

Chapter Three: “Sky,” “Land” and “Vault”

Two Creation Accounts

Genesis 1-2 contains two accounts of creation, and they are different:

- The first account (1:1-2:4a) is characterized by carefully structured repetition. The second account (2:4b-25) is characterized by narrative.
- The first begins with the creation of light, then the *raqia* (dome or vault), followed by vegetation, birds and fish, animals, and male and female humans, *in that order*. The second account begins with a human male before any vegetation exists, then animals and birds, and finally a human female, *in that order*.
- In the first account God creates by *fiat*—“Let there be.” In the second account God creates by *forming*—the man from soil and the woman from the man’s rib.
- In the first account God is identified as “Elohim.” In the second account God is identified as “Yahweh Elohim.”
- In the first account creation begins with watery chaos. In the second account creation begins with desert-like conditions.

The Importance of Identifying the Concepts with Which We Think



What any reader of Genesis will picture while reading either of the two accounts depends on the mental concepts that person brings to the process of reading.

In the mind’s eye of Moshe Heeb there will be a quite different picture from that envisioned by Ian Michael O’Dern (see Chapter Two handout.) For I.M. O’Dern, to read Genesis and picture what Moshe Heeb saw is extremely difficult. But it is *absolutely necessary*, because I. M. O’Dern is, in effect, looking over Moshe’s shoulder and reading Moshe’s mail. It is in *the message to Moshe* that the *authority* of the text resides.

“Sky”

So what did Moshe Heeb see when he heard (or read) the Hebrew word *shemayim*? He saw an immense dome with the sun, moon, and stars set into it, turning majestically overhead. We moderns (represented by I. M. O’Dern), hearing (or reading) the English word “heavens,” more than likely picture a Hubble-enhanced universe containing

innumerable star-studded galaxies. In the outer reaches of one such galaxy—the Milky way—is a solar system with a rocky planet. That planet is our Earth, circling its parent star.

“Land”

What was Moshe’s *’erets*? It was the “land” promised to his forefather Abraham. It was in every sense of the word “The Promised Land.” Moshe’s forebears, emerging from slavery in Egypt, had fought for it, settled it, farmed it, protected it—and Moshe’s descendants still do! The modern-day nation of Israel is, in Hebrew, *’erets Israel*, the Land of Israel. On hearing the equivalent English word it takes poetry or song for us to feel the same thrill as Moshe felt—but it is still possible. Consider “*the land of the free and the home of the brave*” or “*this land is my land; this land is your land;... this land was made for you and me.*”

Moshe’s *’erets* was immovable. God had made it so. The immovable nature of *’erets* was proof of God’s greatness (Ps. 104:5). For us I. M. O’Derns to picture an immovable Earth is a very tall order, for it is the essence of a *planet* that it circles a parent star, and the Earth is most certainly a planet. Indeed, in I. M. O’Dern’s mind the association between earth and planet is so close that he often refers to his home in the universe as “Planet Earth.” If he had used this phrase (or its Hebrew equivalent) in speaking to Moshe Heeb, Moshe would have had no idea of what was being said. The shoe would now be on the other foot: Moshe would be reading *our* mail, and it would be nonsensical to him.

“Vault”

Moshe may not often have encountered the word *raqia’*. Indeed, it is possible that he had only heard it in the setting of the creation account in Genesis 1. But whether or not he had heard *raqia’* before, he would have immediately known what it meant. That is because the Hebrew verb *raqa’* was a common word in daily life. It meant to beat out, to hammer into a flattened state, to enlarge the surface area of metal by hammering it into a thin sheet. The process it described could be seen daily in the local market as artisans produced bowls and plates from brass ingots by “beating out.” Less often, artisans produced silver and gold jewelry by “beating out,” and this process is also mentioned in the Old Testament. The related noun *raqia’*, translated as “dome” or “vault” (and much more obscurely as “firmament” in KJV) occurs only in Genesis 1, in poetic references to the sky (Ps 19:1; 150:1; Dan 12:3), and in Ezekiel’s visions of celestial beings (1:22-26; 10:1). The verb *raqa’* occurs 11 times in the Old Testament (Ex 39:3, Num 16:39, 2 Sam 22:43, Job 37:6, Ps 136:6, Isa 40: 19, Isa 42: 5, Isa 44: 24, Job 10:9, Eze 6: 11, Eze 25: 6). When it occurs it is always in the context of beating out, stamping out, stamping under-foot, or spreading out by enlarging the area covered by whatever had been “beaten out.”