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

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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 אֵת in Genesis 1:2 would be unrelated in meaning to the word אֵת 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 אֵת in Genesis 1:1 could be related in meaning to the word אֵת 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 אֵת and אֵת in Genesis 1:1 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

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. 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,
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 הַשָּמַיִם 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.

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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.

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). 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. 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.

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. Concerning Genesis 1:1, Brown aptly states, “More 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.

**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 אֵת הַשָּמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ in Genesis 1:1 and the word אֶרֶץ in Genesis 1:2. Does the word אֵת in Genesis 1:1 correspond in meaning to the word אֶרֶץ in Genesis 1:2? Does the word אֵת 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. The heart of the debate in answering the former question is in the meaning of the compound phrase אֵת הַשָּמַיִם 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 הַשָּמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ in Genesis 1:2. The focus of this article will be limited to answering the former question by analyzing the compound phrase הַשָּמַיִם 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 הַשָּמַיִם 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 הַשָּמַיִם 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 הַשָּמַיִם in Genesis 1:1 and the הַשָּמַיִם in Genesis 1:2 do not and cannot correspond to one another in meaning.

Because the הַשָּמַיִם of Genesis 1:1 occurs in the compound phrase הַשָּמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ, summary-statement proponents raise two main objections against its correspondence in meaning to the הַשָּמַיִם of 1:2. First, many argue that the phrase הַשָּמַיִם 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). Since the phrase is a merism, the הַשָּמַיִם of Genesis 1:1 cannot correspond to the הַשָּמַיִם of 1:2 because the הַשָּמַיִם of 1:1, being compounded with the word אֵת, has a different meaning from the word הַשָּמַיִם 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 הַשָּמַיִם of Genesis 1:1 is as unrelated in meaning to the individual הַשָּמַיִם 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 הַשָּמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ refers to the “totality of the organized universe.” Since the הַשָּמַיִם of Genesis 1:2 describes a universe that is incomplete and not yet organized, then it cannot correspond with the הַשָּמַיִם of Genesis 1:1 which, combined with אֵת, describes a universe that is complete and organized. Consider the following quotes from Young and Waltke:

At the same time the word הַשָּמַיִם does not have precisely the same connotation which it bore in verse one. In the first verse it went with the word אֵת 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 הַשָּמַיִם 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 הַשָּמַיִם of Genesis 1:1 to correspond to the הַשָּמַיִם 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. These objections against the proximal correspondence of the two occurrences of the word הַשָּמַיִם also raise ancillary questions. First, is the merism label appropriate for the compounded word pair הַשָּמַיִם 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 הַשָּמַיִם to have such a
distinctly different meaning from the word נֶפֶשׁ in isolation? Second, although it is clearly evident that the ancient Hebrews used the word pair נֶפֶשׁ/נֶפֶשׁ 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 נֶפֶשׁ/נֶפֶשׁ 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)

Since a merism is a rhetorical device that communicates the whole by naming the parts, it essentially communicates a tertiary 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.95 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 נֶפֶשׁ/נֶפֶשׁ 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 שָׁמַיִם/אֶרֶץ 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. Second, the compound form of the word pair occurs in parallel with other, singular words that express the meaning of “all,” “every,” or “always.”

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. Thus, the merism in Nehemiah 1:6, which says, “I am praying before you today, day and night,” expresses the meaning of the word pair שָׁמַיִם/אֶרֶץ, communicates the tertiary idea of “I am praying before you today continuously,” שָׁמַיִם/אֶרֶץ שָׁמַיִם/אֶרֶץ. Again, the individual meanings in the Hebrew word pair שָׁמַיִם/אֶרֶץ 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 שָׁמַיִם/אֶרֶץ 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 (’ere) 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 שָׁמַיִם/אֶרֶץ 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 שָׁמַיִם/אֶרֶץ does communicate the idea of the “organized universe.” This is especially evident in Exodus 31:17b, which states,

הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָרֶץ הָאָr

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 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, שמים and אֵֽלֶּה, 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 שמים/埃尔 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, which states,

14Let the L ORD add unto you, unto you and your sons.
15Be blessed of the L ORD, the maker of the heavens and the earth.
16(For the heavens are the L ORD’s heavens, but the earth he has given to the sons of man.)

In 115:15 the compound form of the word pair שמים/埃尔 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 L ORD 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. However, the individual meanings of שמים and埃尔 in the bicola of 115:16 refer back to and treat שמים and埃尔 in 115:15 as words with individual meanings. 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.

For thus says the L ORD,
“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 L ORD, and there is no other.”

In this passage the word pair שמים/埃尔, 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埃尔 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 “pairs 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 syntetic 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 meristic 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.
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 שמים埃尔 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,32

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,

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 אֶרֶץ/שָׁמַיִם/אֶת־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.33 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; 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 merismatic 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,

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 נַחֲלַת הַשָּׁמַיִם/אֶת־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 שֶׁכֶל עַל־פְּנֵי תְּהֹוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֵץ are in the face of the deep and the Spirit of God hovering above the surface of the waters. 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**

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 word 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 תְּהוֹם, in contradistinction to the container of the אֶרֶץ, 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 תְּהוֹם. Thus, the cosmological range of the word אֶרֶץ can also encompass both the container of the תְּהוֹם and the container of the אֶרֶץ. In this sense, the word אֶרֶץ functions very much like the English word “earth” when referring to planet earth. Consider the following verses:

**Genesis 1:2**

הָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹוּ וְחֹֽלָה׃

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**

וַיְכַלְּכוּ הַכֵּלָּהָ֖ה וַיַּגַּלְּא֖וּ הַשָּׁמַ֣יִם וְיִפָּרְצוּן תֵּלָ֑ה וַיָּפֶרֶהֈוּ: וַיַּכְבְּבוּ הַכֹּל וַיִּבְקַֽע׃

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.

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34 See also Psalm 95:5; Jonah 1:9; and Haggi 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 (1989) states, “While used in most of the senses of 'adānā 'erets 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

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

Amos 9:6b

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 יַבָּשָׁה, "deep," as parts of the container of the יָם, these passages demonstrate this larger cosmological dimension of the word. Other studies on the ancient Hebrews' conception of the יָם 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,[ יָם] here is to be understood everything under the heavens, including the seas:
Praise the Lord from the earth;
Sea-monsters and all the deeps.

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

Again, the word יָם in Exodus 20:11 is used literally in a tripartite phrase that communicates the same meaning that the compounded word pair יָם יַבָּשָׁה 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 יָם יַבָּשָׁה could be replaced with the bipartite phrase יָם יַבָּשָׁה. 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.

However, even though the word יָם can describe the larger cosmological container that is in contradistinction to the יַבָּשָׁה, 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

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

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

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39 The inclusion of the sea monsters, יָם, (cf. Genesis 1:21) as dwellers of the יָם demonstrates that in a larger cosmological sense, the יָם 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, farrowed 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 יָם, 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 יָם that are in the Lord’s care (104:27–30).
Psalm 148:7

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

Isaiah 34:1b

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

Micah 1:2a

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 שמיים refers to the larger cosmological container of all that is under the שמיים.

The word שמיים, 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 שמיים. In these instances, the word שמיים communicates the meaning of both.41

Genesis 6:11

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

Exodus 19:5b

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

Psalm 89:12

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

Psalm 115:15–16

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

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

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 (ereš āmûrôn), 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 שמיים 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, שמיים can refer to one half of the “organized universe.”

The cosmological identities of the word שמיים

Much like the word שמיים, the word שמיים 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, שמיים, such as the sun, שמש, moon ים, stars נubes, and the angels/messengers, שמיים.45 Consider the following examples:

41 The container of the שמיים is depicted first, but its contents are distinctly described in verses 7–12.

44 Cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs (1907, s.v. “земл” which has under definition 1.c., “earth=habitants of earth.”

45 For more uses of the phrase שמיים and its relation to the sun, moon, stars, and angels, see Deuteronomy 4:19; 17:3; 2 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

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

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

Psalm 148:1

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

Isaiah 45:12

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.

Psalm 33:6

Shemesh shemym shamym veasher, which is used, it can be a container for all the heavens, including the moon, stars, and the realm of the firmament, which contains the angels/messengers and anything else that is above the heavens. However, as Bartelmus has noted, when the word שמים 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 שמים also seems to refer to a single, overall cosmological container, that encompasses both the containers of the שמים and the שבת שמים. Again, this lexical phenomenon is much like the meaning of the word שמים, which also encompasses both the realms of the שמים, and the שבת שמים.

Nehemiah 9:6

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

Now just as the word שמים can refer to the smaller container of the ‘dry land,’ שמים, which is a part of the larger cosmological שמים, so too the word שמים can refer to the smaller container of the ‘firmament,’ שמים, which also seems to be only a part of a larger cosmological שמים. Unfortunately, since ancient Hebrews were incapable of interacting with the שמים, there is not as much data regarding the details of its physical makeup. Most word studies, however, do agree that with the word שמים there is some kind of semantic distinction between the realm of the שמים, the phenomenological sky, which contains the sun, moon, and stars, and the realm of the שמים, God’s abode, which contains the angels/messengers and anything else that is above the שמים. However, as Bartelmus has noted, when the word שמים 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).

Consider the following verses:

Psalm 33:6

The contents of the שמים are described in verses 1–6 marking a clear distinction between container and contents.

Isaiah 45:12

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 שמים also can refer to His dwelling place. See Deuteronomy 26:15; 2 Chronicles 30:27; Psalm 68:5; Jeremiah 25:30.

Note especially that the word שמים 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 שמים (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 Müller 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.”

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

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

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

Thus says the God, the LORD:

In this verse the word שמים refers to the cosmological container and its contents, but the word אֵת only refers to the container. The phrase שָׁמַיִם אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם and the phrase שָׁמַיִם כּוֹנָנָיו refer to the container and its contents 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, which also states,

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,

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 שמים also refers to the container and the contents; whereas, the word רען only refers to the container, and the word ארץ refers to its contents. Furthermore, the last two cola of the verse treat the word רען as if it had an individual, literal meaning. Nevertheless, the meaning communicated by the individual word שמים and the phrase שָׁמַיִם/ארץ 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 שמים/ארץ 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 שמים/ארץ 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 שָׁמַיִם/ארץ 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 שָׁמַיִם/ארץ 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. 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 שָׁמַיִם of Genesis 1:1 cannot correspond to the isolated שָׁמַיִם 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 שָׁמַיִם of Genesis 1:1 corresponds with the שָׁמַיִם 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. According to the traditional interpretation, the word pair cannot have this meaning because the שָׁמַיִם of Genesis 1:2, which refers back to the שָׁמַיִם 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 ארץ 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. Consider the following examples:

Genesis 2:1

וַיִּקְנֵֽו אֶתֶּרֶץ הַשָּׁמַ֖יִם וְכֹל הָאָרָֽץ

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

Jeremiah 51:48a

וַיְלַעֲבֵֽרֻ לָהֶ֖ם קָרָ֑י והַשָּׁמַ֖יִם וְכֹל הָאָרָֽץ

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 וּבָאָרֶץ 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.”

Second, Waltke also acknowledges this distinction exists in Genesis 2:1 where the word pair אֶרֶץ וּבָאָרֶץ 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

I myself made the earth, and I created man upon it.

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 הבא יתא and the אֶרֶץ.

Third, in other instances in which the word pair אֶרֶץ וּבָאָרֶץ 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

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

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

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 התא אֶרֶץ בָּאָרֶץ used in 1 Kings 8:23 is rendered as בָּאָרֶץ בֵּין התא התא 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, בֵּין, 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 הבא יתא 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.

54 Waltke refers to the “inhabitants in the second triad” in a subtitle. See Waltke (2007, 186).
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. The word pair in collocation predicts that the former occurs in compound with אֶרֶץ. 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. Brown (1993, 102 n. 12) aptly states, “The difficulty for such a rendering is that the first word of v 2, hā’āre, 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.

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 שָׁמַיִם/אֶרֶץ can also refer to only the containers of the שָׁמַיִם, 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.

The corresponding שָׁמַיִם of Genesis 1:2, whose syntactical construction in Hebrew is typically descriptive, specifies the state of the שָׁמַיִם 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 שָׁמַיִם, 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 שָׁמַיִם in Genesis 1:1 cannot correspond in state to the שָׁמַיִם of Genesis 1:2. This argument is based upon their understanding of the compound phrase שָׁמַיִם/אֶרֶץ 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


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

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

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