

# Ancient Cosmology Table

**Participants:** Ken Fentress, John Hilber, Char Hilber, J. Richard Middleton (moderator), John Soden, John Walton; Thomas Middlebrook (secretary)

1. Summary: The charitable discussion around the table on Sat. morning lively engaged questions of how to envision the *original* significance of Gen 1 and the related Israelite cosmology and, periodically, how to helpfully disrupt the modern reader's world-picture where its is particularly distinct from its ancient counterpart.
2. Agreement/Consensus:
  - a. The ANE context provides an essential means of illuminating the original significance of Israel's cosmology.
  - b. The manner of writing in the early chapters of Genesis communicates something about the nature of God and the cosmos.
  - c. The relationship between ancient analogies or figures of speech about the cosmos and the ancient conception of its physical realm is *complex*, containing notions of both materiality and functionality. The ancient cosmology includes spiritual beings that frequently have implicit political notions. This complexity extends into the New Testament.
  - d. Ideas which challenge our old models of envisioning the ancient cosmology or of ancient deities are welcomed, at minimum, for their heuristic value. For example, we could consider a horizontal, Tabernacle-based model vs a vertical stacking of the cosmos (heaven, earth, underworld); or an order-based vs object-based cosmos. Likewise, we shouldn't avoid the question of the materiality vs non-materiality of the gods (including how the ancient Israelites thought of YHWH).
  - e. Communicating ancient cosmologies requires creative teaching and preaching. The first objective is to establish the idea of the pervasive "foreignness" of the ancient conception. However, post-modern minds in the pew and students accustomed to multi-cultural issues may have an easier time maintaining interest and creatively imagining the foreignness of the ancient cosmology.
  - f. The Israelite worldview is transferable to any age, even though we necessarily use our cosmology (alt: world-picture) to construct our worldview.
3. On-going Conversation:
  - a. To what extent does a "solid sky" (etc.) reflect the ancient conception of the physical cosmos along a spectrum towards pure analogy?
  - b. To what extent does our modern use of language that reflects a tripartite universe and the metaphorical value of up/down, dark/light, etc. shape us in helpful ways to read the biblical texts concerning cosmology?
  - c. In which specific aspects does the Israelite cosmology differ from her neighbors, aside from the basic notion of polytheism (although: divine council?), e.g. the enduring physicality of the dead, the immanence of God, etc?