

Genesis and Ancient Near Eastern Cosmology

Proper interpretation of the Bible requires an understanding of the original context in which it was written. This is particularly true for the OT. God chose a specific time, place, and culture in which to inspire faithful persons to produce what we read in the OT: the ancient Mediterranean and the ancient Near East of the second and first centuries BC. Understanding their worldview leads to more faithful understandings on our part, as misreadings result from assuming the biblical writers thought, believed, and acted as we do.

Unfamiliar to most of us, this world would have been even more unfamiliar to students of the Bible living before the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The languages of the ancient Sumerians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and Canaanites were deciphered for the first time only in the past 200 years. The intimate relationship between the OT and the literature and ideas of these civilizations became accessible only after such developments in ancient language studies. This opened an extraordinary window for understanding what the biblical writers meant. These connections significantly impacted our understanding of the early chapters of Genesis.

What is “Cosmology”?

The term “cosmology” refers to the way in which we understand the structure of the universe. The biblical writers’ concept of how the heavens and earth were structured by God represents a particular cosmology. This cosmology involves ideas about where God dwells within the known “universe,” and reflects the writer’s experience or understanding of the world, not historical or scientific fact. For example, cosmologies include descriptions about places and events humans do not experience until death, or unless permitted by an act of God to do so.

Old Testament Cosmology

The Israelites believed in a universe structure that was common among the ancient civilizations of the biblical world. It encompassed three parts: a heavenly realm, an earthly realm for humans, and an underworld for the dead. The vocabulary of this cosmology is also similar to that found in the literature of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Canaan.

The three tiers are reflected in the Ten Commandments: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in *heaven above*, or that is in *the earth beneath*, or that is in the *water under the earth*” ([Exod 20:4](#); see also [Psa 33:6–8](#); [Prov 8:27–29](#)). This cosmology is also affirmed in [Phil 2:10](#) and [Rev 5:3](#).

The Heavens

[Genesis 1:6–8](#) presents a basic understanding of the heavens: “And God said, ‘Let there be an expanse (*raqia*)’ in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’ And God made the

expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse (*raqia'*) from the waters that were above the expanse (*raqia'*). And it was so. And God called the expanse (*raqia'*) Heaven.”

The sky, thought to be a solid firmament, separated the waters above from the waters below: “When he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep” ([Prov 8:27–28](#)). In [Job 37:18](#), Elihu argues, “Can you, like him, spread out the skies, hard as a cast metal mirror?”

The firmament dome surrounded the earth with its edge meeting at the horizon—“the boundary between light and darkness” ([Job 26:10](#); [Prov 8:27–28](#)). It was supported by “pillars” or “foundations,” ([2 Sam 22:8](#)) thought to be the tops of mountains, whose peaks appeared to touch the sky. The heavens had doors and windows through which rain or the waters above could flow upon the earth from their storehouses ([Gen 7:11](#); [8:2](#); [Psa 78:23](#); [33:7](#)).

[Genesis 1](#) describes waters above and below the solid firmament. This belief is also reflected in [Psa 148:4](#). God was thought to dwell above the firmament, as described in [Job 22:14](#)—“Thick clouds veil him, so that he does not see, and he walks on the vault of heaven” (see also [Amos 9:6](#); [Psa 29:10](#)).

The Earth

The earth sat atop the watery deep. The “waters below” refer not only to waters that humans use, but also the deeper abyss. Thus, the earth was surrounded by the seas ([Gen 1:9–10](#)), having arisen out of the water ([2 Pet 3:5](#)). The earth was thought to be held fast by pillars or sunken foundations ([1 Sam 2:8](#); [Job 38:4–6](#); [Psa 104:5](#)).

The Underworld

The realm of the dead was located under the earth. The most frequent term for this place was *sheol* ([Prov 9:18](#); [Psa 6:4–5](#); [18:4–5](#)). The Hebrew word for “earth,” *’erets*, is also used, since the graves dug by humans represented gateways to the Underworld. In Job, the realm of the dead was described in watery terms: “The dead tremble under the waters and their inhabitants. Sheol is naked before God, and Abaddon has no covering” ([Job 26:5–6](#)).

Jonah’s description is perhaps the most vivid. Though in the belly of the great fish, Jonah says he is in the Underworld: the watery deep “at the roots of the mountains,” a “pit” that had “bars” that closed forever ([Jonah 2:5–6](#)).

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See Also:

Ancient Hebrew Conception of the Universe

The ancient Israelites divided the world into Heaven, Earth, Sea, and the Underworld.

They viewed the sky as a vaulted canopy
suspended on four pillars—each pillar
was anchored in a corner. God would
come to the throne in the east and identify

The earth was viewed as a flat
tabletop with waters on either
side. The earth was the
only land. Jerusalem was the center
of the world.

The underworld (Sheol) was a mirror
image of the world above. The underworld
was a physical space beneath the
earth. It could be reached only through death.



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