

Waters Above or Beyond?

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ABSTRACT

The different interpretations of the meaning of 'the waters above' in Genesis 1:7 are briefly reviewed before a critical look is taken at the Humphreys concept of the 'firmament' being outer space and 'the waters above' being beyond at the edge of a bounded universe. Key words in Scripture are examined linguistically and it is concluded the biblical basis of the Humphreys cosmology is still open to question.

Were the 'waters above the expanse' of Genesis 1:7 an ocean of water, a vapour canopy, an ice canopy, or just the clouds we see today?

In his seminal book, **The Waters Above**, Joseph Dillow argues that liberal scholars typically believe that the writer(s) of Genesis 1 'share(d) the primitive concepts of (their) Near Eastern contemporaries.'¹ He claims, however, that the 'usual and oldest view is that the reference is to the clouds in the sky', when it comes to interpreting Genesis 1:7.² Calvin appears to have embraced such a view.

When dealing with Psalm 148:4, Dillow says:

*Typically liberal commentators tend to see this text as proving that the psalmist believed in the existence of the vast heavenly reservoir. . . . Conservative commentators generally take the traditional view that both Genesis 1:6—8 and Psalm 148:4 refer to clouds.*³

More importantly for this discussion, a view that has a history to it adds a further dimension by arguing that an ocean above the sky soon made its way outwards by expansion and became the outer shell of a bounded universe. This view is mentioned by A. M. Rehwinkel:

*'Some Bible students have held that this universe is surrounded by a vast sea of water. . . . There are very serious objections to this view which need not be discussed here.'*⁴

It's a pity Rehwinkel didn't see the need to make these objections explicit. The view he mentions as having existed before 1951 lies behind the view of Dr Russell Humphreys, which captivated a number of creationists at a recent creationist conference in America. One's impressions from hearsay are that the view was regarded as novel by several participants, yet here was Rehwinkel some 40 years earlier saying that the idea of water bounding the universe was already known then.

THE MAJOR VIEWS

We might, then, summarise major views on the 'waters above' of Genesis 1:7 as follows:

- (1) The 'traditional' view, that the top half of the pristine ocean distributed itself as the kind of clouds we see today.
- (2) The 'liberal' view of a Babylonian solid dome (taken from the 'firmament' idea) supporting an elevated ocean.
- (3) A pre-Rehwinkel view that a watery shell round the Earth soon expanded or was 'stretched out' to embrace the whole universe: I call this the 'waters beyond' theory.
- (4) The Morris and Dillow view, an atmosphere-supported watery shell round the Earth, either as
 - (a) a liquid ocean;
 - (b) a vapour canopy; or
 - (c) an ice or ice-block canopy, or even successive forms of these.

The first view is difficult to maintain in line with Rehwinkel's theory that the early Earth was more humid in atmosphere than today, since it is difficult to see how such a feature could be ascertained. However, if the third view is true, we are left with an Earth where the most likely sky pattern would be generally similar to conditions today. We can therefore ignore this first view as a separate issue and include it under the third view.

As typical creationists we can also ignore the second view, though in fact Dillow spends some time suggesting that what Moses retained from this view and incorporated into Genesis must have been those parts the Holy Spirit did not reject, for example, that a great body of 'the deep' was raised above the expanse.

For these reasons, for the rest of this article I would like

to consider only the third and fourth views, suggesting that they are typically represented by Humphreys and Morris respectively. I will endeavour to argue from my understanding of the Hebrew originals in the relevant parts of Genesis 1-11. Humphreys does in fact include a fair amount of his own understanding of Hebrew in his arguments. I take his July 1994 paper as representative of his views.⁵

'IN' THE EXPANSE?

In his introduction Humphreys appeals to a straightforward reading of Scripture, an attitude that no creationist worth his salt would deny. However, that straightforward reading, he says, leads to a conclusion that the 'expanse' of Genesis 1 is not the Earth's atmosphere. I would regard it as less than objective to come to such a conclusion. However, it is linguistically acceptable to regard the Hebrew word concerned as equivalent to some uses of 'interstellar space'.⁶ I would prefer just to call it 'space' and make it possible to include the atmosphere, since the layperson reading this would not be expected to make assumptions concerning what sort of space it is.

As to birds flying 'on the face of the expanse',⁷ I see no reason to assume that this idiomatic expression must be regarded as from beneath. To de-idiomatise it, we should eliminate the idiom 'face' and use the neutral word 'surface'. This means that an observer (not necessarily absolutely underneath) could see birds 'riding' on the atmosphere, as easily as thinking of them operating on the under-surface of some higher expanse, which appears to be Humphreys' understanding according to his Figure 2 (reproduced here as my Figure 1).

To the heading 'A Canopy is not Scientifically Necessary'⁸ one might reply: 'Neither is a watery shell necessary to a bounded universe'. But the real problem for all of us is surely the meaning of Hebrew *be* with regard to Sun, Moon and stars. If there's a water ocean or vapour canopy round the earth, how can they be said to be 'in' it?

Here I must take issue with Humphreys' statement⁹ culled from a lexicon by Holladay, called 'concise'. That lexicon apparently says that Hebrew *be* 'has essentially the same range of meanings as the English word "in"'.¹⁰ But

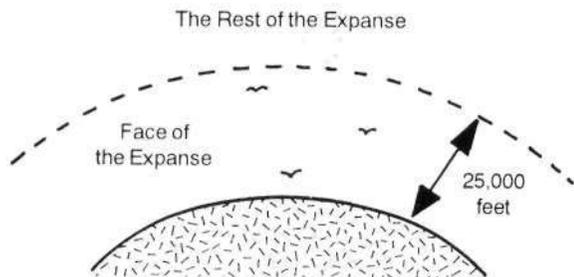


Figure 1. The atmosphere is only the face of the expanse (reproduced from Humphreys).

Item	Number of Occurrences
hand(s)	38
arm(s)	11
heavens	9
line (rule)	5
rod	3
spear	3
sword	2
shadows	1
the north	1
a rule(r)	1
curtains	1
a tent	1
necks	1
colour above	1

Table 1. List of the kinds of things 'stretched', as referred to in the Scriptures.

those who specialise in languages know that 'concise' word-books are dangerous, and those who study Hebrew know that the most carefully researched lexicon is the Gesenius Lexicon." And that publication gives a much greater range of meanings for *be* than Holladay, and several of these are not within the range of English 'in'.

Nevertheless the Sun, Moon and stars could be said to be 'in' an expanse interrupted by some canopy, the 'expanse of space', in the same sense that we see an object 'in' a shop window. In the strict sense, the object is not 'in' the window but behind it, and we see it 'through' the window-glass.

However, if that seems special pleading, we can confirm from Gesenius that the preposition *be* includes in its range of meanings 'by means of', 'by', 'through', as in Isaiah 62:10, where one is encouraged to pass 'through' the gates, and elsewhere.

DOES 'STRETCHING' IMPLY EXPANSION?

The main thrust of Humphreys' argument turns upon the idea of God 'stretching out the heavens'. Here the verb is Hebrew *natah*, rendered mostly as 'stretch' and 'spread'. However, care must be exercised in equating 'stretching' with anything to do with elastic substances. This idea would be foreign to the Old Testament culture, since the basic meaning is to spread out as a salesman in a market might spread out wares. It is not one substance taken and expanded, for which concept there are many other verbs available, none of which are used in connection with God's work in spreading out the heavens.

First, it's unfortunate that the word for 'firmament' is rendered 'expanse'. True, a firmament sounds like a solid object, but expanse also has an overtone in many minds of something that can expand. That said, we can look at the verb(s) used for 'stretching out' the heavens. The commonest, *natah*, occurs 181 times in the Old Testament,

of which 65 instances have little relevance to our discussion. Another 31 are rendered 'turn' and seven are traditionally translated 'spread'. The nine which refer to the heavens are members of the 78 rendered 'stretch', and it is these we should examine, along with the one 'spread' which also refers to the heavens. However, we have already suggested that 'spreading' here has the implication of setting out wares and not expanding.

The kinds of things 'stretched' are shown in Table 1. In none of the examples in Table 1 do I find anything implying expansion or enlargement. The stretching out of hands, arms, rods, spears and swords indicates change of direction of the limb or object only. Stretching out a line, rule, curtain or tent implies stretching the object over something without suggestion of expansion in size or capacity. Shadows could conceivably seem to be 'elastic', but it could mean just extending in a certain direction. The north is presumably 'stretched out' in the sense of its extent also.

The most apposite in connection with the heavens is that they have a vast extent, rather than that they have been expanded. Thus I am unable to deduce from the Scripture references the idea of stretching we have in today's expressions such as 'stretch socks', etc. That idea doesn't fit the Hebrew of the time.

Perhaps we are in danger of placing too much stress on current science, which accepts relativity rather than the Newtonian model. But who knows how long this current model will last? And we cannot ignore completely the negative or circumstantial factors concerning rain and the rainbow, especially since God used exactly the same word *nathan* for 'setting' the luminaries in the sky as He uses for 'setting' the rainbow there. If you believe the luminaries were postponed until the fourth day of creation, it looks clear enough that you also have to accept a long postponement for the rainbow, which again has implications about rain. Don't let's throw out the canopy baby with the rainwater!

CONCLUSION

I trust I have not trespassed in the fields of science more than a layman should. However, my linguistics researches leave me more in harmony with the canopy theories than with the 'waters beyond' theories.

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