Chapter Seven: "The Sky and the Land" versus "The Universe"

Moshe's "sky" and "land"

In the last chapter we explored the idea of explanacepts—explanatory concepts that influence our thinking (because we use them to classify everything we think about)—and how Moshe He'eb's explanacepts differed from Ian Michael O'Dern's. It is now time to explore the context within which those explanacepts function—the material universe. Anything Ian Michael thinks about in the material universe he (usually unconsciously) categorizes by means of one of four explanacepts. Moshe did the same; but, as we have noted, he had only two explanacepts with which to classify all of his all his thinking about such events.

This would seem like a big enough difference between their ways of thinking, but there is another and equally important difference. The ideas that Moshe classified by means of his two explanacepts were not about the "universe" that Ian Michael knows (and tries to understand and explore). Moshe's *shamayim*—"sky" or "heaven(s)"—was (or were) the location(s) of everything that was "above", everything he could see or envision when he looked up—where birds flew, where God was, where the stars and the "greater and lesser lights" were set in a *'raqia* (dome or vault).

The counterpoint to Moshe's *shamayim* was *'erets*—"land". This was the territory where he lived (the "land of Canaan", the "land of Egypt", or other "lands" he had heard of). Collectively, these territories were the "land" God formed during the Creation week. God had protected this "land" from the primordial waters of chaos by the *raqia.* He furnished it with plants and animals and, as a crowning act, God created humanity, the reality most like Himself.

Ian Michael's "universe"

A part of Ian Michael's view of reality is similar but it is mostly very different. When instead of the Hebrew word *shamayim* he reads the English word "heavens", he thinks of the atmospheric "heaven" in which birds and aircraft fly, or, more likely, the astronomical "heaven" that contains the sun, moon, and stars he can see and the galaxies he has heard about. Typically, he pictures the scene looking down from above because he has seen pictures of the Earth from space. If he is a religious person, he may also think of the divine "heaven", home of God and angels. And, when, instead of hearing the Hebrew *'erets* (land), Ian Michael reads the English word "earth",[1] he instinctively pictures Planet Earth, rotating on its axis every 24 hours and circling te sun every 365¼ days.

If Ian Michael thinks "universe" when he reads about Moshe's "sky" and "land" or "heavens and earth", he is imposing a very recent understanding on a very ancient text. That, however, is exactly what Ian Michael will do unless he stops and considers carefully what he is about. Unless he can translate himself back (that is, retrotranslate) 3,000 years, he is almost certain to assume

[1] See, for example, the King James Version (1611), Young's Literal Translation (1898), American Standard Version (1901), Revised Standard Version (1952), Living Bible (1971), New King James Version (1982), The Message (1993), Contemporary English Version (1995), New Living Translation (1996), English Standard Version (2001), Common English Bible (2011).

that it is the creation of the modern universe that is being described in Genesis. He will envision a solar system, a galaxy known as the Milky Way, and a hundred billion other galaxies with, perhaps, a hundred billion stars in each. (That amounts to a hundred billion times a hundred billion, or ten sextillion—10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000, stars.) That is Ian Michael's understanding of material reality—his "universe".

The "universe" is a very modern conception

Ian Michael, we assume, is scientifically informed. It is difficult for him to remember that his "scientifically informed" concept of "the universe" is only a few years old. He can hardly remember, much less describe in detail, his image of the universe prior to the launching of the Hubble Space Telescope (named after the astronomer Edwin Hubble, 1889-1953) in 1990. Picturing the universe now, Ian Michael inevitably includes one or more Hubble images in the process. By and large, his mind and life (and ours!) have been enriched by these images, but for our present task—that of really reading (or really hearing) Genesis—the Hubble images have turned a task that was already difficult into one that is well-nigh impossible.

The vastly different ancient "sky"

When Ian Michael looks up at night he does so in a post Hubble era. He superimposes those Hubble images suggesting a hundred billion galaxies each with a hundred billion suns on the flickering points of light he sees overhead. He can hardly avoid so doing. For Moshe however, those flickering points of light in the night sky were just that—flickering points of light. So Matthew's Gospel can quote Jesus as saying that before the Son of Man returns, "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven" (Matt. 24:29).

In two other passages the book of Revelation uses the imagery of stars falling to earth. Although these passages are highly symbolic, the images that the "stars of heaven fell to earth as the fig tree drops its winter fruit" (Rev. 6:13) and that the tail of "the great red dragon . . . swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to earth" (Rev. 12:3, 4) were not unthinkable for Moshe—as they are for Ian Michael today, This imagery was rhetorically effective precisely because Moshe could *imagine* it. For Ian Michael (and for the rest of us), picturing a series of immense suns crashing into our tiny planet is just impossible.

Chance, creation, and transcendent meaning

If the truth of the matter is that the universe came into existence as the result of a chance fluctuation in a quantum vacuum (whatever that may mean), and if the universe is maintained in existence solely by regularities of nature that also arose by chance, then we have no Creator-designed destiny to fulfill, relationships to maintain, or service to perform; and our lives have no ultimate significance. We ourselves are just the result of meaningless replications of the chance fluctuation that brought the universe into being in the first place.

Over against this stark and dismal picture stands the message of Genesis 1. It reassures us that we human beings, along with the rest of finite reality (whether understood as Moshe's "sky and land" or as Ian Michael's "universe") are ultimately willed into existence by a generous God who extravagantly creates—and for Ian Michael living in today's universe with ten sextillion suns, God's creative extravagance is utterly incomprehensible. Our lives have meaning as we serve and fulfill the purpose for which we were created. As a result of our divine Creation, we have freedom to invest our time and our physical, mental, social, and spiritual resources so as to fulfill (at least to some extent) God's purposes. And thus it is that the message of Genesis 1 is still capable of filling our hearts and lives with the promise of transcendent meaning.