

Flat Earth, Dome

Supporters of a Flat Earth claim from Genesis 1:6-8, that the firmament above the ground is a hard structure, enclosing the Earth. Can you help me sort through this?

Just so there is no ambiguity, **Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics have never supported Flat Earth.**¹ We believe that those adhering to a Flat Earth model, have approached the Holy Scriptures very inappropriately from a hyper-literal viewpoint. We also believe that a Flat Earth cosmology is a negative consequence of a great deal of Young Earth Creation fundamentalism, although we do appreciably recognize how many Young Earth Creationists do adhere to a Spherical Earth model, and have spoken out against Flat Earth.² To be sure, while Flat Earth is not a salvation issue—and there were many Christian people in the Middle Ages who believed in it and will be in the Kingdom—Flat Earth is a major credibility issue for the contemporary people of God. It often highlights how immature some people are in sorting through issues of ancient Scripture and modern, observable science.

How might Genesis 1:6-8 be approached by those adhering to a Flat Earth model?

“And God said, Let there be a **firmament** in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the **firmament**, and divided the waters which *were* under the **firmament** from the waters which *were* above the **firmament**: and it was so. And God called the **firmament** Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day” (Genesis 1:6-8, KJV).

Many, based on an English reading of Genesis 1:6-8, appearing here in the venerable King James Version, may conclude that what is labeled as the “firmament” is a hard structure enclosing Planet Earth into a kind of terrarium. A lexicon such as *BDB* may even reinforce this, as it defines the Hebrew *raqi'a* with, “the vault of heaven, or ‘firmament,’ regarded by Hebrews as solid, and supporting ‘waters’ above it” (*BDB*).³

It is not sufficient for any interpreter, to simply look at a Hebrew lexicon, and then draw the conclusion that the *raqi'a* described in Genesis 1:6-8 is a hard, solid firmament of sorts. There is some obvious variance witnessed among more modern English versions, which are seen to render *raqi'a* as “expanse” (NASU, NJPS, ESV, TLV), “dome” (NRSV, CJSB), “vault” (NEB, NIV), or even “a space” (The Readable Bible). If one is keen to use a resource such as *A Reader's Hebrew Bible*, which includes brief definitions for uncommon Hebrew and Aramaic terms in its footnotes, one encounters *raqi'a* defined with, “firmament, extended surface, expanse.”⁴

It is often not stressed enough, in Messianic circles for sure, **that Biblical Hebrew has a limited vocabulary** (and sometimes also primitive at that). This is something which many do not

¹ Consult the editor's teaching from 13 May, 2019, “Addressing Flat Earth - Blogcast.”

² If necessary, do consult the Messianic Apologetics FAQ, “Creationism.”

³ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 956.

⁴ A. Phillip Brown II and Bryan W. Smith, *A Reader's Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 1.

take into as serious consideration as they should. Also not stressed enough, is that the further back a Bible reader goes in the Tanach (OT) Scriptures—especially in early Genesis—they should expect more creative interpretations to arise. At one end of the spectrum are the supporters of Flat Earth, who take a hyper-literal approach to the material—and then at the exact opposite end are those who view Genesis 1-3 as being entirely poetic, and only to be viewed as a metaphor of Planet Earth created as God’s cosmic temple for Him to dwell with humans.⁵ And, as daunting as it may seem, even more unique perspectives of Genesis 1-3 are likely to be witnessed as we get closer and closer to the Messiah’s return.⁶

Is it at all possible to trace how an older version like the KJV rendered *raqi’a* as “firmament,” to more modern versions now having something like “expanse” (NASU) or “vault” (NIV)? Was this the result of Hebrew scholars succumbing to the so-called “deception of modern science,” as Flat Earth advocates may claim? Or, might there actually be another reason to render *raqi’a* as “expanse” or “vault”? The *Jastrow* lexicon, mainly interested in usages appearing within Rabbinical literature, notably defines *raqi’a* as “*expanse, sky...name of one of the seven heavens,*”⁷ an approach which is more theological than scientific.

If we do some brief digging into some more modern Hebrew resources, it can be seen that there is a fair enough reason to not translate *raqi’a* as just “firmament.” In the rather detailed *HALOT* lexicon, it is seen that *raqi’a* means

“firmament...the beaten metal plate, or bow; firmament, the firm vault of heaven...the gigantic heavenly dome which was the source of the light that brooded over the heavenly ocean and of which the dome arched above the earthly globe” (*HALOT*).⁸

Does this definition of *raqi’a* decisively require the “firmament” to be a hard structure, enclosing the land masses, oceans, plant and animal life, of Planet Earth, into a terrarium? Or, does this definition of *raqi’a*, perhaps better highlight some of the limitations of Biblical Hebrew to modern readers?

An evangelical resource, the *Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament*, offers some additional information to be considered regarding *raqi’a*:

“A masculine noun meaning an expanse, the firmament, an extended surface. Literally, this word refers to a great expanse and, in particular, the vault of the heavens above the earth. It denotes the literal sky that stretches from horizon to horizon (Gen. 1:6-8); the heavens above that contain the sun, moon, and stars (Gen. 1:14); or any vaulted ceiling or expanse that stands above (Ezek. 10:1). By extension, the psalmist uses the word to refer to the infinite and sweeping power of the Lord (Ps. 150:1)” (*AMG*).⁹

What the *AMG* entry for *raqi’a* has appreciably done, is that it has pointed out some other uses of this term in the Hebrew Scriptures, beyond simply Genesis 1:6-8. When these are taken into

⁵ This perspective is broadly represented by John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

⁶ If necessary, do consult Charles Halton, gen. ed., *Genesis: History, Fiction, or Neither? Three Views on the Bible’s Earliest Chapters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

⁷ Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Treasury, 2004), pp 1496-1497.

⁸ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 2:1290.

⁹ Warren Baker and Eugene Carpenter, eds., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2003), 1078.

consideration, even if *raqi'a* is translated as “firmament,” the idea that *raqi'a* must mean a hard dome is easily dismissed:

“Then I looked, and, behold, in the **firmament** [expanse, NASU; vault, NIV] that was above the head of the cherubims there appeared over them as it were a sapphire stone” (Ezekiel 10:1, KJV).

“Praise ye the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary: Praise him in the **firmament** [expanse, NASU; vault, Alter] of his power” (Psalm 150:1, KJV).

It can be recognized that there is maneuverability in the term *raqi'a*, for advocates of both a Flat Earth and a Spherical Earth. But, the term *raqi'a* **cannot be limited to a hard dome enclosing the Earth in a kind of terrarium**. Modern English Bibles which translate *raqi'a* as “expanse” have not done so improperly. When we consider various, observable natural phenomena, Biblical Hebrew employing *raqi'a* in Genesis 1:6-8 was as close, we should think, to using what we would obviously describe today as an “atmosphere.”¹⁰

¹⁰ To be sure, there are required, ongoing discussions involving the material of early Genesis. This should indeed concern the questions asked by Ancient Israel in the Ancient Near East, first, with the Genesis Creation account compared and contrasted to various ANE myths. Yet, many are properly convinced that there is scientific information embedded within early Genesis, and that it can be reconciled to observable phenomena.

Some useful studies we consider worthy of consideration, include: C. John Collins, *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006); Hugh Ross, *Navigating Genesis: A Scientist's Journey through Genesis 1-11* (Covina, CA: Reasons to Believe, 2014).