

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

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Abstract: *In this contribution I argue that האָרץ in Gen 1:1 must mean “the underworld.” After surveying evidence for rendering אָרץ as “underworld” elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, and examining cognate evidence from Mesopotamia and Ugarit, I contend that, as a merism, reading השָׁמַיִם and האָרץ 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 האָרץ in Gen 1:1 as the “underworld.” The article concludes with an excursus on Enuma Elish.*

Gen 1:1–2

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ
וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתָה תֵהוּ וּבְהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם

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 האָרץ, 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 אָרץ means “underworld” elsewhere in the Bible. In the second, I offer cognate data from Mesopotamia and Ugarit.¹ In the

1. The Egyptian *t3* ‘land’ also doubles for “underworld.” See R. Hannig, *Die Sprache der Pharaonen: Großes Handwörterbuch Ägyptisch-Deutsch (2800–950 v. Chr.)* (Kulturgeschichte der Antiken Welt 64; Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1995), p. 913; E. Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many* (trans. J. Baines; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 228.

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 (צִלְמוֹת)” (Job 10:21).² 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” (הָאֶרֶץ) (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 (אֶרֶץ) 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.

2. M. Hutter, “Earth אֶרֶץ,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, and P. W van der Horst; Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 272–273; M. Hutter, “Heaven-and-Earth שָׁמַיִם וָאֶרֶץ,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons*, pp. 390–391; M. Hutter and M. de Jonge, “Heaven שָׁמַיִם οὐρανός,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons*, pp. 388–390.

Isaiah’s famous words to the king of Babylon describe him as having fallen from heaven לְאֲרָץ ‘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 (שְׁאוֹל) (Isa 14:13–15). He later prophesies that “The underworld (הָאֲרָץ) 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 (תִּבְלָה), and those who dwell in the underworld (אֲרָץ)” (Isa 18:3).³ Jeremiah refers to the dead as יְסוּרֵי בְּאֲרָץ ‘those who depart into the earth’ (Jer 17:13),⁴ and Jonah describes his near death experience as an entrance to the underworld: “At the mountain’s edges I descended to the underworld (הָאֲרָץ)” (Jonah 2:7). The Psalmist also hopes for a time when: “All who sleep in the underworld (אֲרָץ) 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).⁵ One could add more examples, but this should suffice to demonstrate that אֲרָץ can mean “underworld” in the Bible.⁶

2. EARTH AS UNDERWORLD IN MESOPOTAMIA AND UGARIT

Mesopotamian texts similarly employ the Akkadian cognate term *eršetu* for both “earth” and “underworld” (Sumerian *kur* or *ki*).⁷ However, most occurrences of *eršetu* refer to the underworld.⁸ As Wayne Horowitz observes, “unambiguous examples of *eršetu* as a name for the earth’s surface are more difficult to identify.”⁹ Thus, the opening verses of the *Descent of Ishtar* inform us: *ana kur.nu.gi₄.a (= eršet lā târi) ana qaqqari l[ā târi] Ištār mārat ^dSîn uzunša iškun* ‘To Kurnugî (i.e., land of no return), to the territory of n[o return], Ishtar, the daughter of Sîn, set her attention’

3. The fourth century poet Yose ben Yose and the medieval exegete Saadia Gaon both understood the verse in this way—observed by M. Lubetski and C. Gottlieb, “Isaiah 18: The Egyptian Nexus,” in *Boundaries of the Ancient Near Eastern World: A Tribute to Cyrus H. Gordon* (ed. M. Lubetski, C. Gottlieb, and S. Keller; JSOTS 273; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p. 375.

4. Isaiah similarly employs the synonym עָפָר ‘dust’ when referring to the dead as שְׁכֵנֵי עָפָר ‘dwellers of the dust’ (Isa 26:19).

5. Reading דְּשֵׁנֵי-אֲרָץ as שְׁנֵי-אֲרָץ, with NAB, since “fat of the land” makes little sense in this context.

6. See N. J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of the Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament* (Roma: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1969), pp. 23–46.

7. W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1998), pp. 268–269. Horowitz identifies at least seventeen Sumerian names and sixteen Akkadian names for the underworld (pp. 268–301).

8. CAD E 310–311, s.v. *eršetu*; CAD Q 124.

9. W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, p. 273.

(lines 1–2).¹⁰ This “land,” we are told, is a lightless place where the dead “eat clay and drink muddy water” (line 33).¹¹ 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 eršetim ețemmašu mē lišașmi* ‘below in the underworld may his ghost thirst for water’ (43:38). The sufferer in *Ludlul bēl nemēqi* also complains (II 52): *ištu irat eršetim (KI-tim) išīha di’u* ‘the *di’u*-demon blew forth from the depth of the underworld’. It is also from the *erșetu* ‘underworld’ that Enkidu’s spirit was summoned after he died (*Epic of Gilgamesh* XII 83). One hemerology also proclaims Shamash 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.¹² In the incantations series *Utukkū-Lemnūtu* IV 40–42, one also reads: “In the absence of Bēlet-șēri, august scribe of the underworld (*arallē*), no foot can enter the underworld (*ki = erșeti*), nor any path negotiate the underworld (*erșeti*).”¹³ Such references could be multiplied.

The Ugaritic cognate *arș* similarly can be used for “earth” and “underworld,”¹⁴ and cases of the latter are fairly clear. The abode of the god Mot ‘Death’ is naturally called *arș*, 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 (*arș*), be numbered among those who descend into the underworld (*arș*)” (*CAT* 1.5 v 15–16). When messengers discover that Baal is dead they tell El: “We came upon Baal fallen to the underworld (*arș*)” (*CAT* 1.5 vi 8–9). They then call him *zbl b l arș* ‘Prince, Lord (lit. Baal) of the underworld’ (*CAT* 1.5 vi 10).¹⁵ Upon hearing the news, El performs mourning

10. P. Lapinkivi, *The Neo-Assyrian Myth of Ištar’s Descent and Resurrection* (State Archives of Assyria Cuneiform Texts 6; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2010), p. 9, reads *l[a ta-ari]* ‘no return’ instead of *E[reškigal]*.

11. See also l. 85: *Ištār ana erșeti ūrid ul ilā* ‘Ishtar has descended to the underworld, and she has not come up’.

12. See the fragment 46553, in A. Livingstone, “The Use of Magic in the Assyrian and Babylonian Hemerologies and Menologies,” *SEL* 15 (1998): 62.

13. M. J. Geller, *Evil Demons: Canonical Utukkū-Lemnūtu Incantations* (State Archives of Assyria Cuneiform Texts 5; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2007), pp. 111, 204.

14. G. del Olmo Lete and J. Sanmartín, “*arș*,” *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition* (trans. W. G. E. Watson; Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 107–108; J. Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978), p. 142; M. S. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle. Vol. 1: Introduction with Text, Translation and Commentary of KTU 1.1–1.2* (VTSup 55; Leiden: Brill, 1994), pp. 145, 176, n. 118.

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 *ard bars̄* ‘I shall descend into the underworld’ (*CAT* 1.5 vi 26).¹⁶ Anat then sets out to find him “in the midst of the underworld (*ars̄*)” (*CAT* 1.5. vi 27), and indeed, this is where she finds him: “fallen into the underworld (*ars̄*)” (*CAT* 1.5. vi 31–32). She then buries Baal in a *hrt ilm ars̄* ‘cavern of the underworld gods’ (*CAT* 1.5 vi 18). The name of one of Baal’s daughters, Artsay “Little Underworld,” also reveals her chthonic origins.¹⁷ Ugaritic texts also refer to the *rpi ars̄* ‘shades of the underworld’ (*CAT* 1.15 iii 3, 14; 1.161:2, 4, 5, 9).

3. MERISMS AND ISRAELITE COSMOLOGY

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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ Above the land were the heavens and beneath it was the under-

over the underworld. See also 1.4 vii 43–44, in which Baal’s rhetorical question reflects his opinion that Mot is no match for him as king: *u mlk u bl mlk ars̄ drkt yštkn* ‘Should a king (i.e., I) or non-king (i.e., Mot) establish dominion over the underworld?’

16. Compare the words of Jacob אֶל-בְּנֵי אֶבְרָהָם אֶל-בְּנֵי אֶבְרָהָם אֶל-בְּנֵי אֶבְרָהָם ‘Verily I shall descend to Sheol mourning for my son’ (Gen 37:35).

17. She has been identified with the Mesopotamian underworld figure Allatum. See M. S. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, 1:72. I read the -y at the end of her name as a diminutive.

18. A. M. Honeyman, “Merismus in Biblical Hebrew,” *JBL* 71 (1952): 11–18; J. Krašovec, *Der Merismus im Biblisch-Hebräischen und Nordwestsemitischen* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1977); J. Krašovec, “Merism—Polar Expression in Biblical Hebrew,” *Biblica* 64 (1983): 231–239.

19. Exod 20:4 (= Deut 5:8) does not reflect a different tripartate cosmology, as some have suggested (e.g., M. Hutter, “Earth אֶרֶץ,” 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 מִמַּעַל בַּשָּׁמַיִם or מִתַּחַת בְּאֶרֶץ מִתַּחַת or בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לְאֶרֶץ.” Since the author presumes the presence of no other gods in heaven, the phrase מִמַּעַל בַּשָּׁמַיִם must mean “in the sky above.” Similarly, unlike Mesopotamian cosmology, Israelite cosmology did not view the underworld as a place populated by other gods or demons. Only dead humans lived there. Therefore, מִתַּחַת בְּאֶרֶץ 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 רִפְאִים ‘shades’ writhe beneath the waters).

world.²⁰ A firmament (רְקִיעַ) in the heavens also contained a reservoir of water.²¹ 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.²²

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 (*šamê*)
Sky with stars (*šamê*)
Earth (*eršetu*)
Apsu with subterranean waters (*nagbu*)
Underworld (*eršetu*)

Finally, the words מַתְּחַת לְאָרֶץ בְּמִים 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 (שָׁמַיִם) and the underworld (וְאֶרֶץ), the sea (הַיָּם), 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.

20. On the tripartite cosmology, see N. Wyatt, *Myths of Power: A Study of Royal Myth and Ideology in Ugaritic and Biblical Tradition* (Ugaritisch-biblische Literatur 13; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1996), pp. 20–24.

21. See, J. E. Wright, *The Early History of Heaven* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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 *šamê u eršetu* to mean “heaven and the underworld.”²³ 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.íb.gu.lu* ‘His lordship is great in heaven and the underworld’.²⁴ A Sumerian poem employs the merism to comment on the limits of human knowledge: *an sù.ud.da gim šu.mu sá bí.in.dug₄.ga ki buru₃.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’.²⁵ 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’.²⁶

Representative of the merism in Akkadian is the title of Šamaš: *bēl šamê u eršetim* ‘Lord of heaven and the underworld’,²⁷ which, much like his epithet *rē’û šaplāti nāqidu elāti* ‘shepherd of that below, herdsman of that above’,²⁸ characterizes his orbit through the sky during the day and underworld at night.²⁹ Elsewhere the merism refers to gods returning to their abodes: *ilū ša šamê ana šamê itelū ilū ša eršetim and eršetim itterbu* ‘the gods of heaven entered heaven, and the gods of the underworld entered the underworld’.³⁰ The mayor of the Canaanite city of Ginti employed the same merism in a letter to the Egyptian pharaoh: *šumma nītelli ana šamê šamēma šumma nūrrad ina eršeti rūšunu ina qāteka* ‘Were we to go up to heaven, were we to descend to the underworld, our head is in

23. See N. Wasserman, *Style and Form in Old-Babylonian Literary Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 73–79.

24. TCL 16, pl. cxlviii, translated by W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths* (Mesopotamian Civilizations 16; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), p. 258.

25. B. Alster, “The Sumerian Poem of Early Rulers and Related Poems,” *OLP* 21 (1990): 18, 23 (lines 16–17).

26. A. Falkenstein, *Die Haupttypen der sumerischen Beschwörung literarisch untersucht* (Leipziger semitische Studien, Bd., 1; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1931), pp. 99–100.

27. CAD E 310, s.v. *eršetu*. See also his Sumerian title *en gal a.ra.li.ke₄* ‘great lord of the underworld’, cited in W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, p. 191.

28. *Hymn to Šamaš*, l. 33, in W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 128–129.

29. This journey is referenced in the *Epic of Baal* at Ugarit, in which the sun goddess Šapš is told to descend to the underworld to speak with the god Mot “Death” (CAT 1.4 viii 21–30).

30. H. C. Rawlinson, *The Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia* (London: R. E. Bowler, 1875), vol. 4, pl. 28, No. 2, lines 19–21. CAD 310, s.v. *eršetu*.

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*)

31. Amarna letter 264:17, translated in W. L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 313.

32. J. E. Wright, *The Early History of Heaven*, pp. 48–51.

33. The polyglot vocabulary list from Ugarit identifies the Ugaritic *arṣ* with Akkadian *erṣetu* and Sumerian idiom "underworld." See J. Huehnergard, *Ugaritic Vocabulary in Syllabic Transcription* (HSM 32; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), p. 110.

34. The notion that *arṣ* cannot mean "underworld" in the merism is asserted without argument by M. S. Smith and W. Pitard, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*. 2:202, n. 9. Nevertheless, Smith translated *arṣ* in this same passage as "Hell" in S. B. Parker, ed., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (SBLWAW 9; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), p. 110.

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 (*arṣ*) and the heaven (*šmm*)! Travel to the ends of the underworld (*arṣ*), 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.³⁶ The merism occurs also in relation to the voracious appetite of newborn gods: *št špt larṣ špt lšmm wy’rb bphm ‘šr 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).³⁷ 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 fowl (sky) and fish (great deep). The pair *šmm-warṣ* ‘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]).³⁸ There is only one other passage in which the merism appears, but it is expanded and its meaning is unclear.³⁹

36. The text even reverses the merism. Usually *šmm* precedes *arṣ*. Note the remark of N. Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit: The Words of Ilmilku and His Colleagues* (The Biblical Seminar 53; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p. 231, n. 250: “In the formula *arṣ wšmm*, *arṣ*, probably has overtones of the underworld.”

37. Note the parallel to Isa 5:14 adduced by B. Cutler and J. MacDonald, “On the Origin of the Ugaritic Text *KTU* 1.23,” *UF* 14 (1982): 43: “Therefore *She’ol* widens its gullet, it opens its mouth without limit, its noble-class, and masses, and its roisterer and reveler descend into it.” M. S. Smith, *The Rituals and Myths of the Feast of the Goodly Gods of KTU/CAT 1.23: Royal Constructions of Opposition, Intersection, Integration, and Domination* (Resources for Biblical Study 51; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), p. 111, similarly observes that the text mirrors the appetite of the god Mot “Death” in *CAT* 1.5 ii 2, though there the merism is reversed. He also suggests a possible thematic parallel with an artistic depiction of a two-headed god devouring child sacrifices from Pozo Moro (p. 113). The parallels to Sheol, Mot, and child sacrifices argue in favor of seeing “earth” in *CAT* 1.23.62 as “underworld.” Moreover, the parallel between *arṣ* ‘earth’ and *dg bym* ‘fish of the sea’, suggests the subterranean water between the earth and the underworld.

38. D. T. Tsumura, “A ‘Hyponymous’ Word Pair: *’rṣ* and *thm(t)* in Hebrew and Ugaritic,” *Biblica* 69 (1988): 258–269, argues that when paired “heaven and earth,” the two comprise cosmic entities. M. Hutter, “Heaven-and-Earth,” p. 391, observes that the pair “has different degrees of divinity” beyond ancient Israel, and thus, they are entreated as gods to serve as witnesses to treaties in Mesopotamian, Hittite, and Ugaritic sources.

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 *!l šmm šmn arṣ rbb [r]kb ‘rpt* ‘the dew of heaven, oil of the underworld, showers of the Rider of the Clouds (i.e., Baal)’. Even if we translate *šmn arṣ* ‘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: *וַיִּתֵּן לְךָ הָאֱלֹהִים מִטֵּל הַשָּׁמַיִם וּמִשְׁמֵנֵי הָאָרֶץ וְרֵב דְּגָן וְתִירֹשׁ* ‘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 שָׁמַיִם and אֲרֶץ in Gen 1:1 as the “heavens” and the “underworld.” Additional evidence comes from several biblical passages in which the author chose to pair שָׁמַיִם ‘heavens’ not with אֲרֶץ ‘underworld’, but with its synonym שְׂאוֹל ‘Sheol’. Thus, in a statement reminiscent of the mayor of Ginti cited above, Amos prophesies: “If they dig down to Sheol (שְׂאוֹל), from there my hand will take them. If they ascend to the heavens (הַשָּׁמַיִם), from there I will make them descend” (Amos 9:2). Witness also Zophar’s query to Job: “They are higher than the heavens (שָׁמַיִם)—what can you do? Deeper than Sheol (שְׂאוֹל)—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.⁴⁰ 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 שָׁמַיִם ‘sky’. Afterwards, he

only other cognate expression of which I am aware is the Akkadian phrase *šaman eršeti (ki)*, known only from an incipit of a song now lost. See B. Groneberg, “Searching for Akkadian Lyrics: From Babylonian to the ‘Lieder Katalog’ 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 שָׁמַיִם and אֲרֶץ 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 Eary 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.bad.DU.a.ba ki an.ta ba.da.sur.ra.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 שָׁמַיִם 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 הָאָדָם ‘humankind’ reflects its creation from the הָאֲדָמָה ‘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 (שָׁמַיִם)

Sky (שָׁמַיִם) and supraterranean waters (הַרְקִיעַ)

Earth (אֶרֶץ)

Seas (יַמִּים) and subterranean waters (תְּהוֹם)

Underworld (אֶרֶץ)

41. Various translations have grappled with the problem by rendering the second occurrence of שָׁמַיִם 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).

43. The starry sky of the Babylonian version is the equivalent of the Israelite’s sky containing water, and the Apsû (great deep) equates with the Israelite subterranean waters. In Mesopotamian, Ugaritic, and Israelite cosmologies, dew comes from the stars. See E. Reiner, *Astral Magic in Babylonia* (Transactions of the American Philosophical Society 85; Independence Square: American Philosophical Society, 1995), pp. 59–60, 101–103; Judg 6:36–40, Hag 1:10, cf. n. 39 above. The underworld also has gates in Mesopotamian and Israelite belief. See S. N. Paul, “Gates of the Underworld,” in *A Woman of Valor: Jerusalem Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honor of Joan Goodnick Westenholz* (ed. W. Horowitz, U. Gabbay, and F. Vukosavović; Biblioteca del Próximo Oriente Antiguo 8; Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2010), pp. 163–170.

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 הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ* ‘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

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” (*מָשַׁל*) the daytime and nighttime skies. In Gen 1:26, he grants mankind the right to “have dominion” (*רָדָה*) 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 *מֶלֶךְ* ‘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*,⁴⁹ to include the underworld. See, for instance, the Psalmist’s observation: “If I go up to the heavens (שָׁמַיִם), you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol (שְׂאוֹל), you are there” (Ps 139:8).⁵⁰ As he goes on to say: “My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place (בְּסִתְרָה), when I was woven together in the depths of the underworld (בְּתַחְתִּיּוֹת אֲרֶץ)” (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 בְּתַחְתִּיּוֹת ‘in the depths’, and certainly would have preferred אֲדָמָה ‘soil’ instead of אֲרֶץ ‘underworld’.⁵¹

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 מוֹת ‘death’ and צִלְמוֹת ‘shadow-of-death’ have

D. T. Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction: A Reappraisal of the Chaoskampf Theory in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005).

49. Perhaps this also relates to Yahweh’s solar aspects, see H.-P. Stähli, *Solare Elemente im Jahweglauben des Alten Testaments* (Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 1985); J. G. Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun: Biblical and Archaeological Evidence for Sun Worship in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); S. A. Wiggins, “Yahweh: The God of Sun?” *JSOT* 71 (1996): 89–106; M. Klingbeil, *Yahweh Fighting from Heaven: God as Warrior and as God of Heaven in the Hebrew Psalter and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography* (OBO 169; Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1999); I. Koch, “The ‘Chariots of the Sun’ (2 Kings 23:11),” *Semitica* 54 (2012): 211–219.

50. See similarly Yahweh’s instruction to Ahaz: “Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the depths of Sheol (שְׂאוֹל) or in the highest heights (לְמַעְלָה)” (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 (בְּשְׂאוֹל)?”

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 עַצְמִי ‘my frame’ (lit. “my bone”; Ps 139:15). In *Atrahasis* 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 רַחְבֵּי־אֲרָץ ‘expanses of the underworld’ (38:18).⁵² 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 (שָׁמַיִם), can you place his (Yahweh’s) dominion in the underworld (בְּאֲרָץ)?” (38:33).

The merism similarly appears in a description of Yahweh’s throne in Isa 66:1: “The heavens (הַשָּׁמַיִם) are my throne, and the underworld (הָאֲרָץ) 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 אֲרוֹן, which means “coffin.”⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ 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 (הָאֲרָץ). You have made heaven and the underworld (הָאֲרָץ)” (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 (הַשָּׁמַיִם) and the underworld (הָאֲרָץ)?” (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

52. Compare הִרְחִיבָהּ שְׂאוֹל ‘He (God) will expand Sheol’ (Isa 5:14); and the Akkadian expressions *eršetu rapaštu* ‘capacious land’ and *eršetu rabītu* ‘great land’, both used for the underworld.

53. See, S. B. Noegel, “The Egyptian Origin of the Ark of the Covenant,” in *Israel’s Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture, and Geoscience* (ed. T. E. Levy, T. Schneider, and W. H. C. Propp; Quantitative Methods in the Humanities and Social Sciences; New York: Springer, 2014), pp. 223–242.

54. O. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (New York: Seabury, 1978), pp. 253–256, provides the evidence in comparison with Ps 110:1: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”

I will once more shake the heavens (הַשָּׁמַיִם) and the underworld (הָאָרֶץ), the sea (הַיָּם) and the dry land (הַחֲרָבָה). I shall shake all nations” (Hag 2:6–7; cf. 2:21). Since הַשָּׁמַיִם does not parallel הַיָּם, it is impossible to read הָאָרֶץ as a parallel to הַחֲרָבָה. Consequently, הָאָרֶץ 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 (הַשָּׁמַיִם) and the underworld (הָאָרֶץ) as witnesses against you that I have set before you the life (הַחַיִּים) and the death (וְהַמָּוֶת), the blessing (הַבְּרָכָה) and the curse (וְהַקְּלָלָה).”⁵⁵ Only when we translate הָאָרֶץ as “the underworld” does הַמָּוֶת ‘the death’ make sense, for as Anne Marie Kitz observes, “In the end, the ultimate goal of all curses is separation from life.”⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ Hence, the sarcophagus curses of the Phoenician kings Tabnit and Eshmunazar, which invoke the shades (רפאים) against would-be grave robbers.⁵⁸

5. WHY THEN HEAVEN AND EARTH?

The understanding of שָׁמַיִם and אָרֶץ 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 (יָמוּת) at a hundred years will be considered a lad, and one who does not reach one hundred will be considered accursed (מִקְלָל);” Ps 27:22: “Those whom (God) blesses will inherit land, whereas those whom he curses (מִקְלָלֵי) will be cut off (יִכָּרְתוּ).”

57. J. G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. cxlviii, clv, ccxi.

58. In H. Donner and W. Röllig, *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1962), pp. 13, 14.

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 אָרֶץ 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

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

60. Some early authors of liturgical poetry understood אָרֶץ in some passages as referring to the underworld. See E. D. Goldschmidt, מְחֹזֵר לַיָּמִים הַנּוֹרָאִים: לְפִי מְנַהֵג בְּנֵי אֲשַׁכְּנוּ לְכָל עֲנֻפֵיהֶם כּוֹלֵל מְנַהֵג אֲשַׁכְּנוּ (המערבי) (Prayer book for the high holy days I: Rosh Hashanah; New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1970), p. 270. See also D. ben Joseph ben David, סֵפֶר אַבְדָרְהָם הַשְּׁלֵם (The complete book of Abudarham; Jerusalem: Usha, 1963), p. 269. Noted by M. Lubetski and C. Gottlieb, “Isaiah 18: The Egyptian Nexus,” p. 376, n. 57.

with multiple heavens, teeming with angelic activity.⁶¹ 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.⁶² 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.”⁶³

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.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵

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.

62. See J. J. Collins, “The Afterlife in Apocalyptic Literature,” in *Judaism in Late Antiquity*, vol. 3 (ed. J. Neusner, et al.; Leiden: Brill, 2001).

63. J. E. Wright, *The Early History of Heaven*, p. 183.

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 (לִשְׁאוֹל) 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.

Press, 2006), p. 222, who states that "there was no single Jewish orthodoxy on the time, mode, and place of resurrection, immortality, and eternal life."

66. A. F. Segal, *Life after Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), pp. 697–707.

67. M. P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* (3rd ed; Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft 5; München: Beck, 1974), pp. 240–241; J. J. Collins, "The Afterlife in Apocalyptic Literature." 3:132–133.

68. Vestiges of this earlier concept do appear in some New Testament texts, for example, Eph 4:8–10; Phil 2:10; Rev 5:3. Nevertheless, Christian theology increasingly transformed the underworld into Hell. Already in the Second Temple Period, the Greek concept of Hades, which had entered Judaism as the Greek translation of Hebrew Sheol, had lost its original meaning as an underworld god and place of cold and pallid existence (cf. *Odyssey* 24.204). Early Christians, who relied on the Septuagint, inherited from Judaism the conception of Hades and the separate notion of a fiery location to punish sinners (see J. J. Collins, "The Afterlife in Apocalyptic Literature," pp. 122–123), though they transformed them and gave them eschatological roles. Hades and its wicked would be thrown into Gehenna or the Lake of Fire, along with Death and the Devil at the end of times (Rev 20:10–14). On these developments, see A. E. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); H. A. Kelly, "Hell with Purgatory and Two Limbos: The Geography and Theology of the Underworld," in *Hell and Its Afterlife: Historical*

It is this “new” cosmology that informs the earliest Bible translations,⁶⁹ 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 otherworldly 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.⁷⁰

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 Judaism and Christianity, 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.

and Contemporary Perspectives (ed. I. Moreira and M. Toscano; Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 121–136.

69. Thus, the translations of the Septuagint ($\gamma\eta$) and Vulgate (*terra*) in Gen 1:1, both reflect the understanding “earth.” The Peshitta’s cognate *ar ‘ā* retains the ambiguity of the Hebrew, but it was understood to mean “earth.”

70. S. L. Cook, “Funerary Practices,” p. 661.

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."⁷¹ 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.⁷² 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*.⁷³ It is difficult to overestimate

71. W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, p. 171.

72. See B. T. Arnold, "Assyriology and Biblical Studies: Time for Reassessment?" *The Bible and Interpretation* (2005). Online: <http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2005/04/arn308001.shtml>, who discusses previous pitfalls besetting comparative work by biblicists and Assyriologists, such as the "Babel und Bibel" controversy and parallelomania. On the former, see also B. T. Arnold and D. B. Weisberg, "A Centennial Review of Friedrich Delitzsch's 'Babel und Bibel' Lectures," *JBL* 121 (2002): 441–457. On the latter, see S. Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *JBL* 81 (1962): 1–13. The latter is based on his presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature in 1961.

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.⁷⁴ 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.⁷⁵ 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.⁷⁶ 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 aforementioned 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 *eršetu*, like *eršetu*, it can refer to “land” or the “underworld.”⁷⁷ However, the reading “underworld” is much preferred. Indeed, long ago,

74. See V. Cregan-Redi, *Discovering Gilgamesh: Geology, Narrative and the Historical Sublime in Victorian Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

75. Republished with a brief introduction in G. Smith, “The Chaldean Account of the Deluge,” in *The Flood Myth* (ed. A. Dundes; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 29–48. Smith presumes the audience’s knowledge of the biblical text when he says, “The Biblical account of the Deluge, contained in the sixth to the ninth chapters of Genesis, is of course, familiar to us all” (p. 42).

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.”

77. See CAD M/2 75, s.v. *ammatu* B; W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, p. 268. Compare an incantation to *Enmešarra*, in which synonyms for both terms also bear out the merism: *bēl ašri kur.nu.gi4 šadū ša d’anunnaki* “Lord (Enmešarra) of heaven and the underworld, Mountain of the Anunnaki.” In R. Borger, “Das Tempelbau-Ritual K 48+,” *ZA* 61 (1971): 77.

Manfred Hutter proposed that we should read *ammatu* as “underworld,” yet, with one exception, his insight appears to have fallen on deaf ears.⁷⁸

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 (*šamê*) and 300 in the earth (*eršetu*); 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 ašar eršetimma* ‘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 *eršetu*. 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 *eršetu* as “netherworld” in VI:43, 44, 46, 79, 100, 141, 144 (though he translates *eršetu* 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 *eršetu*. Since *eršetu* is the commonest term for “underworld,” *ammatu* and *dannatu* must be synonyms.⁷⁹ Another lexical tradition equates the related form *danninu* ‘underworld’ with *eršetu*.⁸⁰ Commentaries to *Enuma Elish* and the *Babylonian Theodicy* record similar traditions.⁸¹

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.”⁸² Moreover, this accords with an earlier tradition in which the divine triad creates the cosmos

79. I:51 reads: *am-ba-tu₄* = *dan-na-tu*; and II:13: *am-ba-tu₄* = *er-še-tu₄*. See I. Hrusa, *Die akkadische Synonymenliste malku = šarru: Ein Textedition mit Übersetzung und Kommentar* (Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 2010), pp. 32–33, 199; CAD A/2 75, s.v. *ammatu*; B. Hutter, “*ammatu*,” p. 187, notes only the first lexical tradition.

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*.

81. In *Enuma Elish* VII:135 *danninu* is paired with *ašru*, a poetic term for “heaven.” The commentary identifies *danninu* as *eršetu*. See W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, pp. 130–131, 134. The commentary to the *Babylonian Theodicy*, line 58, identifies: *a-ma*(text *ba*)-*tīš* = *am-ma-tīš* = *kīma* (gim) *er-še-tū*. See W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, p. 74. The latter also was observed by B. Hutter, “*ammatu*,” p. 187.

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

without mention of Marduk: *enu^d anu^d enlil u^d ea ilāni rabûti šamê u eršeta ibnû ûddû giskimma* ‘When Anu, Enlil, and Ea built heaven and the underworld, they revealed signs’.⁸³

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 šamê u eršetim* ‘he surveyed the heavens and the underworld’ (V:65).⁸⁴ His next act divides 600 Anunnaki into *eliš u šapliš* ‘upper and lower’ groups (VI:40). Here the adverb *šapliš* ‘beneath’, is synonymous with the underworld when paired with *eliš* ‘above’ (cf. its nominal counterpart *šaplītu* ‘lower part’, which invariably means “underworld”).⁸⁵ Marduk then places 300 of them in the heavens (VI:41) and 300 in the *eršetim* “underworld” (VI:43).⁸⁶ He also distributes incomes to the Anunakki of *šamê u*

Cited in CAD E 364, s.v. *ešgallu*. W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, p. 476, also notes the traditions. On the overlap between the Apsu and underworld, see also n. 78 above.

83. W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, p. 177, also reads *eršetu* here as “underworld.”

84. Though the verb *patāqu* means “construct with bricks,” “smelt, refine, cast metals,” or “fashion, form,” W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, p. 101, translates *ipteqma* in V:65 as “surveyed,” probably because Marduk already had ceased his creative work. CAD P 273, s.v. *patāqu*. I contend that the solution of how to understand *ipteqma* and *eršetim* here lies in two texts. The first, is the Akkadian synonym list LTBA 2 2 i 2–5, which equates *eršetu* with the following terms: *kiūru*, *danninu*, *lammu*, and *irkallu*. The second is KAR 307, which identifies *danninu* more specifically as a *surface* of the lowest earth. Since the *danninu* is a surface that prevents the dead from entering the land of the living, it must be the ceiling of the underworld and not its floor, which also makes it the floor of earth. This would match Horowitz’s suggestion (p. 16) that the synonym *dannatu* is the floor of the Apsu (and thus the ceiling of the underworld). With regard to the synonym *kiūru*, Horowitz observes that its near Sumerian homonym *ki.ūr.a* is explained in *an.ta.gál = šaqū* G 22 (MSL 17 221) as *nēreb eršetim* “the entrance to the underworld” (W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, p. 276). This also would identify it as the underworld’s ceiling. Thus, the words *ipteqma šamê u eršetim* V:65 must refer to the creation of “land and the sky.” Indeed, this is what it must mean, since the heavens and the underworld already appeared in Tablet I. The ambiguity here is perhaps deliberate for it forces one to contemplate Marduk’s achievement within the larger cosmos in which the gods already had been living. The meaning of *dannina* as the ceiling of the underworld also would explain VII:135: *aššu ašrī ibnâ iptiqa dannina bēl māātī šumšu ittabi abu^d Enlil* ‘because he created the sky and fashioned the underworld’s ceiling, Father Enlil called him Lord of the Lands’.

85. CAD Š/1 464, s.v. *šaplātu*. See also W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, pp. 116, 292–293. Though CAD Š/1 466, s.v. *šapliš*, renders *šapliš* as “earth,” each of the prooftexts it presents, including this passage, refer to other cosmic realms. In *Atraḥasis* II iv 1–2, the term occurs not in reference to the earth, but to the *nagbu* ‘great deep’: *elēnum mi-[...] šapliš ul i[l]lika] mīlu ina nagbi* ‘above [...], below, no flooding came from the great deep’. Thus, the text in the lacuna after *elēnum* likely referred to the sky. The same applies to passages in the Assyrian recension (IV:45, 55). The passage that CAD sites in *Enuma Elish* V:121 refers not to the earth, but to the floor of heaven: *šapliš ašrata udannina qaqqarša* ‘below the heaven, whose floor I made firm’. So similarly, W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, p. 105. Thus, when referring to cosmic regions, *šapliš*, like *šaplātu*, refers to the underworld. Thus, for example, *Utukkū-Lemnūtu* XIII 19: “(The *Sibittu*-demons) sit silently on the paths and are dispersed below (*šapliš*, i.e., in the underworld).” See M. J. Geller, *Evil Demons*, pp. 166, 242.

86. Translated as “netherworld” by W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, p. 113.

eršetim ‘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 (*šamê u eršetim*), 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 aetiological confusion: *šamû* ‘heavens, sky’ and *eršetu* ‘earth, underworld’.

Heavens (Anu = *šamû*)

Sky (*šamû*)

Earth (*eršetu*)

Subterranean waters (Apsu) and great deep (*nagbu*)

Underworld (*eršetu*)

87. M. Hutter, “*ammatu*,” pp. 187–188.

88. Ea builds his dwelling on top of the deceased Apsu, which fittingly makes his body the equivalent of the underworld (I:71).

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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 *šamê* and *eršetu* in Sumerian and Akkadian texts that need to be revisited.