



JOHN J. PILCH

a CULTURAL

HANDBOOK

to the BIBLE

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University of Oslo

A Cultural Handbook to the Bible

John J. Pilch

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For my colleagues and friends in:

*The Context Group: A Project on the Bible in Its Socio-Cultural Context;
The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation Task Force at the Catholic
Biblical Association of America; and
The Social Scientific Criticism of the New Testament Section at the Society of
Biblical Literature*

*who have inspired, encouraged, and nurtured my research and publications over
more than four decades*

with heartfelt appreciation and gratitude

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Preface

From 1993 to 2006, I wrote a bimonthly article in *The Bible Today* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press) under the heading “A Window into the Biblical World.” The aim of these articles was to show how insights from Middle Eastern culture drawn from the social sciences (Cultural Anthropology, Middle Eastern Anthropology, Medical Anthropology, and others) helped to situate the Bible in its proper cultural context. For example, the “salt” statements of Jesus recorded in the Gospels (Matt 5:13; Mark 9:49-50; Luke 12:49; 14:34-35) have nothing to do with seasoning or preserving foods. Rather, they reflect the use of salt in the Middle East to facilitate the burning of the common fuel — camel and donkey dung — in the ovens. The articles that appeared from 1993 to 1997 were published in *The Cultural Dictionary of the Bible* (Liturgical Press, 1999). In 2000 this book won an award from the Catholic Press Association and was subsequently translated into Italian (*Il Sapore della Parola*, Ancora, 2001) and Polish (*Słownik Kultury Biblijnej*, Edycja św. Pawła, 2004).

In this sequel to that book, I have collected the articles published in that journal from 1998 to 2006 and arranged them thematically under eight headings. Some articles could probably fit under more than one heading, so the arrangement is somewhat arbitrary. However, this is not a book one would read from beginning to end. It is not a book to be read at one sitting. Most readers will quite likely consult the Table of Contents and select a topic that catches attention at the moment.

A special feature of this book and its predecessor is that each article applies insights from the social sciences to the interpretation of biblical passages, topics, and themes. The references listed under “Further Reading” are primarily the social-science resources consulted and secondarily biblical resources that have applied these social-science insights to select segments or books of the Bible. For example, the Further Resources for the part on the Family lists the anthropological resources I consulted in writing each of those chapters (e.g., Broude, Francoeur, and Shapiro) and biblical resources which have applied such insights in interpreting their topics (e.g., Campbell, Malina, and Malina and Rohrbaugh). With this book, readers should be able to become acquainted with social-scientific sources and methods, and also be able to see how biblical scholars utilizing these resources are able to produce fresh, Middle Eastern, culturally plausible interpretations of that Middle Eastern document known as the Bible.

The challenge that remains, then, is how to translate those Middle Eastern understandings to other non-Middle Eastern cultures, situations, and problems. For example, if marriage, adultery, and rape in the Bible do not mean what they mean in Western and other cultures, what can a Bible reader draw from this information? How can a Bible reader bridge the gap between that culture and her or his own? Again, in the Further Readings on Family, I list two very useful resources, books by Augsburg,

and Stewart and Bennett. These two books can serve as basic sources for anyone who wants to address the challenge that the Bible hurls at teachers, preachers, and readers. Perhaps this present book and its predecessor can assist.

For an Index of References to the Roman Lectionary, see my web site: <http://mysite.verizon.net/vzewdxtw/drjohnjpilchwebpage/id67.html>.

Feast of St. Francis of Assisi
October 4, 2011

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Part One

THE COSMOS

In our lifetime, human beings have put various satellites into orbit, become travelers to the moon, and sent exploratory probes deep into outer space. Our knowledge of the universe has expanded dramatically. Yet when contemporary Christians speak about heaven (the sky) and earth and hell, they neglect to notice that these concepts as currently understood carry centuries of outdated intellectual baggage. A close examination of these and related concepts as they appear in the Bible will give readers a fresh appreciation of how our ancestors in the faith understood their cosmos, and what they had in mind when they used these terms.

1. Hell

In the worldview of traditional “holy men” and “holy women” (often called shamans by anthropologists) the Tree of Life is a key way of understanding the cosmos. (This concept appears to have nothing in common with the mythological biblical Tree of Life in Gen. 2:4b–3:24, which is a source of life.) In traditional shamanic reflection, the universe is like a gigantic, cosmic tree. The analogy is vegetative rather than animal. The change of seasons and the change of skylscapes and landscapes are rather like the cycle of a tree than like the behavior of animals. From the flat-earth perspective of these traditional holy men and women, the universe is like a unique tree, the Tree of Life, that stands at the very center of the universe. Its roots contain the lower world, which is the habitat of power animals and the abode of dead souls and/or helper spirits. Its trunk contains the middle world, the spiritual counterpart or “parallel” to the world in which human beings live. This middle world contains the spirit or essence of all things. It is the “real” world behind the visible world. It is sometimes called “alternate reality,” though that more properly describes the upper world. The branches of the Tree of Life contain everything that exists inside and outside our galaxy. Shamans, or holy men and/or women in each culture, take spirit journeys in trance in order to visit these three worlds (Pilch 2011: 48-60). Ezekiel (e.g., Ezek. 3:14-15) and John (e.g., Rev. 4:1-2) are two holy men in the biblical tradition who visited one or another of these worlds (Malina and Pilch 2000).

Anthropologists are quick to point out that the lower world is not hell. They claim that hell is a designation that first occurred in the agricultural religions such as Christianity (Goodman and Nauwald 2003: 68). While this claim is basically correct, it must be nuanced. This is all the more necessary if that notion of hell includes a presumed fire. While the idea of hell is most common [especially] in the popular understanding of Christianity, there is no Hebrew or Greek word in the Bible that can

be appropriately translated “hell” in English. Moreover, much of the theological freight that “hell” carries in the modern popular understanding emerged in the period of time following the biblical period.

Hell

The English word “hell” derives from the Middle English word *helle* (related to the Old German *Hölle* and Old English *hel*, which is associated with the underworld goddess, *Hel*). It is the base of the verb *helan*, which means “to hide,” “cover,” or “conceal.” Hell is the word most commonly used to translate the Hebrew word *Sheol*, the Latin and English word *gehenna* (from the Hebrew *Ge-Hinnom*), and the Greek word *hades* in the Bible. Insofar as the English word reflects the meanings “hide,” “cover,” or “conceal,” it is appropriate since in the Bible this place (“hell”) was located somewhere beneath the earth (e.g., Job 14:13 [*Sheol*]; Isa. 14:9 [*Sheol*]; Matt. 11:23 [*Hades*]). The element of fire or flame that appears in *gehenna* (Matt. 5:22; 18:9) or *hades* (Luke 16:23-24) is a subsequent development. However, this development was neither systematic nor clearly demarcated. In general, the Hebrew and Greek terms identify the abode of the dead, and in this regard the terms coincide with the shamanic understanding of the lower world.

Sheol

This Hebrew word is the most common name for the abode of the dead (65 times in the Hebrew Bible). It is sometimes translated as the “netherworld,” but it was not primarily a place of punishment. Though its etymology is debated, the word probably derives from the Hebrew verb “to ask” (*šā'al*, the same root as for the name of Saul). This etymology is culturally plausible because the ancients sought advice from the dead. When faced with an attack from the Philistines (1 Sam. 28), King Saul first sought advice from God, who, however, did not respond through the customary channels: dreams, the Urim, or prophets (1 Sam. 28:6). Then Saul consulted a medium who brought up the deceased Samuel.

Anthropologists confirm what the biblical record reports: People who seek to learn the will of God, whose abode is in alternate reality (specifically the upper world of the shamanic Tree of Life), will induce or hope to experience an alternate state of consciousness or awareness (e.g., dreams, visions, and the like). God routinely communicates with human beings in alternate states of awareness (1 Sam. 3:1ff.). They may also seek the assistance of a prophet (holy man, or “shaman”), who by definition has easy access to the realm of God and can mediate favors and information from that realm.

After the death of Samuel, a prophet who had this kind of access to the realm of God, Saul, banished all mediums and fortune-tellers from the country (1 Sam. 28:3). In the absence of a holy man/prophet, people might be tempted to seek out these alternate — but forbidden (see Deut. 18:9-11) — sources of recourse to alternate reality in which answers to questions and solutions to problems are often discovered by those who visit there. When Saul failed to obtain answers to his questions from the usual approved sources mentioned above, he turned to one of the alternative sources

banned by Deuteronomy and banished by him(!): a medium at Endor (1 Sam. 28:7).

Saul requests of the medium: “Divine for me by a spirit, and bring up for me whoever I shall name to you” (1 Sam. 28:8; Scurlock 2009). The Hebrew phrase translated “medium” would be literally translated “a woman who is mistress of ghosts,” in other words, a person who has access to and is capable of interacting with the spirit world. Spirits include those who abide in the lower world in the Tree of Life. Some scholars doubt that this is the ancient conception, yet anthropologists would argue in favor of its plausibility. They would identify this “ghost” as a “familiar” spirit or a helper spirit even in antiquity. At the very least, the medium that Saul consulted was successfully able to contact the lower world where the dead and familiar helper spirits abide. Samuel rises from this lower world and communicates to Saul God’s will that Saul and Israel should fall into the hands of the Philistines.

As already noted, the netherworld is not primarily a place of punishment; it is simply the abode of the dead. The place is dark (Job 17:13); silence pervades (Ps. 31:17). Those who dwelt in this place were called “shades” (*rēpā’im*; Isa. 14:9). In Greek thought, the word “shades” describes ghosts or spirits, but in Israel the word describes beings who are but a “shadow” of their former selves. In other words, they no longer have the fullness of being experienced in life on earth. Most are even unable to remember God (Ps. 6:5), an unimaginable and unbearable experience for an Israelite. Though the characteristics of existence in Sheol are peculiar to Israel, the basic concept as the dwelling place of the dead remains similar to the shamanic concept as already noted.

In the period of Second Temple Judaism (520 B.C.E. to 70 C.E.), however, the understanding of Sheol underwent some development. Though initially it was considered the final and permanent place for the dead (Isa. 38:10) in a “shadowy” or hollow existence, in this period Sheol was conceived of as an intermediate place to be followed at some point by reward or punishment. Moreover, the Hellenistic concept of the immortality of the soul began to influence Israelite thinking about existence after death (Wis. 8:19-20; 9:15; 15:8). Some now began to believe that the souls of the righteous went immediately to God at death and would receive new bodies at the resurrection, while the wicked remained in Sheol (Dan. 12:2; Josephus, *Jewish War* 3.374-75).

In the Greek Bible, Sheol is usually translated as “Hades,” but it doesn’t relate to the Hades of Greek mythology. In the New Testament period (and a little earlier) Sheol/Hades came to be understood as a place of punishment for sin (Matt. 11:23; Luke 16:19-31).

A synonym for Sheol, namely, “the pit” (Hebrew *bôr*; e.g., Ps. 28:1), also appears sixty-five times in the Old Testament. Often it is in parallelism with Sheol: “O LORD, you brought me up from the netherworld (*šē’ôl*); you preserved me from among those going down into the pit (*bôr*)” (Ps. 30:4). The image of humans who were created from dust (Gen. 2:7) returning to dust (Gen. 3:19) at death created the image of the abode of the dead as a dusty, dirty place (Job 7:21).

Gehenna

This Greek name derives from the Aramaic *Ge-Hinnam*, which in turn relates to the

Hebrew *Ge-Hinnom*, the Valley of Hinnom, or, perhaps more accurately. the Valley of the Son of Hinnom. At one time, the family of Ben Hinnom owned most of the land. It is located south and southwest of Jerusalem. Ancient Canaanites were said to have practiced rituals of child sacrifice here, and some Israelites (e.g., Ahaz [2 Chron. 28:3; 2 Kings 16:3]) continued that kind of sacrifice to Canaanite gods. Jeremiah (626-587 B.C.E.) denounced the practices, and King Josiah's reform sought to end them (640-609 B.C.E.). According to some archaeologists, in later times (certainly in the New Testament period) the place was likely a crematorium for unclean animals and criminals as well as a dump where temple refuse was burned. (The burial ground Hakeldama [Acts 1:19] associated with the death of Judas [Matt. 27:3-10; Acts 1:16-19] is located in the eastern part of the Valley of Hinnom.) Though no archaeological evidence for this kind of garbage dump has been found for the first century, the association of "fire" with Gehenna in Matthew (5:22; 18:9) suggests that this was indeed the case.

It was especially in the writings of later Second Temple Judaism (620 B.C.E.–70 C.E.) that the punishments of the wicked included smoldering fire. "Then I [Enoch] looked and turned to another face of the earth and saw there a valley, deep and burning with fire. And they were bringing kings and potentates and were throwing them into this deep valley" (1 *Enoch* 54:1-2). Later rabbinic tradition in the Babylonian Talmud said that an entrance to the underworld was located in the Valley of Hinnom (*Erubin* 19a). In the New Testament, Gehenna was considered to have been prepared for Satan and his retinue (Matt. 25:41). In addition, here the soul reunited with its reconstituted body at the resurrection will be destroyed by eternal fire (Matt. 10:28; Mark 9:42-48).

Doctrine

Many of these biblical ideas were combined and amplified in doctrinal debates and statements in postbiblical times. The Athanasian Creed (end of fifth century C.E.) described hell as a place of eternal punishment for sin. The Fourth Lateran Council (1214) said that sinners who go to hell will be punished "with different punishments." The Second Vatican Council did not mention hell at all. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) treats hell at some length, but in general concludes: "The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in which alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs." This is similar to the statement by the Church of England, which a few years earlier declared that there was no physical fire in hell. Thus readers of the biblical evidence through the centuries in general appear to have distinguished carefully between the actual punishment sinners experience in some place and the culturally conditioned descriptions of the nature of that punishment reported in some parts of the Bible.

Conclusion

The word "shaman" describes a holy person (holy man/holy woman) peculiar to Siberia, where they were first identified and studied. All cultures recognize holy persons (men and women) but name and describe them differently. By the same token, while the belief systems of cultures are in some ways similar, they are also different in

specific features. The Tree of Life conception peculiar to Siberian shamans is not the same as the Tree of Life in biblical literature and the culture that produced it. Nevertheless, the conception of places such as a lower, middle, and upper world associated with the Siberian tree also exist in Israelite culture. In general, the understanding of the lower world as the abode of the dead with helper spirits and power animals is similar in Siberian shamanism and in the biblical world (except perhaps for power animals, though see Job 12:7). The Israelite interpretation of the lower world as Sheol, Gehenna, or Hades, however, differentiates it from the Siberian shamanic concept. Further, these three biblical concepts evolved in meaning and function over millennia to the present. The contemporary Catholic understanding of hell as “eternal separation from God” for those dead who merited this punishment is clearly not the Siberian shamanic understanding of the lower world. Similarities and differences always help sharpen our understanding of familiar realities.

2. Heaven

Jesus taught his disciples to pray in this way: “Our Father who art in heaven . . .” (Matt. 6:9). The phrase “Father in heaven” was Jesus’ customary way of referring to God (Matt. 5:16, 45; 6:1, 9; 7:11, 21; 10:32, 33; 12:50; 16:17; 18:10, 14, 19). The Greek word translated “heaven” literally means “sky.” To understand what the biblical authors have in mind, perhaps it might be a good idea to drop the word “heaven” from Bible translations entirely. The biblical reference is always and only to the sky. The Greek plural form in this phrase (Matt. 6:9: *en tois ouranois*) was probably influenced by the Hebrew *šāmayim* (or Aramaic *šēmayin*), which the Greek translates. However, the Greek word occurs most often in the singular. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “heaven” first appeared in eleventh-century translations of the Bible (Gen. 1:1), but its ulterior etymology is unknown. Scholars note that heaven is understood differently in the Bible and in theology. In the Bible, heaven refers either to the physical sky above the earth or to the realm of God. In theology, heaven usually refers to the eternal destiny and destination of believers, the ultimate goal of human existence.

Heaven: The Physical Sky

The first creation story in Genesis reports how God created the world on the foundation of a watery abyss. God made a dome (or “firmament”) to separate these waters into a mass above the dome (Ps. 148:4) and a mass beneath the dome (Gen. 1:6-7). God named this dome “the sky” (*šāmayim*, Gen. 1:8). It is as firm and solid as the earth (Job 37:18), yet the psalmist says that God stretched out the heavens “like a tent” (Ps. 104:2; see also Isa. 40:22). This sky is supported by pillars (Job 26:11).

A countless number of stars (Gen. 15:5) were affixed in the sky (Gen. 1:14-18), but the sun and moon coursed across it. There were also windows in the sky (Isa. 24:18) through which God could shower the earth with gifts or punishments: rain (Gen. 7:11; Luke 4:25; Acts 14:17), manna (Exod. 16:14; Ps. 78:24), even the wind or spirit (Num. 11:31; Job 26:13; Ps. 135:7; Jer. 10:13; Matt. 3:16; Acts 2:2; 1 Pet. 1:12).

The sky serves as a vehicle for audio-visual communication from God. “He works signs and wonders in the sky and on earth” (Dan. 6:27). The rainbow is one such sign (Gen. 9:12-17). Thunder, the “voice of God,” is another such sign (Exod. 20:22; Jer. 25:30). Meteorological phenomena announce God’s intentions to those who know how to interpret them (Luke 21:11, 25).

Perhaps the most important and often overlooked feature of the sky is the opening that allows one to travel from the earth to the other side of the sky, where God abides. According to the ancient Israelite tradition, God created an open sky for Adam “so that he might look upon the angels singing the triumphal song. And the light, which is never darkened, was perpetually in paradise” (2 *Enoch* 31:2-3). Of course, after the disobedience of the first creatures that opening to the other side of the sky was closed. In fact, Israelite tradition in general believed that this hole or opening was permanently closed. Yet God could open it as desired. Isaiah begs God to do just that: “O that thou wouldst rend the heavens [plural: *šāmayim*] and come down” (Hebrew Isa. 63:19; RSV Isa. 64:1).

Where is this opening located? Many ancient peoples believed that the opening was located directly above the earthly residence of their god. For ancient Israel, the opening was directly above God’s temple in Jerusalem. This explains why Jesus could not ascend to God in Galilee after his resurrection, since the opening was not located there.

The tradition mentions people who had access to the realm of God and traveled there. These were mainly holy people like Enoch (see Gen. 5:21-23 and the books of Enoch dating from the third century B.C.E. to the third century C.E.) but especially prophets like Elijah (2 Kings 2:11), Daniel (Dan. 7–12), Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:1), and John (Rev. 4:1-2). The sky opened at Jesus’ baptism (Mark 1:10//). Just before he died, Stephen looked through the opening over Jerusalem and saw Jesus standing before God (Acts 7:56). Though he was in Joppa at the time, Peter had a vision of food descending through the same opening in the sky (Acts 10:11). These journeys to the sky and visions of the realm of God occurred in what contemporary cognitive neuroscience has identified as an alternate state of consciousness, or a level of human awareness that is different from ordinary “waking” consciousness. This is how God has physically equipped human beings to communicate with the deity and the realm of God (1 Sam. 3:1).

Heaven: The Realm of God

The postexilic and intertestamental literature manifests growing curiosity about heaven as the abode of God and God’s attendant beings. The prophet Micaiah reports this experience: “I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven [Hebrew *šāmayim*, thus literally the sky] standing beside him on his right hand and on his left” (1 Kings 22:19). The throne is the symbol of royal authority in a monarchic society. It symbolizes the monarch’s ability to effectively control the behavior of the kingdom’s subjects and to extract loyalty from these subjects. In ancient sky lore, a throne constellation was very well known. The famous Farnese sphere depicting the chief constellations of the second century B.C.E. places the throne of Caesar near the North Pole over Leo and Cancer (Malina 1995: 90-93). Another familiar throne in the

sky is that of Cassiopeia. The constellation Virgo-Isis is the throne in Hellenistic Egyptian sky lore. In the Israelite tradition, Isaiah wrote: “Thus says the Lord: The sky is my throne” (Isa. 66:1 LXX). And Matthew’s Jesus echoes this belief: “But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven [the sky], for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool . . .” (Matt. 5:34-35; see also Matt. 23:22).

Notice also that God does not live alone. Micaiah saw the “host of heaven.” Originally this phrase referred to the stars (Gen. 2:1; Deut. 4:19), but eventually it extended to beings in the realm of God (1 Kings 22:19; Luke 2:13). In the book of Revelation (4:4), John saw twenty-four elders seated on thrones around God’s throne. These are celestial beings, other inhabitants of the realm of God (Malina 1995: 93-97). In astrological lore, they are called decans, truly significant astronomic beings of antiquity, astral deities. In Revelation, they form a core group around God’s throne similar to the scene witnessed by Micaiah. Here these beings regularly worship God and sing celestial songs of praise to God (Rev. 4:10; 5:11, 14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4). They know God’s cosmic plan and share it with prophets (Rev. 5:5; 7:13). They are also in the entourage of the cosmic Lamb (Rev. 5:6) and pay personal homage as well as the homage of other beings to the Lamb (Rev. 5:8). There is no doubt that these decanal thrones belong to the “thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities” over which Jesus Messiah has preeminence in Colossians 1:16.

Still other celestial beings live in the realm of God. Raphael is one of seven holy angels (or sky servants) who stand in the presence of God (Tob. 12:15). According to Daniel, “a thousand thousand served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him . . .” (Dan. 7:10). Even Satan lived in heaven as an associate (Job 1:6; 2:1) before he was cast out (Luke 10:18; Rev. 12:7ff.).

Multiple Heavens

References to “heaven and the heaven of heavens” or “the highest heaven” (Deut. 10:14; 1 Kings 8:27; Neh. 9:6; 3 Macc. 2:15; etc.) led some to speculate about the actual number of heavens. The phrase “heaven and the heaven of heavens” prompted the conclusion that there were at least two and maybe three heavens. God lived in the highest one. This may be the third heaven to which Paul made a sky journey (2 Cor. 12:2). Greek Baruch (11) knows of five heavens. The *Testament of Levi* 2ff. speaks of seven heavens, which became a common belief after the second half of the second century C.E. The number seven may be due to Babylonian influence. In that tradition the seven heavens are layered atop each other, and one must travel through all of them to reach the realm of Anu. Finally, *Slavonic Enoch* (22) recognizes ten heavens (Pilch 2011: 73-88).

In addition, Paul considers heaven synonymous with Paradise (2 Cor. 12:3), a Greek word used in the Septuagint for the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:8-10). Jesus’ use of this word in his promise to the criminal: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43) reflects the association of Eden with the abode of the righteous dead already evident in *1–2 Enoch* and *4 Esdras*. In the New Testament, heaven is clearly the destiny and destination of righteous believers (2 Cor. 5:1; Eph. 2:6; Phil. 3:20; Rev. 11:12). Yet heaven in these instances is less a place than a presence or, more accurately, being with God for all eternity. Heaven, especially in

Matthew, is a metonym for God. Anything that comes from heaven comes from God (Dan. 4:23; John 3:27). Anything that is “in heaven” is “with God.” Thus when Jesus says to Peter: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:18; see also 18:18), the phrase “the kingdom of heaven” is Matthew’s version of the phrase in the other Synoptics, “the kingdom of God.” Whatever Peter decided will be affirmed by God.

Conclusion

It is very useful to keep in mind the differences between the Bible and theology in their use of the word “heaven.” Readers of the Bible can’t go wrong by substituting “sky” all the time, whether referring to the physical sky or to the divine realm, the abode of God and the spirits. When contemporary theologians speak of heaven, they usually are referring to a human state or condition of bliss and happiness which is rooted in the vision and enjoyment of God, technically called the “beatific vision.” The fact that Jesus is there with his body (as is his mother Mary) and human beings are also present corporeally does not allow the denial of heaven as a place. That, however, is not the primary understanding. As hell in the Bible is the abode of the dead, so heaven is the abode of God and of righteous believers.

3. Earth

This reflection upon earth in the Bible completes the consideration of the three segments of the mythological Tree of Life, a shamanic concept for understanding the cosmos. Having examined the roots (the lower world where the dead abide) and the branches (the upper world or sky where God and the righteous dead abide), we now focus on the trunk, which contains the middle world, the spiritual counterpart or “parallel” to the world in which human beings live. This middle world contains the spirit or essence of all things. It is the “real” world behind the visible world. However, human beings in general believe that the world they inhabit, the earth, is the “real” world. Can these conflicting concepts be reconciled? How are we to understand the trunk of the Tree of Life?

The Tree of Life

Anthropologists have gathered extensive information about the mythological Tree of Life or Tree of the World (the *axis mundi*) from cultures around the world (Goodman 1990: 200-204; Gore 2009: 107-9). In the Norse tradition, it is an ash tree, Yggdrasil. Its roots and branches hold the cosmos together. For the Greeks, it was a fig or oak tree. Many traditions believe it to be the yew tree. In Siberia it is birch, and according to the Siberian Yakut, the tree grows at the navel or vulva of the Earth Mother (see Ps. 139:15). Here the moon does not wane nor the sun set. Summer is everlasting. The cuckoo calls forever.

A Hungarian myth reports that only holy men and women (“shamans”) can reach

this tree. “But only that person can find this tree, only he can discover where it is, who is born with teeth, and who for nine years has taken only milk for nourishment. That kind of person is a *táltos* [Hungarian shaman, or holy person]. This marvelously tall tree grows in a special place so that only such a man of knowledge can get to it. Other people merely hear of it, but can never see it” (Diószegi 1958: 270-71). Since only specially sensitive persons can reach this tree, they alone can see and work in that world which is parallel to the one in which human beings live. Is there evidence for this in the Bible? Let us examine the understandings of the earth in the Bible and explore how they relate to the trunk of the Tree of Life or Tree of the World.

The Earth

Two Hebrew words in the Bible are translated “earth”: *’ădāmâ* and *’ereṣ* (Greek *gē*). The word *’ădāmâ* can mean soil (Gen. 2:5), land or country (Gen. 47:19), or the whole earth (Gen. 12:3). In general, however, it refers to the fertile regions in which human beings can lead a sedentary life tilling the soil or pasturing their flocks. The *’ădāmâ* is only part of the whole earth (*’ereṣ*) that also includes the wilderness where no human beings dwell (Job 38:26; Isa. 6:11; Jer. 2:6). The word *’eres* is an antithesis to the physical sky (most often translated in the Bible by the misleading word “heaven”). The phrase “heaven [sky] and earth” that appears forty times in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible reflects a belief in a bipartite division of the universe (e.g., Gen. 14:19; Matt. 11:25, etc.). There are also indications of belief in a tripartite division of the universe: “You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exod. 20:4; Ps. 146:6; Acts 4:24). Yet another tripartite view includes sky, earth, and netherworld: “and no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it” (Rev. 5:3; see also Phil. 2:10). The Bible clearly indicates that the Israelites did not have a consistent view of the cosmos, nor did they attempt like the Babylonian sages to construct one. Thus the contradiction of placing Sheol, a cosmic ocean, or an abyss under the earth (see Jonah 2:2-6).

What remains consistent about the earth, however, is that it is perceived as a flat disk (Isa. 40:22; Job 26:10) set quite firmly upon solid foundations (Ps. 18:15; Prov. 8:29) or on pillars (1 Sam. 2:8; Job 9:6). An older view of the earth considered it to be like a square piece of cloth suspended by its four corners (Job 38:12-13; Isa. 11:12; Rev. 7:1). Janzen sums it up thus: Earth is “the habitation of human beings, viewed physically as land, soil, or ground, geographically as a region, politically as a state, territory, or country, cosmically as the opposite of heaven, and symbolically as the entirety of material existence.”

The “Real” World

Janzen’s description requires some refinement. States and countries did not exist in antiquity, and earth is properly the opposite of sky rather than heaven. But his claim that the earth symbolically represents “the entirety of material existence” is correct. Anthropologists call this consensual reality. This is the world in which human beings live and which they agree is “real.” Alternate reality is parallel to consensual reality.

This is what the trunk of the Tree of Life designed by holy men and women represents.

One clue to the “real” world behind the visible world (consensual reality) is the concept of the navel or center of the earth (Heb. *ṭabbûr*, highest part or center). This concept, so common in the ancient world, is mentioned only once in the Bible. In the Gog and Magog oracles, Ezekiel announces that the foe from the north (Ezek. 38:15) will attack those “who dwell at the center [or navel] of the earth” (Ezek. 38:12). These are God’s people in Jerusalem, for earlier God announced: “This is Jerusalem; I have set her in the center of the nations, with countries round about her” (Ezek. 5:5).

In antiquity, each culture built the earthly residence (temple) of its deity under the deity’s residence in the sky (alternate reality). There was a hole in the sky over this place on earth through which people could have access to the divine realm (the branches of the Tree of Life). Jesus ascended to the Father from the Mount of Olives after his resurrection, because the hole in the sky was in the environs of Jerusalem (over the temple) and not in Galilee.

Earlier in the Israelite tradition it seems that Bethel was considered the navel. This is where Jacob saw angels of God ascending and descending on a ladder that reached to the sky. “This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven [or hole in the sky],” exclaimed Jacob at the end of his sleep (an alternate state of consciousness, Gen. 28:17).

Presumably the deity could visit the earth through the same hole. In another early Israelite tradition (see Gen. 11:5), the navel of the earth was Babylon (about 50 miles south of Baghdad), the center of Hammurabi’s empire. Those who built a tower to the sky here knew where the hole was because God came to visit Babylon, descending through that hole in the sky. Earlier in Babylonian tradition, Nippur (about 100 miles south of Baghdad) was the navel of the earth. It was in this vicinity that Ezekiel experienced God in alternate states of consciousness and communicated God’s will as he learned it in visions to fellow exiles. Thus, holy men and women like the patriarch Jacob and the prophet Ezekiel can find the Tree of Life and gain insight from the middle world on that Tree, the “real” world, to apply to life on earth where human beings live.

On Earth as in Heaven

Some ancient cultures thought that life on earth shared in and should imitate life in the sky. This is not exactly the intent of Jesus’ prayer: “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). The point is that God is Lord or Master of the entire cosmos (Josh. 3:13; Ps. 97:5; Mic. 4:13; Zech. 4:14). “Heaven [the sky] is my throne, and the earth is my footstool” (Isa. 66:1). Life on earth is best lived in accord with God’s will. The challenge for the inhabitants of the earth is to learn that will and then fulfill it. Learning God’s will is possible in the middle world of the Tree of Life, the parallel to the world human beings inhabit.

In the story of the healing of the paralytic (Matt. 9:1-8), Jesus at first announces that God has forgiven his sins. That is the force of the passive voice “are forgiven.” God in the divine realm is the agent. In the ensuing discussion with his opponents, Jesus says, “But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . .” (Matt. 9:6). The power (or authority) to forgive sins is available in

alternate reality, can be acquired there, and can be brought to consensual reality. As a holy man (Mark 1:24), Jesus had access to alternate reality and could broker favors from there to consensual reality quite in line with holy men and women in all cultures.

Further, Jesus the holy man empowers Peter (Matt. 16:19) and the disciples (18:18) with authority to make decisions on earth that will be upheld in the divine realm. This is something new and extraordinary in the biblical record. Though it is not explicitly stated, it is quite likely implied that these leaders will make an effort to learn the real nature of reality by visits to the middle world and also to the divine realm to learn God's will and designs for fulfilling life on earth.

Conclusion

Useful as the shamanic Tree of Life model has been for appreciating the Bible's perspective on the cosmos, the Israelite tradition also expected a new earth and new sky (see Isa. 65:17-20; 66:22; Rev. 21:1, 4). In contrast to contemporary belief in evolution, the ancients believed in devolution (Malina and Pilch 2006: 352-53). Pessimistic as this may sound, the biblical tradition contained a divine promise of a renovated world and a transformed cosmos. There will be no sea (= chaos) in this new world or cosmos. It will have a new Jerusalem, but no temple. God will be the Temple. There will be no sun or moon since God and the Lamb will illumine the city. John explicitly states that he learned this information in altered states of consciousness (Rev. 1:10). He took sky journeys to the Throne (Rev. 4:2) and elsewhere (Rev. 17:3; 21:10). Perhaps he also gained some insight from visits to the middle world of the Tree of Life, the "real" earth.

4. Imaginary Mountains in Matthew

The evangelist Matthew deliberately highlighted mountains in his account of the career of Jesus. Though sometimes he names the mountain (e.g., Mount of Olives, Matt. 24:3), most often he doesn't (e.g., a mountain in Galilee, Matt. 28:16). In general, scholars agree that Matthew's mountain references intend to associate Jesus with Moses, the exodus, or other elements in the Israelite tradition. These familiar literary and theological interpretations have been modified and enriched by culturally sensitive interpretations. Professors K. C. Hanson (1995: 147-70) and Philip F. Esler (1995: 171-77) conducted a ritual analysis of the events that took place on the unnamed mountains in Matthew. A ritual is a social procedure by which persons are transformed from one social situation to another. Hanson and Esler concluded that in these narratives, Matthew proposed rituals which his community of believers and perhaps subsequent communities might imitate and thereby seek to achieve transformation. A review of these narratives with additional cultural background would seem to confirm their conclusion

Mountains in Palestine

There are two major mountain chains in ancient Palestine. West of the Jordan River lie