

# Genesis & Ancient Cosmic Geography

## How Did Ancient Israelites Understand the Cosmos?

by **Tim Mackie & Aeron Sullivan** 4 years ago

The Bible is historically the most well-read, well-circulated, commonly quoted, yet widely-criticized book of all time. While there is no shortage of topics to discuss, pages one and two of Genesis have unfortunately been a frontrunner for controversy due to the creation vs. evolution debate. For whichever side of that argument you might agree with, it begins with the interpretation of the book of Genesis. Which sort of makes sense as Genesis comes from a Hebrew word Bereshit, which means “in the beginning.” It’s here we see set the stage for the Garden of Eden and all that will unfold with Adam and Eve. Nevertheless, before we move onto the Garden and the Fall, there is so much to explore in this .

As you read through the entire Bible, it will become clear that God has a flair for drama. He reveals himself through burning bushes, elaborate visions, and births himself into the world through a poor, working-class, teenage girl. That said, something God does not seem to typically do when he reveals himself in history, is provide science lessons. We are not saying God couldn’t do such a thing. We are simply saying that in the Bible, he doesn’t. To put it another way: if you read the Bible in its historical and literary context, you will not find any text in which God updates our understanding of astrophysics or biochemistry.

God revealed himself to the people of ancient Israel (the original audience of the Bible) and when he did so, he spoke in terms of their cultural understanding of the cosmos. This simple observation has huge implications for understanding what on earth is happening in Genesis chapter one.

## A Three Tiered Universe

Let's take a deeper look at how the ancient Israelites understood the division of the sky and the land as a starting point. Modern people think of the earth as a globe spinning around the sun in the vastness of space, but in the ancient world, the Israelites included, people saw things differently. All throughout the Bible, we find the common ancient view that the cosmos was a three-tiered order, consisting of three distinct realms stacked on top of each other: the skies, or heavens above; the land, surrounded by water; and the waters below.

The earth was a flat, disc-shaped piece of land floating on deep cosmic waters, which is why if you dig deep enough, you eventually hit water. This is "the deep" in [Genesis 1:2](#), so they believed the land must be suspended, or "floating" above the deep by pillars (you've maybe heard the biblical phrase, "pillars of the earth"). The land, surrounded by waters, is where humans and land animals lived, and the waters around the land was "the sea," where all the sea creatures lived. Ancient Israelites also observed that the sky was a dome shape and that the sun, moon, and stars were embedded into the dome. There was more water above the sky, which the dome typically held back, but not always, which explained why sometimes it rained.

While the world functioned in the same manner as it does today, the Ancient Israelites' understanding of those functions differed dramatically. Today, we benefit from several thousand more years of scientific discovery and therefore have a larger context for the universe than those in the Ancient Near East.

# A New Way of Reading

As you dive into “The Beginning,” we encourage you to read [Genesis 1:1](#) with all this in mind. Remember, it wouldn’t be until the 6th century B.C. that Pythagoras would first suggest a round earth, and 16th century A.D. when it would be demonstrated via circumnavigation. Now this doesn’t mean Genesis chapter one is “wrong.” It just means that its purpose isn’t to offer a scientific description of the world. What the author is trying to do is reshape your view of who God is and why he made this strange and wonderful world with us as a part of it. Those questions are the focus on pages one and two of the Bible.

We hope this is helpful and engaging, and gets you asking some questions you may not have thought of before.

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