

## BIBLICAL STUDIES

### RAIN WATER VERSUS A HEAVENLY SEA IN GENESIS 1:6–8

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It has become commonplace among some scholars to say that ancient Near Eastern people believed that the sky was a strong solid dome, holding up heavenly waters above it.<sup>1</sup> In support of the theory of a heavenly sea,

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Paul Seely, “The Firmament and the Water Above, Part 1: The Meaning of *raqia*’ in Gen 1:6–8,” *WTJ* 53 (1991): 227–40; Paul Seely, “The Firmament and the Water Above, Part 2: The Meaning of ‘The Water above the Firmament’ in Gen 1:6–8,” *WTJ* 54 (1992): 31–46. The theory is well established enough that it has made its way into standard lexicons. Thus BDB in the entry on רָקִיעַ, sense 2, says, “the vault of heaven, or ‘firmament,’ regarded by Hebrews as solid, and supporting ‘waters’ above it” (p. 956). But BDB also offers the glosses “extended surface” and “expanse” (sense 1), neither of which meanings includes within it the idea of solidity. Cf. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 2:93–94. John H. Walton offers a variation, according to which רָקִיעַ designates the air and קִשְׁיָא designates the solid sky (*Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011], 155–61). Inevitably, we can also find pictorial diagrams of the “OT conception of the world” that show both the heavenly sea and the solid firmament holding it up (e.g., T. H. Gaster, “Cosmogony,” *IDB* 1:703).

Note also critical interaction with this idea: *TWOT* 2:862 (with appended bibliography); *ISBE* (1955) 1:314–15; R. K. Harrison, “Firmament,” *ISBE* (1979) 2:306–7; Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 96n8; C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2006), 260–65; Robert C. Newman, “The Biblical Teaching on the Firmament” (ThM thesis; Biblical Theological Seminary, 1972); Noel Weeks, “Cosmology in Historical Context,” *WTJ* 68 (2006): 283–93.

James P. Allen in analyzing the Egyptian material offers several comments. On the one hand he says that Gen 1:6–7 has “the same image” as Egyptian texts where the “vault is what keeps the waters from the world” (Allen, *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts* [New Haven: Yale Egyptological Seminar, Department of Near Eastern Language and Civilizations, The Graduate School, Yale University, 1988], 4). On the other hand he says, “In the Egyptian conception, the sky is not so much a solid ‘ceiling’ as a kind of interface between the surface of the Waters and the dry atmosphere. The sun sails on these waters just as people can sail on the Nile: ‘The bark of the Sun courses through the Waters’” (p. 5). If the sun is in the sky, which Allen says is the “interface” between the waters and the atmosphere, the analogy of sailing means that the sun must sit on the waters with no intervening solid barrier vault. So the idea of the solid dome has disappeared. Moreover, the fact that Allen describes the whole thing as an “image” means that, in spite of his use of physicalistic-sounding language, he may be acknowledging the imagistic and

scholars cite texts, not only from ancient Near Eastern myths<sup>2</sup> but from the Bible itself. Genesis 1:6–8, it is said, is one such text.

I maintain that, instead of a heavenly sea, we should be thinking about rain water in clouds.<sup>3</sup>

### I. *Positive Understanding of Genesis 1:6–8 as Phenomenal Language*

We cannot undertake a full analysis of every text that has entered the argument. But we may at least sketch out the directions in which an analysis might proceed. We will presuppose the results of my previous two articles in this series in the *Westminster Theological Journal*, the first on modern myths and the second on correlations with providence in Gen 1.<sup>4</sup>

The second article, in particular, offers an interpretation in which the “expanse” (עֲרֶבֶת) in Gen 1:6–8 is the same as “heaven” (שָׁמַיִם, v. 8).<sup>5</sup> Both words refer flexibly to what is above us. (The word *heaven* can also refer to the invisible dwelling of God with his angels.) Depending on the context and the weather and the time of day or night, we may see clouds (by day), sun in a blue sky, stars and sometimes the moon in a black night sky, and black sky when there is a cloud cover at night. In many contexts the word *heaven* (שָׁמַיִם) is roughly equivalent to our modern English word *sky*. We can comfortably speak of a cloudy sky, a blue sky, a red sky (at sunset), and a night sky. Likewise, the Hebrew term for *heaven* covers the same spectrum (1 Kgs 18:45; Gen 1:14–15). The expression “waters that were above the expanse” designates water above a cloudy sky, that is, water inside clouds, whose lower side is the sky.

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symbolical character of the ancient texts. The language about “the bark [sailing vessel] of the Sun” would constitute one example of imagistic language, since no physical or visible bark is in view. If this reading is correct, Allen is not advocating a physicalistic interpretation of these Egyptian descriptions, but is saying that the representations are symbolical in nature. On the other hand, even if he *is* advocating such a physicalistic interpretation, the texts themselves are still debatable.

On the key verse Job 37:18, see Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 264n25; Newman, “Biblical Teaching on the Firmament,” 18–22. Newman observes that in Job 37:18 the word מִרְיָן, usually translated “mirror,” occurs only once in the OT. Its meaning is uncertain. With a slight repointing (מִרְיָן) it means “appearance” (BDB 909, sense 2), which finds additional support in the LXX translation “appearance” (ὄρασις). Newman offers this translation:

Can you, with him,  
spread out the mighty clouds,  
like an appearance of being poured out? (p. 21)

Newman’s proposal may not be right, but it shows the difficulty of relying on a single poetic verse.

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion of the division of Tiamat in Vern S. Poythress, “Three Modern Myths in Interpreting Genesis 1,” *WTJ* 76 (2014): 321–50.

<sup>3</sup> So John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 1:80; H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 1:60; and others.

<sup>4</sup> Poythress, “Three Modern Myths”; and Vern S. Poythress, “Correlations with Providence in Genesis 1,” *WTJ* 77 (2015): 71–99.

<sup>5</sup> On whether the “expanse/firmament” is distinguishable from the “heavens,” see Seely, “Firmament and the Water Above, Part 1,” 237; with a reply in Weeks, “Cosmology in Historical Context,” 292.

I claim that all this makes sense, to an ancient Israelite as well as a modern reader with appropriate understanding of the point of view and *kind* of description that Gen 1:6–8 offers. In my view, Gen 1:6–8 gives us an ordinary description, a phenomenal description, a description of appearances, and does not offer any detailed “theory” about the expanse (“heaven”) or the water above it.<sup>6</sup> Genesis 1:6–8 becomes intelligible when we realize that it works with analogies between creation and our present experience of God’s providence in bringing rain.

But my interpretation is vigorously disputed. Why?

### 1. *Materialistic Interpretation*

One factor that comes into play is the difference between materialistic and nonmaterialistic interpretations of ancient Near Eastern texts, as discussed in the first of my previous articles.<sup>7</sup> If a person *expects* materialistic information in ancient mythic texts or in the Bible, he can “find” what he expects.<sup>8</sup> Consider the account of Noah’s flood. When Noah’s flood begins,

... the windows of heaven were opened. And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights. (Gen 7:12)<sup>9</sup>

Afterwards,

... the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained....  
(Gen 8:2)

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<sup>6</sup> “For, to my mind, this is a certain principle, that nothing is here [in Gen 1] treated of but the visible form of the world. He who would learn astronomy, and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere” (Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 1:79). Paul Seely’s central interpretive mistake lies in trying to pry out of the word רָקִיעַ a physicalistic theory (“Firmament and the Water Above,” Parts 1 and 2). Such a move pays insufficient attention to the word-concept distinction (James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* [London: Oxford University Press, 1961]).

<sup>7</sup> Poythress, “Three Modern Myths.”

<sup>8</sup> Seely accumulates an impressive number of witnesses from church history in favor of a heavenly sea (“Firmament and the Water Above, Part 2,” 37–40). Only in modern times (Calvin onwards) do people tend towards other interpretations. The pattern that Seely detects from history suggests to him that Bible-believing interpreters in modern times may be prejudicially influenced by modern science, and so fail to interpret the text of Genesis with complete fairness. Ironically, the same may be true of the ancient church. Greek astronomy developed a theory of heavenly spheres from the fourth century BC onwards. Over time, educated people in the Alexandrian Empire and later the Roman Empire were influenced by this theory. Moreover, the translations of Hebrew רָקִיעַ (“expanse”) with στερέωμα (“solid part”) in Greek and *firmamentum* in Latin might encourage the idea of identifying the “firmament” as a solid sphere, corresponding to one of the Greek astronomical spheres. Ancient church interpreters could also be biased if they wanted Gen 1 to “measure up” to the more technical knowledge represented by Greek astronomy, and so the temptation would arise to interpret Gen 1 with a more technical and materialistic slant than the original Hebrew called for. I would suggest that the early church may already have been struggling with an analogue to the “myth of scientific metaphysics” (Poythress, “Three Modern Myths”) and the tendency to interpret Gen 1 in terms of “known” Greek science.

<sup>9</sup> Scriptural quotations are from the ESV.

The water comes from above the windows. In a materialistic and woodenly literalistic interpretation, this means that they come from the heavenly sea, which resides above the barrier, which is “heaven.” The opening of the windows allows the water to come down from the heavenly sea that sits above the barrier. In addition, the language of windows may be interpreted as implying that the windows attach to a solid barrier. There is a difficulty, in that the literal opening of physical windows, like sluice gates, would produce a river from the sky, not forty days of “rain.” But a modern interpreter can brush aside such a difficulty by saying that it is due to the inconsistencies arising from ancient ignorance and primitive mentality.

But if we are not expecting an explanation in terms of physical mechanisms, we can approach the same passages in a different way: they are imagistic, colorful pictures. They are part of a larger pattern, according to which the OT uses analogies between the cosmos and a house or a tent.

## II. *Principles Guiding Understanding the Waters Above*

Which interpretation is correct? We will approach the question through a series of principles.

### 1. *Israelites Could Be Expected to Have Some Knowledge about Rain*

Many of the people of ancient Israel were farmers or herdsmen, familiar with the outdoors, and in the land of Palestine they depended on rain for crops and for pasturage. It was natural that they would develop some experience and elementary knowledge about rain.<sup>10</sup>

### 2. *Old Testament Passages Show That Israelites Knew That Rain Came from Clouds*

Any number of passages show that rain comes from clouds:

... and the heavens dropped,  
yes, the *clouds dropped water*. (Judg 5:4)

He [God] made darkness around him his canopy,  
thick *clouds, a gathering of water*. (2 Sam 22:12)

He [God] binds up the *waters in his thick clouds*. (Job 26:8)

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<sup>10</sup> During their stay in Egypt, the Israelites would have seen much less rain. Today (and presumably also 3000–4000 years ago) Egypt has a desert climate, but there is still a small amount of rain in the north (reported as about 8 inches per year on the coast at Alexandria, but more like ½ to 1 inch in Cairo, and even less south of Cairo). Exod 9:18–19 suggests that Egypt knew the meaning of hail, even though the particular storm of hail in the seventh plague was miraculous.

He [God] loads the thick *cloud with moisture*,  
the clouds scatter his lightning. (Job 37:11)

... thick *clouds dark with water*. (Ps 18:11)

The *clouds poured out water*;  
the skies gave forth thunder.... (Ps 77:17)

... and his [the king's] favor is like the *clouds that bring the spring rain*. (Prov 16:15)

If the *clouds are full of rain*,  
they empty themselves on the earth.... (Eccl 11:3)

I [God] will also command the *clouds*  
that they *rain no rain* upon it. (Isa 5:6)<sup>11</sup>

In addition, 1 Kgs 18:44–45 contains a more extended description of a cloud rising from the sea and then the coming of rain:

And in a little while the heavens grew black with *clouds* and wind, and there was a great *rain*. (v. 45)

In fact, taken as a whole, the information has some complexity. Clouds can bring rain (Prov 16:15), but they can also disappear (Job 7:9; Isa 44:22; Hos 6:4) or blow over without yielding rain (Prov 25:14). The people of the time were familiar with what could happen.

### 3. Other Materials from the Ancient Near East Confirm That People of That Time Were Familiar with the Idea of Rain Coming from Clouds

In Ugaritic poems, Baal, the god of storm and rain, is repeatedly referred to as “Rider on the Clouds.”<sup>12</sup> He brings clouds with rain:

Now, too, the *seasons* of his rains will Baal *observe*,  
The *seasons* of ... with *snow*,  
And <he will> peal his thunder in the clouds,  
Flashing his lightnings to the earth.<sup>13</sup>

But thou, take thy cloud, thy wind,  
Thy ..., thy rains....<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See also Ps 147:8; Jer 10:13; 51:16; Zech 10:1.

<sup>12</sup> ANET 130, III.ABA.8; 131, III.ABA.29; 132, II.AB.(iii).11, 18; etc.

<sup>13</sup> ANET 133, II.AB.(v).68–71 (in ANET italics indicate that the translation is uncertain). Further references to clouds appear in ANET 135, II.AB.(vii).19, 28, 57.

<sup>14</sup> ANET 139 I.AB.(v).6–7.

Straightway Daniel the Rapha-man,  
 ...s a cloud in the heat of the *season*;  
 ...s a cloud raining upon the figs,  
 Dew distilling upon the grapes.  
 Seven years shall Baal fail,  
 Eight the Rider of the Clouds.  
 No dew,  
 No rain;  
 No welling-up of the deep,  
 No sweetness of Baal's voice.<sup>15</sup>

The Epic of Gilgamesh mentions a black cloud briefly in connection with the coming of the south-storm:

With the first glow of dawn,  
 A black cloud rose up from the horizon.  
 Inside it Adad thunders....<sup>16</sup>

Afterward the south-storm brings the deluge.<sup>17</sup>

The *Enuma Elish*, in a fragmentary part of Tablet V, associates clouds with rain:

[*Taking*] the spittle of Tia[mat]  
 Marduk created [...] ...  
 He formed the c[louds] and filled (them) with [water].  
 The raising of winds, the bringing of rain (and) cold,  
 Making the mist smoke, piling up her poison....<sup>18</sup>

Tiamat, the water goddess, is the ultimate source of the water. By this point in the poem, half of Tiamat has become the sky ("heaven").<sup>19</sup> But Marduk makes the clouds the proximate source for rain. (Unfortunately the key word for "clouds" is not clearly readable on the tablet, and other translations do not necessarily agree.)<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. *The Bible Sometimes Describes Rain as Coming from "Heaven"*

But the land that you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by *the rain from heaven*. (Deut 11:11)

For he [God] draws up the drops of water;  
 they distill his mist in *rain*, which *the skies pour down*

<sup>15</sup> ANET 153 AQHT C. (i).39–48.

<sup>16</sup> ANET 94 XI.96–98; COS 1.459.

<sup>17</sup> ANET 94 XI.108, 113; "The flood(-carrying) south-storm subsided in the battle" (ANET 94 XI.129); cf. COS 1.459.

<sup>18</sup> ANESTP 501, Tablet V.47–51.

<sup>19</sup> ANET 67, Tablet IV.137–138; COS 1.398.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. COS 1.399, Tablet V.47–51, which does not contain the word *clouds*.

and *drop* on mankind abundantly.  
Can anyone understand the spreading of the *clouds*,  
the thunderings of his pavilion? (Job 36:27–29)

... the *heavens* poured down *rain*.... (Ps 68:8)

For as the *rain* and the snow come *down from heaven* ... (Isa 55:10)

... he did good by giving you *rains from heaven*.... (Acts 14:17)

... *heaven gave rain*.... (Jas 5:18)

A stubbornly materialistic, literalistic account could insist that this language about rain from heaven is inconsistent with the language about rain from clouds. But such arguments are foolish. Judges 5:4 puts “heavens” in a parallel line with “clouds”:

... and the *heavens* dropped,  
yes, the *clouds* dropped water.

In addition, Job 36:27–29 mentions clouds in close association with rain from the skies. The clouds are in the heavens, so we have here two ways of describing the same phenomenon of rain, not two competing sources for rain. The reference to heaven reminds people indirectly that rain comes from God’s provision. It is completely consistent with saying that rain comes from clouds.

##### 5. *The Bible Uses Language about the Heavens Being “Shut” to Describe a Situation with Lack of Rain*

... he [God] will *shut up the heavens*, so that there will be no *rain*.... (Deut 11:17)

When heaven is *shut up* and there is no *rain* ... (1 Kgs 8:35 // 2 Chron 6:26)

When I [God] *shut up* the heavens so that there is no *rain* ... (2 Chron 7:13)

They [the two witnesses] have the power to *shut the sky*, that no *rain* may fall.... (Rev 11:6)

Given Israelite knowledge that rain came from clouds (principle 2), the language about the heavens being “shut” should be interpreted as a vivid image, not an expression of an alleged materialistic “ancient scientific” theory about how rain is kept from falling. But we can imagine how a materialistic interpretation might approach this language. It would say that ancient people were naive about rain. They thought it came from the heavenly sea. God shut or opened the solid barrier holding up the sea, in order to control the rain. When the barrier was shut, there was no rain. But this kind of account respects neither ancient knowledge of clouds, nor ancient ability to use colorful images.

Or should we conclude that the ancients thought that the clouds were the lower side of a heavenly sea, and that a solid barrier formed the lower edge of a cloud? Job 26:8 says,

He [God] binds up the waters in his thick clouds,  
and the cloud is not split open under them.

This imagistic, poetic language, if taken literally, might suggest such a solid barrier. But a cloud “fades and vanishes” (Job 7:9) and is comparable to a mist (Isa 44:22). By observing the disappearance of a cloud ancient people could learn that there is no solid stuff defining the lower side of a cloud.

In connection with theophanies, the Bible contains accounts of entering a cloud: Exod 24:18; Ezek 1:4; Luke 9:34; possibly also Exod 19:16, 20. The clouds of theophanies are of course not ordinary clouds; but they are analogous, so these descriptions are still suggestive about Israelites’ experiences with ordinary clouds. The theophany at Mount Sinai is described as a time when God came down (Exod 19:11) and “descended” (v. 18). The clouds are symbolical of God’s presence in heaven, and thus confirm the association of clouds with heaven (confirmed also by Job 22:14; Dan 7:13; Matt 26:64; Mark 14:62).

Moreover, for an ordinary observer, ancient or modern, a single experience of entering a low-lying cloud and experiencing fog or mist might suffice to show that clouds can contain moisture and that the lower surface of a cloud is not literally a solid barrier that is shut until the time when it is opened for the rain to be dumped. A materialistic interpreter could of course still escape by claiming that there is a conceptual incompatibility between rain from clouds on the one hand and the idea of shut or open heavens on the other hand, and that this tension only shows the inconsistencies that remain within a primitive mentality. If an interpreter chooses to go this way, he cannot of course be dissuaded. He has made himself deaf to evidence.

6. *In a Manner Analogous to the Heavens Being “Shut,” the Old Testament May Describe Rain as Coming When the Heavens Are “Opened”*

... *the windows of heaven were opened.* And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights. (Gen 7:12)

Afterwards,

... *the windows of the heavens were closed,* the rain from the heavens was restrained....  
(Gen 8:2)

In conformity with the earlier principles, this language about the windows is imagistic language. That is, it provides a colorful image of God bringing voluminous rain from clouds.

Similar imagistic language is used about heaven being opened when God supplies other goods:

“If the LORD himself should *make windows in heaven*, could this thing [abundance of flour and barley] be?” (2 Kgs 7:2; cf. 7:19)

Yet he commanded the skies above  
and *opened the doors of heaven*,  
and he rained down on them manna to eat  
and gave them the grain of heaven. (Ps 78:23–24)

And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not *open the windows of heaven* for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. (Mal 3:10)

A materialistic account for these passages could perhaps say that they indicate an ancient belief in a heavenly granary and a heavenly storehouse for blessing. The interpretation would perhaps then postulate that the heavenly granary is in a separate chamber from the heavenly sea, lest the grain get wet and spoil. And of course there will have to be a system of channels so that the grain or the water can be distributed suitably anywhere on earth. Moreover, this interpretation has to deal with an apparent inconsistency, as to whether “windows” or “doors” let out the contents of the chambers. There is no doubt that a person can produce a materialistic interpretation if he already comes to the OT with such a view in mind. This mode of interpretation illustrates the danger of importing assumptions.

#### 7. *In General, the Old Testament Instructs Israelites about Things That Affect Their Lives*

The individual observations about the various texts fit into a larger picture. Israelites had to depend on rain (Deut 11:11–17). They lived in a land that “drinks water by the rain from heaven” (v. 11). It is reasonable to credit them not only with some familiarity with rain and clouds, but also a practical interest. They could live well only if they had neither too much rain nor too little. The flood of Noah was an instance of having too much. If the heavens were “shut,” it was too little. The Israelites knew that both of these situations could come about by means of rain or lack of rain that came from clouds.

By contrast, an alleged heavenly sea closed in by a solid barrier would have no relation to clouds which allegedly floated underneath the solid barrier. Such a sea could have no practical interest to Israelites, because *clouds* and not the alleged heavenly sea were their source for rain. An alleged heavenly sea is, however, exceedingly relevant to a modern student who is looking for “ancient science” in the form of materialistic explanations.

The materialistic interpreter could still allege that the flood of Noah is an exception that illustrates the relevance of the heavenly sea. But our examination of the language about Noah’s flood shows that, even though the volume of water is greater, nothing in the language indicates that the way that the water came is other than the normal ways involved in rain coming “from heaven.”

In fact, the same principle about relevance to Israelites applies when we interpret the account of the flood in Gen 7–8. The Israelites who heard Gen 7–8 recited in their presence did not experience Noah’s flood themselves. They had to picture it with the help of the textual description in Genesis. Genesis 7–8 invites them to understand the flood by analogy with their own providential situation, where they had experiences with smaller rains and smaller floods. Hence, when they interpret Gen 7–8, they are going to understand it as involving processes analogous to those that they observe providentially: rain from clouds, and floods from overflowing rivers.

The connection between Noah’s flood and clouds is confirmed in Gen 9:8–17. Though the narrative in Gen 7–8 does not mention clouds, the later covenant with Noah in Gen 9:8–17 does:

<sup>12</sup> And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: <sup>13</sup> I have set my bow in the *cloud*, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. <sup>14</sup> When I bring *clouds* over the earth and the bow is seen in the *clouds*, <sup>15</sup> I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. <sup>16</sup> When the bow is in the *clouds*, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

Verse 14 in particular, with the expression “When I bring *clouds* over the earth,” hints at the prospect that the clouds may bring rain. If they bring too much, there will be another flood. God puts his bow specifically “in the *clouds*.” Its location strengthens the guarantee that the clouds, which might to Israelites signify the threat of a flood, will not bring such an intense flood again.

Finally, let us suppose for the sake of argument that we allow that Noah’s flood involved the opening of the heavenly sea, which had nothing to do with clouds. God’s promise to Noah (Gen 9:8–17) guarantees that the Israelites will not have to worry about a recurrence. Hence, the alleged heavenly sea is irrelevant in practice.

#### 8. *Genesis 1 Speaks about Things Relevant to Israelites*

In Gen 1 as a whole and in Gen 1:6–8 in particular God speaks of acts of creation that not only evoke praise but have practical interest to human beings. Thus Gen 1:6–8 is speaking about water above, such as Israelites received from clouds. The alleged heavenly sea is irrelevant, and so it must be rejected as an incorrect interpretation of 1:6–8.

In fact, introducing a heavenly sea creates interpretive problems rather than solves them. Once we acknowledge that Israelites knew that rain comes from clouds, a modern theory about the heavenly sea has to postulate not two bodies of water, but three: the sea on earth, the water in the clouds, and the heavenly sea. It has to say, in effect, that Gen 1:6–8 mentions the first and

the third, even though the third is irrelevant, while leaving out the second, which is continually relevant for crops and for herds. May we ask whether this interpretation is plausible?

Finally, we may observe that an interpretation of Gen 1:6–8 as a reference to a heavenly sea violates the key principle that Gen 1 teaches about creation using analogies from providential experience.<sup>21</sup> There is no providential experience of a heavenly sea, whereas there is providential experience of rain descending from clouds. The implausibility of the heavenly-sea interpretation increases because of its lack of contact with ordinary experience. In reality, the heavenly-sea interpretation imposes an alleged ancient quasi-scientific, materialistic theory of the heavenly sea on the text, which is just as bad as imposing on the text the expectation for modern scientific-technical precision.

### III. *Conclusion*

Since we cannot go back and interview ancient Israelites, modern interpreters can always postulate that the Israelites had strange beliefs about a heavenly sea. Such postulates are likely to be around for a long time. The postulates have become embedded in the tradition of OT scholarship, and they are propped up by the modern myths that make us complaisant about our superiority to the ancients and patronizing towards their alleged primitive naiveté. But, if we are alert, we may entertain doubts. Whether or not the Israelites had strange beliefs, God does not address such beliefs directly, and neither does he presuppose them. He teaches that there is water above, separated from water beneath by an expanse. The language is sparse. If any ancient Israelites or modern interpreters do not realize that rain comes from water above, that is their problem.

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<sup>21</sup> See Poythress, “Correlations with Providence.”