

The Biblical Cosmos is Three-Tiered—No Question.

John R. Roberts

In this paper, I demonstrate that the biblical cosmos is depicted as being three-tiered with heaven above, the earth below and the underworld/deep beneath the earth. The basic structure is heaven above and earth below (Gen 1.1) surrounded by the cosmic waters (Gen 1.2, 7.11, 8.2).

There is no question that the biblical cosmos is portrayed as being three-tiered. I am a Bible translator and I know how to use hermeneutical principles to exegete the biblical text. These principles say the biblical text is to be interpreted according to the “plain meaning” conveyed by its lexico-grammatical construction and historical context.

Regarding historical context, Aune (2003: 119) says there were two major mythological cosmologies in the ancient world. The archaic cosmology conceived of the world in terms of a three-tiered cosmos consisting of the earth as a flat disk in the middle, surrounded by the river Ocean (the Greek version) or floating on water (the Israelite version), with heaven above and the underworld beneath. During the Hellenistic period a geocentric model of the universe largely replaced the older three-tiered universe model, for Greek thinkers (such as Aristotle and Eratosthenes) proposed that the earth was a sphere suspended freely in space. Walton (2007: 166) says: “Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Canaanites, Hittites, and Israelites all thought of the cosmos in terms of tiers: the earth was in the middle with the heaven above and the netherworld beneath.”

A number of passages in the Bible portray the cosmos as being three-tiered (heaven, earth and the deep/Sheol below the earth). In the OT Exo 20.4 describes a tripartite cosmos including the heavens above, earth beneath the heavens and the waters below the earth. Deu 4.18 describes every creaturely domain as including anything on the earth, in the heavens or in the

waters below the earth. Some biblical expositors, such as Harris (1999 [1980]), suggest that *mayim mittaḥat lā-ʾāreṣ* in Exo 20.4 and Deu 4.18 refers to the ordinary seas and lakes rather than to any subterranean waters. However, this exegesis misrepresents the Hebrew syntax. According to BDB, *taḥat* means ‘underneath, below’ and in Exo 20.4, Deu 4.18 this word functions as a preposition. As a preposition *taḥat* has an object which is *lā-ʾāreṣ* ‘the earth.’ So, *mayim mittaḥat lā-ʾāreṣ* means ‘waters underneath/below the earth.’

In the NT Php 2.10 affirms that the cosmos is tripartite with those who will bow the knee to Jesus Christ being in heaven, on earth and under the earth. Here the Greek word *καταχθόνιος* means ‘under the earth/subterranean’ and the biblical affirmation of the existence of the netherworld below the earth cannot be denied. Revelation also depicts the biblical cosmos as tripartite. Rev 5.3 refers to heaven, earth and under the earth. Rev 5.13 refers to creatures in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea.

The creation account in Gen 1.1–2.3 only makes sense if a three-tiered cosmos is assumed. In Gen 1.3–5 day and night are created as a fundamental component of the cosmos. This does not make sense in a modern cosmological context where the day-night cycle is produced by the rotation of the earth with respect to the sun. For day and night to come into being on day one there would need to have been the sun and a rotating global earth. But according to the creation account the earth did not come into being until day three and the sun not until day four. However, Walton, Matthews & Chavalas, eds. (2000: 28) say: “The people of the ancient world did not believe that all light came from the sun. There was no knowledge that the moon simply reflected the light of the sun. Moreover, there is no hint in the text that “daylight” was caused by sunlight. The sun, moon and stars were all seen as bearers of light, but daylight was present even when the sun was behind a cloud or eclipsed. It made its appearance before the sun rose, and remained after the sun set.” Some scriptures suggest that in the biblical worldview the day has its own light independent of the sun. Pro 4.18 refers to the first light of daylight (*ʾôr*) rather than the first light of the rising sun. And the rest of the verse speaks of the full light of the day (*yôm*) rather than the full light of the sun. Ecc 12.2 distinguishes the light of the day (*ʾôr*) from that of the sun (*šemeš*), the moon (*yārēaḥ*) and the stars (*kôkābîm*). Isa 5.30 speaks of darkening the daylight (*ʾôr*) rather than darkening the sun and Amo 5.8 says God darkens the day (*yôm*) into night (*lāyālâ*). In Job 38.12 God asks Job if he has commanded the morning (*bōqer*) to dawn the day rather than the sun. *Bōqer* is the term used in the refrain “and there was evening (*ʿereḇ*) and there was morning (*bōqer*)” in Gen 1. So, within this cosmological context Gen 1.3–5 makes perfect sense. Crucially however, if a global planet earth is assumed the account does not make sense.

In Gen 1.6–8 heaven is created by a *rāqîaʿ* separating the waters above from the waters below. There are at least ten reasons why the *rāqîaʿ* created in Gen 1.6–8 must be conceptu-

alized as being substantive (having substance). Firstly, the Hebrew dictionaries say the verbal root of *rāqîa^c* is *rq^c*, hammer out; its nominal form in Gen 1 therefore means ‘something hammered out flat’ as in *riqqū^cê paḥîm* ‘hammered plates’ (Num 16.38) (Klein, 1987: 628). Secondly, descriptions of *rāqîa^c* elsewhere in the Bible depict it as something with physical substance stretched or spread out flat. Cf. Lev 26.19b, Deu 28.23, Job 37.18, Isa 34.4, 42.5, 44.24, 51.13, Ezk 1.22, Zec 12.1, Rev 6.14. Job 37.18 says: “Can you, like him, spread out (*rāqa^c*) the skies (*šəḥāqîm* ‘clouds’), hard as a cast metal mirror?” In Ezekiel’s vision (Ezk 1.22, 23, 25, 26, 10.1) *rāqîa^c* is described from the perspective of heaven as something solid and flat, sparkling like ice, and which is awesome to behold. In Revelation a similar vision says: “Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.” (Rev 4.6) Thirdly, *rāqîa^c* separates the waters in Gen 1.6–8 and holds the waters above aloft as the blue sky. The *rāqîa^c* would only be able to do this if it was solid and watertight. Fourthly, the birds fly above the earth and across the surface (*pəne^c* ‘face’) of the *rāqîa^c* in Gen 1.20. A surface is a flat, two-dimensional area. The depiction given in Gen 1.20 is therefore of the birds flying above the earth and across the surface of the blue sky above. Fifthly, the *rāqîa^c* requires openings, such as windows (*ʔarubbōt*) (Gen 7.11, 8.2, 2 Kgs 7.2, 19), gates (*ša^car*) (Gen 28.17), and doors (*daltê*, θύρα) (Psa 78.23–24, Rev 4.1), for various things (e.g., rain, angels, manna) to pass through. Sixthly, when the verb *nātan* ‘set’ in Gen 1.17 is used elsewhere in the OT where a physical object is placed in a location, then the location has to be something with physical substance. Cf. Exo 25.30, 40.5, 2 Kgs 12.9, 2 Chr 4.7. Therefore, the implication in Gen 1.17 is that *rāqîa^c* has physical substance for the sun, moon and stars to be “set (*nātan*)” in it. Seventhly, in Psa 19.4 the sky (*hā-rāqîa^c*) is said to be a tent (*ʔohel*) that God has made for the sun to run its course in. The sun comes out from behind the sky to run its course. Eighthly, the Aramaic translation of Genesis describes *rāqîa^c* as a three-finger sukkah. This is a canopy with a roof that is three-fingers-width thick. Ninthly, the LXX translates *rāqîa^c* as στερέωμα ‘firmness, firmament’ from στερεώω ‘make firm.’ This is consistent with the lexical meaning of *rāqîa^c*. Tenthly, *rāqîa^c* never denotes earth’s gaseous atmosphere as the concept of earth’s atmosphere would have been unknown to the ancient Hebrews. Seely (1991) presents the historical evidence in concrete detail that the *rāqîa^c* was originally conceived of as being solid and not a merely atmospheric expanse. The Gen 1.6–8 account of the creation of heaven only makes sense if heaven (the blue sky) is conceptualized as being the upper tier of the cosmos.

In Gen 1.9–10 the earth (*ʔereṣ*) is created as a disk founded on the waters of the deep. NIDOTTE Vol 1 (1997: 518) says *ʔereṣ* has a broad range of meaning, from the whole earth, through particular countries, especially the land of Israel, local districts, the soil, to the ground inside a tent (Jos 7.21). BDB (2010 [1906]: 76) say *ʔereṣ* has these senses: 1) the whole earth

or earth opposite to heaven, 2) a country, territory, 3) ground, soil, 4) people of the land. Since there is no country or territory in view in Gen 1.10 and people did not exist at this point in the creation story the options for the meaning of *ʿereṣ* in Gen 1.10 are limited to ‘the whole earth’ or ‘ground, soil.’ The first meaning would be appropriate for the domain that mankind is to live in and to rule over but not the second meaning. *ʿereṣ* in Gen 1.10 must therefore refer to the whole earth as a domain of creation separate from the domain of the sea (*yām/yammîm*). However, understanding *ʿereṣ* in Gen 1.10 as planet earth makes no sense from a modern cosmological viewpoint. The biblical text only makes sense if one assumes *ʿereṣ* refers to the whole earth shaped as a flat, circular disk founded on the waters of the deep.

While many scriptures confirm the biblical cosmos is conceptualized as being three-tiered there is no scripture which indicates the biblical earth is conceptualized as a globe suspended in space. If there were then it would contradict the rest of the Bible. This concept would have been unknown to the original author and audience.

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Corresponding Author: John R. Roberts, johnroberts1946@gmail.com

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