like you in the heavens and the earth."

In the first example from 2 Samuel 18:9, the word pair is in compound and is governed by the same preposition, בֵּין. However, the individual words of the word pair clearly refer to only the cosmological containers of the heavens and the earth. The last two examples are from the parallel accounts of Solomon's prayer at the dedication ceremony of the temple. The phrase בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְעַל־הָאָרֶץ מִתָּחַת used in 1 Kings 8:23 is rendered as בַּשָּׁמַיִם וּבָאָרֶץ in the parallel account of 2 Chronicles 6:14. The only difference between the two is that the words of the phrase in 1 Kings 8:23 are governed by different prepositions and are not quite in compound. However, the word pair in 1 Kings 8:23 is governed by the same preposition, בְּ, and clearly refers to only the cosmological containers of the heavens and the earth, and not the contents. This suggests that the compounded word pair in the parallel account of 2 Chronicles 6:14 shares the same meaning with the longer phrase in 1 Kings 8:2, which again only refers to the containers. Thus, the compounded word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם in 2 Samuel 18:9 and 2 Chronicles 6:14 does not have the same meaning as the compounded word pair in Exodus 31:17. Rather, the

---

[54] Waltke refers to the "inhabitants in the second triad" in a subtitle. See Waltke (2007, 186).
[55] Cf. Deuteronomy 4:39; Joshua 2:11.
[56] Cf. Deuteronomy 3:24; 1 Chronicles 29:11; Psalm 113:6.

word pair of these passages has the same meaning as the compounded word pair in Genesis 2:1 and Jeremiah 51:48, which only refers to the cosmological containers.[57] The word pair in collocation predictably varies in meaning in the same manner in which the words do individually. Thus, it is entirely possible that the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם in Genesis 1:1 can refer to the creation of only the all-encompassing, cosmological containers of the שָׁמַיִם and the אֶרֶץ.[58]

Conclusion

Based upon the preceding analysis, summary-statement proponents cannot argue that it is impossible for the אֶרֶץ of Genesis 1:1 to correspond to the אֶרֶץ of Genesis 1:2 in meaning simply because the former occurs in compound with שָׁמַיִם. Again, the close proximity of the two identical words strongly suggests that they *do* correspond to one another in meaning, just as they do in other similar verses.[59] Brown (1993, 102 n. 12) aptly states,

> The two products of creation have been commonly considered a merismus that constitutes the whole of creation, i.e., the cosmos, but no commentator I am aware of has ever offered such a rendering *as a translation*. The difficulty for such a rendering is that the first word of v 2, *hā'āreṣ*, clearly has some point of semantic continuity with the last word of v 1. Thus its occurrence in v 1 is not simply meant to function as one part of a merismus without independent meaning.[60]

Again, in order for the summary-statement interpretation to be not only sustainable, but more probable than the traditional interpretation, the אֶרֶץ of Genesis 1:2 cannot correspond to the אֶרֶץ of Genesis 1:1 in meaning. Nevertheless, the previous analysis demonstrates that the two words can correspond to one another in meaning, which consequently suggests that the two verses share a semantic continuity.

According to the traditional interpretation, Genesis 1:1 does not describe the creation of the "organized universe;" rather, it describes the creation of something less, the containers. Since the word pair אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם can also refer to only the containers of the שָׁמַיִם and אֶרֶץ, the creation of such in Genesis 1:1 perfectly fits the traditional interpretation as well as the context of the passage and the larger narrative.[61]

The corresponding אֶרֶץ of Genesis 1:2, whose syntactical construction in Hebrew is typically descriptive, specifies the state of the אֶרֶץ in 1:1 as only a container. Furthermore, the following creation narrative describes the shaping and filling of both the שָׁמַיִם and the אֶרֶץ, the all-encompassing cosmological containers. Again, the traditional interpretation is the better reading of the text, and it works with the proximal correspondence of the two occurrences of אֶרֶץ, not against it. Since, therefore, Genesis 1:1 does not describe anything as being in existence before the initial creation other than God himself, the logical and theological conclusion of this interpretation is that God created the world *ex nihilo*.

However, as noted in the thesis of this article, summary-statement proponents also argue that the word אֶרֶץ in Genesis 1:1 cannot correspond in *state* to the word אֶרֶץ of Genesis 1:2. This argument is based upon their understanding of the compound phrase תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ in Genesis 1:2. A forthcoming article will next offer a lexical analysis of this phrase and will further demonstrate that the traditional interpretation of Genesis 1:1 is a better reading of the text than the summary-statement interpretation.

References

Ante-Nicene Fathers. (1885–1887) 1994. *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson.

Austel, Hermann J. 1980. "שָׁמַיִם (*shāmayim*) heaven, heavens, sky." In *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Edited by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke. Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press.

Avishur, Yitzhak. 1984. *Stylistic Studies of Word-Pairs in Biblical and Ancient Semitic Literatures*. Alter Orient und Altes Testament 210. Neukirchen-Vluyn, Germany: Verlag Butzon & Bercker Kevelaer.

Barr, James. 1998. "Was Everything That God Created Really Good?" In *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*. Edited by Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, 55–65. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press.

Bartelmus. 1978. "שָׁמַיִם (*šāmayim*)." In *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Rev. ed. Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren. Translated by John T. Willis. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

---

[57] See Daniel 6:28 for an Aramaic example of this phenomenon.

[58] The examples from this discussion are also a continuation of the evidence against the strict application of the merism label.

[59] Cf. again Psalm 115:15–16.

[60] Later in the quote Brown does argue that the word pair refers to the totality of creation, but he is able to argue for a semantic continuity between the two verses because he favors the dependent-clause translation of Genesis 1:1. In this translation, it is possible for the two verses to share a semantic relationship even when the word pair refers to the totality of creation.

[61] In the larger narrative of Genesis 1, the רָקִיעַ created in Genesis 1:6–8, which is given the name שָׁמַיִם, and the יַבָּשָׁה created in Genesis 1:9–10, which is given the name אֶרֶץ, are clearly only parts of the larger cosmological containers. Without the traditional interpretation there is no account of the origins of the larger cosmological containers of the שָׁמַיִם and אֶרֶץ, which seems odd in the origins-oriented narrative. Note especially also the interpretation of Samuel David Luzzatto, the nineteenth-century Jewish scholar, who states, "The 'heaven' and 'earth' mentioned here [in Genesis 1:1] are not exactly the same heaven and earth that are later specified on the second and third days. The 'heaven' mentioned here includes everything above the earth, while the heaven mentioned on the second day includes only that part of it known to man. The 'earth' mentioned here includes the land with the water, and the air above it, while the earth mentioned on the third day includes only the dry land" (Luzzatto 1998, 3).

Blacker, Carmen, and Michael Loewe, eds. 1975. *Ancient Cosmologies*. London, United Kingdom: Allen and Unwin.

Brown, Francis, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. 1907. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Clarendon.

Brown, William P. 1993. *Structure, Role, and Ideology in the Hebrew and Greek Texts of Genesis 1:1–2:3*. Dissertation Series/Society of Biblical Literature, no. 132. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press.

Carter, Craig A. 2021. *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition: Recovering Trinitarian Classical Theism*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic.

Childs, Brevard S. 1960. *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*. Studies in Biblical Theology First Series no. 27. Chatham, United Kingdom: W. & J. MacKay & Co Ltd; and Naperville, Illinois: Alec R. Allenson.

Delitzsch, Franz. 1888. *A New Commentary on Genesis*. Translated by Sophia Taylor. Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark.

Driver, S.R. 1904. *The Book of Genesis*. 2nd ed. Westminster Commentaries. London, United Kingdom: Methuen & Co.

Feinberg, John S. 2001. *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*. Foundations of Evangelical Theology. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books.

Grudem, Wayne. 2020. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic.

Gunkel, Hermann. 1997. *Genesis*. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. Mercer Library of Biblical Studies. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press.

Hakham, Amos. 2003. *Psalm 101-150*. Vol. 3 of *Psalms*. The Koschitzky ed. The Bible with the Jerusalem Commentary, 38 n. 8b. Jerusalem, Israel: Mosad Harav Kook.

Harrison, Roland K. 1988. "Earth." In *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Rev. ed. Edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2:3. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Honeyman, A.M. 1952. "Merismus in Biblical Hebrew." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 71, no. 1 (March): 11–18.

Janzen, W. 1992. "Earth." In *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Edited by David Noel Freedman, 2:246. New York, New York: Doubleday.

Koehler, Ludwig, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. 2001. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E.J. Richardson, 2 vols. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.

Krašovec, Jože. 1983. "Merism—Polar Expression in Biblical Hebrew." *Biblica* 64, no. 2: 231–239.

Luzzatto, S.D. 1998. *The Book of Genesis: A Commentary by ShaDaL (S.D. Luzzatto)*. Translated by Daniel A. Klein. Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc.

Mathews, Kenneth A. 1996. *Genesis 1–11:26. The New American Commentary*. Vol. 1A. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers.

Muller, R.A. 1988. "World." In *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Rev. ed. Edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Murphy, Todd J. 2003. *Pocket Dictionary for the Study of Biblical Hebrew*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press.

Ottosson. 1978. "אֶרֶץ (*erets*)." In *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Rev. ed. Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren. Translated by John T. Willis, vol. 1: 393–397. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Reddish, Mitchell G. 1992. "Heaven." In *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Edited by David Noel Freedman. New York, New York: Doubleday.

Sarna, Nahum M. 1989. *Genesis*. The JPS Torah Commentary. Edited by Nahum M. Sarna, and Chaim Potok. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Jewish Publication Society.

Schmid, H. H. 1997. "אֶרֶץ *ʾereṣ* earth, land." In *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Vol. 1. Edited by Ernst Jenni, and Claus Westermann. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers.

Skinner, John. 1951. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*. 2nd ed. The International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark.

Stadelmann, Luis I.J. 1970. *The Hebrew Conception of the World: A Philological and Literary Study*. Analecta Biblica 39. Rome, Italy: Biblical Institute Press.

Tsumura, David Toshio. 1997. "שָׁמַיִם." In *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Vol. 4, 162–163. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.

von Rad, Gerhard. 1963. *Genesis: A Commentary*. 2nd revised ed. Translated by John H. Marks. The Old Testament Library. London, United Kingdom: SCM Press Ltd.

Waltke, Bruce K. 1975. "The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1– 3. Part III: The Initial Chaos Theory and the Precreation Chaos Theory." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132, no. 527 (July): 216–228.

Waltke, Bruce K. 2001. *Genesis: A Commentary*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.

Waltke, Bruce K. 2007. *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.

Watson, Wilfred G.E. 1984. *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 26. Sheffield, England: JSOT Press.

Wenham, Gordon J. 1987. *Genesis 1–15*. Word Biblical Commentary. Vol. 1. Waco, Texas: Word Books Publisher.

Westermann, Claus. 1990. *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*. Translated by John J. Scullion. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House.

Wilson, Joshua. 2018a. "Linguistic Traits of Hebrew Relator Nouns and Their Implications for Translating Genesis 1:1." *Answers Research Journal* 11 (February 28): 1–21. https://answersresearchjournal.org/hebrew-relator-nouns-translating-genesis-1/.

Wilson, Joshua. 2018b. "Syntactical Features of Hebrew Genitive Clauses and Their Implications for Translating Genesis 1:1." *Answers Research Journal* 11 (December 19): 341–358. https://answersresearchjournal.org/hebrew-genitive-clauses/.

Young, Edward J. 1959. "Relation of the First Verse of Genesis One to Verses Two and Three." *Westminster Theological Journal* 21 (May): 133–146.

Young, Edward J. 1961. "The Interpretation of Genesis 1:2." *Westminster Theological Journal* 23, no. 2 (May): 151–178.

Josh Wilson