The Firmament and the Water Above
Part II: The Meaning of "The Water above the Firmament" in Gen 1:6-8

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When one realizes that the historical-grammatical meaning of *raqiaʿ*, "firmament," in Gen 1:7 reflects an ancient rather than a modern concept of the sky,(1) it should come as no surprise that the "water above the firmament" also reflects an ancient rather than a modern concept. There is, however, a slight difference historically between these two concepts. In the ancient world a virtually universal agreement existed among all peoples everywhere that the sky (firmament) was a rock-solid dome over the earth beneath which were the sun, moon, and stars. In the case of the "water above the firmament" that universal agreement did not exist.

The concept of "water above the firmament" appears occasionally in other places besides the ancient Near East, but as described in Genesis it reflects an ancient Near Eastern concept, particularly shaped by a Mesopotamian tradition found in *Enuma Elish*. The historical definition of "the water above the firmament" is, therefore, a veritable sea located above a solid firmament which is in turn located above the sun, moon, and stars. This historical meaning, as we shall see, is also the meaning that Gen 1:6-8 contextually demands. Let us first, however, review the historical background.

Among scientifically naive peoples, who have universally believed in a solid firmament, only a very few seem to have a concept of an ocean or of water being stored in bottles above the firmament.(2) We must beware of arguing from silence, but the vast majority of primitive peoples evidence no belief in a body of water existing above the firmament. Gunkel thought the original primitive idea was that the sky itself was suspended water. He knew primitive peoples think the sky is solid; so, perhaps, he was thinking of water in the form of ice.(3) That idea would fit a biblical passage such as Ezek 1:22. Gunkel cited Rev 4:6. Many primitive peoples, however, think of the sky as an earthen floor for a world above ours. So I think it would be hard to prove that all peoples originally conceived of the sky as being made of water.

Homer and Hesiod, in accordance with Near Eastern beliefs, thought of the earth as floating on and surrounded by an ocean with a solid firmament above. But this ocean is a "River" and no part of it flows above the firmament (*Il.* 18.606-7; *Theog.* 773 ff.).(4) Later Greeks held on to the concept of a solid firmament and to the earth-encircling ocean, but never spoke of water above the firmament. Later Greeks, in fact, scoffed at the Judaeo-Christian belief that there was water above the firmament.

In the ancient Far East, although the Japanese thought of the firmament as solid, they seem to have thought of it in a way similar to the way American Indians conceived it, namely, as an earthen floor for a second universe above this universe. I have seen no evidence that they thought there was an ocean above the firmament.

In ancient Indian thought the universe arose out of water and darkness, and it is regularly described as consisting of earth, atmosphere, and a solid firmament.(5) In spite of this Genesis-like beginning, in the famous Rig Vedic creation hymn 1.32 where the god Indra slays the dragon Vrtra who had enclosed the fertility-giving waters in his body, the slain dragon remains on the ground pierced (vv. 2 and 5), and the rivers of water which flow from him stay on the ground (vv. 8 and 12). There is no mention of water being placed above the firmament. The only similarity to the ancient Near Eastern concept is that the waters were an opposing force which needed to be brought under control. That concept could arise in any geographical setting where water needed to be brought under control for irrigating crops. W. N. Brown for some reason understands the waters to flow from Vrtra into "the atmospheric ocean"; but, even if this interpretation is correct, this ocean is "atmospheric," i.e., clearly under the firmament, not above it.(6)

Still, the concept of water above the firmament is occasionally found elsewhere in the Rig Veda. It is possible that this idea is as original with the Indians as it was with the peoples of the Near East. Given the fact, however, that this concept is "far from universal," Indian scholars tend to believe that the idea of water above the firmament came to India from Babylonia.(7)

In the ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts (ca. 2200 BC) the firmament is separated from the earth and the earth-encircling Ocean, Nun, by Shu, the air god (1778b). The firmament, personified by the goddess Nut, is then supported on the upheld arms of Shu (1101c; 1156c; 2013a; 2091a). There is an Ocean in the sky, Nun, upon which the boats of the Sun and stars sail (318b; 785a; 1486a). But this Ocean is "under the body of Nut" (802b; 1720c; cf. 1517a). Also, unlike Genesis, the heaven to which the dead king ascends is under the body of Nut, not above it (2061b). The dead king's heaven is bounded by the horizon, i.e., within the physical universe enclosed by the firmament (412c).

In the Coffin Texts (ca. 2000-1800 BC) concepts similar to those in the Pyramid Texts continue to be set forth. In CT 682 the idea of PT 1778 is repeated, i.e., the sky was "separated from the earth and the Abyss," but this separation seems to have occurred after the earth has appeared. I understand this both from the words "from the earth," which do not make much sense if the earth has not yet appeared, and from the oft-repeated picture of Shu standing upon the earth as a base while he lifts the sky. Similarly the Egyptian creation concept of a hillock appearing out of the water at the beginning of creation seems to favor this view. So I think the

firmament is lifted up from the earth and the earth-encircling Abyss rather than from the midst of the Abyss as in Gen 1:6.

In CT 76 the dead king, though repeatedly saying he is "in chaos, in the Abyss, in darkness and in gloom," i.e., in the same primeval chaotic Abyss as is found in CT 682 and PT 1778, also repeatedly asks for a ladder so that he can get up to the sky. Consequently I do not think the simple phrase in 682 and 1778 which speaks of separating the sky "from the earth and the Abyss" can be made to prove any more than that the sky was lifted up from the earth and from the Abyss which surrounded and was beneath the earth.

In the description of the Egyptian universe which first Henri Frankfort and then John Wilson give in the book *Before Philosophy*, it is striking that when they list the several places in which the waters of chaos, or Nun, i.e., the Abyss, were thought to exist, they only mention locations surrounding or under the earth. They do not seem to recognize the existence of the waters of chaos even under the sky, much less above the firmament.(8) Erman, also, in his description of the Egyptian universe, recognized that the Egyptians had a concept of water under the sky upon which the sun god sailed; but he never mentioned any concept of water above the firmament.(9)

Nevertheless, in CT 80 the "eight Chaos-gods," one of whom is Nun, are said to "encircle the sky with their arms." This latter expression is rare but seems to mean that Nun was conceived as being in some way above the firmament. Yet, if Nun (chaotic water) was thought to be above the firmament, why does this concept play such a small part in the Egyptian texts that Frankfort, Wilson, and Erman never even acknowledge it? I think the reason is that unlike the water surrounding the earth or even the water in the sky under the firmament, the water above the firmament was thought by the Egyptians to lie outside of the ordered, natural universe. Thus Morenz speaks of the Egyptians, as opposed to the Babylonians, having a concept of creation wherein there was a "continuation of chaos around the orderly realms of creation."(10) Hornung, similarly, points to an Egyptian picture of a snake biting its own tail as a representation of "the regenerating nonexistence [i.e., Nun] that encircles the world."(11)

Hornung goes on to point out how the nonexistent was thought to penetrate the universe, but even then he concludes that in Egypt the nonexistent signified that which was undifferentiated, i.e., "the entirety of what is possible," while the existent is "articulated by boundaries and discriminations."(12)

We have then in the Egyptian writings a concept of water above the firmament which is materially similar to that in Gen 1:6-8, but theologically very different. In both cases the chaotic waters above the firmament are excluded from the normal everyday universe. As Steck pointed out, by not naming the waters above the firmament as he named the waters below (Gen 1:9-10)

God signified that He had excluded them from the world made for man. They were pent up (*zuräckgedämmte*) behind the firmament as behind a dam (*vertikaler Wassertrennung*), and they only entered this world one time: at the time of Noah's flood—something God promised never to do again.(13) (This may explain why these waters are never mentioned again in the OT except in Ps 148:4, which is simply a reference back to Gen 1:7, albeit they are alluded to occasionally with reference to God's domain, e.g., in Ps 104:3.)

However, even though the chaotic waters of creation are described in Egyptian writings as being very similar materially to the chaotic waters in Genesis, in Egypt they are never demythologized or brought under control.(14) In Egyptian thought they are left as a magico-mythical, undifferentiated chaos, outside of the ordered and bounded universe. In Gen 1:7, though, "the waters above" are completely demythologized and God's very act of "separating" them from the waters below is an act of imposing order upon them.(15) The biblical account demythologizes the Egyptian concept and in the process sets forth the God of the Hebrews as sovereign Lord over all creation including the primeval chaotic waters which Egyptian theology could never bring under control.

In Sumerian thought, according to S. N. Kramer, the heaven and earth were surrounded on all sides by "the boundless sea."(16) Unfortunately he does not document this description. It seems to be drawn simply from a text wherein the goddess Nammu, written with an ideogram for "sea," is described as "the mother, who gave birth to heaven and earth."(17) In other Sumerian myths broadly known as "the organization of the universe and of the earth," texts speak of water for the rivers and rain from the clouds, but no text mentions water above the firmament. We would conclude, therefore, that quite possibly the Sumerians did believe in water above the firmament, but we cannot compare this concept to the biblical concept until a further description of the Sumerian concept is given.

This brings us to *Enuma Elish*, the so-called Babylonian Creation Epic. A few scholars deny that any relationship exists between Genesis and *Enuma Elish*.(18) The majority of scholars, however, both liberal and conservative, are convinced, in the words of Heidel, that "there no doubt is a genetic relation between the two stories."(19) The very conservative M. F. Unger was so impressed by the similarity in the sequence of events in the two stories that he concluded, "It seems certain that there is some connection between the two accounts."(20)

There are also, of course, obvious differences between the two accounts both materially and even more so in their contrasting theologies. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that Genesis is dependent upon *Enuma Elish*. Nevertheless, the two accounts are both ancient Near Eastern documents containing some very similar concepts and there may well be some genetic connection between them. Consequently, *Enuma Elish* is an important historical document for shedding light on the concepts employed in Genesis 1. This is particularly true with regard to

nontheological matters wherever a parallel clearly exists between the two accounts. *Enuma Elish* is most clearly parallel to Genesis in 1:6-8. In *Enuma Elish* the god Marduk slays Tiamat, the goddess of salt water and herself a body of water, and then he

> split her into two parts like a shellfish [cf. Gen 1:6]
>
> Half of her he set up and ceiled it as sky [cf. Gen 1:8, 14]
>
> pulled down the bar and posted guards
>
> He bade them not to allow her waters to escape [cf. Gen 1:7].(21)

The striking thing here is that whereas many creation stories from around the world mention a primeval watery beginning and the separation of a solid firmament from the earth, only *Enuma Elish* and Gen 1:6-8 mention the separation of the primeval water into two parts. Lambert, who sought to define as exactly as possible to what extent Babylonian thought stood in back of Genesis, noted the splitting of the water in *Enuma Elish* and in Genesis, and conceded: "These seem to be the only two examples of the splitting of a body of water from the area and periods under discussion (apart from Berossus), so a parallel must be acknowledged."(22)

This parallel is so unique and clear that even scholars who have tried to give equal weight to other cultural backgrounds in order to redress an overemphasis on the Babylonian background of Genesis have returned exclusively to *Enuma Elish* as the background which best sheds light on Gen 1:6-8.(23)

Similarly, Genesis 1 and *Enuma Elish* are the only accounts that set forth the use of the firmament as a dam to control the water above the firmament. There is a world of theological difference between the two accounts at this point. In *Enuma Elish*, Marduk's splitting of Tiamat and using half of her to make a firmament which serves (with the help of guards) as a dam to keep the water above the firmament from flowing out, is polytheistic and mythological. In Genesis 1, the creation of the firmament is monotheistic and a- (if not anti-) mythological. But in both accounts the "natural science" is the same: the firmament serves as a horizontal dam complete with sluices, to control the waters above. As Wenham wrote, "The separation of heaven and earth is a familiar theme in ancient cosmologies, but the control of the waters appears to be peculiar to *Enuma Elish* and Genesis."(24)

Enuma Elish is also in close agreement with Genesis 1 in that subsequent to putting the firmament in place Marduk set the stars, the pole-star in particular, in the belly of Tiamat, i.e., in the firmament, and created the moon and sun to divide the times and seasons (5.4-11). This is remarkably parallel to Gen 1:14-19. So even though Genesis 1 obviously repudiates the mythological and polytheistic theology of *Enuma Elish*, it also just as obviously accepts the

underlying "natural science" of *Enuma Elish* as a foundational framework upon which to build its anti-mythological theology.

Enuma Elish emerges then (along with the Egyptian data to some extent) as the primary historical source for defining the historical meaning of "the waters above the firmament" in Genesis 1. In the light of *Enuma Elish* (and Egyptian literature), what then is the historical meaning of the "water above the firmament"? The answer is that "the water above the firmament" was conceived in the ancient Near East not as terrestrial clouds, nor as a canopy of water between the sun and the earth, nor even as galactic vapor, but as a sea of water (Tiamat means "sea") above a dam-like firmament which serves as a "ceiling" to the universe with the sun, moon, and stars beneath it.

This historical definition of the water above the firmament as an ocean above a solid sky (under which are the sun, moon, and stars) is also the historic doctrine of the Jews and the Christian church. Jews and Christians alike distinguished "the waters above the firmament" from terrestrial clouds.

Thus in the Jewish *Song of the Three Holy Children*, "the waters that be above the heavens" are called upon to bless the Lord (v. 38). Then later in the song, as one is brought closer to the things of earth (v. 51), the clouds are called upon to bless the Lord. Similarly according to *2 Enoch* 3:3ff, Enoch was taken up from the earth and first placed on a cloud. He was then taken up higher above the first heaven and shown "a very great Sea, greater than the earthly Sea." So also in the *Testament of Adam* 1.5-6 (2d or 3d century AD) Adam tells how in Eden the "waters that are above the heaven [mighty waves]" praised God in the fifth hour, but the clouds (of earth) are distinguished from these waters by being constructed in the sixth hour.

In the rabbinical commentary *Genesis Rabbah* the rabbis discussed the water above the firmament, clearly indicating that they understood it to be a body of water (4.5.2 E) above a solid firmament (4.5.2 A-D). Clouds, on the other hand, were below the firmament and rose up to it in order to be filled with water from the water above the firmament (*b. Ta'an* 1.9b). This concept of a solid firmament with a body of water above it is also set forth in *b. Sanh.* 109a where the builders of the tower of Babel are described as trying to "ascend to heaven, and cleave it with axes so that its waters might gush forth."

The Christian church carried on this historic understanding of Genesis 1. Indeed it was thought to be a necessary part of the Christian faith to believe in accordance with Genesis 1 that there was a real body of water above the solid sky (with sun, moon, stars, and clouds beneath the sky). So far was the church from questioning this concept of a body of water above a solid firmament that when unbelieving skeptics asked how water could be held in place above a revolving spherical (or hemispherical) firmament, the church fathers came up with apologetic

answers rather than change the concept, albeit St. Basil in the fourth century introduced the possibility that there were two firmaments, one below the sun in the form of condensed air with the water above this second firmament being clouds.(25) Augustine thought St. Basil's innovation was fine in itself, but nevertheless insisted that there was water above the starry firmament as well, adding, "we must not doubt that it does exist in that place."(26) John Chrysostom's comment on "the water above the firmament" clearly tells us where "that place" was: the water is on "the further side of the visible heaven…and marvelously has not quenched the sun, nor has the sun, which has gone on his way beneath for so long a time, dried up the water that lies above."(27)

The church, then, although it was willing after the fourth century to entertain the possibility that there were two firmaments and that above the lower one were clouds, nevertheless also steadfastly held on to the OT concept of water above "the starry firmament." By the time of the Renaissance, however, the pressure on the church from the outside to give up its belief in water above the starry firmament had become quite strong. Consequently, the idea began to be entertained that perhaps "the water above the firmament" referred *only* to terrestrial clouds. Luther was tempted to accept this new interpretation, but stuck with the Scriptures. He said,

> I might readily imagine that the firmament is the uppermost mass of all and that…the waters separated from the waters would be understood as clouds which are separated from our waters on the earth. But Moses says in plain words that the waters were above and below the firmament. Here, I take my reason captive and subscribe to the Word even though I do not understand it.(28)

Calvin, on the other hand, was apparently swayed by the pressure from the outside world. He rejected what Luther regarded as the plain words of Moses, the historic position of the church, and the fideism of Luther in particular. He wrote:

> The assertion of some that they embrace by faith what they have read concerning the waters above the heavens, notwithstanding their ignorance respecting them, is not in accordance with the design of Moses. And truly a longer inquiry into a matter open and manifest is superfluous. We see the clouds suspended in the air, which threaten to fall upon our heads, yet leave us space to breathe.(29)

Although one might wonder just how threatened Calvin felt about clouds falling on his head, it is to be noted that he simply dismissed the idea of taking the words of Moses at face value. Consequently he made no attempt to exegete the phrase "the water above the firmament" in terms of its historical-grammatical context. Rather, he removed it from its biblical context and interpreted it in the light of natural observation. He then simply imposed his new interpretation

upon the Bible. Other than E. J. Young, who once told me he held Luther's position, modern conservative evangelicals have largely followed Calvin's bad example, albeit without much worry about clouds falling on their heads.

As Luther said, however, the words of Moses in Gen 1:6-8 are "plain"; it is indeed striking just how plain they are. Genesis 1, in fact, repeatedly and from many angles makes it impossible to believe that its writer thought "the water above the firmament" was everyday clouds (much less a water canopy beneath the sun). Let us look at the text and see all that the author did to make his meaning clear.

In Gen 1:1-2 the writer gives us a picture of an unformed earth immersed completely in a *tehom*. The context (vv. 2, 9-10), other biblical usage (e.g., Ps 104:6), and cognate languages (Ugaritic, Akkadian, Eblaite) define the *tehom* which immersed all things as a deep sea.

In v. 3 the creation of light dispels the darkness that was over the sea (v. 2), but there is no indication that fog or clouds were then seen covering the sea. If anything, the picture of the Spirit (or wind) of God moving upon the face of the waters implies clear visibility of the sea. In any case it would be gratuitously adding to Scripture to say that there were clouds or vapor above the sea. Consequently, the idea that the firmament in v. 6 was placed between the clouds and the sea is completely without biblical foundation. Rather, when v. 6 says that the firmament was created in the midst of "the waters," the answer to the question, "What waters?" is immediately given by the context: the waters of the deep sea which are mentioned in v. 2. (The context and the common word, "face," define "the waters" of v. 2b as the waters of the sea in 2a.)

Further, the firmament was created "in the midst of" the waters of the sea. It was not "over" or "upon the surface" of the sea as was the Spirit of God in v. 2. Rather, it was "in the midst of" (בתוך, *betok*) the sea, that is, well below the surface. Consequently, there was sea water *above* and *below* it. The meaning of the word *betok* is aptly illustrated in Exod 14:21b-22 where the Lord divided the waters of the Reed Sea, and the children of Israel went "in the midst of the sea on dry ground, and the waters were a wall to them on the right and on the left." This illustration shows sea water positioned vertically on both sides of the people who were "in the midst" of the sea. The only difference between this and our passage is that in our passage the firmament (being sky) is positioned horizontally in the sea, so that the sea water is not envisioned as being to the right and to the left, but *above* and *below* the firmament.

Another good illustration of the meaning of *betok* is found in Exod 39:25, where bells are positioned "in the midst of" pomegranates at the bottom of the priest's robe. The picture is one of having pomegranates on both sides of the bells, to the right and to the left (v. 26), so that if this garment were held up horizontally, each bell "in the midst of" the pomegranates would have pomegranates above and below it. Hence in our passage where the firmament is positioned

horizontally "in the midst of" the sea, the firmament has sea water *above* and *below* it.

We have then in our passage a picture clearly set forth of a firmament with sea water above and below it. There is a sea on *both* sides of the solid firmament. This picture is so clearly presented, it scarcely needs confirmation. Nevertheless, the second half of v. 6 confirms this picture, for there the firmament is commissioned to "separate" (hiphil participle of בדל, *bdl*) the waters. By the very nature of its task as a separator, the firmament must have water on *both* sides of it. The meaning of the word "separate" is illustrated in Exod 26:33 where the task of the veil in the Tabernacle is to separate the Holy Place from the Holiest Place. There is a place on *both* sides of the separator. So it is in our text that there is water on both sides of the separator: *above* and *below* the firmament.

As if this picture were still not clear enough, the Hebrew language adds yet another word to triply confirm the picture. Verse 6 literally says the firmament is to separate "between [בן, *ben*] water, with reference to water." Verse 7 follows this up by saying God made the firmament and separated "between the water…and between the water." The word "between" all by itself tells us that this water is on *both* sides of the firmament, and the Hebrew makes this explicit in v. 6 (cf. Joel 2:17) and v. 7 (cf. Exod 26:33) by saying the firmament is a divider between water and water. There is then clearly water on *both* sides of the firmament, some *above* the firmament and some *below* it.

Now no one questions the location of the water which is said in v. 7 to be below or under (מתחת, *mittaḥat*, vv. 7 and 9) the firmament. Verses 9-10 tell us that this water was gathered into earthly seas, and hence we know it was literally under the firmament. Nor did anyone until the Renaissance question the location of the water which v. 7b says was "above the firmament" (מעל לרקיע, *meʿal laraqiaʿ*). The biblical context, as we have pointed out, made it abundantly clear that "the water above the firmament" in v. 7b was that very water which had just been mentioned three times in vv. 6 and 7a as being literally positioned *above* the solid firmament. Contextually, it is impossible to identify "the water above the firmament" in v. 7b as any other water than that water which was *above* the firmament. Three details make clear that the firmament had water literally above it: the firmament was "in the midst of" a sea (v. 6a); it "divided" the sea (v. 6b); and it divided "between" the waters (vv. 6b-7a). To define "the water above the firmament" as being located in any other place than literally *above* the solid firmament is to hold the biblical context in contempt; and no one did this until the Renaissance.

Admittedly, if one ignores the biblical (and historical) context, the Hebrew phrase *meʿal laraqiaʿ* could conceivably be construed as referring to water positioned below the firmament, over the face of the firmament as in Job 26:9. This would be, in the words of Joseph Dillow, "observer-true language," describing the water as seen by an observer on earth.(30) How one could see the sun, moon, and stars in back of a suspended sea is a bit of a mystery, but

grammatically this interpretation is possible. If it were really legitimate to interpret the Hebrew language in isolation from its context, however, one could just as easily make a case that the phrase *mittaḥat laraqia'* referred not to the water below the firmament as the context clearly demands (vv. 9 and 10), but to the water behind or in back of the firmament and hence above it from the point of view of an observer on earth. The "water below the firmament" would then be just like Ehud's sword which was "below his robe" (מתחת למדיו), that is, behind it and hence unseen to observers (Judg 3:16).

The biblical context, however, simply will not allow "the water above the firmament" to be located anywhere else in relation to the firmament except literally above it, that is on the top side. The meaning of the Hebrew text is so clear contextually that not only Luther, but even some modern conservative Hebrew scholars (and, of course, all other Hebrew scholars) have been unable to bring themselves to distort the meaning of the text. Umberto Cassuto, known for his mastery of Hebrew as well as for his rejection of standard higher critical theories, commented on Gen 1:6-7 as follows: "Thus as soon as the firmament was established in the midst of the layer of water, it began to rise in the middle, arching like a vault, and in the course of its upper expansion it lifted at the same time the upper waters resting on top of it."(31)

It is to the credit of E. J. Young's mastery of Hebrew as well as to his integrity that he also could not bring himself to distort the meaning of the text. He wrote, "I am unable to accept the opinion that the waters above the expanse refer to the clouds, for this position does not do justice to the language of the text which states that these waters are above the expanse."(32)

Similarly, the opinion that "the water above the firmament" refers to a water canopy below the firmament (between the sun and the earth) does not do justice to the language of the text. Taken out of context, the Hebrew phrase could conceivably refer to a water canopy below the firmament, but there is nothing in the context which suggests such an interpretation; the context, in fact, forbids it.

If the writer of Genesis 1 had intended to say there was a water canopy in the space between the earth and the sun, he probably would have said the water was "in front of" the firmament for that is the way he describes the space between the earth and the sun (v. 20). Or, if he wanted to refer to a water canopy, he could have described the water as being "above the earth." Or, he could have said the water was "between the heavens and the ground" (as in 2 Sam 18:9). Or, he could have said the water was "between the earth and between the heavens" (as in 1 Chr 21:16). In other words, the author could have readily and clearly described a water canopy if that is what he had intended to describe. But, he described no such thing because he was not referring to a water canopy at all, but to an ancient Near Eastern concept of a sea above a solid firmament.

It seems to me that the most important grammatical consideration for interpreting our text (apart from context) ought to be the only other biblical use of the phrase *meʿal laraqiaʿ* outside of Genesis. This is found in Ezek 1:25 where a voice comes forth *meʿal laraqiaʿ*. Contextually the only possible source of this voice is either the living creatures who are clearly portrayed as being below the firmament (vv. 22-23) or the likeness of a man on a throne that is clearly portrayed as sitting above the firmament (v. 26). Since the voice is described as coming "*meʿal* the firmament that was over their heads," that is, in contradistinction to the living creatures, it seems obvious that the voice *meʿal laraqiaʿ* originated with the likeness of the man on the throne, and hence from a position *on top of* the firmament. Nor do I know of any exegetes who would disagree with this. The sole use of the phrase *meʿal laraqiaʿ* outside of Genesis 1 confirms then the contextual meaning of the phrase in Gen 1:7. The water "above the firmament" in Genesis, like the voice "above the firmament" in Ezekiel, is positioned on the *top side* of the firmament.

Similarly, as Joseph Dillow (who does a superb job of proving that the water above the firmament is not ordinary clouds) points out, "There seems to be little doubt that Moses saw the waters above (Gen 1:6-8) as the source of the water that came through the 'windows of heaven' (Gen 7:11)."(33) If this is true, then the water above is again pictured in Genesis 7 as being located on the top side of the firmament. This is the only logical position the water above could have if the opening and closing of the sluice gates in the firmament ("windows of heaven") controlled the flow of the water (Gen 7:11; 8:2). I conclude then that distant biblical context as well as immediate context defines "the water above the firmament" as being located literally on the top side of the firmament.

Dillow and other creation scientists, having rejected the idea that "the water above the firmament" refers to terrrestrial clouds, have not really objected to locating "the water above" on the top side of the firmament. This location is fine with them because having taken the firmament itself out of its biblical and historical context, they have redefined the firmament as mere atmosphere (or a space between the earth and the sun). Their canopy of water then sits literally above the atmosphere until it falls as rain in the time of Noah.(34)

But even if this canopy theory did not ignore the historical and biblical context which defines the firmament as rock-solid, it would still be falsified by Gen 1:14-17. Gen 1:14-17 tells us that the sun, moon, and stars were placed in the firmament, so that if "the water above" is literally above the firmament, then it must be above the sun, and hence could not be a canopy of water beneath the sun. If the biblical text is accepted in the straightforward way that creation scientists say they want to accept the Bible, then defining "the water above the firmament" as a water canopy below the sun is not possible. Nor is it possible to define the firmament as atmosphere, for the sun, moon, and stars are not in the atmosphere.

Unfortunately, creation science is not really bound by Scripture, but adds imagination to Scripture whenever necessary in order to sustain its theories.(35) Seeing then that accepting Gen 1:6-8 and 14-17 at face value would destroy their canopy theory, creation scientists have suggested two imaginative solutions. One, Gen 1:14-17 is referring to a different firmament than the one mentioned in vv. 6-8.(36) Two, vv. 6-8 are a literal description: there really is water above the firmament, but vv. 14-17 are just phenomenal language: the heavenly bodies just look like they are in the firmament.(37)

But, is Gen 1:14-17 really referring to a different firmament than the one mentioned in vv. 6-8? Hardly. When Gen 1:14 speaks of "the firmament of heaven," it implicitly raises the question, What "firmament of heaven"? The biblical context immediately replies, "the firmament of vv. 6-8 which God called Heaven." Similarly, there is no contextual reason to say vv. 6-8 are giving a literal description of the universe, but vv. 14-17 are just phenomenal language. Verse 14's "Let there be lights" and v. 17's "God set them in the firmament" are no less literal descriptions than v. 6's "Let there be a firmament" and v. 7's "So God made the firmament and separated." Furthermore, even if one grants that the sun just looks like it is in the firmament, the firmament looks like it is in back of the sun. Therefore, even on the basis of phenomenal language, the water above the firmament would still be above the sun.

Taken in context in a straightforward way, then, the firmament of vv. 14-17 is identical with the firmament of vv. 6-8; and the water above the firmament (vv. 6-8) is also above the sun, moon, and stars which are placed into that firmament (vv. 14-17). The water above the firmament, therefore, cannot be a water canopy beneath the sun.

In addition, according to the Bible the "water above the firmament" is not only above the sun and not below it, it also did not completely fall to earth during Noah's flood and hence according to the Bible is still above the firmament today. This is clear from comparing Gen 7:11-12 to 8:2. In 7:11-12 water above the firmament is allowed to fall as rain by opening the floodgates of the firmament; and in 8:2 the water above the firmament is restrained from falling by closing these same floodgates. Whether these floodgates are literal or poetic, the fact remains that there would not have been any point in mentioning the closing of the floodgates if all the water above had already come down. Hence according to the Bible "the water above the firmament" was still there after Noah's flood.

Ps 148:4 also testifies that the water above the firmament was still there after Noah's flood for it was still there in the time of the psalmist. The psalmist calls upon the "waters above the heavens" to praise the Lord, and the reference is clearly back to Gen 1:7.(38) Dillow has argued that Ps 148:4 does not prove the "waters above the heavens" were still there in the psalmist's day for according to Dillow the psalmist was just employing an apostrophe. Thus the psalmist was

calling upon the waters above even though he knew they were long gone.(39)

But the only footnote Dillow gives to substantiate his claim that v. 4 is an apostrophe is the definition by Bullinger that an apostrophe is "a turning aside from the direct subject matter to address others." This definition, however, proves either that v. 4 is not an apostrophe or, as Bullinger seems to believe, that vv. 2-4 are all apostrophes, for v. 4 does not turn aside from the direct subject matter to address others. Rather, it addresses one more heavenly entity in a list of others and is woven formally and functionally into that list. Contextually, there is no more reason to say that v. 4 is an apostrophe and the "waters above" are long gone than there is to say that v. 2 is an apostrophe and the angels are long gone. In addition, v. 6 says the Lord established the waters above "forever and ever."(40) So, even if v. 4 is an apostrophe, the context and content of vv. 1-6 prevent it from being an address to waters long gone.

It seems to me that what Dillow and his fellow creation scientists have done is to become so committed to a theory that they have been willing to remove "the water above the firmament" from its historical and biblical context, redefine it in a way that fits their theory, and then rationalize away anything in Scripture that would testify against them. Certainly no one can say he is accepting the Bible in a straightforward way, while changing Scripture's solid firmament into mere atmosphere, changing Scripture's one firmament into two firmaments, and changing Scripture's permanent water above into temporary water below. Nor is there anything spiritual or true about saying, as they do, that the only people who believe Genesis 1 speaks of a solid firmament with a sea above it are either radical critics or liberals. In order to maintain that extreme stance, one has to write off all the saints before the Renaissance as either radical critics or liberals—including Augustine and Luther!

I believe it will bring more glory to God if we will just acknowledge the fact that when "the water above the firmament" is left in its historical and biblical context and given its historical-grammatical meaning, that meaning which the church held until the Renaissance, it cannot mean either terrestrial clouds or a water canopy between the earth and the sun. It means rather a large body of water, a sea, above a solid firmament, which firmament serves as a roof to the universe and under which firmament are the sun, moon, and stars.

The divine intent of this picture was not to communicate natural science, but to teach the fact that the God of Scripture is Creator and absolute Sovereign over the supposedly independent forces of the natural world. This is an important revelation which men still need today. Of course, the ancient science employed in giving this revelation cannot be completely harmonized with modern science.(41) This gives us a clue, I think, as to why, as Davis Young has pointed out, neither concordism nor literalism has genuinely been able to harmonize modern science with Genesis.(42) Nevertheless, the divine revelation endures.

We need simply to see with Warfield that divine inspiration does not bestow omniscience, and hence God has sometimes allowed his inspired penmen to advert to the scientific concepts of their own day. This fact in no way effaces the point and purpose of Genesis 1 to reveal the sovereign power and glory of the one true Creator. The divinely intended message of Genesis 1 does not err, but stands out in glorious contrast to the dark mythological polytheism of its own time, and by its divinely inspired excellence endures yet today as a bright revelation for all time.

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