

WHAT WAS THE “FIRMAMENT” OF GENESIS 1?

Bert Thompson, Ph.D.

Early in Genesis, the text mentions that God made “the firmament” (1:6-8). What was the “firmament”? I have heard it said by Bible critics that the Hebrews believed there was some kind of solid “dome” or “vault” above the sky. Does the Bible teach such erroneous concepts?

Several words within the Genesis creation narrative have caused considerable controversy through the years. On the one hand, unbelievers have suggested that Moses’ writings are flavored with terms that document beyond reasonable doubt the Hebrews’ dependence upon, and belief in, “pre-scientific” (read that as “unscientific”) concepts. On the other hand, liberal theologians have argued that Moses instilled into the Genesis record ancient, mythological teachings and ideas whose presence militates against the possibility of Genesis being accepted at face value as a literal, historical account of God’s creative activity. One such word is the “firmament” mentioned in Genesis 1: 6ff. Unbelievers have seized upon this singular term in order to depict Genesis as unworthy of acceptance by modern, well-informed, “intelligent” people. For example, the late atheist Isaac Asimov frequently expressed his views on the “scientific absurdity” of the Mosaic record of origins. In volume one (on the Old Testament) of his two-volume set, *Asimov’s Guide to the Bible*, he denied that Moses wrote the Pentateuch and opted instead for the position known in theological circles as the Documentary Hypothesis (often referred to as the Graf-Wellhausen theory), which suggests that editors (called “redactors”—designated individually as J, D, E, and P) produced the Pentateuch. [For an up-to-date explanation and refutation of the various aspects of the Documentary Hypothesis, see McDowell, 1999, pp. 402-477.] Asimov wrote:

The first book was named “Genesis,” which means, literally, “coming into being.” It implies a concern with births and beginnings, which is appropriate for a book that begins with the creation of heaven and earth. By ancient tradition, the first five books of the Bible were written by Moses, the folk hero who, according to the account given in the second through fifth books, rescued the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. Modern scholars are convinced that this theory of authorship is not tenable and that the early books of the Bible are not the single work of any man. Rather, they are the combined and carefully edited version of a number of sources (1968, p. 17).

He repeated, and expanded, this viewpoint in his book, *In the Beginning* (1981, p. 5), and then commented:

First comes the creation of the firmament. The first syllable of the word “firmament” is “firm,” and that gives an accurate idea of what the writers of the P-document had in mind. The firmament is the semi-spherical arc of the sky (it looks flattened on top and rather semi-ellipsoidal, but that is an optical illusion), and it was considered a hard and firm covering of the flat earth. It was considered very much like the lid of a pot and was assumed to be of much the same material as an ordinary lid would be. . . . From the scientific view, however, there is no firmament; no sky to be viewed as a material dome (1981, p. 33, parenthetical comment in orig.).

Robert Schaedewald, an atheistic science writer, not only accused the Bible writers of harboring an incorrect view regarding the firmament, but also of believing in a flat Earth. He phrased his arguments against the Bible as follows.

The ancient Hebrews, like their older and more powerful neighbors . . . were flat-earthers. The Hebrew cosmology is never actually spelled out in the Bible but, even without knowledge of the Babylonian system upon which it is patterned, **it can be read between the lines** of the Old Testament. The Genesis creation story itself suggests the relative size and importance of the earth and the celestial bodies by specifying their order of creation. The earth was created on the first day, and it was “without form and void” (Genesis 1:2). On the second day a vault—the “firmament” of the King James Bible—was created to divide the waters, some above, and some being below the vault. . . .

Other passages complete the picture. God “sits throned on the vaulted roof of earth, whose inhabitants are like grasshoppers” (Isaiah 40: 21-22). He also “walks to and fro on the vault of heaven” (Job 22: 14), which vault is “hard as a mirror of cast metal” (Job 37:18). The

roof of the sky has “windows” (Genesis 7:12) that God can open to let the waters above fall to the surface as rain. The topography . . . isn’t specified, but Daniel “saw a tree of great height at the centre of the earth . . . reaching with its top to the sky and visible to the earth’s farthest bounds” (Daniel 4:10-11). Such visibility would not be possible on a spherical earth, but might be expected if the earth were flat (1983, p. 290, emp. added).

Even prominent Hollywood stars have joined the attack upon Moses and his fellow writers. The late, well-known comedian Steve Allen was a devout humanist who was one of the Bible’s severest critics. Two of his books, *Steve Allen on the Bible, Religion & Morality* (1990) and *More Steve Allen on the Bible, Religion, & Morality* (1993), were frontal assaults upon the Good Book. In both of his tomes, Allen parroted the same hackneyed charges against the Genesis record of creation as his atheistic colleagues. For example, he wrote disapprovingly of “the scientific nonsense with which the first chapters of Genesis abound—as, for example, the view that the firmament is a solid platform in space containing reservoirs of water, the valves of which open to produce rain” (1990, p. 92). He then went on to state: “There can be no serious question, surely, that the original author(s) firmly believed the view of the natural universe just as they explained it” (p. 93).

Modern-day religious liberalism frequently has employed this same type of argument as an indicator of the Bible writers’ alleged “unscientific view” of the Universe. In their withering critique of the biblical doctrine of origins, *Creationism and Evolution*, Murray and Buffaloe suggested:

When consistently applied, the literalist approach to Biblical interpretation leads to a maze of difficulties. One of the best ways to demonstrate this is to examine the “blueprint,” or “model,” of the universe that is found in Genesis 1 and throughout the Bible. This concept of how the universe is built was common to all ancient peoples and was simply taken for granted by the Hebrews, who undoubtedly adopted it from their Middle Eastern cultural environment. In fact, it was the standard way of viewing the universe in Western culture until Copernicus and Galileo challenged it in the 16th century. It is quite clearly outlined in verses 6-10 of Chapter 1. . . .

Here we see plainly set forth the basic structure of the pre-scientific view of the universe: the earth is essentially a flat plain, partly covered by water, and over the earth is a great dome, the sky or “heavens.” The Genesis account explains that there is a vast reservoir of water collected above the dome (“firmament”), which of course is how ancient people accounted for rainfall. This picture of the universe is presupposed throughout the Bible. . . .

The ancient Biblical picture of the world is commonly termed the “three-story” or “three-tiered” view of the universe. . . . According to this model, the universe consists essentially of the sky-dome or “heavens” above; the flat earth stretched out beneath; and the underworld, pictured something like underground caverns. The ancients envisioned this whole world-structure, finally, as floating in a vast ocean. An added touch was that the heavenly bodies—sun, moon, and stars—rolled across the underside of the sky-dome, being attached to it in some fashion (1981, pp. 12-15).

What response should the Bible believer offer to such accusations? Does the Bible imbibe ancient mythological misrepresentations? Is its information on origins “unscientific”? What is the truth of the matter?

The Hebrew *raqia* (the “firmament” of the KJV, ASV, RSV, et al.) means an “expanse” (Davidson, 1963, p. DCXCII; Wilson, n.d., p. 166), or “something stretched, spread or beaten out” (Maunder, 1939, p. 315; Speiser, 1964, p. 6). Keil and Delitzsch offered this definition in their monumental commentary on the Pentateuch: “to stretch, to spread out, then beat or tread out . . . the spreading out of air, which surrounds the earth as an atmosphere” (1980, 1:52). In an article discussing the firmament of Genesis 1:6-8, Gary Workman observed that this word is an “unfortunate translation” because it “not only is inaccurate but also has fostered unjust criticism that the Bible erroneously and naively pic-

tures the sky above the earth as a solid dome" (1991, 11[4]:14). Strictly speaking, of course, "firmament" is not actually a translation of *raqia* at all, but rather, more accurately, a **transliteration** (i.e., the substitution of a letter in one language for the equivalent letter in another language) of an "unfortunate translation." Allow me to explain.

The Septuagint (a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek produced by Jewish scholars in the third century B.C. at the behest of the Egyptian pharaoh, Ptolemy Philadelphus, for inclusion in his world-famous library in Alexandria) translated *raqia* into the Greek as *stereoma*, which connotes a "solid structure" (Arndt and Gingrich, 1967, p. 774). Apparently, the translators of the Septuagint were influenced by the then-popular Egyptian view of cosmology and astronomy [they were, after all, doing their translating in Egypt for an Egyptian pharaoh] that embraced the notion of the heavens being a stone vault. Unfortunately, those Hebrew scholars therefore chose to render *raqia* via the Greek word *stereoma*—in order to suggest a firm, solid structure. The Greek connotation thus influenced Jerome to the extent that, when he produced his Latin Vulgate, he used the word *firmamentum* (meaning a strong or steadfast support—from which the word "firmament" is transliterated) to reflect this pagan concept (McKechinie, 1978, p. 691). In his *Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Old Testament scholar W.E. Vine stressed:

While this English word is derived from the Latin *firmamentum* which signifies firmness or strengthening...the Hebrew word, *raqia*, has no such meaning, but denoted the "expanse," that which was stretched out. Certainly the sky was not regarded as a hard vault in which the heavenly orbs were fixed.... There is therefore nothing in the language of the original to suggest that the writers [of the Old Testament—BT] were influenced by the imaginative ideas of heathen nations (1981, p. 67).

Raqia denotes simply an expanse, not a solid structure (see Harris, et al., 1980, 2:2218). Furthermore, the actual **substance** of the expanse is not inherent in the word. Numbers 16:38 juxtaposes *raqia* and *pahim* (plates), suggesting literally an "expanse of plates." Here, "plates" specifies the actual material involved in the expansion. In Genesis, "heavens," not solid matter, is given as the nature of the expanse (Genesis 1:8, 14, 15, 17, 20). The original context in which *raqia* is used does not imply any kind of solid dome above the Earth. The Bible equates "firmament" with the "heavens" (Psalm 19:1), even using the compound "firmament of heaven" (Genesis 1:14-15, 17). God provided the correct definition on the second day of creation when He "called the firmament Heaven" (Genesis 1:8). It was described further when Isaiah said that the Lord "stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in" (Isaiah 40:22). "Heavens" always is dual in the Hebrew and, in general, refers to the "heights" above the Earth. As such, there are three particular applications of the word in Scripture. There are the atmospheric heavens (Jeremiah 4:25), the sidereal heavens (outer space) where the planetary bodies reside (Isaiah 13:10), and the heaven of God's own dwelling place (Hebrews 9:24). As the context requires, "firmament" may be used in reference to any one of these. Birds are said to fly in "the open firmament of heaven" (the atmospheric heavens, Genesis 1:20). The Sun, Moon, and stars are set in "the firmament of heaven" (the sidereal heavens, Genesis 1:17). And the psalmist spoke of God's "sanctuary" as being "in the firmament" (Psalm 150:1). R.K. Harrison, writing on the word "firmament" in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, observed:

The relationship of the firmament to the concept of heaven can be clarified if the firmament is identified with the troposphere, and then by thinking of the celestial heavens either as a topographic dimension beyond the firmament itself, or as the designated abode of God (1982, 2:307).

The context of Genesis 1:6-8, 14-22 makes it clear that Moses intended his readers to understand *raqia* simply as the sky above the Earth.

When a word has more than one meaning (as firmament obviously does), the context in which the word is used in the passage under consideration is critical to a proper understanding of the meaning of the word. Steve Allen suggested: "There can be no serious question, surely, that the original author(s) firmly believed the view of the natural universe just as they explained it." I could not agree more! The context in which "firmament" is employed explains quite clearly that view. Furthermore, the accusation of Murray and Buffaloe that "this concept of how the universe is built was common to all ancient peoples and was simply taken for granted by the Hebrews, who undoubtedly adopted it from their Middle Eastern cultural environment" is a mere assertion that is without any foundation in fact. William White commented:

Numerous authors have assumed that the use of this term indicated a specific system of cosmology involving a hollow concavity of the celestial sphere. **There is no evidence for this** in the literature of the Near East or in the occurrences of this rare term (1976, 2: 540, emp. added).

And lastly, the suggestion that the Bible writers thought the Earth to be flat hardly deserves comment. Rather than teaching a flat Earth, those writers actually depicted our planet as a circular sphere. Isaiah said, in speaking of God, "It is He who sitteth upon the circle [Hebrew *chuwg*] of the Earth" (40: 22). William Wilson suggested these meanings for the word *chuwg*: "circle, sphere, the arch or vault of the heavens; the circle of the earth, *orbis terrarum*" (n.d., p. 77). All of these renderings share a common thought—that of roundness, not

flatness. The charge that the Bible gives credence to the concept of a flat Earth is baseless, and represents little more than wishful thinking on the part of the Good Book's critics.

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