

What is the “firmament” in Gen. 1:6? I see some translations render it “expanse,” others “dome.” What is going on in these translations that they translate presumably the same Hebrew word so differently?

The reason for the differences in translation is that what is “at stake” is nothing less than biblical inerrancy, the belief that the Bible has been miraculously prevented from containing any statement that is false or contrary to objective reality. This is what conservative Protestants mean by “biblical inerrancy.”

If the “firmament” in Gen. 1:6 refers to what it seems to refer to, then you only have to go six verses into the Bible before it is proven wrong by science.

Until a few hundred years ago, as far as we can tell, every civilization and culture believed that the earth was the center of the universe and that the stars visible at night were affixed to a solid shell that rotates once every night. That is certainly how things look to the naked eye. That solid shell or sphere containing the stars would seem to be what the Bible refers to in Gen. 1:6 and a few other verses as the “firmament.”

The problem is, we now know that the earth is not the center of the universe, and there is no solid sphere around it. Instead there is “the vast expanse of interstellar space.” The Bible would seem to reflect the pre-modern (in this case, before

Nicolaus Copernicus, died 1543) view of the structure of the universe.

To save the Bible from containing even one false statement, conservative Protestants have come up with a theory that saves Gen. 1:6 from being wrong.

They say that although there is no firmament around the earth now, there once was one, and that is the “firmament” Gen. 1:6 refers to. They say “firmament” is a mistaken translation of the underlying Hebrew word *raqi'a*, which (they say) has nothing to do with the quality of firmness or hardness but rather indicates thinness. They say there originally was a thin, non-hard layer of charged ions around the earth. This ionosphere -- though not solid -- was able to hold above it water in the form of clouds (vapor), so that the earth was surrounded by a “vapor canopy.” At the Flood, God made the ion sphere lose its charge and dissipate, allowing the water above it to fall to the earth, flooding it.

There are many problems with this theory, scientific and biblical. First, there is no evidence that there ever was such an ion sphere supporting water vapor.

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Biblically, *raqi'a* does indeed seem to involve the idea of hardness.

In Ezek. 1:22-26 a *raqi'a* above the heads of the four beasts supports the throne of God. A thin but non-solid expanse could not do this, but a solid, hard floor could.

In Ps. 19:2 (“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork”) and 150:1 (“Praise God in his holy temple; praise him in the firmament of his power.”) The psalmist (who presumably lived after the flood -- David certainly did) writes of the firmament not in the past tense but as a present feature of the created universe.

Also, while Ps. 148:4 (“Praise him, heaven of heavens, and you waters above the heavens”) does not use the word “firmament,” the “waters above the heavens” must be the waters above the firmament of Gen. 1:6-8. So according to the Psalms, the firmament was not something that ceased to exist at Noah's Flood.

I think this theory of a vapor canopy and a disappearing non-solid firmament is clear-

ly “reaching,” but necessary nonetheless to avoid concluding that the Bible reflects the knowledge and experience of its writers, which in this case, science has gone beyond.

The “all or nothing” view that the Bible has to be perfect and without error or else it is without value doesn't realize that having scientific or historical errors doesn't mean everything in the Bible is wrong, any more than my being mistaken about one thing means that I am wrong about everything. What the biblical writers have to say about God and humanity, about the meaning of life and what it is to live in the service of God, have informed and inspired all subsequent generations of Jews and Christians and always will. We may understand the world of nature better than our ancestors but the human heart and what it means to be human has not changed. Nor has God.

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