

Genesis 1:1–2 and the Doctrine of *Creatio Ex Nihilo* (Part 2): A Lexical Analysis of the Phrase תהו ובהו

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Abstract

In the debate over the proper interpretation of Genesis 1:1–2, a key issue is over the meaning of the phrase תהו ובהו in Genesis 1:2. If this phrase describes the אָרֶץ of Genesis 1:2 as a “chaos” that is contrary to creation, then the “chaotic” אָרֶץ of Genesis 1:2 would be unrelated in state to the “created” אָרֶץ of Genesis 1:1. 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. However, in the summary-statement interpretation, there is no explanation for the origin of the material in Genesis 1:2, which then undermines the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. However, if the phrase תהו ובהו does not describe the אָרֶץ of Genesis 1:2 as a “chaos” contrary to creation, then the אָרֶץ of Genesis 1:2 could be related in state to the אָרֶץ of Genesis 1:1. The two verses then would exhibit a semantic continuity where Genesis 1:1 would be understood as the opening, or first act, of the creation narrative, and Genesis 1:2 would be understood as a description of the state of that opening creation. 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 1:1–2 by showing that the phrase תהו ובהו does not describe a “chaos” contrary to creation, but rather a creation that is in an “incomplete” state. The author also individually analyzes the words תהו and בהו to show that the incomplete state of the אָרֶץ of Genesis 1:2 is best understood as a “desolation,” empty of inhabitants, after its initial, yet incomplete, creation in Genesis 1:1.

Keywords: *creatio ex nihilo*; compound phrase; word pair; “chaos”; *Chaoskampf*; desolation; desolation motif; judgment-themed oracles; literal sense; figurative sense

Introduction¹

In the previous article, “Genesis 1:1–2 and the Doctrine of *Creatio Ex Nihilo* (Part 1),” (Wilson 2023) the phrase אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ was analyzed in order to demonstrate that the word אָרֶץ in Genesis 1:1 could correspond in meaning to the word אָרֶץ in Genesis 1:2. This possible semantic continuity between the two words, along with their proximity to one another, strongly suggests that Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 share a semantic and syntactic relationship with one another. First, Genesis 1:1 introduces God’s first

creative act in the narrative. Then, Genesis 1:2 describes this initial creation of Genesis 1:1 as being in an incomplete state. The remainder of the creation narrative then describes how God shaped, molded, and added to that initial, incomplete creation of Genesis 1:1.

This interpretation of Genesis 1:1, in semantic continuity with Genesis 1:2, and within the larger context of the creation narrative, has led Christian and Jewish scholars throughout the centuries to conclude that God created the world out of nothing.²

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 For example, the early church father Tertullian writes, “We, however, have but one God, and but one earth too, which in the beginning God made. The Scripture, which at its very outset proposes to run through the order thereof tells us as its first information that it was created; it next proceeds to set forth what sort of earth it was. In like manner with respect to the heaven, it informs us first of its creation—‘In the beginning God made the heaven:’ it then goes on to introduce its arrangement; how that God both separated ‘the water which was below the firmament from that which was above the firmament,’ and called the firmament heaven,—the very thing He had created in the beginning. Similarly it (afterwards) treats of man: ‘And God created man, in the image of God made He him.’ It next reveals how He made him: ‘And (the Lord) God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.’ Now this is undoubtedly the correct and fitting mode for the narrative. First comes a prefatory statement, then follow the details in full; first the subject is named, then it is described. How absurd is the other view of the account, when even before he had premised any mention of his subject, that is, matter, without even giving us its name, he all on a sudden promulgated its form and condition, describing to us its quality before mentioning its existence [(Genesis 1:2)],—pointing out the figure of the thing formed, but concealing its name! But how much more credible is our opinion, which holds that Scripture has only subjoined the arrangement of the subject after it has first duly described its formation and mentioned its name! Indeed, how full and complete is the meaning of these words: ‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth; but the earth was without form, and void,’—the very same earth, no doubt, which God made, and of which the Scripture had been speaking at that very moment. For that very ‘but’ [autem] inserted into the narrative like a clasp, (in its function) of a conjunctive particle, to connect the two sentences indissolubly together: ‘But the earth.’ This word carries back the mind to that earth of which mention had just been made, and binds the sense thereunto. Take away this ‘but,’ and the tie is loosened; so much so that the passage, ‘But the earth was without form, and void,’ may then seem to have been meant for any other earth” (Tertullian 1885, 3:491–492).

Since Genesis 1:1 does not describe anything as being in existence before the initial creation, other than God himself, interpreters have logically concluded that God created the world *ex nihilo*. Thus, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is an inherent theological reading of the opening verses of the Bible.

This logical and theological interpretation of Genesis 1:1 is what is known as the traditional interpretation.³ However, this interpretation is not without its recent challengers. As explained in Part 1, a growing group of scholars argue that Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 cannot share a syntactical relationship with one another because a semantic discontinuity necessarily exists between the word בְּרֵאשִׁית in Genesis 1:1 and the word בְּרֵאשִׁית in Genesis 1:2. Because of this discontinuity, Genesis 1:1 should not be interpreted as the first act of the creation narrative; rather, it should be interpreted as an introductory summary or title of the creation narrative. The narrative itself, they argue, does not start until Genesis 1:2, and the first act of creation in the narrative does not take place until Genesis 1:3.

This summary-statement understanding of Genesis 1:1 not only changes the interpretation of opening verse of the narrative, it also changes the theology of the narrative. If Genesis 1:1 is not the first creative act, then the opening verses of the Bible no longer support the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* because there is no description or explanation for the origin of the elements in Genesis 1:2. Barr, a proponent of the summary-statement interpretation, states,

“Creation by separation” is a good term to describe the major thrust of the passage. The main emphasis is not on a process from nothing to something, from nonexistence to existence, but on a process from confusion to distinction, from chaos to order. Some of the things created do appear to be absolutely created, as if out of nothing, like the light; others seem to “emerge naturally,” like plants, which the earth “brings forth”; others again seem to have been there from the beginning and simply to have been demarcated, like the land and sea. And the chaos of 1:2 seems to have been not just a negation of existence but to have been a source from which certain elements in the created world were drawn. . . . Second, we come back to the theme of creation out of nothing. We have seen that this is not the main theme of Genesis 1, and

perhaps of any canonical Old Testament passage. In Genesis, some things, like light, are created out of nothing; others, like land and water, seem to be there already. If so, we may say that creation out of nothing is not a central affirmation of the passage. (Barr 1998, 59–60, 65)

As Part 1 stated, 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 for the origin of the elements in Genesis 1:2, the summary-statement interpretation leaves the creation narrative wide open to a theological reading in which *eternal* matter coexisted with the *eternal* God prior to creation. Once the center-piece verse of Genesis 1:1 has been removed from the foundation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, the doctrine quickly erodes.⁴ Once the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* erodes, then other categories of theology proper and general theology erode as well. Craig Carter’s statement from Part 1 is worth repeating:

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)

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 בְּרֵאשִׁית in Genesis 1:1 and the word בְּרֵאשִׁית in Genesis 1:2. Does the word בְּרֵאשִׁית in Genesis 1:1 corresponds in *meaning* to the word בְּרֵאשִׁית in Genesis 1:2? Does the

³ 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).

⁴ Consider the example of Bruce Waltke, a well-known and respected Hebrew scholar, whose summary-statement interpretation of Genesis 1:1 causes him then to reinterpret other creation passages that are also foundational to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. With respect to John 1:1–3 and Hebrews 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).

word אָרָץ in Genesis 1:1 correspond in *state* to the אָרָץ 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.⁵ The heart of the debate in answering the former question is in the meaning of the compound phrase אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ in Genesis 1:1. The heart of the debate in answering the latter question is in the meaning of the compound phrase תהו ובהו in Genesis 1:2. Part 1 focused on answering the former question. The focus of this article, Part 2, will then answer the latter by analyzing the compound phrase תהו ובהו in Genesis 1:2. 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 תהו ובהו

One of the strongest arguments in favor of the traditional interpretation is the proximal correspondence between the אָרָץ of Genesis 1:1 and the אָרָץ of Genesis 1:2. They literally and literarily occur back to back. Part 1 demonstrated that the two identical words can correspond to one another in *meaning* even when the former is in compound with the word שָׁמַיִם. Again, this proximal correspondence between the two identical words also suggests that there is semantic correspondence between the two verses. This is the plainest and simplest reading of the text. However, many proponents of the summary-statement interpretation still separate any kind of semantic continuity between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 by also arguing that the אָרָץ of 1:1 cannot correspond to the אָרָץ of 1:2 in *state*.

Summary-statement proponents use the phrase תהו ובהו to argue that the אָרָץ in Genesis 1:2 is actually in a chaotic state. Since the אָרָץ of 1:2 is in a chaotic state, it cannot correspond to the created אָרָץ of 1:1 because chaos is contrary in state to creation. Gunkel, a proponent of the summary-statement interpretation, argues, “The notion of a creation of Chaos is intrinsically contradictory and odd, for Chaos is the world before the Creation” (Gunkel 1997, 103). Childs, another proponent, also states,

[S]ince the beginning of the Christian era careful exegetes have been perplexed regarding the manner

in which verse 1 should be related to verse 2. Is the chaos conceived of as being before or after the creation? Does the chaos exist independently of God’s creative activity? It is rather generally acknowledged that the suggestion of God’s first creating a chaos is a logical contradiction and must be rejected. (Childs 1960, 30)

Finally, Waltke states,

It is concluded, therefore, that though it is possible to take verse 2 as a circumstantial clause [to verse 1] on syntactical grounds, it is impossible to do so on philological grounds, and that it seems unlikely it should be so construed on theological grounds, for it makes God the Creator of disorder, darkness, and deep, a situation not tolerated in the perfect cosmos and never said to have been called into existence by the Word of God. (Waltke 1975b, 221)⁶

If it is impossible for the אָרָץ of Genesis 1:1 to correspond to the אָרָץ of 1:2 in *state*, then it is more likely that there is a semantic discontinuity between the two verses even if the two identical words can correspond to one another in *meaning*. What, however, is the rationale for arguing that the אָרָץ in Genesis 1:2 is in a chaotic state? Answering this question will also help to determine the lexical validity of both interpretations, and again, the theological implications require this continued investigation.

Framing the Discussion and Giving it Context

Defining the term “chaos.” Before examining the evidence of whether the אָרָץ is in a chaotic state in Genesis 1:2, the term “chaos” must first be defined. Most modern speakers understand the word “chaos” to mean some kind of disorder or confusion. The term “chaos,” however, and the concepts associated with it are mostly Greek, and they can be quite different from the typical, modern understanding of the word. According to the lexicon of Liddel, Scott, and Jones (1996), the definition of the Greek word *χάος* refers to the original state of the universe; space or the expanse of air; the nether abyss or infinite darkness; or any vast gulf or chasm.⁷ Some of these Greek definitions do overlap with other modern definitions of the word, but the actual modern understanding of it as a kind of disorder or confusion actually comes from its use by the later Roman poet Ovid.⁸ Thus, the meaning of the term “chaos” can vary from one person to the

⁵ Waltke (2001, 60) and Barr (1998, 58), 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.

⁶ Although, Waltke does not directly call the phrase תהו ובהו chaos in this article, he certainly describes it in the same manner as the modern understanding of chaos, namely as “disorder,” and he refers to it as chaos in other publications. See Waltke and O’Connor (1990, § 30.3a) and Waltke (2007, 181 n. 16).

⁷ Liddel, Scott, and Jones (1996), s.v. “*χάος*.”

⁸ *Encyclopedia Britannica* states, “The modern meaning of the word is derived from Ovid, who saw Chaos as the original disordered and formless mass, from which the maker of the Cosmos produced the ordered universe. This concept of Chaos also was applied to the interpretation of the creation story in Genesis 1 (to which it is not native) by the early church fathers.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. “Chaos.”

next, especially when cultural contexts are considered. Watson aptly states,

The difficulty [with using the term “chaos” to describe a Hebrew concept] is compounded by the fact that both Greek and modern European definitions (which, of course are anyway derivative upon the Greek) are very wide-ranging and inconsistent. (Watson 2005, 13)

With such a varying definition for the term “chaos,” the main question then is how do proponents of the summary-statement interpretation define it?

The quotes from the introduction of this section suggest that summary-statement proponents seem to use at least two definitions of the term. Chaos can mean the early state of the world before creation, or it can mean disorder and confusion. The following excerpts, however, suggest that defining the term according to its usage by summary-statement proponents is much more complex. They state,

We can understand then why the state which is opposed to and precedes creation is called הָרָה . (Westermann 1990, 103)

[Genesis 1:2] serves to picture through its chaos, the ‘negative’ side of the creation. The creation is not contrasted with a condition of nothingness, but rather with a chaos. This reality is not a creation of God, nor is it a dualistic principle of evil independent of God. Nevertheless, the OT writer struggles to contrast the creation, not with a background of empty neutrality, but with an active chaos standing in opposition to the will of God. It is a reality which continues to exist and continues to threaten his creation. The chaos is a reality rejected by God. It forms no part of the creation, but exists nevertheless as a threatening possibility. (Childs 1960, 42)

The writer speaks out of the ordered universe of his experience in which with unerring regularity day follows night, season follows season, plants sprout and animals breed at their proper times, and water and land have their proper place. Verse 2 describes the opposite of this. It is chaos as opposed to “cosmos” (the Greek word for order). There is confusion, darkness, wetness, and wind. (Scullion 1992, 16–17) The term *tōhū* is common in the vocabulary of creation. Its function is to indicate chaos in contrast to the order of creation. (Konkel 1997, 607)

formless and empty [*tōhū wābōhū*]. This phrase is an *antonym* [(emphasis mine)] to the “heavens and the earth,” signifying something uncreated or disordered (Jer 4:23–27)... Chronologically, this must describe the state of the earth prior to verse 1, as it would be a contradiction to represent the creation as formed

cosmos and the earth as unformed. (Waltke 2001, 59–60)

The summary statement [in Genesis 1:1] entails that the chaos of verse 2 does not exist independently from God, but the text does not explain the connection between God and chaos. Rather, verse 2 supplies the context in order to interpret the significance of the creation—namely, Israel’s covenant-keeping God overcomes the chaos to bring about his good pleasure. The chaos “is a reality rejected by God.”... The inchoate dark abyss is not good because it resists life. It is a surd [evil] (i.e., irrational, such as wind or floods that destroy crops), not a theological good (such as a windmill that pumps water to nurture crops). The origin of the surd [evil] (i.e., God does not call the earth good until it is restrained by light and by land that foster human life) is as mysterious as the diabolical lying and murdering Serpent who incarnates moral evil in Genesis 3:1–5.... To answer the whence and why of both surd and social evils, appeal has been made to highly figurative texts such as Ezekiel 28 and Revelation 13, but these highly figurative texts do not provide a firm foundation for dogma. On the other hand, neither surd nor moral evil are presented as eternal, unlike God. Since the darkness and abyss [of Genesis 1:2] will be eliminated in the new heaven and earth (Rev. 21–22), they are not eternal; their beginnings are cloaked in mystery. The absence of data is not an argument for eternal dualism. “Formless and empty” (*tōhū wābōhū*) indicate this negative, “not good,” state of the earth. Accordingly, the creation narrative is a story of redemption, of triumph of light over darkness, of land and sky over water, both of which are essential for life. (Waltke 2007, 180–181)

Based upon these and the preceding quotations, there is no explicit, uniform definition of the term “chaos” from summary-statement proponents. However, a common thread does seem to weave through their arguments and explanations. The term “chaos,” at the least, is the opposite of creation, the opposite of order. In other words, whatever is created is in the state of A, and whatever is chaotic is in the state of non-A. Chaos is a state that cannot be created because if it were, it would be both A and non-A at the same time and in the same respect, a logical contradiction.⁹ Thus, aside from the inappropriate and anachronistic application of the concept of chaos¹⁰ to the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:2, the next question to be asked is what element(s) in Genesis 1:2 cause(s) scholars to argue that this definition of chaos is a proper description of the state of the הָרָה in Genesis 1:2?

⁹ Waltke (1975b, 220) states, “To take Genesis 1:2, therefore, as a circumstantial clause presents the contradiction: He created . . . and the earth was uncreated.”

Determining what makes the תהו ובהו of Genesis 1:2 a chaos. At the lexical level, many scholars of the summary-statement interpretation argue that it is the word pair תהו ובהו that depicts the תהו ובהו as being in a state of chaos. Consider the following explanations:

The sound as well as the meaning of the pair of words [תהו ובהו] is awe-inspiring; the earth according to its substratum was a desolate and dead mass, in a word chaos (χάος). (Delitzsch 1888, 78)

Heb. *tōhū wā-bōhū*—an alliterative description of *chaos*, in which nothing can be distinguished or defined. *Tōhū* is a word which is difficult to express consistently in English: but it denotes mostly something *unsubstantial*, or (fig.) *unreal*.... (Driver 1904, 3–4)

“Tohuwabohu” means the formless; the primeval waters over which darkness was superimposed characterizes the chaos materially as a watery primeval element, but at the same time gives a dimensional association: *t’hōm* (“sea of chaos”) is the cosmic abyss. (von Rad 1963, 47)

‘And the earth was waste and void’ (*wēhā’āreṣ hāyēthāh thōhū wābhōhū*). The verb ‘was’ is somewhat surprising since in a nominal clause it is superfluous. What we actually have is a nominal clause of circumstantial force used to specify a condition in its proper sphere of time: ‘the earth having been chaos.’ (Childs 1960, 32)

It is therefore still legitimate to assume that the word pair *tōhū wābōhū* is ground semantically in the characteristic of menacing reality that can

be represented by the term “chaos,” albeit with reservations. (Görg 2006, 571)

“Formless and empty” (*tōhū wābōhū*) indicate this negative, “not good,” state of the earth. (Waltke 2007, 181)¹¹

Thus, based upon these explanations from summary-statement proponents, the word pair תהו ובהו is clearly the main reason for arguing that Genesis 1:2 describes the תהו ובהו in a state of chaos.

Some proponents of the summary-statement interpretation do appeal to the other lexical elements in Genesis 1:2 to support the idea that the verse describes the תהו ובהו in a state of chaos. For instance, Gunkel argues that the word תהו in the second clause of Genesis 1:2 is etymologically related to the Babylonian *Tiāmat*,¹² the primordial sea goddess of *Enūma Elish* who clashes with the god Marduk in a pre-creation theomachy.¹³ Thus, Genesis 1:2 is a remnant description of the *Chaoskampf* motif of *Enūma Elish* (Gunkel 1997, 105). Westermann, another proponent of the summary-statement interpretation, argues that the word תהו in the second clause of Genesis 1:2 refers to a much more sinister darkness that is more reflective of a pre-creation chaos (Westermann 1990, 104).¹⁴ He also argues that the phrase רוח אלהים in the third clause of Genesis 1:2 is best translated as “mighty wind” because it is also syntactically a part of the description of the chaos (Westermann 1990, 108).¹⁵ Although these elements in Genesis 1:2 might support the argument that the verse describes the תהו ובהו in a state of chaos, it is the original attribution of this concept to the meaning of the phrase תהו ובהו that drives this interpretation of the verse. Without identifying the word pair תהו ובהו as chaos, there is no need to

¹⁰ By using the term “chaos” to describe the state of the תהו ובהו in Genesis 1:2, scholars take a Greek word, with a modern meaning, which was first employed by a Roman poet, and apply it to an ancient Hebrew concept. Watson states, “The term ‘chaos’ derives from Greek cosmology, in which context it pertains to a world-view quite distinct from the Hebrew. From here, it entered the current of Western philosophy and literature from which Gunkel (1997) drew. However, the Old Testament itself lacks any overarching designation for the entities (dragons, the sea) classified by Gunkel as ‘chaotic’, or any corresponding philosophical conception, so it thus seems to represent a superimposition from one matrix to another” Watson (2005, 13). Many ancient Christian commentators, and even some modern commentators, likewise misapply the Greek concept of formless matter to the description of the תהו ובהו in Genesis 1:2.

¹¹ Waltke clearly sees this phrase as a reference to chaos since in his own footnote to this excerpt he writes, “To capture both the negative denotation and connotation of *tōhū*, ‘chaos’ is more apt than ‘emptiness.’” Waltke (2007, 181 n. 16). Note that also in his grammar the translation of Genesis 1:2a as “Now the earth was chaotic.” Waltke and O’Connor (1990, § 30.3a).

¹² Tsumura (2005, 36–37) counters Gunkel’s claim (Gunkel 1997) stating, “The earlier scholars who followed Gunkel usually held that the author of Genesis had borrowed the Babylonian proper name Tiamat and demythologized it. However, if the Hebrew *tēhōm* were an Akkadian loanword, there should be a closer phonetic similarity to *ti āmat*. The expected Hebrew form would be something like *ti āmat > tiō mat > tē ōmāt. This could have been subsequently changed to *tē ōmā(h), with the loss of the final /t/, but never to *tēhōm*, with the loss of the entire feminine morpheme /-at/.

Moreover, because the second consonant of Tiamat is /l/, a glottal stop, which often disappears in the intervocalic position, so that the resultant vowel cluster experiences so-called vowel *sandhi* in Akkadian as *ti āmtum > tiāmtum > tāmtum*, it is very unlikely that a West Semitic speaker would represent the second consonant as a fricative [h]. In fact, there is no example of West Semitic borrowing Akkadian /l/ as /h/, except Akkadian *ilku* “duty” as *hilk*’ (Aram.) with the word initial /h/. It is almost impossible to conclude that Akkadian *Tiamat* was borrowed by Hebrew as *tēhōm* with the intervocalic /h/, for the latter also tends to disappear in Hebrew (for example, /h/ in the definite article /ha-/in the intervocalic position).” See also his continued discussion on the etymology and use of the root *THM. In this discussion he further argues that there is no etymological relationship between Genesis 1:2 and the *Chaoskampf* motif (Tsumura 2005, 42–57).

¹³ For a more detailed explanation of the theomachy theme see Walton (2008).

¹⁴ See also Childs (1960, 33).

¹⁵ See also Childs (1960, 32–35).

interpret the words הַשָּׁדַי , תְּהוֹמוֹת , and רוּחַ ¹⁶ as elements of that chaos since they are also elements of the natural phenomena of creation and order. However, even though summary-statement proponents argue that the word pair is a description of a chaos contrary to creation, the actual data for determining the most appropriate meaning for the word pair is extremely sparse.¹⁷

The paucity of lexical data. There is little if any consensus on the etymology of the compound phrase $\text{תְּהוֹמוֹת וְהוֹשָׁדַי}$. On the one hand, Tsumura proposes that the compound phrase is etymologically related to a possible Ugaritic phrase *tu-a-bi-[ú(?)]*. The proposed Ugaritic phrase is parallel to the Akkadian term *nabalkutu*, which he argues describes certain words like *eršetu*, earth, and *rēmu*, womb, and may mean “to be unproductive,” not “to turn over” or “upset” as he declares that some have suggested (Tsumura 2005, 15–22). However, on the other hand, Görg argues that Tsumura’s proposal is based upon a problematic reading of *tu-a-bi-[ú(?)]* which itself may not even “represent an actual Ugaritic word (or syntagm)” (Görg 2006, 567). He instead proposes that the words תְּהוֹמוֹת and וְהוֹשָׁדַי may be etymologically related to the Egyptian lexemes *th3* and *bh3* (Görg 2006, 567–568, 571), which mean “to deviate” (*abweichen*) and “to flee panic-stricken” (*kopflös fliehen*).¹⁸ If the compound phrase $\text{תְּהוֹמוֹת וְהוֹשָׁדַי}$ in Genesis 1:2 is etymologically related to these Egyptian lexemes then its most likely meaning is that of “unstable and unformed” (*haltlos und gestaltlos*), which would make the compound phrase more descriptive of a chaotic state than an unproductive state (Görg 2006, 571). Tsumura (2005, 14–15), however, rejects Görg’s proposal arguing that there is no evidence that the Egyptian lexemes even have a nominalized form, nor do they occur as a hendiadys in Egyptian. Furthermore, Brown wonders how Görg can “make the semantic jump from verbal bases that imply aimless *motion*” to a meaning that is related to condition,—the condition of Genesis 1:2—not direction or motion (Brown 1993, 74). Brown instead proposes abandoning the etymological route and argues that the word is a farrago describing the אֲרָצוֹת

in its early state as a “hodgepodge” (Brown 1993, 60, 74–75). Based upon these varying arguments and the lack of data, the etymological derivation of the compound phrase may never be known.

Even with respect to the individual words תְּהוֹמוֹת and וְהוֹשָׁדַי the etymology of either is still questionable. Görg (2006, 571) states,

Attempts to find an etymology for *bōhû* among other Near Eastern languages have so far proved unsuccessful. Neither the name of the Sumerian deity Bau nor the figure of Baau mentioned by Philo of Byblos is semantically or etymologically relevant.

Furthermore, listing the many arguments for the etymological derivations of both תְּהוֹמוֹת and וְהוֹשָׁדַי , Konkel (1997, 606) likewise states,

The nom. *thw*[, a possible derivation of תְּהוֹמוֹת ,] may be found in the Ugar. Baal cycle in the encounter with Mot the god of death (*KTU*, 1.5 i 15). In describing the insatiable appetite of Mot the text uses the metaphor of *lbīm thw* (*CTA*, 5 1.15); Gibson interprets this as the “appetite of lions (in) the waste” (*CML*, 68). Translating *thw* as “in the desert” may be compared to Job 6:18, where the streams go up *battōhû*, in the desert, or to Deut 32:10, where Yahweh finds Israel in the wilderness and *b’tōhû*, in the desert, though the Ugar. lacks the preposition. Like Mot, the Heb. compares Sheol to a devouring lion (Isa 5:14; Hab 2:5), and similarly uses the metaphor of the insatiable appetite of the lion for flesh (Deut 33:20; Hos 13:8). DeMoor translates the metaphor as the lion “craving live prey,” a paraphrase that takes *thw* as related to the Arab. *hawīya*, to desire, and analyzing [*sic*] it as a verbal form (cf. Aistleitner, *WUS*, 820). Deitrich, Loretz, and Sanmartin take *thw* as a scribal error for *thwt* (cf. *KTU*, 1.133) to be understood as the Heb. *taʿwâ*, meaning greed or desire (536–537). Gordon does not provide a translation (*UT*, 19.2536)... The nom. *bōhû* may also be compared to the Phoen. goddess Baau or to the Babylonian mother goddess *bau* (*HALAT* 107). *The derivation of both bōhû and tōhû is unknown* [(emphasis mine)].

Many etymological suggestions for the individual words and the compound phrase have been offered, examined, accepted, and rejected, and there is still no consensus.¹⁹

¹⁶ Some scholars and translations render the word רוּחַ as “wind” rather than “S/spirit.” For instance Waltke (2007, 182) states, “The Hebrew phrase *rūah ’elōhīm* grammatically can mean ‘spirit of God,’ ‘wind from God,’ or ‘mighty wind,’ but contextually it probably means ‘wind from God’ (see NRSV).” It is, therefore, important to note that the word רוּחַ , when rendered as “wind,” could also be an element of the natural phenomena of creation and order. The author of this present article, however, does not hold to this rendering of רוּחַ .

¹⁷ Note that at the comparative-literature level, many scholars argue that Genesis 1:2 contains remnants of the ancient Near Eastern *Chaoskampf* motif. In this motif a creator god battles a watery chaos monster. After the monster’s defeat, the creator god creates the world out of the monster’s watery body. Thus, some summary-statement proponents argue that Genesis 1:2 is a demythologized version of the *Chaoskampf* motif, making Genesis 1:2 a description of chaos. An analysis at the comparative-literature level is beyond the scope of this article, but other scholars, such as Tsumura, Watson, and Walton convincingly argue that the *Chaoskampf* motif has nothing to do with creation nor a creator god. Also, according to these scholars, the merging of the *Chaoskampf* motif with creation in *Enūma Elish*, the first ancient Near Eastern document to be compared with the creation account of Genesis, is a late conflation of two different traditions. See Tsumura (2005), Watson (2005), and Walton (2008).

¹⁸ Görg’s German phrases and some of his explanations are taken from Brown’s analysis of his argument. See Brown (1993, 74).

¹⁹ For some of the more robust etymological discussions, note especially the following works, which are by no means in agreement with one another: Brown (1993, 73–75), Tsumura (2005, 9–22), and Görg (2006, 565–68).

The paucity of the etymological data has even caused some scholars to suggest other avenues for determining the word pair's meaning. Commenting on the word תהו, Youngblood states,

Since the word has no certain cognates in other languages, its meaning must be determined solely from its OT contexts. (Youngblood 1980, 964)

Brown also states,

One need not, however, take the etymological route, on which countless suggestions have been made. There are enough occurrences of *tōhû* in the Hebrew literature to connote “devastation” of some sort. (Brown 1993, 74)

Finally, Mathews states,

The etymology of the word [*bōhû*] remains a mystery, and we are left with the meaning of *tōhû* to clarify the sense of the couplet.

Although the etymology is also unclear for *tōhû*, it occurs sufficiently in the Old Testament (twenty times) to indicate its meaning. (Mathews 1996, 131)

Thus, the actual consensus seems to be that the etymological evidence is too limited for determining the meaning of both the word pair as a whole and its individual words. At best the etymological evidence can only support what the context of the Hebrew Old Testament suggests.

However, even though scholars seem to have abandoned the etymological route because of the paucity of the data, the data from the Hebrew Old Testament is also quite sparse. By itself, the word pair תהו/בהו occurs only three times in the entirety of the literature (Genesis 1:2; Isaiah 34:11; Jeremiah 4:23) with only Genesis 1:2 being descriptive of the creation event. To further complicate the issue, the second word of the word pair, בהו, only occurs in these three instances. It does not occur anywhere else in the Hebrew Old Testament. Considering the rarity of בהו, the actual means for determining the meaning of the word pair תהו/בהו seems to lie solely with the word תהו.

The word תהו has challenges of its own as well. Aside from its three occurrences with בהו (Genesis 1:2; Isaiah 34:11; Jeremiah 4:23), the word תהו is only used 17 other times in the Hebrew Old Testament.²⁰ However, its meaning within a given context is not so easy to ascertain. *HALOT* states, “The rendering of the Heb. sbst. [תהו] is not easy for it vacillates in meaning and the meanings are not able clearly to be segregated from one another.”²¹ Even *BDB* makes the parenthetical note of “primary meaning difficult to seize.”²² Furthermore, the word is only used in three instances as a descriptor of the creation event

(Genesis 1:2; Job 26:7?; Isaiah 45:18).²³ Thus, even the data from the Hebrew Old Testament is extremely limited for determining the meaning of the word pair תהו/בהו in Genesis 1:2. Görg aptly states, “To this day the proverbial word pair *tōhû wābōhû* has not found a universally satisfactory explanation” (Görg 2006, 570). Nevertheless, summary-statement proponents are somehow able to extract from the exiguous data the complicated and technical definition of a chaos contrary to creation? The paucity of the data and the following analysis, however, suggest that the word pair requires a much simpler definition.

A Contextual and Thematic Analysis of the Word Pair

Proponents of both interpretations, the summary-statement and the traditional, frequently use the contexts of certain passage like Isaiah 34:11, Jeremiah 4:23, and Isaiah 45:18 to argue for a specific definition of the word pair תהו/בהו and the word תהו. However, the evidence for determining the meaning of the word pair and the singular word תהו is not limited to the context alone. The word pair used in Isaiah 34:11 and Jeremiah 4:23 also occurs within two judgment-themed oracles, as does the singular תהו in Isaiah 24:10. These judgment-themed oracles against specific lands or city-states are common in the prophetic literature and are excellent sources of data for determining the meaning communicated by the word pair תהו/בהו and the individual תהו. Thus, the following analysis will consider both the context and the theme of these passages.²⁴

A contextual analysis of Isaiah 34:11. Even though the word pair תהו/בהו occurs only three times, all of its occurrences describe the state of the word אָרֶץ. Contextually, the word pair in Isaiah 34:11 is used to describe God's future judgment upon the land, or אָרֶץ, of Edom. The verse states,

וירשׁוּהָ קִצְּוֹת וְקִפְזֹד וְיִנְשׂוּרָה וְעֵרָב יִשְׁכְּנֶיהָ וְנִטְעָה עָלֶיהָ קִרְתֵּיהֶוּ וְאַבְיִרֵיהֶוּ:

And the pelican and the porcupine shall possess it and the owl and the raven will dwell in it and he will stretch over it the line of *tōhû* and the stones of *bōhû*.

By itself, the verse only states that the pelican, porcupine, owl, and raven will inhabit the land, and the line of תהו, *tōhû*, and the stones of בהו, *bōhû*, will be stretched over it. The verse alone offers no help in determining the meaning of the word pair.

²⁰ Deuteronomy 32:10; 1 Samuel 12:21 (2×); Job 6:18; 12:24; 26:7; Psalms 107:40; Isaiah 24:10; 29:21; 40:17, 23; 41:29; 44:9; 45:18, 19; 49:4; 59:4.

²¹ Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm (2001, s.v. “תהו”).

²² Brown, Driver and Briggs (1907, s.v. “תהו”).

²³ In both Genesis 1:2 and Isaiah 45:18, תהו is used to describe the word אָרֶץ.

²⁴ For other, more comprehensive analyses of the word pair תהו/בהו see also Ouro (1998, 264–276) and Tsumura (2005, 9–35).

The imagery in Isaiah 34:11, however, contributes to a larger picture (34:10b–15) describing a land devoid of human habitation and oversight. It is the desolation of the land of Edom as a result of God’s judgment. The larger passage communicates this desolation in three ways. First, the usual inhabitants, such as humans and domesticated livestock, are absent from the land (Isaiah 34:10b, 12). Second, the land is reinhabited by undomesticated or wild animals (Isaiah 34:11a, 13b–15).²⁵ Third, the land is overgrown with wild vegetation (Isaiah 34:13a).²⁶ These three pictures describe a land that has been desolated by God’s judgment and the word pair תהו/בהו contributes to this picture.

A thematic analysis of Isaiah 34:10b–15. The desolation described in Isaiah 34:11 is actually a common motif in other judgment-themed oracles.²⁷ Such oracles also describe this desolation as a reinhabiting of a deserted land or city by wild animals. Consider the following verses:

Isaiah 13:20–22a²⁸

20 לא יִשְׁבּוּ לְנֶצַח וְלֹא תִשְׁכַּן עַד־דָּוָר וְדוֹר וְלֹא־יִקְרָא שְׁם עֲרָבֵי וְרַעִים לֹא־יִרְבְּצוּ שָׁם:
21 וְרִבְצוּ־שָׁם צִיִּים וּמִלְאוּ בְתִיבָתָם אֲחִים וְשִׁכְנוּ שָׁם בְּנוֹת יַעֲנָה וְשִׁעִירִים יִרְקְדוּ־שָׁם:
22 וְעֵגְלָה אֵיִים בְּאֶלְמִנּוֹתָיו וְתַנִּים בְּהִיקְלֵי עֲנָג

²⁰ It, [Babylon,] will not be inhabited forever nor will it be settled from generation to generation. The Arab will not pitch his tent there, nor will shepherds lay down *flocks* there.

²¹ But the wild beasts will lie down there, and the owls will fill their houses, and the offspring of the ostrich will dwell there, and goats will leap there.

²² Hyenas will howl in its citadels and jackals in the exquisite temples.

Jeremiah 49:33²⁹

וְהָיְתָה חֲצוֹר לְמַעוֹן תַּנִּים שְׂמֵמָה עַד־עוֹלָם לֹא־יִשְׁבּוּ שָׁם אִישׁ וְלֹא־יִגְדֹר בָּהּ בְּרֵאשִׁים:

And Hazor will become a habitation of jackals, a desolation forever; no man will live there nor will a son of man sojourn in it.

Zephaniah 2:13b–14

13b וַיֵּשֶׁם אֶת־נִינְוָה לְשֵׂמָמָה צִיָּה כַּמִּדְבָּר: 14 וְרִבְצוּ בְתוֹכָהּ עֲדָרִים כְּלִי־חַיִּתֹּת־גֹּי גַם־קִצְתֵי גַם־קִפְדֵי בְכַפְתָּרֵיהֶּ לְגִינוֹ קוֹל יְשׁוּרָר בְּחִלּוֹן חָרֵב בְּסֹף כִּי אֲרוּהָ עֶרְבָה:

^{13b}And he will make Nineveh a desolation, a dryness like the wilderness. ¹⁴And all flocks of all the livestock of the nations; even the pelican and the porcupine will sleep in the tops of her pillars; a voice singing in her windows; desolation in the threshold, for he has laid bare the cedar work.

In these passages the language clearly communicates the idea that the land or city has been cleared of all its typical inhabitants and has been reinhabited with wild animals. Thus, the word pair תהו/בהו in Isaiah 34:11 contributes to the description of a desolation that is similarly described in the desolation motifs of Isaiah 13:20–21; Jeremiah 49:33; and Zephaniah 2:13b–14. None of these passages, however, describe the desolation as a chaos contrary to creation.

Is Isaiah 34:11 chaos contrary to creation?

How then do scholars argue that the word pair תהו/בהו in Isaiah 34:11 describes a chaos contrary to creation? Görg (2006, 570) argues,

In Isa. 34:11 the parallelism “*tōhû* line” and “*bōhû* stones” symbolizes the desolation of Edom ordained by Yahweh. This metaphor can already indicate that the two nouns belong to a sphere that stands in opposition to the ordered world. Weights and measures have their meaning within the framework of ordered everyday life. For example, in Egypt they are the subject of regulations reflecting an “administrative professional ethics.” A land becomes all the more chaotic when infected with unpredictable caprice.

Similarly, Waltke (1975a, 142) argues,

In the immediate context of 34:11, Isaiah sees the destruction of Edom. As part of his evocative imagery, he implicitly likens Edom’s destruction to the dismantling of a house to its precreated state. He predicts God’s destruction on Edom: “And He shall stretch over it the line of desolation (תהו, “formlessness”) and the stones of emptiness (בהו).” The line and stones (plummets) of the builder are employed here not for erecting a building but for dismantling it. Once again God’s judgment results in the return of the object of His wrath to its original state.³⁰

²⁵ Görg, who argues that the word pair תהו/בהו describes chaos in Genesis 1:2, states, “In a similar vein Isaiah 34:11 uses the image of beasts in the wilderness to describe baleful desolation; the phrase ‘line of tōhû’ describes the desolate existence that Yahweh will impose on the land of Edom (cf. also v. 17)” (Görg 2006, 569). Konkel, who also sees Genesis 1:2 as a description of chaos, states, “Isaiah juxtaposes the two [תהו and בהו] in the judgment against Edom (Isaiah 34:11) to describe the total depopulation and destruction of the land, so it is a waste fit only for desert animals” (Konkel 1997, 606).

²⁶ Though it is not common, the picture of wild vegetation is used in Zephaniah 2:9 to describe the desolation of Moab and Ammon as מְמִשְׁקָהּ הָרוּל, “a possession of weeds.”

²⁷ The desolation motif is further explained in a later section.

²⁸ Cf. Isaiah 14:23.

²⁹ Cf. Jeremiah 51:27.

³⁰ See Waltke (2007, 181 n. 16).

Both of these scholars refer to the imagery reflected in the two substantives “line,” קו, and “stone,” אבן, as a basis for their interpretations of the passage.

Neither of these scholars’ arguments, however, adequately explain how the word pair תהו/בהו describes a chaos contrary to creation. With respect to Görg’s interpretation, it is difficult to determine how he can argue that use of the word pair and the two substantives, קו and אבן, belong to a sphere that stands in opposition to the created world. This interpretation is not suggested by the context of the passage nor by the desolation motif of judgment-themed oracles. This explanation seems to be more of a statement than an actual argument. If it is an argument, it is a *non sequitur*. With respect to Waltke’s argument, he does not even argue that the word pair תהו/בהו describes a chaos contrary to creation in Isaiah 34:11;³¹ rather, he argues that the two substantives קו and אבן describe a dismantling of the land. However, the context of the verse and the theme of the oracle are more descriptive of an emptying of the land than a dismantling. Nevertheless, even if the passage uses the word pair תהו/בהו to describe the dismantling of the land back to a state similar to that of the ארץ in Genesis 1:2, there is no evidence suggesting such a state describes a chaos contrary to creation. Furthermore, there is no evidence suggesting that such a state is “precreative.” One could just as easily argue that Isaiah 34:11 describes the dismantling of the land of Edom back to an “initial-creative” state. One’s interpretation of Genesis 1:1–2 determines how one would perceive the alleged dismantled state of the land of Edom in Isaiah 34:11, but it doesn’t prove what the definition of the word pair תהו/בהו actually is.

Summary-statement proponents do not offer any valid reasons for why or how the word pair תהו/בהו describes a chaos contrary to creation in Isaiah 34:11. Although the theme of judgment in this oracle creates a negative picture of the consequences of God’s judgment on the land of Edom, Isaiah 34:11 itself clearly parallels other passages using the desolation motif to describe a land desolate of its typical inhabitants. Tsumura aptly states, “Isa 34:11 simply means that ‘the land will become a desolation and waste so that it can no more receive inhabitants.’ From the context of the Isaiah passage it is rather difficult to see any direct connection with the Genesis creation story” (Tsumura 2005, 32). If the word pair תהו/בהו better describes the desolation of the land, ארץ, of Edom in Isaiah 34:11 than it describes a chaos

contrary to creation, then it is logical to assume that the word pair describes the ארץ of Genesis 1:2 in the same manner.

A contextual analysis of Jeremiah 4:23. The word pair תהו/בהו in Jeremiah 4:23 is also used to describe God’s judgment upon the land, or ארץ, of Judah in another judgment-themed oracle. The verses states,

רֵאִיתִי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְהִנֵּה־תְהוּ וְהִנֵּה־תְהוּ וְאֵל־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵין אֹרֶם:

I saw the land, and behold, it was *tōhû* and *bōhû*, and I looked to the heavens and their light was not there.

By itself, the verse only describes the state of the ארץ as תהו ובהו and the state of the שמים as without their light, אין אורם. The language of the oracle does bring to mind Genesis 1:2 in which the state of the ארץ is also a darkened תהו ובהו.

Although the verse itself does not shed any light on the meaning of the word pair תהו/בהו, the context does. Both the ארץ and the שמים are mentioned in 4:23; however, verses 4:24–26 focus more on the description of the ארץ. Verse 4:24 describes an earthquake that shakes the mountains and the hills of the ארץ, while verses 4:25–26 describe the ארץ as devoid of human habitation. Both situations are a result of God’s judgment upon the ארץ. Thus, verses 4:24–26 is a more detailed description of the ארץ in its state of תהו ובהו. The presence of the earthquake in 4:24 can certainly portray a picture of disorder or confusion, a chaos, but no other use of the word pair תהו/בהו or the word תהו parallels with any other descriptions of an earthquake. However, the judgment of an earthquake upon a land *is* used in other judgment themed oracles;³² thus, it is most likely another motif of these types of oracles rather than a further description of the word pair תהו/בהו. However, the contextual description of the land of Judah as devoid of normal habitation in verses 4:25–26 matches the contextual description of the land of Edom in Isaiah 34:10a–15, which again suggests that the word pair תהו/בהו in both passages helps to describe the ארץ as a desolation or emptiness rather than as a chaos contrary to creation.

Tsumura argues that the context of Jeremiah 4:23–26 must also relate to 4:27–28 where God’s speech concerning the land, ארץ, and the heavens, שמים, closely parallels what the prophet describes in 4:23–26. He states,

³¹ In the previously cited excerpt, Waltke’s argument is against the views of the gap theory; nevertheless, he refers back to this argument in order to support his conclusion that in Isaiah 34:11, “תהו ובהו denotes the antithesis of creation.” See Waltke (1975b, 220).

³² For a more detailed analysis of the literary parallels between Genesis 1 and Jeremiah 4, see Fishbane (1971, 151–153). For a counter to Fishbane’s proposal see Tsumura (2005, 28–30).

³³ Isaiah 13:13; 24:1, 18–20; Jeremiah 49:21; 50:46; 51:29; Ezekiel 27:28.

From a structural analysis of vv. 23–28 as a whole, it is noteworthy that the word pair “the earth” (*hā’āreṣ*) and “the heavens” (*hasšāmayim*) appears in this order both in the beginning (v.23) and at the end (v.28) of this section, thus functioning as an inclusio or a “frame” for the section. In other words, “(the earth is) *tōhū wābōhū*” // “(the heavens) are without light” in v.23 corresponding to “(the earth) will dry up” (*’bl) // “(the heavens) will be dark” (*qdr) in v.28. Here the phrase *tōhū wābōhū* corresponds to the verbal phrase “to dry up” and suggests the “aridness or unproductiveness” of the earth. This is in keeping with v.27, which mentions that the “whole earth will become a desolation” (*šēmāmā tihyeh kol-hā’āreṣ*). (Tsumura 2005, 31)

Thus, the continued, contextual description of the אֶרֶץ in 4:27–28 is that of a desolation, שְׁמָמָה (4:27), devoid or empty of its typical inhabitants. This contextual description of the אֶרֶץ in this judgment-themed oracle also fits perfectly with the desolation motif.

A thematic analysis of Jeremiah 4:23–28. The use of the desolation motif in Jeremiah in 4:23, 25–27 also parallels the use of the motif in other judgment-themed oracles. For instance, in the oracles against Judah in Isaiah 5, Babylon in Isaiah 13, and Egypt in Ezekiel 32, the motif is depicted in the following manner:

Isaiah 5:6, 9

וְאֶשְׂיִתְהוּ בְתָהּ לֹא יִזְמַר וְלֹא יַעֲדָר וְעֵלָה שְׁמִיר וְשִׁיט
וְעַל הַעֲבִיבִים אֲצַוֶּה מִהַמְטִיר עָלָיו מָטָר:

I shall set it as a destruction, it will not be pruned and it will not be hoed, but thorns and thorn bushes will come up, and I will keep the clouds over it from raining a rain upon it.

בְּאָזְנֵי יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אִם־לֹא בְתִים רַבִּים לְשִׁמָּה יִהְיוּ
גְדֹלִים וְטוֹבִים מֵאֵין יוֹשֵׁב:

In my ears the LORD of hosts *swears*, “Surely many houses will become desolate, great and good *houses* without inhabitant.

Isaiah 13:9, 20–22

הִנֵּה יוֹם־יְהוָה בָּא אֲכַזְרִי וְעִבְרָה וְחָרוֹן אַף
לְשׁוֹם הָאָרֶץ לְשִׁמָּה וְחִטָּאִיהָ יִשְׁמַד מִמֶּנֶּה:

Behold the day of the LORD comes as cruel, furious, and angry to make the land a desolation, and he will exterminate its sinners from it.

לֹא־תִשָּׁב לְנֶצַח וְלֹא תִשְׁפֹּן עַד־דָּוָר וְדוֹר וְלֹא־יִתֵּל שָׁם עֶרְבִי וְרַעִים לֹא־יִרְבְּצוּ שָׁם:
וְרִבְצוּ־שָׁם צִיִּים וּמִלְאֵוּ בְתִימָם אֲתִים וְשָׂכְנוּ שָׁם בְּנֹת יַעֲנָה וְשֹׁעִירִים יִרְקְדוּ־שָׁם:
וְעֵנָה אִיִּים בָּאֵלֶּיָם מִנְּוֹתָיו וְחַנְיִים בְּתֵיכֶלִי עֲנָג

²⁰It[, Babylon,] will not be inhabited forever nor will it be settled from generation to generation. The Arab will not pitch his tent there, nor will shepherd lie down *flocks* there.

²¹But the wild beasts will lie down there, and the owls will fill their houses, and ostriches will dwell there, and goats will leap there.

²²Hyenas will howl in its citadels and jackals in the exquisite temples.

Ezekiel 32:15

בְּתִמִּי אֶת־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שְׁמָמָה
וְנִשְׁמָה אֶרֶץ מִמִּלְאָה
בְּהַכּוֹתִי אֶת־כָּל־יְוֹשְׁבֵי בָהּ

When I make the land of Egypt a desolation and make the land desolate of its fullness when I smite all the inhabitants in it.

The parallel use of the desolation motif in these judgment-themed oracles, however, is not the only similarity between them and Jeremiah 4.

The judgment-themed oracles of Isaiah 5, 13, and Ezekiel 32 also use two other parallel motifs. The first is that of the earthquake upon the land, used in Jeremiah 4:24, which has already been discussed, and the second is that of the darkening of the heavens, used in Jeremiah 4:23, 28. The judgment oracle against Judah in Isaiah 5 uses the judgment motifs of the earthquake upon the land (5:25) and the darkening of the heavens (5:30). The judgment oracle against Babylon in Isaiah 13 also uses the motifs of the earthquake (13:13) and the darkening of the heavens (13:10).³⁴ Finally, the oracle against Egypt in Ezekiel 32 also uses the motif of the darkening of the heavens (32:7–8), but not the motif of the earthquake. These parallels demonstrate that there are a variety of motifs the Israelite prophets used in other judgment-themed oracles, but it is the desolation motif that closely fits the use of the word pair תהו/בהו in both Jeremiah 4:26 and Isaiah 34:11.

Is Jeremiah 4:23 a chaos contrary to creation?

How then do summary-statement proponents come to the conclusion that the word pair תהו/בהו describes a chaos contrary to creation in Jeremiah 4:23? Most seem to come to this conclusion based upon the literary parallels between Jeremiah 4:23–28 and

³⁴ Cf. also Joel 2:10, 30–31; Amos 8:9.

Genesis 1. Görg (2006, 571) states,

This idea [that the word pair תהו/בהו stands in opposition to the created world] takes on cosmic dimensions in the vision in Jer 4:23: “I see the earth: behold—*tōhû wābōhû*.” This statement parallels a vision of the heavens devoid of lights. Thus for the word pair *tōhû wābōhû* we can claim the negative elements that are central to *tōhû* by itself, the perilous, menacing phenomena of tracklessness and instability. . . . It is therefore still legitimate to assume that the word pair *tōhû wābōhû* is ground semantically in the characteristic of menacing reality that can be represented by the term “chaos,” albeit with reservations. In Jer. 4:23 we may note a cosmic orientation of the expression, which envisions a “chaotic” state of the “earth” like the primordial state described in Gen. 1:2. Although the two occurrences and their contexts are literarily independent, common allusions are recognizable.

Waltke (1975a, 141) states,

Whether the vision is intended as a metaphor of Judah’s return to her precreative state, or an apocalyptic portrayal of cosmic destruction at the end time, need not be decided for our purposes. The point is that the judgment to come on the land [in Jer 4:23–26] takes the form of dismantling or undoing creation. But it obviously does not follow that the precreative state [of Genesis 1:2] itself is the result of God’s fury. . . . Here, however, we should pause and note the meaning of תהו ובהו as clarified by these two passages [(Isa 34:11 and Jer 4:23)]. We may deduce that the compound rhyming expression indicates a state of material prior to creation. The Septuagint renders the compound in Jeremiah 4:23 appropriately by *οὐθέν*, “nothing.” Indeed this appears to be essentially its meaning; not in the sense that material does not exist, but rather in the sense that an orderly arrangement, a creating, a cosmos, has not yet taken place.³⁵

Finally, Konkel (1997, 607) states,

The other two occurrences of *tōhû wābōhû* are a description of the pre-creation chaos (Gen 1:2; Jer

4:23). It is not certain that the same cosmic type of judgment is meant in the case of Edom [in Isaiah 34:11]. It is clear, though, that Jeremiah depicts a universal and cosmic catastrophe. Jeremiah uses creation language to describe the judgment on the fruitful garden of creation as a reversal to pre-creation chaos.

Like the arguments of the word pair’s use in Isaiah 34:11, the common argument of all of these scholars is that the passage of Jeremiah 4:23–28 describes the dismantling of the ארץ of Judah back to a state similar to that of the ארץ in Genesis 1:2: the state of תהו ובהו.³⁶ It is a reversal of creation.³⁷ How do these scholars, however, come to the conclusion that the resulting state of this reversal is a pre-creation chaos without first assuming that such is the state of the ארץ in Genesis 1:2? There is nothing in the passage of Jeremiah 4:23–28 that suggests that the ארץ of Judah has returned to a state of both pre-creation and chaos. Again, a proponent of the traditional interpretation could just as easily counter that Jeremiah 4:23–28 describes the dismantling of the ארץ of Judah back to an “initial-creative” state rather than a “precreative” state. Furthermore, the preceding contextual and thematic analyses suggest that the state of the ארץ of Judah in Jeremiah 4:23–28 is that of a desolation rather than a chaos contrary to creation.³⁸ Again, just because the passage may describe the dismantling of the ארץ of Judah back to a state similar to that of the ארץ in Genesis 1:2, it is not proof that the word pair תהו/בהו describes a chaos contrary to creation. Such argumentation is a *non sequitur*. However, since both Isaiah 34:11 and Jeremiah 4:23 use the word pair תהו/בהו and the desolation motif as a descriptor of the ארץ of Edom and ארץ of Judah, a brief analysis of the desolation motif can offer a more detailed understanding of the word pair’s meaning.

The Desolation Motif

The desolation motif is very common in many judgment-themed oracles against specific lands or city-states.³⁹ It is used in the judgment oracles against

³⁵Again, even though Waltke is arguing against the views of the gap theory, he refers back to this argument in another article as proof that the word pair describes a chaos contrary to creation. He states, “Then to it has been demonstrated from Jeremiah 4:23 and Isaiah 34:11 that תהו ובהו denotes the antithesis of creation. To take Genesis 1:2, therefore as a circumstantial clause presents the contradiction: He created. . . and the earth was uncreated.” (Waltke 1975b, 220)

³⁶Görg (2006) does refer to other, singular uses of תהו to argue that the word pair תהו/בהו describes the ארץ as a chaos contrary to creation in Jeremiah 4:23. However, the following sections of this article demonstrate that singular uses of תהו do not have this meaning either.

³⁷The preceding thematic analysis suggests that the language of Jeremiah 4:23–28 is more parallel to other judgment-themed oracles than to a reversal of the creation account in Gen 1.

³⁸Ouro (1998, 275) states, “In brief, the expression *tōhû wābōhû* refers to a ‘desert-uninhabited’ (Isa 34:11; Jer 4:23) and ‘arid or unproductive’ (Jer 4:23) state. Neither text gives any linguistic or exegetical evidence to support the existence of a situation of mythic chaos.” Mathews (1996, 132) also states, “Rather than a primordial ‘chaos,’ however, Jeremiah used the similar imagery of creation so as to announce that the ‘land’ (*eres*) of Judah will become a ‘desolate’ place as was the ‘earth’ (*eres*) before its creation, that is, a land lifeless without the blessing of God.” Finally, Tsumura (2005, 31) states, “Thus, the Jeremiah passage refers to a destruction brought about by lack of water, not by the flood water. This is in keeping with my explanation, which takes *tōhû wābōhû* as signifying ‘aridness or unproductiveness’ of the earth.”

³⁹Although Tsumura (2005, 32) does not unpack the significance of the desolation motif for understanding the meaning of the word pair תהו/בהו and the word תהו, he does recognize its usage in certain passages such as Isaiah 34:11.

Ammon in Jeremiah 49; Assyria in Zephaniah 2; Babylon in Isaiah 13, 14, 50, and 51; Damascus in Amos 1; Edom in Jeremiah 49 and Ezekiel 25; Egypt in Jeremiah 46 and Ezekiel 29, 30, and 32; Gaza in Amos 1; Hazor in Jeremiah 49; Moab in Jeremiah 48 and Zephaniah 2; Nineveh in Nahum 2; Philistia in Zephaniah 2 and Zechariah 9; Syria in Isaiah 17; and against Tyre in Isaiah 23 and Ezekiel 26.

Within these judgment-themed oracles, the desolation motif exhibits five common characteristics. First, it is always applied to a specific land or city-state. In other words, it is always a pronouncement against a specific geographical location. It is certainly true that the judgment oracle is against specific people groups, but the desolation motif is always applied to their land or city. Second, the desolation motif always communicates the understanding that the land or city will be emptied of its typical inhabitants.

Jeremiah 50:3 (against Babylon)

כי עלה עליה גוי מצפון הוא ישיב את ארצה לשמה ולא יהיה יושב בה מאדם ועד בהמה גדו הקכו:

For from the north a nation has come upon her, and it will make her land a desolation, and there will be no inhabitant in her, and from man unto beast they will flee.

Jeremiah 51:2 (against Babylon)

ושלחתי לבגל זרים וזויה ויבקרו את ארצה כייני עליה מסביב ביום רעה:

And I will send to Babylon winnowers, and they will winnow her and empty her land, for they will be upon her from all around on the day of evil.

Jeremiah 51:62 (against Babylon)

ואמרת יהוה אתה דברת אליהם קום הנה להכריתו לבלתי יהיו תבו יושב למאדם ועד בהמה כיישמות עולם תהיה:

And say, "Lord, you yourself have said to this place that you will cut it off to be without an inhabitant in it, from man unto beast, for it will be a desolation forever.

Ezekiel 29:11 (against Egypt)

לא תעבר בה רגל אדם ורגל בהמה לא תעבר בה ולא תשב ארבעים שנה:

The foot of a man will not pass over it, nor will the hoof of a beast pass over it, and it will not be inhabited for forty years.

Ezekiel 32:15 (against Egypt)

בתתי את ארץ מצרים ונשמה ארץ ממלאה בהכותי את כל יושבי בה וידעו כייאני יהוה:

When I make the land of Egypt a desolation, the land will be desolate of its fullness, when I strike all the inhabitants in it, and they will know that I am the LORD.

Third, in the desolation motif, the words *נשמה*, *נשמה*, or similar words with the root *נשם* are most commonly used as a descriptors of the desolation.⁴⁰

Isaiah 13:9 (against Babylon)

הנה יום יהוה בא אנגרי ועברי ותרון אף לשום הארץ לשמה ותטאיה לשמיד ממנה:

Behold, the day of the LORD comes with cruelty, fury, and burning anger to make the land a desolation, and he will exterminate its sinners from it.

Jeremiah 46:19 (against Egypt)

כלי גולה עשי לך יושבת בת מצרים כיינף לשמה תהיה ונצתה מאין יושב:

Make for yourselves vessels of exile, oh Daughter of Egypt, for Memphis will become a desolation, and it will be ruined without an inhabitant.

Jeremiah 51:43 (against Babylon)

היו עריה לשמה ארץ ציה וערבה ארץ לא יושב בהו כל איש ולא יעבר בהו בראדם:

Its cities have become a desolation, a dry, desert land, a land in which not any man will live in them and no son of man will pass through them.

Ezekiel 29:10 (against Egypt)

לכו הנני אליה ואלי יאריה ונתתי את ארץ מצרים לקרבות תרב שמה ממגדל סנה ועד גבול כוש:

Therefore, behold! I am against you and against your streams, and I will make the land of Egypt a total waste and desolation from the tower of Syene unto the border of Cush.

Zephaniah 2:13 (against Assyria)

ויט ידו על צפון ויאבד את אשור וישם את נינה לשמה ציה כמדרב:

⁴⁰ Cf. also Isaiah 17:9; Jeremiah 48:9; 49:2, 13, 33; 50:3, 13; 51:29, 37, 62; Ezekiel 29:9, 12; 30:7; 32:15; Zephaniah 2:4, 9. Even Görg, who argues that Gen 1:2 describes a chaos, states, "The term semantically closest to [תהו] is probably [נשמה] in [Isaiah 24:12a] (cf. also Jeremiah 4:27)" (Görg 2006, 569). Tsumura (2005, 25) also recognizes a semantic parallel between *נשמה* and *תהו*.

And he will stretch his hand against the north and he will cause Assyria to perish, and he will make Nineveh a desolation, dry as the wilderness.

Fourth, the desolation motif frequently uses a form of the verb *ישב* as an antonymic description.⁴¹

Jeremiah 48:9 (against Moab)

תנור־ציון למוֹאָב כִּי נִצָּא מִצָּאָה וְעָרֶיהָ לְשִׁמְהָ תִהְיֶינָה מֵאֵין יוֹשֵׁב בָּהֶן:

Give wings to Moab, for she will surely fly away, and her cities will become desolate without an inhabitant in them.

Jeremiah 49:18 (against Edom)

כְּמִהֲפַלֵּת סֹדֶם וְעִמְרָה וְשִׁכְנֶיהָ אָמַר יְהוָה לֹא־יֵשֵׁב שָׁם אִישׁ וְלֹא־יָגִיר בָּהּ בְּרֹאֲדָם:

“Like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah and her inhabitants,” says the Lord, “A man will not dwell there, and the son of a man will not sojourn in it.”

Jeremiah 50:13a (against Babylon)

מִקְצָרָה יְהוָה לֹא תֵשֵׁב וְהִיתָה שְׁמֵמָה בְּלֵהָ

Because of the wrath of the LORD, she will not be inhabited, and she will become a complete desolation.

Jeremiah 51:37 (against Babylon)

וְהִיתָה כְּבָּל לְגִלְיָם מֵעוֹן־תַּגִּים שְׁמָה וְשָׂרָקָה מֵאֵין יוֹשֵׁב:

And Babylon will be a heap, a refuge of jackals, a desolation, and a hissing, without an inhabitant.

Zephaniah 2:5 (against Philistia)

הוּא יֵשֵׁב תְּבַל הַיָּם גְּזֵי כְרִתִּים דְּבַר־יְהוָה עֲלֵיכֶם כִּנְעוֹן אֶרֶץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים וְהֵאֲבֹדְתִיהָ מֵאֵין יוֹשֵׁב:

Woe, oh inhabitants of the seacoast, nation of the Kerethites, the word of the LORD is against you, Canaan, land of the Philistines, for I will cause you to perish and be without an inhabitant.

Last, the desolation motif, in which a land or city-state is desolate of its normal inhabitants, is described in multiple ways: as a place empty of its typical

inhabitants, as a place overrun with wild animals, as a place overgrown with wild vegetation,⁴² or as a place that is like a desert.⁴³ In Isaiah 34:11 and Jeremiah 4:26, the word pair *תהו/בהו*, used in the desolation motif of these judgment-themed oracles, exhibits many of these same characteristics.

This understanding of the word pair is also reflected in the ancient translational paraphrases of the targumim. Consider again the treatment of the word pair *תהו/בהו* in Genesis 1:2 of *Tgs. Neofiti* and *Onqelos*:

Tg. Neof.

וארעא הוות תהיא ובהיא וצדי מן בר נש ומן בעיר וריקנא מן כל פלחן צמחין ומן אילנין וחשוכא פריס על אפיתהומא ורוח דרחמין מן קדם ה היה מנשבא על אפי מיא :

(Grossfeld 1969, 10, 14)

And the earth was waste and unformed, desolate of man and beast, empty of plant cultivation and of trees, and darkness was spread over the surface of the waters. And the spirit of mercy from before God was blowing over the face of the waters. (McNamara 1992, 55).

Tg. Onq.

וארעא הות צדיא וריקניא וחשוכא פריש על אפי תהומא ורוחא מן קדם יי מנשבא על אפי מיא :

(Aberback and Grossfeld 1982, 20)

And the earth was desolate and empty, and darkness was on the face of the deep; and a wind from before the Lord was blowing on the face of the water.

(Aberback and Grossfeld 1982, 20).

Clearly, these early Jewish translators understood the word pair in the same manner. Thus, both contextually and thematically the word pair seems to describe a container desolate of its typical contents rather than a chaos contrary to creation. By itself the word *תהו* also exhibits these same characteristics.

The Literal Sense of the Word *תהו*

According to both BDB and *HALOT*, the word *תהו* seems to be used with two major senses.⁴⁴ The first major sense is more literal in nature. This use of the word describes the conditions of a physical location. This is also the sense of the word when it is used with *בהו* in Genesis 1:2, Isaiah 34:11, and Jeremiah 4:26.

⁴¹ Cf. also Isaiah 13:20 (שכך); Jeremiah 46:19; 49:33; 50:3; 51:29, 43, 62; Ezekiel 26:19, 20; 29:11; Zechariah 9:5.

⁴² For references, see the previous contextual discussion on Isa 34:10b–15.

⁴³ Cf. Jeremiah 50:12, 51:43; Zephaniah 2:13.

⁴⁴ Brown, Driver, and Briggs (1907) and Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm (2001), s.v. “תהו.”

The following section analyzes the other occurrences of the word תהו in this more literal sense. The second major sense in which the word is used is more figurative in nature. The figurative use of the word תהו will be analyzed in the next section.

Deuteronomy 32:10. Deuteronomy 32:10 uses the word תהו in a way that is consistent with the characteristics exhibited by the desolation motif. The verse states,

ימצאהו בארץ מדבר ובהו ילל ישמן

He found him (*Jacob/Israel*) in a land of desert, in a howling *tōhû* of wilderness.

In this passage, the noun ישמון, which is a descriptor of תהו, describes a desert-like location. In fact, as this verse indicates, the word is a synonym of מדבר,⁴⁵ which most often refers to the desert or wilderness. The word ישמון is also used in other passages to describe a land that is both uninhabited and overrun by wild animals, which as the previous section demonstrates is also characteristic of the desolation motif. Consider these passages:

Psalm 107:4

תעו במדבר בישמון דרו עיר מושב לא מצאו:

They wandered in a desert, in a wilderness on the journey, *but* they found no habitable city.

Isaiah 43:20

תכבדני תית השדה תנים ובנות יענה כיינמתי במדבר מים נהרות בישמון להשקות עמי בהירי:

The beast of the field, the jackals and the offspring of the ostrich, will glorify me, for waters in the desert, rivers in the wilderness to give water to my chosen people.

Again, the imagery of the word ישמון is very similar to the descriptions of lands and city-states in the desolation motif. Thus, it is not surprising that the word modifies תהו in Deuteronomy 32:10.

Isaiah 24:10. This passage occurs in a judgment-themed oracle against the whole earth. The passage as a whole has many of the previously mentioned motifs that are common in judgment-themed oracles. It uses the motif of the earthquake (24:1b, 18b–20) and possibly the motif of the darkening of the heavens (24:23). Most importantly, however, it

uses the desolation motif (24:1a, 3, 6b, 10–13). Isaiah 24:10 occurs in the desolation motif. The verse states,

נשברה קרית־תהו סגר כל־בית מבוא:

The city of *tōhû* is broken, all the houses are closed up from entering.

The verse by itself offers minimal evidence concerning its meaning, but the context of the passage and the theme offer more clarification.

Within the context and theme of the passage the word תהו is used to describe a city that is empty of its typical inhabitants; it is a desolation. Verses 12 and 13 clearly describe the city in this way. They state,

נשאר בעיר שמה ושאה יכתשער:
כי לה יהנה בקרב הארץ בתוך העמים פנקו זית פעולות אב־כלה בציר:¹³

¹²Desolation is left in the city, and the gates are crushed and a ruin

¹³For thus it will be in the heart of the earth, in the midst of the people, like the shaking of an olive tree, like the gleaning when the grape harvest is complete.

The incomplete similes in this passage are clear. As a tree is bare of olives after it has been shaken, and a vineyard is bare of grapes after it has been harvested, so too is a city empty of its inhabitants after it has been desolated. Since Isaiah 24:10 occurs in a judgment-themed oracle is it not surprising that the word תהו is used as a part of the desolation motif. Again, a simple contextual and thematic analysis demonstrates that the word תהו, by itself, is also used to describe a place that is desolate of its typical inhabitants.

Isaiah 45:18. Because Isaiah 45:18 is very similar to Genesis 1:2, in that both passages are used in creation contexts, it is extremely helpful in understanding the meaning of the word תהו in Genesis 1:2. The passage states,

כי זה אמר־יהוה

בורא השמים הוא האלהים
יצר הארץ ועשה הוא כוננה
לא־תהו בראה
לשבת יצרה
אני יהוה ואני עוֹד:

For thus says the LORD,

“The one who created the Heavens, He is God

⁴⁵ Cf. Psalms 78:40; 106:14; 107:4; Isaiah 43:19–20.

The one who formed the earth and made it, He established it
He did not create it *to be tōhū*⁴⁶
He formed it to be inhabited
I am the LORD, and there is no other.

Within the passage itself it is clear that the word תהו is antonymically paired with מְשַׁבֵּת⁴⁷ and both are a description of a physical location: the אֶרֶץ.

Again, considering the use of תהו in the desolation motif in the passages of Isaiah 34:11; Jeremiah 4:23; and Isaiah 24:10, it is not surprising that in the only instance in which the word תהו occurs with an antonym, the antonym is a form of the verb יָשַׁב. Again, the previous discussion demonstrates that the desolation motif frequently uses this verb as an antonymic description of the desolation.⁴⁸ Tsumura (2005, 25) states,

However, *tōhū* here is contrasted with *lāšebet* in the parallelism and seems to refer rather to a place that has no habitation, like the term *šēmāmā* “desolation” (cf. Jer 4:27; Isa 24:12), *hārēb* “waste, desolate,” and *‘āzūbā* “deserted.” There is nothing in this passage that would suggest a chaotic state of the earth “which is opposed to and precedes creation.” Thus, the term *tōhū* here too signifies “a desert-like place” and refers to “an uninhabited place.”

Thus, the creation passage of Isaiah 45:18 is one of the strongest evidences supporting the argument that the word תהו, rather than describing a state of chaos, describes a state of desolation, empty of inhabitants. In other words the lexical data of Isaiah 45:18 suggests that whatever is inhabited is in a state of A and whatever is תהו, or desolate, is in a state of non-A. Thus, if a cosmological container like the אֶרֶץ is described as תהו, it is uninhabited not chaotic. It is not a logical contradiction to argue that such a state could be created.

Other Evidences. There are three other passages that use the word תהו in a way that is similar to the

desolation motif. They describe a desert land that is devoid of habitation. Consider the following verses:

Job 6:18

יִלְפְתוּ אֶרְתוֹת דְּרַכֶּם יַעֲלוּ בְתֵהוּ וַיֵּאבְדוּ:

They turn themselves from the paths of their way; they go up into the *tōhū*, and they perish.

Job 12:24

מִסִּיר לֵב רָאִשֵׁי עַם־הָאָרֶץ וַיִּתְעַם בְּתֵהוּ לֹא־דָרָךְ:

He who takes away the understanding of the rulers of the people of the land, and causes them to wander in the *tōhū* where there is no road.

Psalms 107:40

נִשְׁפָּךְ בְּיַד עַל־נְדִיבִים וַיִּתְעַם בְּתֵהוּ לֹא־דָרָךְ:

He who pours contempt upon the nobles, and causes them to wander in the *tōhū* where there is no road.

In these passages the word תהו is not used to describe a land or a city, nor is it coupled with any other words that might describe a desert land or wilderness, nor is it used in any judgment-themed oracle against a land or a city. However, the phrase לֹא־דָרָךְ in Job 12:24 and Psalm 107:40 and the description of wandering from the דָּרָךְ suggest that the word is descriptive of a wilderness in which no one travels. This meaning is consistent with the other literal uses of the word when it describes a desolation.

Most scholars who argue that תהו describes a chaos in Genesis 1:2 agree that its use in the preceding verses refers to some kind of desert wasteland (Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1907, s.v., “תהו”;

⁴⁶ Waltke (1975b, 220) counters this translation by saying, “[T]he double accusative after verbs of making does not normally have this sense.” He argues that the normal sense of the third colon in Isaiah 45:18 should be “He did not create it a formless mass.” However, in the parallel bicola of the passage תהו is paired with the infinitive form (לְשַׁבֵּת) of יָשַׁב, which implies purpose and does not function as a double accusative in the bicola. If תהו were functioning as a double accusative, it is more likely that it would be paired with the participial form (נוֹשַׁבֵּת) of יָשַׁב which would then function as a double accusative in the bicola as well (cf. Exodus 16:35). Thus, the rendering of תהו as “*to be tōhū*” seems to be implicit in the parallelism and grammatical context of the bicola. Tsumura (2005, 26) also states, “It should be noted that *lō’-tōhū* here is a resultative object, referring to the purpose of God’s creative action. In other words, this verse explains that God did not create the earth so that it might stay desert-like, but to be inhabited. So this verse does not contradict Genesis 1:2, where God created the earth to be productive and inhabited, though it ‘was’ still *tōhū wābōhū* in the initial state.”

⁴⁷ Interestingly, Westermann (1990, 103) and Waltke (2007, 181 n. 16) argue that the word תהו in this passage is the “direct opposite of creation” and “an antonym to ‘create.’” It is difficult to understand how Westermann and Waltke can come to this conclusion when the parallel structure of the passage clearly demonstrates that תהו is antithetically paired with מְשַׁבֵּת, while בְּרָאָה, “he created it,” is synonymously paired with יִצְרָה, “he formed it.” There is nothing in the structure or the context of the passages that suggests that תהו is antithetically parallel to בְּרָאָה. Even Görg (2006, 569), another proponent of treating תהו as a reference to chaos in Genesis 1:2, recognizes the correct parallelism.

⁴⁸ Again, cf. Isaiah 13:20 (שָׁכַן); Jeremiah 46:19; 48:9; 49:18, 33; 50:3, 13; 51:29, 37, 43, 62; Ezekiel 26:19, 20; 29:11; Zephaniah 2:5; Zechariah 9:5.

Youngblood 1980, 964; Westermann 1990, 102; Konkel 1997, 607; Waltke 2007, 181 n.16). Görg (2006, 568), however, disagrees stating,

Clearly these words refer not to literal exile in a wasteland but to the disorientated bewilderment of those stripped of understanding by God. The prepositional compound appears with the article in Job 6:18, where a caravan that turns aside from its course (v.18a) is described as wandering *battōhū*—again, the text does not refer to the wilderness simply as a geological phenomenon; this straying leads to death.

The problem with this analysis is that the literal sense of the word is being used to denote an abstract thought. This does not mean that the abstract thought of disoriented bewilderment should not be applied to the passage using the word תהו, but it is the literal meaning that defines the figurative idea expressed in these passages, not vice versa. Again, the most basic, literal meaning of the word תהו is that of a desolate place devoid of habitation. This fits its meaning in all of the passages in which it is used as a substantive and as a modifier describing certain geographical locations.

The Figurative Sense of the Word תהו

Again, the second major sense in which the word תהו is used is more figurative in nature. In such passages as 1 Samuel 12:21; Job 26:7; Isaiah 29:21; 40:17, 23; 41:29; 44:9; 45:19; 49:4; and 59:4, the word תהו has a meaning of “emptiness” or “nothingness” (Kohler, Baumgartner, and Stamm 2001, s.v., “תהו”) and is synonymously parallel with such terms as *קְלִימָה* (nothing), *אֵפֶס* (nothing), *הַקָּבֶל* (vanity), and *רִיק* (emptiness) in Job 26:7 and Isaiah 40:17 and 49:4 (Westermann 1990, 103, and Görg 2006, 569). Delitzsch (1888, 78) uses the more figurative definition of the word תהו to argue that it describes a chaos in Genesis 1:2. He states,

The chaos, as which the developing earth existed, embraced also the heaven which was developing with and for it. The substance of the תהו ובהו is left undefined; תהו is the synonym of אֵפֶס, קְלִימָה, הַקָּבֶל, and the like, and is therefore a purely negative notion.⁴⁹

The figurative uses of תהו can certainly portray a negative picture that may reach such an abstract level that it could be a description of a “chaos.” However, there is little, if any, evidence to suggest that the figurative meaning of the word תהו should be applied to its usage in Genesis 1:2. The uses of the word pair תהו/בהו in Genesis 1:2, Isaiah 34:11; and

Jeremiah 4:23 describe a physical, geographical location much like the word תהו does in its more literal uses. There is no evidence to suggest that the word pair in Genesis 1:2 should take on the figurative meaning of תהו.

Furthermore, even though the figurative meaning of תהו creates a negative abstraction, as Delitzsch observes, there is no reason to assume that such an abstract meaning carries over into the literal meaning. It is much more likely that the literal meaning of תהו, describing a desolation without inhabitants, influences its figurative meaning, describing what is empty, vain, or worthless, since the literal meaning is drawn from personal experience (Westermann 1990, 103). Consider also the adjective *רִיק*, a cognate of *רִיק* which occurs in parallel with one of the figurative uses of תהו. Like תהו, the word *רִיק* also has both a literal meaning, describing what is empty, and a figurative meaning, describing what is worthless or vain (Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1907, s.v., “רִיק”). No one would argue that the literal use of the word *רִיק* in Genesis 37:24 is descriptive of a terrible, menacing pit, בּוֹר, on account of the figurative sense of the word *רִיק* in Judges 9:4; 2 Samuel 6:20; and Proverbs 12:11. The same should also apply to תהו. There is no good reason to assume that the figurative meaning of תהו influences its literal meaning in Genesis 1:2 or any other passage in which it is used literally.

Other Arguments

Because of the interpretive and theological implications involved in defining the word pair תהו/בהו as a chaos contrary to creation, many proponents of the traditional interpretation legitimately argue that the word pair describes the אָרֶץ as being in a more neutral state (Mathews 1996, 143–144; Ouro 1998, 276; Rooker 1992, 320–322; and Sailhamer 1990, 24–25). Even some proponents of the summary-statement interpretation are not convinced that the word pair in Genesis 1:2 describes the אָרֶץ as a chaos contrary to creation. Young, for instance, states, “It would probably be wise to abandon the term ‘chaos’ as a designation of the conditions set forth in verse two. The three-fold statement of circumstances in itself seems to imply order” (Young 1959, 145).⁵⁰ Tsumura also states,

In conclusion, the phrase *tōhū wābōhū* in Gen 1:2, which is traditionally translated into English “without form and void” (RSV) or the like, simply means “emptiness” and refers to the earth, which was a desolate and empty place, “an unproductive and

⁴⁹ Driver (1904, 3–4) also seems to use the figurative sense of תהו to argue for a meaning of chaos in Genesis 1:2.

⁵⁰ Young’s position is somewhat nuanced, but he does argue that Genesis 1:1 is a summary and not the first act of creation (Young 1958, 141–143; Young, 1961, 166–167. (Note especially his footnotes.) He also states, “It is true that the second verse of Genesis does not represent a continuation of the narrative of verse one, but, as it were, a new beginning. Grammatically it is not to be construed with the preceding, but with what follows.” (Young 1961, 166–167).

uninhabited place.” As Westermann notes, “creation and the world are to be understood always from the viewpoint of or in the context of human experience.” In other words, to communicate the subject of creation meaningfully to human beings, one must use the language and literary forms known to them. In order to give the background information to the audience in this verse, the author uses experiential language explaining the initial situation of the earth as “not yet.” (Tsumura 2005, 35)⁵¹

Finally, Walton (2009, 51–52) states,

Based on the above assessment of the beginning state as it is presented in Genesis, we are now in a position to compare it to what we find in the ancient world. In the ancient Near East the precosmic condition is neither an abstraction (“Chaos”) nor a personified adversary.⁵²

Waltke, however, argues that the word תהו is frequently used in a negative sense, which should be considered in the case of Genesis 1:2. He states,

David Toshio Tsumura says, “The phrase [*tōhū wābōhū*] in Gen 1:2 has nothing to do with chaos and simply means ‘emptiness,’ which he defines as “an unproductive and uninhabited place.” But he fails to note adequately that *tōhū* always connotes something terrible, eerie. Even in Job 26:7 it connotes a state that effects awe. To capture both the negative denotation and connotation of *tōhū*, “chaos” is more apt than emptiness.” (Waltke 2007, 181 n. 16)

Thus, according to Waltke’s argument, it seems that the problem for those who do not recognize Genesis 1:2 to be a description of chaos is that they do not perceive just how negative a description תהו, *tōhū*, can be. The problem with this argument, however, is that it injects more subjectivity into the debate than objectivity. Since scholars of either position argue that תהו either does or does not describe a chaos from the same passages, it seems odd to argue that one side does not view תהו negatively enough. Should not the context of each passage

determine how negative the term should be viewed? While it is a possibility that the literal use of תהו describes something negative in Genesis 1:2 and other passages, there is *nothing* in the previous analysis of the evidence suggesting that תהו is so negative that it describes a chaos contrary to creation. The bridge between what is negative and what is a chaos contrary to creation is simply not there. Furthermore, there is nothing in the previous analysis suggesting that God could not create the ארץ in this manner. Such an interpretation is neither a logical nor theological contradiction. A plain and simple reading of the contextual and thematic evidences clearly demonstrates that the word pair תהו/בהו in Genesis 1:2 describes the ארץ as being in a state of desolation, empty of inhabitants.

Conclusion

Based upon the preceding lexical analysis, summary-statement proponents cannot argue that it is logically contradictory for the ארץ of Genesis 1:2 to correspond to the ארץ of 1:1 in state simply because it is described as being תהו ובהו. There is no evidence to suggest that the word pair describes a chaos contrary to creation. In fact, the contextual and thematic evidences clearly demonstrate that the word pair describes a desolation empty of inhabitants. Again, the close proximity of the two identical words in Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 strongly suggests that they *do* correspond to one another in state. Thus, as previously suggested, in order for the summary-statement interpretation to be sustainable and more probable than the traditional interpretation, the two words must not be able to correspond to one another. Nevertheless, the previous discussion demonstrates that there is no reason they should not.

As Part 1 demonstrated, if Genesis 1:1 narrates the creation of only the cosmological containers of the ארץ and the ארץ, then, as Part 2 demonstrates, the description of the ארץ in Genesis 1:2 as תהו ובהו

⁵¹ Unlike Young, Tsumura is much more nuanced. He expresses many views that are shared by summary-statement proponents. First, he seems to argue that the creation of light in Gen 1:3 was the first creative act. He states, “According to the discourse analysis of Gen 1:1–3, the first two verses constitute the SETTING for the EVENT that begins in v. 3, since the *wayqtl* (*waw* consecutive + imperf.), the narrative ‘tense,’ first appears in the phrase ‘and God said’ (*wayyō’mer ’ēlōhīm*)” (Tsumura 2005, 33–34). He also states, “Therefore, v. 2 is, as Perry notes, a ‘prelude’ to v. 3, where the first of God’s creative actions begins with his utterance ‘let there be light!’” (Tsumura 2005, 35). Second, he seems to argue that Gen 1:1 is a summary statement (Tsumura 2005, 34). Third, he argues that the word pair ארץ/שמים is a merism for the “universe” (Tsumura 2005, 75). However, he also expresses views that are shared by proponents of the traditional interpretation. First, in arguing that the phrase *lō’-tōhū* in Isa 45:18 is a resultative object, he seems to argue that the earth in Gen 1:2 was created. He states, “In other words, this verse explains that God did not create the earth so that it might stay desert-like, but to be inhabited. So this verse does not contradict Gen 1:2, where God created the earth to be productive and inhabited, though it ‘was’ still *tōhū wābōhū* in the initial state” (Tsumura 2005, 26). Second, he seems to argue that there is a semantic link between Gen 1:1 and 1:2. He states, “It is not necessary to posit that *hā’āreṣ* has different meanings in v. 1 and v. 2 . . . However, a shift in focus from the totality of the universe (‘heaven and earth’) in v. 1 to the ‘earth’ in v. 2 does not necessarily result in a change of meaning for the term *hā’āreṣ*” (Tsumura 2005, 69 n. 44). However, even though he may be quite nuanced, Tsumura’s default position seems to be that of the summary-statement interpretation. He writes, “After the *summary statement* [emphasis mine] ‘in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’ (v. 1), in v. 2a the author focuses not on the ‘heavens’ but on the ‘earth’ where the audience stands, and, in preparation for what is to come, presents the ‘earth’ as ‘still’ not being the earth that they all are familiar with” (Tsumura 2005, 34). Tsumura never explicitly states that Gen 1:1 is the first act of creation, but he does explicitly state that it is a summary.

⁵² See also Walton (2009, 45–46), where he states his support for the summary-statement interpretation.

substantiates such an interpretation. The word pair describes the cosmological container of the רָאָה as a desolation, empty of inhabitants.⁵³ This interpretation works with the proximal correspondence of the two occurrences of רָאָה , not against it. Thus, if there is a semantic correspondence between the רָאָה of Genesis 1:1 and the רָאָה of Genesis 1:2, then there is semantic and syntactic correspondence between the two verses as well, and if there is semantic and syntactic correspondence between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, then the summary-statement interpretation is unlikely.

The majority of scholars from both the Christian and Jewish traditions have long appraised the traditional interpretation of Genesis 1:1–2 as the clearest reading of the text. According to this interpretation, Genesis 1:1 describes the first act of creation, but Genesis 1:2 then describes that initial creation as being in an incomplete state. This initial, incomplete state of creation, however, sets the tone for the rest of the creation narrative where the context shows that the initially, incomplete creation is increasingly shaped, molded, and populated until it reaches a completed state on the sixth day as explained in the summary statement of Genesis 2:1. Thus, with the traditional interpretation, everything in the creation narrative is explicitly described as being created by God, and there is nothing in the narrative that is already in existence when God begins creating. It is because of this traditional interpretation that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is a logical and theological inference drawn from these opening verses of the Bible, and these lexical analyses of Part 1 and Part 2 have demonstrated that traditional interpreters and theologians are on a sure lexical footing when arguing for it.

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⁵³ Note especially the interpretation of the nineteenth-century Jewish scholar Samuel David Luzzatto who states, "Just as the desert is called *shemamah* and *yeshimon* ('wilderness'), so it is called *tohu va-vohu*. The meaning is that on the earth there were neither plants nor animals." (Luzzatto 1998, 5)

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