

BIBLICAL STUDIES

COSMOLOGY IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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Biblical interpretation, especially when we are considering more contentious issues, often experiences a tension between allowing due weight to the uniqueness of the biblical text and interpreting the text against its historical background. One extreme threatens to interpret the text as though it had no historical context, the other to absorb into the teaching of the text the general views of the surrounding cultures. Debate is further complicated by the treatment accorded to those elements that are alleged to be common at the time the text was written. We might once again construct a contrast. One possibility would emphasize linguistic or literary features appropriated from an existing stock as part of the way the unique message is conveyed. Alternatively, we might posit time-bound and erroneous elements that enter the text because of the historical circumstances of its composition. Many other variations and possibilities exist.

An area in which such questions frequently arise is that of physical cosmology. Is the cosmology presupposed or even taught by the biblical text a definitive revelation or an expression of the ideas of that time which we now believe to be erroneous? I will examine this question by looking first at the presuppositions of those who equate the biblical view with that of the surrounding cultures and then at the actual arguments.

I. Presuppositions of the Argument

Invoking the historical context of Scripture might entail a commitment to either historical relativism or to progressivism. Historical relativism claims that all truths and eras are time-bound. Therefore our statements are every bit as bound to their time as those of the ancients. Both the Scripture we defend and the tools we use in that defense lack absolute overriding truth and authority. While a popular non-Christian position, historical relativism conflicts at too many points with a Christian position to be seriously considered in this discussion.

Progressivism sees the positions adopted later in history as improvements upon or corrections of earlier ones. Once again this can be seen in a relativist

sense: since our present positions will in turn be corrected, it makes little sense to argue for them. Most progressivists, however, think in terms of definite advance: what we now know is true and what former ages believed was wrong. Applied broadly, this is once again an attack upon any form of Christianity based on the Bible. Therefore, when used by Christian apologists, the things which are seen as time-bound tend to be limited.

Of course, this issue raises a fundamental question. How much of Scripture falls within this time-bound realm? Apologists are often so concerned to argue that what is seen as the offensive item is time-bound and not authoritative, that they do not consider the opportunity they are providing for further attacks on Scripture using their approach. This danger may be illustrated by two contemporary flash points. There are those who are happy to concede biblical cosmology but who will vigorously defend the continuing authority of the biblical view of the roles of men and women. Seeing that both are closely tied with the early chapters of Genesis, on what ground do we defend one and not the other? I am not using this as an argument against any recognition of the time-bound nature of Scripture, but rather asking for criteria by which one distinguishes between enduring and time-bound.

It is common to proclaim this or that element of Scripture as a reflection of views or practices of the time. The confidence with which this is said conveys to the reader that recovering what was generally believed or done at the time is easy. Often that is far from the case. If we are dealing particularly with the OT, then the problem is greater because of the lack of extra-biblical material from Palestine. One passage may be illuminated by another passage of Scripture, but it could be argued that both passages are reflections of common views of the time. Ideally, we need copious documentation external to the biblical text and rarely is that the case. Externally written material from Palestine that will illuminate things such as cosmological beliefs is non-existent. The resort to Ugaritic material to fill the gap left by the lack of Palestinian material brings its own problems of being certain that Ugarit is fully representative of Palestinian beliefs and practices. Mute archaeological findings may somewhat fill that gap but material remains speak to a limited range of issues. The course of argument from mute archaeological findings to abstract beliefs is so problematic as to be not worth considering.

Hence, the argument for beliefs and practices of the time has to use a particular sort of argument. Generally, appeal is made to a common ancient Near Eastern pattern and/or to a universal pattern of mankind in a certain stage of development. Notice that there are crucial assumptions with each position. One crucial assumption is that biblical revelation cannot hold a different position on the issue in question from the surrounding world. That may be true or false, but the key thing is that it is a presupposition, and presuppositions need to be made explicit and tested. The position that posits a strong connection between stages of human development and beliefs and practices is very popular because both Marxist and Liberal social theory rest upon common origins in

thinkers such as Adam Smith and Lewis Henry Morgan.¹ However, popularity, especially in historical sociology, may not be the same as truth.

How does one construct an argument to prove that the Bible may not depart from universal practice? The Bible frequently tells Israel not to be like the nations. Since an unstated premise of the apologetic that sees cosmological and historical statements as a concession to their time is that we may distinguish religious statements in Scripture from other statements; and since the warnings to remain separate have a heavily religious and cultic orientation, these appeals to distinctiveness will not be seen as relevant to the issue. Yet, there is a theoretical possibility that the Bible, for whatever reason, deviates from surrounding cultures even on "non-religious" issues. Perhaps there are not uniform beliefs at certain stages of human society, but rather individual cultures have distinctive beliefs, even before the modern age. The argument to negate this possibility has to establish a universal, or near universal, external situation and then argue what the Bible describes is identical to or at least close to that universal situation. Of course it can be attempted, but it is well to be aware of the pitfalls. If there is a common or near universal modern mind and it is clear that pre-modern practice deviates from that, then the tendency can be to combine together all pre-modern expressions as being the universal converse of the modern, when actually there are considerable differences among pre-modern beliefs and practices. It also follows that the whole argument must collapse if there are actually varying beliefs and practices in the pre-modern period, especially in cultures contemporary with the Bible.

The various paradoxes and complexities of the attempt to distinguish time-bound elements of Scripture from enduring elements produce unexpected results. Let us return to the issue of progressive assumptions. When we identify a certain element of Scripture as coming from the scientifically naive assumptions of the time, and therefore distinguishable from the theological content of the biblical message, are we interpreting Scripture in its historical context? To some people we are, because the cosmology and prehistory of Scripture must be separable from its theological message because the cosmology and prehistory is the area that Christian apologists find difficult to defend. Yet, the same question could be answered quite differently. Is a distinction between the cosmological and theological demonstrably part of the common conceptions of the world in which Scripture originated? The answer is an unambiguous negative! That distinction is a modern one and thus is part of what we bring to the past. It looks very much like a popular version of Kant's distinction between the noumena and the phenomena. So an interpretation of the biblical text in which such a distinction is foundational involves an element of eisegesis, no matter how much the user may intend to put Scripture in its context.

¹ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776; repr. ed. R. H. Campbell, A. S. Skinner, and W. B. Todd; New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); L. H. Morgan, *Ancient Society* (1877; repr. ed. L. A. White; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964). For a critique of the notion of "primitive society," with special reference to Morgan, see Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* (London: Routledge, 1988).

Yet, one must concede a certain attractiveness to this distinction between the physical and the religious. It forms a way in which difficult passages of Scripture may be dealt with while the "theological" truths are apparently still maintained.

II. *The Floating Earth*

It is common to postulate that the Bible shared the common view of primitive societies that the land was surrounded by sea upon which it floated and was surmounted by solid heavens.² Let us consider first the contention that the earth was seen as floating on the sea. A defense of this view has been presented by P. H. Seely.³ Since Seely has presented detailed arguments for seeing the Bible as reflecting a primitive worldview he is a convenient example of the position being considered here. He brings claims about many pre-modern people to support his contention for a uniform primitive view. I am in no position to dispute all these claims; and one does not need to prove what the ancient Japanese, for example, believed in order to weaken his argument. The force of Seely's argument depends upon there being a uniform pre-modern belief. All that is needed to undermine the argument is an example of a different belief, preferably from a culture close to ancient Israel. The culture contemporary with the writing of the OT that gives us the most information about cosmological beliefs is Mesopotamia.

Since Seely published his views, a comprehensive review of Mesopotamian cosmology has appeared in Wayne Horowitz's *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*.⁴ Significant Mesopotamian evidence exists in a text which shows a drawing of land surrounded by a circular ocean.⁵ In reference to this drawing, Seely does not mention that the map also shows regions beyond the sea. Horowitz is undecided whether these regions are islands or larger landmasses.⁶ Whatever the case, the drawing is not evidence for a simple picture of the earth as land surrounded by a circular ocean. We might postulate that the Mesopotamians believed that the landmass on which they lived was surrounded by sea, but that they also knew that theirs was not the only land. Further evidence of land beyond the sea comes in the *Etana Epic* when Etana, looking down from a great height, compares the sea to a ditch, presumably with banks on either side.⁷

One can argue that the Mesopotamians saw the inhabited surface of the earth as one level, below which was a watery level. A Neo-Assyrian text gives three levels to the earth: the earth's surface; the region of the god Ea, which is

² E.g., John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 35; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 4.

³ Paul H. Seely, "The Geographical Meaning of 'Earth' and 'Seas' in Genesis 1:10," *WTJ* 59 (1997): 240-46.

⁴ Wayne Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Mesopotamian Civilizations 8; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1998).

⁵ Seely, "Geographical Meaning," 245.

⁶ Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, 32.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

generally seen as the watery Apsu; and the underworld.⁸ Yet, there is not a consistent belief that below the solid surface was a watery Apsu. Building texts describe the foundations of a building being placed on the underworld or the surface of the underworld.⁹ The roots of mountains also go down to the underworld.¹⁰ Further complicating the picture is a text where the gods dig a ditch for the sea with a plough so that the sea would actually rest on the earth's surface.¹¹ These varying pictures should warn us that there is not a simple, uniform physical picture being presented.

Throughout recent discussions of the relationship of the Bible to other cosmologies, one text has been disproportionately used: the Babylonian Creation Account, or *Enuma Elish*.¹² There are some problems with its common comparison with the Bible because it is a text known for its aberrant character and is not typical of the oldest Mesopotamian cosmologies.¹³ As an attempt to justify the pre-eminent position of Babylon and its god Marduk, it had a political importance, but that does not mean that its conceptions were central to the tradition.

Proponents of the theory that Gen 1 was part of the late Priestly document have been happy to argue a relationship to *Enuma Elish*.¹⁴ Such a relationship is more problematic for those who accept a conservative dating of Genesis.¹⁵ There has been debate over the dating of *Enuma Elish*. Two suggestions are the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I (c. 1124–1103 B.C.)¹⁶ or the late Kassite period (c. 13th and 12th centuries).¹⁷ If these dates are roughly correct, and given that *Enuma Elish* represents a somewhat innovative direction in Mesopotamian cosmology—however prominent it may have become later because of the political prominence of Babylon—it is hard to reconcile a conservative dating of Gen 1 and influence upon Genesis from *Enuma Elish*. Further, the cosmology of *Enuma Elish* is by no means straightforward. When the story begins, we have three characters: Apsu, Tiamat, and Mummu. They function in the story as characters with human attributes and actions, yet they are also physical entities. We are told that “they were mingling their waters together” (1:5). The common identification is that Apsu is sweet (fresh) water, based on texts where *apsu*, as a

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16–19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 275. Note that buildings could also be founded on the Apsu (*ibid.*, 309).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 284.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 319.

¹² For an English translation, see Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (2 vols.; 2d ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 1996), 1:350–401.

¹³ W. G. Lambert, “A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis,” *JTS* 16 (1965): 291.

¹⁴ For example, E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB 1; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 9–11.

¹⁵ Seely says that Genesis “reflects an ancient Near Eastern concept, particularly shaped by a Mesopotamian tradition found in *Enuma Elish*” (“The Firmament and the Water Above, Part 2: The Meaning of ‘The Water above the Firmament’ in Genesis 1:6–8,” *WTJ* 54 [1992]: 31). He also says that Gen 1 “belongs conceptually to the second millennium B.C.” (“Geographical Meaning,” 236).

¹⁶ W. G. Lambert, “The Reign of Nebuchadnezzar I: A Turning Point in the History of Ancient Mesopotamian Religion” in *The Seed of Wisdom: Essays in Honour of T. J. Meek* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1964), 3–13.

¹⁷ W. Sommerfield, *Der Aufstieg Marduks* (AOAT 213; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1982), 174ff.

common noun, refers to springs and canal waters.¹⁸ Tiamat is obviously related to the noun *tāmtu*, meaning “sea,” thus the common explanation that Apsu and Tiamat stand for fresh and salt water respectively. While the identity of Mummu is problematic, a reasonable surmise is that the text is ascribing watery origins to the universe along with the common polytheistic fusion of primal gods and primal cosmic parts.

Apsu and Mummu planned to kill the gods they had created. The god Ea foiled this scheme by casting spells on Apsu and Mummu. Ea established his dwelling upon Apsu (1:71) and called this dwelling Apsu (1:76). Immediately there is difficulty in deriving a physical picture from this action. The “deep” or Apsu, is often pictured as the domain of Ea. In such cases it seems to be in the Persian Gulf, which is salt water.¹⁹ Apsu can also be found in fresh water, and Apsu is also the name of Ea’s temple in Eridu.²⁰ The problem is then to determine which Apsu is meant in any subsequent reference to Apsu. Is it the original Apsu bound by Ea’s spells? Is it the dwelling Ea built upon the original Apsu, or is it Ea’s temple? More likely these are seen as in some way equivalent. Yet, if that is the case, was drawing a physical picture the text’s purpose?

The next battle pitted Tiamat against the younger gods. Their champion this time was Marduk, who killed Tiamat and split her in half. With one half, he made the sky. He set some sort of a guard so that the waters could not escape from this half, now become the sky (1V:136-140). Older translations such as by P. Jensen²¹ and A. Heidel²² saw the following lines (1V:142-145) as describing the formation of the earth over Apsu, thus giving a three-tiered universe of sky, earth, and Apsu. This translation cannot be sustained and it is clear that these verses are still talking about the sky. *The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* puts forward an alternate translation: “The ešgalla (great temple) (called) Ešarra which he created, is the sky.”²³ The text says that this temple is equivalent in dimension to the Apsu. Note that the text is once again concerned with a temple, but it would seem to be one of cosmic dimensions. An index to the difficulty of this passage is that yet a different interpretation is presented by A. Livingstone. He believes that the Esarra is a new level of the cosmos, situated between heaven and the Apsu.²⁴ He sees this new level as intended to be a dwelling for the god Enlil.

The fate of the other half of Tiamat is contained in an incomplete text.²⁵ What is clear is that the Euphrates and Tigris rivers are described as coming out

¹⁸ CAD 1:2, s.v. “apsu.”

¹⁹ Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, 341.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 334-47.

²¹ P. Jensen, *Die Kosmologie der Babylonier* (Strassburg: K. J. Trübner, 1890), 198.

²² Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation* (2d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 43.

²³ CAD 4:364a, s.v. “ešgallu.” For an alternate translation with the same import, see Foster, *Before the Muses*, 1:376.

²⁴ Alasdair Livingstone, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 80-81.

²⁵ See B. Landsberger and J. V. Kinnier Wilson, “The Fifth Tablet of *Enuma Elish*,” *JNES* 20 (1961): 154-79.

of her eyes (V:55). Something, perhaps mountains, are placed on her head. It seems a reasonable surmise that the mountains of Anatolia, which are the sources of the rivers that dominate Mesopotamia, are in view.

There are problems in trying to form a physical picture from this description. We have seen that Tiamat is generally equated with the sea, or at least a watery body. In his treatment of "the waters above the firmament," Seely concedes the point that, contrary to his other attempts to argue universal pre-scientific notions, primitive peoples do not generally think of water above the sky.²⁶ Hence, he has to argue that the biblical account is closely related to *Enuma Elish*. Thus, it is crucial to his whole argument that a guard be set to prevent the waters of the half of Tiamat, now become the sky, from escaping. Here Tiamat is very clearly watery, and that is crucial to Seely's argument.²⁷

Let us now take the other half of Tiamat. Surely it must also be watery, yet it seems to be laid over Apsu, which we have seen was also a body of water. Seely's solution is to suggest that it is the water of Apsu which is emerging through Tiamat.²⁸ That is in a way logical in that springs and the Tigris and Euphrates are fresh water; however, the text itself does not mention Apsu in this context. Anyway, why did water need to come from Apsu if this lower half of Tiamat was also watery?

One suspects that behind these difficulties there is a problem. If pre-scientific people think in terms of the world as a flat disk, surrounded by sea and floating on that sea, then the waters from below that emerge as springs must be the waters of the sea, namely, salt water. Yet, they are fresh. If we are correct in seeing Apsu as sweet water and Tiamat as salt water, then the composer at least recognized the distinction. Further, if the waters of Tiamat's half that was raised to the sky are the source of rain, then one would expect rain to be salt water. We may come with the hubris which characterizes the modern age and suggest that all the pre-modern people, who held to the earth as a flat disk floating on the sea, were too stupid to realize that there was a conflict between their belief in a sea below the earth and the fact that the water which usually comes out of the earth is fresh. Yet, in charity, we might suggest that there are alternate explanations.²⁹

What physical and geometric model can we form from *Enuma Elish* if Apsu, the dwelling of Ea, which, according to other texts is watery, is built upon Apsu which is fresh water? If half of Tiamat is the sky, is the sky conceived of as salt water? What about the other half of Tiamat? If that becomes the earth, should not the earth become salt water? If Livingstone is correct and there is a level below the half of Tiamat that became the heavens, what does that do to the geometry of the cosmos?

What this examination shows us is that one can form a physical and geometric model if one is selective in what one chooses to quote from *Enuma Elish*, but not

²⁶ Seely, "The Firmament and the Water Above, Part 2," 31.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

²⁸ Seely, "Geographical Meaning," 245.

²⁹ Note Horowitz's point that no Mesopotamian text spells out the physical relationship of the underground waters to the surface waters and the sea (*Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, 318).

if one takes each passage that should be relevant. This situation raises a fundamental issue. Was the author thinking in terms of a physical and geometric model? For modern thinkers cosmology primarily implies a physical model. In trying to abstract the cosmology of an ancient text, we naturally look for what physical model we can extract. By selective quotation, we can obtain such a model. Yet, if all the details will not fit a physical and geometric picture, are we engaging in correct exegesis?

I strongly suspect that the aim of *Enuma Elish* is not to build a physical cosmology, but to provide a background for Esagila, the temple of Marduk at Babylon. The building of Ea's dwelling and hence the defeat of Apsu is relevant to the temple at Babylon, because Esagila is presented as the equivalent of Ea's temple (VI:62). In the narrative and order of the text, great attention is given to the ordering and arrangement of the part of Tiamat that has become the heavens because that was seen as the abode of many gods and their connected stars. In addition, the Apsu was seen as an abode of gods. Little attention is given to the ordering of the part of Tiamat that becomes the earth because, with respect to the earth, the crucial thing for the writer is Marduk's temple. I wonder whether our concern with the watery or non-watery nature of the bottom half of Tiamat was no concern of his because he was dealing with other issues. If that is the case, is it legitimate to take parts out of context and to try to form a physical cosmology?

III. *Deriving a Physical Cosmology from the References to Seas in the Biblical Text*

It follows that we need to ask whether the similar attempt to read a physical and geometrical cosmology into the biblical text also faces the danger of substituting the primary concerns of the modern world for those of the biblical text. In this discussion Ps 104:5-9 occupies a crucial position, because it is a poetic commentary on Gen 1. Seely rightly objects to the argument of some Creation Science writers that the passage has primary reference to the flood.³⁰ However, I wonder if he gives due regard to the features of that passage, which have been seen as supporting the assignment to the flood. The text uses dramatic and emphatic language to describe the initial events of day three of creation. Why such emphasis? Surely it is because the reversal of the shaping of the earth for man is judgment. If the waters return to cover the earth, then men experience the judgment of God. That is what the flood was, a case where, under divine command, the waters did return. Psalm 104 may be about creation, but it was written post-flood, and that shapes its language.

From this understanding of flood language a crucial question arises about the primary focus of the passage. Was the author aiming to stress the physical relationship of land and water so that we appreciate that the earth is a circular disk floating on the sea? Or was his intention to stress the goodness of God in establishing a regime in which the waters do not overflow the land? Surely it

³⁰ Paul H. Seely, "Creation Science Takes Psalm 104:6-9 Out of Context," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 51 (1999): 170-74.

was the latter! Should that not inform our understanding of parallel passages? Take for example Ps 24:2. Seely makes a point of the fact that the relationship of the land to the waters in this passage and in Ps 136:6 is explained by the preposition 'al which has "upon" as its primary meaning.³¹ The problem is that there are also passages where this preposition has a primary sense of "above." How does one decide which should be our translation in these passages? The very existence of a word covering both "upon" and "above" may mean that the Hebrew language, in its use of this word, is not making the distinctions which seem natural to an English speaker invited by his language to choose between "upon" and "above" as the most appropriate term.

Judgment by water is a recurrent theme in the biblical text. We find it first in the flood, with its clear connections to the creation account. It appears again in the crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan. It is frequently invoked as a metaphor of threat and judgment (Pss 29:10; 32:6; 46:2-4 [ET 46:1-3]; 93:3-4; Isa 28:17; Jer 51:42, 55; Ezek 26:19; Nah 1:8). I am suggesting that it is in that context that we interpret passages that describe the relationship of land and water.

It may be objected that we may still discern the underlying physical cosmology in such passages. Perhaps! Attempts to do so take us back to the already mentioned problem of the relationship of fresh and salt water. The threat from water to the earth involves both sweet and salt water. Rivers may overflow their banks; sea may invade the land. There is water at the seashore and water gushing from the earth as springs. As long as the various forms of water stay in their place, man is not threatened. Therefore, Scripture gives thanks for the divine power that preserves us and the world from these potential threats. There is no need in this picture to investigate the relationship of salt water to fresh water; however, once we attempt to turn this into a physical picture, we cannot avoid the issue of the physical relationship of fresh to salt water. If both biblical and other ancient texts were not thinking in terms of a comprehensive physical model, then the problem does not arise. We may ascribe the lack of concern about a physical model to their "pre-modern" mentality, but in reality that is just saying that what is foremost for us should be foremost for them. When we think that way then we demonstrate that we are arrogant progressivists.

IV. *The Meaning of the Firmament*

Seely argues that there is a common pre-modern conception of the sky as a solid dome. Hence, the writers of the Bible must have been thinking of the firmament of Gen 1:6-8 as solid.³² His primary argument from the biblical text itself rests upon the meaning of *raqia'*. The root has the sense of stamping or beating out something.³³ Seely's view has been contested by J. P. Holding who points out that the *raqia'* is called heaven (Gen 1:8). Birds fly in heaven (Deut 4:17) and God

³¹ Seely, "Geographical Meaning," 250-51.

³² Paul H. Seely, "The Firmament and the Waters Above, Part 1: The Meaning of *raqia'* in Genesis 1:6-8," *WTJ* 53 (1991): 227-40.

³³ *Ibid.*, 237-40.

is enthroned in heaven (Ps 11:4), so it cannot be conceived as a solid structure.³⁴ Seely attempted to deal with this in his original article by saying that heaven is wider than the *raqia'*.³⁵ However, the proof texts that he cites for that proposition are all texts which show that heaven is not solid. Thus, they prove that heaven is wider than the *raqia'* only if we accept the point at issue that the *raqia'* must be solid; therefore, a non-solid heaven cannot be completely synonymous with the *raqia'*. This is a clear example of assuming the point at issue.

Mesopotamian texts are not a great help to us because there seem to be different views in Mesopotamia. One view sees three different levels in heaven, made of different colored stones.³⁶ Another view connects the heavens with water.³⁷ Even if we ignore the problem in assuming that biblical views must be the same as external cultures, if there is not unanimity in the Mesopotamian tradition, then we cannot invoke that tradition to explain the Bible.

In the problem of the relationship of earth and water considered earlier, I suggested that the prominence of water as an instrument of divine judgment provided the context for the crucial biblical statements and that we were in danger of anachronism in imposing our concern with physical and geometrical models on those texts. Do we have a similar biblical context to help us understand the sense of the *raqia'*? There is no clear comparable context. Aside from viewing the heavens as the particular domain and concern of God (Ps 115:16), the Bible, outside of the creation account, does not tell us much about the structure of the heavens. Heavens are often mentioned in connection with God, but descriptions of the heavens themselves are meager. That means that dogmatism is excluded. Perhaps one might allude to the vastness of heavens implied in statements about God such as, "Behold, the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain you" (1 Kgs 8:27). If the dominant image is vastness I wonder if the primary sense of *raqia'* is to direct our attention to the fact that the heavens are a vast, spread-out array. With human action there must be something solid to spread out. Does the same apply to God?

In other words, I am willing to confess ignorance as to the import of *raqia'*. Since the expectation that a physical model must have been primary in the mind of the author leads in the wrong direction in other cases, I am reluctant to assume that it is primary here. In the case of the Mesopotamian text with a three-tiered heaven, the necessity of three heavens arises from the need to accommodate various gods.³⁸ The biblical text has no such need; therefore, a greater indefiniteness about the arrangements of the heavens is not surprising. If the argument for a uniform pre-modern mentality is spurious, as I believe it to be, then Seely's case really rests on one word. I think that is an insufficient basis for determining biblical cosmology.

³⁴ James Patrick Holding, "Is the *raqiya'* ('firmament') a Solid Dome? Equivocal Language in the Cosmology of Genesis 1 and the Old Testament: A Response to Paul H. Seely," (Creation Science) *Technical Journal* 13 (November 1999): 44-51.

³⁵ Seely, "The Firmament and the Waters Above, Part 1," 237.

³⁶ Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, 3-4, 262-63.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 262-63.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 3-15.

V. *Some Concluding Observations*

The clear connection of the biblical portrayal of the relationship of land and sea to the flood should promote some reflection. Land and sea are not conceived independently of the history of their interaction. There has been something of a tendency in theology to divorce physical aspects of the biblical picture from historical ones.³⁹ Thus, creation and the physical questions connected to it are seen as divorced from historical questions and the involvement of God in acts of redemption. Scripture itself does not make that distinction. The act of judgment and salvation that is the flood is described in terms of creation, and then, subsequently, images drawn from the flood become the way subsequent acts of judgment and salvation are described. Creation and history are not unconnected, which means that creation and redemption are not unconnected. Thus, there is a certain understandable, even commendable, logic in Seely's extension of his basic paradigm of accommodation to erroneous views of the time to historical events such as the flood.⁴⁰ Of course, it also follows that if we falsely accommodate part of Scripture's unique view of reality to either the surrounding pagan views or to modern secular views, then we will be in danger of doing the same with other aspects of Scripture's views.

³⁹ That tendency has been partly abetted by the Albright School's emphasis on the God of Israel as a God who acts in history as opposed to the pagan gods who acted in nature. See Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973); G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (SBT 8; London: SCM, 1952). For the argument that Assyrian gods were seen as active in history, aimed against the Albright school, see Bertil Albrektson, *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and in Israel* (ConBOT 1; Lund: Gleerup, 1967).

⁴⁰ Paul H. Seely, "Noah's Flood: Its Date, Extent, and Divine Accommodation," *WTJ* 66 (2004): 291-311.



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