

Is the *raqiya*' ('firmament') a solid dome? Equivocal language in the cosmology of Genesis 1 and the Old Testament: a response to Paul H. Seely

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Anti-Christian sceptics often denounce the Bible as teaching a faulty cosmology. One example is the assertion that the Hebrew word **רָקִיעַ** (*raqiya*', or 'firmament' in the KJV) denotes a solid dome over the earth, so that the Bible is guilty of scientific error. Such enemies of the Gospel have an ally in the professing evangelical Paul H. Seely, who maintains that both the social background data and the text of the Bible itself support this conclusion.

Seely's conclusion is both presumptuous and untenable, and he fails to recognize that the description of the *raqiya*' is so equivocal and lacking in detail that one can only read a solid sky into the text by assuming that it is there in the first place. One can, however, justifiably understand Genesis to be in harmony with what we presently know about the nature of the heavens.

Introduction

It is common for sceptics to attack the Bible for teaching a primitive cosmology, including a flat earth and geocentrism. They use these arguments to claim that the Bible cannot be the word of God, rightly pointing out that God would not make errors in his Word. Neither

would Jesus, if he were truly God in the flesh, endorse erroneous teaching. However, such sceptical arguments against the Bible's cosmology have been repeatedly refuted by conservative Christians.¹

More recently, the enemies of Christ have acquired an ally in the professing evangelical Paul H. Seely, who has also claimed that the Bible makes scientific errors. In giving ammunition to sceptics and others who want to destroy the Bible, thus feeding into the world system and giving it comfort, in some ways Seely is more dangerous to Christians than atheists. Although his papers are not cited in any Bible commentary I could find at the Reformed Theological Seminary at Orlando, Florida, his views seem to be beloved of Christians who desire to compromise the plain teachings of Scripture with the man-made theories of evolution and billions of years. Therefore this article is justified as pulling out this tree of misinformation by its roots.

A solid dome?

In particular, Seely has published two papers in the *Westminster Theological Journal* claiming that the Bible teaches that there is a solid dome above the earth. He announces near the very start of his 1991 article:

*'The basic historical fact that defines the meaning of raqiya' — the Hebrew word in Genesis 1 which the King James Bible reads as 'firmament,' but many modern translations render 'expanse' — 'is simply this: all peoples in the ancient world thought of the sky as solid.'*²

Following this statement is an impressive and informative list of citations that goes on to prove just that point: from American Indians to the neighbors of the Hebrews in the ancient East; from ancient times until the time of the Renaissance, there were almost no recorded dissenters, leading Seely to the resolution, 'When the original readers of Genesis 1 read the word *raqiya*' they thought of a solid sky.'² Then, after an analysis of relevant Biblical texts, Seely concludes:

*'... (T)he language of Genesis 1 suggests solidity ... and no usage of raqiya' anywhere states or even implies that it was not a solid object ... The historical-grammatical meaning of raqiya' in Gen. 1:6-8 is very clearly a literally solid firmament.'*²

Biblical inerrancy

We will have much to say regarding the specific Old Testament citations that Seely uses in defence of his thesis, but for the present, I perceive some rather gaping holes in Seely's general logic. In terms of the meaning of *raqiya*' and the composition of Genesis, there are three basic possibilities:

First, it is possible that what Seely says is correct.

The terms given in Genesis had only one possible meaning and no other, and Genesis was written, even under inspiration as Seely professes to believe, with this basic error in thought preserved.

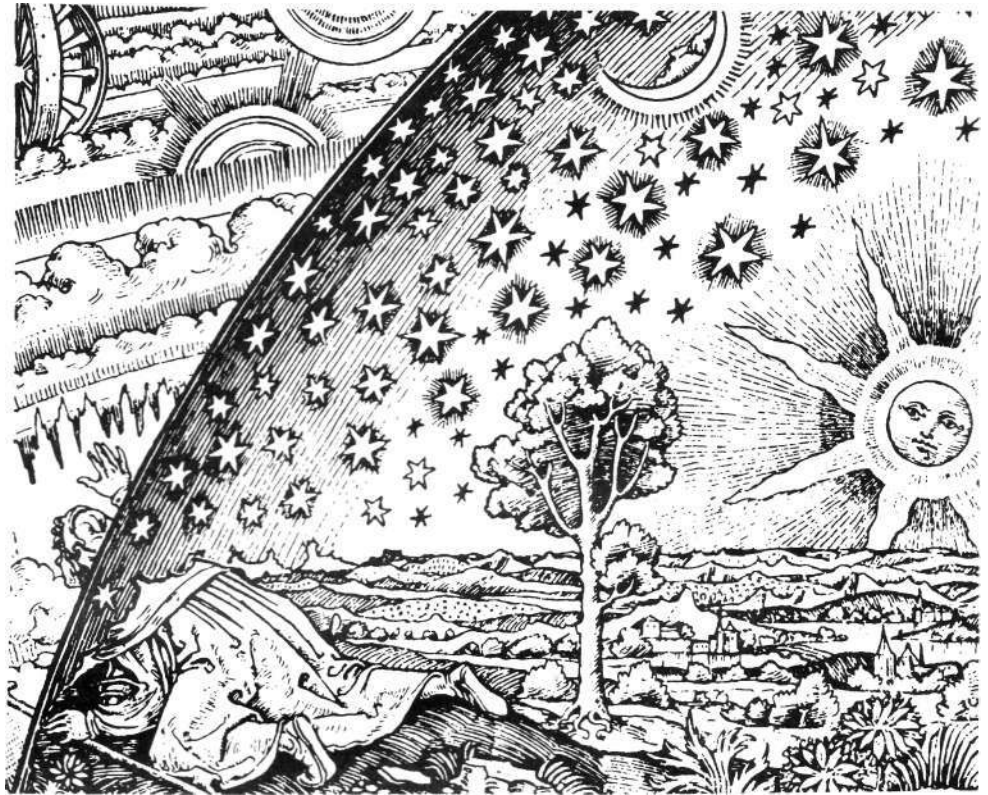
Second, it is possible that the Genesis account was written *before* any of the erroneous cosmological theories of solid skies that Seely lists. It is not an uncommon suggestion that Gen. 1-11 was founded in sources prior to Moses — some would say the story derives from Abraham; we may even suppose that it derived from the experiences of Adam. If this is so, and if we can show that the descriptions in Gen. 1 are compatible with our present-day observations of the natural world, then

Seely's entire argument collapses. All he has shown is that the Hebrews and all of those following misinterpreted the meaning of *raqiya'* according to their own perceptions and derived from Genesis the idea of a solid sky. We may regard this solution as satisfactory, but a question mark remains in that we have no exact idea of the original composition date of Genesis 1.

Finally, there is a third option. Truly enough, one can indeed read Genesis 1 and say that a solid sky is in mind. But one can also, with as much justification, read Genesis 1 and say rather that it comports exactly with what we know today of the atmosphere and the solar system, with or without adjustments made for phenomenological language, and this is because of the utterly *equivocal nature* of the language used in Genesis 1.

Certainly Seely is correct to quote Warfield's dictum that it was not the purpose of the writer of Genesis³ to describe the nature of the sky; Seely is also correct (if a bit chauvinistic in tone) to say that *'there is no reason to believe the Hebrews were any less scientifically naive than their neighbors.'*⁴

Where the line must be drawn is before the implication that inerrancy is not compromised by reading a solid sky into Genesis 1, and allowing no other interpretation. It does not do to say that *'God has sometimes allowed his inspired penman to advert to the scientific concepts of their own day.'*⁵ Seely confuses *adaptation to human finitude* with *accommodation to human error* — the former does *not* entail the latter.⁶



As I know all too well, having spent several years confronting critics of the Bible,⁷ such 'allowances' as Seely asserts easily open the door to ridicule of the inspired Word, and the critics are correct to see such rationalizations as Seely's as totally invalid.

It also opens the door to those who claim that the Bible writers' teaching on morality was also a reflection of 'the scientific concepts of their own day'. For example, was their teaching against adultery and homosexual acts in ignorance of the modern scientific 'fact' that such behaviour is 'in the genes', programmed by evolution? This is hardly a caricature,⁸ showing that Seely's attitude is the top of a perilous slippery slope. (Of course, it is fallacious to claim that behaviour is completely controlled by genes,⁹ and the 'gay gene' finding has been strongly questioned.¹⁰)

Rather than wave the white flag over inerrancy with this compromise over *raqiya* \ it is better served, under this third option, to realize that the inspired author of Genesis was allowed to use the only terms available to him in his language to describe natural phenomena, but was *not* allowed to offer anything more than the vaguest, most minimal descriptions of those phenomena, thereby leaving nearly everything unsaid about their exact nature. Genesis 1 was perfectly designed to allow that interpretation which accorded with actual fact, for it *'says nothing more than that God created the sky or its constituent elements'* while remaining *'completely silent about what those elements were.'*¹¹ It only depended upon

where one started: if one starts with the presumption of a solid sky, one will read into the text a solid sky. If one starts with a modern conception, the text, as we shall see, permits that as well.

Put another way: if today we say 'the sky is blue' to a person who is a member of a 'primitive' society, and they happen to define the 'sky' as 'the solid expanse over our head', this does not make our original statement, 'the sky is blue,' in error. Their thought-concept is indeed in error, but our original statement is not — even if we both happen to use the same word, 'sky', to describe different concepts. So it is that God, using an inspired penman under the constraints of human language, did not err in Genesis. The cosmology has been kept so basic and equivocal that one must force certain meanings into the text and analyze what the writer 'must have been thinking' (as well as pay no attention to the fact that God, not man, is the ultimate author of the text) in order to find error.

Solid proof

Sailhamer¹² warns us that:

'... we must be careful to let neither our own view of the structure of the universe nor what we think to have been the view of ancient people to control our understanding of the biblical author's description'

of the *raqiya'*; rather, we must come to the text itself and ask what it says. After beginning his case by spending several pages delineating *'the views of ancient people'*, Seely finally follows Sailhamer's dictum and asks whether there is anything in the OT *itself* that *'clearly states or implies that the raqiya' is not solid'*.¹³ He first submits:



Birds fly in the 'heavens',

'The fact that [the raqiya'] was named "heaven(s)" in Gen. 1:8 and birds fly in the heaven(s) (Deut. 4:17) seems to imply that the raqiya' was not solid. But the word shamayim (heaven[s]) is broader in meaning than raqiya'. It encompasses not only the raqiya' (v. 8, Ps. 19:6; 148:4) but also the space above the raqiya' (Ps. 2:4; 11:4; 139:8) as well as the space below (Ps. 8:8; 79:2). Hence birds fly in the heavens, but never in the raqiya'. Rather, birds fly upon the face or in front of the raqiya' (Gen. 1:20).¹³

This phrase upon the face (surface) of the raqiya' is important in that it implies that the raqiya' was neither space nor atmosphere. For birds do not fly upon the surface or in front of space or air, but rather in space or air.

This distinction is illustrated in the case of fish, which no one would say swim upon the surface of or in front of the water (Gen. 7:18), but rather in the water (cf. Exodus 7:18, 21).¹³

The problem with this argument is that the claim that *shamayim* is 'broader in meaning' than *raqiya'* in Genesis¹⁴ is simply groundless — the result of circular reasoning. In Genesis 1:8, the implication is that the *raqiya'* has the name *shamayim* in an exact one-to-one correspondence, just as is the case for the 'Earth' and the 'Seas' when they are named (v. 10). There is no reason to see a broader meaning of *shamayim* than an exact equation with *raqiya'*.

In fact, Seely's only reason for saying that *shamayim* and *raqiya'* are not equal seems to be that it would result (because of verses like Deuteronomy 4:17, and other like Psalm 11:4) in the absurd conclusion that the birds fly or God sits enthroned 'inside' a solid structure! In other words, Seely has done precisely what Sailhamer

has warned against: he has started with the idea of the solid sky, based on the views of ancient people, and forced onto the text divisions in the *shamayim* that are simply not specified, and in the case of Genesis 1, not even permitted, by the text.

We therefore argue that *raqiya'* is intended rather to refer to that which serves to 'separate the earth from all that is beyond it',¹⁵ (that is, what we call the atmosphere, and interstellar space) and that because no differentiation is made otherwise, there is no reason why Genesis can not be read to permit a description of the heavens and the natural

order as we know it.

What of the other verses cited? Psalm 19:6 says, *'It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat'* (NIV). This occurs after one of only two uses of *raqiya'* in the Psalms, in verse 1: *'The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork'* (KJV).¹⁶ The poetic parallel of verse 1 strongly suggests that *raqiya'* and *shamayim* are meant to be equal in some sense, and in that case this verse would be contrary to Seely's argument. But without any specific definitions from the author of this Psalm, any argument is simply speculative. Psalm 19:6 offers support for neither Seely's position nor my own.

Psalm 148:4 says: *'Praise Him, highest heavens, And the waters that are above the heavens!'* (NASB) No comparison is made to the *raqiya'* at all, and we can hardly assume without any definition or comparison from the writer of this Psalm that the two were or were not in exact correspondence; much less can it be assumed that there is embedded in this passage all of the given assumptions about what the *shamayim* consists of. At the same time, that the Psalmist refers in this poetic genre to multiple heavens no more means a division in types of heavens than his reference to the 'most High God' (78:56) and a 'lowest hell' (86:13) means that he knew of a God lower than the highest one or of a hell higher than the lowest one! Like the previous verse from the Psalms, this verse supports no specific interpretation.

Psalms 2:4, 11:4, and 139:8 all refer to God's 'location' in heaven. It is difficult to see (especially since no explanation is offered) how these prove that there is some portion of *shamayim* that is 'above' the *raqiya'*. Not one of these verses speaks of the *shamayim* in reference to the *raqiya'*; nor do they make any kind of distinction between them.

Psalms 8:8 and 79:2 both refer to *'birds of the shamayim'*, again, with no reference to the *raqiya'*. Moreover, the *'birds of the shamayim'* are referred to in Gen. 1:26, a verse that Seely bypasses without comment! There is nothing in either of these verses, especially in light of Gen. 1:8 and 26, that in any way indicates that the two words refer to anything different within their contexts. Seely appears to make the differentiation only because to do otherwise would lead to an absurd conclusion.

That leaves Gen. 1:20. Many commentators regard this verse as phenomenological.^{17,18} But what of Seely's 'fish in the sea' distinction? The analogy is in fact completely inappropriate. Water presents a definitively visible and tactile barrier to the human observer; the heavens do not. We know where the water starts, but where does the sky start? How high must something be



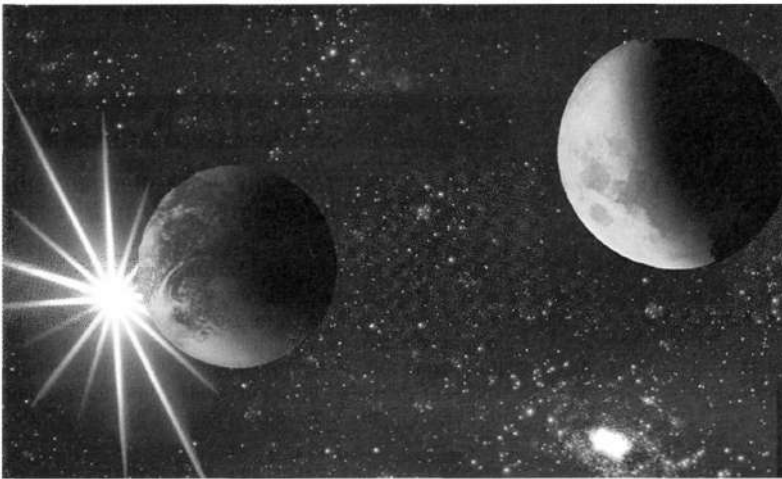
Where does the sky start?

to be *'in the sky'*? 2 Samuel 18:9 describes Absalom caught in a tree by his hair as hanging 'between heaven and earth'. Is heaven very low, or is this a very tall tree, and was Absalom riding tall in the saddle? Ezekiel (8:3) was *'lifted up between the earth and the heaven'* in his vision. No altimeter accompanied him, but it is difficult to see why any great height needs to be implied. 1 Chr. 21:16 refers to *'the angel of the LORD standing between heaven and earth'* (NIV). So does one have to be at least as tall as Jerusalem to be considered 'between' heaven and earth? (If I were Absalom or Ezekiel, or the woman called 'wickedness' [Zech. 5:9], I'd consider flight insurance.)

Genesis 1:7, read with wooden literalism, would suggest that the *raqiya'* began at the very surface of the waters! I don't think that even Seely would read a solid *raqiya'* into that one — **this is a *reductio ad absurdum*** of Seely's **position**.

The point is that whereas water presents a tangible and identifiable starting point, the 'sky' does not, and it is to the credit of the OT writers (as well as evidence of their inspiration, and perhaps of the equivocal language they were inspired to use) that they do not say where the *shamayim/raqiya'* 'begins' and 'ends'. The only verse that Seely can offer that comes close to such an estimation is Gen. 1:20, which does not say precisely where the *shamayim* starts in relation to the ground (for there is no indication that birds flying higher are considered to be any closer to the *raqiya'* than those flying low to the ground); nor for that matter does it say or even imply what this *raqiya'* is made of. Even so, the parallel in Gen. 1:26 strongly suggests that birds live in the *shamayim* just as fish live in the sea — and thereby points to the words of Gen. 1:20 as purely phenomenological, said from the point of view of a writer on earth. Now Seely is aware of the phenomenological interpretation, for he notes:

*'Gen. 1:17 also testifies that the *raqiya'* is not air or atmosphere for it says that God placed the*



the moon in the *raqiya*'.

stars (and probably the sun and moon) *in* the *raqiya*' of the heavens.' But the stars are not located in the air or atmosphere. Rather (as anyone can tell on a clear night away from city lights) they **look like** they are embedded in a solid vault which is exactly why scientifically naive peoples believe in a solid vault, and why 1:17, in accordance with that belief says God placed the stars in the *raqiya*'.¹⁹

I am not sure what Seely means when he says that the sun and moon were 'probably' placed in the *raqiya*' — the text clearly enough indicates that they were (vv. 14-15). As to whether the stars were placed in the *raqiya*', that is an open question. Commentators have often noted that the creation of the stars is added on to verse 16 as something of a parenthetical note.²⁰ Whether they actually are or are not 'in' the *raqiya*'/*shamayim* is left unsaid.²¹ If they are not, but the sun and moon are, then *raqiya*' may be meant to indicate our solar system only.²² If the *kowkabim* (stars) are intended to be within the bounds of the *raqiya*', then Young's definition noted above, that the *raqiya*' indicates only that which separates the earth from what is beyond it, may hold true; or else, there is no reason, despite Seely, why the phenomenological approach cannot be used: that the luminaries are created for the express purpose of being '*signs, and for seasons*' shows a thoroughly earth-bound phenomenological perspective.²³ It is shocking that all that Seely offers contrary to this is a vague assertion that '*anyone can tell*' that from the perspective of earth, the stars look like they are '*embedded in a solid vault*'. I have never gotten such an impression at all about the stars. Nor, it seems, did at least one biblical writer, perhaps the earliest of them, think that the expanse was solid. The natural implication of Job 26:7 is that the writer understood that the stars, like the earth, were hung upon nothing. Nowhere does Genesis even use words like 'embedded' to describe the relationship.²⁴

Air up there

A keystone to one of my own arguments is that the inspired authors, working under the constraints of human language, simply had no words to use that would adequately describe the creation of the *raqiya*' as 'open air', and so were made to leave the descriptive details of the matter unsaid. Seely does try to offer some alternatives, however:

'...(W)hen God divided the light from the darkness **nothing** was **made**. But in order to divide the tangible upper ocean (the "waters above the **raqiya**" — JPH) from the lower ocean the *raqiya*' was **made** ("asah). The combination of dividing two tangibles (as opposed to intangibles) with something that was made ('asah), a verb which often means 'manufacture,' implies a tangible, i.e., a solid divider. It would be unnatural to use ('asah) to say that God made space. Nor is it a particularly apt word for saying God made air.'²⁵

There is a flaw in this line of reasoning as well. Seely has asserted that the 'air' or 'space' which surrounds us is 'intangible,' and this is correct from a strictly phenomenal point of view. But in actuality, the 'air' and 'space' around and above us is *not* strictly 'intangible' at all. It is rather composed of gas molecules (oxygen, carbon dioxide, etc.) that are too small for us to feel or otherwise perceive unaided, and further out into space there is a wide variety of material such as spaceborne dust, gases, and so on. There is no reason why 'made' should be an inappropriate verb for the creation of such things, unless Seely can show elsewhere that creation of something similar required a different verb — and that he certainly cannot do, unless he has some hidden passages in the Old Testament up his sleeve. This is indeed a key problem for Seely's thesis: he has no way of proving that *raqiya*' would not also be used for the creation of something made of gas, dust, or liquid because he has no comparison points within the text of the Old Testament to offer.

Now I am by no means asserting that the human writer of Genesis 1 had some knowledge of terrestrial gases or extraterrestrial objects; that is not the point. That author (and later readers) could very well have understood the *raqiya*' as Seely supposes; but in being inspired to say that a *raqiya*' was 'made', without saying anything about its nature, the word permits us today to recognize the *raqiya*' for what it most likely is: An 'expanse' of terrestrial gases — or perhaps also extraterrestrial matter within our solar system or throughout space.

Now an obvious question is, if Seely has decided (in spite of having no comparison point to say so) that these words are not 'apt' for the creation of air and space, then what words would he have used that were available

in Hebrew? Claiming that *raqiya'* was a 'particularly unfortunate' choice (thus denying the plenary verbal inspiration, putting him outside the evangelical camp), since it derives from a root that is used of hammering out metal into thin plates, he makes these suggestions for replacements:

*'It could have been said that God put **room** or **space** (revach) as in Genesis 32:16 (17) or space (rachowq) as in Josh. 3:4, between the two bodies of water. If air (a word never appearing in the OT) had been in mind as the divider, **ruwach** ('wind') could have been used, as in Exod. 14:21, or **neshamah** ('breath') as in Gen. 2:7; Ps. 150:6.²⁶*

A closer look at each of these word choices reveals them to be inadequate. The first word (*revach*) appears only twice in the OT, in Genesis 32 and in Esther 4:14, and in both cases carries the sense of an *enlargement* of a previous space or thing. In Esther it refers to the 'space' and deliverance given to the Jewish population! In Genesis it refers to the increasing of space between two droves of herd animals. One can readily see someone like Seely arguing that the use of this word would imply a space between a solid dome and the surface of the earth! It would not by itself serve for a space that reaches upward to an indefinite or infinite place, and at the very least has not been shown to be a better choice than *raqiya'*.

The same criticism could be levelled against the second word, *rachowq*, which in Joshua 3:4 does not describe space between two bodies of water, but the space needed between the people and the Ark of the Covenant. It is used in the OT in the sense of describing distance in time, space, and even value, but even so is made in reference to the distance between two specific points, and therefore does not serve at all for an infinite or indefinite upward reach, and again, at the very least has not been shown to be a better choice than *raqiya'*.

Ruwach (wind) is the word that is actually used in reference to two bodies of water: it is the force that divided the Red Sea. It is used throughout the OT to describe the meteorological force of wind, breath (inhaling or exhaling), and also a 'spirit'. This word would hardly serve to describe an infinite/indefinite expanse above the earth. Its main focus seems to be movement: note that when the two words *ruwach* and *shamayim* are used in tandem in 'meteorological' contexts, the indication is that *ruwach* is a phenomenon of the *shamayim* (1 Kings 18:45; Jer. 49:36; Dan. 8:8; Zech. 2:6). There is clearly a distinction in the words that would make *ruwach* an inappropriate choice to describe the heavens themselves.

The last word (*neshamah*) is Seely's most absurd selection. It is used in the OT in the sense of one's life-breath, spirit or soul. If the *raqiya'* could have been called a soul or a spirit, or a life-breath, then whom does

it enliven, and who breathed it out? This term might have been useful under the rubric of a New Age 'Gaia' theology, but it would not make a great deal of sense in the context of Genesis!

We are left with the assertion that *raqiya'* and *'asah* are the most suitable choices available to the Hebrew, and Seely has failed to show otherwise. The Hebrew language had no holding place at this time for the concept of terrestrial gases or space-borne particles, nor for the concept of an infinite or immeasurable upward space, and the combination of words that was used in Genesis offered the only choice.²⁷

The *Raqiya'* in other books: Ezekiel and Exodus

As a final effort to argue that the *raqiya'* should be understood as solid, Seely appeals to the use of the word in the book of Ezekiel, where it appears five times describing something that is clearly some sort of solid, crystalline canopy. As he puts it:

'... (I)n Ezekiel I the nature of a firmament is described ...It was a divider of some kind over the heads of four cherubim (vv. 22-25), and on top of it was a throne with a man on it (v. 26). As to the composition of the firmament, it looked like "terrible crystal or ice."

*Inasmuch as the throne mentioned was apparently sitting on the firmament (cf. Exod. 24:10) and the firmament looked like crystal or ice, it is apparent that the firmament is solid and is certainly not mere atmosphere or space or simply phenomenal language ... Having then this clear definition of *raqiya'* as a solid divider, one is hermeneutically bound to interpret the *raqiya'* in Genesis as solid unless there is some clear reason to differentiate the one from the other.²⁸*

There are plenty of 'clear reasons' to make the differentiation, the most obvious being that there is no indication at all that Ezekiel considered this *raqiya'* to be identical with the one in Genesis — or perhaps, there was no faulty inspiration given to him which identified one with the other. It is not described as the *raqiya'* of *shamayim*, merely as a *raqiya'*, and there is no indication that a *raqiya'* can only be made of something solid (as opposed to perhaps a gas or liquid — would Ezekiel have regarded this covering as a *raqiya'* if it had been a soap bubble?). But the clinching reason to not equate the two is that to do so would also imply that cherubim were literally the sort of amalgamated zoo that Ezekiel describes — or that God had a solid, humanlike form and sat on a literal, physical throne! Surely Seely does not wish to imply that the visions granted to Ezekiel and to the elders of Israel depicted some sort of actual reality in the same way that our own world is a reality? Theologians are certainly correct to say that our own consciousness is unable to truly, *fully* comprehend what

these creatures are like and what these visions represented; all of these things were rather conversions into forms that could be perceived by human senses. By God's standard, they were crude and thoroughly inadequate constructs, but they served as the most that the minds of men could endure.

It is therefore hazardous to suppose that the *raqiya'* of Ezekiel and that implied in Exodus (24:10) may be used to interpret the *raqiya'* of Genesis 1 as a solid dome. In fact, this even applies if they are meant to be understood in correspondence. Theoretically, angelic and spiritual beings, which are 'intangible' to us, might regard what we consider to be 'intangible' as 'liquid' or 'solid'. As long as we are uninformed as to these matters (and we will certainly remain so for quite some time!) it is foolish to judge these texts by our own perceptions and experiences and apply them to our own reality.

Waters above the heavens

In a second article, Seely goes a step further and attempts to show that the Genesis account teaches the existence of 'a veritable sea located above' the solid *raqiya'*.²⁹ Now to begin this section, here is an analogy regarding the first of the Ten Plagues that will prove useful. We have a descriptive indication that the waters of the Nile were turned to 'blood', but we need not automatically believe that it was 'blood' in the sense of having erythrocytes, platelets, plasma, etc.³⁰ By the same token, when Genesis speaks of 'waters' above the *raqiya'*, we are hardly to suppose that it was a substance universally composed of two parts hydrogen, one part oxygen. Nor for that matter can we suppose the distribution of these 'waters' was uniform above the *raqiya'*, although we do not doubt that some ancient peoples, including the Hebrews, reached that conclusion of their own accord.

What, then, are these 'waters'? We agree with Seely, against a number of commentators, that these are not clouds.³¹ Rather, it is our suggestion that these 'waters' were the originally-created, basic building blocks of matter that the earth was made from, and otherwise became all that was created outside of our atmosphere and/or our solar system.³² We would hardly expect the author of Genesis to make distinctions between things like stellar matter, methane gas, asteroids, comets, etc. A simple elemental term, 'waters,' would be sufficient, especially in light of the fact that these same waters were made into 'Seas' below the *raqiya'*, and even so after the primordial 'waters' had been coalesced into different forms. The term 'waters' would serve in the minds of the pre-scientific just as 'blood' stood for whatever actual substance the Nile became.

We are not told what becomes of these 'waters' above the *raqiya'* in Genesis. This is not surprising, and in fact accords with the biblical record, for as Seely rightly

observes, citing Steck:

*'...(B)y not naming the waters above the firmament as he named the waters below (Gen. 1:9—10) God signified that he excluded them from the world made for man.'*³³

This clue is more significant than Seely realizes. No further revelation is given about the nature of these waters; nor is it said what has happened to them. As far as the inspired writers knew, these waters were still 'up there,' and if they started with the conception of an ocean, they would continue with that conception. At the same time, as long as they referred only to the 'waters' without any further description, they were not inspired to error. The 'waters' were still there, but God had made further use of them in His creation, and the terminology was hardly available to say that things were any different. (Hence, it is appropriate that Psalms 148:4 only refers to these 'waters' and says nothing else about them.)

With that, we are only left with some figurative language associated with the Flood account. Seely reports:

*'In Genesis 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 is restrained from falling by closing those same floodgates.'*³⁴

This works well as long as it is assumed proven that *raqiya'* and *shamayim* are not equal in the mind of the Genesis writer, but as we have shown, this is not proven at all. This water that came from above could have come from any point in the expanse. It is not my place here to offer any speculations on the mechanisms of the Flood, but it is worth noting that this term 'floodgates of heaven' is used elsewhere in the OT in the context of *heavy rain* (2 Kings 7:2, 19; Mal. 3:10). Perhaps the ancient readers of this text did envision a solid dome with an ocean above it, but if so, they read things into the inspired and equivocal language of the text every bit as much as Seely or I have.

Conclusion

Theologians of a liberal persuasion have often claimed that the idea of special or propositional revelation is 'nonsense' because human language is inadequate to the task of communicating divine truths. This argument is deeply flawed, but it does contain a kernel of truth. Concepts of which human beings are thoroughly ignorant, and would require several steps of scientific exploration to understand, are merely simple matters in the mind of God. To the Hebrews and other 'scientifically naive' peoples, basic cosmology was still in this realm. But it was not beyond God's ability to present the truth without any mix of error. Equivocal language, terms left precisely undefined, served until such time as our own understanding was sufficient to

comprehend the wonders of God's creation. It is singularly unfortunate that men of ancient times and even up unto the present day have imposed their own concepts of what is true upon the Word of God.

References

1. I analyse the usual 'proof texts' found in sceptical websites and show that the sceptics have grossly twisted them, in Holding, J.P., *What Shape is the Earth In? An Evaluation of Biblical Cosmology*. <http://www.integrityonline15.com/jpholding/tekton/tekton_03_03_01.html>.
2. P.H. Seely, The firmament and the water above. Part I: The meaning of *raqiya* in Gen. 1:6-8, *Westminster Theological Journal* 53:227-240, 1991.
3. I adhere to the thesis of Mosaic composition of the Pentateuch: however, I do not believe that this excludes the possibility that a good part of Genesis, particularly chapters 1-11, derived from pre-Mosaic sources which were incorporated into Moses' own work. This was argued cogently by Wiseman, P.J., ed. Wiseman, D.J., *Clues to Creation in Genesis*, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1977, Part I; see also Grigg, R.M., Did Moses really write Genesis? *Creation* 20(4):43-46, 1998. Hence for the purposes of this paper I will leave the question of the immediate authorship of Genesis 1 indeterminate.
4. Seely, Ref. 2, p. 234.
5. Seely, P.H., The firmament and the water above. Part II: The Meaning of 'the water above the firmament' in Gen. 1:6-8, *Westminster Theological Journal* 54:31-46, 1992.
6. These and other important issues relating to biblical inerrancy are well covered in Geisler, N.L. and Nix, Wm.E., *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Moody Press, Chicago, revised and expanded, pp. 62-64, 1986. They give the example of a mother telling her four-year-old: 'you grew inside my tummy' — this is not false, but language simplified to the child's level. 'Tummy' is equivocal language — it can mean 'stomach' or anything within the abdominal cavity. Conversely, 'the stork brought you' is an outright error.
7. Holding, J.P., Answering a List of Biblical Contradictions, <http://www.integrityonline15.com/jpholding/tekton/JPH_AALOBC.html>
8. Spong, J.S., *Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality*, Harper San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, 1984. For a comprehensive critique, see Bott, M.R. and Sarfati, J.D., What's wrong with Bishop Spong?, *Apologia* 4(1):3—27, 1995; on line at <<http://www.answersingenesis.org/WebMan/Article.asp?ID=1119>>
9. Bergman, J., Creationism and the problem of homosexual behaviour, *CEN Tech. J.* 9(1): 121-130, 1995.
10. Rice, G., Anderson, C., Risch, N. and Ebers, G., Male homosexuality: Absence of linkage to microsatellite markers at Xq28, *Science* 284(5414):665-667, 1999; Perspective by Wickelgren, I., Discovery of 'gay gene' questioned, same issue, p. 517.
11. Aalders, G.Ch., *Genesis Vol. 1*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 61, 1981.
12. Sailhamer, J.H., *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 89, 1992.
13. Seely, Ref. 2, p. 237.
14. A further assumption is that the author of Genesis 1 holds exactly the same cosmological view as the author(s) of the cited Psalms, and uses the same terms in exactly the same way. The lack of precision in meaning might be ascribed to the looser constraints of poetic narrative.
15. Young, E.J., *Studies in Genesis One*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, New Jersey, p. 90, 1973.
16. The only other verse in Psalms that uses *raqiya* is 150:1. Seely offers no analysis of this verse, but we might suggest that any 'sanctuary' of God would not be limited, in the context of praising God for His power, to a mere solid dome — regardless of how large it is.
17. Matthews, K.A., *Genesis 1-11:26*, Broadman and Holman, Nashville, TN, pp. 150, 154, 1996.
18. Wenham, G.J., *Genesis 1-15*, Word Books, Waco, TX, p. 24, 1987.
19. Seely, Ref. 2, p. 237.
20. See Matthews, Ref. 17, pp. 154-5: The creation of the stars is '*treated almost as an aside ...as if a mere afterthought*'; Young, Ref. 15, p. 94: '*appears almost as an afterthought*'; Wenham, Ref. 18, p. 21: '*almost as an afterthought*'.
21. At least, this is left unsaid as far as Genesis 1 is concerned. Other verses indicate that the stars are in ('of) the *shamayim*, but may indicate a later and less precise (or more phenomenological) cosmology.
22. The Hebrew word *kowkab* did not make any distinction between what we now call 'stars' and planets, so that it might be objected that at least some of the *kowkabim* ought to have been said to be within the confines of the *raqiya* if my 'solar system' idea is correct. But I see no reason why, if Genesis is indeed less concerned with cosmology than with pointing to God as the Creator, anyone should tender this objection. A second diversion explaining that some *kowkabim* were in the *raqiya* while others were not would have caused needless confusion to ancient readers who would not have had any possible reference point to understand the concept.
23. Matthews, Ref. 17, p. 154-155, writes that the description of the celestial placements presupposes a human view: '*The narrative stresses their function as servants, subordinate to the interests of the earth.*'
24. Aalders, Ref. 11, p. 65, notes that Genesis '*says nothing about precisely where these heavenly bodies are located, and what their relationship is to each other and to the earth.*'
25. Seely, Ref. 2, p. 237.
26. Seely, Ref. 2, pp. 237-8.
27. An equation of *raqiya* with atmosphere, or with atmosphere plus miscellaneous spaceborne matter, comports well with descriptions in the OT elsewhere of the *shamayim* comparing it to a scroll, a curtain, or a tent.
28. Seely, Ref. 2, p. 239.
29. Seely, Ref. 5, p. 31.
30. It is typical to make the suggestion that the 'blood' was actually some sort of algal bloom ('red tide'), or perhaps silt and mud from further up the Nile.
31. Seely, Ref. 5, p. 37ff.
32. The physicist Dr Russell Humphreys has proposed that the heavenly bodies were created out of water, and this has successfully predicted their observed magnetic fields far better than evolutionary models. See Humphreys, D.R., The Creation of Planetary Magnetic Fields, *CRSQ* 21(3): 140-149, 1984; Good news from Neptune: The Voyager 2 magnetic measurements, *CRSQ* 27(1): 140-149, 1990; and Sarfati, J.D., The Earth's magnetic field: Evidence that the earth is young, *Creation* 20(2):15-17, 1998.
33. Seely, Ref. 5, p. 34.
34. Seely, Ref. 5, p. 44.

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