

# A STUDY ON THE DUAL FORM OF *MAYIM*, WATER\*

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In biblical Hebrew, a pair of an object is spelled with the distinctive dual form, taking a particular ending (-*ayim*). For example, a pair of eyes is spelled *einayim* and a pair of hands *yadayim*. On the other hand, there are some words spelled in the dual form that are hard to understand as a pair, such as *mayim* (water), *shamayim* (sky, heaven), *Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem), and *Mitzrayim* (Egypt). In general, books on grammar do not explain that these words mean an actual pair or have their origin as a pair. However, I would now like to suggest that the spelling of *mayim* (water), in particular, is closely associated with its original meaning as a pair. To support this argument, the Creation story in the Bible together with that in *Enuma Elish* will be examined.

Not every word in the dual form has the meaning of a pair. For example, many place names take the dual form, although they do not have a dual meaning. The best examples are *Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem) and *Mitzrayim* (Egypt). When we note that *Yerushalam* in the Masoretic text is read as *Yerushalayim* (e.g., I Kgs. 12:18), that "Samaria" is spelled *Shamrayin* in Aramaic but called *Shomron* in Hebrew, and that *Mitzrayim* is *Mtzrm* in Phoenician, we may conclude that these place names do not actually denote a pair: they are simply transliterations from foreign languages.<sup>1</sup> By and large, *mayim* and *shamayim* are explained in a similar way, although they are never used as place names and are always presented with a distinctive clarification. Another popular explanation has it that *mayim* and *shamayim* are examples of the so-called "local extension plural" with a masculine plural ending. This plural is specifically employed to indicate abundance, plurality or locality of a singular noun (e.g., *meromim* in Isa. 33:16). Based on this, *mayim* and *shamayim* mean water and sky abundantly extended in a certain place. Gesenius's grammar offers good examples of such usage, but as an explanation for *mayim* and *shamayim* it is dubious.<sup>2</sup> The examples of local extension plurals given by Gesenius are all standard nouns with regular plural endings, such as the masculine *-im* and the feminine *-ot* ending. However, it should be noted

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that *mayim* and *shamayim* do not occur in the singular, as there is no evidence what-soever of *mai* and *shamai* singular forms.<sup>3</sup>

One rarely finds it claimed that the dual form of *mayim* has something to do with that word possessing an indigenous dual meaning.<sup>4</sup> Given that the two words have clear dual-sounding pronunciations and dual-form spellings, they may well have been *received* as dual in their actual linguistic practices. The established form of words does not occur regardless of their practical use in real communications, verbal or written. These dual forms were what ancient people used in their daily life when referring to water and the sky. They understood water or sky to be a duality.

#### THE DUALITY OF WATER IMPLIED IN THE CREATION STORY OF GENESIS

*Tehom* in the creation story of Genesis 1 is generally taken to be the watery "deep":<sup>5</sup> *Now the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep (tehom); and the spirit (or a wind) of God hovered over the face of the waters* (Gen. 1:2).

In the design of "chaos-order", widely attested in many creation stories of ancient Western Asia,<sup>6</sup> the above passage duly portrays a state of chaos. Chaos is thus expected to be followed by "order", which is realized in "creation", as narrated in Genesis 1. The chaos is very much associated with "water", and it represents the fear and anarchy featured in the region's many myths. The subsequent passage (verses 3-5) tells how light and darkness were made on the first day of creation, while verse 6 mentions water once again: *And God said: 'Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters.'*

Thereafter, in verses 7-8, the waters were split into the waters above and below the expanse (*raki'a*); later, on the second day, the expanse separating the waters came to be called *shamayim* (sky). In verses 9-10 the water below the sky was rearranged to form sea and dry land, "the earth." Through these passages we may rightly visualize water and soil all mixed up before Creation. Set in the design of "chaos-order", the muddy space was subsequently divided to expose a new substance, the earth, on which the terrestrial creatures might live.

Nations of antiquity regarded the expanse called *shamayim* (sky) as a kind of dome supporting the water above so that it would not leak and collapse. That is why some passages in the Bible variously describe the expanse as *the pillars of*

*heaven* (Job 26:11) and *the foundations of heaven* (II Sam. 22:8). It seems probable that the dome was also understood to be hard and transparent, like a sheet of glass or a space packed with air. Ancient folk might therefore have believed that the dome was pushing hard against the water above and the water below, which once formed a single body but were now split as a "pair".<sup>7</sup>

The primitive concept of water as a pair is well illustrated in the literary structure of Genesis 1, where the Seven Days of Creation narrative follows a well-known parallel arrangement:<sup>8</sup>

Creation of the substances			Creatures on the substances		
A.	Day 1	Light	A'.	Day 4	Luminaries
B.	Day 2	Expanse	B'.	Day 5	Birds and Fish
C.	Day 3	Earth	C'.	Day 6	Animals and Men
D.	Day 7	Rest			

A comparison of the column on the left with the one on the right (A-A', B-B', C-C') shows the imagination of ancient people embedded in the record of the Creation story. It is particularly interesting to note how the "expanse" in B corresponds to the "birds and fish" in B'. Ancient people might well have seen a correspondence between the birds above and the fish below, since both were living in the same substance, water, though divided in two by the expanse. The birds were visualized "swimming" with their wings in the water above, just as the fish swam below in the sea. For the ancients, the sky's color was blue like that of ocean, because the water above was seen through the expanse. Hence, Ezekiel 1:26 describes the color of the expanse, when looked upon, as that of sapphire. And since there is water above the sky, some passages in the Bible declare that the water above may rain down or pour out in a deluge when the window in heaven is opened: *all the fountains of the great deep [were] broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened* (Gen. 7:11; see also Gen. 8:2 and Isa. 24:18).

Describing what happened on the very first day of the Flood, the passage quoted above tells of the windows in heaven opening and releasing water from above, which also bursts forth below when the fountains of the deep break apart. Clearly, the waters above and below the expanse are juxtaposed as a pair.<sup>9</sup> This is also illustrated in Proverbs 8:27-28:<sup>10</sup> *When He established the heavens, I was there; when He set a circle upon the face of the deep, When He*

*made firm the skies above, when the fountains of the deep showed their might.*

In conclusion, the literary evidence so far demonstrates that the waters above and below were understood as a pair that was originally one body but separated later into two.

#### THE DUALITY OF WATER IMPLIED IN THE CREATION STORY OF ENUMA ELISH

*Enuma Elish*, the most complete creation story we have from ancient Mesopotamia, tells how Marduk defeated Tiamat, the goddess of sea, and made the sky out of her corpse. Interestingly, it is said that Marduk clove the body of Tiamat in two: "He split her like a shellfish<sup>11</sup> into two parts; Half of her he set up and made the sky as a covering" (Tab IV 137-8); ". . . and he stationed watchmen; He ordered them not to let her waters escape" (Tab IV 139-140).

We see here that the sky, made from half of Tiamat's body, is water, since water is the very substance of Tiamat, goddess of the sea. This idea parallels Genesis 1, where water is placed above the expanse.<sup>12</sup> It is noteworthy that the water in the sky, half of her body, must be guarded to prevent a leakage. For the ancients, water leaking from heaven was the explanation for rain falling from above.<sup>13</sup> They may have supposed that mismanagement of the sky could bring about a leakage of water; and that this would result in a terrible, chaotic flood, probably with the fountains of the deep bursting forth, as in Genesis 7:11 (quoted above). They feared the revival of Tiamat, goddess of the sea and the emblem of chaos, since a coalescence of the waters above and below would reunite the two halves of her body.

*Enuma Elish* parallels Genesis 1, since both describe the waters/Tiamat's substance being split in two and placed above and below the expanse as a pair. Some argue, in fact, that the name "Tiamat" is linguistically associated with *tehom* in Genesis 1:2.<sup>14</sup> This shows that in ancient times it was customary for people living in Mesopotamia to view water and the sky as dualities. It is worth noting that Samuel David Luzzato (Shadal), in his commentary to Gen. 1:6, explains that the Bible uses the term *rak'ia*, "based on the belief in higher waters" that was widespread in antiquity, even though in later times the belief in a *rak'ia* separating the lower and higher waters became "obsolete and forgotten" and "the term *raki'a* itself became obsolete."<sup>15</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In ancient Israelite verbal and written communications *mayim* (water) must clearly have been pronounced and written as "dual"; and this practice would have been closely associated with a belief that the waters were divided in two as a pair. This idea was popularly circulated in the cosmologies of both the Israelites and their neighbors.

The word *shamayim* (sky, heaven), which is closely associated with water in the cosmologies and takes the same intriguing dual ending, could be explained in the same manner. A point of interest here is that fact that the words denoting "sky" in the Semitic languages are all spelled by prefixing *s/sh* to the words meaning "water" in general.<sup>16</sup> Simply understood, for example, *shamayim* in Hebrew or Aramaic and *šamū* in Akkadian could be seen as a term combining "of/one of which" (*ša*) and "waters" (*mayim/mū*). One might therefore assume that the sky was "one of the waters/of the waters." Or, as Gerardo Sachs maintains, since the Hebrew letter *shin* "placed before a three-letter root extends the underlying idea to the utmost", *sha-mayim* is the superlative of *mayim*, which suggests that there was water above the sky.<sup>17</sup> This kind of idea, though proposed by some, is usually rejected. J.A. Soggin criticizes such a notion as a conceit of popular etymology that takes advantage of the assonance of the words.<sup>18</sup> However, I would contend that popular etymology is in fact a sensible way to figure out the development of a word circulated, verbally or literally, among primitive peoples. As for those fundamental terms, water and sky, their development could have been fostered by the utterly practical linguistic exercises of the common people in their understanding of a word's form, whatever the rules of grammar might say. A prime example discussed here is *mayim* (water), which ancient folk clearly perceived and articulated as a pair.

## NOTES

\* The main idea presented here is drawn, and thoroughly revised, from my Korean-language article in *Bogeuim Gwa Silcheon* 42 (2008) pp. 41-62, published by Korea Baptist Theological University Press.

1. GKC § 88 c. (GKC here and in the following stands for *Gesenius Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch, trans. A.E. Cowley, New York: Dover, 2006). It also says that the place-names in the dual form with no actual dual meaning seem to have their original ending *-an* or *-am* altered or expanded. See also P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1996) § 91. The duality of Yerushalayim was discussed by Josiah Derby, "From Yerushalem to Yerushalayim", *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 25:4 (1997) p. 241, and by Shubert Spero

in a letter to the editor, *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 26:2 (1998) p. 131.

2. GKC § 124b.

3. In contrast, GKC § 88 d insecurely supposes that *mayim* and *shamayim* derive from their primitive singulars.

4. Cf. H.-J. Fabry, "*mayim*", *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament VIII* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004) p. 266; P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1996) § 91f; and E. Hostetter, *An Elementary Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) p. 42: "*mayim* 'water' and *shamayim* 'sky' are not duals but abnormal plurals."

5. C. Westermann, "*tehom*", *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament II* (München: Kaiser) pp. 1027-1030.

6. Specifically, see *Enuma Elish* Tab VI, Creation of Man by the Mother Goddess, and Myth of Zu from Mesopotamia; the Egyptian story of Astarte and the Tribute of the Sea; and some Hittite myths concerning Ullikummiss, Illuyanka, and Kingship in Heaven; which are all rendered in ANET, pp. 17-18, 68-70, 99-100, 120-125 and CoS I, pp. 150-151 (ANET stands for J.B. Pritchard ed., *The Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, Princeton: Princeton University, 1969; and CoS, W.W. Hallo ed., *The Context of Scripture*, Leiden: Brill, 1997-2002, here and in the following). See also Ugaritic Baal Cycle, and Shachar and Shalim (KTU 1:1-1:6; 1:23) (KTU stands for M. Dietrich, O. Loretz and J. Sanmartín, *Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit*; Kevelaer: Verlag Butzon & Bercker, 1976). As for the Hebrew tradition, see the Lord's victory over the chaotic sea or dragon illuminated in Isa. 27:1, 51:9; Ezek. 29:3-4, 32:2-8; Ps. 74:13-14; Job. 7:12, 26:12-13, and 40:25-26. Among the apocalyptic writings, see particularly 1 Enoch 10; 55; 21; Revelation 12:7-9 and 20:1-10.

7. G. Sachs, "Why Shamayim As Sky", *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* 34:2 (2006) p. 130, presents the same argument.

8. Cf. N. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 4; U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1989) p. 17.

9. H-G. von Mutius, "Neues zur Textkritik von Genesis 6:17 und 7:6 aus judaistischer Sicht", *Biblische Notizen* 104 (2000) pp. 38-41, suggests that the "water" in the Deluge of Genesis is a secondary addition to the original story. His argument may stand, yet the idea of the water above the sky still makes sense, as it is well attested in other parts of the Bible.

10. Cf. T. Gaster, "Heaven", *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible II* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962) p. 552.

11. Although *nu-nu maš-di-e* is variously translated as "shellfish", "fish (for drying)", "flat dish" or "oyster", all of these convey the act of splitting her body into two.

12. The idea of seeing the sky as water is also embedded in the Egyptian word for "sky", *qbhw*, which literally means "cool waters" (CoS I, p. 5, n.2). While the waters fix the limits of the world in the beginning of the Egyptian *Book of Nut*, here the sky is intimately associated with water (CoS I, pp. 5-6). In the Egyptian cosmologies a certain watery mass of darkness existed before the world was formed and they largely parallel the creation stories in Genesis and *Enuma Elish* (cf. CoS I, pp. 6-32).

13. T. Gaster, "Heaven", *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible II* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962) p. 551, with Ugaritic evidence, suggests that "cracking (the sky) for the rain" could be rendered instead of "lightnings" in passages such as Ps. 135:7; Jer. 10:13 and 51:16.

14. Cf. N. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 6; J. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context – A Survey of Parallels between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) pp. 26, 35. While the story lines of the creation stories in *Enuma Elish* and Genesis are not very similar, Walton declares, the closest parallel between them is found when the water is split in two.

15. Daniel A. Klein, trans., *The Book of Genesis: A Commentary by Shadal* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1998).

16. Cf. P. Bennett, *Comparative Semitic Linguistics – A Manual* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1998) pp. 140-141, 150, 152, 159-160, 183, 187, 244-5, 229-231, 246-7; G. Bergsträsser, *Introduction to the Semitic Languages – Text Specimens and Grammatical Sketches* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1977) pp. 209, 214-225.

17. G. Sachs, "Why Shamayim As Sky", *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* 34:2 (2006) p. 130. Giving other instances, Sachs claims that *gush* (grouping) becomes *shagosh* with the prefix *shin* and means "agitator", *ger* (stranger) becomes *shager* and means "to send", and *abad* (work) becomes *shib'ud* and means "heavy labor or slavery."

18. J. Soggin, "shamayim", *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament II* (München: Kaiser) p. 966. Cf. *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament IV* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994) p. 1559.



## עשה תורתך קבע

### THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

July	Isaiah	43 – 66
	Jeremiah	1 – 4
August	Jeremiah	5 – 32
September	Jeremiah	33 – 52
	Ezekiel	1 – 8
October	Ezekiel	9 – 36
November	Ezekiel	37 – 48
	Hosea	1 – 14
	Joel	1 – 2
December	Joel	3 – 4
	Amos	1 – 9
	Obadiah	1
	Jonah	1 – 3
	Micah	1 – 7
Nahum	1 – 3	

Habakkuk

1 – 3

