

## The Hebrew Conception of the Universe

*The big bang created the expansion of the universe whenever the initial density expanded rapidly to produce the initial elements that grew and evolved into the more complex structures that we see all around us.*

The statement seems rather basic, doesn't it? But what if we lived in the future without clear access to the social structures, linguistic and conceptual ideas of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? How would we interpret such a statement? Would we attempt to recreate the cosmology of these primitive people and confidently speak of their primitive mindset?

What if we found an ancient (at least to our future selves) Oxford Dictionary and slowly decrypted the terms? We might learn that *bang* means "a loud, sudden, explosive noise." We might learn from the meaning of the verbs that these primitive people thought that the "great massive noise" was the cause underlying everything in the universe. We might write articles about it, make charts and boldly speak about what the primitives thought, but we would be radically incorrect because in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are using "bang" in a figurative sense to discuss scientific matters.

Now, imagine that our future selves come across the lyrics to the Beatles song, "Across the Universe." We read,

*Words are flowing out like*

*Endless rain into a paper cup*

*They slither wildly as they slip away across the universe.*

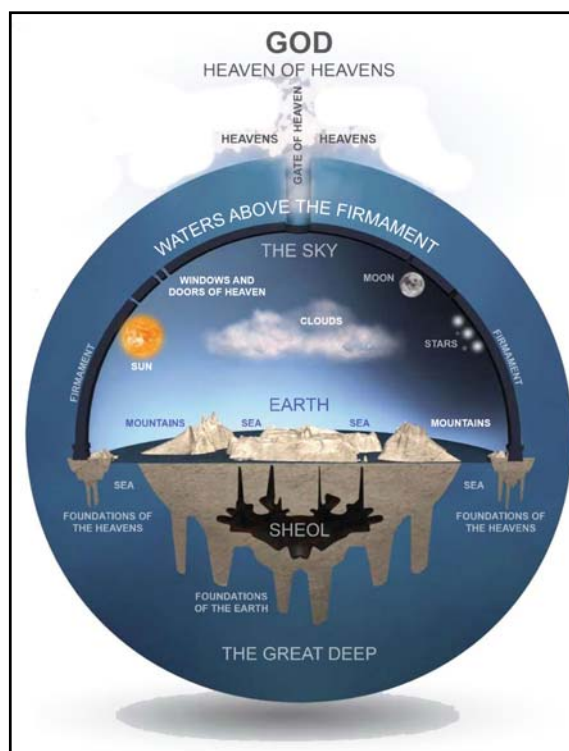
*Pools of sorrow waves of joy*

*Are drifting through my opened mind*

*Possessing and caressing me.*

Think of how this would cloud our view! Most 21<sup>st</sup> century individuals have no idea what was in the mind of John Lennon as these lyrics were penned. How could someone 3000 years from now even begin to interpret such lyrics? In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we know that such lyrics are figurative and probably came about after massive drug use, but how would they know? What if they took this data and added it to the reconstructed cosmology from the first statement? "Apparently," they might say, "the ancient primitives thought that there was an initial massive voice, which they called a 'big bang,' and this massive voice sent words throughout the universe that brought about all of its

complexity.” Imagine if their only other data came from Turkish writings in the 1500s and Italian writings from the 1750s, because this was the only extant writing from within the general location of the 21<sup>st</sup> century British writing. Unfortunately, exercises such as this seemingly silly illustration happen all the time in biblical studies.



The above image is a beautiful example of our 21<sup>st</sup> century attempts to get into the mind of those living in the Ancient Near East. This image is titled “Ancient Hebrew Conception of the Universe.”<sup>1</sup> The image came about from taking cosmologically oriented words in the Bible, comparing them with other Ancient Near Eastern texts from within a two thousand or so year period across the Middle East, and then attempting to put it all together into an image. The image is supposed to allow us to see what they thought about their world.

But how accurate is such an image? If, as the illustration above showed, both seemingly precise and figurative language can be distorted to create something radically different, how does this reconstruction fair? To assess this question, two of the terms will be considered; the *waters above the firmament* and the *gate of heaven*.

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<sup>1</sup> The image comes from the recent release of Logos 5, and the image above was taken from this [link](#).

Although similar analyses could be made for each of the images, this non-technical paper does not afford the space for such an inquiry.<sup>2</sup>

### The Waters Above the Firmament

This phrase comes from two verses in the Hebrew Bible; Genesis 1:7 and Psalm 148:4. They say,

*And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. (Gen 1:7)*

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

The discussion of firmament (expanse) in Gen. 1 has been discussed at length elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Instead, this analysis will focus on the idea of a water above the firmament and the heavens. From these two verses, not much can be stated firmly. The meaning of “heavens” (הַשָּׁמַיִם) in Ps. 148 most naturally means “the sky,” both here and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. From somewhere in “the sky,” waters reside.

It’s not that simple though. What is “the sky?” Modern concepts of atmosphere, stratosphere, etc. had not yet been developed. The sky was simply that which was above us. The term seems to include the objects seen whenever you look into the sky as well as whatever the substance is that forms it. Thus, phrases like “the sky and the land” in Gen. 1 most likely serve as a merism to describe all that is visible.

The preposition translated “above” in Ps. 148:4 and Gen. 1:7 is מעל. The typical translation is “above” or “on top of,” but basically refers to those things that are upward. Although, it can refer to things that are set upon other things, this is not always the

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<sup>2</sup> There are countless available articles on various interpretations of these terms. To say that scholarship has settled on one interpretation for any of them would be deceptive.

<sup>3</sup> The standard article arguing that the firmament was understood as a solid dome is P.H. Seely, "The Firmament and the Water Above". *The Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (1991). A fine argument for agnosticism on the issue is G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority*.

case. A natural reading of Genesis 1:7 could simply read, “God made the expanse and separated the waters below the expanse from the upper waters.”

If the sky is simply that which is above, and the waters in these passages are simply those from above, then an obvious assumption is that this refers to rain. Many passages, such as Deut 11:11, show that biblical literature referred to rain coming from the sky, in similar language to what 21<sup>st</sup> century people use regularly. We might say, “The sky is pouring out rain today.” Of course we do not mean that a personification of the sky is literally pouring a giant cup of rain over us, but we are simply using colloquial speech to describe a scientific process. Such common speech can regularly be found in technical journals that assume a common experience, social construct and linguistic domain. Why should we assume that non-technical literature from the Ancient Near East is speaking in scientifically specific ways when it references waters above?

I find it reasonable to assume that the author does not mean “that substance which you think of as being in that location there,” as though he were answering more cosmological questions. Based on these two verses, one might fairly interpret that the authors experienced rain as falling from above in the sky and are simply stating that truth. Neither passage seems intent on constructing the reasons behind such events, nor how they fit within a cosmological framework, but simply the realization that the water that falls from the sky above comes from the Lord.

### The Gate of Heaven

Unfortunately, the illustration uses an unhelpful term. The phrase “gate of heaven” (שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמַיִם) only occurs in Gen. 28:17 in reference to the place where God and Jacob met. Most translations refer to the concept illustrated above as “windows of heaven.”<sup>4</sup>

Whenever I say that “it’s raining cats and dogs,” am I speaking literally or figuratively? This is an obvious example, but I think a fair case can be made that the Hebrew phrase “windows of heaven,” is used in non-literal ways within the Hebrew Bible as well.

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<sup>4</sup> KJV, NRSV, ESV, etc.

The phrase “windows of heaven” (אַרְבַּת הַשָּׁמַיִם) is used six times in the Hebrew Bible; twice in Genesis, twice in Kings, once in Isaiah and once in Malachi.<sup>5</sup> In Psalm 78 a similar phrase, “doors of heaven” (דַלְתֵי שָׁמַיִם) is used. Let’s progress backward through these verses to assess them individually.

The Malachi reference comes from the mouth of the Lord. In reference to withholding tithes, the Lord says, “if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.” The immediate context of this blessing seems to include produce and victory over enemies. Could an argument be framed that this refers to a literal hole in the sky through which God will pour down blessings? Possibly, but that reading would be forced. Blessings come from the Lord, and he will prove to them by figuratively showering down blessings upon those who are faithful to him.

Isaiah 24 speaks of the earth mourning God’s judgment, which affects even the physical world. It speaks of a personification of terror coming upon the people, and in this context speaks of the “windows of heaven” being opened and the “foundations of the earth” trembling. Does the author intend for his readers to think about a literal hole in heaven opening and water pouring out, or literal pillars being shaken like a policeman might shake a tree to get a cat to come down? The author seems most clearly to be using figurative language to warn them of coming natural disasters that signal judgment on the earth, inspiring even the natural order to mourn. It is using figurative language to explain the phenomenological experiences of the natural disasters.

Psalm 78 speaks of the doors of heaven being opened up during the Exodus to provide manna for God’s people. The immediate context talks about the Lord “commanding the skies” to provide for the people. It speaks of the Lord raining meat on the people like dust. In other words, the context teaches that Lord provided for their needs. Would it be fair to say that the Psalmist intends to tell the readers that God literally commanded the skies to drop meat on his people until there was literally as much as their was dust in the dessert? Obviously not. Thus, why interpret “doors of heaven” as meaning literal holes in the sky from which the blessings would fall. A more

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<sup>5</sup> Gen. 7:11, 8:2; 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 7:2, 19; Is 24:18; Mal 3:10

natural understanding is that the author used figurative language to describe God's great blessings upon his people.

The two uses of the phrase in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 7 are in what appears to be a colloquialism. In response to Elisha's prophecy, the King says, "If the LORD himself should make windows in heaven, could this thing be?" Clearly, the king is not making a cosmological statement, but referring to God's providence with a figure of speech. 21<sup>st</sup> century people use colloquialisms in this way as well. We say things like, "Good heavens, how could this happen?" We are not literally discussing the ethical qualities of the sky, and I don't think such uses in the Hebrew Bible should be interpreted in this manner either.

The final uses are in Genesis 7-8 within the flood narrative. The two instances are used for rhetorical effect in the narrative. They increase the rhetorical impact of the narrative. In 7:6, 10, the author refers to the "flood of waters," and as the narrative builds the language describing the flood builds as well until the rain actually begins to come down in 7:11, which is where we read that the "great deep" opened up and the "doors of heaven" poured down their rain. The use of these images shows the immensity and scale of the waters coming upon the earth. The narrative continues that it was "on that very same day" that Noah and family entered the ark, escaping these immense waters just in time. The narrative effect of the language is clear. The cosmological extrapolations from this narrative use are what remain ambiguous.

### Conclusion: Two Sides to Literalism

A common argument against Young Earth Creationism is that the view reads a 21<sup>st</sup> century scientific worldview into the ancient text. The view is accused of reading the text as a modern scientific document and taking the words in an excessively literal manner.<sup>6</sup> Do reconstructions of the Hebrew conception of the universe do the same? I believe they do for the following reasons.

To create a conception first requires that there was uniformity or at least a large degree of conformity among the ancient Hebrew people. I think a case can be made

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance the following critiques from the Biologos organization: <http://biologos.org/resources/find/any/Young+Earth+Creationism>.

from our analysis above that the usage of these terms differed depending on context, genre, etc. Assuming a uniform understanding for these phrases cannot be maintained from these passages alone.

Second, our only access to the minds of the authors is through the words that they wrote. These words come across a vast spectrum of time and location. Are these words alone sufficient to say that the Hebrew mindset held to a particular cosmological perspective?

Third, even within the Hebrew Bible there are clear discrepancies between what the authors say about reality and what the people are said to believe. The people are constantly scolded for idolatry and syncretism. They held to a mixture of worldviews. Is it justified to extrapolate from the words of the biblical author to the mind of the “man on the street?” A more humble endeavor would be to reconstruct a “biblical conception of the universe,” but even then the data seems too sparse to draw conclusions.

Fourth, although the reconstruction illustrated above is an attempt to show the differences between our worldview and the Hebrew worldview, it requires a 21<sup>st</sup> century understanding of cosmology to even attempt such a reconstruction. It’s interesting that it presents the reconstruction from an outsider’s perspective, as though we might think of the earth from a space shuttle. Furthermore, it’s interesting that the image is encapsulated within a globe shape. The words in the Hebrew Bible more frequently describe things from an insider’s perspective and not from an outsider’s view. It uses terms like “the sky above,” “below the land,” etc. Thus, they take on a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective of cosmology in order to create an ancient perspective of cosmology. This will be addressed more at the end.

We have no idea how the authors of the Hebrew Bible would have thought about cosmological questions. We have no idea what they thought the “waters of the deep” looked like, or whether or not they thought there were literal “doors” which opened up in the sky and dropped down rain. We have no idea whether or not they considered the firmament to be a hard, metallic substance that separated God’s abode from the earthly abode. The data does not lend itself for solid conclusions on these issues that the Hebrew Bible only indirectly addresses.

The only means to answer such questions is through texts not intent on answering them. The only access is through words for which scholars differ radically on their interpretation, such as (רָקִיעַ). As has been shown above, these phrases do not demand a uniform, literal interpretation and sometimes do not even lend themselves to one, so how can a uniform cosmology be speculated with any real probability?

Illustrations such as the one above create a hermeneutical rubric for understanding passages that describe elements of the universe. Is such a rubric helpful when such gymnastics are required to even make such a speculative reconstruction?

Illustrations such as the one above fall prey to the same error that its proponents usually accuse Young Earth Creationists (YEC) of committing. YEC are accused of letting a modern scientific understanding of the world restrict their interpretation of passages in the Hebrew Bible. YEC are accused of reading a 21<sup>st</sup> century construct into the text, amounting to eisegesis. The problem arises that if we shouldn't allow a 21<sup>st</sup> century scientific perspective to influence how we interpret the text, why should we allow a 21<sup>st</sup> century reconstruction based on limited data and disputed conclusions influence our interpretation instead? Hopefully this paper, although not technical, provides enough data for us to be agnostic on the issues such illustrations present.