

Is the Firmament of Heaven a Solid Dome in Gen.1:6-8?

*Kel Hammond: This copy is dated **2 January 2016**. A copy of this article is found on the Vault, the hyperlink is [here](#)*

Introduction.

The aim of this study is to determine the meaning of the term **'firmament'** in the Genesis account and in the rest of the Bible. This subject is important because many who don't take Genesis as a literal account often assert that this word is used to describe a 'solid dome' like structure.

How we approach this subject and all other Bible subjects will be somewhat determined by our 'worldview'. **If we believe that the Bible is the product of the evolution of Hebrew theology, which was developed over many centuries, as a synthesis out of various other religious traditions, then we will read its testimony in a comparative way to that of other Ancient Near East (ANE) sources.**¹This is the prevailing view of many historians, philosophers and some theologians. Many of these assume that the record is, to varying degrees, a human production from an amalgam of human sources. Others believe that the record is inspired but nevertheless uses cosmological concepts and ideas borrowed from other ANE sources.

These two positions are similar in that they both deny the record of Genesis is to be taken literally at face value, as both assume that some or many of its ideas are borrowed from foreign cosmological concepts. There are many variations of this theory. Regarding the firmament in Genesis, one Christian writer summed it up, **²"Ancient Israelites "saw" this barrier (i.e. the firmament) when they looked up. There were no telescopes, space exploration, or means of testing the atmosphere. They relied on what their senses told them."**

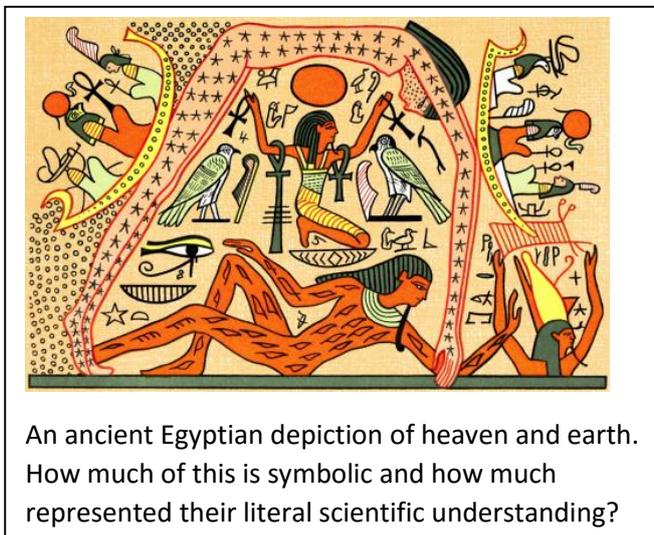
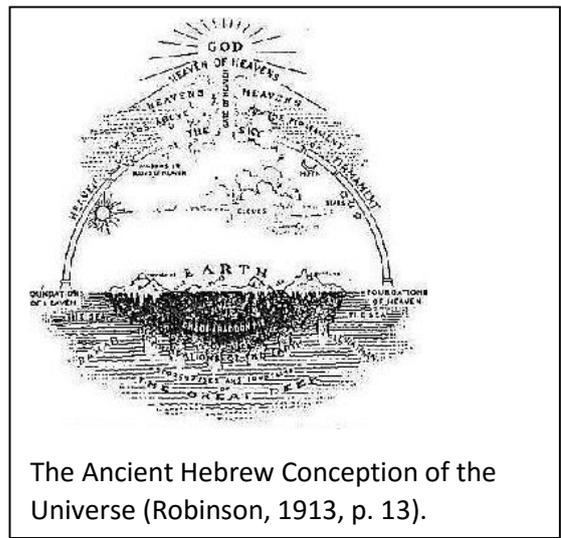
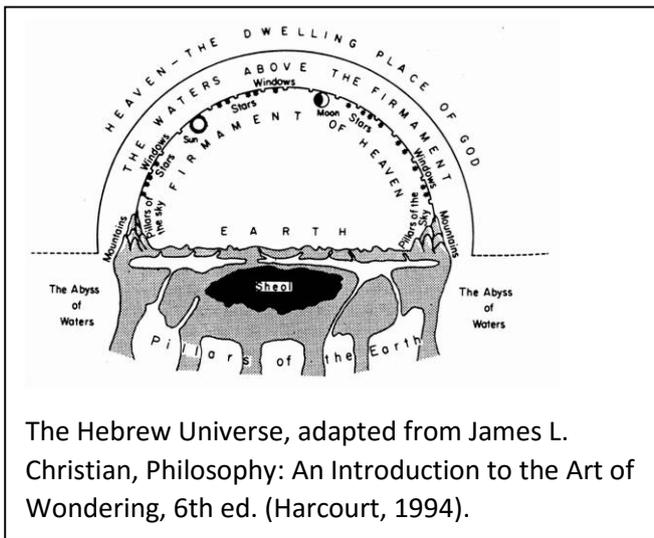
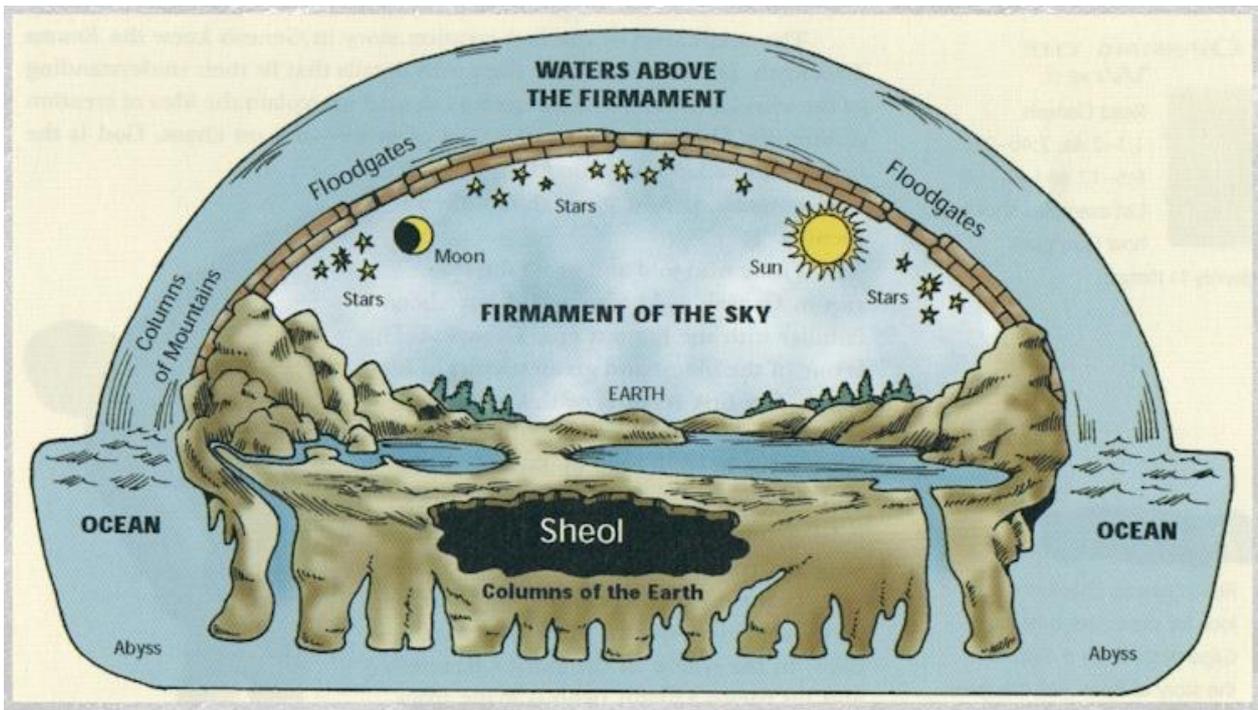
It is quite clear that these positions depend, to some degree, upon the assumption that the Genesis record is either; the product of man's thinking, or ³was designed by God to fit into man's understanding of cosmology i.e. how he saw the heavens in his cultural context. We intend to explore these assumptions in this essay.

The following diagrams are common examples of how some scholars understand the cosmological beliefs of the ancient Hebrews. **It is noteworthy that these are not diagrams from the Bible, but the product of scholarship and rational thinking often summarizing the thoughts of later Jewish and Christian commentaries of the Bible as well as the alleged cosmology of ancient cultures.** In other words, these conclusions are largely based upon concepts developed from studies in comparative religion and culture. Later in this essay we will list details from other scholars who contend that these conclusions are incorrect and are based upon mixing together the figurative language of the Bible with medieval theology and a wrong conception of ancient cosmology. In other words, the diagrams are wrong on a number of fronts, both scripturally and historically, and are more the product of fanciful thinking than sound scholarship.

¹ See Wikipedia's imaginative summary under 'Biblical Cosmology'. A diligent student will notice many inconsistencies and fallacies in the general assumptions found all through this article. See [here](#)

² Bilogos is a website that seeks to show the harmony between science and biblical faith. We do not call into question the good intentions of such efforts, only the conclusions drawn. The article is found [here](#)

³ For example, "The Three Story Universe", University Press of America, 1987. See [here](#)



Gods and Goddesses

- Each community took a particular god or goddess as its patron and protector
- Greeks believed 12 most important deities lived on **Mount Olympus**
- Believed that each **part of the natural world**, e.g. Zeus (right), the chief god ruled the sky, weather and thunderstorms



The modern comparative approach is to look for similarities between the Bible and other ancient beliefs. To many of scholars, Yahweh is a local Hebrew tribal god.

1) **What God says about himself and his creation.**

The God of the Bible.

Firstly, to answer the assumption in many history books that Yahweh was only a local Hebrew tribal god and the Bible narrative itself is a synthetic composition from ANE sources, we must consider what the Bible states within the narrative of its own revelation. **It is important to understand the self-evident fact that God (Yahweh) can only be known and fully understood within the bounds of his own revelation of himself, which is in his word. For God, by every definition is greater than his own creation.** We have listed some foundational concepts below in their relative categories. Many more could be added, but these will be sufficient for the moment to dispel the concept that Yahweh was considered only one god amongst many.

God has declared his power and unity – he knows no equals.

Isaiah.46:5. To whom will ye liken me, and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be like?

Isaiah.46:8-10. Remember this, and shew yourselves men: bring it again to mind, O ye transgressors. Remember the former things of old: **for I am God** (EL = Power), **and there is none else; I am God** (Elohyim), **and there is none like me**, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure:

God has declared that he made the heavens, the earth and the sea.

The God of Israel is unlike all other gods, which are but man-made constructs. Yahweh is his name, and he has declared himself to be the creator and sustainer of all. He formed and filled the world with life, **in 46 days.**

Gen.1:1. **In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.**

Exod.20:11. (The 4th Commandment given by God on Mt Sinai) **For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.**

Exod.31:17. (God speaking first hand to Israel, RE: Keeping the Sabbath day) **It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever: for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.**

Psalms.96:5. For all the gods of the nations are idols: **but the LORD made the heavens.**

Isaiah.45:18. **For thus saith the LORD that created the heavens; God himself that formed the earth and made it; he hath established it, he created it not in vain, he formed it to be inhabited: I am the LORD; and there is none else.**

Rev.10:6. **And sware by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein,** that there should be time no longer:

⁴ The author of this essay believes that the 6 days can only be read literally to maintain the sense of the original narrative. However, he believes that the scripture clearly tells us that the work of creation in the Genesis record was the forming and filling of the world with life etc, and not planet earth's original creation. He believes that this is the only scripturally sustainable and consistent position, and it is evident in the list of reference given above. See "Gen.1v1 re-examined" [here](#)

God is unlike all others. He has declared his purpose.

If we believe the Bible's own testimony, **that it contains God's own special revelation**, then our worldview will dictate that the other religions and societies of ancient times will at best have been the product of a rebellion away from God, and their beliefs a corruption of his revelation which resulted from this departure (**Gen.10-11**). The various nations which emerged from this rebellion developed a world view which was based upon how they saw and perceived the world. In other words, without staying close to God and his revelation man departed and developed his own imaginations and his own religions. Thus we have the many gods, religions and customs of the many ancient nations. To varying degrees, these were all a corruption of what was given in the beginning when all knew God. This is the general summary that Paul gives in **Rom.1:18-32**.

Rom.1:21-23. Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things.

In consideration of these things and in adopting the Bible based worldview that the Bible narrative presents, we should therefore be suspicious of what we hear and read when ideas and interpretations are drawn from ancient societies and their religions. This is particularly so when modern interpreters draw on these sources to justify their interpretations of the word of God. We can clearly see this when some modern academics seek to interpret the concepts and ideas in the Bible through this ANE filter. Unfortunately, this comparative methodology has often become the dominant approach in many circles of higher learning.

When we read the Scriptural record we must firstly recognise that the early chapters of the Bible **were not written** to explain either **how** God made the heavens, the earth and the sea and all life therein, **neither was it given** as a scientific explanation of **how the world or of the physical universe operates**. Rather, it is designed to firstly declare that God is the creator and maker of all. It does this by describing the main areas in which He worked. **From there it moves on to what is the central theme of Genesis, which is to detail God's purpose in the creation as it focusses upon God's purpose with man upon the earth.**

This leads us to conclude that most of the focus in the record is on why God has done what He has done. That is, that God has a purpose and that purpose was clearly declared, as the following reference shows -

Gen.1:26-28. And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, **Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.**

As stated, it is clear from this reference that man was the central focus of God's purpose. No other creature was made to be like God, and no other creature was given the dominion over all the works of God.

We should take special note of this from the reference, when it states that man was given dominion over the creatures of the sea, the air and the land. **Psalm 8:4-8** also refers to this purpose. This concept becomes the main theme of the Bible's narrative, which connects Genesis through to Revelation. The general narrative in the early chapters of Genesis is that Sin entered into the world and appeared to derail God's purpose. Sin changed man, and whom he served. As a consequence of the first sin of Adam (**Rom.5:12**), man no longer solely served God, he now served his own lusts, which inevitably leads to sin and death (**James.1:13-15**). From this time forth man followed his own will, and not God's. This was totally foreign to God's determined purpose, to fill the earth with people who thought and behaved like him. For sin corrupts, and totally corrupted God's purpose with man and with the earth, so that the earth was filled with sinful men and not men in the image of God. In this sense Sin is later personified as the ruler of all men.

However, even though Sin came into the world, God has sworn to complete His original purpose (**Num.14:21**). This is what God's work in His Son Jesus Christ is all about. For this reason, in the NT, Jesus is both compared and contrasted to Adam (**Rom.5:14, 1.Cor.15:45,47**). Jesus is declared to be the man in God's image, and is the special man, the second Adam through whom God is working to save mankind (**2.Cor.4:4, Col.1:15, Heb.1:3**), that he might complete his original purpose. Jesus came into the world to save man (**John.3:16**) by destroying Sin's power over man (**Rom.8:3, Heb.2:14**), which he accomplished in his death upon the cross. Salvation can be ours if we are 'in him', having faith in what God was doing in him. In practical terms we begin to do this by being baptised into his death and being raised again in the likeness of his resurrection (**Rom.6:1-7**).

We know that this is the right way to understand the early chapters of Genesis by comparing how the NT uses these concepts as its underlying model in describing the man, Jesus Christ. Carefully compare the following references **Gen.1:26-28, Psalm.8:3-6, Heb.2:5-11**. This is why he is called the 'Word of God' and the 'Word made Flesh', and why he is spoken of as the one from the beginning. God, who is not bound by time and space as we perceive it, had always determined to bring a Son into the world (**Luke.3:22,38**). That is why this Jesus was the one purposed from the beginning to be in God's image and likeness = which is what **Gen.1:26-28** is all about.

The importance of perceiving things from God's perspective.

As for the choice of words and descriptions found in the narrative of many Bible passages, it is obvious that God has chosen to describe things for the benefit and perspective of a man living on the earth under the burden of the curse. This is why some time is given in the narrative to describe why things are as they now are. It is also probable that God has chosen to describe, from man's perspective, how he would view the physical creation of the world in a way that he was able to comprehend it. However, this does not mean that God used false or incorrect cosmological models to describe the universe.

It is clear from the record that there is no attempt in the Bible to describe in any detail how the creation was technically formed or how it operates, i.e. laws of gravity, atomic structure, energy, DNA information, etc. It was not important for man to understand as far as the purpose of God was concerned. It was sufficient for him to grasp that God is greater than his creation, and that with God all things are possible. That God has a purpose, and that purpose will prevail and be accomplished. Man's salvation depends upon him lifting himself up from the dust and seeing all things with God's perspective in the light of God's purpose. This ultimately involves aligning himself with God and his purpose with man and the earth.

God has not chosen to reveal the details of how he does what he does, neither is he under any obligation to reveal, describe or justify his works. As we noted earlier, **the Biblical record is primarily designed to explain to man why the world is as it is, subject to vanity, where the law of sin and death reigns over all men** (**Rom.5:12-21**). God does this so that man might trust in God and hope in that which relates to the completion of God's original purpose (**Gen.1:26-28**), which in this dispensation means being born again as Sons of God by means of faith and baptism into Christ (**John.1:12-13, Col.2:12**), and to live in faith and in hope of that which is to be completed at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the hope of all his saints (**Rom.8:19-24**).

2) The meaning of the word 'firmament'.

The 'firmament = a solid dome' theory of many scholars.

The firmament = **raqiya`** [ST7549], is pronounced *ra-KEE-ah*. Much has been written on the meaning of this term 'firmament'. We have already shown some of these opinions in the previous pictures. The following is taken from Strong's Concordance and is a typical explanation of this term, as understood by many scholars.

raqiya` [ST7549] **Gen.1:6, 7:8; Psalm.19:2**; fully "rachiya of the shamayim" **Gen.1:14, 15, 17, 20**, etc the firmament of heaven, spread out like a hemisphere above the earth (from the root **raqa'** [ST7554] – see below), like a splendid pellucid sapphire (**Exod.24:10**, compare **Dan.12:3**), to which the stars were supposed to be fixed, and over which the Hebrews believed there was a heavenly ocean (**Gen.1:7, 7:11, Ps.104:3, 148:4**; compare however **Gen.2:6**).

raqa' [ST7554] cognitive (= known connection, root word and associate) of **raqiya`** -

- (1) To beat, to strike the earth with the feet, as in indignation, **Ezek.6:11**; in exultation, **Ezek.25:6**.
- (2) To spread out by beating, (see Piel), and simply, to spread out, e.g. God the earth, **Psalm.136.:6; Isaiah.42:5; 44:24**. (Syriac. To make firm, to found)
- (3) To tread down, **2.Sam.22:43**.

Some typical examples of this scholarly and semi scholarly view can also be found in the following articles –

1. ⁵"**The Firmament of Genesis 1 is Solid but That's Not the Point**", Biologos link in footnotes
2. ⁶At **Theopedia**, "**The Firmament and the Water Above**" P.H. Seely, which summarizes an article that argues the same position. A copy of Seely's original work is available through the link in the footnotes.
3. ⁷"**Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography in the Bible**", Brian Godawa.

The diagrams at the beginning of this essay show in graphical detail how many conceive of Hebrew cosmology. The web holds many comments that typically assume that this theory and its proposed layout is correct. Many of the comments on the web are quite derogatory of the Bible, and many use this 'solid dome' theory to mock at the concept of inspiration. We do not recommend these sites as they have little scholarship behind them.

The Recent History of the Solid Firmament Concept.

The following summaries are borrowed from the articles found in the footnote references preceding each quotation. They suggest that the 'solid dome' concept has been wrongly attributed to ANE sources, whereas it is most likely a medieval concept that was probably borrowed from an incorrect understanding of Greek and later Jewish speculation (i.e. of the 6th century BC and younger).

⁸"Biblical scholars already in the nineteenth century began entertaining the idea that the ancients believed in a solid vault of heaven. Then, in 1850, Hormuzd Rassam discovered seven tablets in Ashurbanipal's library at Nineveh that were found to contain a Mesopotamian creation account, now known as the Enuma Elish. The original composition may date into the late second millennium, ca. 1100 B.C. during the time of Nebuchadnezzar 1. One of the first scholars to utilize this creation account in an attempt to reconstruct an ancient Babylonian cosmology was the German Assyriologist Peter Jensen in 1890. In Tablets IV and V the basic Babylonian cosmogony and cosmology were outlined. The creation of the Himmelswölbung (—heavenly vault) appears on line 145 of tablet IV. Works like Jensen's added support to the pan-Babylonian school led by scholars like Friedrich Delitzsch (1850–1922), **who argued that Hebrews received many of their ideas about**

⁵ This is the same article as referenced in No.1 above, Reference [here](#)

⁶ Theopodia, P.H. Seely. "The Firmament and the Water Above". The Westminster Theological Journal 53 (1991), p. 228, 230-231. Reference [here](#) A copy of Seely's work 'The Firmament and the Water Above' is found [here](#)

⁷ "Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography in the Bible", Brian Godawa, available [here](#)

⁸ "Crucial Questions of Interpretation in Genesis 1", Randall W. Younker, Available [here](#)

primeval history, including their creation story, from the Babylonians during the exile. Soon, a number of critical scholars augmented the Hebrew meaning of *raqia'* in lexicons, commentaries, etc. by adding the idea of a solid vault, usually composed of metal".

Then, in 1975, when Assyriologist ⁹W. G. Lambert tried to locate the idea that the Babylonians conceived of the firmament as a solid vault in original Babylonian sources, his search came up empty! Lambert could find no evidence that the Mesopotamians believed in a hard-domed heaven.

¹⁰**"There is no evidence that the Mesopotamians ever believed in a solid heavenly vault."** However, **"There is good evidence that as early as the sixth century b.c., the ancient Greeks suggested that the heavens might consist of a series of hard spheres. However, this idea should not be confused with the solid-vault or –dome theory that was suggested by later biblical critics.** The critics have envisioned only a hard, hollow hemisphere, resembling half a sphere in the shape of an upside-down bowl. In reality, however, the Greeks argued for a spherical (not flat!) earth that was suspended inside a complete, hollow heavenly sphere, which, in turn, was also suspended inside additional outer spheres (a geocentric model)" and ...**"the dome theory is really a recent nineteenth-century invention tied to incorrect Medieval thinking..."**

Lambert's study was taken up by his student, Wayne Horowitz, who notes that ¹¹ ... "although the clear sky seems to us to be shaped like a dome, rather than a flat circle, **there is no direct evidence that ancient Mesopotamians thought the visible heavens to be a dome.** Akkadian *kippatu* are always flat, circular objects such as geometric circles or hoops, rather than three dimensional domes." And ¹²**"The fact remains that there is no word for a heavenly domed vault in ancient Mesopotamia."**

The alternative, 'the firmament is an expanse' theory of other respected scholars.

Many scholars are not convinced by the solid dome theory. They suggest that ¹³**"we just do not know that all ancients believed the sky was a solid dome or that there was anything near unanimity on this point"**.

The articles titled ¹⁴**"The Myth of the Solid Heavenly Dome"** and ¹⁵**"Crucial Questions of Interpretation in Genesis 1"** are useful to consider. They review the history of Biblical Scholarship in the 19th and early 20th centuries, as scholars tried to interpret the Hebrew Scriptures through a Babylonian lens. This has now been abandoned by many, yet "Still there have been some who continue to suggest that the ancient Hebrews borrowed cosmological concepts, including the idea of a solid domed heaven, from the Mesopotamians.

We will now list other well-known and respected scholars who hold contrary views to those detailed in the previous chapter. The following references are mostly drawn from the article, ¹⁶**"What was the "Firmament" of Genesis 1?"**

⁹ Wilfred G Lambert, was an historian and archaeologist, a specialist in Assyriology and Near Eastern Archaeology, the world's leading expert on cuneiform. A Christadelphian by faith. See Wikipedia [here](#), [here](#)

¹⁰ W. G. Lambert, —"The Cosmology of Sumer and Babylon", in *Ancient Cosmologies* (ed. Carmen Blacker and Michael Loewe; London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975), 62.

¹¹ Wayne Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns. 1998), 264-65.

¹² Further, see *ibid.*, 262-63

¹³ Quoted in Theopodia, as above in Note 6, which references; G. K. Beale, "The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority", pp. 197-205. Crossway, 2008.

¹⁴ "The Myth of the Solid Heavenly Dome: Another Look at the Hebrew [ʾyqir]; (RĀQĪAʾ)", 2011, Randall W. Younker and Richard M. Davidson, Andrews University Press... ,see the full document in PDF [here](#)

¹⁵ Crucial Questions of Interpretation in Genesis 1, By Randall W Younker, PDF [here](#)

¹⁶ The quotations in this section are largely taken from the article 'What was the "Firmament" of Genesis 1? By Bert Thompson, Ph.D. The source for these references is found [here](#)

¹⁷“The Hebrew *raqia* (the “firmament” of the KJV, ASV, RSV, et al.) means an “expanse”, or ¹⁸“something stretched, spread or beaten out”.

Keil and Delitzsch offered this definition in their monumental commentary on the Pentateuch: ¹⁹“to stretch, to spread out, then beat or tread out...**the spreading out of air, which surrounds the earth as an atmosphere.**”

In an article discussing the “firmament” of Genesis 1:6-8, Gary Workman observed that this word is an ²⁰“unfortunate translation” because it “**not only is inaccurate but also has fostered unjust criticism that the Bible erroneously and naively pictures the sky above the earth as a solid dome**”. Strictly speaking, of course, “firmament” is not actually a translation of *raqia* at all, but rather, more accurately, a transliteration (i.e., the substitution of a letter in one language for the equivalent letter in another language) of an “unfortunate translation.” ... (from the ²¹Septuagint, as) ... ²²“**Apparently, the translators of the Septuagint were influenced by the then-popular Egyptian view of cosmology and astronomy Unfortunately, those Hebrew scholars therefore chose to render *raqia* via the Greek word *stereoma*—in order to suggest a firm, solid structure. The Greek connotation thus influenced Jerome to the extent that, when he produced his Latin Vulgate, he used the word *firmamentum* (meaning a strong or steadfast support—from which the word “firmament” is transliterated) to reflect this pagan concept.**”

In his *Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Old Testament language scholar W.E. Vine stressed: ²³“While this English word is derived from the Latin *firmamentum* which signifies firmness or strengthening,...**the Hebrew word, *raqia*, has no such meaning, but denoted the “expanse,” that which was stretched out. Certainly the sky was not regarded as a hard vault in which the heavenly orbs were fixed....** There is therefore nothing in the language of the original to suggest that the writers [of the Old Testament] were influenced by the imaginative ideas of heathen nations.”

It is also possible that the word “firmament” is meant to convey the idea of a barrier in the same way we can speak of a wall or a fence, such as we find in **1.Sam.25:16**. Each of these words can be used in the sense of what function they provide and without reference to materiality. We will further explore this idea shortly.

Many of these scholars are suggesting that the concept of ‘a solid dome’ is a left over from medieval times, based upon misconstrued ideas borrowed from the Greeks and later Jewish speculation. There is no clear evidence that the ancient Mesopotamians believed that the ‘firmament’ was a solid dome, and there is also little evidence to conclude that the ancients believed that the earth was flat. In fact there is evidence to suggest that many Greek philosophers believed the earth was spherical, e.g. Pythagoras and Aristotle.

¹⁷ This quotation is taken from the source in footnote 16, who references, Davidson, B. (1963), *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (NY: Harper & Brothers) 1963, p. DCXCII; Wilson, William (n.d.), *Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies* (McLean, VA: MacDonald) p. 166

¹⁸ This quotation is taken from the source in footnote 16, who references, Maunder, E.W. (1939), “Astronomy,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans) p. 315; Speiser, E.A. (1964), “Genesis,” *The Anchor Bible Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday) p. 6

¹⁹ This quotation is taken from the source in footnote 16, who references, Keil, C.F. and Franz Delitzsch (1949), *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans).

²⁰ This quotation is taken from the source in footnote 16, who references, Workman, Gary (1991), “What is the ‘Firmament’ Spoken of in the Bible?,” *The Restorer*, 11[4]:14, May/June

²¹ The translation of the Septuagint. The traditional story is that Ptolemy II (285-246 BC) sponsored the translation of the Torah, from Hebrew to Greek, for use by the many Alexandrian Jews who were not fluent in Hebrew but fluent in Koine Greek, which was the lingua franca of Alexandria, Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean at the time.

²² This quotation is taken from the source in footnote 16, who references, McKechnie, Jean L., ed. (1978), *Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Collins World).

²³ This quotation is taken from the source in footnote 16, who references, Vine, W.E. (1981), *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell), Pg 67. This reference to Vine is also found [here](#)

3) Which view is correct?

Testing the ²⁴hypothesis.

We have before us two sets of scholarly opinions which need testing. As believers and Bible students we should test any hypothesis that seeks to interpret the meaning of significant terms used in the Bible, particularly if an important interpretation is based upon it. This is particularly so if non-Biblical ²⁵ANE sources are being referenced as proof or support in an interpretation.

The question we need to consider is as follows. **Does the use of the word ‘firmament’ in the Bible intend to refer to a solid dome like structure that supports oceans of waters above it? Is this really the meaning that the use of this word and the Genesis narrative is intending to convey, in the Bible, irrespective of what other ANE cultures may have believed?**

Good study methods dictate that we should seek to understand how the Bible uses this term within the bounds of its own definitions and uses, and not solely according to interpretations drawn from any foreign sources or ANE cosmology. We should be doubly cautious to do this, especially if we believe that the Genesis narrative is designed to present God’s account of the creation and that this general narrative is widely referred to and endorsed in other parts of the scripture. Our caution springs from the Biblical narrative which clearly teaches that God originally revealed his ways to all, but early in human history man corrupted God’s way and moved far from God. This is part of the simple narrative in the early chapters of Genesis, and this should make us cautious in accepting any interpretation that relies upon ANE sources.

The newly made firmament is called Heaven.

Technically speaking, this word firmament (**raqiya`**) is used 17 times in 15 verses, and is always translated as ‘firmament’ in the KJV, [Gen.1:6,7, 8, 14, 15, 17, 20, Psalm.19:1, 150:1, Ezek.1:22, 23, 25, 26, 10:1, Dan.12:3].

Gen.1:6-8. And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.

In considering Gen.1:6-8, the firmament is clearly made for the purpose of separating the original two bodies of water, that is, those above it [clouds?] and those below it [seas]. This may be connected to the meaning of Gen.1:2, which may be interpreted to speak of these two phenomena (waters) in their original condition, as ‘the deep’ and ‘the face of the waters’. Also, there is no innate necessity in this account of the firmament being considered as a materially solid dome. In fact, this section ends with these words ‘and God called the firmament heaven’. This context suggests that the word ‘firmament’ refers to its function, (as man observes it - an invisible barrier or expanse) to separate the waters, and not to its materiality, i.e. the material quality of its composition. We get a feel for this in Zech.12:1 where the LORD is said to have originally “stretched forth the heavens” and again in Lev.26:19, where sinful Israel were warned that they would receive no rain for, “I will make your heaven as iron, and your earth as brass.” This seems simple enough to grasp.

If it refers to a solid barrier, it seems strange that God would call it heaven. This word ‘heaven’ is translated as ‘heaven’ 398 times and ‘air’ 21 times, in the KJV OT writings. Other translations often translate this word as ‘sky’. In many of these references, the word cannot refer to a solid structure, as we shall see. From this given definition of the firmament being called heaven, we should be able to see how the word “heaven” is used in the rest of the Scriptures which will help us understand what is meant.

²⁴ A hypothesis is a supposition or proposed explanation made on the basis of limited evidence as a starting point for further investigation.

²⁵ ANE commonly refers to ‘Ancient Near Eastern’ sources, i.e. the nations that lived about ancient Israel.

Firstly, the word heaven is used in a number of different ways in the Bible. We find that [Gen.1:14-17](#) goes on to speak of God setting 'lights' in the firmament of heaven to give light upon the earth. Now this word 'lights' in Hebrew quite specifically refers to their function as lights, not to their physical properties. We know this because the same word is used in [Exod.25:6](#) and [Exod.27:20](#) which speak of the 'light' produced by burning oil. In other words, it refers to function and not physical property. It is important that we don't impress our modern material perspective on the record. It is an interesting fact that we cannot see the sun, only the sun's light. Also, much of the light from the Sun that we experience on earth is the product of the sun's rays being refracted in the sky, in the earth's atmosphere. A planet with a negligible atmosphere will not experience light in the same way that we do. The Apollo 11 Astronauts experienced that condition, as ²⁶"the lunar sky is always black because diffraction of light requires an atmosphere".

Next we read of the birds of the sky, '**fowl of the air**' in KJV [Gen.1:26-30](#) - in these references the word 'air' is the Hebrew word for '**heaven**'. Some suggest that the account of [Gen.1:20](#) (see the quotation below) indicates that the 'fowl' only fly in the face or on the surface of the firmament, and not in the firmament. This is rather a limited way to read this reference, as it could just as easily describe how man saw it from his perspective, as if the birds were flying across the face of heaven. Furthermore, there are plenty of references that speak of the birds flying in the heaven (we will list some of these later).

[Gen.1:20](#). And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open (the face, surface or presence of the) firmament of heaven.

Those who conclude that the term 'firmament' can only refer to a solid sky do so by assuming that it is there in the first place. It is sometimes stated that ²⁷ "all peoples in the ancient world thought of the sky as solid", **as if this is true in itself - which it isn't, and that this would be proof that Genesis is saying the same thing – which it would not be**. If we are not careful we can end up using circular reasoning, by assuming that Genesis is using this term because of the alleged beliefs of ANE sources. As we have already seen there is that there is scant evidence to support this hypothesis and a large number of respectable scholars who challenge its legitimacy.

The Firmament called Heaven.

Some suggest that the terms shamayim (heaven) and raqiyah' (firmament) are not equal or speaking of the same thing. While this is technically true, as far the word meaning is concerned, it is in contradiction of what [Gen.1:8](#) plainly says. The reason they conclude this is that it would result, because of verses like [Deut.4:17](#) and [Psalm.11:4](#), in the absurd conclusion that the birds fly or God sits enthroned 'inside' a solid structure! This is confusing the terms. The close relationship of the two words is seen in a number of places in the Bible. For example the Bible equates "firmament" with the "heavens" in the poetry of ([Psalm 19:1](#)).

As far as comparative cultures are concerned, as we have alluded to previously, it is quite probable that the ideas portrayed in the Genesis account were widely known before any of the alleged cosmological theories of solid skies were later developed. It is not an unreasonable suggestion that the concepts of [Gen. 1–11](#) were known at least since Moses' time, as the themes and ideas of Genesis chapter one are clearly referred to at the time of Moses ([Exod.20:11](#), [31:17](#), [Deut.4:32](#)), and alluded to by David ([Psalm.8:6](#)) and Isaiah ([Isaiah.54:9](#)). (According the general Biblical chronology the Exodus was between 1500 & 1600 BC). If we accept the Bible's narrative that all once knew God but turned away from him, then it is not too difficult to conclude that they took many ideas from the original narrative, and over time, corrupted them with their own concepts of religion and cosmology.

²⁶ The Moon has negligent atmosphere, which means that there is no diffraction of light, See [here](#)

²⁷ Many of these quotations that assert that all ancient people believed that there was a solid dome are based upon a variant of the cosmology of the Greeks, and the worldview of medieval philosophers and theologians. However, the later Greeks believed the earth was a sphere, and that it was surrounded by concentric rings – as in Neoplatonism and Stoic Philosophy. Moreover, to extrapolate these ideas back to Babylonian Astronomers is a bit of a wild guess. See [here](#)

At this stage it is worth remembering that it is a common strategy for sceptics to attack the Bible for teaching a primitive cosmology, including a ²⁸Flat Earth and ²⁹Geocentrism. They use these arguments to claim that the Bible cannot be the word of God, rightly pointing out that God would not make such errors in his Word. The argument for a 'solid dome' seems to follow the same path, with many sceptics seeking to disparage the word.

These references and more raise some interesting questions. For instance, where does the firmament of heaven (sky) start? How high must something be to be 'in the sky'? In this regard, consider [2.Sam.18:9](#) where Absalom is described as being caught in a tree by his hair as hanging '**between heaven and earth**'. Again In [Ezek.8:3](#) Ezekiel was '**lifted up between the earth and the heaven**' in his vision, and again [1 Chr.21:16](#) refers to '**the angel of the Lord standing between heaven and earth**' (NIV). In each of these the idea is of someone higher than the earth, but lower than the sky (heaven). There are no references in the Bible that say where the firmament of heaven begins or ends, which is a testimony to the deliberate vagueness and generality implied in the text and the way the words are used. We can easily grasp these terms today without being scientifically technical. **These references would indicate that the 'sky' is not exactly used to describe the atmosphere, but rather the upper regions of the sky where the birds can fly and below the clouds. Interestingly, we use the word 'sky' today to describe much the same thing, in the same vague terms.**

The making of the firmament.

[Gen.1:6-8](#). (NKJV). Then God said, "[Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. Thus God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament; and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven.](#) So the evening and the morning were the second day."

The question naturally arises, are the clouds the same as the water above the firmament? The answer to this question can only be determined by seeing how the rest of scripture explains this and related concepts. In the Proverbs Solomon tells us that wisdom was in the beginning with God as his counsellor, '**when he established the clouds above.**' This sounds like commentary upon the Genesis account.

[Prov.8:27-29](#). When He prepared the heavens, I was there, When He drew a circle on the face of the deep, [When He established the clouds above](#), When He strengthened the fountains of the deep, When He assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters would not transgress His command, When He marked out the foundations of the earth,

In another context, God asks Job these related questions. In these God refers to the clouds and likens them to a garment and a swaddling cloth of darkness. This sounds like an echo from the Genesis account.

[Job.38:4](#). Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.

[Job.38:9](#). [When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness a swaddlingband for it.](#)

The next relevant reference is at the time of the flood, where God determined to punish sinful man with an overwhelming flood ... which he does by opening the windows of heaven.

[Gen.6:17](#). (NKJV) And behold, I **Myself am bringing floodwaters on the earth**, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die.

²⁸ The Bible does not speak about a 'flat earth', neither did the educated Greek Philosophers and scientists.

²⁹ Geocentrism means that the earth is the centre of the universe. It was believed by many Greek Astronomers and Philosophers, and codified by Claudius Ptolemy (90–168 AD) who passed his cosmological concepts down to medieval scholars. The Bible is silent on this question, except that it presents God as the centre of all.

Gen.7:11-12. (NKJV) In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep were broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened. And the rain was on the earth forty days and forty nights.

What are the “**windows**” of heaven? The Hebrew word is “arubbah”, which means “a lattice, window or sluice”. In this context, it seems to be used as a figure – in the sense of windows being opened (**Gen.7:11**) or closed (**Gen.8:2**) to either allow or restrain the flow of rain. We can see this concept also used figuratively in **2.Kg.7:2, 19**. Does this suggest that the author believed that physical windows existed in heaven to either allow or restrict the flow of rain? Not necessarily, it could simply be the use of figurative language. Just so we don't miss the point, we are later informed by the implications of the covenant made after the flood, **that the waters – or rain - came from the clouds**. For this reason, God set his sign in the clouds to memorialize his covenant.

Gen.9:13-16. (NKJV) I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that **the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud**; and I will remember My covenant which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.

Furthermore, we know from various other places that the ancients knew and often spoke of the rain coming from the clouds. We see it spoken of regularly, sometimes in the same context of the clouds being in heaven. Therefore, **the rain is called the water of the rain of heaven**. In this figurative language, there was no rain when God “**shut up the heaven**”. For an agricultural society, the effect of such droughts were fully understood.

Deut.11:11. (NKJV) “but the land which you cross over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water from the rain of heaven,”

Deut.11:17. (NKJV). “lest the LORD's anger be aroused against you, and He shut up the heavens so that there be no rain, and the land yield no produce, and you perish quickly from the good land which the LORD is giving you.”

1.Kings.8:35. (NKJV). “When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against You, when they pray toward this place and confess Your name, and turn from their sin because You afflict them,”

1.Kg.18:45. And it came to pass in the mean while, that the heaven was black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode, and went to Jezreel.

Job.26:8. (Job) He bindeth up the waters in his thick clouds; and the cloud is not rent under them.

Job.38:34. Canst thou lift up thy voice to the clouds, that abundance of waters may cover thee?

Job.38:37. Who can number **the clouds** in wisdom? or who can stay **the bottles of heaven**,

Psalm.77:17. The clouds poured out water: the skies sent out a sound: thine arrows also went abroad.

We will now look at some further references that speak about the clouds of heaven and the birds of heaven, as well as some clear examples of the figurative language used to describe the firmament of heaven.

The Clouds of Heaven.

From the previous references it seems clear that ‘**the waters above**’ are the clouds which swaddled the creation in thick darkness, like a new born baby in tightly wrapped in (swaddling) blankets. This seems to be an illusion to **Gen.1:2**, which would confirm our understanding that this is the starting point in Genesis and shows the land covered in ‘**deep**’ water and thick dark clouds (called ‘**waters**’ in Genesis) covering the deep.

On the second day these clouds are separated from the waters below (the deep) by a firmament (or sky). Likewise, as we have seen in other places that the scriptures speak of the clouds holding water, which is poured upon the earth as rain. There is nothing particularly difficult or complex in these ideas. The waters above the firmament are most logically speaking of the clouds that are full of water. At Mt Sinai these clouds came down upon the mountain, and the LORD descended and spoke to the people, [Exod.19:16-18](#).

These concept are further confirmed in the following references:

[Deut.11:17](#). And then the LORD'S wrath be kindled against you, and he shut up the heaven, that there be no rain,

[Job.38:34](#). Canst thou lift up thy voice to the clouds, that abundance of waters may cover thee?

[Eccl.11:3](#). If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth:

[Prov.16:15](#). In the light of the king's countenance is life; and his favour is as a cloud of the latter rain.

[Psalm.78:23](#). "Though he had commanded the clouds from above, and opened the doors of heaven".

[Psalm.147:8](#). Who covereth the heaven with clouds, who prepareth rain for the earth, who maketh grass to grow upon the mountains.

[Psalm.148:4](#). Praise him, ye heavens of heavens, and ye waters that be above the heavens.

Likewise, we know that the heavens themselves are darkened by clouds and by rain.

[1.Kg.18:45](#). And it came to pass in the mean while, that the heaven was black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode, and went to Jezreel.

[2.Sam.22:12](#). And he made darkness pavilions round about him, dark waters, and thick clouds of the skies.

[Deut.4:11](#). And ye came near and stood under the mountain; and the mountain burned with fire unto the midst of heaven, with darkness, clouds, and thick darkness.

There are many other Old Testament passages depicting clouds producing rain, including; [Deut.28:12](#); [Judg.5:4](#); [1.Kgs.18:44-45](#); [Eccl.11:3](#); and [Isa.5:6.68](#). **Thus there is good evidence to conclude that the "waters above" are equated with clouds in ancient Hebrew thinking** (as opposed to a celestial ocean of solid water above a vault).

Furthermore, if the clouds are above the firmament then the firmament must be invisible otherwise we would not be able to see the clouds. This confirms our understanding that the term firmament is deliberately vague, as it speaks of an invisible expanse above the earth – i.e. the sky.

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Summary: The question of the clouds is the key to understanding – where are they located?

Are the clouds above the firmament called heaven or below it ([Gen.1:6-8](#))?

The scripture is clear - the clouds are above the heaven. In the scriptural language, which is often figurative, when the windows or doors of heaven are open, then the clouds (like full bottles) pour out water as rain.

The firmament is below the clouds.

- **Gen.7:11-12.** "... the windows of heaven were opened. And the rain was on the earth forty days and forty nights."
- **Psalm.78:23.** "Though he had commanded **the clouds from above, and opened the doors of heaven**".
- **Deut.11:17.** "...and He shut up the heavens so that there be no rain "

The clouds hold water, which water the earth.

- **Job.26:8.** (Job) He bindeth up the waters in his thick clouds; and the cloud is not rent under them.
- **Psalm.77:17.** The clouds poured out water; the skies sent out a sound
- **Eccl.11:3.** If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth:
- **Job.38:37.** Who can number **the clouds** by wisdom? Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens,

The waters above the firmament are most logically identified with the clouds.

- **Psalm.148:4.** Praise him, ye heavens of heavens, and ye waters that be above the heavens.
- **Job.38:4.** Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. **Job.38:9.** When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness a swaddlingband for it.
- **Psalm.147:8.** **Who covereth the heaven with clouds**, who prepareth rain for the earth, who maketh grass to grow upon the mountains.

After the flood, the sign of the rainbow in the clouds meant there would be no more flood (for the rain originated from the clouds).

- **Gen.7:11-12.** (NKJV) and the windows of heaven were opened. And the rain was on the earth forty days and forty nights
- **Gen.9:13-16.** (NKJV) I set My rainbow in the cloud, ... the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh

The Sun is above the clouds.

We know by both simple observation and by scriptural testimony that the firmament, called heaven, is UNDER the clouds and the sun is above the clouds, for the clouds are said to veil the sun. This being so, how can the sun be in the firmament of heaven if it is above the clouds which are above the firmament? This suggests that either different locations are meant or different concepts are implied.

- **Ezek.32:7-8.** And when I shall put thee out, **I will cover the heaven, and make the stars thereof dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud**, and the moon shall not give her light. **All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over thee**, and set darkness upon thy land, saith the Lord GOD.
- **1.Kg.18:45.** And it came to pass in the mean while, that the heaven was black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode, and went to Jezreel.

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The Birds of Heaven.

We likewise know that the Bible speaks of birds flying in face of the heaven, towards heaven and in the midst of heaven. Again, the general vagueness in the choice of words is interesting, as the heaven describes the great expanse stretched out above us.

Gen.1:20. And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open (the face, surface or presence of the) firmament of heaven.

Deut.4:17. The likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged fowl that flieth in the air (Heb = heaven),

Prov.23:5. Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not? for riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven.

Psalm.104:12. By them shall the fowls of the heaven have their habitation, which sing among the branches.

Jer.7:33. And the carcasses of this people shall be meat for the fowls of the heaven, and for the beasts of the earth; and none shall fray them away.

Rev.19:17. And I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the fowls that fly in the midst of heaven (i.e. highest point of heaven, at noon)

The firmament of heaven

On the fourth creative day, the record says that God made the great lights (sun, moon and stars), and in connection with this the narrative introduces us to the term “**the firmament of heaven.**” This raises an interesting question. If the clouds are clearly spoken of as being above the firmament (sky or heaven), then how can the lights (sun, moon and stars) be said to be in the firmament. For it is clear from both simple observation and from other scriptural usages (eg. **1.Kg.18:45**) that these lights are obscured or darkened by the clouds.. This means that they must be above the clouds, which are above the firmament. This suggests that the firmament of heaven may be different (& higher again) to the firmament created on day two.

Gen.1:14-19. “And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years: and let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so. And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth, and to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness: and God saw that it was good. And the evening and the morning were the fourth day”.

We note here that these heavenly bodies are said to reside, not within the newly created heaven, but “**the firmament of the heaven**”. We suggest that this change of terms mean that it is referring to something else, even those physical heavens that proceeded the work of the creation week. This agrees with Nehemiah’s testimony which speaks of **the host of heaven** (i.e. sun, moon and stars) **dwelling within “the heaven of heavens”** (**Neh.9:6**). From this we could conclude that the “**heaven of heavens**” is the same as “**the firmament of heaven**” – while being different and distinct from the firmament created on day 2.

The idea of “**the heaven of heavens**” being a physical place which cannot contain God is also spoken of by Solomon in **1.Kg.8:27**. Again, it is also referred to by Moses in **Deut.10:14**. These references seem to be speaking about another region other than that where the birds of the air fly.

Heaven is God's dwelling Place.

Apart from the descriptions of "the heaven" and "the heaven of heavens", the word heaven is also used of God's dwelling place. This is not to be confused with the other two references, and may well be what Paul is referring to as "**the third heaven**" in [2.Cor.12:2](#) - where he met with and was personally instructed by Jesus Christ ([Acts.26:16](#) and [Gal.1:15-17](#)).

[Psalm.11:4](#). "**The LORD is in his holy temple, the LORD's throne is in heaven: his eyes behold, his eyelids try, the children of men.**"

[Matt.6:9](#). "After this manner therefore pray ye: **Our Father which are in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.**"

4) **The use of Figurative Language.**

The use of figurative language in the Bible.

It is a common literary practice of the Bible to regularly use figurative language to describe either natural or even supernatural things. This choice of words utilizes the full range of literary techniques to communicate its message, and it is generally clear when the Bible is using such figurative language. The following list details some examples. These should not to be read as if they describe some primitive concept of cosmology, or of some borrowed concept of how the world is constructed. They are simply figurative concepts similar to those we use today, such as; the four corners of the earth, sunrise and sunset, etc. It is also interesting to consider [Job.38:37](#) which speaks of rain coming from 'the waterskins of heaven', or as other versions have it 'the water jars of heaven', and compare this to our modern vernacular, where we speak of 'it bucketing down rain'.

The following list of references clearly show the figurate nature of Scriptural language.

[Gen.7:11](#). ... the same day were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened.

[Gen.8:2](#). The fountains also of the deep and the windows of heaven were stopped, and the rain from heaven was restrained;

[Job.38:37](#). Who can number the clouds by wisdom? Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens,

[Psalm.78:22-24](#). Because they believed not in God, and trusted not in his salvation: Though he had commanded the clouds from above, and opened the doors of heaven, And had rained down manna upon them to eat, and had given them of the corn of heaven.

[Lev.26:19](#). And I will break the pride of your power; and I will make your heaven as iron, and your earth as brass:

[Deut.28:23](#). And thy heaven that is over thy head shall be brass, and the earth that is under thee shall be iron.

[Deut.1:28](#). Whither shall we go up? our brethren have discouraged our heart, saying, The people is greater and taller than we; the cities are great and walled up to heaven; and moreover we have seen the sons of the Anakims there.

[Deut.33:26](#). There is none like unto the God of Jeshurun, who rideth upon the heaven in thy help, and in his excellency on the sky.

Isaiah.48:3. Mine hand also hath laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand hath spanned the heavens: when I call unto them, they stand up together.

Isaiah.11:12 (Ezek.7:2, Rev.7:2). And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

Isaiah.24:20. The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard, and shall be removed like a cottage; and the transgression thereof shall be heavy upon it; and it shall fall, and not rise again.

Figurative Language using the related word raqa' [ST7554]

From the following references, which record God speaking first hand, it is quite clear that the terminology is mostly figurative. That is, that God is speaking of what he did in the past in terms that the audience could easily relate to. Later the figure is likened to a man stretching out a tent, such is the greatness of God. These words speak only in general terms using common figures relating to physical items and their properties. Again, the full range of literary device is observable. The Bible uses metaphor, simile, allegory and a host of other devices.

Job.37:18 (KJV). Hast thou with him spread out ["raqa"] the sky ["shachaq" = fine dust, thin clouds], **which is strong, and as a molten looking glass?**

Job.37:18 (ESV). Can you, like him, spread out the skies, hard as a cast metal mirror?

Isaiah.42:5. Thus saith God the LORD, he that created the heavens, and stretched them out ["natah" = To stretch out, to extend, to unfold]; he that spread forth ["raqa"] the earth, and that which cometh out of it; he that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein:

Isaiah.40:22. It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth ["natah" = To stretch out, to extend, to unfold] out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in:

More Figures – 'The windows of heaven' and 'the doors of heaven'.

It is often suggested that the Hebrews believed there were literal windows or doors in the firmament or rāqîa', as per the diagrams at the start of this essay. However, in **Gen 7:11**, it is the "windows of heaven" and not the windows of the rāqîa' ("firmament"), from which the waters above fall. Windows and/or doors never appear with rāqîa' (firmament), nor with the expression "waters above" (hammayim mē'al), which occurs only twice in the Hebrew Bible (**Gen.1:7** and **Ps.148:4**). This works against the idea of a solid firmament.

Psalm.78:23 is helpful to us understanding the meaning of terms "windows" and "doors of heaven." In this verse, the term "the doors of heaven" is explicitly associated (by means of poetic synonymous parallelism) with the clouds: "Yet He commanded the clouds above and opened the doors of heaven." This verse indicates that the "doors of heaven" are to be understood figuratively as a reference to "clouds." According to this Old Testament representation, whenever it rains heavily, the doors or windows of heaven are opened. Other OT references make clear that the phrase "windows of heaven" and parallels are figurative expressions. If the "windows of heaven" refers to the release of the water that is in the clouds, then it is most likely that the opening of the windows of heaven at the time of the flood may imply that there was no rain on the earth (but only a mist which watered the ground, **Gen.2:6-7**) until the time of the flood. However, of this we cannot be certain as there is insufficient evidence and as there are a number of other ways to read **Gen.2:6-7**.

The clouds are used to hide God's presence.

The clouds of heaven are often used to describe God's presence (and angelic presence) in Israel, and of God's presence and his power being like a fire hidden by the thick clouds. For God cannot be seen by man, lest man die (**Exod.33:20**), and also with his material worldview lest he try and represent God according to his limited perspective. Furthermore, when the cloud is said to come down upon the mountain or upon the tabernacle or temple, it represents heaven, the place of God's presence, coming down in the midst of men (**Exod.19:16-18**).

Deut.4:12 And the LORD spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice.

Deut.4:15-16. Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of similitude on the day that the LORD spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire: Lest ye corrupt yourselves, and make you a graven image ...

Exod.14:19. And the angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them:

Exod.16:10. And it came to pass, as Aaron spake unto the whole congregation of the children of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and, behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.

Exod.19:9. And the LORD said unto Moses, Lo, I come unto thee in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with thee, and believe thee for ever.

Exod.34:5. And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD.

Exod.40:34-35. Then a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter into the tent of the congregation, because the cloud abode thereon, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

Exod.40:38. For the cloud of the LORD was upon the tabernacle by day, and fire was on it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys.

This same symbology is used in the rest of the Prophets and in the NT.

Rev.10:1. And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed with a cloud: and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire:

Dan.7:13. I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him.

Mark.14:62. And Jesus said, I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.

Jesus ascended into a cloud, and clouds are used figuratively of the presence of his coming.

Acts.1:9. And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight.

Rev.8:13. And I beheld, and heard an angel flying through the midst of heaven,

Rev.14:6. And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth,

The firmament in the visions in Exodus and Ezekiel.

We have in the scriptures a number of comments about God in his sanctuary as well as visions of his presence which are derived from the ideas and narrative of Genesis. The following reference speaks of God in his sanctuary – in the firmament of his power. This is the same word *raqiya`* that is used in Genesis, and cannot mean a solid dome if the text is to make any sense at all. Many other translations use the word ‘heaven’ for ‘firmament’, but the word is the Hebrew word for ‘firmament’.

Psalm.150:1. Praise ye the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary: praise him in the firmament of his power.

In the Bible we read of two specific instances where God makes his presence known and is seen by certain of the men of Israel. Both of these instances are significant, and we need to give some time to consider the context and essential meaning of what these visions mean.

The first is in **Exod.24.** The context here is very important. God had just spoken to the people directly and given to them his law in the Ten Commandments. These things that God spoke were written in a book. This became the foundation of what the NT calls the “First or Old Covenant” (**Heb.8:13, 9:18-21**). The words of this book were read back to the people so that the people clearly understood and agreed to the terms and conditions of the covenant, and they answered; ‘**All that the LORD hath said will we do, and be obedient**’. Up until this point they were forbidden from approaching the mount (**Exod.19:12, 23**), but after this the elders, as representatives of the people, ascended the mountain, as follows -

Exod.24:9-11. Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel: And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand: also they saw God, and did eat and drink.

On the basis of this covenant Israel were now brought near to God. The record says that they ‘saw the God of Israel’ and under his feet was what appeared to be a paved work (‘libnah’, which Strong defines as “whiteness, transparency”) of sapphire stone (blue lapis lazuli), which represented the body of heaven in its clearness. We have in this imagery a representation of God above the firmament, with Israel now sharing a fellowship meal with him. Now the things they observed were symbolic of their new found relationship with God on the basis of the covenant they had made. In this there is no suggestion that God’s feet were upon a solid dome, only that they were upon a blue-clear transparency that represented the clear blue sky of the firmament of heaven.

The imagery in later scriptures seems to be related to the concepts of this vision. For example;

Isaiah.66:1. Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest?

The second vision is in the book of Ezekiel, which is many hundreds of years later, when Israel had broken God’s covenant (in **Exod.24**) and rebelled against him. God was about to remove his presence from them and send them into Babylonian captivity. We have here a similar vision to the one above, but this time it is of the glory of God being withdrawn from their presence.

The vision in this context is used in the references detailed below. In each of these, we have depicted what is described as ‘**the likeness of the firmament**’ that was over the head of the Cherubim. This firmament was as the colour of terrible crystal, stretched forth over the heads of the Cherubim. On top of this firmament there appeared a throne made of sapphire, upon which sat the likeness of the appearance of a (special) man.

We can see in the two translations of **Ezek.1:22** the different ways to read it. What neither of them say, nor any of the other references in Ezekiel, is that the firmament was solid dome. The ESV likens it to an expanse of shining awe-inspiring crystal spread out above the Cherubim under the throne, **but even here it is important to note that the text does not say it was crystal—only that it had the likeness or gleam of crystal.** This seems

to give it dimension, which in a compact vision like this is designed to represent the firmament of heaven with God sitting above and upon it. The firmament is clearly meant to be a representation of the sky above us.

Ezek.1:22 (KJV). And the likeness of the firmament upon the heads of the living creature was as the colour of the terrible crystal, stretched forth over their heads above.

Ezek.1:22 (ESV). Over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring crystal, spread out above their heads.

Ezek.1:25. And **there was a voice from the firmament that was over their heads**, when they stood, and had let down their wings.

Ezek.1:26. **And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne**, as the appearance of a sapphire stone: and upon the likeness of the throne was the likeness as the appearance of a man above upon it.

Ezek.10:1. Then I looked, and, behold, in the firmament that was above the head of the cherubims there appeared over them as it were a sapphire stone, as the appearance of the likeness of a throne.

5) **Conclusion.**

As we bring our investigation to an end, we can agree that the Bible uses terms, words and descriptions that the people of those times would have been able to understand. We can further agree that things are often described from the perspective of a man living on the earth under the burden of the curse, and how he would view the physical creation as well as the circumstances of the world he lived in. The general narrative of the Bible is designed to explain to man why the world is as it is, subject to vanity (Rom.8:20) where the law of sin and death reigns over all (Rom.5:12-21).

Furthermore, **the Bible shows that the heavens are high and man is low, and when man dies he is buried below and returns to the dust of the earth from which he was made.** The contrast is seen in man's condition, with his aspirations above but his natural heritage below. To be free from his natural heritage, he needs to raise his view to see those things that are above where God dwells. This is God's constant exhortation to man.

Isaiah.66:1. Thus saith the LORD, **The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool:** where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest?

Acts.7:38. Howbeit **the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands;** as saith the prophet, Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest?

2.Chron.2:6. But who is able to build him an house, **seeing the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain him?** who am I then, that I should build him an house, save only to burn sacrifice before him?

From the way that the narrative about the 'firmament' being created on the second day we can conclude that the firmament probably does not specifically define the 'atmosphere' as we know it, but more generally the expanse of the sky where the clouds are above the sky, where the high flying birds can reach and where high defensive walls and towers are built to reach, poetically speaking (Deut.1:28, Gen.11:4). A brief review of the section that deals with the location of the clouds confirms this.

We can therefore conclude that the word firmament (**raqiya`**) does not describe a hard dome like structure, but rather a broad (invisible) structure, perhaps an expanse, which we generally call the sky through which the birds fly and above which the clouds (waters) are located.

We can also conclude that the basis for the depictions shown at the start of this essay, which are often accepted without question, are the product of fanciful concepts that are based upon assumptions. They are largely drawn from perhaps - a misconception of later Greek cosmology, later Jewish mythology, medieval sources and a misapplication of what is clearly figurate language used in the Bible. There are many well respected historians, specialists and theologians who reject the 'solid dome' theory, and who correctly identify it as the product of imagination and the synthesis of Greek, and later medieval sources. There is little or no internal scriptural evidence to support the 'solid dome' theory. The main support is from either taking figurative terms and giving them a literal application or inserting selected ANE concepts into the text.

Lastly, we will repeat our earlier suggestion that the term 'firmament' most likely refers to the general function of the 'expanse' that separates the waters, which equates to our transparent sky, whereas 'heaven' refers to its location as high above land and sea and therefore of us. It is most likely that God through the inspired authors, working under the constraints of the language and understanding of the times, simply had no better words to use that would adequately describe the creation of the firmament of heaven. The term simply refers to the 'sky' in the same general way that we would use that term. The terms they selected were sufficient to generally describe the details of creation without being technically or scientifically specific in their details. We should not try and impose on the text our own materialistic biases, nor any alleged ANE cosmological models. There is no scriptural or even historical ANE reason to suppose that the firmament refers to a solid dome.

In the final analysis, it is clearly not important that we understand **how** the heavens were created or even what force keeps them in place. All that is important is that we understand and believe the oft repeated statement, that the LORD made the heavens, the earth and the seas. **These words do not describe a natural process but a supernatural one which is, and continues to be, the product of God's determined purpose.**

Further Notes:

There are other summaries that challenge the 'solid dome' interpretation of Genesis. We recommend considering those as well. Details as follows –

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The Myth of the Solid Dome (Part 1)

Found here = https://www.academia.edu/5247294/The_Myth_of_the_Solid_Dome_Part_1

The Myth of the Solid Dome (Part 2)

Found here = https://www.academia.edu/5255903/The_Myth_of_the_Solid_Dome_Part_2_-_Concluded

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There is also the summary put together by Mark Allfree and Matt Davies, titled "**Is the Firmament of Genesis 1 a Solid Dome**".

Found here = <https://www.facebook.com/groups/christadelphians/928844553821512/>

"The Firmament of Genesis Chapter 1 is Not Solid" Reply to Critics

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/964700863556969/1214878865205833/>