GOD OF HEAVEN AND SHEOL:
THE “UNEARTHING” OF CREATION

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Abstract: In this contribution I argue that אֶרֶץ in Gen 1:1 must mean “the underworld.” After surveying evidence for rendering אֶרֶץ as “underworld” elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, and examining cognate evidence from Mesopotamia and Ugarit, I contend that, as a merism, reading הַשִּׁיָּם and אֶרֶץ as “the heavens and the underworld” here makes better sense in terms of Israelite cosmology. I then illustrate how attention to the cosmological merism improves our understanding of the biblical creation and of several other passages beyond Genesis. Afterwards, I examine some historical factors that precluded later generations from understanding אֶרֶץ in Gen 1:1 as the “underworld.” The article concludes with an excursus on Enuma Elish.

Gen 1:1–2

1. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
2. And the earth was void-and-waste, and darkness was over the face of the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.

These two majestic verses are arguably the most famous in Scripture. They bring us into a remote world, informed by an omniscient narrator inspired with secret knowledge of the origins of the cosmos. Of course, one reason for their renown is that they open both the Hebrew and Christian canonical Bibles, and thus, they have been engrained in Western religious tradition for two millennia. Yet, I submit that it is precisely their status as a traditional fixture that has made them impervious to interpretive change, despite a wealth of comparative evidence that shows that אֶרֶץ, cannot mean “the earth,” but rather “the underworld.”

I divide my presentation of the evidence into five sections. In the first, I survey cases in which אֶרֶץ means “underworld” elsewhere in the Bible. In the second, I offer cognate data from Mesopotamia and Ugarit.¹ In the

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third, I examine the use and function of merisms and illustrate why reading “heaven and underworld” in Gen 1:1 makes better sense in terms of Israelite cosmology. In the fourth section, I discuss how attention to the cosmological merism improves our understanding of the biblical creation and several passages beyond Genesis. In the fifth, I discuss some historical factors that precluded later generations from understanding the “earth” in Gen 1:1 as the “underworld.” As I intend to show, the interpretation “heaven and earth” tells us more about the cosmological beliefs of the early (and perhaps modern) translators than the Israelites. At the end of this study, I offer an excursus on Enuma Elish.

1. אֶרֶץ AS UNDERWORLD IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

From the onset, I should like to make it clear that אֶרֶץ does, in fact, usually mean “earth, land,” that is, the ground upon which one walks that extends horizontally in all directions from the observer to the horizon. Nevertheless, it long has been recognized that the word can serve as a synonym for שְׁאוֹל Sheol, the dark, cold place beneath the earth in which one continued an animated, albeit dreary, existence after death. It is this place that Job has in mind when he laments: “Before I go to the place of no return, to the land (אֶרֶץ) of gloom and shadow-of-death (וֶת צַלְמָה)” (Job 10:21). The אֶרֶץ ‘underworld’ also swallows Yahweh’s enemies in Exod 15:12. When Saul has the necromancer of Endor summon Saul from the dead, she claims to see preternatural beings coming up from the “underworld” (ארץ) (1 Sam 28:13). Isaiah pronounces a measure-for-measure curse upon necromancers that ironically portrays them as the wandering dead:

Distressed and hungry, they will roam through it (i.e., the underworld). When they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, they will curse their king and their God. Then, they will gaze at an underworld (ארץ) and see only distress and darkness and oppressive gloom, and be thrust into blackness (Isa 8:21–22).

Nevertheless, the cosmologies that emerged in Egypt are very different and not entirely applicable to this comparative study.

Isaiah’s famous words to the king of Babylon describe him as having fallen from heaven נָאֲמָן ‘to the underworld’ (Isa 14:12). Indeed, in accordance with lex talionis, he tells us that for desiring to ascend to the heavens and place his throne above God’s stars, God will cast him into Sheol (שְׁאָוֵל) (Isa 14:13–15). He later prophesies that “The underworld הָאָרֶץ will disclose its blood, and it will no longer conceal its slain” (Isa 26:21). Isaiah elsewhere refers to “all those who dwell on the land (דָּרֶךְ), and those who dwell in the underworld (אָרֶץ)’ (Isa 18:3). 3 Jeremiah refers to the dead as יָדְרוֹר בִּנְאָרִים ‘those who depart into the earth’ (Jer 17:13), and Jonah describes his near death experience as an entrance to the underworld: “At the mountain’s edges I descended to the underworld הָאָרֶץ) (Jonah 2:7). The Psalmist also hopes for a time when: “All who sleep in the underworld (אָרֶץ) will eat and bow down before him [God], all who descend to the dust will crouch down, and everyone whose soul has not lived” (Ps 22:30). One could add more examples, but this should suffice to demonstrate that אֶרֶץ can mean “underworld” in the Bible.

2. EARTH AS UNDERWORLD IN MESOPOTAMIA AND UGARIT

Mesopotamian texts similarly employ the Akkadian cognate term erṣetu for both “earth” and “underworld” (Sumerian kur or ki). 7 However, most occurrences of erṣetu refer to the underworld. 8 As Wayne Horowitz observes, “unambiguous examples of erṣetu as a name for the earth’s surface are more difficult to identify.” Thus, the opening verses of the Descent of Ishtar inform us: ana kur.nu.gi.4.a (= erṣet lā tāri) ana qaqqari [lā tāri] Ištār mārat 4Sīn uzunša iškun ‘To Kurnugî (i.e., land of no return), to the territory of n[o return], Ishtar, the daughter of Sīn, set her attention’...
This “land,” we are told, is a lightless place where the dead “eat clay and drink muddy water” (line 33). This is a location in which one finds ghosts and demons. Thus, a curse found in the epilogue of The Code of Hammurapi reads: šapliš ina ėrṣetim ēṭemmašu mē liššašmi ‘below in the underworld may his ghost thirst for water’ (43:38). The sufferer in Ludlul bēl nemēqi also complains (II 52): ištā irat ėrṣetim (KI-tim) išīša diʾu ‘the diʾu-demon blew forth from the depth of the underworld’. It is also from the ėrṣetu ‘underworld’ that Enkidu’s spirit was summoned after he died (Epic of Gilgamesh XII 83). One hemerology also proclaims Shamas to be “judge of heaven and the underworld” (dut[u di.kud an-e ki-ti at-ta-ma]). An epithet that characterizes his role as adjudicator among the dead.

The Ugaritic cognate arṣ similarly can be used for “earth” and “underworld,” and cases of the latter are fairly clear. The abode of the god Mot ‘Death’ is naturally called arṣ, which means “land” from his perspective, and “underworld” for the other figures in the narrative (CAT 1.5 ii 16; 1.6 ii 19). As Mot also tells Baal: “go down into the house of the underworld (arṣ), be numbered among those who descend into the underworld (arṣ)” (CAT 1.5 v 15–16). When messengers discover that Baal is dead they tell El: “We came upon Baal fallen to the underworld (arṣ)” (CAT 1.5 vi 8–9). They then call him zbl bʾl arṣ ‘Prince, Lord (lit. Baal) of the underworld’ (CAT 1.5 vi 10).


11. See also l. 85: Ištār ana ėrṣetī ārid ul iīla ‘Išhtar has descended to the underworld, and she has not come up’.


15. About the appearance of this expression in CAT 1.3 i 3–4, M. S. Smith and W. Pitard, The Ugaritic Baal Cycle. Vol. 2. Introduction with Text, Translation, and Commentary of KTU/CAT 1.3–1.4 (VTSup 114; Leiden: Brill, 2009), p. 105, remark: “This specific epithet may signify that now that Baal has defeated Yamm, Baal has become lord of the earth.” However, since Mot eventually recognizes Baal’s kingship (CAT 1.6 vi 31–35), I suggest that the title also foreshadows his kingship.
rites and declares \textit{ard barṣ} ‘I shall descend into the underworld’ (\textit{CAT} 1.5 vi 26).\footnote{Compare the words of Jacob כִּי־אֵרֵדָאֶל־בְּנִיָאָבֵלָשְׁאֹל ה ‘Verily I shall descend to Sheol mourning for my son’ (Gen 37:35).} Anat then sets out to find him “in the midst of the underworld (\textit{ars}’ (\textit{CAT} 1.5. vi 27), and indeed, this is where she finds him: “fallen into the underworld (\textit{ars}’ (\textit{CAT} 1.5. vi 31–32). She then buries Baal in a \textit{ḥrt ilm arṣ} ‘cavern of the underworld gods’ (\textit{CAT} 1.5 vi 18). The name of one of Baal’s daughters, Artsay “Little Underworld,” also reveals her chthonic origins.\footnote{She has been identified with the Mesopotamian underworld figure Allatum. See M. S. Smith, \textit{The Ugaritic Baal Cycle}, 1:72. I read the -y at the end of her name as a diminutive.} Ugaritic texts also refer to the \textit{rpi arṣ} ‘shades of the underworld’ (\textit{CAT} 1.15 iii 3, 14; 1.161:2, 4, 5, 9).

3. **M**erisms and **I**sraelite **C**osmology

A merism is a figure of speech in which two opposites are juxtaposed to express a totality. In English, one might say “they came young and old,” to mean that “everyone came,” or “head to toe” to signify “the entire body.” Ancient Semitic texts generally abound in merisms, and the Hebrew Bible is no exception.\footnote{A. M. Honeyman, \textit{“Merismus in Biblical Hebrew,” JBL} 71 (1952): 11–18; J. Krašovec, \textit{Der Merismus im Biblisch-Hebräischen und Nordwestsemitischen} (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1977); J. Krašovec, \textit{“Merism—Polar Expression in Biblical Hebrew,” Biblica} 64 (1983): 231–239.} Among the most well known in the Bible is “the tree of knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:9), which denotes “the tree of all knowledge.” Of course, “heaven and earth” in Gen 1:1 also constitutes a merism meaning the “entire cosmos.” However, this view is incongruent with Israelite cosmology if we insist that “earth” here is the land upon which humans live.

Scholars typically understand Israelite cosmology as a tripartite universe consisting of a flat circular disk (“land, earth”) that rested upon the mountains (“foundations”) of the cosmic sea, which also surrounded the disk.\footnote{Exod 20:4 (= Deut 5:8) does not reflect a different tripartate cosmology, as some have suggested (e.g., M. Hutter, \textit{“Earth ארץ, p. 273}), but rather it delineates the only realms in which one might find an object on which to fashion an idol. The passage reads: “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above (\textit{biməṣ maṭṭaḥ לָאָרֶץ מִמַּעָל}, or \textit{biməṣ maṭṭaḥ לָאָרֶץ מִתְחַת}, or \textit{biməṣ maṭṭaḥ לָאָרֶץ מִתְחַת}), or in the earth beneath (\textit{biməṣ maṭṭaḥ בַּמַּיִם מַחַת}, or \textit{biməṣ maṭṭaḥ בַּמַּיִם מַחַת}), or in the sea, which is under the earth (\textit{biməṣ maṭṭaḥ בַּמַּיִם מַחַת}). Since the author presumes the presence of no other gods in heaven, the phrase \textit{biməṣ maṭṭaḥ לָאָרֶץ מִמַּעָל} must mean “in the sky above.” Similarly, unlike Mesopotamian cosmology, Israeliite cosmology did not view the underworld as a place populated by other gods or demons. Only dead humans lived there. Therefore, \textit{biməṣ maṭṭaḥ בַּמַּיִם מַחַת} must mean “on the land below” (i.e., the land below the sky). Moreover, the underworld rests below the subterranean waters, not above it (see Job 26:5 in which the הָרְפָאָים ‘shades’ writhe beneath the waters).} Above the land were the heavens and beneath it was the under-
A firmament (רָקֵם) in the heavens also contained a reservoir of water. Thus, within the tripartite cosmology, only the underworld is truly the opposite of heaven. Therefore, if we are to understand “heaven and earth” as a merism, “earth” must refer to the underworld.

Additional support for this perspective comes again from Mesopotamia. The cosmology of ancient Sumer and Babylonia was remarkably constant over two and a half millennia, and it was equally symmetrical, though it was slightly more complex in that it was a five-part structure. According to Horowitz, it consisted of:

- superimposed levels separated by open space. From above to below, the levels were: a region of heaven above the sky where the gods of heaven dwelled, the starry sky, the earth’s surface, the subterranean waters of the Apsu, and finally the underworld of the dead.

Surrounding the earth on all sides was the great ocean, which was a continuation of the subterranean waters. However, unlike the Israelite conception of Sheol, the Mesopotamian underworld was inhabited by gods and demons in addition to the deceased. We may schematize the Mesopotamian cosmos as follows:

- Heavens (šamē)
- Sky with stars (šamē)
- Earth (erṣetu)
- Apsu with subterranean waters (nagbu)
- Underworld (erṣetu)

Finally, the words בַּמַּיִם מְתַחַת אָרֶץ must refer to the subterranean waters below the earth that also engulf it on all sides. Consequently, the text prohibits the making of idols modeled on birds, animals, fish, and other creatures associated with the sky, land, and water. The Psalmist’s description of the extent of God’s dominion in Ps 146:6 also does not offer a tripart cosmology: “He is the maker of heaven (שְׁמַיִם) and the underworld (אָרֶץ), the sea (יָם), and everything in them.” It merely places the seas between the cosmic poles. Indeed, the mention of the underworld here follows nicely upon his remark concerning the world’s princes: “When their spirit departs, they return to the soil. On that day, his thoughts perish” (Ps 146:4). Interestingly, this passage appears in a slightly expanded form in Rev 5:13: “Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them.” On the cosmological shift behind this expansion, see below.


22. W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, p. xii. Horowitz also discusses variant portrayals of Mesopotamian cosmology, including one of three earths: an upper, middle, and lowest, which correspond to land, Apsu, and the underworld (pp. 16–19). He also examines the traditions of multiple heavens (pp. 208–220). In most cases, these variations merely represent further divisions of the larger cosmology discussed here.
Since the heavens and underworld were opposites, Sumerian and Akkadian texts often employ the merism an and ki (or kur) or the cognates šamē u eršetu to mean “heaven and the underworld.” A few examples from Sumerian will demonstrate, such as an Old Babylonian hymn lauding Marduk’s power: nam.en.bi an.ki.bi.da ši.ib.gu.lu ‘His lordship is great in heaven and the underworld’. A Sumerian poem employs the merism to comment on the limits of human knowledge: an si.ud.da gim šu.mu sá bi.in.dug4.ga ki bu.ru.3.da.gim na.me nu.un.za.wa.a ‘Like the remote heavens, can my hand reach them? Like the deep underworld, no one knows them’. We also find it in a Sumerian magic text: [ú-inin]-nu-uš ú-sikil a[zu-ta m]ú-a an-šè pa-zu ki-šè úr-zu ‘Soap plant, pure plant growing from the Apsu, your branches (reach) to heaven, your roots to the underworld’. Representative of the merism in Akkadian is the title of Šamaš: bēl šamē u eršetim ‘Lord of heaven and the underworld’, which, much like his epithet re’ú šaplāti nāqidu elāti ‘shepherd of that below, herdsman of that above’, characterizes his orbit through the sky during the day and underworld at night. Elsewhere the merism refers to gods returning to their abodes: ilū ša šamē ana šamē ūtelū ilū ša eršetim and eršetim ūterbu ‘the gods of heaven entered heaven, and the gods of the underworld entered the underworld’. The mayor of the Canaanite city of Ginti employed the same merism in a letter to the Egyptian pharaoh: šumma nītel ana šamē šamēma šumma nurrad ina eršeti rūšunu ina qāteka ‘Were we to go up to heaven, were we to descend to the underworld, our head is in..."
your hand”.31 Obviously, the mayor is saying that there is nowhere for them to go that is beyond pharaoh’s reach.

Ugaritic texts do not provide an exposition concerning the layout of the cosmos, as we find in the Bible and in Akkadian texts, so we must glean this information from the literary texts.32 Here we find that Ugarit’s bards also employed the cognate merism šmm and arṣ to mean “heaven and the underworld.”33 In the Baal myth, Baal sends a message to the goddess Anat that offers her secret knowledge: “the word of the tree and the whisper of the stone, the murmur of the heavens (šmm) with the underworld (arṣ), of the deep (thmt) to the stars” (CAT 1.3 iii 24).34 Each of the merisms characterizes communication that takes place in and across different cosmological realms. Thus, the whisper of the tree to the stone takes place on the central level of earth, that of the heavens and the underworld crosses from the highest to the lowest cosmological levels, and that of the great deep to the starry sky moves from the second lowest to the second highest level.35 The passage reveals that the Ugaritic cosmos was like that of Mesopotamia.

Heavens (šmm)
  Sky with stars (šmm)
  Earth (arṣ)
  Great deep (thmt)
Underworld (arṣ)

35. All intend to convey the notion that Baal possesses knowledge of the entire cosmos. It is fitting that Baal concludes with the deep and the stars, since both levels of the cosmos are water reservoirs, and he is associated with water and fertility. However, when the messengers deliver the missive to Anat they add a line: “I understand the lightning, which the heavens do not know” (CAT 1.3 iv 18). The line emphasizes his role as a storm god (cf. CAT 1.4 vii 36–39). Interestingly, at the start of the myth, El uses this same chain of merisms, but concludes by saying: “a word unknown to men, and which the multitudes of the earth do not understand” (CAT 1.1 iii 15). Perhaps Baal’s adoption of the chain and the additional claim that even the heavens do not understand his lightning signal his usurpation over El.
In the Legend of Kirtu we find the merism uttered sympathetically to induce Baal’s rain during a drought: “See, tour the underworld (arcer) and the heaven (šmm)! Travel to the ends of the underworld (arcer), to the edge of the abyss!” (CAT 1.16 iii 2). Implicit in a drought is the fear that Baal has died, and so instructing the search to start in the underworld is apposite. The merism occurs also in relation to the voracious appetite of newborn gods: št špt larš špt lšmm wy’rb bphm ʿsr šmm wdg bym ‘they set their lip to the underworld, their lip to the heavens. And the fowl of the sky and the fish of the sea entered their mouths’ (CAT 1.23.61–63). In accordance with the cosmological schema above, note that the passage shows that the newborn gods had to open their mouths as wide as the heavens and underworld in order to swallow the creatures of the penultimate levels of the cosmos, that is, the foul (sky) and fish (great deep). The pair šmm-arcer ‘Heaven-and-Underworld’ also appears in a ritual text, but as a binomial deity (CAD 1.47.12 [= 1.118.11; 1.148.5, 24]). There is only one other passage in which the merism appears, but it is expanded and its meaning is unclear.

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39. CAT 1.3 ii 39 is a difficult passage. It tells us that after wading to her thighs in the blood of the warriors she slew, the goddess Anat washed herself with šm arcer rbb rḥp ‘the dew of heaven, oil of the underworld, showers of the Rider of the Clouds (i.e., Baal)’. Even if we translate šmm arcer ‘oil of the earth’, its meaning remains unknown. Is it a metaphor for the subterranean waters? The association of the dew with stars in the next verse (40) does imply that the merism’s opposite must be below the earth. Indeed, when Anat washes herself with it again, when arriving at Baal’s home on Mt. Saphon (CAT 1.3 iv 33–34), the text describes the place as belonging to the most remote gods, two lengths beneath the springs of the earth (35). My former student Shira Jaret draws my attention to Isaac’s blessing: וְיִתֶּן־לְךָָה אֱלֹהִיםָמִטַּלָהַשׁ מַיִםָוּמִשְׁמַנֵּיָה אָרֶץָוְרֹבָדּ גָן וְרֹבָדְּיָה יִתֶּרֶשׁ ‘May God give you from the dew of the heavens and from the oil of the underworld, an abundance of grain and new wine’ (Gen 27:28). The
The evidence of shared merisms and cosmology from Mesopotamia and Ugarit supports the understanding of שְׁמַיִם and אֶרֶץ in Gen 1:1 as the “heavens” and the “underworld.” Additional evidence comes from several biblical passages in which the author chose to pair שְׁמַיִם ‘heavens’ not with אֶרֶץ ‘underworld’, but with its synonym שְׁאוֹל ‘Sheol’. Thus, in a statement reminiscent of the mayor of Ginti cited above, Amos prophesies: “If they dig down to Sheol (שְׁאוֹל), from there my hand will take them. If they ascend to the heavens (שמים), from there I will make them descend” (Amos 9:2). Witness also Zophar’s query to Job: “They are higher than the heavens (שמים)—what can you do? Deeper than Sheol (שְׁאוֹל)—what can you know?” (Job 11:8).

4. RETHINKING THE CREATION AND OTHER EARTHS

The combined evidence should compel us to translate Gen 1:1–2:

1. In the beginning God created the heavens and the underworld.
2. And the underworld was void-and-waste, and darkness was over the face of the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.

The change in orientation permits us to view what occurs next not as a telescoping narrative that repeats the first two verses in greater detail, but rather as a sequential development. Thus, after creating light to distinguish day from night (Gen 1:4–5), God creates a firmament (רָקִיעַ) to divide the watery deep that roils above the underworld (Gen 1:6–7). He then calls the water above the firmament שְׁמַיִם ‘sky’. Afterwards, he

only other cognate expression of which I am aware is the Akkadian phrase šaman erṣeti (ki), known only from an incipit of a song now lost. See B. Groneberg, “Searching for Akkadian Lyrics: From Babylonian to the ‘Liederkatalog’ KAR 158,” JCS 55 (2003): 66. Stefan Maul informs me that the text remains unknown (private communication, July 5, 2014).

40. The focus solely on earth does not take place until Gen 2:4, as noted by the change in order of the merisms: “This is the account of the earth and the sky when they were created, when the Lord Yahweh made the heavens and the underworld.” There is little purpose to mentioning שְׁמַיִם and אֶרֶץ twice, unless their meanings have changed in the second instance. Perhaps this relates to similar tradition in Sumerian and Akkadian texts in which we find an immediate reversal of the merism. Thus, in an Early Dynastic text employing the UD.GAL.NUN orthography we find: UD UNU-ta LAGAB ki UD-ta LAGAB UD UNU-ta LAGAB ‘to separate heaven from the underworld, to separate earth from the sky’. In Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Underworld, we read: u₄ an ki.ta ba.da.ba.DU.a.ba ki an.ta ba.da.sur.ta.ba ‘After heaven had been separated from the underworld, and after earth had been separated from the sky’ (ll. 9–10). See similarly in the Myth of the Hoe and the Pickax, both treated in W. G. Lambert, Babylonian Creation Myths, pp. 169–170, though he translates all as “heaven” and “earth.”
gathers dry land from the waters below the firmament and calls it אֶרֶץ ‘land’ and the remaining water יַמִּים ‘seas’ (Gen 1:9–10). Though the use of the identical terms שׁ מ יִם for “sky” and “heavens,” and אֶרֶץ for “land” and “underworld,” naturally contributes confusion,41 it also provides a meaningful aetiology for the sky and land. In the same way that the name for אָדָם ‘humankind’ reflects its creation from the ה אֲד מ ה ‘soil’, (Gen 2:7), so also do land and sky bear the names of the realms from which they derive. Insofar as “sky” and “land” are identical to the names of those regions that betoken their origins, we may see them as sharing their essences.42 Thus, things of the sky, such as the clouds, stars, and planets, share a numinous essence with the higher heavens, and those things on land, like the soil, and all things that have mortality, share an essence with the underworld.

Moreover, the new reading of creation offered here results not in a tripartite structure, but in a five-part structure that is the equivalent of the Mesopotamian and Ugaritic cosmologies.43 We may envision it as follows:

Heavens (שׁ מ יִם)

Sky (שׁ מ יִם) and supraterranean waters (ה ר קִיעַָ)

Earth (אֶרֶץ)

Seas (יַמִּים) and subterranean waters (תְָהוֹם)

Underworld (אֶרֶץ)

41. Various translations have grappled with the problem by rendering the second occurrence of שׁ מ יִם and אֶרֶץ as “sky” and “land,” as I have done here (e.g., ISV, NET, NIV, NLT).

42. On a similarity of name implying a similarity of essence, see I. Rabinowitz, A Witness Forever: Ancient Israel’s Perception of Literature and the Resultant Hebrew Bible (Bethesda: CDL Press, 1993).

Reorienting our understanding of Gen 1:1–2 not only offers a more holistic merism in accordance with Israelite cosmology, it makes the creation of the heavens and the underworld the first divine act.\(^{44}\) Thus, it also helps to explain a crux that long has bothered exegetes—the creation of light (Gen 1:3–5) before the creation of the sun and moon (Gen 1:14–19). Since the earth and sky have not been created, the creation of light applies only to the heavens and the underworld.\(^{45}\) It becomes the tool by which God is able to begin his divisive work. In fact, Gen 1:4 makes explicit that it functioned to distinguish בֵּין הָאָרָּוְעָבְּנָה הָבֶּשֶׁת ‘the light from the darkness’.\(^{46}\) To this point, the only darkness referenced is that which was over the surface of the underworld’s deep (Gen 1:2). It is only when God creates the sky, earth, and seas that the luminaries become essential.\(^{47}\)

Changing our comprehension of the first two lines of Genesis naturally changes the way we understand Israelite cosmological beliefs and other biblical passages in which the merism occurs.\(^{48}\) For one, it extends

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\(^{44}\) Thus, God becomes the creator of heaven and the underworld (e.g., Exod 31:17; Jer 32:17), and his glory stands above it (Ps 148:13). This has been suggested by some, but not fully explored.

\(^{45}\) Note too that in Akkadian and Ugaritic, the word for heavens is plural, and in Hebrew it is a dual, demonstrating that the ancients perceived at least two distinct realms they called sky/heaven.

\(^{46}\) N. Wyatt, “The Darkness of Genesis I 2,” \(VT\) 43 (1993): 543–554, similarly argues that the darkness here relates to the underworld, though he suggests that אֶרֶץ in this pericope may be ambiguous, evoking both “land” and “underworld” (cf. Jer 4:23). If he is correct in seeing the darkness as the primordial place of invisibility from which God speaks during creation, then this pericope also is suggestive of God’s chthonic aspects.

\(^{47}\) It is at this point too that God begins to assign different rulers to each of the cosmic layers beneath him, each with a different form of rulership. In Gen 1:16, he permits the sun and moon to “govern” (יָשָׁב) the daytime and nighttime skies. In Gen 1:26, he grants mankind the right to “have dominion” (מָשַׁל) over all living creatures that are “upon the land” (עַל הָאָרֶץ), which commences when he names them (Gen 2:19–20). The passages both grant power and restrict it. While the sun and moon exert rulership over the land and people beneath them by controlling the days and seasons, neither humankind nor the sun and moon can assert rulership over the realms above them. Thus, the sun and moon (deities elsewhere in the Near East) cannot control Yahweh, and humans cannot control the celestial bodies. Of course, God retains his rule over “heaven and the underworld,” and thus over everything in between, including the luminaries and living creatures. Implicit in the hierarchy of governance is God’s role as מֶלֶך ‘king’.

\(^{48}\) Some scholars have opined that the P(riestly) source identifies the world of death with “the sea” or “the waters” (as seen in Gen 7:17–22; Exod 14:28). In Genesis 1 this would equate with the subterranean waters. It is not my intention to engage in a debate concerning the existence of P or our (in)ability to know with certainty where to demarcate sources. Suffice it to note here that a similar confusion/identification occurs in Akkadian texts in which the world of the dead sometimes is equated with the watery Apsû (see below in the excursus and its accompanying notes). Moreover, once the Israelite cosmology is understood to comprise five parts, harmonizing P’s views on death as a watery place (whether one accepts them or not) with Genesis 1, becomes unnecessary. On these views, see notably O. Kaiser, \(Die mythische Bedeutung des Meeres in Ägypten, Ugarit und Israel\) (BZAW 78; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1959), pp. 112–120; D. T. Tsumura, \(The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2\) (JSOTS 83; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1989); D. T. Tsumura, “The Earth in Genesis 1,” in ‘I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood’: \(Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11\) (ed. R. S. Hess and D. T. Tsumura; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), pp. 310–328;
Yahweh’s rule to the underworld. Indeed, if we see Yahweh as the sovereign of only the heavens and the earth, then the underworld remains outside his control. Yet, as several texts demonstrate, the Israelites understood Yahweh’s rule and judgment, like that of the Mesopotamian Šamaš, to include the underworld. See, for instance, the Psalmist’s observation: “If I go up to the heavens (שְׁמַיִם), you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol (שְׁאוֹל), you are there” (Ps 139:8). As he goes on to say: “My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place (בַּסֵּתֶר), when I was woven together in the depths of the underworld (בְּתַחְתִּיָּרֶץ)” (Ps 139:15). The passage implies that the underworld plays a role in the creation of humankind. This is not merely a matter of expressing the notion “from dust to dust,” for then the Psalmist would not have used בְּתַחְתִּיָּרֶץ ‘in the depths’, and certainly would have preferred אֲדֹم הָאָרֶץ ‘soil’ instead of אֶרֶץ ‘underworld’.

Yahweh’s rule over chthonic affairs is apparent also in his rhetorical queries to Job from the whirlwind (Job 38). In this pericope, Yahweh challenges Job’s knowledge of the cosmos and its origins. He asks him where he was when he laid the earth’s foundation (38:4), who was it who shut the sea behind doors (38:8), and if he has ever walked the recesses of the תְּהוֹם ‘deep’ (38:16). He then turns his attention to the underworld and asks Job if the gates of מַזְמִי ‘death’ and צַלְמִי ‘shadow-of-death’ have

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50. See similarly Yahweh’s instruction to Ahaz: “Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the depths of Sheol (שְׁאֹל) or in the highest heights (לְמָעְלָה)” ( Isa 7:11). Nevertheless, the dead apparently are unable to respond to Yahweh from the underworld. Hence, Ps 6:6: “None among the dead proclaims you. Who praises you in Sheol (שָׁנָא)’?”

51. The Psalmist’s statement also is reminiscent of *Enuma Elish* VI:29–33, in which Ea fashions humankind from the blood of the slain god Qingu, the consort of Tiamat (the Deep). Note also that Ea states that from the blood he first will make the bones (VI:5). Compare the Psalmist’s יִצְרֵי ‘my frame’ (lit. “my bone”; Ps 139:15). In *Atraḥasis* I 210–211, Nintu creates mankind by mixing the flesh and blood of a deceased god with clay. There also is the tradition of Ea pinching off clay in the Apsu to create the humans. See W. G. Lambert, “Fire Incantations,” *AfO* 23 (1970): 43. A. D. Kilmer, “The Brick of Birth,” *JNES* 46 (1987): 211–213, also discusses a number of comparative linguistic and cultural parallels that connect clay with the placental afterbirth. On the role of blood, soil, and water in the biblical creation of Adam and Eve, see S. B. Noegel, “Scarlet and Harlots: Seeing Red in the Hebrew Bible,” *HUCA* 87 (2016): 1–47.
been revealed to him (38:17), and if he understands the רַחֲבֵי־א רֶץ ‘expanses of the underworld’ (38:18). Then, after a series of questions that focus on the heavens, he summarizes his queries with the cosmic merism: “Do you know the limits of heaven (שְׁמִי), can you place his (Yahweh’s) dominion in the underworld (בַּרְאֵי־”? (38:33).

The merism similarly appears in a description of Yahweh’s throne in Isa 66:1: “The heavens (הַשְּׁמִים) are my throne, and the underworld (הָאָרֶץ) is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be?” The question, of course, is rhetorical, for if his throne extends to the polar ends of the cosmos, any temple in which to place it would need to outsize it.

Several texts similarly describe the Ark of the Covenant’s “lid” as a “throne” and its “box” as a “footstool” (e.g., 1 Chr 28:2; 2 Chr 9:18; Ps 99:5; 132:7). Indeed, the Ark has a number of chthonic associations, not the least of which is its name אְַרוֹן, which means “coffin.” If comparisons to Egyptian footstools are at all present in the mind of the Israelite writers when describing God’s furniture, then the fact that they portray Egypt’s traditional enemies as bound and deceased also underscores the object’s chthonic connections. It is in this context, that we should understand Hezekiah’s antanaclastic prayer before the Ark: “Yahweh, the God of Israel, enthroned before the cherubim, you alone are God over the kingdoms of the land (הָאָרֶץ). You have made heaven and the underworld (הַשְּׁמִים)’” (1 Kgs 19:15; Isa 37:16; cf. 2 Chr 2:11).

See also Yahweh’s rhetorical query to Jeremiah: “Can a man hide in secret places and I not see him, says Yahweh? Do I not fill the heavens (הַשְּׁמִים) and the underworld (הָאָרֶץ)?” (Jer 23:24). The question reasons that it is impossible for a human to hide anywhere on earth, when Yahweh’s knowledge extends to the two places above and below earth that no living human could know.

The prophet Haggai’s use of the merism also is instructive. While forecasting Yahweh’s destruction of the nations, he declares: “In a little while

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52. Compare He (God) will expand Sheol’ (Isa 5:14); and the Akkadian expressions erṣetu rapaštu ‘capacious land’ and erṣetu rabītu ‘great land’, both used for the underworld.
I will once more shake the heavens (הַשַּׁ מַָּיִם) and the underworld (ה א רֶץ), the sea (הַיּ ם) and the dry land (הֶחָ רֶבֶּה). I shall shake all nations” (Hag 2:6–7; cf. 2:21). Since הַשַּׁ מַָּיִם does not parallel הַיּ ם, it is impossible to read ה א רֶץ as a parallel to הֶחָ רֶבֶּה. Consequently, ה בָּ רֶץ cannot mean “earth,” but instead must refer to “the underworld.” Thus, we must see the merism as enveloping both the sea and dry land, both of which, therefore, must exist on a plane horizontal from the observer.

The merism occurs also in Deut 30:19: “This day I call the heavens (הַשַּׁ מַָּיִם) and the underworld (ה א רֶץ) as witnesses against you that I have set before you the life (הַחַיִָּּים) and the death (וְהַמָּ וֶת), the blessing (הַבְּרַ כָּה) and the curse (הַקָּ לֵו).” Only when we translate ה א רֶץ as “the underworld” does הַמָּ וֶת ’the death’ make sense, for as Anne Marie Kitz observes, “In the end, the ultimate goal of all curses is separation from life.” Moreover, in his comparative study of curse tablets and binding spells, John Gager shows that most curses succour the aid of chthonic deities and spirits of the dead. Hence, the sarcophagus curses of the Phoenician kings Tabnit and Eshmunazar, which invoke the shades (רפאים) against would-be grave robbers.

5. Why Then Heaven and Earth?

The understanding of שׁ מַָּיִם and אֶרֶץ in Gen 1:1–2 as “heaven” and “earth” is so engrained in Judaism and Christianity that it scarcely seems possible to dislodge it from Western religious consciousness—and certainly that is not my aim here. Nevertheless, it is incumbent upon scholars of the ancient Near East to rethink traditional interpretations in the light of “new” evidence, even if our finds do not make their way into English Bible translations.

55. The two are invoked as witnesses also in Deut 31:28.
56. This occurs either through prolonged hardship, premature death, or the extinction of one’s name and family line. A. M. Kitz, “Curses and Cursing in the Ancient Near East,” Religion Compass 1 (2007): 620; A. M. Kitz, Cursed are You! The Phenomenology of Cursing in Cuneiform and Hebrew Texts (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2014). See also Isa 65:20: “Indeed, one who dies (יָ מוּת) at a hundred years will be considered a lad, and one who does not reach one hundred will be considered accursed (יְקֻל ל);” Ps 27:22: “Those whom (God) blesses will inherit land, whereas those whom he curses (יְ יָ קַ ל ל יו) will be cut off (יִ כּ רֵתוּ).”
I do not intend the words “‘new’ evidence” to sound facetious, so let me qualify what I mean by “new.” From the time of the first canonical Jewish and Christian Bibles until today, roughly eighteen to twenty centuries depending on the canon, those privy to the biblical text were primarily ritual authorities. Few laypersons enjoyed access to Scripture outside of the ritual settings of the synagogue and church, and certainly they possessed no power to question authoritative/traditional interpretations of the received text. While the study of the Bible in Judaism continued to rely primarily on the Hebrew text (with increasing influence of Aramaic/Targumic and later Talmudic traditions), Christian clergy read their Bibles (i.e., Old Testament) in Greek, Latin, or Syriac translations. Moreover, until the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, both Jewish and Christian religious authorities were completely unaware of the comparative texts from Mesopotamia and Ugarit because they had not yet been unearthed.

The discovery and decipherment of Mesopotamian texts in the 1800s and of the Ugaritic texts in the 1920s revolutionized the study of the Hebrew Bible, though primarily only for scholars. Despite many noble attempts to show the general public how these new corpora shed light on biblical texts, it is fair to say they have had little impact on traditional religious teachings or readings of the Bible, both in Judaism and Christianity. Anecdotally, I confess that I am unsurprised that virtually none of my first-year students, even the most biblically informed, have ever encountered Enuma Elish or the Epic of Gilgamesh, much less the literature of Ugarit.\(^59\) The fact is, that scholarly comparative studies of the Bible seldom penetrate religious traditions.

Even if we recognize the occasional observation by ancient exegetes that אֶרֶץ can mean “underworld” in some passages, we may attribute their complete neglect of Gen 1:1 to a far more powerful factor—the cosmology of their day.\(^60\) This cosmology, while still geocentric, had already in the first centuries CE expanded to become a far more complex structure

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\(^59\) In fact, increasingly I find that the majority of students in my large introductory courses confess that they have never read the Bible.

with multiple heavens, teeming with angelic activity. Under the influence of Persian and later Greco-Roman culture, the belief in a soul that departs the body and ascends to the heavens became commonplace in Judaism, through which it entered early Christianity, though the belief found different articulations in each tradition. Though the Greco-Roman astrological models that influenced these traditions were largely misunderstood, they nevertheless were adapted to fit theological, rather than scientific, concerns. As J. Edward Wright observes: “The heavenly realms have become little more than places where people receive postmortem punishment or reward.”

The cosmological changes led to, and/or were induced by, changing beliefs concerning the afterlife. Notions of resurrection and the eschaton, which were mostly latent in Israelite religion, began to crystalize and find definitive expression. In Judaism, views of the afterlife were diverse. Some sectaries believed in resurrection and the immortality of the soul, while others did not, and there was also a variety of views on what would happen at the end of days. Some believed one Messiah would appear, others two, and some saw the world to come as a spiritual existence, others as a renewed physical one.

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61. The plurality of term for שמים ‘heavens’, and the fact that it also doubled for “sky,” no doubt contributed to the adoption of the Greco-Roman notion of many heavens. The former point is made by J. E. Wright, The Early History of Heaven, p. 180.
64. J. D. Levenson, Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), argues that Sheol was only the destination of those less worthy, who had died without God’s blessing, and that there was an alternative view in ancient Israel in which the pious might be taken or redeemed by God and enjoy a form of continued existence free from the tribulations of life. While he presents some convincing evidence in support of his hypothesis, the proposal cannot be reconciled consistently with all biblical passages. For example, Jacob’s assumption that his son Joseph has died and his willingness to join him in Sheol suggests there is no alternative destination (Gen 37:35). Also, David tells Solomon not to let Joab’s “gray head descend to Sheol (שָׁאֹל) in peace” (1 Kgs 2:6), implying that one normally would do so. Eliphaz also envisions the possibility of one going to the grave in full vigor (Job 5:26). There is also cognate evidence from Mesopotamia and Ugarit that shows the underworld to have been like Sheol, and yet, the ultimate destination for all the living. Moreover, Israelite grave goods from the Bronze Age through the Iron Age typically included an oil lamp, an item that one would deem unnecessary if the destination of the deceased was not dark and cold (noted by S. L. Cook, “Funerary Practices and Afterlife Expectations in Ancient Israel,” Religion Compass 1 [2007]: 678–679). In any event, an alternative view of the afterlife in Israel does not negate the existence of the cosmology discussed here, which was shared throughout the Levant. In fact, it might have contributed to the changing conceptions of the afterlife in the early Judaisms of the first few centuries CE.
65. See G. W. E. Nickelsburg, Resurrection, Immortality and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism and Early Christianity (Harvard Theological Studies 56; Cambridge: Harvard University
Views concerning the afterlife in early Christianity were no less diverse, changing, and ideosyncratic. At first, there appears to have been little interest in immortality of the soul, the hope instead being bodily resurrection. Christians interpreted the martyrdom of their leader as starting the eschaton, and his resurrection as proof that he is Messiah and God. However, it was not long before Christians adopted Hellenistic notions of the soul’s immortality, for it allowed them to explain the apparent delay in the imminent end of time. It provided an interim time in which God would recompense the just and the sinners.66

For both Jews and Christians the influence of Hellenistic thought was so profound, that in just the first few centuries of the common era, the ancient Israelite concept of a five-part universe gave way to the cosmology of Hellenistic astronomers: an earth at the center of a universe surrounded by concentric heavenly spheres, each in motion, with the divine dwelling in the outermost sphere. There were several variations of this model, some with more or fewer spheres, but its basic structure remained firmly in place for centuries hence. Meanwhile, Hellenistic philosophers, inspired by notions of the immortal soul, and unconvinced by the existence of an underworld, increasingly located Hades in the heavens.67

Of course, Christianity, reserved a place for Hades outside of the heavenly spheres, but by this time, Hades had lost its place on the cosmological map, which increasingly looked heavenward.68 As a result, the notion of an underworld as a cold and continued hopeless existence gradually faded into oblivion.
It is this “new” cosmology that informs the earliest Bible translations, and which, for nearly two millennia, made it inconceivable to understand God’s creation in Gen 1:1 to include the underworld. Even the advances of Copernicus and Kepler in the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries, and Galileo a century later, would only perpetuate a cosmology among natural philosophers and theologians that was wholly foreign to the Israelites, as Stephen Cook observes:

It is generally agreed that pre-modern, classical interpretation of the Bible erred grievously in applying alien notions of afterlife based on Greek dualism to its readings of the Hebrew scriptures. Few modern biblical scholars continue to associate the Hebrew Bible with an otherworldy heaven, an immaterial soul ensnared in a physical prison, or death as an experience of liberation. The biblical world simply did not oppose spirit and matter, mind and body. This fact, however, generally comes as a surprise to large segments of the general public, who continue to assume that the Bible depicts salvation as something disembodied and ethereal.

Cook’s observation rightly encapsulates the powerful impact that anachronistic theoretical constructs can assert on contemporary readings of the biblical text. So too is it, I contend, with the traditional reading of “heaven and earth” in Gen 1:1, which is more a product of Hellenistic philosophy than Israelite cosmology. Furthermore, insofar as the theological speculation that informed the new cosmology was of earthly concern only to humans, the cosmology became equally androcentric, with mortals now occupying the cosmic pole opposite God. Given the pervasive influence of this paradigm shift in Judaisms and Christianities, past and present, one can understand why the traditional reading has had, and likely will continue to have, such a tight grip on the faithful. Moreover, as I shall argue in the following excursus, this influence has played an ironic role in shaping our understanding of one of the most important archaeological discoveries in the history of biblical studies.


69. Thus, the translations of the Septuagint (γῆ) and Vulgate (terra) in Gen 1:1, both reflect the understanding “earth.” The Peshitta’s cognate ʾarʿāʾ retains the ambiguity of the Hebrew, but it was understood to mean “earth.”

EXCURSUS: Enuma Elish

Not only has Hellenistic cosmology influenced the earliest Bible translations, but by way of these translations, it has left a vicarious imprint on the most important comparative text relevant to Genesis 1, the Babylonian creation story: Enuma Elish.

Its very first lines similarly assert special knowledge of the origins of the cosmos:

1. enūma eliš lā nabû šamāmū
2. šapliš ammatum šuma lā zakrat

When on high, the heavens had not been named,
Below, the earth had not been evoked.

From the moment of its sensational discovery, the text has been compared to Genesis 1, and for good reason. The texts’ similarities, at least in translation, should be obvious even to those with a rudimentary familiarity with Genesis. According to W. G. Lambert, “The first chapter of Genesis provides the closest parallel to the division of cosmic waters.” Yet, is it possible that the traditional reading of Gen 1:1 as the creation of “heaven and earth” influenced our understanding of Enuma Elish?

Today, we may credit our guild with practicing a far more measured approach to comparative work than in times past. However, in the fledging years of Assyriology, the Hebrew Bible was the very lens through which one read new discoveries. A perfect illustration of this is the name of George Smith’s publication in which Enuma Elish first reached the general public: The Chaldean Account of Genesis, Containing the Description of the Creation, the Fall of Man, the Deluge, the Tower of Babel, the Times of the Patriarchs, and Nimrod. It is difficult to overestimate

73. G. Smith, The Chaldean Account of Genesis, Containing the Description of the Creation, the Fall of Man, the Deluge, the Tower of Babel, the Times of the Patriarchs, and Nimrod: Babylonian Fables, and Legends of the Gods; from the Cuneiform Inscriptions (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, 1876).
the impact of this small book. It was a world sensation, and it even forced upon Victorian society a renewed debate on creationism and the true age of the earth. Moreover, Smith already had achieved fame in 1872 for his translation of the Chaldean account of the deluge, that is, *Epic of Gilgamesh XI*, which he had presented to the Society of Biblical Archaeology with the Prime Minister in attendance. In fact, the discovery of the flood text led the *Daily Telegraph* to sponsor and sensationalize the excavation that brought us *Enuma Elish*.

Perusing through the antique pages of Smith’s “Chaldean Genesis” reveals an equally antiquated methodology. Smith openly suggests that cuneiform texts were the source materials from which the biblical account was “copied,” and he repeatedly refers to the text’s fragments as pieces of the “Genesis legends,” or the “Fall of Man,” or the “Tower of Babel.” And while we may forgive Smith for not entirely understanding the myth’s first two lines correctly, the placement of Gen 1:1 immediately after the text’s opening lines, in such a loaded context, does more than invite comparison. Had the traditional understanding of Gen 1:1 been “heaven and the underworld,” one wonders how Smith would have rendered the first lines of *Enuma Elish*.

Indeed, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that we should read the merism “heaven and the underworld” also in *Enuma Elish* I:1–2. Certainly, the aforecited evidence for the merism elsewhere in cuneiform texts encourages this reading, but there is internal evidence as well.

Though the text employs the poetic synonym *ammatu*, rather than the cognate *erṣetu*, like *erṣetu*, it can refer to “land” or the “underworld.” However, the reading “underworld” is much preferred. Indeed, long ago,

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76. G. Smith, *The Chaldean Account of Genesis*, p. 62, rendered I:1–2: “when above, were not raised the heavens and below on the earth a plant had not grown up.” Improvements were made to the translation after Smith’s premature death. Thus, E. A. W. Budge, *The Babylonian Legends of Creation and the Fight between Bel and the Dragon: As Told by the Assyrian Tablets of Nineveh* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1921), pp. 31–32: “When the heavens above were yet unnamed, and the name of the earth had not been recorded.”
Manfred Hutter proposed that we should read *ammatu* as “underworld,” yet, with one exception, his insight appears to have fallen on deaf ears.  

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78. M. Hutter, “*ammatu*: Unterwelt in Enuma Eliš I 2,” RA 79 (1985): 187–188. To my knowledge, only B. R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, vols. 1–2 (3rd ed; Bethesda: CDL Press, 1993), 1:439, 485, has translated *ammatu* as “netherworld,” and he cites Hutter’s important note. However, neither W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, nor W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, appear aware of it, since neither cites it, even to refute it. Yet, Horowitz (pp. 122, 125) argues that there is no underworld in *Enuma Elish*. His argument has four bases: first, the Anunnaki are said to come up from the Apsu to reach Babylon in V 125–126; second, in VI 39–44, Marduk places 300 Anunnaki in the heavens (*šamē*) and 300 in the earth (*erṣetu*); third, no humans die in the text; and fourth, Nergal and Ereshkigal do not appear. With regard to the first point, other texts inform us that the Anunnaki’s trip through the Apsu is merely a periphrasis, since Ea dwells in the Apsu, yet we are told: *šubassu asar erṣetimma* “his abode is where the underworld is” (CT 16 46:189). Indeed, long after Marduk had assigned the Anunnaki to the underworld, we are told: “300 Igigi of heaven and 600 of Apsu, all of them, had assembled” (VI:69). Perhaps the confusion stems from the notion that Ea built his dwelling upon the deceased Apsu (which places Apsu’s body in the underworld), and names his own home Apsu (I:71, 76). Horowitz himself provides much additional evidence for the overlap between the two regions in his section entitled “The Apsu and the Underworld” (pp. 342–344), and Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, p. 199, discusses the same. A similar confusion exists in Ugaritic and biblical texts that describe the underworld as near or in water (CAT 1.1 iii 23; 2 Sam 22:16; Job 28:11; 38:16). Horowitz’s second argument is rather circular, since it depends on how one translates *erṣetu*. If one understands it to mean “underworld,” there is no contradiction. Further, we know from other textual traditions that the Anunnaki were believed to inhabit the underworld and not the land of the living. Horowitz oscillates on this point for he argues: “From the Kassite period onward, Anunnaki are generally gods of the earth” (p. 108), and yet he also asserts: “As noted earlier, the Anunnaki, from the Kassite period onward, are almost always underworld gods” (p. 18). He also provides a number of prooftexts for the Anunnaki’s underworld abode, such as KAR 307, in which “Bel shut 600 Anunnaki in the underworld” (p. 18). With regard to no human beings dying in *Enuma Elish*, I am not convinced that we should expect to find this when the focus of the story is entirely on how things come into existence. Thus, we hear of the creation of humans, but not their deaths. The Genesis creation account similarly tells us how humans were made, but we hear nothing of the death of Adam until the genealogical list in Gen 5:3, and we never hear of Eve’s death. This, is because mortal death has no place in an account of their creation. Finally, I remain unconvinced that we can place expectations on the text’s author to include Nergal and Ereshkigal. The opening tablet tells us only about the gods that were formed in the midst of Apsu and Tiamat (I:9) and the epic is not meant to be cosmologically exhaustive, as Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, p. 169, reminds us: “But this does not mean that *Enūma eliš* presents all that is known of Babylonian cosmology. On the contrary, the Epic use only a selection of the wealth of available material.” In addition, Nergal generally does not appear prominently in epics and myths beyond the *Myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal* and the twelfth tablet of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. He does not even appear in the *Descent of Ishtar*, where one might argue we should expect to find him. Moreover, according to his own myth, he was sent to the underworld for offending Ereshkigal’s vizier Namtar, and after sleeping with Ereshkigal and forsaking her, Anu, Enlil, and Ea forced him to return to the underworld forever. He is thus something of an outcast among the gods of heaven. In the same myth, Ereshkigal is unable to ascend to the heavens by the immutable laws of the universe. Since *Enuma Elish* focuses entirely on the origins of the heavens and their gods and upon the lordship of Marduk and the creation of the first mortals, the divine couple plays no role. I also note that Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, does not share Horowitz’s view as he renders *erṣetu* as “netherworld” in VI:43, 44, 46, 79, 100, 141, 144 (though he translates *erṣetu* in I:2 as “earth,” [p. 51]). For the aforementioned myths, see O. Gurney, “The Sultantepe Tablets (Continued): VII. The Myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal,” AS 10 (1960): 105–131; M. Hutter, *Altorientalische Vorstellungen von der Unterwelt: Literar- und religionsgeschichtliche Überlegungen zu “Nergal und Ereskigal”* (OBO 63; Fribourg: Editions universitaires; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985).
Perhaps the most convincing argument in favor of the reading “heaven and underworld” is that the narrator’s point of view in I:1–2 is the land upon which he stands, which means that the *ammatu* “beneath” him must be the underworld.

However, there also is linguistic and literary evidence. For instance, the lexical list *Malku* I:51 equates *ammatu* with *dannatu*, and *Malku* II:13 identifies *ammatu* with *erṣetu*. Since *erṣetu* is the commonest term for “underworld,” *ammatu* and *dannatu* must be synonyms. Another lexical tradition equates the related form *danninu* ‘underworld’ with *erṣetu*. Commentaries to *Enuma Elish* and the *Babylonian Theodicy* record similar traditions.

Further, the sky and the land are not created until Marduk severs Tiamat in Tablets IV and V. In IV:137–138, we learn: “He split her into two like a dried fish. One half of her he set up and stretched out the sky (*šamāmī*).” This is clearly the starry sky of Babylonian cosmology and not the uppermost heavens, because Marduk then creates the stars and their constellations (VI:1-2). If *šamē* in I:1 encompassed the uppermost heavens and the sky, then there would be no need for Marduk to create it again.

Observe also Marduk’s construction of three temples at tablet’s end, which the author assigns to the gods chiastically: “In Eshgalla, Esharra, which he had built, and the heavens (*šamāmī*), he settled in their shrines Anu, Enlil, and Ea” (IV:145–146). Anu’s dwelling in the heavens is well known, and Esharra belongs to Enlil, which gives Eshgalla to Ea. While naturally, one might place Ea’s structure in the Apsu, two lexical traditions show that Eshgalla means “the underworld.” Moreover, this accords with an earlier tradition in which the divine triad creates the cosmos

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80. See Diri: MSL 15 126 150–154. *CAD D* 91, s.v. *danninu*. As B. Hutter, “*ammatu*,” p. 187, n. 2, observes, *dannatu*, *danninu*, and *danānu* have a similar semantic range (essentially meaning “strong, firm”), and each is used of the underworld. In fact, the term *danninu* always refers to the underworld. See *CAD D* 91, s.v. *danninu*.


82. Thus, Ea IV 161 reads: *úr.ru.gal* (ab x eš) [*qab-ru*], *úr.ru.gal* (ab x gal) = [min], eš.g[al] (ab x gal) = [šu]; and Aa IV/3 106 records: [eš.gal] (ab x gal) = [šu = (ešgallu)], *qab-ru*, *er-še-tu*. 

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without mention of Marduk: *enu ḫānu ḫānīl u ḫēa ilānī rabūti šammē u ĥeṣēta ibnū ūddū giskimma* ‘When Anu, Enlil, and Ea built heaven and the underworld, they revealed signs’.  

In V:53–64, Marduk then takes the other inner half of Tiamat and creates the land, the Tigris and Euphrates, the mountains, and the wedges to support the sky. Afterwards, he scans the entire cosmos: *ipteqma šammē u ĥeṣetim* ‘he surveyed the heavens and the underworld’ (V:65). His next act divides 600 Anunnaki into *elīš u šapliš* ‘upper and lower’ groups (VI:40). Here the adverb *šapliš* ‘beneath’, is synonymous with the underworld when paired with *elīš* ‘above’ (cf. its nominal counterpart *šapliṭu* ‘lower part’, which invariably means “underworld”). Marduk then places 300 of them in the heavens (VI:41) and 300 in the *ĕrṣetim* “underworld” (VI:43). He also distributes incomes to the Anunnaki of *šammē u...*
erṣetim ‘heaven and the underworld’ (VI:46). Had there not been an underworld prior, it would not have been possible to station the Anunnaki there. Thus, Marduk’s establishment of the sky and land in Tablet VI parallels the creation of sky and land in Gen 1:6–10, not the heavens and underworld of Gen 1:1.

Additional support comes from two of Marduk’s fifty names. His second name is “Marukka: he is the god who created them, who put the Anunnaki at ease, the Igigi at rest” (VI:133–134). The word pair Anunnakki/Igigi generally denotes the underworld and heavens (cf. VI:69). Similarly, Marduk’s fifth name is Lugaldimmeranki, which the text glosses as meaning “He is the lord of heaven and the underworld (šamē u erṣetim), the king at whose injunctions the gods in upper and lower (eliš u šapliš) regions shudder” (VI:141–142).

The combined evidence strongly argues in favor of rejecting the conventional reading of Enuma Elish I:1 as “heaven” and “earth” in favor of “heaven” and the “underworld.” As Hutter rightly observes, the conventional reading leaves the appearance of the underworld elsewhere in the myth unexplained.87 It complies neither with Babylonian cosmology nor with the many instances of the merism elsewhere in cuneiform texts. Indeed, when read in this light, the descriptions of Apsu and Tiamat in I:3–5 represent an expansion of the first two verses, for they provide and explain the raw materials from which the heavens, earth, and underworld will be made. Thus, Anu “heaven” is the offspring of Apsu and Tiamat (I:14), Ea’s slaying of Apsu creates the underworld (I:69–71),88 and Marduk’s murder of Tiamat produces the sky and the land (IV:103–V:62). The result, is the Babylonian five-part cosmology, one that is identical to that of Ugarit and Israel, and which shares the same linguistic and etiological confusion: šamû ‘heavens, sky’ and erṣetu ‘earth, underworld’.

Heavens (Anu = šamû)  
Sky (šamû)  
Earth (erṣetu)  
Subterranean waters (Apsu) and great deep (nagbu)  
Underworld (erṣetu)

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88. Ea builds his dwelling on top of the deceased Apsu, which fittingly makes his body the equivalent of the underworld (I:71).
In the light of Hutter’s proposal and the additional evidence garnered here, I submit that there are a great number of other references to šamē and erṣetu in Sumerian and Akkadian texts that need to be revisited.