

A Word Study of Tohu wa Bohu

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Introduction: The primary purpose of this word study is to arrive at an accurate understanding of the Hebrew phrase tohu wabohu as found in [Genesis 1:2](#).

Tohu

You will find, in the italicized words below, a definition of [tohu](#) followed by an alphabetized list of translations of [tohu](#) from the New American Standard Bible as itemized in the New American Standard Hebrew Dictionary (as found in [Quickverse](#) 2008):

H8414

תהו

tohu (1062c); from an unused word; *formlessness, confusion, unreality, emptiness*:—chaos (1), confusion (1), desolation (1), emptiness (1), empty space (1), formless (2), futile (2), futile things (1), meaningless (2), meaningless arguments (1), nothing (2), waste (3), waste place (2).

Number 1 (Gen. 1:2)

וְהָאָרֶץ תְּהוֹ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם: Gen 1:2

Ge 1:2 And the earth was **without form**, and void; and darkness [was] upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. (KJV)

²The earth was **formless** and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. (NASB)

[Genesis 1:2](#). In the initial phase of Day One during God’s Creation Week, the earth is said to have been [tohu](#). This Hebrew word in this context has been translated in two categories of words. (1) The first category of words all deal with the **form**, or physical appearance of the earth. In other words they assign a form, or more precisely, an absence of form to the earth in Genesis 1:2 as follows: formless ([NASB](#), [NIV](#), [NLT](#), [GWT](#), [GNT](#), [HCSB](#), [NIVUK](#), [TNIV](#)); without form ([KJV](#), [NKJV](#), [ESV](#), [AMP](#)); didn’t have any shape ([NIRV](#)). (2) The second category of words deal with the **function** of the earth, or more precisely, its absence of function in Genesis 1:2 as follows: barren ([CEV](#)); empty ([NCV](#)); waste ([ASV](#), [YLT](#), [DT](#)); void ([DRA](#)); a soup of nothingness ([MSG](#)).

What did the translators mean by the words “formless” or “without form”? If they meant merely that the earth, as a watery sphere, had no observable land

features or things that appear on land, such as hills, mountains, rivers, or vegetation, their translation is at least admissible, if not optimal. The difficulty with the words “formless” or “without form” is that they at least suggest that the earth had no shape. In fact, the [NIRV](#) translation flatly states, “The earth didn’t have any shape.” Let’s think that through a little bit. Did Moses really mean that the earth had no shape? Is there any intimation in the surrounding text that the earth was an amorphous blob? Was it not spherical? If it were a shapeless blob, would it not be because it had no gravity? What would have kept the blob from dispersing all over the heavens? To me, a translation that focuses on form to the exclusion of function is problematic.

In my own study of the word [tohu](#) in its various contexts, in a decided preponderance of the instances, the emphasis is not on form, but on function. Here, too, in [Genesis 1:2](#), in its broader context of [Genesis 1:1-2:3](#), I believe, the translation must carefully balance form and function. Whatever [tohu](#) means in [Genesis 1:2](#), it means that the earth at that stage constituted an inhospitable, unsuitable environment in which physical life in any form could exist, whether plant, animal, or human. It was non-organized or non-functional ([tohu](#)) as regards its ultimate purpose, which was to be a suitable environment for man and animals; and naturally, it was also void or empty ([bohu](#)) of any living organisms, just as is our moon today. As [Genesis 1:2](#) reveals, at this stage in Day One of Creation, the earth was a vast, unlit matrix of water, and presumably, soil and mineral. There was nothing chaotic or evil about its state at this point. Quite to the contrary, the Spirit of God Himself was moving upon the face of the waters, presumably imbuing the planet with the appropriate building blocks to support life. The earth was not deficient, but merely incomplete, not yet organized to be a hospitable environment for either fish or fowl, or land animals or man, their ruler. Those transformations would take place incrementally during the remainder of Day One and the subsequent five days of Creation ([Gen. 1:3-31](#)). So an appropriate literal translation of [tohu](#) and [bohu](#) in [Genesis 1:2](#) is this: “Now the earth was *unformedness* and emptiness” ([tohu](#) and [bohu](#) are both substantives). Smoothing out the translation and again including the word [bohu](#), we could say, “Now the earth was *unformed* and empty...” By “unformed” I do not mean that the earth had no shape, but rather that it was *insufficiently organized* to be a suitable environment for life. It was *pre-functional*. See the conclusion of this word study.

Number 2 (Deut. 32:10)

יִמְצָאֵהוּ בְּאֶרֶץ מִדְבָּר וּבְתֵהוֹ יִלְלֵ יִשְׁמֹן יִסְבְּבֵנָהוּ יִבְוֹנְנָהוּ Deut 32:10
 יִצְרְנָהוּ כְּאִישׁוֹן עֵינָיו:

De 32:10 He found him in a desert land, and in the **waste** howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. (KJV)

¹⁰ “He found him in a desert land, and in the howling **waste** of a wilderness; He encircled him, He cared for him, He guarded him as the pupil of His eye. (NASB)

[Deuteronomy 32:10](#). [Deuteronomy 32](#) is the didactic Song of Moses, written as a witness against [Israel](#)’s inevitable apostasy ([Deut. 31:14-22](#)). (For the setting of this song, see the author’s [Analysis of Deuteronomy](#), pp. 16-17.) Moses spoke of Yahweh’s provision for [Israel](#) ([Deut. 32:7-14](#)). Yahweh had found His people, Jacob, the sons of Israel ([Deut. 32:8-9](#)) “in a desert land, and in the howling waste of a wilderness” ([Deut. 32:10](#)). The word translated “waste” is the word [tohu](#). “Waste” here may refer both to the desert land of Egypt (Thomas Constable, [Notes on Deuteronomy](#), 2010 Edition, p. 102), and also to the desert experience of bondage and slavery in which the sons of Israel found themselves. [Israel](#)’s slavery was not a judgment by God on the nation, but rather a painful crucible in which God melded the clan into a nation, separating them from their Egyptian hosts. In slavery, the people of Israel were *unable to function* as the nation that God intended for them to be.

Number 3 (1 Sam. 12:21)

וְלֹא תִסְּוּרוּ כִּי־אֲחֲרַי תִּתְּהוּ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִוְעִילוּ וְלֹא יִצִּילוּ כִּי־תִתְּהוּ הַמָּה: 1Sam 12:21

1Sa 12:21 And turn ye not aside: for [then should ye go] after **vain [things]**, which cannot profit nor deliver; for they [are] vain. (KJV)

²¹“You must not turn aside, for *then you would go* after **futile things** which cannot profit or deliver, because they are futile. (NASB)

Number 4 (1 Sam. 12:21)

וְלֹא תִסְּוּרוּ כִּי־אֲחֲרַי תִּתְּהוּ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִוְעִילוּ וְלֹא יִצִּילוּ כִּי־תִתְּהוּ הַמָּה: 1Sam 12:21

1Sa 12:21 And turn ye not aside: for [then should ye go] after vain [things], which cannot profit nor deliver; for they [are] **vain**. (KJV)

²¹“You must not turn aside, for *then you would go* after futile things which cannot profit or deliver, because they are **futile**. (NASB)

[1 Samuel 12:21](#). [1 Samuel 12](#) constitutes Samuel’s renewal of the kingdom of Saul over [Israel](#) at Gilgal ([1 Sam. 11:14-15](#)). Samuel chided the people for rejecting Yahweh as their (invisible) king and requesting a (visible, human) king ([1 Sam. 12:12-20](#)). They had committed all this evil, yet still Yahweh would bless them if they served Him with all their heart ([1 Sam. 12:20](#)). They were not to “turn aside” from following Yahweh, for if they did, they would pursue “futile things” ([tohu](#)) that could never “profit or deliver, because they are futile” ([tohu](#)) ([1 Sam. 12:21](#)). So turning aside from Yahweh by serving other gods and disobeying Yahweh’s commands could be classified as *futile*, or *non-*

productive, because disobedience would inevitably lead to God’s cursing and judgment ([Deut. 27:1-26; 28:15-68](#)). So *tohu* in this context means *useless, futile, and counterproductive*.

Number 5 (Isa. 24:10)

נְשֻׁבְרָה קְרִית־תְּהוֹ סִגְר כָּל־בַּיִת מִבּוֹא: Isaiah 24:10

Isa 24:10 The city of **confusion** is broken down: every house is shut up, that no man may come in. (KJV)

¹⁰The city of **chaos** is broken down; every house is shut up so that none may enter. (NASB)

What [Isaiah 24:10](#) is speaking of is that because of the terrible events of the [Tribulation](#) ([Isa. 24:1-6; 17-20](#)), many people have died in the typical city of the earth, leaving houses empty. Survivors have apparently locked themselves in, or boarded up their homes so marauders cannot enter. There is an outcry in the streets because of the absence of basic necessities, such as wine ([Isa. 24:11](#)). Thus it is a “city of chaos” (*tohu*) because it is not functioning as a normal city. It is a city of *non-organization* or *non-functionality*, and perhaps, of *anarchy*.

Number 6 (Isa. 29:21)

מִחֲטִיאֵי אָדָם בְּדָבָר וְלִמּוֹכִיחַ בְּשַׁעַר יִקְשׁוּן וַיִּטְוּ בַתְּהוֹ צְדִיק: ס Isaiah 29:21

Isa 29:21 That make a man an offender for a word, and lay a snare for him that reproveth in the gate, and turn aside the just **for a thing of nought**. (KJV)

²¹Who cause a person to be indicted by a word, and ensnare him who adjudicates at the gate, and defraud the one in the right **with meaningless arguments**. (NASB)

[Isaiah 29:21](#). People who are described as “the ruthless,” “the scorner,” and “all who are intent on evil” will be cut off ([Isa. 29:20](#)). They are further described as performing the actions of [Isa. 29:21](#). They sound like crooked lawyers or evil people who employ crooked lawyers to defraud their victims with meaningless arguments. So here [batohu](#) means “**with meaninglessness**.”

Number 7 (Isa. 34:11)

וַיִּרְשׁוּהָ קִאֲנָת וְקַפּוּד וַיִּנְשׂוּף וְעֵרֵב יִשְׁכְּנוּ־בָהּ וַנִּטָּה עָלֶיהָ קוֹרֵתְהוֹ וְאַבְגִּי־בָהּ: Isaiah 34:11

Isa 34:11 But the cormorant and the bittern shall possess it; the owl also and the raven

shall dwell in it: and he shall stretch out upon it the line of **confusion**, and the stones of emptiness. (KJV)

¹¹But pelican and hedgehog will possess it, and owl and raven will dwell in it; and He will stretch over it the line of **desolation** (*tohu*) and the plumb line of **emptiness**. (*bohu*) (NASB)

The entirety of [Isaiah 34](#) describes the time of God's terrible judgment upon all nations of the earth during the [Tribulation](#) period. Edom and Bozrah are singled out especially as receiving God's judgment. Probably they are specific examples of God's global wrath. Edom and Bozrah will be devastated by burning pitch and brimstone that will smoke forever. For that reason no one will pass through the land, nor will there be any inhabitant except for wild animals. Since, in [Isa. 34:11](#), no humans are there and it is deserted, the land of Edom and Bozrah is described as measured by a line of desolation (*tohu* – it is a non-functioning land) and by a plumb line of emptiness (*bohu* – no one is there). Note that both *tohu* and *bohu* are used. So *tohu* here means **desolation** or *non-functionality*.

Number 8 (Isa. 40:17)

כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם כְּאֵין נִגְדוּ מֵאֵפֶס וְתִהְיֶה נֶחְשְׁבוּ־לִי: Isaiah 40:17

Isa 40:17 All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and **vanity**. (KJV)

¹⁷All the nations are as nothing before Him, they are regarded by Him as less than nothing and **meaningless**. (NASB)

[Isaiah 40:17](#). [Isaiah 40](#) features the mighty power of Sovereign Yahweh as being able to comfort and to restore gloriously the people of [Israel](#) and the city of Jerusalem despite the repeated ravages of the surrounding hostile nations. Appropriately, in [Isa. 40:17](#), Yahweh regards all the world's nations, who have been [Israel](#)'s enemies, as “nothing,” “less than nothing,” and “meaningless” (*tohu*). As far as God is concerned, He will stop the onslaught of the nations against His people, and so they will be an immobilized, non-factor. The nations are “of no account” in Yahweh's sight and against [Israel](#), and ultimately they cannot possibly succeed in deterring His program for His people. Here, *tohu* means *meaningless* or *of no account*.

Number 9 (Isa. 40:23)

הַנּוֹתֵן רוּזְנִים לְאֵין שְׁפִטֵי אֶרֶץ כְּתִירוֹ עֲשֵׂה: Isaiah 40:23

Isa 40:23 That bringeth the princes to nothing; he maketh the judges of the earth **as vanity**. (KJV)

²³He *it is* who reduces rulers to nothing, Who makes the judges of the earth **meaningless**. (NASB)

[Isaiah 40:23](#). Just as the nations of the earth are non-functional and non-organized in opposing God and His efforts to restore His people [Israel](#) ([Isa. 40:17](#), cf. [Isa. 40:1-11](#)), just so He reduces potentates to nothingness and renders judges of the earth as *meaningless* or *non-functional* ([tohu](#)) in their opposition to God and His plans of salvation for His people [Israel](#), and indeed, for all who wait upon Yahweh ([Isa. 40:23](#), cf. [40:27-31](#)).

Number 10 (Isa. 41:29)

תֵּן כָּלֶם אֲוֵן אֶפֶס מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם רוּחַ וְתָהוּ נִסְפֵיהֶם: Isaiah 41:29

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Isa 41:29 Behold, they [are] all vanity; their works [are] nothing: their molten images [are] wind and **confusion**. (KJV)

²⁹“Behold, all of them are false; their works are worthless, their molten images are wind and **emptiness**. (NASB)

[Isaiah 41](#) demonstrates Yahweh’s omniscient sovereignty in comparison to idols. Unlike Yahweh Himself, who through the prophet Isaiah predicted the Persian King Cyrus as [Israel](#)’s savior at least 120 years before his appearance ([Isa. 41:2](#); [44:28](#); [45:1](#)), the Gentiles have no counselor who can predict the future ([Isa. 41:28](#)). All the nations’ counselors are false, and the nations’ works are worthless, and their molten images are wind and emptiness ([tohu](#)), meaning they are *devoid of accomplishment and purpose* ([Isa. 41:29](#)).

Number 11 (Isa. 44:9)

יִצְרֵי-פֶסֶל כָּלֶם תָּהוּ וְחַמוּדֵיהֶם בְּלִי-יִעֲלוּ וְעַדֵיהֶם תִּמְאָה בְּלִי-רָאוּ וּבְלִי-יִדְעוּ לְמַעַן יִבְשׂוּ: Isaiah 44:9

Isa 44:9 They that make a graven image [are] all of them **vanity**; and their delectable things shall not profit; and they [are] their own witnesses; they see not, nor know; that they may be ashamed. (KJV)

⁹Those who fashion a graven image are all of them **futile**, and their precious things are of no profit; even their own witnesses fail to see or know, so that they will be put to shame. (NASB)

[Isaiah 44:9-20](#) is a scathing essay on the utter absurdity of constructing and worshipping idols. The section begins ([Isa. 44:9](#)) with a three-fold charge: 1) All “who fashion a graven image are futile” ([tohu](#)); 2) “...their precious things are of no profit ([yaal](#));” 3)

since “their own witnesses fail to see or know” the truth, the result of this folly is that the makers and worshipers of the graven images “will be put to shame” ([bosh](#)). So [tohu](#) is here defined as *that which is futile because it brings no benefit, but only shame*. It is *futile, worthless and thus shameful* to build one’s own god.

Number 12 (Isa. 45:18)

Isaiah 45:18 כִּי כִה אָמַרְיָהוּהָ בּוֹרֵא תְשׁוּמִים הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים יִצֹר
הָאָרֶץ וְעָשָׂהּ הוּא כּוֹנֵנָהּ לֹא תִהְיֶה בְרֵאשִׁית
לְשֵׁבֶת יִצְרָהּ אֲנִי יְהוָה וְאֵין עוֹד:

Isa 45:18 For thus saith the LORD that created the heavens; God himself that formed the earth and made it; he hath established it, he created it not in **vain**, he formed it to be inhabited: I [am] the LORD; and [there is] none else. (KJV)

¹⁸ For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens
(He is the God who formed the earth and made it,
He established it *and* did not create it a **waste place**,
But formed it to be inhabited),
“I am the LORD, and there is none else. (NASB)

[Isaiah 45:18](#) is a superb commentary on [Genesis 1:2](#) in relation to the rest of God’s creative activity in [Genesis 1-2](#). Many foundational creation terms appear here: created (*bara’* – [Gen. 1:1, 21, 27; 2:3, 4](#)); heavens (*shamayim* – [Gen. 1:1, 8, 9, 14, 15, 17, 20, 26, 28, 30; 2:1, 4, 19, 20](#)); formed (*yatsar* – [Gen. 2:7, 8, 19](#)); earth (*erets* – [Gen. 1:1, 2, 10, 11, 12, 15, 17, 20, 22, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29, 30; 2:1](#)); made (*asah* – [Gen. 1:7, 11, 12, 16, 25, 26, 31; 2:2, 3, 4, 18](#)); and waste place (*tohu* – [Gen. 1:2](#)). The most fascinating aspect of the commentary of [Isaiah 45:18](#) upon [Genesis 1:2](#) is this: it helps us understand the meaning of the word *tohu*, translated in [Genesis 1:2](#) as “formless,” and here in [Isaiah 45:18](#) as “waste place.” Far from denying that the earth, as God created it on day one, was *tohu*, [Isaiah 45:18](#) tells us that God did not create the earth *to be tohu*, but rather He created it *to be inhabited*. So when Moses wrote in [Genesis 1:2](#) that the earth was *tohu*, he did not mean that it was chaotic, evil, coordinate with sin and judgment, and in need of redemption (contra Allen P. Ross, [The Bible Knowledge Commentary](#), OT Vol., p. 28). He merely meant that it was not yet a suitable environment in which humans might live. So an appropriate translation of *tohu* in both [Genesis 1:2](#) and [Isaiah 45:18](#) is *non-functional* or perhaps, *pre-functional*. It was at that point *not suitable* for habitation, which was God’s ultimate purpose for the earth. God would incrementally make the earth suitable for human habitation during the remainder of day one and during the remaining six days of creation.

Number 13 (Isa. 45:19)

Isaiah 45:19 לֹא בִסְתֵר דִּבַּרְתִּי בַּמְקוֹם אֶרֶץ חֹשֶׁךְ לֹא אָמַרְתִּי לְזָרַע יַעֲקֹב
תִּהְיֶה בְקִשְׁוֹנֵי אֲנִי יְהוָה דֹּבֵר צְדָק מִגִּיד מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל:

Isa 45:19 I have not spoken in secret, in a dark place of the earth: I said not unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye me **in vain**: I the LORD speak righteousness, I declare things that are right. (KJV)

¹⁹ “I have not spoken in secret,
In some dark land;
I did not say to the offspring of Jacob,
‘Seek Me in a **waste place**’;
I, the LORD, speak righteousness,
Declaring things that are upright. (NASB)

In the very next verse ([Isa. 45:19](#)), Yahweh applies His purpose in creating the earth – to be inhabited ([Isa. 45:18](#)) – to the nation of [Israel](#). Unlike the obscure and secret communications of the priests of false gods, Yahweh has communicated with the people of [Israel](#) openly and forthrightly things that are true. Yahweh did not ask [Israel](#) to seek Him in *tohu*, that is, *in a meaningless, non-productive exercise in futility*. No, when Jacob’s descendants worshiped the One True God, they were participating in genuine worship and in a relationship of eternal significance and value, for their worship of Yahweh was based on righteousness and uprightness. (See also Thomas Constable, [Notes on Isaiah](#), 2010 Edition, p. 206.) Here, the translation (of KJV), “*in vain*,” is preferable to (that of NASB), “*a waste place*.”

Number 14 (Isa. 49:4)

וַאֲנִי אֶמְרָתִי לְהִיָּק יִגְעֵתִי לְתַהוֹ וְהִבֵּל כִּתִּי כְלִיָּתִי
אֶכֶן מִשְׁפָּטִי אֶת־יְהוָה וּפְעֻלָּתִי אֶת־אֱלֹהֵי:

Isa 49:4 Then I said, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for **nought**, and in vain: [yet] surely my judgment [is] with the LORD, and my work with my God. (KJV)

⁴ But I said, “I have toiled in vain,
I have spent My strength for **nothing** and vanity;
Yet surely the justice *due* to Me is with the LORD,
And My reward with My God.” (NASB)

[Isaiah 49:4](#). In this particular “[Servant](#)” passage found in the book of Isaiah ([Isa. 49:1-13](#)), there is a double identification of the [Servant](#). Clearly he is identified by name as [Israel](#) ([Isa. 49:3](#)). Yet there are [other factors at work](#) ([Isa. 49:2](#); [Rev. 1:16](#); [19:15, 21](#); [Isa. 49:5-7](#); [49:8-10](#); [Rev. 7:16-17](#)) that identify the [Servant](#) as the [Messiah](#), Jesus, who fully embodies the mission assigned to the nation to reach the nations for God ([Ex. 19:5-6](#)). The [Servant](#), in [Isaiah 49:4](#), makes some conflicting statements. He believes that His labor has been in vain, yet He is confident that Yahweh will yet reward Him. As applied to Jesus, these statements mean that His toil during His earthly ministry presenting Himself as [Messiah](#) brought Him rejection, flogging and crucifixion. Yet God raised Him up, and He has ascended to the right hand of the Father. Yet even so His own people continue to reject Him, and the earth’s nations and rulers plot their revolt against Him ([Psa. 2:1-3](#)). So the [Messiah](#) waits, fulfilling His [Priestly](#) mission ([Psa. 110:1, 4](#)), assured that one day Yahweh will perform justice on His behalf. He will one day receive the nations as His inheritance from Yahweh and rule them with a rod of iron as [King](#) ([Psa. 2:6-9](#); [110:2-3, 5-7](#)). In [Isaiah 49:4](#), the passage in question, Isaiah quotes

the [Servant](#) as saying the following (which I have reproduced literally in the Hebrew word order in my own translation): “But I said, ‘For emptiness (*riya*) I have toiled; to no avail (*tohu*) and [for] vapor (*hebel*) my effort I have exerted. Surely my justice [is] with Yahweh, and my compensation [is] with my God.’” So *tohu* here refers to *non-productivity* or *fruitlessness*. It is a synonym for emptiness and vapor. The [Servant](#) is saddened because all His efforts appear to have resulted in little or no gain in relation to His appointed office as [King](#) of [Israel](#), at least up to this point. In the case of [Israel](#) as the [Servant](#), the nation’s efforts to serve and represent Yahweh have only resulted in centuries of hostility, anti-Semitism, and anti-Zionism from the nations of the world. In the case of Jesus as the [Servant](#), His efforts to present Himself as [Messiah](#), proven by His miraculous signs and advertized by His preaching of the good news of the [Kingdom](#), ended only in His rejection and crucifixion by the nation. Yet in both cases, the [Servant](#) rests Himself on Yahweh’s ultimate triumph and dispensation of justice on behalf of the [Servant](#). He will be vindicated and He will rule the earth from Jerusalem! An appropriate translation of *tohu* in this context is *of no avail*.

Number 15 (Isa. 59:4)

אִין־קָרָא בְצֶדֶק וְאִין נִשְׁפָּט בְּאִמּוּנָה בְטוֹחַ עַל־תְּהוֹ וְדַבֵּר־שׁוֹאִי
 הָרוּ עֵמָל וְהוֹלִיד אָנָּן: Isaiah 59:4

Isa 59:4 None calleth for justice, nor [any] pleadeth for truth: they trust in **vanity**, and speak lies; they conceive mischief, and bring forth iniquity. (KJV)

⁴ No one sues righteously and no one pleads honestly.
 They trust in **confusion** and speak lies;
 They conceive mischief and bring forth iniquity. (NASB)

In [Isaiah 59:1-8](#) the prophet describes the corruption and depravity rampant in Judah. Here is my own literal translation of [Isaiah 59:4](#): “No one calls in righteousness, and no one is judged in fidelity. They trust in *obfuscation* (*tohu*) and speak emptiness. They conceive trouble and give birth to wickedness.” This sounds like a modern court of law in which corrupt plaintiffs, aided by corrupt lawyers, and abetted by corrupt judges or juries, defy the original intent of the law and the clear facts of the case to achieve a pre-determined monetary settlement based on greed or a civil result based on racism or immorality or atheism. Here the word *tohu* refers to the deliberate distortion of truth to circumvent justice. *Obfuscation* is an appropriate translation here.

Number 16 (Jer. 4:23)

רָאִיתִי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְהִנֵּה־תְהוֹ וְנִבְתָּה וְאֶל־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאִין אֹרָם: Jer 4:23

Jer 4:23 I beheld the earth, and, lo, [it was] **without form**, and **void**; and the heavens, and they [had] no light. (KJV)

²³ I looked on the earth, and behold, *it was formless* and *void*;
And to the heavens, and they had no light. (NASB)

[Jeremiah 4:23](#). Jeremiah was predicting that judgment from Babylon was coming upon Judah. The judgment was so severe that the entire land of Israel would be devastated. Yet aspects of the language, especially in [Jeremiah 4:23-28](#), are so severe and far-reaching that this prophecy goes beyond predicting judgment merely upon Israel. It also looks at a much more distant time when God would pour out cosmic judgment on the entire earth. We know this time of unprecedented trouble as the [Tribulation](#). In either case, the result would be that both the land of Judah, and later the whole earth, would be both *devastated*, thus *non-functional* (*tohu*) and, in many places *empty of people* (*bohu*) (the Book of Revelation predicts that upwards of one half of the earth's population will be destroyed – see, for example, [Rev. 6:7-8; 9:15](#)). So Jeremiah compared the *non-functionality* and *emptiness* of the earth in his day and the distant future ([Jer. 4:23](#)) with the *non-functionality* and *emptiness* of the earth on day one of creation ([Gen. 1:2](#)).

Number 17 (Psa. 107:40)

שִׁפְךָ בּוֹז עַל־נְדִיבִים וַיִּתְעַם בְּתוֹרוֹ לֹא־דָרָךְ׃ Psalms 107:40

Ps 107:40 He poureth contempt upon princes, and causeth them to wander *in the wilderness*, [where there is] no way. (KJV)

⁴⁰ He pours contempt upon princes
And makes them wander *in a* pathless *waste*. (NASB)

[Psalm 107](#) is a call to the redeemed of the LORD to thank Yahweh for His goodness ([Ps. 107:1-2](#)). The redeemed are identified as those whom Yahweh has redeemed from their adversary and gathered from the lands – from the east, west, north, and south ([Ps. 107:2-3](#)). Though the people of Israel are never mentioned by name, they have to be in the Psalmist's thinking. On the other hand this psalm is broad in its scope, addressing the "sons of men" ([Ps. 107:8, 15, 21, 31](#)). The author of [Psalm 107](#) appears, in the first part of [verse 40](#), to be quoting from [Job 12:21a](#), and in the second part, from [Job 12:24b](#). In [Psalm 107:39-43](#) the worshipers are urged to thank Yahweh for delivering the conquered needy. When the conquered are "diminished and bowed down through oppression, misery and sorrow" ([Ps. 107:39](#)), Yahweh delivers them by pouring "contempt" on the "princes" who subjugate them. In poetic justice, Yahweh avenges these princes' ill-treatment of their captives by causing them to wander in a *tohu* (waste, NASB; wilderness KJV) ([Ps. 107:40](#)). There is here, in the word *tohu*, a reference to *futility* and *meaninglessness*, for the judged princes wander in a wilderness that has no way (KJV) or in a waste that is pathless (NASB). Meanwhile, Yahweh delivers the needy, afflicted ones ([Ps. 107:41](#)). So *tohu* here refers to a *desert* or *wilderness* with overtones of *futility* and *meaninglessness*. (For an overview of Psalm 107 see the author's [Expanded Analysis of Psalm 107](#).)

Number 18 (Job 6:18)

יִלְפְּתוּ אֲרֻחֹת פְּרָכָם יַעֲלוּ בְּתוֹהוּ וַיִּאֲבְדוּ: Job 6:18

Job 6:18 The paths of their way are turned aside; they go **to nothing**, and perish. (KJV)

¹⁸ “The paths of their course wind along,
They go up **into nothing** and perish. (NASB)

In [Job 6:14-30](#), Job reprimands his three friends for their unsympathetic and erroneous response. They should have been kind to him so that he would not lose his faith in God ([Job 6:14](#)). Instead, their help had evaporated like the torrents of wadis in the desert ([Job 6:15-18](#)). (A wadi is a stream bed or river bed that only has water when there is sufficient rain or when there is snow-melt in the spring. Most of the year the wadi is dry.) In the spring, melting snow from higher elevations produces rushing water in these stream and river beds. But when the hot summer sun comes, these torrents vanish. “The paths of their course wind along, they go up into nothing (*tohu*) and perish” ([Job 16:18](#)). Here Job speaks of the help his friends should have given him. Looking for their help is like travelers who looked for life-giving water from the wadis, but found nothing ([Job 6:19-20](#)). As the hot summer sun comes out, the torrents in the wadis “go up” (evaporate) “into nothing” (*tohu*) – into “thin air,” as we would say. So *tohu* here refers to the nothingness of air into which the waters of the torrents have evaporated under the searing sun. So *tohu* here means *nothingness* with overtones of *futility* and *meaninglessness*, because the travelers had hoped to find water, but their efforts went unrewarded. (See a satellite image of [Wadi El Arish](#).)

Number 19 (Job 12:24)

מִסִּיר לֵב רֹאשֵׁי עַם־הָאָרֶץ וַיִּתְּעֵם בְּתוֹהוּ לֹא־דָרֶךְ: Job 12:24

Job 12:24 He taketh away the heart of the chief of the people of the earth, and causeth them to wander in a **wilderness** [where there is] no way. (KJV)

²⁴ “He deprives of intelligence the chiefs of the earth’s people
And makes them wander in a **pathless waste**. (NASB)

In [Job 12-14](#), Job responds to the speech of Zophar. He replies to Zophar ([Job 12:1-13:19](#)) and then appeals to God ([Job 13:20-14:22](#)). In [Job 12:7-25](#) Job concedes **God’s sovereignty**. For example, God is the controller of nations ([Job 12:23-25](#)). He enlarges and destroys nations ([Job 12:23](#)) and He deludes national leaders ([Job 12:24-25](#)): “He deprives of intelligence the chiefs of the earth’s people and makes them wander in a pathless waste” (*tohu*) ([Job 12:24](#)). “They grope in darkness with no light, and He makes them stagger like a drunken man” ([Job 12:25](#)). This appears to be a figurative use of *tohu*. National leaders do not wander through a trackless desert literally, but metaphorically. In other words, God brings problematic situations into their reigns or administrations which they are helpless to solve. They endeavor to find solutions to these problems, but find none. They are like a ship lost at sea at night with no engine,

no power, no instruments, no light, and a clouded sky. So [tohu](#) here refers to a metaphorical *wilderness* with overtones of *futility* and *helplessness*. (For an overview of this portion of Job, see the author's [Analysis of Job](#), pp. 25-26.)

Number 20 (Job 26:7)

נִטָּה זָפוֹן עַל-תְּהוֹ תִלְתָּה אֲרֵץ עַל-בְּלִי-מָה׃ Job 26:7

Job 26:7 He stretcheth out the north over the **empty place**, [and] hangeth the earth upon nothing. (KJV)

⁷ “He stretches out the north over **empty space** and hangs the earth on nothing. (NASB)

[Job 26:7](#). Job must have been thinking not merely of the direction north, but of the vast northern reaches of the North Star, up and out in what we would call outer space. North here is the center around which the constellations at night appear to revolve as our earth rotates. Job asserts that God stretches out the north over empty space ([tohu](#)). This is an amazingly accurate statement even by today’s scientific terminology. Here is yet another instance in which [tohu](#) does not refer to anything chaotic, but rather to that which is unformed and not useful for man’s purposes. NASB here appropriately translates [tohu](#) as “empty space.”

Conclusion

[Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon](#) lists the following meanings of the noun, tohu: “formlessness, confusion, unreality, emptiness”. Then it adds, (“primary meaning difficult to seize” ...). This is certainly true, as is evidenced by the chart, [Representative Translations of the Hebrew Word Tohu](#). Most Bible versions employ a variation of the word “form,” translating [tohu](#) either “formless” or “without form.” The translations “formless” and “without form” tend to leave the impression that the earth in Genesis 1:2 was shapeless. I do not believe that is what Moses meant. Instead, I have chosen the word “unformed” and I have added four qualifying statements as to what “unformed” *does not mean* and what it *does mean*.

1. **Unformed** *does not mean* that the earth on Day One **had no shape** (contra [NIRV](#), “The earth didn’t have any shape”). Think it through. Why are the vast majority of entities in our universe, whether they are stars or planets or moons, spherical? It is because they all have gravity. If something were both aqueous ([Gen. 1:2, 9](#)) and shapeless, it must also mean that it was not spherical. If it were not spherical, it must mean that it had insufficient gravity to keep it together. So to say that the earth was shapeless is also to say that it had no gravity or insufficient gravity. What then would have prevented the earth from beginning to disperse throughout the universe?

2. **Unformed** *does not mean* that the earth on Day One was **chaotic** (contra Allen P. Ross, Genesis, [The Bible Knowledge Commentary](#), OT Vol., p. 28; contra Thomas Constable, [Notes on Genesis](#), 2010 Edition, pp. 13-14; contra Bruce K. Waltke, [Creation and Chaos](#); contra Waltke, [An Old Testament Theology](#), p. 181, quoted by [Constable](#), p. 10, text denoted by footnote 28). God does not create chaos because He is not chaotic. The world God created on Day One was preliminary, not chaotic. It was “a waste” (see the NASB marginal reading for formless in [Genesis 1:2](#)) in the sense that it was not a suitable environment for man or animals to live in, but it was not a chaos.

 3. **Unformed** *does not mean* that the earth as God originally created it had been **disrupted by some sin**, whether by man or by fallen angel (Satan) (contra Allen P. Ross, [The Bible Knowledge Commentary](#), p. 28. Ross apparently believes that the fall of Satan ruined the earth, causing sin to enter the earth, making it a chaos which had to be transformed and redeemed by God in the six days of creation). The Scriptures are clear that sin entered the earth *after* the creation week, not *before* it ([Gen. 3](#)) and that it was by one *man* that sin entered the earth, not by one *fallen angel* ([Rom. 5:12](#)).

 4. **Unformed** *does mean* that **the earth was not yet in its final form**. The best Biblical commentary on *tohu* in [Genesis 1:2](#) is to be found in [Isaiah 45:18](#), which tells us that God did not create the earth *to be tohu*, but rather He created it *to be inhabited*. So when Moses wrote in [Genesis 1:2](#) that the earth was *tohu*, he merely meant that it was not yet a suitable environment in which humans and animals might live. It was unsuitable because it was dark and aqueous ([Gen. 1:2, 3-4](#)), because there was no atmosphere ([Gen. 1:6-7](#)), because there was no dry land ([Gen. 1:9-10](#)), because there was no vegetation ([Gen. 1:11-12](#)), and because there were no celestial bodies up in the heavens ([Gen. 1:14-18](#)). In fact, there is a sense in which it can be said that the words “unsuitable” or “pre-functional” are appropriate translations of *tohu* in [Genesis 1:2](#). By way of illustration, it could be said that today’s moon is *tohu*, although not nearly to the degree that the earth was in [Genesis 1:2](#). Today’s moon is *tohu* in the sense that it is not formed to be suitable for human or animal habitation or for the growth of vegetation. This is true because it has no atmosphere and no water, and because of the [extreme variations in temperature](#).
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Bohu

922 בוהו bohu (96a); from an unused word; *emptiness*:—emptiness (1), void (2). (This definition is from the New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance as found in [Quickverse](#) 2008.)

בוהו n.[m.] **emptiness**, alw. c. תְּהוֹ q.v.; שׁוֹבְהוֹ of primaeval earth; of earth under judgment of 'י ; קוֹרְתְּהוֹ וְאַבְנֵי שְׁבָהוֹ; *the line of wasteness and the stones of emptiness*, i.e. plummets, employed, not as usual for building, but for destroying walls; v. sub אֲבָן 6. (This definition is from *Brown Driver Briggs Lexicon* as found in [Bibloi 8.0](#), adapted from [Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon](#).)

There are three instances of *bohu* found in the Hebrew text. Every time *bohu* appears, *tohu* also appears in the same verse. Obviously, the two are linked. In the following representations, the Hebrew text and English translations for *bohu* are marked in cyanide, while the Hebrew text and English translations for *tohu* are marked in yellow. I have given four representative translations of each of these verses.

Number 1. Genesis 1:2

וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תְּהוֹ וְבוֹהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם: Gen 1:2

Ge 1:2 And the earth was **without form**, **and void**; and darkness [was] upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. (KJV)

²The earth was **formless and void**, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. Genesis 1:2 (NASB)

² Now the earth was **formless and empty**, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (NIV)

²The earth was **without form and void**, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. (ESV)

Number 2. Isaiah 34:11

וַיִּרְשׁוּהָ קִאֲצֵת וְקַפּוּד וַיִּנְשׂוּף וְעֵרֶב יִשְׁכְּנוּ־בָהּ וְנָטָה עָלֶיהָ: קוֹרְתְּהוֹ וְאַבְנֵי־בְהוֹ: Isaiah 34:11

Isa 34:11 But the cormorant and the bittern shall possess it; the owl also and the raven shall dwell in it: and he shall stretch out upon it the line of **confusion**, and the stones of **emptiness**. (KJV)

¹¹ But pelican and hedgehog will possess it,
And owl and raven will dwell in it;
And He will stretch over it the line of **desolation**
And the plumb line of **emptiness**. (NASB)

¹¹ The desert owl and screech owl will possess it;
the great owl and the raven will nest there.
God will stretch out over Edom
the measuring line of **chaos**
and the plumb line of **desolation**. (NIV)

¹¹ But the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it,
the owl and the raven shall dwell in it.
He shall stretch the line of **confusion** over it,
and the plumb line of **emptiness**. (ESV)

Number 3. Jeremiah 4:23.

Jer 4:23 רָאִיתִי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְהִנֵּה־תִהְיֶה נִבְהָה וְאֶל־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵין אֹרָחַם :

Jer 4:23 I beheld the earth, and, lo, [it was] **without form**, **and void**; and the heavens, and they [had] no light. (KJV)

²³ I looked on the earth, and behold, *it was* **formless** **and void**; And to the heavens, and they had no light. Jeremiah 4:23 (NASB)

²³ I looked at the earth,
and it was **formless** **and empty**;
and at the heavens,
and their light was gone. (NIV)

²³ I looked on the earth, and behold, it was **without form** **and void**; and to the heavens, and they had no light. (ESV)

Conclusion

The term [*bohu*](#) occurs only three times in Scripture, [Gen. 1:2](#); [Isa. 34:11](#); [Jer. 4:23](#). Each time it does so, it is in tandem with [*tohu*](#). The Jeremiah passage harkens back to the language of creation in [Genesis 1:2](#). [Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon](#) lists a one-word definition for [*bohu*](#) – “emptiness,” and gives no etymology. C. F. Keil ([Keil and Delitzsch](#)), in his commentary on [Genesis 1:2](#), states that the etymology for both [*tohu*](#) and [*bohu*](#) has been lost. Four representative translations (http://wordexplain.com/Translations_of_tohu_and_bohu.html) translate [*bohu*](#) as “void” six times, and as some variation of “empty” or “emptiness” five times.

In the English language today, “empty” is a synonym for “void.” Since “void” with the meaning of “emptiness” is not a commonly used word, I will use the noun “emptiness” to translate the noun [*bohu*](#).

Conclusion in regard to the dual use of *tohu* and *bohu*

We have already noted that *tohu* and *bohu* always appear in the same connection. In two of those instances, [Genesis 1:2](#) and [Jeremiah 4:23](#), are to be paired off. In [Genesis 1:2](#) Moses declared that the earth was “formless and void” ([*tohu*](#) and [*bohu*](#)); Jeremiah stated that, as he looked at the earth, it had primeval conditions – the earth was “formless and void,” and the heavens “had no light” ([Jer. 4:23](#)).

Some have viewed [*tohu*](#) and [*bohu*](#), connected by “and,” as a [hendiadys](#), “the expression of an idea by the use of usually two independent words [connected](#) by *and* (as *nice and warm*) instead of the usual combination of independent word and its modifier (as *nicely warm*).” Constable, in his discussion of [Genesis 1:2](#) ([Notes on Genesis](#), 2010 edition, p. 11) states, “Here we learn that the earth was ‘formless and empty’ (a hendiadys meaning unorganized, unproductive, and uninhabited) before God graciously prepared it for human habitation (cf. [Jer. 4:23-27](#)).”

Whether or not [*tohu*](#) and [*bohu*](#) form a hendiadys, Constable has accurately captured their combined meaning as it relates especially to [Genesis 1:2](#). The earth at this stage of Day One of the Creation week was unorganized and unproductive ([*tohu*](#)) and it was uninhabited ([*bohu*](#)).

So together, [*tohu*](#) and [*bohu*](#) are saying that the earth, at the time God first placed it in the heavens He had just made consisted, literally, of “unformedness and emptiness.” Or we could say it was “unformed and unfilled.” Or we could say it was “unorganized and empty.”

A Word Study of Tohu wa Bohu

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