

Chapter Four: “The Vault of the Sky”

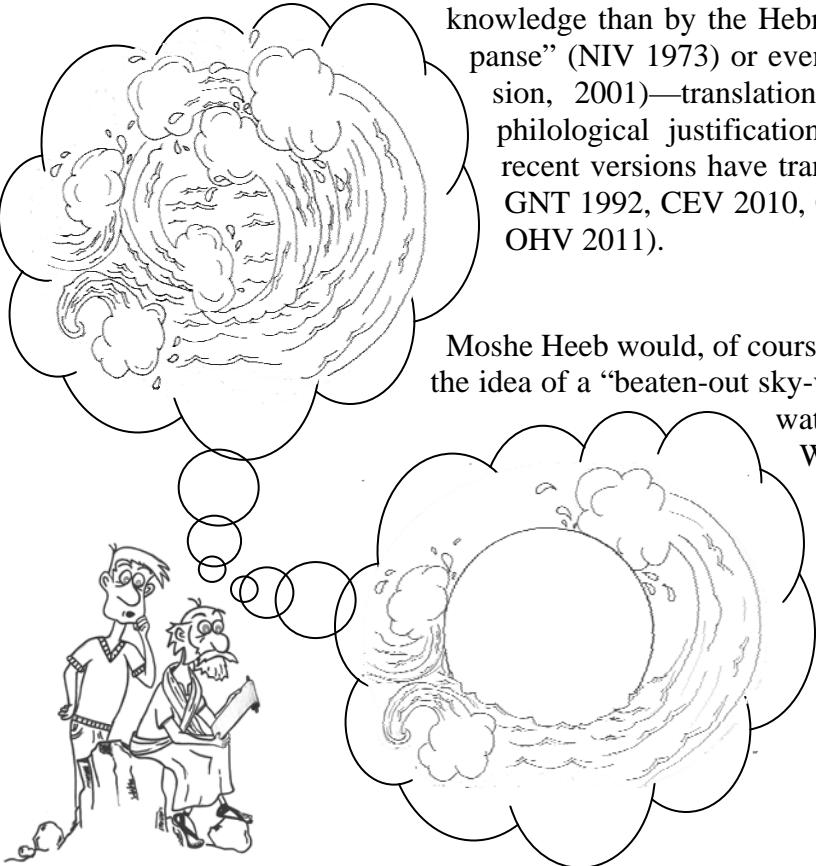
Giving “Form” and Assigning “Function”

At the “beginning” the condition of things was total disarray, which the Hebrew author of Genesis describes as *tohu wabohu*. We have rendered this enigmatic expression as “without form or function” (Gen. 1:2 OHV), underscoring its initial state of utter uselessness and looking forward to the creative activity by which God will not only give form (days one through three) but also assign function (days four through six). The meaning of *tohu* is reasonably clear, since the word occurs 18 more times in the Hebrew Bible. It connotes futility, waste, or emptiness. The prefix *wa* is the common conjunction “and,” but the meaning of *bohu* is not obvious. It occurs only two more times; one of these, Jer. 24:3, is an obvious reference back to the initial chaos of Gen. 1:2, and the other, Isa. 34:11, may well be. These references do not use *bohu* in some other setting, they are thus of little help. It is possible that *bohu* is a made-up word invented to rhyme with *tohu*—something like our “Humpty-Dumpty” or “mumbo-jumbo.” In any case, the general meaning is clear enough: empty uselessness that is utterly unpromising.

The Overarching (!) Importance of the “Vault”

We concluded our previous chapter by noting that the Hebrew word *raqia* referred to a beaten-out “vault” or “dome.” It seems to have puzzled the translators of the early English versions. They settled on the word “firmament,” following the Latin *firmamentum* of the early Latin translations of the Hebrew Bible. Because “firmament” doesn’t mean much to modern readers, a couple of recent versions, influenced more by scientific

knowledge than by the Hebrew text, have translated *raqia* as “expanse” (NIV 1973) or even “atmosphere” (Urim-Thummim Version, 2001)—translations for which there is absolutely no philological justification. More responsibly, the majority of recent versions have translated *raqia* as “dome” (NRSV 1989, GNT 1992, CEV 2010, CEB 2011, etc.) or “vault” (NIV 2011, OHV 2011).



Moshe Heeb would, of course, have had no difficulty whatever with the idea of a “beaten-out sky-vault” or dome separating the primeval waters “above” from those “underneath.”

When he looked up at night, what he saw looked like an enormous vault or the inside of a gigantic dome; and he had no reason to envision anything else. However, Ian Michael—standing in for all of us moderns—has a problem. He knows that there is no such thing as a sky-vault or

dome above his head (he has seen rockets on TV leaving for Mars), whereas there clearly is an atmosphere. Equipped with the knowledge of that atmosphere and also knowing that there is no sky-vault or dome, Ian Michel can make no sense out of *raqia*. He gets into this quandary by *forgetting that he is reading someone else's mail*. He assumes that Genesis 1 is answering his questions (and not Moshe's) and so is anticipating a description of the process by which Ian Michael's universe, Ian Michael's solar system, and (most importantly) Ian Michael's Planet Earth came to be.

Whose Question? What Answer?

If Ian Michael is going to make sense of *raqia* and the rest of Genesis 1, he must first understand what it meant to its original audience—Moshe and his tribe. Ian Michael is reading a text in a different language and from a different culture in a different era *addressed to someone else*. His first task is to avoid the mistake of simply assuming (without even thinking about it) that Genesis 1 is addressing *his* questions. He will inevitably make this assumption unless he consciously thinks about it, rejects it, and asks himself what Moshe Heeb's questions might have been—all of which requires a good deal of mental effort from Ian Michael.

Ian Michael who lives on this side of the scientific revolution, (which transformed the way the way he thinks about everything), is interested immediately in *processes*—in *how* cosmological events happen and how things come to be the way they are. By contrast, Moshe Heeb, having very limited information about the *how* of the physical universe, is interested primarily in *reasons* and *purposes*—in *why* events occur the way they do and *why* things are the way they are.

Perhaps an analogy will help us explore this difference. If a woman dying of cancer asks, “Doctor, why does it hurt so much?” she doesn’t need or want a technical description of the physiology of pain; what she wants and needs is some insight into the *purpose* of her extreme discomfort, some way to *make sense* of her agony. Similarly, Moshe is not interested in natural history (since the concept of Nature and Natural Law is still far in the future!). He is much more interested in, “*Why* is there anything at all? *Why* is there something and not just nothing?” In other words, “Does existence—especially human existence, including my own existence—*make sense*? Does it *mean* anything?” The answer from Genesis is an eloquent and powerful “Yes! Because God freely chose to create.” This answer comes more as an *ultimate explanation* than as a *factual description*; but it is of enormous importance for it enabled him (and it enables us) to affirm transcendent meaning for our collective and individual lives.

Ian Michael, on reading Genesis 1 is going to find it difficult to keep from thinking of it as a *description*—prescientific, to be sure—of the origin of Planet Earth and of the solar system of which it is a part. But Genesis 1 was addressed to Moshe and told of the origin of the world that Moshe lived in. In Moshe’s world there was no Planet Earth, there was no solar system—just “greater” and “lesser” “lights” “set” in a *raqia* which protected the fixed, immovable “land” from the waters of chaos that threatened it from above and from below. The “greater light” was what moved; not the “land”. It circled Moshe’s “land” once each day. For Ian Michael (and for us) Genesis 1 should be read as a profound explanation of the meaning and significance of human existence—just as it was for Moshe more than 2,000 years ago!