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# The Three-Storied Universe

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*The Bible assumes that the universe consists of three stories. The top story consists of a hard firmament which serves to divide a part of the primeval ocean from the other part of that ocean which is on the earth. The middle story, the earth, is where flesh and blood men live. The bottom story, Sheol, is where the souls of the departed live.*

*The firmament is hard, not gaseous. This is evidenced by the etymological meaning of the Hebrew word for firmament, the logic of the case, the ease with which Moses could have described a gaseous firmament had he so desired, Biblical cross references, and the absence of any evidence to the contrary.*

*The earth is presumably, but not necessarily flat.*

*The bottom story is not just figurative language for the state of the dead, nor is it simply equivalent to the meaning of "grave". It is, as we see in Numbers 16:30-33, I Samuel 28:815, and elsewhere, the subterranean realm of the dead.*

*The Bible assumes that the universe is three-storied; but, we do not believe that Christians are bound to give assent to such a cosmology, since the purpose of the Bible is to give redemptive, not scientific truth. The relationship of science to Scripture is this: The Bible gives redemptive truth through the scientific thoughts of the times without ever intending that those scientific thoughts should be believed as inerrant.*

## INTRODUCTION

**I**t seems to the author that the three-storied universe as it is found in the Bible serves as an object lesson to those who would like to know the relationship between science and the Bible. It would serve even better, however, if more people could see this Biblical cosmology.

It seems that in reaction to unbelief, the current shibboleth of would-be theological orthodoxy is, "The Bible is inerrant whenever it touches on matters of science." We find

this doctrine to be a priori, a doctrine that is read into the teachings of the Bible, rather than derived from it by legitimate exegesis. Not that we will here undertake to show how illegitimate the exegesis has been that buttresses this a priori doctrine. Rather, we only seek to demonstrate that the Bible portrays a three-storied universe, a cosmology which any modern man will reject as being scientifically erroneous.

The three-storied universe is a cosmology wherein the universe is conceived of as consisting of three stories. The ceiling of Sheol, the bottom story, is the surface of the earth. The surface of the earth, in turn, is the floor of the middle story. The ceiling of the earth, the middle story, is the firmament with its contiguous heavenly ocean. This firmament with its ocean is, in turn, the floor of the top story, heaven.

## **THE UPPER STORY**

### **The Solid Firmament**

As to the upper story, one big point of dispute is the meaning of "raqia' ", the firmament that God created to divide the waters above and below it (Genesis 1:6). Though standard Hebrew lexicons have defined "raqia'" as "solid vault of heaven", some conservatives have argued, perhaps from the cognate verb, raqa' (heat out, spread out), that we may translate "raqia'" by the word "expanse". There is some truth in this.

Since metal spreads out when it is beaten, the verb "raqa'" can be translated "spread out": (Ex. 39:3; Isa, 40:19; Jer. 10:9) ; and the meaning "spread out" can be used in virtual independence of the meaning "beat out": (Ps. 136:6; Isa, 42:5; 44:24). If this is so, why not translate "raqia'" by the word "expanse"? We are not at all adverse to this translation.

But, having translated "raqia'" by "expanse", one has by no means changed the biblical assumption of a three-storied universe. There is nothing in the translation "expanse" that denies the solidity of that expanse. The connotations of airiness and non-solidity which tend to accompany the word "expanse" when used in Genesis 1 cannot be admitted. An "expanse" is simply something that is spread out over a wide area". (Webster's Third International Dictionary). Thus, it is said that the earth is an "expanse: (Isa. 42:5; 44:24), just as the firmament is an "expanse".

To say that the firmament in the Bible is an "expanse" is not to say that it is not solid. Bear in mind that the meaning "spread out" for the cognate verb "raqia' " would never have arisen unless the idea of beating or pounding something solid had come first. The meaning "spread out" is derived from the more basic meaning "stamp" or "heat out". The metal only spreads out after and because it has been beaten. Had the concept of solidity not been tied to "raqio' ", the concept of expanse would not have arisen.

This historical etymology of "raqia'" and "raqa'" does not absolutely prove that "raqio' in Genesis 1 is solid, but it does give an initial presumption to the idea that "raqia'" is solid.

More directly, we find it only logical that the firmament be hard or solid in order to fulfill its purpose of serving as a divider of the primeval ocean (Gen. 1:6), carrying the water

above on its back (Gen. 1:7). It is impossible, by the nature of air and water, for an empty, airy, evercontinuing expanse to serve as a divider for a body of water. A part of a primeval ocean may be made to settle above or beyond a solid wall, a solid dome acting as a divider; but, place a part of a primeval ocean "above" or "beyond" (that is the Hebrew word) a gaseous or vacuous expanse, and you find that the ocean immediately makes itself at home "in" the expanse, not "beyond" it. That is, it is self-contradictory to talk of water being "beyond" an empty or gaseous expanse; for if it is "beyond" the expanse, "beyond" the firmament, where is it? The only place the water could be on the airy, atmosphere "expanse" view would be "in" the firmament, not "beyond" it, as the text requires.

On the non-solid definition of the firmament, one has to cease talking about "beyond" the firmament. That is, one has to cease talking about the text. One has to give up the Bible's statement (Gen. 1:7) if he defines firmament as non-solid. We, therefore, reject the definition of firmament as a non-solid expanse; because such a definition immediately involves one either in a self-contradiction or in a demand that Genesis 1:7 be excised.

### **Other Passages**

Besides these considerations, the one passage where the nature of a firmament (Raquia') can be determined with certainty, Ezekiel 1:22-26, shows us a firmament that is solid. Keil comments that the description of the firmament in Ezekiel 1:22 is based on Exodus 24:10. If so, since Exodus 24:10 describes a solid firmament (mid we see Genesis 24:10 as adding more strength to our case for a solid firmament), Keil means that the firmament in Ezekiel 1:22ff. is also solid. We need not doubt, however, that this was his understanding, for he adds, "Under the canopy were the wings of the cherubim ... spread out ... so that they appeared to support the canopy." He goes on to show, however, that contrary to appearance, the wings did not support the canopy, "but only were so extended, when the cherubim were in motion, that they touched the canopy."

Hengstenberg called the firmament in Ezekiel 1:22 ,a "vault", under which are the cherubim; and "God's throne stands upon the vault."

Other commentators could be cited: but, without laboring the point further, the consensus of commentators is that the firmament (raqia') in Ezekiel 1:22-26 is a solid firmament. This adds presumptive evidence to the idea that the firmament in Genesis 1:7 is solid.<sup>1</sup>

### **Alternative Words**

To add yet more evidence, we note that if Moses had wanted to convey the idea of empty space as separating the water above from the water below, he could easily have used a word or phrase that does not suggest solidity like "raqia'" does. He could have spoken of separating (hodhal) the waters above from the waters below, without mentioning the creation of a firmament to do this work. Or, he could have spoken of putting room (moqom) or space (rcwah) as in Genesis 32:16 or space (rohoq) as in Joshua 3:4 between the two bodies of water. Moses was certainly not forced to convey a false impression

because of the limitations of his language.

There are probably other ways also that the idea of a non-solid divider between the two bodies of water could have been conveyed. But, instead, we read of a "raqia' ", which leads one most naturally to think of something solid. The LXX accordingly translates "raqia'" by ".s'tcrconia" (solid body). The Vulgate translates with "firmamentsim"; and most English translations have "firmament".

### **Job 37:18**

There is yet another verse of Scripture (for we would interpret Scripture by Scripture) that dramatically establishes the solidity of the firmament. We refer to job 37:18, "Can you with him spread out (raqa') the sky, strong (or hard) as a molten (cast metal) mirror?"<sup>2</sup> Here in the context of ancient Near Eastern thought, the sky is compared to a metal mirror. The point of comparison between the sky and the mirror is specifically the hardness of the metal.

There is no escape here in saying that the passage is poetical, for the simile (the poetry) would be incongruous if the mirror were hard, but the sky gaseous. (Old Testament passages referring to heaven as a curtain or tent have reference to the "stretchedness" of heaven and disprove nothing as to its solidity.) And, even if this reflection on the hardness of the sky is not Cod speaking revealed truth, but only Elihu; the passage still throws light on the ancient Near Eastern conception of the firmament in Genesis 1. Nor do we ever find any revelation of God that suggests that the firmament is not solid.

### **Waters Above the Firmament**

Parenthetically, let us add a few words about the water above the firmament since it has been the source of rather imaginative solutions to the science-Scripture conflict. In the first place, there is no evidence that the water is a mist or fog. It is rather an ocean. The deep (tehom) of Genesis 1:2 is divided in Genesis 1:6,7 into two bodies of water. The body of water below forms the earthly sea (Genesis 1:9); and the water above, since it is the other half of the "tehom", forms a heavenly sea. Cf. Psalm 148:4. Thus, the sky above is blue; and the opening of the windows of heaven allows a great deal of water to be poured out on the earth. (Genesis 7:11)

Secondly, the water is above the firmament. (Genesis 1:7) Catastrophists and other science-Scripture harmonizers are forever putting this water below the firmament. This water, so far as the Bible is concerned, is on the far side of the sun, not between the sun and the earth.

Finally, this water does not as a whole condense or fall as rain either before or during Noah's flood. The heavenly ocean is still above the firmament in the time of the Psalmist (Psalm 148:4) ; and so far as the Bible is concerned, the water is still there.

### **Other Evidence**

Although extra-Biblical concepts are not absolute proof of what the Bible idea is, it is significant that the ancient world thought of the sky as a solid dome above the earth or as solid concentric spheres in which the heavenly bodies were implanted.<sup>3</sup>

But, apart from the ideas of the rest of an ancient world we think we have presented evidence sufficient to prove that the Bible has in view a solid firmament in Genesis 1:7. That is, when one adds the initial etymological presumption to the self-contradiction that arises when one defines the firmament in Genesis 1:7 as non-solid, to the definition of a firmament in Ezekiel 1 as a solid vault, to the ease with which Moses could have described a non-solid divider between the two bodies of water, to the normal translation of "roqia' ", to the Near Eastern milieu as reflected in Job 37:18, to the complete absence of any hint anywhere that the firmament in Genesis 1:7 is not solid, one comes, without room for doubt, to the exegetically derived judgment that the firmament (req/a') in Genesis 1:7 is, as standard Hebrew lexicons define it, "the solid vault of heaven."

One last word. It has been thought by some that since the "birds fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven," (Genesis 1:20), the firmament must be mere airy expanse. However, the Hebrew of Genesis 1:20 when properly translated reads, "let birds fly above the earth before or 'in front of' the firmament." Genesis 1:20 when properly translated proves that the firmament is a solid plate, not a gaseous expanse. This is not to deny, however, that the space below the firmament is sometimes called "Heaven". This occurs via synecdoche, since the firmament is "Heaven" proper. (Genesis 1:8)

## **THE EARTH**

Transitionally, we may say that there is no way to prove that the Bible regards the earth as flat. There are some indications, however, that this is the case. In Matthew 4:8 one can see the whole world by climbing a very high mountain. In Daniel 4:11, a very high tree can be seen from the end of the earth. These passages cannot serve as definitive proof of anything, however, for the "earth" is often a limited concept in the Scriptures. Even when the "whole earth" is overspread by the sons of Noah, judging by Genesis 10 apparently neither the Far East nor the Americas are included.

## **THE LOWER STORY**

The lower story of the three-storied-universe is generally recognized as a geographical place, the abode of the dead. This place, Sheol or Hades, beneath the surface of the earth, is, however, disputed by some conservatives. They refuse to recognize that Scripture often regards it as a subterranean place. On the other hand, a few conservatives recognize what the Bible teaches and ask, Why not? The dead have to be somewhere. (Cf. E. R. Craven's excursus in Lange's commentary of the book of Revelation.)

It has been claimed by some that Sheol is just the grave. "Grave", no doubt, is the meaning in some passages, e.g., Isaiah 14:11; Job 24:19, 20, and may even have been the original meaning; but this meaning falls short of covering all of the data. (Cf. Craven's excursus). It has also been claimed that Sheol is just figurative language. It stands for the

state of the dead. It is not a geographical location. This explanation, as we shall show, also fails to cover all of the data.

### **Dropping into Sheol**

In Numbers 16:30-33, we see how literally and geographically Sheol could be to a writer of Scripture. In this passage the earth opens up and Korah and his associates and their material goods "went down alive into Sheol." Not just the men, but their goods as well dropped down into the subterranean place. This is not figurative; men do not enter alive into a state of death; nor is it easy to say that material goods enter a state of death,

We might illustrate the problem this way: On some occasion, one might, under the influence of biblical concepts, be led to use the figurative expression "drop into hell," But even the existence of this expression would not lead a 20th century man in a historical document, to describe a godless person who fell into a fissure caused by an earthquake as a person who "dropped into Hell" Much less would one speak of material goods such as an automobile as "dropping into Hell" because it fell into a chasm caused by an earthquake. just so, it is impossible that Sheol is a figurative expression for the state of death in the historical context of Numbers 16.

The meaning of "grave" in Numbers 16:30-33 has bare possibility; but, normally in a historical narrative like this, "qeber" would be used for "grave" if one wanted to say "grave." Also, "grave" connotes a more limited receptacle than the cavern here that receives this immense load. Then too, "grave" does not carry out the spirit of the passage, the dramatic fury of judgment that drops these rebels and all that they have into the "lowest pit". In short, "grave" would be a reductionist definition here.

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It is not the state of death nor the grave that is in view in Numbers 16, but the subterranean realm of the dead. And the picture could scarcely be drawn more clearly. The floor of the middle story opened up, and the men standing on it fell down into the bottom story. They did not "go down" figuratively, but literally. This is a sober, historical account, telling of literal men literally dropping into a literal subterranean Sheol, "So they and all that appertained to them went down alive into Sheol." (Not 'that God was mistaken. He accommodates Himself to current cosmology, as in Luke 16:22-26.)

### **The Ghost of Samuel**

The historical narrative in I Samuel 28:8-15 draws the same picture of a subterranean, bottom story, where the dead live. Saul asks the witch of Endor to "Bring me up whomsoever I shall name." Having gone to work, the woman says, "I see a god coming up out of the earth." And Samuel says, "Why have you disquieted me to bring inc up?"

The narrative describes the spirit of Samuel as coming up from beneath the surface of the earth. (Cf. job 26:15 "the shades below"), up through the surface of the earth (the ceiling of the bottom story) and ending up over the surface of the earth (in the middle story), asking why he has been brought up. (Note that this occurs at Endor, v. 7, not at Ramah where Samuel was buried, 25:1. Samuel does not come up from his grave, but from Sheol.) Regardless of whether or not the spirit is really Samuel, the picture of a subterranean realm of the dead could scarcely be more clearly drawn.

### **A Subterranean Realm**

Though the context is not as literally historical as in Numbers 16, Isaiah 14:9, "Sheol from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming; it stirreth up the shades for thee, even all the chief ones of the earth.", paints the picture again of a subterranean realm of the dead. The shades live, as in I Samuel 28, beneath the surface of the earth, in the bottom story of the three-storied universe.

Along the same line, Amos 9:2 contrasts "digging into Sheol" with "climbing up into heaven." One cannot dig into a state of death, nor can a mere grave (even a 30 foot deep one, as one writer says) constitute a real contrast to "climbing into heaven". Sheol is far deeper than 30 feet. (Deuteronomy 32:22; Psalm 139:8) It is the opposite of heaven. "Deeper than Sheol" is opposed to "high as heaven" in job 11:8. To reach "deeper than a grave" is manifestly in error. Nor is "deeper than a state of death" a reasonable antithetical parallel to "high as heaven." As heaven is literally' high, the only reasonable opposition is that Sheol is literally deep.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

We say then that the Bible presents a three-storied universe. But, must we accept this biblical cosmology as an article of faith? We think not. Rather we would say with Dr. Herman Ridderbos,

Not only does the Bible attach itself to human representations in general (for example, when it speaks of God's eyes, his nose, and so on), but in part it assimilates the human conceptions current during the time when the Bible was written. For example, it speaks on the basis of conceptions which people had concerning the structure of the cosmos (The cosmos was thought of as having three levels: heaven, earth, and the underworld. Cf. Phil. 2:10). No one would deny that these conceptions bear a character determined by their own time and, as such, are not binding even for a person who would subject himself to the Scripture as the Word of God. They are not binding because in these utterances the Bible would not give us a revelation or instruction concerning the structure of the cosmos. The aim of the Bible is quite different.<sup>4</sup>

The aim of the Bible is to give redemptive truth. It never intended to teach science; nor does it ever claim to be "inerrant whenever it touches on science." It does not correct the errant science of the times in which it was written, but rather incorporates that pre-

scientific science into its redemptive message. It is left to man, to whom Cod has given the cultural mandate (Genesis 1:28), and the common grace to fulfill it, to discover the truth about science.

In writing Scripture, God takes up science at the point to which man has developed it at the time of the writing. God does not give special revelation to help man fulfill the cultural mandate. His special revelation has to do with that which man cannot discover by his own efforts. His special revelation has to do with redemption.

This does not mean that one can lightly write off every science-Scripture conflict as being due to the culturally-related inerrancy of Scripture. Many Wellhansian "errors" have been punctured on the pointed facts of archaeology. But, the lesson the three-storied universe should teach is that Near Eastern thought forms are mixed into the Bible without demanding assent as articles of faith.

To insist that the Bible be inerrant every time it touches on science is to insist on an a priori doctrine that has been read into the Bible. This doctrine not only leads to intellectual dishonesty about such matters as the three-storied universe and to fighting against God as He is working through men called to be scientists, but it destroys faith in Christianity by implying that only obscurantists can be Christians.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>The defenders of a non-solid "raqia" for Genesis 1:7 are at least under obligation to give proof of their definition; for silence cannot overthrow presumptive evidence.

<sup>2</sup>On the word, "molten", cf. I Kings 7:16, 23 where the same hophal participle is used.

<sup>3</sup>See the articles on "firmament" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* and in *Dictionary of the Bible*-William Smith, Vol. I, Part II.

<sup>4</sup>Bultmanrs, pp. 28, 29. *Modern Thinkers series*. The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company.

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