

Heaven and Earth

GENESIS I:6-10

Rev. Dr. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, December 27, 2015

And God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters” (Gen. 1:6).

When secular writers speak about the universe they often emphasize how small and insignificant is the earth and, by extension, the human race. Richard Dawkins describes the earth as “the tiny stage on which we play out our lives – our speck of debris from the cosmic explosion.”¹ Carl Sagan described it as “a tiny speck of rock and metal, shining feebly by reflected sunlight.”² The worldview arising from these claims is necessarily one that devalues human life and experience.

In contrast, Genesis 1 bears exactly the opposite message. One feature of the Bible’s creation account is its striking earth-centeredness. The very first day of creation is measured in earth-terms: “evening and morning, day one.” Especially on the second and third days, God constructs the universe with a focus on the earth. Far from our experience lacking any significance in the grand cosmos, Genesis sees the universe finding its relevance in terms of the earth which God has made. Indeed, by the third day God has constructed the basic framework for creation with the making of heaven and earth. Clearly, the Bible sees our world and its affairs as central to God’s purpose in creation and history. As people living on the earth, Genesis 1 would have us look upward to heaven and the God who made us for his glory.

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2006), 113.

² Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (1980), 4.

An Expanse Between the Waters

Genesis 1:6-8 relates God's activities on the second day of creation: "And God said, 'Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.'"

The language of Genesis 1:6 has occasioned a great deal of study. The first question involves the meaning of the Hebrew word *raqia*, translated as "expanse" or "firmament." Genesis says that God made a barrier between the upper and the lower waters: "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters" (Gen. 1:6).

A popular view among liberal scholars is that Moses held a primitive understanding in which the sky was a metal dome holding back the waters of the cosmic sea. The use of the word *firmament* in the Latin Vulgate and through it the King James Version has encouraged this interpretation. Moreover, Job 37:18 used the word *raqia* in describing the sky as a tin mirror. Furthermore, when Moses described the rains that brought Noah's flood, he said that "the windows of the heavens were opened" (Gen. 7:11). The idea is that the Israelites picked up this idea of the sky as a metal roof from their ancient Near Eastern neighbors. This would then constitute a benign and understandable error in the Scriptures and an example of how we must update mythical Bible teachings based on today's advanced science.

The first problem with this view is that *raqia* does not mean a metal dome but rather comes from a verb meaning "to stretch out." It is sometimes used of tin or other metals because of the way they are beaten and flattened. But in other occasions it is used of a curtain, as in Isaiah 40:22 where God "stretches out the heavens like a curtain." David Livingston comments: "The emphasis in the Hebrew word *raqia* is not on the material itself but on the act of spreading out."³ Second, it is very doubtful that the Israelites would have simply imbibed the cosmology of their pagan neighbors, since their religion strongly emphasized both physical and metaphysical separation from idolaters. Moreover, the evidence suggests that Moses and Israel had

³ Cited by Andrew S. Kulikovsky, *Creation, Fall, Restoration: A Biblical Theology of Creation* (Ross-Shire, UK, 2009), 131.

a relatively sophisticated understanding of their planet. When God made the sun and the moon on the fourth day, he “set them in” the *raqia*. Genesis 1:20 sees the flying creatures soaring within the *raqia*. Thus they understood that there was depth within the sky, which does not fit the idea of the expanse as a metal roof (see also Job 26:9). Therefore, when Moses spoke of the “windows of the heavens,” this was a figurative depiction of the deluge that was falling from the sky.

The best way to understand the *raqia* or *expanse* of Genesis 1:6 is as a barrier spread out by God to separate the waters of earth from the waters above. In other words, it describes the atmosphere of our planet in which the clouds hover. This was a remarkable thing for God to have done, and so far as we know unique in the observable universe, making life possible on the surface below. How far from an “insignificant speck” is this world like no other! For all its achievements, science has never discovered another remotely like it.

God made the atmosphere to “separate the waters from the waters” (Gen. 1:6). The expanse “separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse” (Gen. 1:7). If we doubt that there are waters above, we need only look upward on a rainy day. The legions of clouds flout in the atmosphere, holding and sometimes pouring down vast quantities of water. So the waters below are those on the earth and the waters above are the seas of the sky. The second day thus witnessed an advance in God’s creation of the earth’s ecosystem, including natural laws that govern winds and clouds. William Still comments on the enormity of this achievement:

The separation of the waters, under from over, provides the vital atmosphere – “that mysterious blending of oxygen, nitrogen, and other elementary gases which constitute the earth’s envelope of air” – in which alone we can survive. The marvel is that the clouds are supported upon “a substance so light that on certain days we are scarcely conscious of its presence, yet so powerful as to be able to bear upon its bosom billions of tons of water evaporated from the ocean.”⁴

This concludes the second day of creation: “And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day” (Gen. 1:8).

⁴ William Still, *Theological Studies in Genesis and Romans* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 16.

Making and Separating

It is worth noting that verse 7 uses a word for “made” (Hebrew, *asah*) that is different from the word “create” in Genesis 1:1. The idea is that God is now working with the material that he previously made. In contrast with the creation myths of other ancient cultures, God’s creation involves construction rather than conflict. The Babylonian creation myth sees the god Marduk slaying the dragon Tiamat and casting her tail into the heavens to make the sky. But there is no such warfare as God creates, makes, and shapes. Meredith Kline writes: “There is no serious suggestion in Scripture of the existence of divine adversaries with whom the creating God had to contend.⁵ Creation is the masterwork of divine architecture and construction, God designing a theater for the display of his glory and a stage for the outworking of his sovereign plan.

If we reflect on the structure of God’s construction we will find a prevalence of binary couplets. The basic structure of creation involves a sequence involving a series of two opposite and complementary parts. On day 1, God created light and darkness, day and night. On day two, God made heaven and earth. On day four we see the sun and the moon. On the sixth day God created mankind in binary sexes: “male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). As the Bible progresses we continue to find what Peter Jones has called a “two-ist” structure.⁶ The biblical worldview is thus organized as heaven and earth, male and female, good and evil, faith and unbelief, life and death, true and false, salvation and damnation. At the foundation of this binary structure is the basic declaration of Genesis 1:1 with the Creator and his creation: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth.”

Not only does God make things in pairs, but he then orders the creation by making a clear differentiation between them. Verse 4 introduces this word *separation* (Hebrew, *badal*) as God’s way of shaping the universe. Verse 6 says that God made the *raqia* to separate the waters above and below. All told, “separate” occurs five

⁵ Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 29.

⁶ Peter S. Jones, *One or Two: Seeing a World of Difference* ().

times in Genesis 1, marking it as a primary means of God's ordering (Gen. 1:4, 6, 7, 14, 18). The point is that God makes a clear distinction between opposites and gives to each a proper sphere. The Christian and biblical worldview, therefore, proceeding from Genesis 1:1 with its Creator-creature distinction, is one that sees a divine order to the world, with clear categories and distinctions which God made and declares good. This binary structure is the mark of biblical theism, in which truth is received from God as opposed to error, through faith versus unbelief, cultivated in obedience rather than rebellion, with an aim to life instead of death.

It is for this reason that we previously emphasized Genesis 1:1 as the key to a biblical and Christian worldview. The Bible's first verse declares that there is a Creator who is not part of the creation and the creation is not part of God. Moses wrote this in a polytheistic world which denied the Creator-creature distinction. The false gods were part of the creation and their worship was a way of manipulating nature. In worshiping one God, you sought to bring rain. Worshiping another god increased your chances of fertility. Another god brought happiness and yet another power. Idolatry was, in this way, a worship of the creation in the place of the Creator. According to the apostle Paul, this idolatry is at the very heart of sin: "Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things" (Rom. 1:22-23).

This is why the opposite of biblical monotheism is not atheism but rather pantheism; whereas the Bible proclaims God on the one hand and nature on the other, pantheistic paganism proclaims that nature is god. Having rejected the Creator-creature distinction of Genesis 1:1, paganism subsequently rejects the Bible's further distinctions. Henri Blocher comments: "When we study non-biblical religions, we constantly discover a fascination with intermixture and a kind of longing for a universal dissolution of differences."⁷ What God has separated in creation, paganism collapses in rebellion: life and death, true and false, male and female, the Creator and creation are merged together into one.

⁷ Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1984), 72.

Idolatry's rejection of the binary structure in biblical creation might seem like ancient history if pagan one-ism was not the worldview seeking to replace Christianity in Western culture today. In recent decades, the intellectual quest of our times has been that of deconstruction. Jacques Derrida, its founder, stated as his purpose to "deconstruct the dualisms and hierarchies embedded in Western thinking," which he regards as "false polarities" to be destroyed.⁸

This neo-pagan agenda proceeds from the supposed removal of the biblical God. With no Creator to make and rule, there is no grand story or meaning, leaving each individual to make his or her own story and determine his or her own meaning. There is no truth, no heaven, no gender, and no purpose other than that which each person decides individually. All is one so that structure, categories, order, and obligation are removed. This pagan one-ist worldview permeates our culture today, especially in the arts. Movies, plays, and novels constantly present a world in which good and evil are virtually impossible to tell apart, in which there is no meaningful difference between men and women, and in which the only real liars are those pitiful fools who still believe in absolute truth. *Only the Sith...*

The problem with neo-pagan one-ism is that its original premise is false. Contrary to the news reports, God is not dead; the reports of his demise, as Winston Churchill once said of himself, are premature! There remains a single God who is the Creator of all things, and who structured the creation according to his own will: light and darkness, heaven and earth, day and night, male and female. The witness of Genesis 1:1 stands: "In the beginning, God." To accept this statement, to believe in God, therefore means to follow Genesis 1 forward in accepting the creation as God has made it. The problem in the church today, therefore, is with Christians who profess faith in God and the Bible and yet accommodate the one-ist worldview of the pagan culture around us, downplaying the distinctions between true and false, male and female, life and death, the church and the world. To receive in faith Genesis 1's witness about God and his creation thus calls for us to be people who stand for truth against error, who defend life against death, who cultivate biblical standards of gender

⁸ Peter Jones, *The Pagan Heart of Today's Culture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), 9.

and sexuality against gender confusion and sexual immorality, and who live by faith in the face of unbelief. To live in such a way today is to be completely out of synch with our suddenly pagan culture, just as Moses and his Israelite readers were out of step with the ancient world through which they sojourned to the land of God's promise. To do otherwise is to profess faith while practicing paganism.

The Good Earth

Genesis 1:9 brings us to the third day of creation, where the work of day two is completed: "And God said, 'Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so." Having separated the waters above from the earth, God now gathers the waters below so that dry land may surface.

It is not clear from this verse how God caused the land to appear, whether he drained the waters or caused the land to spring up in the seas. Biblical teaching elsewhere suggests the latter. Job 38:8 says that the "mountains rose" in the seas. Psalm 104:8 paints a similar picture: "The mountains rose, the valleys sank down to the place that you appointed for them." Up until this point, the earth apparently consisted only of water, so it seems that God did some molecular rearrangement in order to make silicon and carbon as the building blocks for the rocks and minerals of the rising land. 2 Peter 3:5 agrees with this picture: "the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God" (2 Pet. 3:5).

John Currid summarizes God's achievement: "The fundamental construction of the cosmos – sky, earth and sea – is now established. In other words, the physical structure is finished, and it awaits God's acts of filling with things to dwell in it."⁹ Unless we presuppose that these events could only take place over millions of years there is no reason to doubt that God could have accomplished this work quickly by his own omnipotent power. The impact of such sudden upheaval on the geological record would be immense, perhaps accounting for the apparent contradictions between science and the Bible.

⁹ John Currid, *Genesis: Volume 1, Genesis 1:1-25:18* (Darlington: UK: Evangelical Press, 2003), 70.

As we gaze on God's work of making the earth for our habitation, we should note that God rules by his own power and according to his own Word. The sovereignty of God is written large over the entirety of the creation account, especially in these verses where we learn of God wreathing the earth with its water-laden atmosphere and summoning continents out of the primordial sea. The implication is that God possesses every right and ability to rule over the world which he made in his own way. The laws of nature continue to function in the manner that God fixed them in order to sustain and nurture life on earth. While there are small shifts along the line of the seashore, it remains true that God's boundary between the sea and the land holds fast. The drumbeat of Genesis 1 continues to be heard today: "God said. . . . And it was so" (Gen. 1:9). This marks "the absolute authority of the One who speaks; nothing resists his command, everything bows to his decrees."¹⁰ Thus the Word of God, which effects God's purpose, is as certain as his sovereign will which shaped the earth in the dawn of creation.

The prophet Isaiah made the power of God's Word a point of emphasis as he challenged his generation to trust in the Lord's promises. Facing mounting unbelief and ungodliness, he called on the people to repent and believe, trusting God to grant them a salvation they would fail to achieve by their own resources. "Israel is saved by the Lord with everlasting salvation; you shall not be put to shame or confounded to all eternity," he claimed (Isa. 45:17). But on what basis can such confidence in God be established? Isaiah answered by looking back to the sovereign power of God's Word in forming the heavens and the earth: "For thus says the Lord, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it empty, he formed it to be inhabited!): 'I am the LORD, and there is no other'" (Isa. 45:18).

When you open your Bible today and consider God's claims, commands, and promises, you should remember that this same Word separated the heaven and the earth and made the dry land appear amidst the seas. The Word of God will continue to be mighty and true, and the Creator who ruled the earth's first days by his Word will

¹⁰ Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 67.

rule them all, to the very last. “I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty’” (Rev. 1:8).

God continued to exercise his sovereignty by naming what he has made: “God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas” (Gen. 1:10). At this point, midway through day three, God looks on his work and declares his satisfaction: “And God saw that it was good” (Gen. 1:10).

It is often observed that day two did not end with God’s word of approval. This fact has prompted some biblical humorists to quip that not even God considers Monday to be good! A better explanation is that the work of day two was completed on day three. At that point God looked on the heaven above and the earth below and declared that it was good. Umberto Cassuto writes: “Now that the work of the water was completed and the world had assumed its proper tripartite form of Heaven, Earth and Sea, it is possible to declare, that it is good.”¹¹ By our standards, what God accomplished on the second and third days of creation staggers the mind in contemplation of his greatness. R. Kent Hughes writes of it: “The earth, warmed by light, was now robed in blue and dappled with clouds floating over a sparkling sea. The picture is increasingly inviting.”¹² Indeed, the God of the heaven and the earth is not only great, but he is wonderfully good.

Blessing by the Word

As we appreciate the astonishing achievement of God’s Word in creating heaven and earth we are better prepared to rejoice in the greater glory of the gospel as it tells us of God’s redemption from our sin in Jesus Christ. The New Testament frequently refers to our salvation through faith in Jesus in creation terms. For instance, Paul writes: “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). This being the case, our study of God’s working in Genesis 1 finds its echo in our salvation through faith in Jesus.

¹¹ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part 1, From Adam to Noah, Genesis 1-6:8* (Skokie, IL: Varda Books, 1944, reprint 2005), 40.

¹² R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis, Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 29.

Consider the great phrases that are repeated over and over = throughout the creation record of Genesis 1: “And God said (ten times). . . And it was so (seven times). . . And God blessed it (three times). . . And it was good (seven times)” These statements mark a chorus or refrain within the grand historical narrative. That God said and it was so is still seen every evening and morning as the days roll forward to their appointed end. But God went further than mere creation, continuing on to give his repeated blessing. This is why he ordained, why he spoke, and why it was: so that his blessing might be upon the earth.

This Genesis 1 way of thinking prepares us for the pattern of salvation through faith in God’s Word that recurs in the New Testament. God purposed to bring blessing to the earth and in creation it was all good. The Bible will go on to speak of the entry of sin and our alienation as sinners from the blessing of God. Yet God’s blessing remained on the earth through his Word. Out of this purpose to bless, God sent his Son to remedy the stain of sin that separated heaven and earth more completely than did the original expanse in the creation sky. So God’s Son came from heaven to earth, and as his blood fell to the ground from the cross, God’s Word was fulfilled in restoring blessing to those who believe.

God has said. It is so. God’s blessing is upon his gospel Word. We receive that Word in faith, trusting in God’s Son, Jesus Christ, and then living so as to reflect Genesis 1, honoring God’s order in a world made for God’s glory. And while ungodly voices declare this glorious world as an insignificant speck and a stage for meaningless lives, we by God’s Word receive the benediction once said over the heavens and earth. Through faith, God says of our salvation: “And it was good.”