

Ancient Worldviews

Ancient Cosmologies

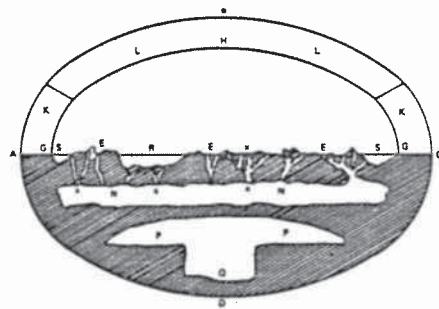
GOD creates the world. God sustains the world. God redeems the world. Broadly speaking, these affirmations are what the Scriptures are all about.

These affirmations include the physical world and yet the Bible contains no description of it. The most natural explanation for this is that the biblical writers and the later Jewish rabbis accepted the basic geology and astronomy of the Ancient Near Eastern peoples.

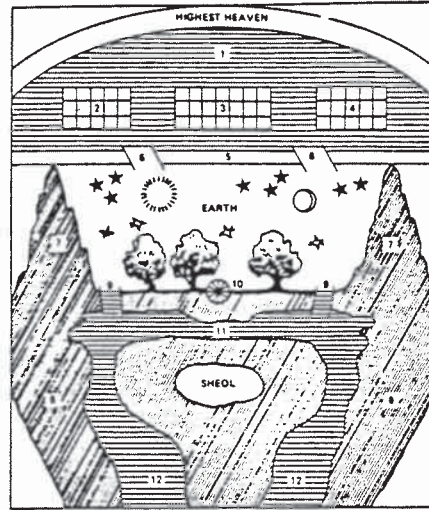
From scattered passages in the Old Testament, later rabbinic writings and the Near Eastern cosmologies, scholars have attempted to describe this picture of the universe. Two of these are reproduced below. Though essentially similar, their differences remind us not to accept modern reconstructions too uncritically. But it is helpful, while reading the Scriptures, to be able to visualize the biblical images even though we may wonder how literally the ancient writers understood them.

The earth, which is at the center of the cosmos, was pictured as a flat disc surrounded by ocean and steadied by pillars (or foundations) which sink down into the waters beneath the earth. These lower waters connect to the earth's surface in wells, streams, fountains and springs. Sheol, which lies under the earth, is the place to which the dead descend.

Arching over the earth like an overturned bowl (or perhaps level and supported by pillars), is the firmament, also



Heaven, the earth and the abysses: ABC, the upper heaven; ADC, the curve of the abyss; AEC, the plane of the earth and seas; SRS, various parts of the sea; EEE, various parts of the earth; GHG, the profile of the firmament or lower heaven; KK, the storehouses of the winds; LL, the storehouses of the upper waters, of snow, and of hail; M, the space occupied by the air, within which the clouds move; NN, the waters of the great abyss; xxx, the fountains of the great abyss; PP, Sheol or limbo; Q, the lower part of the same, the inferno. (From W.F. Warren, *The Earliest Cosmologies*)



Ancient conception of the world: 1. waters above the firmament; 2. storehouses of snows; 3. storehouses for hail; 4. chambers of winds; 5. firmament; 6. sluice; 7. pillars of the sky; 8. pillars of the earth; 9. fountain of the deep; 10. navel of the earth; 11. waters under the earth; 12. rivers of the nether world. (From N.M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*)

referred to as the lower heaven. Isaiah poetically described it as a tent or a curtain (40:21-23). This firmament is solid, for it must hold back the upper waters lest they again flood the earth. There are windows (doors, sluices) in the firmament that let out the moisture which gathers in the clouds. When the heavens are "shut up" there is drought.

The sun, moon and stars are in, or just under, the firmament and move across it. Above the heavenly waters is the (upper) heaven or "heaven of heavens" where God dwells.

But the biblical writers certainly did not accept the religious meaning placed on the similar cosmologies of the Mesopotamians, Egyptians and Canaanites. In the Old Testament accounts, "the heavens and the earth" are the creation of a God who transcends them. And they, in turn, point back to their Creator, revealing His glory:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;

And the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

Notes on Worldview

1. Axis of the world:

- Aztecs: places from which wealth dervies-fountains, forests and mines--are points of communication between the worlds of men and that of death. They are guarded by the lords of dangerous places.
- Aztec space was cruciform: Tenochtitlan was made by a crossing of major roads. Each subsection had its own center and cross roads and temple. Carrasco 1981, 283. Templo mayor in Religion 11:275-297.
- pyramids and ceremonial centers replicated the sacred tree or mountain which stood at the center of the cosmos. This center was a vertical axis where optimal communication between the three realms of gods, humans and underworld was achieved. This communication also took place through trees that constituted the corners of the cosmos, as well as sunlight, fire, caves, animals and stones. These communicated to the celestial powers such as stars powers and the fertility powers of the underworld.
- another great center of the cosmos was the human body: the head represented sunlight and fire, the heart the seat of emotion and wisdom, and liver the seat of charisma and bravery.

2. Aztec view of time:

- cyclical and multiple: operating on three planes: 3 circles in each other. The outer is transcendent time or primordial time: in it the high god Ometeotl exists prior to the creation of the cosmos. Little relevance for humankind and world. Second time is myth, which exerts great influence on human time experienced by humans: days, months, years. Lopez Austin 1988.

- The hour of the day was characterized by a moment of day or night; by the influence of a sign (one among 20); and a number (one among 13) in a cycle of 260 days; by the group of thirteen to which it belonged; by its month (among 18) and its position in the month (among 20) by the year (among 52) which in turn was marked by the destiny of a sign (among 4) and a number (one of 13), etc. Each moment on earth was a complex combination of the different influences coming down from the heavens or influencing from the underworld. Austin, A.L. 1988. The human body and ideology: concepts among the ancient Nahuas. Trans. Bernardo Ortiz de Montallano. Salt Lake City, Utah: Univ. of Utah Press. p. 65. 365 day solar calendar, 18 months of 20 days; 260 day ceremonial calendar. 13 months of 20 days. Carrasco 1987 and 1990.

3. The German word *weltanschauung*, signifying the beliefs that underlie and shape all human action, denoting a global outlook on life and the world, was used extensively in Europe. Originated with Emmanuel Kant and influenced by Romanticism, --became a hotly debated term in philosophy and science.