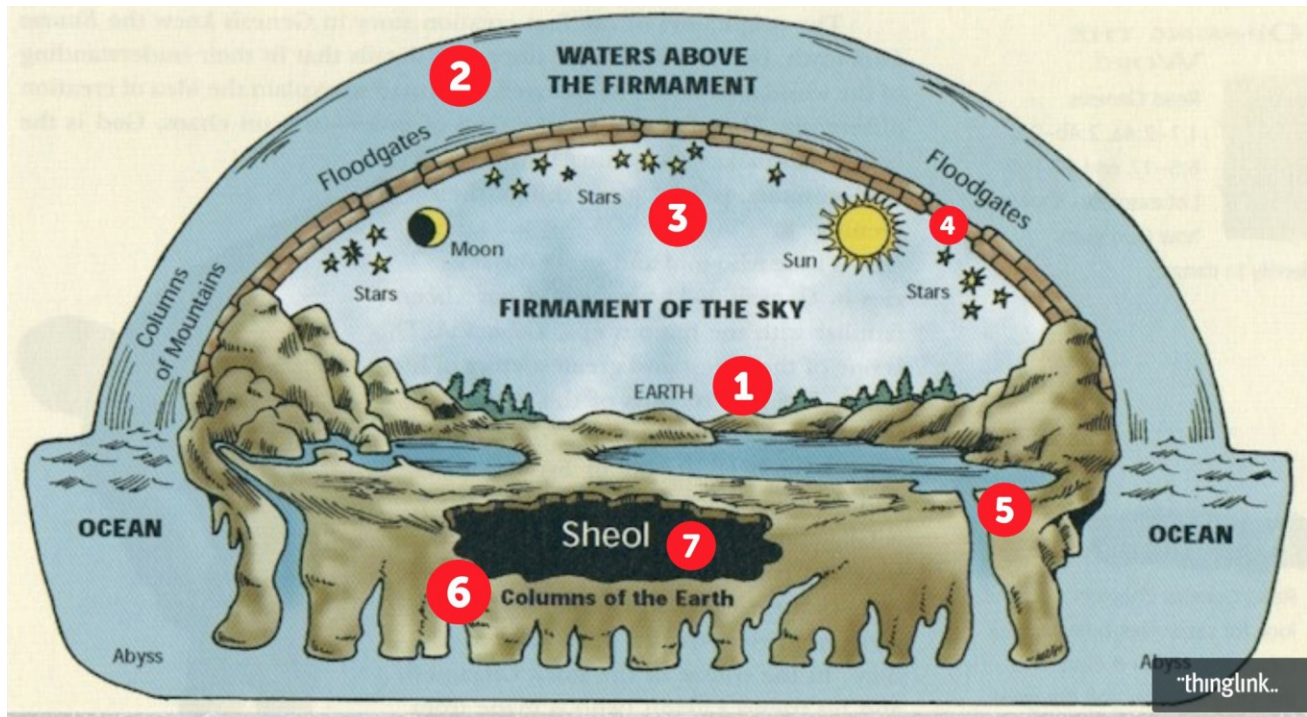


Ancient Cosmologies

Cosmology is a term that refers to the study of the structure and origins of the universe. People throughout history have been interested in how the world in which we live is constructed and how it developed. From ancient writings and artifacts, we've discovered that ancient people imagined a very different universe than we do today.



This image depicts the way that ancient Israelites viewed the world in which they lived—their cosmology. Many of these ideas are found in the Israelite creation stories which are found in the *Book of Genesis*, the first book in the Hebrew Bible.

1. Ancient Israelites believed that the earth was flat. This was true for many in the ancient world.
2. They thought the world was surrounded by water—above, below, and all around.
3. The sky or the space that separates the water above the earth from the water below is often called the “**firmament**” in many of the biblical translations.
4. The water surrounding the earth was the source of rain (and snow). Israelites believed that God would open floodgates in the barrier to allow it to rain and then close them to stop the rain.
5. Rivers and other bodies of water on the earth were formed by the water below the earth.
6. The earth was held in place by strong columns that extended below it.
7. Israelites believed that when people died they would descend to **Sheol**, a place under the earth. Sheol is not the same as hell, an idea which developed much later in time.

“And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament...” (Gen. 1:7).

Online at: <http://bit.ly/IsraeliteUniverse>



This image, from the *Egyptian Book of the Dead of Nesitanebtashru* (around 950 BCE), depicts an Egyptian cosmology. Here, the air god **Shu**, assisted by the ram-headed **Heh** deities, hold up the sky goddess **Nut**. The earth god **Geb** rests below.

1. What do you notice when you compare this cosmology with the Israelite cosmology?

2. In the space below, sketch a picture of the universe that you live in today—your cosmology. How would you compare it to the ancient cosmologies that you have just examined? How is your universe different? Why?