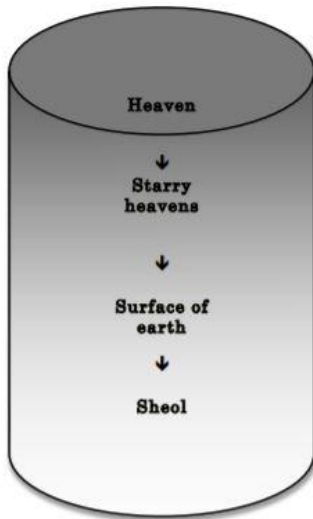


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Module V Overview & Objectives

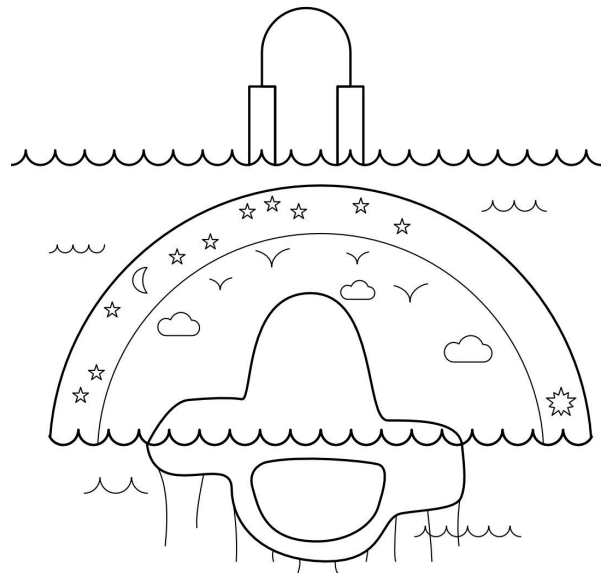
Students will look at the cosmos as it is presented in the Bible. They will reconcile contemporary physical cosmology with the metaphysical cosmology of the Bible. Students will consider how biblical cosmology shows the sovereignty of God as well as the divinity of Jesus.



A Holiness Axis

“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.”¹



¹ Robin A. Parry. *The Biblical Cosmos: A Pilgrim’s Guide to the Weird and Wonderful World of the Bible*, pp. 12-13 (image & text).

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Basic Divisions of the Biblical Cosmos ²					
Main Divisions	Subdivisions		Inhabitants		References
The Heavens	The highest heaven/The third heaven?		God, the divine council, angels, heavenly beings		Genesis 1:6-8; 2 Corinthians 12:2-4
	Chaos Waters above the firmament		Chaos waters that flooded the Earth in Noah's time		Genesis 1:6-8
	Firmament/Dome/Expanse/Sky/רָקִיעַ/"raqia"		Sun, moon, stars		Genesis 1:7-8, 14-18; 7:11
	The "atmosphere"/The heavens		Rain, hail, snow, birds, and flying creatures		Genesis 1:6-8, 20-22
The Earth	Land	Sea	Humans and animals (Domestic and wild)	Fish and sea monsters (Leviathan)	Genesis 1:9-10, 20-30
	Chaos waters under the earth		Chaos waters that flooded the Earth in Noah's time		Genesis 1:6-7; 7:11
	Sheol, Hades		The dead		Genesis 37:35

What is Hell

Depending on your Bible translation, there could be four different words (1 Hebrew and 3 Greek) that are translated as Hell: Sheol, Hades, Tartaroo, and Gehenna. What are these different "hells"?

→ **Sheol/Hades**

- ◆ Hades is the Greek word used for what is called Sheol (also "the Pit" or "Grave") in the Hebrew Bible.

² Robin, Parry A. *The Biblical Cosmos: A Pilgrim's Guide to the Weird and Wonderful World of the Bible*, pp. (adaption of original chart).

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- This is a dark (Job 17:13), subterranean (Deuteronomy 32:22) chamber that all people go to after death - Including the righteous (Psalm 89:48) - and stay until the resurrection.
 - The ancient people only mined down to a certain level because they did not want to mine into Sheol (Job 28:1-11).
- People in Sheol are cut off from God (Psalm 6:5) because it is the opposite of Heaven (Job 17:16).
 - While people do not have access to God from Sheol, God still has full access to Sheol (Psalm 139:8).
- By the time of Jesus, Jews had developed the concept of Abraham's Bosom (as referenced by Jesus in Luke 16:22) inside of Sheol where the righteous would live without the torment of the rest of Sheol.

→ Tartaroo/Abaddon

- ◆ Although the Hebrew word Abaddon (Job 26:6; Proverbs 27:20) is not translated as Hell in any English translations, it is equivalent to the Greek Tartaroo (Tartarus).
- ◆ Tartarus is referred to as the bottomless pit throughout the Bible (Revelation 9:1), but also as the Angel that has power over the bottomless pit (Revelation 9:11).
 - Tartarus is the epitome of Sheol because it is the deepest, darkest section of it for only the most wicked.
- ◆ Tartarus is not for humans but is where the fallen angels were chained down (2 Peter 2:4).

→ Gehenna/The Valley of Hinnom

- ◆ Although there is much debate over what "Gehenna" is, it is said to be the Greek word for the Valley of Ben Hinnom first found at the end of Jeremiah 7.
- ◆ Gehenna is a valley just outside of Jerusalem where apostate Israelites gathered to sacrifice their children to the pagan god Molech.
- ◆ Later, Jews would burn their garbage in this valley and it would have an awful stench and a continual fire.
- ◆ Jews would go on to develop an idea of Gehenna being the place where the reprobate would suffer after the resurrection outside of the New Jerusalem where God was present.

The Chaos Waters

Genesis 1:2 says that there was "welter and waste." It gives us this idea of chaotic waters; in the mind of the Ancient Near-Eastern peoples, these waters were forces of death, destruction, and chaos - The Israelites viewed these waters no differently. The difference between the Israelites'

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view of these waters and the other Ancient Near-Easterns, was that the God of the Israelites did not need to struggle to harness their power. The God of the ancient Israelites merely spoke to them and they listened. Psalm 74:12-15 speaks of God's great power over these waters. The other ancient Near-Easterns told of their gods struggling with the leviathan and the waters to bring about creation, but the God of Israel is all-powerful and even walks the leviathan like a dog (Job 41:1-6).

God and other "gods"

Contrary to the thoughts of most Christians today, the Bible speaks of many gods (Psalm 82:1). These gods are also referred to as holy ones (Job 15:15), hosts of heaven (Jeremiah 33:22), or sons of god (Genesis 6:2 - "son of" is a way to say "in the class of" in Hebrew). However, the Hebrew Bible makes it very clear that these gods are not to be praised (Deuteronomy 4:19; 17:3; 2 Kings 23:5; Jeremiah 8:2). These gods were created beings (Genesis 1:14; Psalm 136:7), but God is eternal and all-powerful and has no beginning or end (Revelation 22:13). This is why God calls Himself "I AM" (Exodus 3:14 - He is the all-imminent one and has no cause). God is the Most High (Psalm 97:9) and the God of gods (Deuteronomy 10:17) and the LORD of Hosts (Isaiah 44:6). When the Bible says there is no other God beside God (Isaiah 45:5), it is simply an expression (like if I said there was no mom beside my mom; it's not that no other moms literally exist - it's that my mom is the best).

The Nations and Their gods

Deuteronomy 32:8-9 says,

When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance,
when he divided mankind,
he fixed the borders of the peoples
according to the number of the sons of God.
But the Lord's portion is his people,
Jacob his allotted heritage.

In other words, God divided all of the nations and set rulers and principalities over them all. Each nation had its own god, but the nation of Israel got the one true living God (this is why he is called the God of Israel). While all of the other nations worship their false Gods, Israel is to worship the one true God over them. For this reason, Namaan takes Israel's land with him to worship the one true God in 2 Kings 5:17.

The Two Temples

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Joel 3:17 says that God lives in Zion, but 2 Chronicles 2:6 says that even the highest heaven cannot contain God. What does this even mean??? We can think of God's presence in two ways: his omnipresence and his special presence. Yes, God is everywhere (Psalm 139), but he also has a very special presence in the Temple. This is because the Temple is where Heaven and Earth meet. The Babylonians from Genesis 11:4 literally wanted to build up to Heaven. This is why ancient temples (Ziggurats) were almost like artificial mountains where people would get close to God. Even the Temple of the one true living God is built on Mount Zion. While the earth has its own temple, God also has a Temple that is a reflection of the earthly Temple (Psalm 11:4). When Jesus steps onto the scene, he claims that he is the Temple (John 2:20-21). When he dies, the veil in the Temple is torn in two (Matthew 27:51) because his prophecy of the Kingdom of God being at hand was complete (Mark 1:15). Followers of Jesus are told to pray for his kingdom (Heaven) to finish aligning with earth (Matthew 6:10) as they await his glorious return.

The Heavens

In 2 Corinthians 12:2-4, Paul talks about being taken up into the third heaven. There are three heavens? What even is the third heaven? Despite the confusion that this phrase can cause for contemporary readers of the Bible, the idea of three heavens was not at all foreign to the first readers of the New Testament. In fact, there were probably some readers of the New Testament that were used to seven heavens (the Ascension of Isaiah 1:13, the Secrets of Esther 20:1). But where does this idea of more than one heaven come from? Where else is it in the Bible? Its actually in the first line of the Bible that we read that "God made the heavens" (Genesis 1:1) (notice the plurality). So what are the first and second heavens? Why does God need three different heavens?

→ The First Heaven

- ◆ This is what people today refer to as "the atmosphere."
- ◆ This is where the clouds and the birds and flying creatures are.
 - When it rains, this is where the rain comes from, except for Noah's flood (see second heaven).

→ The Second Heaven

- ◆ This is what a flat earther and the Bible would call the firmament or the dome, or the expanse (Hebrew רקיע "raqia").
 - The biblical authors, much like their pagan neighbors, believed the sky to be a physical dome.
- ◆ The sun, moon, and stars were thought to have been placed on the actual expanse itself (Genesis 1:14).
 - The sun, moon, and stars were not believed to have been big flaming balls of gas and energy but living gods (see "gods and other gods").

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- ◆ This is where God's flood chambers are that open for Noah's flood in Genesis 7:11.
 - Contrary to the opinion of some Christians today, this firmament did not go away after the flood

→ The Third Heaven

- ◆ This is what most people mean when they say "Heaven."
- ◆ This is where God himself lives (Isaiah 66:1)
 - Even this heaven cannot contain God (2 Chronicles 2:6).

Jesus is God

Jesus proves himself to be God by showing himself to have power over the cosmos. Just as God only rides upon the clouds (Deuteronomy 33:26), Jesus ascended into the clouds (Acts 1:9). Just as God walks on the sea as on the ground (Job 9:8), Jesus does the same (Mark 6:47-53 - Notice how Jesus walks on the sea but Peter walks on the water). Jesus also shows that he has power over the wind and waves (Mark 4:35-41) just as God has power over the chaotic waters in Genesis 1:6-8. Hebrews 2:14 even shows how Jesus descended into Sheol and defeated even Sheol when he died.

The Biblical Cosmos Today

How can Christians cope with the idea of a flat earth with a firmament and star gods? With contemporary physics and our current understanding of the cosmos, we know the earth is a spheroid without a firmament and stars are big flaming balls of gas. There are two common ways that biblical scholars make a biblical cosmology work with the contemporary understanding of the cosmos.

Metaphysics versus Physics

Metaphysics is what is beyond natural or beyond what humans can perceive (Gk. meta = beyond physics=nature); physics is what is within natural explanation. Although the biblical authors believed the earth to literally be flat with a firmament and that stars were gods, there is reason to believe that they wrote about it in a metaphysical way and not a physical way. In other words, the authors of the bible were not concerned about the scientific physical functions of the earth but with the meaning behind the functions of the earth. In Psalm 48:2, one can see that the biblical authors believed Zion to be in the north. One quick look at a map will prove that Zion was in the center of their known world and in relation to Israel, it was in the South. Obviously, David (who lived in Zion) knew where Zion was in Israel. He wrote about Zion being in the North to say that it had significance and not to say that it was literally or physically in the North. Isaiah 17:12-14 speaks of the nations raging like the chaos waters to say that the chaos waters are a destructive force that brings about de-creation. Jeremiah 4:23 even uses the same phrase from

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Genesis 1:2 that describes the waters being “welter and waste” and from verses 23-26, he describes how the earth is without life and is a desert. This is not to make a scientific claim about there being literally no people on the earth and it being a physical desert but is again making a claim about how the earth is going back into a state of de-creation because of the wickedness of the people. By about the third century BCE, it had been hypothesized that the earth was spherical and by the time of the Apostles it was a common fact. But this did not seem to startle the Apostles in the slightest. In fact, they still wrote about Jesus literally physically ascending into the heavens that they had to know was not physically above them.

Relative Revelation

Another way of understanding the biblical cosmos is to say that God revealed the cosmos to the authors of the Bible in accordance to how much they already knew. Since the authors of the Bible could not conceive of the earth without thinking about it being flat and with a firmament, that was how God decided to speak to them. It's not that God was lying to them, rather, he was communicating to the people at that time in a way that was understandable. Since God is infinitely transcendent and all-knowing, He simply would not be able to communicate to us mortals with our finite understanding while using all of his knowledge and power - There's no way us humans could understand.

Discussion Questions

- What were some misconceptions you had about the Bible?
- Is there anything from this course that did not make sense or that you are not sure you fully agree with?
 - ◆ How or Why?
- What is something you learned that will completely change your understanding and reading of the Bible?
- How has learning this helped you to better understand and love Jesus?
- How do you think your understanding of the biblical cosmos changes about how you read the Bible?
 - ◆ What do you think First-Century Jews would have thought about how the cosmos worked in comparison with Christians today?

Module VI Homework

Read Genesis 1-3; Genesis 6-9; Exodus 14; Joshua 3; Matthew 3-4:11. Write out a comparison of the stories: what are the similarities and differences between all of them. Make sure not only to note comparisons in the narrative and wording themselves but also the meanings of the different narratives. Note key symbols that appear and are repeated throughout.

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Recommended Resources

The Biblical Cosmos by Robin A Parry

The Unseen Realm by Michael S Heiser