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.' 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. 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.'

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.'

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.

'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 'expanses' 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'. 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', 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' 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' statement
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"'. But

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 'expanses
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 'expanses'. 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.

REFERENCES

3. Dillow, Ref. 1, p. 106.
6. Humphreys, Ref. 5, p. 255.
7. Humphreys, Ref. 5, p. 258.
8. Humphreys, Ref. 5, p. 259.
9. Humphreys, Ref. 5, p. 257.

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