

CHAPTER 6

GENESIS: NON-CORDIST INTERPRETATIONS

ANCIENT NEAR EAST COSMOLOGY IN THE BIBLE

In addition to Genesis 1, many other Bible passages refer to the physical structures of Ancient Near East (ANE) cosmology, particularly the firmament, the waters above the sky, the storehouses of rain, the waters below the earth, and the pillars supporting the earth. Here is a list of some of those passages.

- ▶ Genesis 1:1-22; 7:11-20; 8:1-5; 11:4; 49:25
- ▶ Exodus 15:8; 20:4
- ▶ Deuteronomy 5:8; 28:12; 33:13
- ▶ 2 Samuel 22:8-17
- ▶ Job 9:6, 22:12-14; 26:8-14; 36:27-30; 37:18; 38:4-38
- ▶ Psalm 19:4-6; 74:13-17; 75:3; 89:9-12; 93:1-4; 102:25; 104:1-9; 135:6-7; 136:5-9; 139:8-9; 146:6; 148:1-7
- ▶ Proverbs 3:19-20; 8:22-29; 25:3
- ▶ Isaiah 14:12-15; 24:18-19; 40:21-26; 42:5; 45:18; 48:13; 51:13; 65:17; 66:1-2
- ▶ Jeremiah 4:23-28; 10:11-13; 51:16
- ▶ Ezekiel 32:7-8
- ▶ Daniel 4:10-11
- ▶ Zechariah 12:1
- ▶ Malachi 3:10

By reading these passages with Ancient Near East cosmology in mind, one can better understand the intended theological message. Here are a few examples (from the NIV):

Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 5:8

“You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.”

In ANE cosmology, “heaven above,” “earth beneath,” and “waters below” is both a poetic and a literal way of referring to the whole of creation. Moses wrote the second commandment in terms of the same physical picture of the cosmos as the surrounding cultures (flat-earth, solid firmament, waters above and below the earth), but

Moses turned the theology of the surrounding cultures upside down. The gods the ancient people associated with each part of the physical world were mere idols.

Psalm 93:1, 2, 4

“The LORD reigns, he is robed in majesty. . . . The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved. Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity. Mightier than the thunder of the great waters, mightier than the breakers of the sea—the LORD on high is mighty.”

This passage was used in Galileo’s time to argue that the earth did not orbit the sun. Considering it now in terms of ANE cosmology, we can understand it even better—God established the flat earth on pillars so stably that it cannot be shaken or moved. God did this by holding back the mighty primordial waters that threaten to flood the land. This passage proclaims God’s sovereignty over each element of the creation and the powerlessness of the “god” of the waters in which surrounding cultures foolishly trusted. It’s all told in vivid imagery that powerfully communicated to the people of that time. Today, although we have a different physical picture of the cosmos, we can still hear the powerful theological message of God’s sovereignty over all natural and spiritual forces.

Proverbs 8:22, 27-29

“The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, when he gave the sea its boundary so the waters would not overstep his command, and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.’ ”

In spite of the NIV translation of “clouds” for “firmament,” you can see ANE cosmology throughout this passage. The passage is praising God for making the firmament, dividing the primordial waters, and raising up the dry land out of the waters below. In other words, the whole of the cosmos was made by God in wisdom, power, and authority.