

THE THREE-STORY UNIVERSE:
A COMPARISON OF THE COSMOLOGY OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST
WITH THAT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

BY
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In his book, *The River of God*, Dr. Gregory Riley of the Claremont School of Theology argues that Christianity developed through an evolutionary process that can be likened to a river system. In this model, many tributaries flow into the major stream, each contributing particular elements to the final mixture. He says:

If we apply this model of a great river system to the rise of Christianity, we again find contrast with the traditional picture of the history of salvation. The river is, of course, the totality of the historical and religious background of Christianity. This is the River of God, the flow over time of the relationship between God and humanity in the ancient Near East.... The relationship stretches over thousands of years and travels through many cultures, from before the dawn of writing in approximately 3200 BCE to the time of the early Christians.... The major tributaries are the civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Canaan, Persia, Greece, and Rome, with many untold contributions from other cultures less visible that influenced each of these.¹

In support of his thesis Riley claims that the writers of the Old Testament adopted the cosmological model of the civilizations of the ANE² which he calls the "three-story universe".³

He describes that model as follows:

The physical universe as the ancients perceived it was small, much like a sphere half filled with water, upon which floated the flat disk of the earth. There was water everywhere else--above the heavens, around the earth, and below, flowing around the underworld. According to an old myth the Mesopotamians imagined the earth as a disk, surrounded by a rim of mountains and floating on an ocean of freshwater. Resting on these mountains and separated the earth by the atmosphere was the sky vault, along which revolved the astral bodies.... The whole universe was immersed like a gigantic bubble in a boundless, uncreated, primeval ocean of saltwater.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate Riley's claim that the Old Testament writers simply adopted the cosmological view of the ANE in order to determine whether or not it is valid. I will describe the way the people of ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations saw their cosmos, and compare their beliefs with corresponding details of the cosmology of the Old Testament.

The first civilization was that of Sumer, which developed in the southern part of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley about 3500 B.C.. They invented writing, and developed a script that consisted of wedge-shaped marks in clay that we call cunieform. They studied the heavens, but

¹ Gregory J. Riley, *The River of God: A New History of Christian Origins* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco), 2001, 9-10.

² In this paper I will use the abbreviation ANE instead of writing out Ancient Near East.

³ *Ibid.*, 38.

they mixed observation with astrology and religion, and therefore their astronomy did not produce their cosmology.⁴ In order to understand their beliefs about the universe, scholars must rely on their cosmogenic myths. These are mainly theological in purpose, and the details of their cosmology must be inferred from statements about the actions of their gods.⁵ This injects an interpretive element into the understanding of the texts that give information about cosmology.

For example, an early second millennium B.C. document known as the *Epic of Atra-khasis* tells us that:

When the gods like men
bore the work and suffered the toil--
the toil of the gods was great,
the work was heavy, the distress was much--
the Seven great Anunnaki
were making the IGI suffer the work.
Anu, their father, was the king;
Their counselor was the warrior Enlil;
Their chamberlain was Ninurta;
and their sheriff Ennugi.
The gods clasped hands together,
had cast lots and divided.
Anu had gone up to heaven,,
...the earth to his subjects.
[The bolt] the bar of the sea,
[they had given] to Enki, the prince.
[After Anu] had gone up to heaven
[and Enki] had gone down to the Apsu...⁶

It is from texts such as this that scholars glean information concerning cosmology. In this portion the god Anu appears as the king of heaven. The god Enki is seen to be the ruler of the Apsu, or great deep. Later, the sky god, Enlil sends messengers to "fetch" Anu down and Enki up from their realms, to confer with him in his realm the sky. From this and other texts scholars have inferred a three level configuration of the Apsu below, the earth and sky between, and the

⁴ Robert Wilson, *Astronomy through the Ages: The Story of the Human Attempt to Understand the Universe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 1997, 9.

⁵ W. G. Lambert, "The Cosmology of Sumer and Babylon," in *Ancient Cosmologies*, ed. Carmen Blacker and Michael Loewe (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.) 1975, 50.

⁶ "Epic of Atra-khasis," in *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic) 2002, 21-31.

heaven above. Other texts add their own details, and the Sumerian gods along with their myths were adopted by the succeeding Babylonian-Assyrian culture and worshipped under Akkadian names.⁷

We can see from this that the Sumerian view of the cosmos was one of cosmic levels. This idea held sway from as early as 3000 B.C. until the end of the Babylonian civilization.⁸ It was also believed that all that existed, including the gods, originated from a single primordial element, such as space, water or time.⁹ Although the different accounts sometimes make contradictory statements, they did not see this as problematic.¹⁰

A late second century document known as the *Epic of Creation*, or simply by its first two words, *Enuma Elish*, combines two earlier views of the cosmos. It shows how Marduk, the tutelary deity of Babylon, re-organized the universe after defeating the goddess Tiamat.¹¹ He splits her body into two parts, forming the heavens from one and the earth from the other. Both are located above the watery underworld.¹² Modern scholars compare the information found in these and other documents to produce interpretive models of the Sumero-Babylonian cosmos.

This process has produced descriptions like these:

The heaven appeared to be a solid vault, the foundation of which rested on the vast ocean, "the deep" (Apsu), which also supported the earth. Above the vault were the upper waters, and above them again the "interior of the heavens," the dwelling of the gods.... The earth was supposed to be a great mountain, hollow underneath; it had originally been divided into seven zones inside each other.... The vault of heaven is not supposed to be moving, but the sun, moon, and stars are living beings or dieties, moving along in paths or orbits.¹³

The sky was a bell-shaped dome constantly whirling around, pasted with stars, and enveloped in a mantle of water that extended down below the earth.¹⁴

⁷ Helmer Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, trans. John Sturdy (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press) 1973, 51.

⁸ Lambert, 48-49.

⁹ Ibid. 50.

¹⁰ Ibid. 54.

¹¹ Ibid. 55.

¹² Ibid. 57.

¹³ J. L. E. Dreyer, *A History of Astronomy from Thales to Kepler* (Dover Publications) 2.

¹⁴ Rudolph Thiel, *And There Was Light: The Discovery of the Universe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf) 1957, 37.

Small wonder then that so rationally minded a civilization should consider the Earth as a flat disk surrounded by water. Towards one end lay a mountain range (identifiable with the Munzer mountains) and the source of the Euphrates. The heavens were believed to be dome shaped...the Babylonians did not postulate gods for supporting it, believing that mountains carried out the duty.... They also believed that the earth was fixed and that the heavens revolved around it...¹⁵

Comparing these models, it is obvious that the details contradict one another. In two the earth is still and the heavens move. In another the heavens are still, but the sun, moon, and stars move along their inner surface. Another interpretive model, that of W. G. Lambert, describes the Sumero-Babylonian universe as six-layered! There are three layers above the earth, and three below the heavens.

'Earth' in Babylonian can mean both 'earth' in the English sense and 'underworld'. Thus the three levels are; the abode of men, the Apsu, and the underworld. *Six levels* then, are the fullest form of the Babylonian universe, three heavens and three 'earths' as they would appear in a side view of the universe [emphasis mine].¹⁶

Thus to the Babylonians the universe consisted of superimposed layers of the same size and shape separated by space. This is confirmed in that a cosmic cable was thought to hold the various levels together, to prevent them drifting apart, and the movement between the different levels was (at least for the gods) achieved by use of a cosmic staircase.¹⁷

In addition to this model, Lambert claims that the idea of a vault of heaven is based on a mistranslation of the Babylonian word for heaven by the phrase "vault of heaven". This, (in Lambert's view), error was made by P. Jensen in 1890 and is "no longer held".¹⁸

In summary, it is clear that the Sumero-Babylonian's believed that the gods and the universe came from pre-existent matter, usually water. They also believed that the cosmic order was the result of re-creation by the gods. They usually described their cosmos as three-tiered, but some documents imply a two-tiered or even a six-tiered view. It is also clear that we do not completely understand their views because of the necessity of making inferences from myths recorded for *theological* purposes.

¹⁵ Colin A. Ronan, *Changing Views of the Universe* (New York: The Macmillan Company) 1961, 31.

¹⁶ Lambert, 59-60.

¹⁷ Ibid 62.

The ancient Egyptians, whose civilization arose a few centuries after that of Sumer, believed that before the beginning of their world there existed a primordial abyss of water. It was infinite, without surface, and dark.¹⁹ They thought of the world as a bubble-like cavity within this infinite expanse of water, which they personified as the god Nun. Nun preserved and sustained the world by keeping it from being overwhelmed by "the demonic powers of chaos."²⁰

There are three major creation accounts as well as several minor ones found in Egyptian mythology. Each one is associated with an important religious center, and was propagated by the center's priests. In one, that of Hermapolis, the god Thoth was the leader of eight lesser deities who swam together to form the cosmic egg or bubble.²¹ In the cosmogony of Heliopolis the god Atum emerges out of the waters in the form of a hill.²² He then "spits out" two other gods, Shu and Tefenet, who continue the creative process. They produce two more gods, Geb, the earth god, and Nut the sky goddess. They were created locked in an embrace, but their father separated them. Nut became the arched sky, and Geb became the earth. Shu remained between as the air.²³ In the cosmogony of Memphis it is Ptah who stands behind all the creative activity. He was seen as a spirit, the "eternal mind of the universe", who contained all the other gods within himself. They served as his heart, teeth, tongue, and lips as he spoke the creation into existence.²⁴

Out of this "polytheistic melange"²⁵ emerged a cosmological model of a rectangular, box-like universe with a concave floor, (Geb), centered upon the Nile Valley. The sky, (Nut), arched

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ J. M. Plumley, "The Cosmology of Ancient Egypt", in *Ancient Cosmologies*, ed. Carmen Blacker and Michael Loewe (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.) 1975, 25.

²⁰ Ibid, 26.

²¹ Ibid, 27.

²² Ibid, 28.

²³ Ibid. 31.

²⁴ Ibid, 34.

²⁵ Colin A. Ronan, *Changing Views of the Universe* (New York: The Macmillan Company) 1961, 35.

above it like a ceiling with its earthward face covered with lights thought to be lamps carried by deities. It rested upon either columns or mountain peaks. When illustrated, it was portrayed as the goddess Nut arched above the earth with her hands and feet resting at the "ends of the earth".²⁶ The sun god was believed to travel over Nut in a barge.²⁷ In some versions the sun passed beneath the earth every night, or through the underworld. In others Nut swallowed the sun every evening and gave birth to it at dawn.²⁸

In summary, the Egyptian view of the cosmos was that it existed in an eternal, infinite body of water. It was created, or organized, by a creator-god with the help of lesser deities. An exception to this is the Memphite cosmogony in which Ptah is said to be self-existent and to contain all other things. It is a "polytheistic melange" in which various gods are identified with being or causing all observed natural objects and phenomena.

Before beginning to discuss the cosmology of the Bible a few things need to be said: First, just as the Sumero-Babylonian cosmogenic myths focus on theology with the cosmological details at their periphery, so does the Genesis account. The theology of Genesis and the rest of the Bible, however, differs significantly from those myths. Second, the Genesis account, as will be seen, emphasizes elements that contradict the Sumero-Babylonian myths, possibly for a polemical purpose. Next, the Hebrew language has a small vocabulary, resulting in multiple definitions for individual words and grammatical complexities that require expert knowledge to understand. I will not become involved in these issues. Again, it can be argued that Moses, the author or compiler of the Genesis account, had access to either oral traditions, written accounts,

²⁶ John Louis Emil Dreyer, *A History of Astronomy from Thales to Kepler* (Dover Publications, Inc) 1953, 3-4.

²⁷ Ronan, 35.

²⁸ Plumley, 21-22.

or a combination of these, which had been passed down from patriarchal times.²⁹ It is interesting to note that the early chapters of Genesis contain many Babylonian words, while the chapters subsequent to the story of Joseph's arrival in Egypt contain elements only a person familiar with the Egyptian culture and language of the second millennium B.C. would know.³⁰ Finally, "although the Biblical writings extend over a period of several hundred years, the cosmological picture in these writings is remarkably uniform. One can, without distortion, refer, therefore, to the 'Biblical' view and quote in its support passages from the different books of the Bible."³¹

We will consider the Biblical cosmos from two perspectives; the perspective of its *origin*, and that of its *form*. The first verse of the first chapter of Genesis reads, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1 NASB). The author's intent is clear. First, there was God. Then, there was everything else. "The expression 'the heavens and the earth' indicates the totality of the universe."³² In light of this Biblical scholar Kenneth Matthews says, "as a theological conception the startling absence of precreated matter distinguishes Israelite cosmogony from its rivals in the pagan Near East. The absolute sense of 'beginning,' the very first word of the Bible, awakens the reader to the exceptional Creator-God of Israel's faith."³³ As the story continues, God speaks, saying, "let there be light", (Gen. 1:3 NASB), and the light exists. In this account, all things find their source in God. The only ANE myth that is even similar is the account of the god Ptah in the Memphite cosmogony. However, even Ptah must work through the lesser gods that either exist within him or emanate from him.

²⁹ Percy J. Wiseman, *Ancient Records and the Structure of Genesis: A Case for Literary Unity*, ed. Donald J. Wiseman (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 1985, 20.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 75.

³¹ Rabbi Louis Jacobs, "Jewish Cosmology," in *Ancient Cosmologies*, ed. Carmen Blacker and Michael Loewe (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.) 1975, 67.

³² Michael E. Lawrence, ed. *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1, (Nashville: Abingdon Press) 1994, 129.

³³ Kenneth A. Matthews, *The New American Commentary*, Vol. 1A, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, (Chicago: Broadman and Holman) 1996, 142.

The form of the cosmos found in the Bible also differs from that of Sumero-Babylonian cosmogenic myths in several respects. When we first read of the earth we read that..."darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters", (Gen. 1:2, NASB). Here we see the Spirit of God moving over the *surface* of the waters, while the earth is beneath that surface. If the waters, (*Tehom*, deep), refer to the primordial sea from which the ANE civilizations believed the gods came, and as is claimed by some authors, the Creator-God of Genesis is seen as existing apart from it and as having created it. It is seen as obeying his spoken commands, (Gen. 1:9 NASB). If, on the other hand, it is seen as the terrestrial sea covering the earth's surface, this cannot be the cosmology of the *Enuma Elish*. In the *Enuma Elish* Marduk splits the body of Tiamat, forming the heavens out of one half and the earth from the other. The heavens are so watery that he is forced to stretch a skin beneath it to keep the waters from falling down.³⁴ At this point in the Genesis narrative, there are no upper waters mentioned at all.

In this account, God says, "Let there be an expanse, (*raqia*) in the midst of the waters and let it separate the waters from the waters" (Gen. 1:6 NASB). The expanse then separates the "waters which were below" from the "waters which were above", (Gen. 1:7 NASB). Then God names the expanse "heaven", (Gen. 1:8 NASB). Because the Hebrew word *raqia* can mean a beaten out plate, many have claimed that it was intended to hold back the "waters above" in like manner to the skin placed by Marduk. But the expanse of Genesis is neither a skin nor a solid plate. It is described in the phenomenological terms of normal common sense observation. This should not surprise us because the author participated in "a widespread fund of images and ideas" shared with his ANE culture³⁵, and also had to work within the limits of the vocabulary of his

³⁴ Lambert, 56.

³⁵ The New Interpreter's Bible, 341.

language. This *raqia* is described phenomenologically, and carries the atmospheric waters as clouds. The birds fly in it. But it is more than just the sky. The greater and lesser lights and the stars move in the expanse. There is no hint of any waters above it in the immediate context.

Another Biblical author describes the creation of the heavens by saying,

It is He who made the earth by His power, who established the world by His wisdom; And by His understanding He has stretched out the heavens. When He utters His voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, And he causes the clouds to ascend from the end of the earth...(Jer. 10:12-13 NASB).

The waters are seen to be nothing more than the atmospheric waters contained in the clouds, and the author is drawing on the image of the white cumulus clouds that can be seen roiling in the sky. Another Biblical author tells us that "It is He...who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in", (Isa. 40:22 NASB). One does not "dwell in" a solid metal plate, nor does a plate continually expand.

Other verses add to the description of the Biblical cosmos. In Job 26:7 we find a remarkable statement. "He stretches out the north over empty space and hangs the earth on nothing." This seems to our modern ears to be an accurate, albeit poetic, description of the earth being held in its orbital path by gravitational forces. Being "hung upon nothing" it certainly does not appear to be a circular disk floating in the Apsu of ANE myths. Nor does there appear to be any of the "waters above", Mesopotamian or Egyptian, in the empty space above the north. In another verse the author prays:

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you...
(I Kings 8:27 NASV).

He speaks of the earth, (which includes the underworld), next is heaven, the realm in which birds fly and clouds hold water, and in whose outer reaches the stars and planets move. Beyond this, the "highest heaven" or "heaven of heavens" which cannot contain God. God is seen as transcending the entire creation. There is a hint here of existence beyond the material universe.

In conclusion we can make some observations about Dr. Riley's claim that the cosmology of the Bible is adopted from the three-story universe of the ANE. First, Riley has oversimplified the cosmologies of the ANE. Some documents describe a two-level universe, some a universe of three levels, and at least one has described a six-level universe. Second, Riley has drawn his conclusion on the basis of faulty logic. He assumes that mere prior existence proves causation. This is the fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, (after this, therefore on account of this). One must demonstrate the causative link to prove causation, which Riley fails to do. In fact, he is quite open about this method of reasoning when he says, "one's model of interpretation determines one's conclusions, one's telescope determines one's cosmology."³⁶ In this case the model of interpretation seems to be; select the desired outcome and organize the data in such a way as to make it seem to lead to the intended conclusion. Finally, Riley seems to have overlooked significant differences between the cosmologies of ANE myths and that of the Bible. Although these cosmologies share common elements and are described in the same poetical and phenomenological language, there are too many distinct differences to allow them to be considered identical. Dr. Riley's thesis is not supported by the evidence.

³⁶ Riley, 5.

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