

Cosmology and New Testament Theology: A Brief Introduction

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Cosmology is easily disregarded in the modern world. Pictures of the moon of Saturn are quickly tossed aside to make room for pictures of the stars of Hollywood; the lights of the shopping mall blot out the night sky for a good portion of the population. It was not so in the ancient world. Whether it was the philosopher contemplating the perfection of the heavenly orbits, the farmer searching the sky for signs of when to plant his crops, or the desert-dwelling sectarian looking for the end of the world, the cosmos held an endless fascination and occupied a prominent place in their understanding of life. It is ironic that while scientific knowledge about the universe has exponentially waxed over the last two millennia, popular interest has waned.

In light of the importance of cosmological perspectives in the ancient world, it is unfortunate that the study of cosmology has been relatively under-served in New Testament studies. While there are a few valuable specialty studies on bits and pieces of NT cosmology available,¹ there remains a need for a systematic and overarching study on this crucial backdrop to the worldview of the early Christians. The present study is an attempt to address this lacuna in the field.

Ancient Roots

A fascination with, and fear of the heavens goes deep into human history. In the Ancient Near East, the stars were universally regarded as divine beings, and “astral mythology” is pervasive throughout the literature and iconography of Egypt and Mesopotamia. The Babylonians in particular made meticulous observations about the heavenly bodies, and the interplay of their scientific calculations and their religious beliefs remains a fascinating area of inquiry. Of particular interest was the widespread

¹ For example, A. T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul's Thought with Special Reference to His Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Edward Adams, *Constructing the World: A Study in Paul's Cosmological Language* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000); George H. van Kooten, *Cosmic Christology in Paul and the Pauline School: Colossians and Ephesians in the Context of Graeco-Roman Cosmology, with a New Synopsis of the Greek Texts* (Tubingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2003). Old Testament studies are slightly better served, though the focus has been primarily on a comparison between OT cosmology and that of the ANE. A good point of entry is Bernd Janowski and Beate Ego (eds.), *Das biblische Weltbild und seine altorientalischen Kontexte* (Tubingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2001). Much of the Second Temple apocalyptic literature has obvious connections with cosmological concerns, but this topic in particular is still in need of more study, especially because cosmology is quickly overshadowed by questions of eschatology. One study in this field is A. Y. Collins, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

assumption that terrestrial events were overseen, manipulated, or even completely controlled by celestial forces (see, e.g., the heavenly temple of Marduk as the prototype for the earthly Babylonian temple). The very fact that the heavens were the epitome of predictable, ordered movement made disturbances in that order – comets, falling stars, the uneven movements of the planets (the “wanderers”) – deeply troubling.

Interest in the heavens did not diminish with the advent of the distinctively Greek philosophical approach. The stars remained the standard of perfect order, and if the personalities of various heavenly bodies became less pronounced, they were considered no less, and probably more, divine for all that. Astronomical observation continued and produced many quite remarkable achievements. Astrology, which had doubtless always been present in some form, took on a greater prominence in the Hellenistic period, drawing upon both ancient astral religiosity and scientific (or pseudo-scientific) observation. Further evidence of the centrality of cosmology in the Greco-Roman world can be seen in the works of its greatest philosophers, including Plato (e.g., his highly influential *Timaeus*) and Aristotle (e.g., *De Caelo*).

Biblical Resonance

This cosmologically-conscious world provides the context for the biblical literature, both Old and New Testaments. At the head of the Hebrew Bible stands the claim that the Jewish God made the heavens and the earth. This claim, which is picked up and repeated as a refrain throughout the rest of the Jewish and Christian literature, is a bold statement not only about cosmogony (the machinations of the creation) but also cosmology (the structure of the world) and theology (who God is). As many OT scholars have observed, Genesis 1:1 is a YHWH-exalting assertion within the context of Ancient Near Eastern worldviews. Other OT texts such as Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 manifest motifs drawn from astral mythology, albeit substantially reworked in light of Israelites’ distinctive religious history. At the same time, the worship of the heavenly bodies was regularly and stoutly condemned in the OT, showing that it was considered a clear and present danger by the biblical authors in their own contexts. Yet the foundational text of Genesis 1:14 left room for a positive engagement with ancient astronomy, though this could of course bleed easily into more astrological speculations. (What do we make, for example, of the brontologia and horoscopes within the hyper-orthodox community at Qumran?) Moving beyond the Hebrew Bible into the Second Temple literature, we find that much apocalyptic interest is closely related to cosmological speculation. Frequently using

richly-textured cosmological language and the motif of heavenly journeys, many Second Temple writers show evident concern about the structure of the world as it relates to their theological claims about the Jewish God.

Ancient cosmology is equally important for correctly situating the texts of the NT. The canonical bookends of Matthew and Revelation both show marked interest in cosmological language and concepts. Paul's statements about the "spiritual forces of wickedness" have rightly been seen against the backdrop of cosmic battles of good and evil, while his mention of "ascending to heaven" must be understood within some conceptual framework of the universe. The same goes for the descent/ascent motifs in the gospels, and John in particular. Authors of various apocalyptic strains in the NT paint their picture of the past, present, and future on a cosmic canvas, inviting a closer examination of what comprised this worldview. The eschatological material in 2 Peter, especially its treatment of the destruction of the cosmos, provides one especially striking example. The book of Hebrews with its emphasis on the structure of heaven and earth has many obvious connections with ancient cosmological views in general, and (perhaps) with particular points of Greek philosophy. Allusive references to Jesus as the agent of creation, with their echoes of Proverbs 8 and Genesis 1, are inexplicable apart from some understanding of ancient conceptions of the creation and ordering of the cosmos.

Cosmology and New Testament Theology

It is apparent from these brief examples that an understanding of ancient cosmology will prove relevant to our understanding and appreciation of the NT documents. As mentioned earlier, few studies have undertaken such a project, and none has sought to cover the entire NT with an eye to its theological emphases. But before outlining the goal and scope of this project, it is necessary to raise one foundational question.

When previous scholarly discussion has touched on NT cosmology, typically the focus has been on the precise determination of the number of "levels" or "tiers" of the cosmos, with debates raging between two, three, four, seven, nine, or more of such layers. While this is an understandable line of inquiry in light of Second Temple apocalyptic speculations, it has created two less than helpful consequences for our study of biblical cosmology. First, a focus on the levels of heaven or the exact structure of the universe has often missed the point that biblical cosmological statements are never seen as an end within themselves, but instead always serve a theological purpose. This distinction could be called the difference between a biblical *Weltbild* and biblical *Weltanschauung*. The

Weltbild is the picture of the universe that biblical writers presume and is thus an important topic of analysis. However, far more important than the *Weltbild* is the *Weltanschauung*, the theological or ontological worldview that is communicated by a certain cosmological structure.²

Second, and closely related, many studies of ancient cosmology seem to presuppose that there was a tacit, shared “scientific” view on these matters which met with more or less universal approval in the ancient world. The biblical writers then reflect, or in ignorance deviate from, what everyone knew about the order of the cosmos.

But is this really the case? Bona fide scientific observations of the cosmos, we have seen, go back at least to the Babylonians, and Plato had given a fairly comprehensive philosophical account of the universe in his *Timaeus*. But even in the latter case, he goes out of his way to state that this is only his best guess as to what is going on, and that one ought not to suppose it is a definitive statement at all. More to the point, none of the NT statements about the cosmos has anything remotely like the flavor of scientific inquiry about it. Rather than being better or worse versions of a “scientific” consensus, they instead perform a theological function. Thus, it is certainly possible that various NT writers could have countenanced various schema for the “levels” of the cosmos with the full awareness that these were not meant to be definitive accounts of what is scientifically the case, but rather were employed because they served useful literary or theological purposes. We ought to recognize the latitude people in the first-century had to employ different models according to their theological needs.

This then, is the goal of the present project. Introductory chapters will seek to provide the necessary orientation to ancient cosmology in general. Following this, the NT canon will be systematically examined to inquire as to how cosmological language and concepts *inform, interact with, and contribute to* the specific theological emphases of the various NT books. In some NT books, the importance of cosmology can be easily discerned, while in others what is required is a new and close examination of key cosmological terms (e.g., heaven, earth, world, creation) in the various writings. It should be noted that the focus is not on creation theology per se (though this is a related and worthwhile study), but on cosmological language and concepts, and the theological purpose these serve.

² A study of this distinction and the organic relationship between the OT’s *Weltbild* and *Weltanschauung* can be found in Jonathan T. Pennington, “Dualism in Old Testament Cosmology: *Weltbild* and *Weltanschauung*,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 18/2 (2004): 260-277.

Not every book of the NT will be given a full and separate treatment, but instead the canon has been divided into a number of different sections. Contributors have been sought from among scholars who have a firm grasp on key themes and issues related to their particular assigned texts and who see the integration of historical and theological study as a worthwhile approach to Scripture. We trust that the essays in this volume will make a substantial contribution to our understanding of both the cosmology and theology of the NT.