

Crucial Questions of Interpretation in Genesis 1

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Many issues, both theological and scientific have been raised in connection with the account of creation in Genesis. These issues are related and have resulted in numerous attempts at answering the many interpretative questions involved in an understanding of Genesis 1 and 2. Having dealt with the relation between these chapters elsewhere,¹ the focus of this article will be on Genesis 1. While space limitations do not allow an examination of every verse, the most crucial questions which are persistently raised will be considered, including the relation of v. 1 to the rest of the chapter, the meaning of the terms “deep” (v. 2) and “expanse” (vv. 6-8), and, finally, the creation of light on the first day with the somewhat oblique references to the sun, moon, and stars on the fourth day.

Divergent Approaches to Genesis 1:1

There has been considerable debate over the translation of Gen 1:1, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” In recent scholarship there have been two basic approaches. The first (and most traditional) approach is to understand the first verse of Genesis as a complete sentence (an independent clause). In this case the verse would be translated simply, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (period). The second approach is to translate Gen 1:1 as a “dependent clause,” that is, an incomplete part of a sentence that would need to be connected to v. 2 to make a complete sentence; vv. 1-2 together would, thus, be translated something like, “In the beginning, *when* God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void....” Good linguistic arguments have been presented in support of both positions by various commentators.

Recently, a number of scholars have proposed a modified form of the first view.² They note that, from the context of v. 3 onward, Genesis 1 is clearly talking about the *creation of this earth* but that this does not appear to be the case with v. 1. The “beginning” in this verse clearly involves *both* the heavens (Heb. *shamayim*) and the earth (*eretz*). “Heavens,” of course can be understood in both a local sense as pertaining to the earth’s atmosphere (i.e. the “sky”) or in a cosmic sense (i.e. the entire universe). How should it be understood in v. 1? Several Hebrew scholars have observed that when these two terms “heavens and earth” are used *together* they take on a distinct meaning as a special figure of speech known as a “merism.”³ A merism combines two words to express a single idea; it expresses “totality” by combining two contrasts or two extremes. As John Sailhamer notes, “By linking these two extremes [“heavens and earth”] into a single expression ... the Hebrew language expresses the *totality of all that exists*.”⁴ That people in antiquity understood the expression as a merism is supported by extra-biblical literature such as *The Wisdom of Solomon* 11:17 which, in paraphrasing Gen 1:1, refers to the “cosmos” (*kosmos*) rather than the “earth” (*gē*).

If this understanding of “heavens and earth” is correct, it would suggest that “in the beginning” in Gen 1:1 does indeed describe God’s creation of the *entire* universe, including the sun, moon, and stars—that is, it refers to the *ultimate* beginning of everything in the universe.⁵ However, there is a subtle, yet critical nuance to the meaning of the expression “heavens and earth” in Gen 1:1. As Mathews points out,

... the expression may be used uniquely here since it concerns the exceptional event of creation itself.... “Heavens and earth” here indicates the *totality* of the universe, not foremostly *an organized, completed* universe.⁶

The idea that the creation of the heavens and earth in Gen 1:1 was *not* complete is *supported* by Gen 2:1, which reads, “*Thus* the heavens and the earth *were completed* in all their vast array” (emphasis added). Gen 2:1 is the first explicit indication in Scripture that the creation was *now* finally complete. Only *after* the six days of creative activity on this earth is a completed creation of the universe proclaimed!

The implications of this understanding are interesting and significant. First, it is faithful to the most traditional and probably the best translation of Gen 1:1 as a complete sentence: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (period). Second, the “heavens and the earth” of Gen 1:1 do indeed mean everything—the *entire* universe. Third, it clearly places God as the Creator at the *absolute beginning of everything*, a point that is in harmony with the rest of Scripture (and a major concern to the author of Genesis vis-à-vis Mesopotamian claims). Fourth, it does create a separation between the creation of the rest of the universe and this earth. That is, there are other worlds and beings whose creation *preceded* our own.⁷ Fifth, it means that there is a shift in meaning from the “earth” in the expression “heavens and earth” of Gen 1:1 to the “earth” that was “without form and void” in v. 2. Indeed, several scholars have discerned this distinction regarding the different meanings of “earth” in Gen 1:1 and 1:2. As

Mathews notes, “The term ‘earth’ in v. 1 used in concert with ‘heaven,’ thereby indicating the whole universe, distinguishes its meaning from ‘earth’ in v. 2, where it has its typical sense of terrestrial earth.”⁸ Finally, this means that, from God’s perspective, the whole universe was not complete until our little planet was finished.

The last three points raise the question, how much *time* separated the creation of the “heavens and earth” in Gen 1:1 from the commencement of the six-day creation of this earth beginning in Gen 1:3. For that we simply don’t know. It was apparently during this time that Satan’s fall from heaven took place. It could have been a considerable time. All the Bible tells us is that, as God began the six days of creation, the earth was “without form and void.” The two Hebrew synonyms involved here are *tohu* “without form, empty” and *bohu* “empty, void.” Even in English, we are a bit baffled by what without form and void means—an empty, shapeless blob? nothingness? Some have equated the expression with “chaos.” However, it actually appears simply to be describing an earth that is a sterile wasteland awaiting the creative word of God to make it habitable for human life. As Isa 45:18 says, “He did not create it [the earth] to be empty (*tohu*), but formed it to be inhabited.”⁹ In this verse “empty” (*tohu*) is equated with “uninhabited.” The point of Gen 1:1-2 is not that there was no matter here when God began the six days of creation, but rather that there is no matter anywhere in the universe (on this earth or in the heavens) that God did not create. There is no problem with God’s use of matter which He had already created to form or create something else—humans themselves were created from clay. Within a Mesopotamian context, Gen 1:1 claims that the Biblical God existed in the beginning of everything, thus repudiating any claims of divine sovereignty for any other deity.

Darkness Over the “Deep” (Gen 1:2)

The biblical *tehom* “deep” simply refers to waters that were here when the earth was in the condition of *tohu wbohu* “without form and void” between the initial creation and the completion of the earth to make it inhabitable. The earlier scholarly opinion that the biblical *tehom* (“deep”) is derived from the Babylonian primordial water deity Tiamat has been shown to be wrong¹⁰ and virtually no scholar holds to this view any longer. Rather, it is now clear that both the Babylonian *Tiamat* and Hebrew *tehom* are derived from a common Semitic word for ocean and, therefore, do not necessarily have any relationship to each other. The fact that it has now been shown that the Enuma Elish (which names *Tiamat*) is a *later* creation story than Genesis 1–11 merely reinforces this conclusion.

Yahweh’s power over the *tehom* was important to the Mosaic community. It was the *tehom* that confronted Israel at the Red Sea, but Yahweh was able to overcome it (Exod 15:5, 8; cf. Ps 106:9; Isa 51:9-10; 63:13). As Mathews reminds us, the *tehom* not only stands in the way of Israel as they leave Egypt, this same word is used as an analogy for the Canaanites whom the Israelites must overcome (with God’s help!) in order to possess the Promised Land (Exod 14:21-22; Josh 3:14-17).¹¹ In retrospect, Moses reminds Israel that it was this same *tehom* that God controlled at the time of Noah’s flood.

The “Expanse” (Gen 1:6-8)

One still widely-held interpretation of *raqia* ‘“expanse” among modern biblical scholars was expressed long ago by Fosdick:

In the Scriptures the flat earth is founded on an underlying sea; it is stationary; the heavens are like an upturned bowl or canopy above it; the circumference of this vault rests on pillars; the sun, moon, and stars move within this firmament of special purpose to illumine man; there is a sea above the sky, “the waters which were above the heavens,” and through the “windows of heaven” the rain comes down; within the earth is Sheol, where dwell the shadowy dead; this whole cosmic system is suspended over vacancy; and it was all made in six days with a morning and an evening, a short and measurable time before. This is the worldview of the Bible.¹²

Three basic lines of evidence are presented in defense of this view of ancient Hebrew cosmology: (1) the Hebrews held this view in common with their ancient neighbors, especially Mesopotamia; (2) the Greek (LXX/Septuagint) and Latin (Vulgate) translate the Hebrew *raqia* ‘ of Gen 1:6 as *stereōma* and *firmamentum* respectively, showing that *raqia* ‘ means something solid like an inverted metal dome or vault; (3) *raqia* ‘ itself carries the sense of stamped or pounded metal.

Because arguments 1 and 2 have impacted argument 3¹³—that is, both the assumption that Israel’s ancient neighbors held to such an “inverted metal bowl” cosmology and the Greek and Latin seem to support this have led to how lexicons

define the Hebrew *raqia'*—it is important to review the evidence for the first two arguments before looking at the meaning of *raqia'* itself.

Firmament in Ancient Mesopotamian Cosmology

Biblical scholars already in the nineteenth century began entertaining the idea that the ancients believed in a solid vault of heaven. Then, in 1850, Hormuzd Rassam discovered seven tablets in Ashurbanipal's library at Nineveh that were found to contain a Mesopotamian creation account, now known as the *Enuma Elish*.¹⁴ The original composition may date into the late second millennium, ca. 1100 B.C. during the time of Nebuchadnezzar I. One of the first scholars to utilize this creation account in an attempt to reconstruct an ancient Babylonian cosmology was the German Assyriologist Peter Jensen in 1890. In Tablets IV and V the basic Babylonian cosmogony and cosmology were outlined. The creation of the *Himmelswölbung* ("heavenly vault") appears on line 145 of tablet IV. Works like Jensen's added support to the pan-Babylonian school led by scholars like Friedrich Delitzsch (1850–1922), who argued that Hebrews received many of their ideas about primeval history, including their creation story, from the Babylonians during the exile. Soon, a number of critical scholars augmented the Hebrew meaning of *raqia'* in lexicons, commentaries, etc. by adding the idea of a solid vault, usually composed of metal.

Then, in 1975, when Assyriologist W. G. Lambert tried to locate the idea that the Babylonians conceived of the firmament as a solid vault in original Babylonian sources, his search came up empty! The closest support he could find was Jensen's original 1890 study which translated the Babylonian word for "heaven" in *Enuma Elish* IV 145 as *Himmelswölbung* or "vault of heaven." Although Lambert generally admires Jensen's pioneering work, he notes that Jensen made this translation without any support or justification whatsoever. Rather, Jensen simply makes the translation and then proceeds thereafter as if "the point is proved."¹⁵ Apparently Jensen accepted the common assumption that the Babylonians conceived of the firmament in this way and arbitrarily translated the Babylonian word for heaven as a vault! However, after reviewing the evidence, Lambert concluded, "The idea of a vault of heaven [in ancient Babylonian literature] is not based on any piece of evidence." Rather, Lambert notes that the ancient Babylonians viewed the cosmos as a series of *flat*, superimposed layers of the same size separated by space, held together by ropes; there was no hint of a solid dome.

Lambert's study was taken up by his student, Wayne Horowitz, who notes that "although the clear sky seems to us to be shaped like a dome, rather than a flat circle, there is no direct evidence that ancient Mesopotamians thought the visible heavens to be a dome. Akkadian *kippatu* are always flat, circular objects such as geometric circles or hoops, rather than three dimensional domes."¹⁶ The fact remains that there is no word for a heavenly domed vault in ancient Mesopotamia.¹⁷

Translations of Raqia'

This brings us to the second line of evidence that is used in support of the idea that *raqia'* meant an inverted metal bowl—the translations of the word with the Greek *stereōma* (LXX/Septuagint) and the Latin Vulgate's *firmamentum*. Why did the Greek and Latin translators use these words—both of which convey the sense of something solid? According to the *Letter of Aristeas*, the Septuagint version of the Hebrew Scriptures was commissioned by the Egyptian ruler, Ptolemy (II) Philadelphus, who wanted to include this work in the famous library he was establishing at Alexandria. While all fields of knowledge were pursued in Alexandria, prominent among them was cosmology. The Greeks, who had been aggressively pursuing this topic since the seventh century B.C. in a manner that really must be considered the forerunner of our modern "scientific" approach, were not simply interested in ancient cosmogonies, myths and legends; they really wanted to know the precise physical nature of the universe, including what stuff was made of and how it actually functioned in a mechanical way.

To assist their investigations, the Greeks combed through the astronomical materials of both the ancient Babylonians and Egyptians. Already by the sixth century B.C., Greek discourse on the cosmos had moved beyond the flat disc models common in Egypt and Mesopotamia and were revolving around the idea that one or more solid *spheres* surrounded the earth (note—these were not half spherical or hemispherical domes or a vault that rested on a flat earth). Thus, ironically, it is from the Greeks that the earliest "metal" sky or sphere model emerges. Interestingly, although we usually associate the debate between a heliocentric cosmology versus a geocentric cosmology to the thoughts of Copernicus and Galileo, the Greeks at Alexandria were already entertaining early forms of these two cosmologies.¹⁸ Therefore, the idea that the earth was enclosed within one or more hard spheres was commonplace within the academy at Alexandria when the Septuagint was being

translated and is undoubtedly the main factor (rather than etymology) in the Hellenistic Jewish translators' choosing the Greek *stereōma* for the ancient Hebrew *raqia'*.¹⁹

Biblical Usage of Raqia'

This leaves us with the final line of evidence for *raqia'*—its actual usage in the Hebrew Bible. The basic verb *raqa'* simply means “to stamp, spread out, stretch.”²⁰ The idea is to make something *thin* by stretching it out. It is important to note that there is nothing inherent in the word that evokes either a specific shape (dome) or material (metal). *Raqia'* is also used as a verb for non-metal objects such as the cloth of a tent or gauze—in which case the idea of “stretching” and “spreading out” makes a lot more sense. Whether the object is hard or soft must be determined from context.

While the uses of *raqia'* in Genesis 1 do not provide any *direct* indication as to the nature of the material, Gen 1:14, 20 provide some insight from a phenomenological perspective as to how the ancient Hebrews understood *raqia'*. In v. 14, *raqia'* is where the sun, moon and stars are located but v. 20 indicates that birds can fly upon it or (better) *in* it! The full Hebrew expression *al-pni raqia'* is often translated “in the open heavens,” meaning “up,” “above,” or “in” the heavens. In other words, the birds would be flying *below* the firmament (and the sun, moon and stars) if the *raqia'* was thought of as a solid structure! The text has birds flying *in* the *raqia'* but clearly at a lower level than the sun, moon and stars. Either the writer conceives of multiple layers or a continuous expanse from the level of the birds to the level of the sun, moon, and stars. Sailhamer, preferring the latter explanation, argues that *raqia'* should be understood simply as “sky.”²¹ The author's own review of Bible commentators from the Byzantine period, Middle Ages, and up to the time of the Enlightenment shows that *raqia'* is commonly translated as “expanse”—something not solid—and not understood as an upside down metal bowl.

The Light and the Sun (Gen 1:3-5, 14-19)

One final issue in the creation story that probably should be discussed briefly is the creation of light on the first day and the reference to the sun, moon, and stars on the fourth day. Without pretending to provide a final answer to this, Sailhamer notes that there is a subtle but significant difference in the Hebrew grammar and syntax of v. 14 when compared to v. 6.²² Specifically, v. 6 reads “Let there be an expanse,” creating something that was not there before. However, in v. 14 God does not say, “Let there be lights in the expanse to separate the day and night...” as if there were no lights before his command and afterward they came into existence. Rather, the Hebrew text says, “Let the lights in the expanse *be for separating* the day and night...” According to Sailhamer:

The meaning of God's command in verse 14 is that the “lights” which were created “in the beginning” now are to serve “to separate the day and night” and “to be signs to mark the seasons and days of the year.” Given the difference between the Hebrew syntax of verse 6 and verse 14, the narrative suggests that the author did not understand his account of the fourth day to be an account of the creation of the lights but merely a statement of their purpose. The narrative assumes that the heavenly lights already were created “in the beginning.”²³

Interestingly, a similar argument with reference to the stars is used by Colin House, who indicates that the Hebrew of Gen 1:16 is best translated as “and God made the two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, the lesser light to rule the night *with* the stars.”²⁴ The implication is that the stars were not created on day four but rather were simply joining the moon in its task of “governing” the night.

Another important detail is the fact that the usual Hebrew terms for sun and moon are avoided, being described instead as the “greater” and “lesser” lights (v. 16). By shunning these names, the author of Genesis further diminishes the stature afforded them by neighboring Mesopotamians, Canaanites, and Egyptians—all of whom deified the sun and moon.

Conclusion

Although Genesis 1 does not provide a detailed, scientific description of what happened at creation, it does offer a historically reliable account of God's creative activity that is both authoritative and accurate. It describes the creation of this earth and life on it as the culmination of the more generalized creation of the universe summarily mentioned in Gen 1:1.

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¹Randall W. Younker, "Are There Two Contradictory Accounts of Creation in Genesis 1 and 2," in *Interpreting Scripture* (ed. Gerhard Pfandl; Silver Spring, Md.: Biblical Research Institute, forthcoming).

²E.g., John Sailhamer, *Genesis Unbound* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 1996); Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26* (NAC; Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman and Holman, 1996); John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1997), 65.

³See Sailhamer, *Genesis Unbound*, 56 and 102-3 where he convincingly argues that v. 1 cannot simply be a title for the chapter); also Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, 142. This idea is not original with Sailhamer. Franz Delitzsch and C. F. Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (trans. J. Martin et al.; 25 vols; Edinburgh, 1857-1878; Hendrickson reprint, 10 vols., Peabody, Mass., 1996), 1:37 noted that the expression "the heaven and the earth" is "frequently employed to denote the world, the universe, for which there was no single word in the Hebrew language."

⁴Sailhamer, *Genesis Unbound*, 56 (emphasis added); see also Richard M. Davidson, "The Biblical Account of Origins," *JATS* 14 (2003): 32-33 n. 88, pointing to Isa 44:24 and Joel 3:15-16 where the idea of totality in the reference to "heavens and the earth" is explicit (cf. John 1:1-3). Notably, the reference to "a new heavens and a new earth" in Isa 65:17; 66:22 reflects a different Hebrew construction which seems to refer more particularly to the recreation of this earth and its atmosphere (cf. 2 Pet 3:13; Rev. 21:1).

⁵As Sailhamer (*Genesis Unbound*, 106-7) points out, in Exod 20:11 the cosmologic merism "heavens and earth" is not used; rather, the triad of "heavens, earth, and seas" is used, reflecting not Gen 1:1 but Gen 1:2-31 with the creation of the three earthly habitats (heavens for birds, seas for fish, and earth for animals and man). Thus Exod 20:11 reflects the Sabbath command of Gen 2:2, *after* the creation of earth was completed.

⁶Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, 142 (emphasis added).

⁷See Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, 39-40, describing the existence of intelligent beings on other planets, who have trees of knowledge of good and evil but who chose differently from Adam and Eve and thus did not fall into sin.

⁸Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, 142.

⁹See *ibid.*, 143.

¹⁰Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (Trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 104-5.

¹¹Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, 134.

¹²Henry Emerson Fosdick, *The Modern Use of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), 46-47.

¹³E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 1; New York: Doubleday, 1964), 6.

¹⁴For a convenient review of the discovery and publication history of these tablets, see John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context: A Survey of Parallels between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1989), 21-22.

¹⁵W. G. Lambert, "The Cosmology of Sumer and Babylon," in *Ancient Cosmologies* (ed. Carmen Blacker and Michael Loewe; London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975), 62.

¹⁶Wayne Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 264-65.

¹⁷Further, see *ibid.*, 262-63.

¹⁸As early as Homer (*Odyssey*, lines 325-29) the Greeks were speculating that the heavens were an inverted metal bowl (*sideron ouranon*). Variations on the original crude Greek model can be traced through various philosophers, including Anaximander, Pythagoras, Anaximene, Empedocles, Aristotle, and Aristarchus of Samos who proposed a heliocentric cosmology.

¹⁹See Bert Thompson, *What Was the Firmament of Genesis 1?* (Montgomery, Ala.: Apologetics Press, 2000); online: <http://www.apologeticspress.org/articles/2168>.

²⁰According to BibleWorks 4, "In the OT, the foot-stamping connotation of *raqa'* may be understood literally, indicating either a malicious glee (Ezek 25:6) or a threatening excitement (Ezek 6:11). It may be used figuratively to describe beaten and crushed enemies (2 Sam 22:43). In the Piel and Pual stems, the verb *raqa'* acquires the sense of beating out precious metals, and of the spreading that results" (e.g. to overlay an image (Isa 40:19; cf. Exod 39:3; Jer 10:9). Also, *raqa'* can denote "God's spreading forth the tangible earth" (Isa 42:5; 44:24), "stretching out its land above the water (Psa 136:6), or spreading out the intangible sky (Job 37:18)."

²¹Sailhamer, *Genesis Unbound*, 116; cf. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, 150. Biblical texts that seem to describe the heavens in a solid, metal-like fashion are poetic, rich in metaphors, and difficult to take literally because they would then be contradicted by other passages that describe the heavens in completely different terms (see Thompson, *What Was the Firmament of Genesis 1?*).

²²In v. 6, the Hebrew verb *hyh* ("let there be") appears alone, while in v. 14 it appears with an infinitive (*whyw*). See Sailhamer, *Genesis Unbound*, 132-35, justifying his approach to the grammar and syntax of Gen 1:14 with arguments from *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (ed. E. Kautzsch; trans. A. E. Cowley; Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), 348. For a different interpretation of the syntax, see Benjamin Shaw, "The Literal Day Interpretation," in *Did God Create in Six Days?* (ed. Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. and David W. Hall; Taylors, S.C.: Southern Presbyterian, 1999), 211-12.

²³Sailhamer, *Genesis Unbound*, 132.

²⁴Colin L. House, *The Successive, Corresponding Epochal Arrangement of the "Chronogenealogies" of Genesis 5 and 11B in the three textual traditions: LXXA, SP, and MT* (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Mich., 1988), 241-48, noting also that the object marker *et* can be translated "in addition to" or "also."