

Why Did God Create the Sun on the Fourth Day?

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The Preliminary State of the Earth

One of the most important determinants of the order of the days of creation is the preliminary state of the earth found in Genesis 1:2. This state of the earth constitutes for the author a giant problem. The very survival of humans was dependent upon the fertility of both animals and plants. And although this is still true, it was felt much more acutely in the ancient world. The earth which ought to be fruitful, that is abounding with animals and vegetation was just the opposite. It was covered with an ocean, in total darkness and accordingly tohu and bohu. That is, desolate and barren.¹

This concept of darkness and an ocean preceding light and a dry earth is diametrically opposed to the modern scientific concept of the sun forming first and the early earth being a molten mass which formed a dry crust long before it had any ocean. But this concept of a primordial ocean and darkness is right at home with ancient Near Eastern science, and by "science" I mean their understanding of the natural world.²

The existence of the ocean before the creation of heaven and earth is found in the three major Egyptian creation stories, but is not as closely parallel to Genesis as are some Mesopotamian accounts. In a Sumerian text the goddess Nammu, the cuneiform symbol of whose name also means Deep water, is called the "creator of heaven and earth."³ This concept, like many Sumerian concepts, was passed on to the Babylonians, who in their most famous creation story, *Enuma Elish*, made Ti'amat, whose name means sea or ocean, give rise to heaven and earth.⁴ And although Genesis 1 sets forth a theology which radically contradicts the mythology and theology of the ancient Near East, the word used for the Deep ocean in Genesis 1:2 is not the normal Hebrew word for the sea, but Tehom, a word not derived from but nevertheless linguistically related to the name Ti'amat. And Tehom is used in Genesis 1 without the definite article, which suggests that it is or derives from a name. So, in spite of the radical difference in theology, the idea of an ocean preceding the making of heaven and earth, which we find in Genesis 1:2, is in broad agreement with Egyptian views of creation and in close agreement with the Mesopotamian tradition found in *Enuma Elish*.

The Darkness

The concept of a pre-creation darkness is found in Egyptian creation texts, particularly in the Memphite theology where darkness and primordial water dominate the pre-creation scene. Pre-creation darkness is also found in some Mesopotamian creation texts. A Sumerian text speaks of the precreation period as being one in which “earth was in darkness...nothing [in the way of vegetation] was produced on the vast earth,”⁵ Darkness is also part of the pre-creation scene in some versions of *Enuma Elish*, as seen in the version known to Berossus, a third century B.C. Babylonian priest, and in the one known to Damascius in the fifth century A.D.⁶

We can see then that Genesis 1:2 reflects an ancient Near Eastern tradition of a primeval ocean shrouded in darkness. This situation sets before the Creator the awesome task of working so as to remedy the pre-creation darkness, the unbounded Deep Ocean, and the barrenness of the earth.

The First Two Days of Creation

The making of Light on the first day of creation is primarily a direct response to the problem of the darkness that covered the primeval Deep. One reason this response comes first is because it is natural. Even in our times the first thing we do when entering a dark room, is turn on the light. In addition, because one purpose of the account is to set forth God as a workman analogous to human workers, who in ancient times did not attempt to work in the darkness of the night, a period of light needed to precede any further work. In other words, the creation of light had to be first both because it is the most natural first response to the darkness of the pre-creation state and because otherwise God would have been working in the dark contrary to the way people worked in those days and hence not a good example of how they should work six days.

Since the light created on Day One is specifically defined in verse 5 as Daylight and since it alternates with the Darkness of Night, producing “evening and morning,” some suppose that this Light must be due to the sun. But such a conclusion is not only contrary to the fact that the sun has yet to be created, it is the result of reading the text through the glasses of our modern Western scientific mentality. In Old Testament thought the light is an entity in addition to the sun, moon and stars, as is seen in Ecclesiastes 12:2 which speaks of “the sun and the light and the moon and the stars.” Similarly, in Job 39:18 the light is an entity which has its own dwelling place quite apart from the sun just as darkness has its dwelling place.

The question arises, nevertheless, why did God not create the sun on the first day? Even if its existence was not necessary to have light, the ancients at least associated the sun with daylight. To answer this question, we must take a moment to talk about the ancient view of the sky.

In ancient times all peoples believed the sky or the firmament was a solid dome over the earth. There is no evidence that the Israelites believed otherwise, and various Scriptures indicate that they too believed it was solid.⁷ The Egyptians apparently believed the firmament was made of metal. The Babylonians explicitly described it as being made of stone. The Bible reflects both views: metal in Job 37:18, and stone in Exodus 24:10 and Ezekiel 10:1.

When the sun, moon and stars are created on the Fourth Day, God places them “in the firmament” (Gen 1:14, 15, 17). They were in this solid structure in the same sense that we are “in” this solid building. At the same time judging by Isaiah 34:4 and Rev 6:13 the stars at least were thought to be attached to the firmament.

The reason the sun could not be created on the first day is because at that time, there was no firmament, no sky to put it in. The sun, according to the author’s understanding belonged “in the firmament”, and according to Gen 1:14, 1:15 and 1:17 that is where God put it. But before Day One there was no firmament. Consequently, from the author’s point of view, there was no sense in creating the sun on the first day because at that time there was no proper place to put it.

Nor could the sun be created on Day Two because that day was needed to make the firmament. This leads us to ask, Why not at least have the sun created on Day Three?

The Third Day of Creation

There are three reasons why God would not create the sun on Day Three. In order to understand the first reason, we must go back to the end of Day Two. On Day Two God created the firmament and used it to split the Deep ocean of Gen 1:2 into two bodies of water. This division of the primeval Deep ocean of Genesis 1:2 into two parts and placing one part above and one part below the firmament was God’s first step in solving the problem of the unbounded primeval Deep covering the earth.

At the end of Day Two, God had not finished solving the problem of the earth being covered with an unbounded Ocean. At the end of the day, the Deep had only half the volume of water it had initially, but it was still unbounded. This ocean still imposed barrenness on the earth just as it had from the beginning. At the end of Day Two, the waters below were still unbounded, unfinished, and hence still unnamed. And because the job was only half done, unlike the work of every other day, God does not say the work was “good.”

So, at the dawn of Day Three, God was in the middle of a job. The earth’s desolate and barren condition (tohu and bohu) was not solved as long as the earth was covered with an ocean, and at the end of Day Two it was still covered with an ocean. Since light already existed, the problem of the Deep still submerging the earth had a far greater need to be solved than the creation of the sun. Day Three was needed to complete the other half of the work begun on Day Two.

Secondly, according to the biblical author, the sun had three major functions. It was to “divide the day from the night,” to serve as a means of marking time (Gen 1:14) and to “give light upon the earth” (Gen 1:15), and a second time the author says, “to give light upon the earth” (Gen 1:17). The dividing of day from night and the marking of time were already being performed by the Light created on the first day, so there was no need for the sun until the earth appeared. Consequently, the gathering of the unbounded ocean into one place with the earth appearing as a result, was needed not only to complete the work of bounding the primeval ocean that had begun on Day Two, it was a prerequisite for the sun to fulfill its purpose.

Thirdly, the unique dividing of the primeval waters, which is only found in Genesis and in the Babylonian Creation Epic *Enuma Elish*, tells us that the work of Day Two is following the tradition found in *Enuma Elish*. The biblical theology of a God who by his majestic word puts the sea in its proper place strongly contrasts with the theology of a desperate battle with the Sea found in *Enuma Elish*. But the biblical science is following the tradition found in *Enuma Elish*, and according to that tradition, the firmament is formed first, then the earth, and only after that is the sun created.

So to summarize, God could not make the sun on the third day because God was in the middle of the job of removing the primeval ocean from the earth, and until the dry earth appeared, the sun could not fulfill its designated function of giving light upon the earth, and finally because in the scientific tradition which the author was following, the sun was not made until after the earth appeared. Consequently, the making of the sun had to wait until the Fourth Day.

Why Not Create the Sun on the Fifth Day?

Why not create the sun on the fifth day? Two reasons: One, both theologically and literarily humans in Genesis 1 are the climax of the creation. Accordingly, they must wait until the sixth day; and since in those times humans were more dependent upon and more closely associated with the land animals than with the birds and fish, they most naturally belong with humans on the Sixth Day.

That leaves the author with the choice of creating the fish and birds either on the fourth day, or on the fifth day. Having just created the sky, the earth and the earth's ocean, it seems more in keeping with these major and inanimate creations for the sun, moon, and stars to come next. And since the creatures of the sixth day are animate, it seems most appropriate to place the creation of the animate birds and fish very near the creatures of Day Six. Thus the birds and fish belong most fittingly to the Fifth Day, leaving only the Fourth Day for the creation of the sun, moon, and stars.

Some Lessons

1. Genesis 1, and I think as a clue to 2-11, must be interpreted not within the framework of modern science but within its historical context including the "science" of the times.
2. As is seen by the agreement of the natural science in Gen 1 with the science of the times, the science in Scripture is not a divine revelation, but a divine accommodation.
3. As is seen by the radical contrast between the theology of Genesis 1 and the theology of the times, especially as found in *Enuma Elish*, the theology in Scripture is a divine revelation. Hence without claiming that Scripture is authoritative in scientific matters, the ASA statement of faith rightly affirms that it is "authoritative in matters of faith and conduct."

ENDNOTES

¹ David T. Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989) 42-43.

² Cf. James Barr, who says of the cosmology of the Old Testament, “to them it was a sort of science.” [*The Concept of Biblical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1999) 472].

³ John L. Hayes, *A Manual of Sumerian Grammar and Texts*, 2d ed. (Malibu: Undena, 2000) 35.

⁴ Tiamat is often described as the salt sea, and Apsu as the fresh water sea. But, when Tiamat is used to make the heavens and the earth, her water above can come down as rain which is fresh water, and her water below can come up as springs and rivers, which are also fresh water. Others have concluded that this pair, god and goddess, represents the same entity.

⁵ Richard J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1994) 28.

⁶ Damascius was a Neoplatonic writer of the 5th century. *Stanley M. Burstein, The Babyloniaca of Berossus* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1978) 14-15; Damascius' text can be found in Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963) 78-81. of the 5th century

⁷ Paul H. Seely, “The firmament and the water above, Part I: The Meaning of raqia' in Gen 1:6-8,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (1991) 227-240.