

THE COSMOLOGY OF THE BIBLE
ITS SOURCES, ITS PURPOSE, AND ITS INFLUENCE

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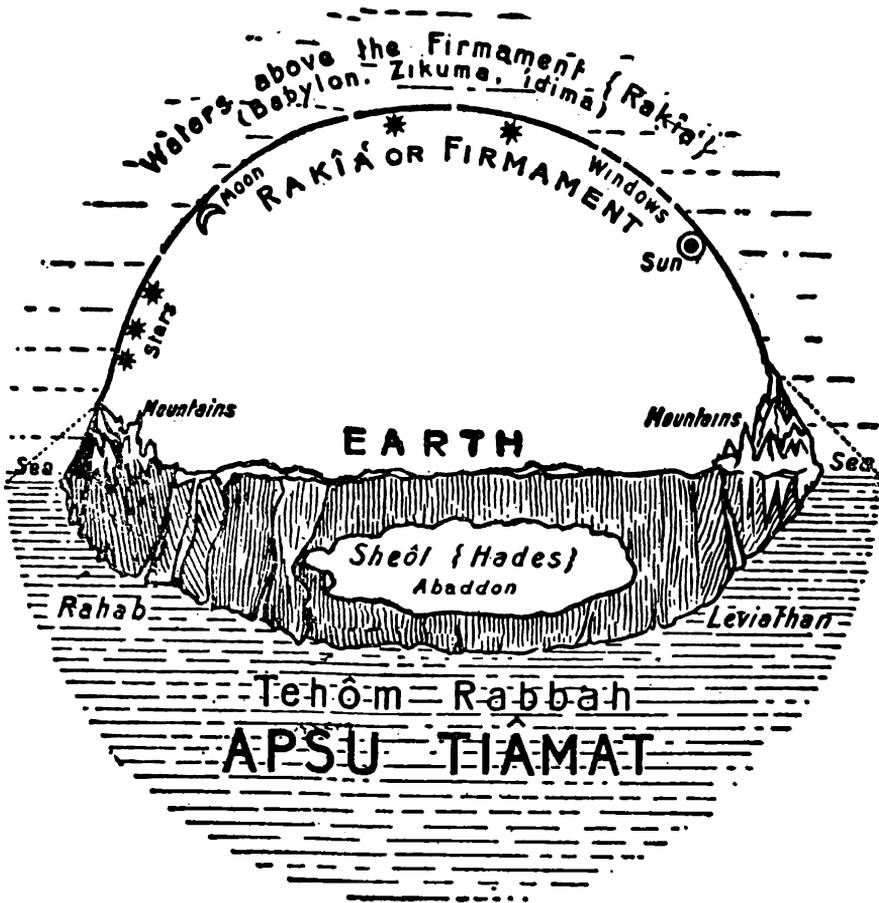
Perhaps no task is more complex and difficult than to enter sympathetically into the thought of those of a by-gone age, and view the problems of their life and the mysteries of their world with kindred eyes—the eyes of their minds, limited by their ignorance, enlightened by their wisdom. Our minds are so easily fixed in the attitudes of the modern world which with contempt dismisses the cosmic concepts of the ancient peoples as infantile imaginings without lasting value.

But it is impossible to understand antiquity—its philosophy, its history, its literature—if we place its people outside the world which they mentally pictured around them. This it was that gave rise to their rites, their religion, their laws and customs, and their attitudes to life.

It is also impossible to understand present day thought and life if we divorce it from its historical procession out of the ancient past. We must realize that the ancient conception of the cosmos has had a steadily waning influence upon European thought. And the point of equilibrium between this classic influence on the one hand, and the commencing modern scientific outlook on the other, seems to fall into that very era when Swedenborg's mind was prepared, on the one hand by classic traditions and by the literal sense of the Word, and on the other by the new natural sciences, into a rational vessel which could receive the great cosmic truths of both the spiritual and the natural worlds, and which was adopted by the Lord as the instrument of the new revelation.

Our first task must be to seek to reconstruct the biblical picture of the universe. Scholars have differed in their attempts to piece it together from fragmentary treatments and vague, isolated references.

One popularly approved representation of the Hebrew conception is that of O. C. Whitehouse (see page 46). The earth is there depicted as a disk, floating on the waters of the great abyss, and containing in its interior a vast cavern—an "earth of lower things"—which is the abode of the dead, called Sheol and Abaddon.



ANCIENT SEMITIC CONCEPT OF THE COSMOS

According to Owen C. Whitehouse. Reproduced from Dr. James Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible* (s.v. Cosmogony), by kind permission of Charles Scribner's Sons.

Far above the surface of the earth, and resting upon the high circumferential ranges of the everlasting hills, the mountains of eternity, is stretched the Rakia' or Firmament. This firmament—provided with adequate windows through which rain may pour—restrains the waters above the firmament from flooding the earth. Just below the firmament are placed the stars, the sun, and the moon.

This picture accounts for only some of the biblical descriptions. Dr. G. Schiaparelli, in his *Astronomy in the Old Testament*, describes the firmament of the Hebrews as "a vault of great solidity"

—a tank for the heavenly waters—although transparent to the light of stars and planets which were *above* it.¹ Below the earth's habitable crust lay the great abyss from which the "fountains of the deep" once upon a time sprang forth to flood the earth. Still lower down lay Sheol and Abaddon, the underworld, the "limbo" and hell of the dead. The storehouses of the winds are above the horizon at the four quarters.

Whatever may have been the crudities of popular belief, Solomon and Job—and certainly some of their Egyptian and Babylonian contemporaries—might well have scoffed at such a clumsy cosmos. The Hebrews did not originate their ideas of the world, but received them from prior sources. Their representative of a church was built around the "bones of Joseph"—i.e., around the dead letter of Ancient Church tradition. To find the more perceptive thought of antiquity which lay back of Hebrew symbolism we have to examine the nature of the prior churches.

Perhaps the most fundamental feature of primitive peoples is their inability to distinguish the precise lines which demark the natural and the spiritual worlds from each other. The two worlds fuse into each other in their thought. This infantile trace, which we generally term *animism*, was derived from the attitude of the men of the Most Ancient Churches, who were interested in the world only as the representative form of the spiritual environment within which their lives were placed.

Now this very fact made the universe of the ancients different from that of our present, more abstract conception. The natural universe as it *actually* is created by God is a theater representative of the affections of the Lord's love and wisdom (TCR 78). This universe, in an image, is like a solar system, centered in God as the Divine sun. This represents the Lord's modes, His laws of providence, His ultimate revelations, as they are in themselves regarded. But the creation visualized by the wise among the most ancient people was the spiritual environment as it gradually became a part of the church. The six days of creation (in Genesis) describe therefore an order or image of creation such as the angels are said to see around them; in which they recognize the particular affections and thoughts which are active with them,

¹ See the criticism of Wm. Fairfield Warren, in his *The Earliest Cosmologies*, New York, 1909, p. 26 ff.

represented in ultimates about them by the creative power of the Lord (DLW 322 f; TCR 78).

To make out that the Genesis account of creation is *literally true* as a picture of the mode of formation of the outer world of nature, and to force a modern meaning into an ancient text, is therefore a fruitless task, despite the presence therein of all those analogies that exist between the creation of the universe as a whole and the formation of the responsive human in man. The two series are not fully correspondent, and therefore the Writings note that "the creation of the universe is *not there meant*; for such things are there described as may be known from common sense *not* to have been so—as that there were days before the sun and the moon," etc. "In what follows in the history there are also like things, which are scarcely acknowledged by anyone who thinks interiorly, to be possible . . ." (AC 8891). The Genesis story of creation was instead "a history so framed as to contain within it heavenly and Divine things, and this according to the received manner in the Ancient Churches. This manner of writing extended also to many who were outside of that church, who *in like manner* devised histories and involved arcana within them, as is plain from the most ancient writers. . . ." The men of the Ancient Church "thought more interiorly than men at this day, and thus had communication with angels and found their enjoyment in connecting such things together . . ." (AC 8891).

As the human race fell from its high inherited estate, and turned to corporeal things, the essential idea that a *spiritual* creation was meant by the creation myths became more and more vaguely maintained. Men turned their interest to the external world without them. Yet the demarkation between that world and the world of gods and demons and spirits was not actually perceived. The doctrine of discrete degrees was confused. Spiritual laws were applied to natural things, and *vice versa*. Gradually, as interest in nature as such became greater, the spiritual cosmogony of tradition was mistaken for a scientific cosmogony among the peoples of the decaying Ancient Church.

There is a remarkable unity within the concepts of the ancient civilizations as to certain essential features of the universe they dwelt in, and these common features are particularly observable among those peoples with whom the Ancient Church had a par-

ticular stronghold—the Sumero-Accadians, the Hamitic Egyptians, the Indo-Iranians, in lesser degree the Chinese, and derivatively the Greeks.

All these agree in picturing the earth as the central thing of the universe. All represent heaven as above, the stars as the abodes of the gods, the planets as moving deities; and they accept the sun, in his daily appearances, as a chief object of adoration. All agree that the abode where the shades of the dead were held captive within the memories of their former earth-life—in contrast to the redeemed heroes who were received among the gods—was situated *below the earth*, in the underworld. Most of these systems, especially the Babylonian and the Indo-Iranian, but also the others in less distinct fashion, teach the existence of seven concentric spheres or strata within the expanse of the universe; spheres which were later clearly identified as belonging to the moon, the sun, and the five known planets, and surrounded by the eighth sphere—the crystalline vault of the fixed stars.

In Indian thought these concentric spheres are fully described as seven transparent worlds contained within the Loka-loka, the star-studded shell of Brahma's primal egg of the universe. Each world corresponds to the other in almost every respect, but each is inhabited by its own race of beings of discretely different degrees of perfection. Each is divided into two hemispheres, northern and southern, or higher and lower, separated by an ocean. Each hemisphere is divided into seven belts, or separated by inaccessible mountain-ranges. A stationary world-axis is conceived through the core of the earth, ending in a polar mountain on either side; and upon this axis the transparent spheres all revolve at varying distances and speeds, moving through the general horizontal plane of the ecliptic or the twelve signs of the Zodiac.

If we trace this world-view, which, according to Wm. Fairfield Warren, "shimmers" even through the Vedas, its Babylonian origin becomes likely. Since esoteric traditions have been mainly responsible for preserving the doctrine of the spheres, and priestly interpretations in the latter millennia of the Ancient Church wove all manner of fancies around it, and since orthodox Christian thought, in the Dark Ages, inclined to take the literal passages of the Hebrew Bible as the sole touchstone of truth in matters of all

science, the Babylonian origin of the doctrine of the spheres has not until recently been fully recognized, and the knowledge of the ancient world as to the rotundity of the earth and as to the general cosmic order which we know as Ptolemy's System was generally doubted. But owing to the many scholars who in our own century have tried to study the thought of the ancients more affirmatively, we are now allowed to believe that the ancient peoples, since a great antiquity, have had recurrent glimpses of the general idea of the rotundity of the earth, and of the existence of an antipodal population on the nether surface of this earth. This nether earth was considered, such scholars affirm, the abode of the dead. It was the Hades of the departed, the Amenti and Tuat of the Egyptians, the Sheol of the Babylonians and the Jews.

Instead of going into the tempting details of these analogies, we desire only to suggest that the cosmic concepts of the early Hebrews—a relatively illiterate nomad race—were largely formed from the ancient tradition of concentric spheres; but that among the Hebrews this idea perhaps was only shadowy, unfixed, and vague. The problem of the evident and incontrovertible similarity between the Babylonian creation tablets and the Genesis account of creation can only be solved by a more definite dating of the Hebrew story, and of what the Writings call the Ancient Word.

But whether the Israelites placed the abode of the dead in a cavern underfoot, or on the antipodal surface of the earth, matters little; since the Word of the Old and New Testaments presents the cosmos only as a true picture of the spiritual states which it means to portray—the spiritual environment of the church on earth before and after the Advent.

It is a remarkable fact that in the spiritual world the heavens do sometimes appear, from the point of view of spirits in the world of spirits, as above them—yet also as stretching to the east and west, north and south. The heavens above then appear as cloudy expanses or transparent spheres. The world of spirits—although it is sometimes depicted as a vast valley surrounded by the distant mountains of salvation which, when the spirit's state is mature, may be reached by travel—is yet described as a *globe*; and the heavens are said to be concentric around and above it! The spirits imprisoned by false faiths and evils of external character are there seen below the earth, protected by the Lord in the "lower

earths," but surrounded by infesting hells. The hells are below the world of spirits, *antipodal*, yet accessible by cavernous openings, and the devils walk *inverted*. Even the hells are in discrete spheres, and are described as diametrically *opposite* to the heavens, yet so placed that the heavens are in some sort of direct *contact* with their corresponding hells, which are on inverted mountains; and this with a view to the heavens governing the hells and maintaining their equilibrium, as it were, from without! (AE 1133: 5, 6; LJ post. 126; SD 5240e; 5244, DLW 275; DP 300; AR 761.)

Let me not give the impression that this or any other *one* spatial category or geographical picture could tell the whole story of the spiritual relations in the other life. But although the Lord is known as the *real center* of heaven, yet the earth of the world of spirits is taken as the central focal point on which concentrate all the sweet influences of the heavenly spheres. The geo-centric relation is clearly needed to display the fact that a spirit or man, yea, even an angel, lives in the world of *appearances*. Yet in heaven that appearance no longer dominates. For the angel sees himself in the organic category of *uses*, within the Grand Man of heaven.

Before the advent of the Lord, the hells rose high over the world of spirits, invading the domains of the natural and spiritual heavens (TCR 121). The ancients perceptively pictured this by the assumption that the spheres nearer to the earth were then also dominated by evil powers. The "Prince of this World" was no mere figure of speech. Over the world of spirits ruled the false gods of the imaginary heavens. Below the earth—in the "ubi" or *πρό* of the departed mortals—were the "spirits in prison" to whom the Christ was to preach, the disconsolate shades who possessed no magic word to unlock the gateways of the spheres or frighten away the fearful guardians of the way of Anu. Below them—yea, and around them—were the *hells*, the proper homes of the merciless gods of the underworld.

The whole sublunary sphere was indeed, at that time, a prison-house. And the salvation which the holy name of Jesus Christ offered to the world's forgotten-of-the-gods was the more in demand when Paul stepped out of the narrow circle of self-righteous Judaism and offered it to the Greek-thinking world, inbuilt as this already was into the fearful cosmos of the seven spheres.