

Translating the Cosmology of the Biblical Flood

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ABSTRACT

The commentaries are divided as to how to interpret “the windows of heaven were opened” and “the fountains of the great deep burst forth” in Gen 7.11. Some understand Gen 7.11 to be describing an anti-cosmogony or uncreation where the waters separated in Gen 1.6–8 pour back into the cosmos. Other commentators try to interpret “the windows of heaven were opened” and “the fountains of the great deep burst forth” in Gen 7.11 within the context of how we understand the cosmos to be today. With regard to translation, those English versions that translate “the windows of heaven” and “the fountains of the great deep” literally are coherent if it is made known that the text is set in an ancient cosmological context. If this is not made known then the translation is incoherent to a modern audience. However, for those English versions that translate “the windows of heaven” and “the fountains of the great deep” as natural language equivalents it is not possible to make the translation coherent as the alternative referents for “the windows of heaven” as a cloud burst and “the fountains of the great deep” as an eruption of underground water cannot perform the role assigned to them in the narrative and the account does not make sense. A translation that brings the audience to the text is therefore preferred to a translation that brings the text to the audience.

Introduction

Roberts (2020) argues that the Gen 1.1–2.3 creation account can only be properly understood if an ancient three-tiered cosmos is assumed with heaven above, earth below and the deep/underworld below the earth. Scriptures such as Exo 20.4, Deu 4.18, Php 2.10, Rev 5.3, 13 refer to the cosmos as being thus three-tiered. These scriptures would contradict the creation account if it did not also describe the cosmos as being three-tiered. In Gen 1.6–8 heaven is created by a *rāqî^a* separating the waters above from the waters below. The Hebrew dictionaries, i.e., Klein (1987), BDB, NIDOTTE, agree that *rāqî^a* means ‘something hammered out flat.’ The *rāqî^a* would logically need to be solid and watertight to hold aloft a mass of water that the ancients thought the blue sky was. The *rāqî^a* was named *šāmayim* ‘heaven’ as the upper tier of the cosmos. In Gen 1.9–10 the earth (*’ereṣ*) is created by the dry ground (*yabbāšā*) appearing out of the gathered waters. The Hebrew dictionaries (BDB, NIDOTTE) say *’ereṣ* has the senses: 1) the whole earth or earth opposite to heaven, 2) a country, territory, 3) ground, soil, 4) people of the land. Crucially, *’ereṣ* does not have the sense ‘land opposed to sea.’ So *’ereṣ* in Gen 1.9–10 must refer to the whole earth conceptualized by the ancients as a flat, circular disk founded on the waters of the deep (*tāhôm*).¹ Gen 1.1–2.3 therefore describes the cosmos as created with the heavens (*rāqî^a*) as having waters above it and the earth (*’ereṣ*) as being founded on the waters below it. In Psa 148.4 the waters above the heavens (*haš-šāmayim*) are called upon to praise the LORD and in Gen 49.25 blessings of the deep (*tāhôm*) below the earth complement the blessings of heaven above.

Psa 148.1–6: ¹ Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights! ² Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts! ³ Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars! ⁴ Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens (*haš-šāmayim*)! ⁵ Let them praise the name of the LORD! For he commanded and they were created. ⁶ And he established them forever and ever; he gave a decree, and it shall not pass away. (ESV)²

Gen 49.25: by the God of your father who will help you, by the Almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep (*tāhôm*) that crouches beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb. (ESV)

¹ See the Babylonian Map of the World in the British Museum, for example.

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The biblical flood is depicted in Genesis as being worldwide and universal.³ Cf. So the LORD said, “I will blot out man (*hā-’āḏām*) whom I have created from the face of the land (*hā-’āḏāmā*), man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.” (6.7) ... And God said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of ALL flesh, for the earth (*hā-’āreṣ*) is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth (*hā-’āreṣ*). (6.13) ... Take seven of EVERY clean animal (7.2) ... take seven of EVERY kind of bird (7.3) ... I will wipe from the face of the earth (*hā-’āreṣ*) EVERY living creature I have made (7.4) ... the floodwaters rose greatly on the earth (*hā-’āreṣ*), and ALL the high mountains under the ENTIRE heavens were covered (7.19) ... EVERY living thing that moved on the earth (*hā-’āreṣ*) perished (7.21) ... EVERYTHING on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died (7.22) ... EVERY living thing on the face of the earth (*hā-’āreṣ*) was wiped out (7.23) ... ONLY Noah was left, and those with him in the ark (7.23) ... but the dove could find no place to set its feet because there was water over ALL the surface of the earth (*hā-’āreṣ*) (8.9). There was no corner of the earth (*’ereṣ*) anywhere that the flood did not affect. The scope of the biblical flood is also cosmic. In Gen 7.11 the cosmic waters separated in Gen 1.6–8 pour back into the cosmos. The waters above the sky pour in through the windows of heaven and the waters under the earth pour in through the fountains of the great deep.

Young & Stearley (2008) say there is no geological evidence that a flood of water ever covered the whole earth. However, Dickin (2018) presents archaeological evidence that the Flood most likely occurred around 5700 BCE, before the settlement of Oueili, corresponding to the radiocarbon age of the upper part of the sapropel layer dated by Aqwari. This early date makes the extreme effects described in the Flood narratives much more credible. At this time, lower Mesopotamia had only recently been colonized by people migrating southward from the villages of northern Mesopotamia where the agricultural revolution began. These people would have been living in small settlements on the immediate banks of the Euphrates, and their nascent civilization would have been completely overwhelmed by the greatest flooding event that Mesopotamia has ever seen. In such circumstances, it is not hard to see how the devastation of the Flood would have seemed like a return to cosmic chaos.

Interpretating *’ārubbōt haš-šamayim*

With this context in mind, how should we understand Gen 7.11, 8.2? The commentaries divide between those that say *wa-’ārubbōt haš-šamayim niṣṭāḥû* ‘and the windows of heaven were opened’ in Gen 7.11 should be interpreted literally and those that say it should be interpreted figuratively. Literal interpretations include: NJB Study Bible, Kidner (1967), Sarna (1989), Hamilton (1990), Alter (1997), Wyatt (2001). Figurative interpretations include: ESV Study Bible, Calvin (2007[1847]), Keil & Delitzsch (2001), Leupold (1942), Henry (1960), Cassuto (1961), Morris (1976), Wenham (1987). Literal interpretations assume an ancient three-tiered cosmology with waters above the sky and below the earth. In this case, *’ārubbōt haš-šamayim* is understood to be metaphorical for actual openings in the *rāqīa’*. Figurative interpretations assume a modern cosmological setting where there are no waters above the sky or below the earth. They suggest *’ārubbōt haš-šamayim niṣṭāḥû* is figurative for a heavy downpour of rain. Since the sky we know today is not solid and does not have openings a figurative interpretation is obligatory in the context of a modern cosmology.

Gen 7.11: In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep (*ma ’yānōt tēhôm rabbā*) burst forth, and the windows of the heavens (*’ārubbōt haš-šamayim*) were opened. (ESV)

Gen 8.2: The fountains of the deep (*ma ’yānōt tēhôm*) and the windows of the heavens (*’ārubbōt haš-šamayim*) were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, (ESV)

³ In other Flood accounts such as the Atrahasis Epic and the Epic of Gilgamesh the gods demand the total destruction of mankind.

However, there are at least seven hermeneutical reasons why *ʾarubbōt haš-šāmayim niṭātāhû* in Gen 7.11 should be interpreted as literal describing a real event:

First, Gen 8.2 says the windows of heaven were closed. It actually says both the fountains of the deep and the windows of heaven were closed. Since both are closed, this must be a literal reference to *ʾarubbōt haš-šāmayim* ‘windows of heaven’ just the same as it is a literal reference to *maʾyānōt tēhôm* ‘fountains of the deep.’ It follows therefore that if closing the windows of heaven is described as a literal event then opening the windows of heaven in 7.11 must be a literal event also.

Second, Gen 7.12 says “And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights.” The *wa-yāhî* ‘and it was’ at the beginning of the verse is a *waw*-consecutive verb and this indicates that the rain falling on the earth follows the event described in the preceding clause. The preceding clause says “and the windows of the heavens were opened.” If this clause is understood literally then the opening of the windows of heaven is the cause of rain falling on the earth for forty days and forty nights. This makes sense. However, if this clause is understood figuratively then the cause of the rain falling for forty days and nights is a heavy downpour of rain. This does not make sense.

Third, the expression “open the windows of heaven (*ʾarubbōt haš-šāmayim*)” is used elsewhere in the Bible but in these instances it is not figurative for a heavy downpour of rain. In 2 Kgs 7.2, 19 it is grain that is poured down and in Mal 3.10 it is blessings poured down. So ‘the windows of heaven were opened’ in Gen 7.11 cannot be a figure of speech for a heavy downpour of rain.

Fourth, in Gen 7.11 opening the windows of heaven is an act of judgment, whereas in 2 Kgs 7.2, 19 and Mal 3.10 opening the windows of heaven is an act of blessing. Acts are real events.

Fifth, there are other openings in heaven mentioned in the Bible, such as doors (Psa 78.23–24, Rev 4.1) and gates (Gen 28.17, Psa 19.5 (implied)), through which various things (e.g., rain, angels, manna) pass from heaven to earth. This would indicate that doors, gates and windows of heaven are metaphorical for real openings in the *rāqîʿ* of heaven.

Sixth, incongruously the commentators that view “the windows of heaven were opened” in Gen 7.11 as figurative because the sky does not have windows view “all the fountains of the great deep burst forth” as literal, even though there is no referent for the great deep (*tēhôm rabbâ*) below the earth in the modern world.

Seventh, the interpretation that “the windows of heaven were opened” in Gen 7.11 is literal is coherent with the rest of scripture. For example, just as doors and gates of heaven are a metaphor for real openings in the *rāqîʿ* of heaven, so windows of heaven have the same metaphorical function. A literal interpretation also allows for an anti-cosmogonic allusion. On the other hand, the interpretation that “the windows of heaven were opened” in Gen 7.11 is figurative is incoherent with the rest of scripture. “Windows” are not a metaphor for openings in heaven, as doors and gates are, and this interpretation does not allow an anti-cosmogonic allusion to Gen 1.6–8.

Interpretating *maʾyānōt tēhôm rabbâ*

The point on which the interpretation of *niḥāqəʾû kol-maʾyānōt tēhôm rabbâ* ‘the fountains of the great deep burst forth’ in Gen 7.11 turns is the identity of the great deep (*tēhôm rabbâ*). Some commentators, such as NJB Study Bible, Cassuto (1961), Sarna (1989), Alter (1997), Wyatt (2001), understand Gen 7.11 to be describing an anti-cosmogony or uncreation where the waters separated in Gen 1.6–8 pour back into the cosmos. In this case, *tēhôm rabbâ* refers to the biblical deep below the earth which the earth is founded upon (see Pro 8.29, Pss 24.2, 104.5). Calvin (2007[1847]) and Wenham (1987), on the other hand, say this reference is figurative. Others, such as the NET Bible, Keil & Delitzsch (2001), Leupold (1942), Morris (1976), think *tēhôm rabbâ* refers to underground waters of some kind. Henry (1960) and Hamilton (1990) think *tēhôm rabbâ* refers to the seas and oceans of the world as we see them to be today. And the ESV Study Bible interprets the fountains of the great deep burst open as poetic imagery conveying the intensity of the flood, where “poetic” means ‘imaginative.’

Regarding the interpretation of *niḥəqə 'û kol-ma 'yanōt təhôm rabbâ* ‘the fountains of the great deep burst forth’ in Gen 7.11, the deep (*təhôm*) below the earth is a known component of the biblical cosmos (see Gen 49.25, Deu 33.13, for example). Psa 136.6 says the Lord spread out the earth above the waters as a demonstration of his steadfast love. Ezk 31.4 says the deep supplies freshwater to the streams and rivers. So, the *təhôm* below the earth is a vital component of the biblical hydrologic cycle. Thus, identifying *təhôm rabbâ* in Gen 7.11 with the deep below the earth identifies with a known referent in the biblical world. However, treating this reference as figurative makes *təhôm rabbâ* unreal and disqualifies it as an essential component of the biblical hydrologic cycle. On the other hand, treating *təhôm rabbâ* as referring to unknown subterranean waters does not make a great deal of sense. They would have needed to have been immense reservoirs of water to fill all the oceans and seas and such reservoirs of water do not exist today.⁴ Yet Gen 49.25 and Deu 33.13 speak of the presence of the deep below the earth in a post-flood reality. Henry (1960) and Hamilton (1990) seem to suggest that the fountains of the great deep burst forth in Gen 7.11 represents the seas and the oceans somehow overwhelming the land. But how could water simultaneously pour down from heaven and run uphill over the land? Thus, only the literal exegesis of Gen 7.11, 8.2 where the flood happened in the biblical three-tiered cosmos with waters above the sky and below the earth created in Genesis 1 provides a coherent interpretation of *'ārubbōt haš-šamayim* and *ma 'yanōt təhôm rabbâ*.

Translating *'ārubbōt haš-šamayim*

Table 1 illustrates how a range of English versions from ancient to modern translate *'ārubbōt haš-šamayim* in Gen 7.11, 8.2. Most versions translate *'ārubbōt* literally as “windows, net-work, casements, belts, sluices, floodgates.”⁵ Most versions also translate *haš-šamayim* literally as “heaven, the heavens.” However, while the Hebrew expression is metaphorical for actual openings in the *rāqī'a*^a of heaven, the English formal equivalent translations are not. They require the context of the biblical worldview to have that meaning. Only the NJB translation supplies this context. Against Gen 1 the NJB footnote says: “The text makes use of the primitive science of its day. It would be a mistake to seek points of agreement between this schematic presentation and the data of modern science. Using a scenario familiar in the polytheistic myths of the ancient near east, the narrative conveys a revelation of one, transcendent God, existing before the world which he created—a revelation valid for all time.” And against Gen 7.11 the NJB says: “There are several Babylonian stories of the Flood which are in some respects remarkably similar to the biblical narrative. This narrative does not derive from them but draws on the same source, namely on the memory of one or more disastrous floods in the valley of the Euphrates and Tigris which tradition had enlarged to the dimensions of a worldwide catastrophe.” So, all the English formal equivalent translations of *'ārubbōt haš-šamayim*, apart from NJB, fail to translate the meaning of this metaphor.

Table 1: English Translations of *'ārubbōt haš-šamayim*.

Gen 7.11: <i>'ārubbōt haš-šamayim niḥəqə</i>
“the windows of heaven” (KJV, Darby, Wenham, Message//Remix)
“the windows of the heavens” (RSV, NRSV, ESV, Rotherman, REB)
“the windows and floodgates of the heavens” (Amp)
“the net-work of the heavens” (YTL)
“the casements of the heavens” (Alter)
“the belts in the heavens” (Fenton)
“the sluices of heaven” (Moffatt, NJB, Schocken)
“the floodgates of the heavens” (NET, NIV)
“the floodgates of the sky” (Tanakh, NASB, TEV)
“the windows in the skies” (CEB)

⁴ Large aquifers have been found in N. and S. America, Africa and Australia but this water is locked in the rocks and has to be extracted by digging wells, etc.

⁵ Net-work, casements, and belts are archaic terms for windows that can open outwards.

“The sky opened like windows” (CEV)
 “The sky opened,” (GW)
 “the clouds [floodgates; windows] in the sky [heavens]” (EXB)
 “the clouds in the sky” (NCV)
 “the rain fell in mighty torrents from the sky” (NLT)
 “it began to rain so hard that it was as though a dam [MET] in the sky burst open” (T4T)

Gen 8.2: *yissākārû ’ărubbōt haš-šāmayim*

“the windows of heaven” (KJV, Darby, Wenham, Message//Remix)
 “the windows of the heavens” (RSV, NRSV, ESV, Amp, Rotherman, REB)
 “the net-work of the heavens” (YTL)
 “the casements of the heavens” (Alter)
 “the belts in the heavens” (Fenton)
 “the sluices of heaven” (Moffatt, NJB, Schocken)
 “the floodgates of heaven” (NET, NIV,
 “the floodgates of the sky” (Tanakh, NASB, TEV)
 “the windows in the skies” (CEB)
 “He also closed up the sky” (CEV)
 “the clouds [floodgates; windows] in the sky [heavens]” (EXB)
 “the clouds in the sky” (NCV)
 “the rain had stopped pouring” (GW)
 “the torrential rains from the sky were stopped” (NLT)
 “he caused the floodgates of water from the sky to close” (T4T)

Some English versions translate *’ărubbōt haš-šāmayim* with a functional equivalent and translate *haš-šāmayim* with “sky, skies, clouds.” This moves the text more into a modern cosmological context but the biblical cosmological context is still needed in order to understand the text. Neither the sky nor the clouds can be opened. Some versions drop the *’ărubbōt haš-šāmayim* metaphor completely and translate the natural language equivalent. The NLT says: “the rain fell in mighty torrents from the sky” and the T4T says: “it began to rain so hard that it was as though a dam in the sky burst open.” The problem with these natural language translations is, firstly how could it rain torrentially for forty days and forty nights all over the world (Gen 7.12)? There is always water in the atmosphere. Clouds are, of course, the most visible manifestation of atmospheric water, but even clear air contains water—water in particles that are too small to be seen. One estimate of the volume of water in the atmosphere at any one time is about 12,900 cubic kilometres (km³) or 3,100 cubic miles (mi³). That may sound like a lot, but it is only about 0.001 percent of the total earth’s water volume of about 1,385,000,000 km³ (332,500,000 mi³). If all of the water in the atmosphere rained down at once, it would only cover the ground to a depth of about 2.5 cm (1 inch). Since the record amount of rain to fall in one hour is 30.5 cm (12 inches) it would not take long for 1 inch to fall. The rainfall certainly could not be sustained for 40 days and nights. But it would be impossible anyway for this moisture to precipitate out of the atmosphere all at once let alone fall torrentially. Secondly, how could sufficient water fall from the skies to be able to cover the highest mountains to a depth of 15 cubits (6.096 meters) (Gen 7.19–20)? If the earth were a smooth spheroid, there would not be enough water to cover the surface with the equivalent of the world’s highest mountain, Mount Everest 8.849 km (5.498 mi).

An approximation can be obtained quite simply by dividing the volume of water in the oceans by the surface area of an ellipsoid with a smooth surface representing the idealized earth.

The volume of earth’s oceans, seas and bays is 1.332×10^9 km³.

The equatorial radius of earth (semi-major axis of the spheroid) is $a = 6378.1$ km. The polar radius of earth (semi-minor axis) is $c = 6356.8$ km.

The surface area of the oblate ($c < a$) spheroid is:

$$S = 2\pi a^2 \left(1 + \frac{1-e^2}{e} \tanh^{-1} e \right)$$

$$\text{where } e^2 = 1 - \frac{c^2}{a^2}$$

Which gives us $\approx 0.51 \times 10^9 \text{ km}^2$.

Dividing the volume of the oceans by this result gives us $\approx 2.6 \text{ km}$. This would be the maximum height the water from all the oceans could reach if the waters covered the whole surface of the globe of the earth. This is over 6 km short of Mount Everest's 8.849 km.

Also, if it did somehow rain torrentially all around the world for 40 days and 40 nights the atmosphere would have become supersaturated and it would have been impossible to breathe. The NLT and T4T natural language translations do not compute in the real world. They therefore do not make sense.

Translating *ma'yānōt tēhōm rabbā*

Table 2 illustrates how our selection of English versions translate *ma'yānōt tēhōm rabbā* in Gen 7.11, 8.2. In the formal equivalent translations *ma'yānōt* is translated variously as “fountains, springs, wellsprings, depths, outlets,” and *tēhōm rabbā* is translated as “great deep, great roaring deep, great abyss, great ocean.” However, these formal equivalents do not really tell you what *ma'yānōt tēhōm rabbā* refers to or what *tēhōm rabbā* might be. Pro 8.28 tells us that the fountains of the deep (*ʾinōt tēhōm*) were established when the *rāqīʾa*^a lifted aloft the waters above in Gen 1.6–8. So, in the context of biblical cosmology *tēhōm rabbā* in Gen 7.11, 8.2 must refer to the great deep the earth is founded upon, cf. Psa 136.6. The TEV translation “the outlets of the vast body of water beneath the earth” confirms that this is the reference. However, this translation is incoherent as there is no vast body of water beneath the earth. Neither is there any geological or archaeological evidence that there has ever been such a body of subterranean water in the past. The TEV translation only makes sense in the context of the biblical cosmic geography where the earth is conceptualized as a flat, circular disk floating on the waters of the deep.

Pro 8.27–29: ²⁷ When he established the heavens, I was there; when he drew a circle (*hūḡ*) on the face of the deep (*ʾal-pānē tēhōm*), ²⁸ when he made firm the skies (*šəḥāqīm* ‘clouds’) above, when he established the fountains of the deep (*ʾinōt tēhōm*), ²⁹ when he assigned to the sea (*yām*) its limit, so that the waters (*mayim*) might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth (*môšādē ʾāreṣ*), (ESV)

Psa 136.6: to him who spread out the earth (*hā-ʾāreṣ*) above (*ʾal*) the waters (*ham-mayim*), for his steadfast love endures forever (ESV)

Table 2: English Translations of *ma'yānōt tēhōm rabbā*.

Gen 7.11: *niḇəqə ʾû kol-ma'yānōt tēhōm rabbā*

“the fountains of the great deep” (KJV, Darby, YTL, RSV, NRSV, ESV, Tanakh, NASB, Amp, NET)

“the fountains of the great abyss” (Moffatt)

“the fountains of the great roaring deep” (Rotherman)

“the springs of the great deep” (NIV, NJB, REB, LEB, Wenham)

“the wellsprings of the great deep” (Alter)

“the well-springs of the great Ocean” (Schocken)

“the depths of the Great Ocean” (Fenton)

“the outlets of the vast body of water beneath the earth” (TEV)
 “the water under the earth” (CEV)
 “the underground springs” (Message//Remix, NCV)
 “the underground springs [fountains/springs of the deep]” (EXB)
 “the underground waters” (NLT)
 “the deep springs” (GW)
 “the springs of the deep sea” (CEB)
 “the water that is under the surface of the earth” (T4T)

Gen 8.2: *yissākārû ma ‘yānōt tēhôm rabbâ*

“the fountains of the deep” (KJV, YTL, RSV, NRSV, Darby, ESV, Tanakh, NASB, Amp, NET, TEV)
 “the fountains of the abyss” (Moffatt)
 “the fountains of the roaring-deep” (Roth)
 “the springs of the great deep” (Wenham)
 “the springs of the deep” (NIV, NJB, REB, LEB)
 “the wellsprings of the deep” (Alter)
 “the well-springs of Ocean” (Schocken)
 “the outpourings from the Deep” (Fenton)
 “the water under the earth” (CEV)
 “the underground springs” (Message//Remix, NCV)
 “the underground waters” (NLT)
 “the deep springs” (GW)
 “the springs of the deep sea” (CEB)
 “the water that was under the earth” (T4T)

The CEV, Message//Remix, NCV, EXB, NLT, GW, CEB, T4T versions do not use “great deep” in their translations. Instead, they express the notion of “underground water” that erupts from the earth. They are natural language equivalent translations set in a modern cosmological context. However, nowhere on earth is there any sign of any underground water capable of erupting from the ground and flooding the earth. The CEB translation “the springs of the deep sea” suggests *tēhôm rabbâ* is the deep sea. But then how would the deep sea overwhelm the land and then later recede? The only thing that does that in a modern context is a tsunami. Tsunami are waves caused by sudden movement of the ocean surface due to earthquakes, landslides on the sea floor, land slumping into the ocean, large volcanic eruptions or meteorite impact in the ocean. But tsunamis are examples of water displacement rather than being a sudden increase in water volume as in the biblical flood. The T4T translation in Gen 8.2 “the water that was under the earth” suggests that the water that was once under the earth is now in the oceans. Most scientists agree that the atmosphere and the oceans accumulated gradually over millions and millions of years with the continual “degassing” of the earth’s interior through volcanic eruption. According to this theory, the ocean formed from the escape of water vapour and other gases from the molten rocks of the earth to the atmosphere surrounding the cooling planet. After the earth’s surface had cooled to a temperature below the boiling point of water, rain began to fall—and continued to fall for centuries. As the water drained into the great hollows in the earth’s surface, the primeval ocean came into existence. The forces of gravity prevented the water from leaving the planet. But this all happened about 3.8 billion years ago, long before there were any humans on earth to see it. So, none of the natural language translations of *ma ‘yānōt tēhôm rabbâ* in Gen 7.11, 8.2 make sense. The only translation of *ma ‘yānōt tēhôm rabbâ* in Gen 7.11, 8.2 that makes sense is the NJB translation “the springs of the great deep” because here “the great deep” refers to *tēhôm rabbâ*, the cosmic waters below the earth.

Only a literal translation of *ma ‘yānōt tēhôm rabbâ* in Gen 7.11, 8.2 achieves dynamic equivalence with the understanding of the original audience. There is no equivalent to *ma ‘yānōt tēhôm rabbâ* in a modern view of the structure of the earth.

Conclusion

The commentaries are divided as to how to interpret *’ārubbōt haš-šāmayim nīpātāhū* ‘the windows of heaven were opened’ and *nīḥaqā ’ū kol-ma ’yanōt tēhōm rabbā* ‘the fountains of the great deep burst forth’ in Gen 7.11. Some understand Gen 7.11 to be describing an anti-cosmogony or uncreation where the waters separated in Gen 1.6–8 pour back into the cosmos. The context here is that the cosmos created in Gen 1.1–2.3 has the cosmic waters above the *rāqī’a* of heaven and below the earth (*’ereṣ*). The *’ārubbōt haš-šāmayim* and *ma ’yanōt tēhōm rabbā* are channels opened to allow the cosmic waters back into the cosmos. Under this interpretation *’ārubbōt haš-šāmayim* should be understood as metaphorical for actual openings in the *rāqī’a* and *ma ’yanōt* should be understood as water channels in the flat earth (*’ereṣ*) which burst open. This interpretation is coherent.

Other commentators try to interpret *’ārubbōt haš-šāmayim nīpātāhū* and *nīḥaqā ’ū kol-ma ’yanōt tēhōm rabbā* in Gen 7.11 within the context of how we understand the cosmos to be today. In this context there are no vast bodies of water above the sky or below the earth and *’ārubbōt haš-šāmayim* and *ma ’yanōt tēhōm rabbā* have to be explained in other ways. It is suggested that *’ārubbōt haš-šāmayim* are clouds where rain comes from and *tēhōm rabbā* is subterranean water of some kind. However, neither of these suggestions are validated. It is not possible for clouds to hold anywhere near enough water to produce a downpour that would last for forty days and nights and flood the entire earth. Also, nothing like a vast reservoir of water below the surface of the earth exists or has ever existed. This interpretation within a modern cosmological context is therefore incoherent.

With regard to translation, those English versions that translate *’ārubbōt haš-šāmayim* and *ma ’yanōt tēhōm rabbā* literally are coherent if it is made known to the audience that the text is set in an ancient cosmological context. If this is not made known then the translation is incoherent to a modern audience. However, for those English versions that translate *’ārubbōt haš-šāmayim* and *ma ’yanōt tēhōm rabbā* as natural language equivalents it is not possible to make the translation coherent as the alternative referents for *’ārubbōt haš-šāmayim* as a cloud burst and *ma ’yanōt tēhōm rabbā* as an eruption of underground water cannot perform the role assigned to them in the narrative and the account does not make sense. A translation that brings the audience to the text is therefore preferred to a translation that brings the text to the audience.

Abbreviations

Amp	Amplified Bible (1995)
BDB	Brown, Driver & Briggs
CEB	Common English Bible (2011)
CEV	Contemporary English Version (1995)
Darby	Darby Bible (1890)
ESV	English Standard Version (2007, 2008)
EXB	Expanded Bible (2011)
Fenton	Holy Bible in Modern English (1903) by Ferrar Fenton
GW	God’s Word for the Nations (1995)
KJV	King James Version (1611)
Message//Remix	The Message//Remix (2005)
Moffatt	James Moffatt Bible (1924)
NASB	New American Standard Bible (1995)
NCV	New Century Version (1993)
NET	New English Translation (1996)
NIDOTTE	New international dictionary of theology and exegesis
NIV	New International Version (1978)
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible (1994)

NLT	New Living Translation (1996, revised 2004)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version (1989)
REB	Revised English Bible (1989)
Rotherham	Rotherham's Emphasised Bible (1902)
RSV	Revised Standard Version (1971)
Schocken	Schocken Bible (1995) by Everett Fox
Tanakh	The Jewish Study Bible (2004)
T4T	A translation for translators. Ellis Deibler.
TEV	Today's English Version (1976)
YLT	Young's Literal Translation (1887) by Robert Young

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