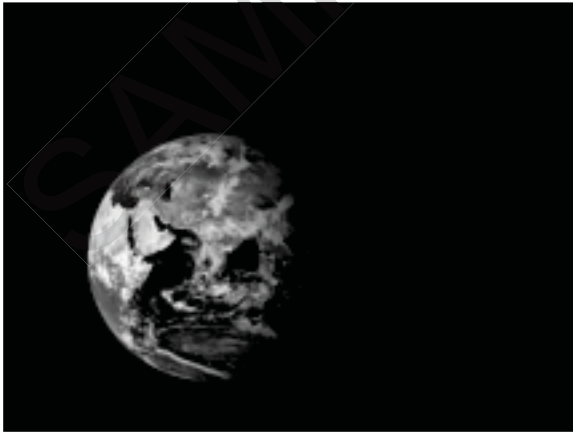


# Introduction

## Welcome to the Biblical Cosmos

WE THINK THAT WE have a pretty good grasp of what the cosmos is like. There's us living on the skin of a giant globe, circling a star we call the sun. That star is just one of many millions in the Milky Way galaxy, and the Milky Way, in turn, is just one among many millions of galaxies. So when *we* read the creation story in Genesis 1, in our mind's eye we imagine the world that God created looking something like this picture:



However, as we'll discover, neither the author of Genesis 1 nor his original audience would have thought of the world in this way. Indeed, in many ways the world of the Bible, the cosmos as pictured by the writers and original audiences of biblical texts, was a *very* different cosmos to our own.

Before we get into the “crazy” stuff, however, let's ease into things with some plain and simple “slightly odd” stuff.

## The Living Cosmos

The biblical cosmos is a very *vital* place, a place bursting with life. Modern Westerners draw rigid distinctions between animate objects (like animals and plants) and inanimate objects (like the sea and mountains). The former are alive and, in varying degrees, can be conscious. The latter are not alive and have no consciousness. We climb mountains, we look at mountains, we dig in mountains, we paint mountains, but we do not talk to mountains and we certainly do not expect them to talk back. Now ancient Israelites didn't talk to mountains either, but they seem surprisingly willing to talk about the whole of the created order as if it were *in some sense* alive and conscious and able to respond to God in a manner appropriate to it. This phenomena is so common in the Bible we often become oblivious to it, so it worth highlighting some instances.

First, notice that God is regularly said to speak **not only** to humans and heavenly beings (no surprise there) but also to animals and plants and even to stars, to clouds, to mountains, to the sea, and to *sheol* (world of the dead). They can be called to obey, to perform certain acts, and to serve as witnesses in a cosmic law court.

Second, notice that these “inanimate” aspects of creation are also spoken of as addressing God or as speaking about God. Stars, waters, trees, and even the mountains and stones cry out *to* and *about* Jehovah.

### **Stars:**

The heavens declare the glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.  
Day after day they pour forth speech;  
night after night they reveal knowledge.  
They have no speech, they use no words;  
no sound is heard from them.  
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,  
their words to the ends of the world. (Ps 19:1–4, NIV)

### **Waters above the sky:**

Praise him, you highest heavens,  
and you waters above the heavens! (Ps 148:4)

***Waters in the sea:***

Let heaven and earth praise him,  
the seas and everything that moves in them. (Ps 69:34)

***Trees:***

let the field exult, and everything in it!  
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy. (Ps 96:12)

***Mountains:***

[Mount] Tabor and [Mount] Herman joyously praise your name. (Ps 89:12)

And they not only praise but also protest. The Promised Land is polluted by Israel's idolatry and vomits sinful Israel out of it like a body expelling poison.

But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you (for the people of the land, who were before you, did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean), lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. (Lev 18:26–28; cf. 20:22)

Third, in some contexts the whole of the heavens or the earth or the seas are spoken of as though they, and not simply individual creatures within them, were conscious. Paul even speaks of creation as a whole as if it were an agent with desires and pains.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. (Rom 8:19–22)

Fourth, notice that humans too will address “inanimate” aspects of creation in certain ritual contexts. In *worship* humans call on creation—on the sun, the moon, the stars, the seas, the mountains, the flora, and fauna—to praise God. For instance,

Praise him, all his angels;  
praise him, all his hosts!

Praise him, sun and moon,  
praise him, all you shining stars!  
Praise him, you highest heavens,  
and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of Jehovah!  
For he commanded and they were created. . . .  
Praise Jehovah from the earth,  
you great sea creatures and all deeps,  
fire and hail, snow and mist,  
stormy wind fulfilling his word!  
Mountains and all hills,  
fruit trees and all cedars!  
Beasts and all livestock,  
creeping things and flying birds! (Ps 148:2–5, 7–10)

Our natural reaction to this is to say, “Well, sure, but that’s only metaphor. That is simply speaking about inanimate things *as if* they were animate.” Yes and no. It *is* metaphor; ancient Israelites were well aware that the “speech” of the stars or mountains, say, was not audible or in human languages (see Ps 19:1–4, quoted above). It was not *literally* speech as such. We should not be so quick, however, to suppose that they did not think that there was not something *analogous to* life, to consciousness, to intention, to speech, and to praise in the “inanimate” aspects of creation. To us moderns the universe is mostly like a lifeless machine, but we need to be open to the possibility that the biblical authors saw the world as much more alive than we tend to.

So we can already see that the Bible’s universe is somewhat stranger than we may at first think. Prepare for a few surprises in the pages to come.

To really open up the whole issue of the gap between ancient and modern worlds it would be helpful to get a bird’s eye view of the biblical cosmos, understood in the light of some of the other cosmologies that were in the air back then. While it may seem a bit of a distraction to try to get your head around ancient Egyptian or Babylonian worldviews, I hope that you’ll think it to be worth all the effort in the end. So—here we go . . .

## A Bird's Eye View of the Cosmos: Some Ancient Near Eastern Perspectives

In this tour we shall be taking sideways glances at some of the ancient cultures that Israel interacted with, because an appreciation of the wider world inhabited by authors of the Bible can help us to better understand the Bible in its original context. In particular, we will pay attention to ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian (by which we mean Sumerian, Assyrian, and Babylonian), and Canaanite material. The map below shows where these different cultures were based in relation to each other.



### Ancient Egyptian Cosmography

There is no single Egyptian account of creation. However, across all the varied accounts we find some common motifs that seem to capture enduring and central elements in ancient Egyptian views of creation.

The Egyptian cosmos was one in which the earth was a flat expanse, beneath which lay the underworld, and above which soared the sky—a watery place crossed each day by the sun god on a boat. In the image below—a common Egyptian image—the two parts of the Egyptian cosmos can be seen: Nut, the sky goddess arches over Geb, the earth, lying beneath. Heaven and earth are separated by the air god Shu, who holds up the sky. The air god is assisted in holding up the sky goddess by other gods. Above Nut is the infinite expanse of pre-creation chaos, Nu(n). Clearly the very structures of the world are closely associated with gods.



Central to the conception of the universe was Ma'at, the eternal order of the universe, an order associated with justice and truth. Ma'at ordered both the natural world and the human world and was essential for any kind of flourishing. Without Ma'at the world would descend back into disorder. However, Ma'at was under constant threat from the forces of chaos, so both humans and gods needed to fulfill their designated roles in the structure of the world in order to resist this pull towards disorder.

Egyptian cosmology takes great care to balance order and chaos, light and dark, life and death in cyclical patterns. Indeed, every day the battle between life and death takes place as the sun sets, descends to the underworld, and then rises again. And every year it takes place as the Nile floods and then recedes, allowing the land to appear again from the chaotic water, as it had in creation itself, and to burst forth with fresh fertility. This ever waxing and waning conflict between order and chaos is what sustains the cosmos.

### Ancient Mesopotamian Cosmography

In ancient Sumer (located in what is now Iraq) the cosmos was divided into two main zones: the heavenly and the earthly. Each of these zones could be subdivided into three heaven zones and three earth zones:

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Main divisions	Subdivisions	Belongs to ...	Stone Floor
<i>Heavenly realms</i>	<i>Upper heavens</i>	Anu, king of the gods	Red stone
	<i>Middle heavens</i>	The Igigi	Blue stone
	<i>Lower heavens</i>	The stars (= gods)	Translucent or blue/grey Jasper
<i>Earthly realms</i>	<i>Upper earth</i>	Humanity	
	<i>Middle earth (underground water)</i>	Ea	
	<i>Lower earth (the underworld)</i>	600 imprisoned Anunnaki	



In terms of the cosmos that humans can see, only the upper earth, where we live, and the lower heavens, inhabited by the divine stars, are visible.

Each of the three heavens was associated with a different level of deity and with a different stone. It seems that each heaven had its own solid stone floor, rather like a three story house; the floor of the upper heavens forming the ceiling of the middle heavens, and so on. The stone floor of Anu's heaven—the highest realm of the cosmos—was composed of a red stone, that of the middle heavens of blue stone, and that of the lower heavens was jasper.

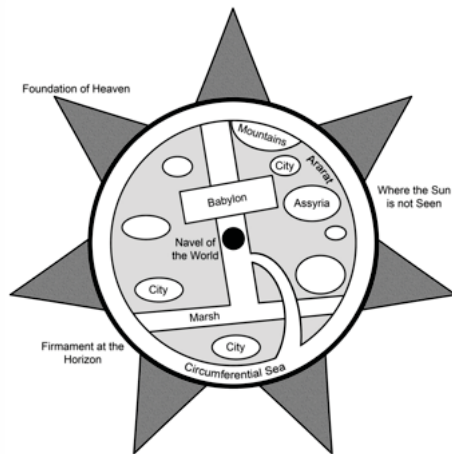
Jasper comes in all sorts of colors, but it is likely that the floor of the lower heavens was composed of sky-blue jasper or grey jasper—the sky visible from earth. The constellations were etched onto the stone undersurface of the lower heavens, which, it is reasonable to suppose, were thought to rotate.

We ought to note in passing that the area between the earth's surface and the stars (what we call “the atmosphere”) may be considered as the lower part of the lower heaven.

The upper earth is simply what we think of as the earth's surface. That's simple enough to understand. When we come to the middle earth we need to forget Hobbits; this is the realm of Ea, the freshwater god. So the middle earth is an underground watery realm known as the Apsu, the source of springs and rivers. The lower earth is the underworld in which 600 gods known as Anunnaki were imprisoned by the god Bel. Some texts refer to it as “vast earth,” “lower land,” “the earth of no return,” or “earth of the dead.”

The universe was pictured as a sphere, divided into two hemispheres. The earth, inhabited by the living, was the flat plane dividing the two hemispheres. The dome above was the sky inhabited by the gods of the living. The hemisphere below was the Apsu (underground water) and below the Apsu was the netherworld inhabited by deities and the ghosts of the dead. These two hemispheres were linked by gates. As in Egypt the sun and moon would pass through both spheres each day.

In Mesopotamian sources the dry land inhabited by humans is always presented as flat and circular, like a round tabletop, surrounded by ocean. The single continent of dry land was described by phrases such as “circle of the lands,” “circle of the earth,” and the like.





We can see this visually presented in the famous Babylonian map of the world (probably dating back to some time between the eighth and sixth centuries BCE). This map depicts the earth's surface as a central circular landmass on which one can locate key cities of the time, with Babylon itself placed as most prominent. One can also see some prominent geographical features, such as the mountains in southern Turkey to the north, the Euphrates river, the swamps along the lower Euphrates, and (possibly) a shipping channel. Surrounding this continent is a cosmic ocean. Beyond that ocean are triangles of distant uncharted territories (*nagû*), probably thought of as populated political territories and most likely as islands. However, the descriptions of them are vague and indicate that the map's designer knew little about these distant places.

The map is interesting for many reasons but we simply need to note that it intends to chart the scope of the whole earth and that this earth is a circular land mass surrounded by ocean. It is interesting to note that the world of these cartographers was a lot smaller than the world that we now know. For instance, they thought that beyond the mountains of Anatolia (modern Turkey) in the north lay this surrounding ocean. The "totality of the land under heaven," in the minds of the author of a text known as *The Sargon Geography*, extended from the Persian Gulf/Indian Ocean (known as the Lower Sea) to the Mediterranean (known as the Upper Sea), and from Anatolia to Iran. This is just the same as in the world map. There was no Russia, no China, no Scandinavia, no Africa (beyond Egypt), and certainly no Americas.<sup>1</sup> While there was no consensus, and most ancient Mesopotamians likely had no clear opinion on the matter, it is incontestable that their world was a lot smaller than our own.

Mesopotamian sources do not agree about the very ends of the earth. Some texts imagine the surrounding ocean being the uttermost limits of the earth; other texts imagine a mountain range beyond the surrounding ocean acting as a kind of dam (and perhaps also holding up the sky). These mountains contain gates through which the sun could rise and set. It is very clear that there was considerable and understandable fuzziness about exactly what lay at the boundaries of the world.

1. It has been estimated that *The Sargon Geography* conceives of the earth's land surface as having an approximate diameter of 4,500 km, although we should not assume that this was a universally shared view.

## Ancient Israelite Cosmography: A Quick Overview

The biblical cosmos, like that of other ancient Near Eastern cultures, was essentially a cosmos with a fundamental twofold division between heavenly and earthly realms. Indeed, Scripture often refers to the whole cosmos simply as “heaven and earth.” That covers *everything*—there are no other parts of the cosmos beyond heaven and earth. But, as in Mesopotamia, this two-part cosmos can be further subdivided. The divisions are very similar to, though not identical with, those we saw above in ancient Sumer, Assyria, and Babylonia.

Main divisions	Subdivisions		Inhabited by ...	
<b>Heavenly realms</b>	<i>The highest heaven</i>		God, the divine council, the angels	
	<i>Waters above the skies</i>			
	<i>The firmament (sky dome)</i>		sun, moon, and stars	
	<i>The “atmosphere”</i>		Weather and birds	
<b>Earthly realms</b>	<i>Land</i>	<i>sea</i>	Humans and animals (wild and domestic)	Fish & sea monsters
	<i>Waters under the earth</i>		Water (and water creatures?)	
	<i>Sheol, the underworld</i>		The dead	

The Old Testament has a differentiated notion of the “heavens” (*shāmayim*). It included the firmament, or sky dome (*raqiāʿ*),<sup>2</sup> but also the space *below* the dome<sup>3</sup> and the space *above* it.<sup>4</sup> Thus, below the dome, in what we call “the atmosphere,” is the zone in which weather “happens”—rain, dew, frost, snow, hail, thunder and lightning, wind, and clouds.<sup>5</sup> Here

2. Gen 1:8; Pss 19:6; 148:4.

3. Pss 8:8; 79:2.

4. Pss 2:4; 11:4; 139:8.

5. Gen 8:2; Isa 55:10–11; Job 38:29; Deut 33:13; Josh 10:11; 1 Sam 2:10; Zech 6:5; Ps 147:8.

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the Bible will often speak of the “birds of the heavens,”<sup>6</sup> because the atmosphere was part of “the heavens.” Note, however, that birds fly “in front of”<sup>7</sup> the sky dome (*raqiaʿ*) and *not* “in” it.<sup>8</sup> The sun, moon, and stars, on the other hand, are set “in” the sky dome.<sup>9</sup>

For ancient Israelites, if one ascended past the birds and past the clouds and past the stars one would need to go through a door in the solid vault of the sky to enter the highest heaven, the dwelling place of God beyond the stars.<sup>10</sup> This dwelling was also spoken of as “in the heavens.”<sup>11</sup> Occasionally the Bible will nuance the language of “heaven” to distinguish the different heavens. Thus, for instance, we hear of “God’s heaven”<sup>12</sup> and the “highest heaven,”<sup>13</sup> and Matthew’s Gospel distinguishes between the plural “heavens” (where God dwells) and singular “heaven” (where birds and stars can be found).



6. Gen 1:26, 28; 2:20; 6:7; 7:3, 23, etc.

7. Or, “on the surface of . . .”

8. Gen 1:20.

9. Gen 1:17.

10. *2 En.* 3:3ff. The Bible only appears to refer to one level of heaven above the stars (as opposed to the two levels in Mesopotamia), although by the time of Jesus some non-biblical Jewish texts refer to as many as seven heavens and it is possible that some New Testament authors were aware of these ideas.

11. Deut 26:15; 2 Chr 30:27; 1 Kgs 8:30, 39.

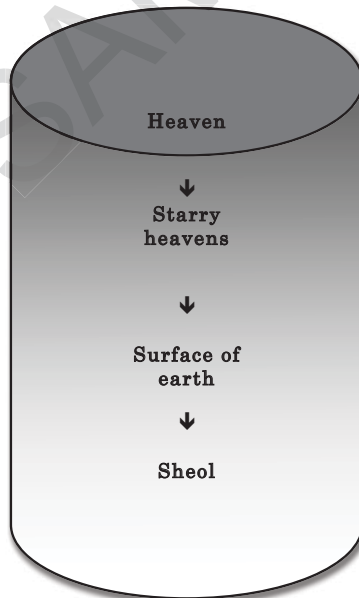
12. Ps 115:16; Lam 3:66.

13. 1 Kgs 8:27.

We can think of this like different floors in a house. To those living on the ground floor (and remember that this was a pre-flight world in which, without divine assistance, humans could *only* inhabit the ground floor) “upstairs” is the appropriate language to refer to the first and the second floors. The sky dome was the ceiling separating the first and second floors—the stars were the lights in that ceiling. Birds, clouds, stars, and God all lived “upstairs.” But, of course, God inhabited the penthouse on the top floor and not the suite on the first floor. And while the first floor in this house is visible from the ground floor, the top floor is not. Non-divine beings cannot see it or enter it (with very rare exceptions).

Beneath the ground was a subterranean freshwater ocean that was the source of springs and rivers, we might think of this as the plumbing for the house, and beneath that was sheol, the world of the dead. Sheol was akin the basement of the house, although it was a basement to which the living had no access and from which the dead had no escape.

Now there was a graded scale of holiness in this cosmos that worked along a vertical axis. Heaven, God’s dwelling, was supremely holy, while sheol, the dead zone, was the part of the cosmos furthest away on the holiness spectrum. We could represent that diagrammatically as a cylinder of holiness in which the “further away” one is from God the less holiness there is:



We should not think of the biblical cosmos as composed of completely sealed off units. It is true that the zones are distinct and it is also true that movement between them is restricted. However, there is fluidity. Humans descend to sheol (the underworld) when they die, and, on very rare occasions, can ascend from sheol to the land of the living again (as with the prophet Samuel). On exceptional occasions a human can even ascend to heaven (as in the cases of Enoch and Elijah). Some heavenly beings too can sometimes come down from heaven to earth and then re-ascend to heaven (and some fallen angels are cast into a subterranean prison). But most obviously God is associated with *all* the spheres of creation. Heaven—the highest heaven—is, of course, his throne room, but he also works through the stars, the weather, through historical events on the earth, and even sheol is open before him. In the New Testament, as we will see later in this tour guide, Jesus—God made flesh—moves from heaven to earth to the underworld, then back to earth and finally returns to the right hand of God in heaven. He is thus Lord of *every* sphere of creation.

### The Shape of Things to Come

The guide that follows is divided into two main tours, one into each of the two parts of the cosmos—heaven and earth. These tours have various stops along the way that take us into the different zones within the heavenly and earthly realms. Having travelled around the cosmos we will go to Jerusalem and take a third tour around the temple. The reason for that tour and its relevance for understanding biblical cosmology will become clear at the time. Then, before returning to our own cosmos, we will consider the one human being who has actually dwelt in all the zones of the biblical universe—Jesus the Messiah. We shall see that it is Jesus who acts as the ultimate key to understand the cosmos of the Bible. After that it is time to come home, but hopefully by the time we get back to our universe we will better understand the Bible in its own world. However, we cannot leave the tour there. The Bible is not simply an old book locked away in the past; it is divinely inspired Scripture and God continues to speak into our world through it. So the final question we must address is this—what might God be saying to *us* through these ancient biblical cosmologies about the way that *we* should think about the cosmos? The post-tour debrief considers that question in ways that I hope are helpful and show just how relevant the Bible is to the modern world.