

The Ancient Universe and the Cosmic Temple



Star cluster Westurlund 2, Credit NASA/ESA

By **J. Richard Middleton** on July 19, 2016

“Space,” says *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, “is big. Really big. You just won’t believe how vastly, hugely, mind-bogglingly big it is.”¹ Just how big *is* space?

The Size of the Universe

Let’s start with our solar system. Many people learned in school that the Earth is 93 million miles from the sun. That distance is actually hard to imagine. But how far out is the furthest planet, Neptune (now that Pluto isn’t formally a planet anymore)? Neptune is a bit less than three thousand million miles from the sun (2,798,700,000 miles, to be more precise). I’d say that’s mind-bogglingly big. And that’s only our solar system. Then there’s the Milky Way Galaxy, of which our solar system is just a part. Estimates for the size of the Milky Way range from 100 billion to 400 billion stars (depending on what we take to be the average star density). Either way, that’s a lot of stars, with lots of space between them. But the Milky Way is just one galaxy in a universe that has some *twenty billion trillion* stars (not that we can really conceive a number that large). And the farthest stars in any direction are 47 billion light years away, which makes the observable universe 94 billion light years across.

I think that “mind-bogglingly big” might even be an understatement. And the universe is not only big; it’s old.

The Age of the Universe

Human beings have been around for a long time. The remains of the first anatomically modern *Homo sapiens* are dated to about 200,000 years ago, whereas the first examples of the genus *Homo* appeared about two million years ago (*Homo habilis*). The Australopithecines originated about four million years ago, and first hominin remains may go back some six or seven million years. But life has been around for much longer

than that. Whereas complex single-celled organisms first appeared *1.4 billion* years ago, simple single-celled organisms date back to *3.6 billion* years.

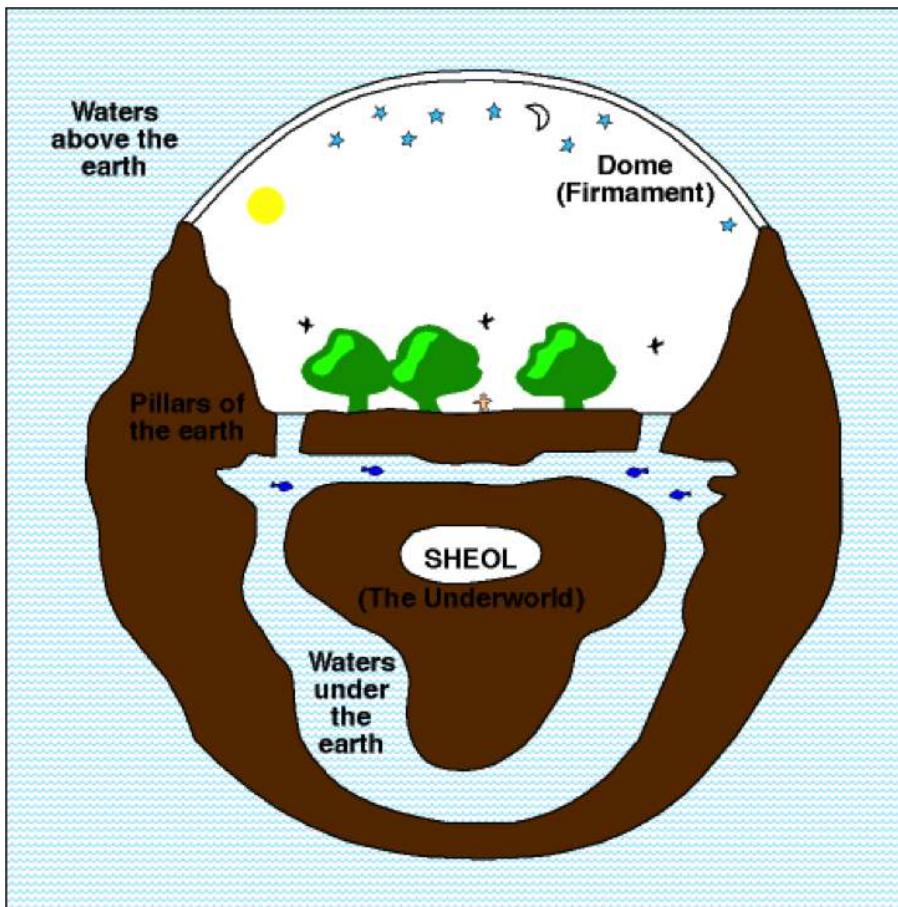
The Earth itself (and our solar system) was formed *4.6 billion* years ago. And the universe originated in the Big Bang *13.8 billion* years ago. If you're wondering how the most distant stars can be 47 billion light years away while the universe is only 13.8 billion years old, it's because the universe is *expanding* at an exponential rate.

So the universe is really, really big and very, very old.

The Biblical World Picture

Many Christians have thought that this modern scientific picture of a universe of such immense size and age must be in tension with the biblical picture of the world, especially as found in Genesis 1. After all, according to this text God created "the heavens and the earth" (that is, the cosmos) in six days (then rested on the seventh); and by some calculations (using the genealogies in Genesis) this took place no more than 6,000-10,000 years ago. But going beyond the assumed contradiction in time scale (which I think can be adequately addressed), there are the widely differing understandings of the size and structure of the cosmos when we compare the Bible with modern science.

The world picture that we find both in Genesis 1 and in many other creation texts in the Bible seems to assume a flat earth founded upon the waters (with the netherworld somewhere "down there," either *in* or *below* the subterranean waters). At the extremities of the Earth were the distant mountains that extended down into the underworld waters and up into the heavens or sky (Hebrew *šamayim*). These mountains are thought of as the "pillars" that supported the dome (or "firmament") of the heavens, envisioned as a sort of roof over the Earth, which held back the cosmic waters above.



The Biblical Cosmos

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Reading the Old Testament

So long as we don't take this world picture as overly literal (it is more a phenomenological portrait of the world), this makes perfect sense as a non-scientific way of describing the human environment.

Even though Genesis 1 is the only biblical creation account that explicitly portrays creation as a six-day process (we'll get to what this means in a moment), the basic world picture sketched above is assumed throughout the Bible and in other ancient Near Eastern cosmologies.

The Cosmos as a Building

In both the Bible and other cultures of the ancient Near East (Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, Sumer, etc.), the world was thought of as a building, a habitable space for humans and other creatures to live in.² This is why we have God's creation of the world and the building of a house described in similar terms in the book of Proverbs.³

*By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established;
by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches. (Prov. 24:3-4)*

A few chapters earlier we find this description of how God created:

*The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens;
by his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew. (Prov. 3:19-20)*

Verbs like "founded" and "established" are architectural terms. Even the New Testament retains language of "the foundation of the world" (Matt. 13:35; Luke 11:50; John 17:24; Eph. 1:4; Heb. 9:26), though some modern translations like the NIV treat this as a dead metaphor and render it as "the creation of the world." But the metaphor was very much alive in the Old Testament.⁴ So, when God questions Job, his description of creation draws on architectural imagery.

*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? (Job 38:4-7)*

Although this ancient picture of the world as a building may seem strange to modern people – aware as we are of the vast expanses of space – it conveys an important theological truth that is directly relevant to our contemporary scientific understanding of the universe.

The Cosmos as a Temple

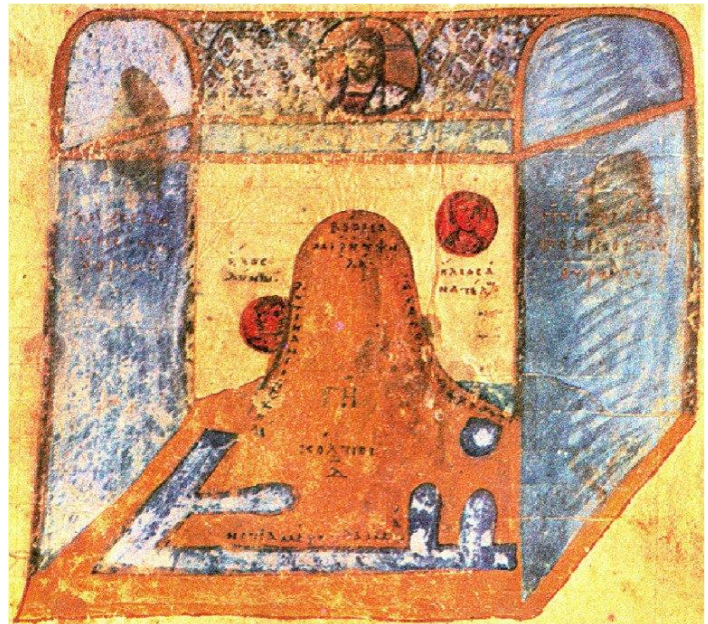
As Job and Proverbs (among many other biblical texts) suggest, creation is pictured in the Bible as a building. But creation is not just *any* building. The Bible follows ancient Near Eastern convention in understanding the world as God's "house," that is, as a cosmic sanctuary, a temple for God to inhabit, with heaven corresponding to the Holy of Holies, where God's presence is concentrated.⁵ Much of the Old Testament treats God's presence in the Jerusalem temple as the earthly correlate of YHWH reigning from heaven. However, Isaiah 66 stands out in challenging those rebuilding the temple after the exile; since creation is already God's dwelling, he has no need for a humanly constructed "house."

*Thus says the Lord: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool;
what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting place?
All these things my hand has made, and so they all came into being,
says the Lord. (Isa. 66:1-2; NRSV adapted)*

The pervasive understanding of the cosmos as sacred space in the Bible makes sense of the picture of the world sketched by the sixth century monk Cosmas Indicopleustes, in Book 3 of his *Christian Topography*.⁶

The Cosmos of Cosmas (Sixth Century)

This picture would be incomprehensible if we did not understand the biblical conception of the universe as the tabernacle or temple writ large (in the depiction of Cosmas, the Holy of Holies is Mt. Zion, where God dwells).



The correspondence between creation and the tabernacle (as macrocosmos and microcosmos) is evident in Exodus 31:1-5; 35:30-33, where Bezalel is charged with overseeing construction of a house for God's dwelling. To this end, he is filled with wisdom (*hokmâ*), understanding (*tebunâ*), and knowledge (*da'at*) – the same triad of terms by which God created the cosmos in Proverbs 3.

Through these endowments Bezalel is “to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft” (Exod. 31:2-5). Bezalel's work in “every kind of craft” (Exod. 31:5) reflects God's completing “all the work” of creation (stated twice in Gen. 2:2-3). Despite the differences in translation, the Hebrew wording is identical.

And Bezalel is filled with “the Spirit of God,” the same Spirit who hovered over the formless and empty world to which God was about to bring order (Gen. 1:2). The presence of the Spirit at the start of Genesis 1 suggests that God was getting ready to breathe his holy presence into the cosmos, much as the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle and the temple after their completion (Exod. 40:34-35; 1 Ki. 8:10-11).

Back to Genesis 1

These multiple echoes between the tabernacle and the creation account of Genesis 1 lead us to reconsider the significance of the six-day framework, with God's rest on the seventh day.

Seven is a number widely associated with worship and temples in the ancient world and also in the Bible. Not only are there references to ancient temple dedication ceremonies that took seven days, but Solomon built the Jerusalem temple in seven years and dedicated it in a seven-day ritual (the Feast of Tabernacles). Indeed, there are multiple uses of sevens not only in Genesis 1, but also in the account of the tabernacle construction and in the account of the dedication of the Jerusalem temple.⁷

The very point of God's “rest” in Genesis 1 (and in ancient Near Eastern creation accounts) is that, having constructed the cosmos as his “house” or temple, the divine King has now taken up residence in the world. God is now sitting on his throne, reigning as Lord of the universe.

So the 6+1 timeframe of the Genesis 1 creation account has nothing to do with scientific calculations of how the universe came into being. And if we persist in reading it as a quasi-scientific account, we will miss the main point – that this world is God's intended dwelling, which he has sanctified with his presence.

But Genesis 1 goes beyond the common ancient Near Eastern picture of the cosmos as a temple. In contrast to the polytheism of Israel's neighbors, this opening account of creation affirms that there is only one God, who is sovereign creator of all.

Not only does Genesis 1 challenge Israel's temptation (and ours too) to trust in false gods, but this creation account portrays each stage of the creative process as "good," the result of God generously calling into being a variety of creatures and blessing both animals and plants with fertility. That God deems this finite, contingent cosmos "very good" (Gen. 1:31) stands in contrast to other ancient accounts that portray creation as the outcome of a violent battle between vengeful deities.

Genesis 1 also emphasizes the dignity and high calling of human beings, to be God's very own *image* in the world (the topic of my next blog post). This is in contrast to creation accounts that portray humans made from clay mixed with the blood of a demon god, destined to be slaves of the high gods and of the empire that controlled religion and temples in the ancient world.

World Picture versus Worldview

The question for us today is: How do we connect the biblical understanding of the world as God's creation to what modern science tells us of a very old and immensely large universe?

Here it is helpful to distinguish the *world picture* (German *Weltbild*) or cosmology or "cosmic geography" (a favorite term of scholars) that the Bible assumes from its normative *worldview* (German *Weltanschauung*), the distinctive and abiding theological vision that God was revealing precisely *through* this ancient world picture. The biblical writers were not *teaching* this ancient world picture (this way of seeing the world was simply the common understanding of ancient Near Eastern cultures); rather, they were using this world picture to communicate a distinctive vision of the *meaning* of this world.

Christians in earlier ages transferred the abiding values of this ancient theological vision from the original picture of a flat Earth with heaven overhead to the medieval conception (learned from the Greeks) of the Earth as a sphere, with seven concentric crystalline spheres around it, in which were embedded the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn (in that order). This theological vision was again transferred to the heliocentric universe of modern times, with the various planets orbiting the sun (and the moon orbiting the Earth).

This Universe as God's Temple

Now that we have come to understand our sun as just one among many stars in an expanding universe of billions of galaxies that have developed over deep time, the question is whether we can see this universe with the eyes of faith as God's good creation, the cosmic temple that he wants to inhabit with us and other creatures.

When the biblical writers spoke of God reigning from heaven (Ps. 11:4, 14:2), this was intended as a symbol of divine *transcendence*, implying that God is far *above* and *beyond* us (after all, we don't have access to heaven). Yet since "heaven and earth" is how the Bible describes creation, God dwelling in heaven is also a symbol of divine *immanence*; God has condescended to inhabit part of the created order.⁸

When Solomon pondered God's further condescension to inhabit the Holy of Holies, he asked in amazement: "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" (1 Ki. 8:27) We, who have a much clearer understanding of just how immense "the heavens" are, can appreciate Solomon's words in a new way. Even a universe *94 billion light years across* cannot contain God! Yet God has condescended not just to dwell in heaven or in the Holy of Holies of the

tabernacle and temple, but to become incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, the Word made flesh (John 1:14), and also to indwell the church, as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16–17, 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21).

While the Earth does not currently experience the fullness of God’s presence (due to human sin), the Bible promises that even this small portion of the cosmic temple will ultimately be filled with the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea (Num. 14:21; Isa. 11:9; Hab. 2:14). When evil has been vanquished and the world becomes the kingdom of God (Rev. 11:15) so that God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:10), then, in the words of the Apostle Paul, God will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28).⁹

Notes & References

1. Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (orig. 1979; multiple editions available). This quote is from the start of chap. 8.
2. or a fuller account of the biblical understanding of the cosmos as a building, see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 77-81.
3. All biblical references are NRSV unless otherwise noted.
4. Other Old Testament texts that refer to the foundation/ founding of the world include Deut. 32:22; Ps. 8:5, 18:7, 18:15, and 104:5; 2 Sam. 22:8 and 22:16; Prov. 8:29; Isa. 24:18, 48:13; Jer. 31:37; Zech. 12:1.
5. For a more detailed analysis of the cosmos as temple, see Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 81-88. Also see Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Mesopotamia and Israel,” in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel*, ed. Richard Clifford (SBL Symposium Series; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2007), 67-90.
6. My thanks to Jon Garvey for alerting me to this work; see “The Cosmos of Cosmas.”
7. For an account of these sevens, see Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 83.
8. This is an important point made by Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 37.
9. For an extended discussion of the biblical expectation that creation will be filled with God’s presence, see J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 163-179.

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