

Session 2: The Biblical Worldview

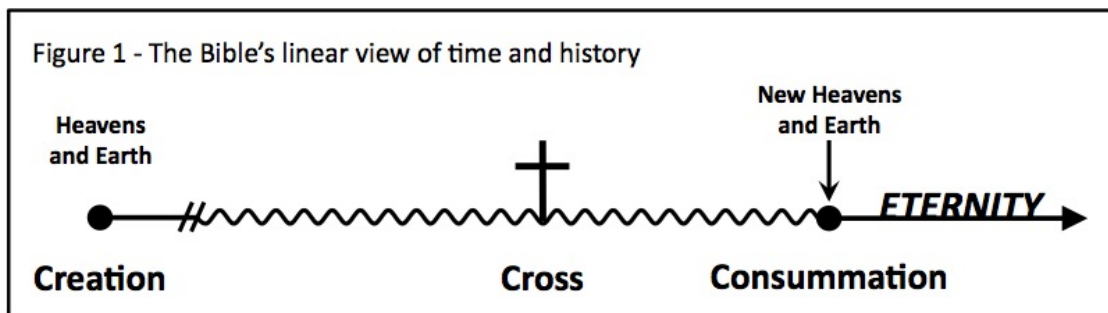
Faith, Hope, and Love: Rediscovering the Essentials of Christianity

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Review

In order to understand the story of Scripture and read the world from the Bible's perspective, we must "play the game" on the Bible's *field* and follow the Bible's *rules*.

Instead of a pagan view of time and eternity (primarily based on Plato and Greek philosophy), the Bible presents time linearly. A simple timeline can be used to describe redemptive history in a *two-age* manner ("this age" and "the age to come"), separated by a climactic day called *the Day of the LORD*.



Worldview - the playing field

We looked at one of the *rules* of the game in the last session, and today we will look at the game's *playing field*.

1. A *worldview* is a system that gives answers to questions that are directly applicable to understanding life: What caused existence? When, how, and why did existence originate? What is our relationship to it? How do we relate to it? How did existence become imperfect? How will it be made right?

A worldview is like a set of colored glasses. If one looks at the same object through green-colored glasses he will see it as green, while another looking at the same object through red glasses will see it as

red. This is why people with different worldviews will often see the same facts in a very different way.¹

A worldview acts like a filter in that it screens and analyzes and categorizes all information so that we can make sense out of the world. It is the frame of reference from which we discern truth from falsehood, make rational decisions, and formulate ethical and religious values. Worldviews are made up of certain presuppositions or assumptions that an individual believes to be true. These presuppositions form the infrastructure of all worldviews.²

In the broadest sense, a worldview is the standard by which an individual, consciously and unconsciously, interprets all data so as to maintain a consistent and coherent understanding of the whole of reality.³

2. All of us, by virtue of the fact that our minds were shaped in the context of Western world in the modern era, have an interpretive lens that we are not even aware when we read the Bible. Though we are ignorant of its existence, it powerfully affects the way the witness of Scripture settles in our minds and hearts.
3. This unperceived filter has been many centuries in the making and it is so deeply entrenched in the Western mind that it is hard to even expose its existence, much less to dethrone its pervasive influence on the way we understand reality.
4. This engrained perspective that so colors our every thought and idea, which so controls the way we assimilate information, is what is typically referred to as our worldview.
5. Evaluating our worldview is a difficult task because it must be done *internally*. Just as an unintelligent fish cannot easily describe the cloudy fishbowl in which it lives, we too will always come short in understanding the nature of our existence.

¹ Story, D. (1998). *Christianity on the offense : Responding to the beliefs and assumptions of spiritual seekers* (40). Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications.

² Ibid. p.39.

³ Dan Story, *Christianity on the Offense : Responding to the Beliefs and Assumptions of Spiritual Seekers*, 39 (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1998).

Bringing Definition to Worldview

1. To understand that a worldview is a potent lens through which reality is interpreted is quite different than recognizing the conceptual building blocks that comprise a worldview.

Worldviews are made up of certain presuppositions or assumptions that an individual believes to be true. These presuppositions form the infrastructure of all worldviews”⁴

2. To recognize that these presuppositions are closely tied to one’s “religious beliefs” is true but far too generic. All worldviews have a specific conceptual framework, regardless of whether it is couched in religious language or not. However, it is of utmost importance to recognize that (as Christians) our worldview is not something that is independent from Scripture.
3. The Bible speaks directly to all of the principal elements that form a worldview, and our challenge is found precisely in making sure that it is God’s revelatory word that is shaping these formative presuppositions rather than external influences.

The Basic Components of a Worldview

In *simple terms* (much more detail could be developed), all worldviews have four major elements. For the sake of clarity these are stated below in essentially Christian terms, but the concepts themselves apply across all worldviews.

Cosmology

Cosmology tells of the origin, design, and parameters of existence. It answers the question of how all reality came to be and the manner in which it now subsists. This radically informs how we understand the larger matrix of reality in which we currently live.⁵ It is the truth about us, the world around us, and how we relate to it.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Cosmogony (more often spelled *Cosmogony* in modern writings) refers to the origin of the universe and is very legitimately its own vein of study. For the sake of clarity, I have allowed Cosmogony to be functionally subsumed in Cosmology, a practice which has precedent in scholarship on the subject. See *ABD*, Vol. 1, p 1162.

Eschatology

Eschatology tells of where existence is going – its final purpose and destiny.⁶ It answers the deep question of purpose and the longing for hope inherent in existence.

Redemption

Intrinsic in eschatology is the belief that reality is moving toward some end that does not exist presently. This means that there is at least the presence of imperfection, if not corruption, that must be rectified. The manner in which this aberration arose and the way it finds resolution forms the third component of a worldview.

Theology

Theology stands at the center, indispensably binding the three together by revealing the identity (or force) responsible for the beginning, the end, and the process of redemption.

The Existence of the Modern Western Worldview

**So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding...
(Ephesians 4:18)**

1. The greatest and most destructive lie about the worldview of the culture in the West is that *there is not one*. We have somehow come to accept the idea that the Western worldview is not like those of other cultures and therefore neutral toward the biblical view of reality.
2. If we desire clarity concerning the story of the Bible and how we are to *live in the story*, it is necessary to challenge this notion in the strongest possible terms. There *is* a distinct worldview inherent in Western culture, it is extremely *potent*, it is thoroughly rooted in *deception*, and it is *violently hostile* to the truth of the Bible.
3. Ephesians 4:17-19 states that Gentiles lacking the truth walk in the futility of their minds, being darkened in their understanding and ignorant. We must realize that this is just as true for Americans or Europeans as it is for a tribesmen of Africa or an aborigine of Australia. For far too long we have failed to recognize that coming to Christ means an entire upheaval of our worldview instead of merely trying to assimilate Him into it.

⁶ Eschatology has classically referred to the biblical teaching on the ‘last things’ but has come to more commonly mean ‘future things’.

4. The consequence is that the modern Western worldview and the modern Western *Christian* worldview share the same foundation and are tragically similar to one another. What is often termed a Christian (or biblical worldview) often leaves these four pillars of perspective untouched.

The Modern Western Christian Worldview

1. It is a point beyond contention that all roads in the Western philosophical tradition lead back to one place – *Greece*. The writings of Plato and Aristotle, two ancient Greek philosophers, are the foundation upon which *all* Western thought, culture, and education are built.
2. The point of contention lies only in the extent to which these ideas have influenced the Church throughout the centuries and whether that influence was positive or negative.
3. Modern Western Culture has been so many centuries in the making that its lofty heights now rise so far from its foundation that it is difficult to see the continuity at first glance. The situation with the modern Western *Christian* worldview is slightly different.
4. All four of its principal components have been enormously affected by its foundation in Greek philosophical thought. However, it has resisted many of the features that now form its secular counterpart, and therefore actually bears much more resemblance to its ideological foundation.
5. If one had to generalize, the vast majority of theological study falters because – to one degree or another – it is attempting to reconstitute the building without ever digging up this foundation and laying an entirely new one.

The Development of the Western Worldview

Plato, Aristotle, and Alexander

1. Plato was a philosopher who resided in Greece in the 4th century B.C. Following the death of his mentor, Socrates, Plato founded *the Academy* in Athens. It was a center of learning very loosely comparable to a modern university that attracted students from the surrounding region.
2. It is an unfortunate but very true fact of history that the ideas propagated by this man would be some of the most influential and formative in Western

civilization. Though his philosophies likely would have had a measure of import regardless of what happened after his lifetime, a series of very specific events occurred that caused the significance of his constructs to explode exponentially.

3. In 367 B.C. a young man named Aristotle arrived at the Academy in Athens to sit under Plato's tutelage. After Plato died in 347 B.C. Aristotle remained in Athens for a couple of years until he went into the region of Macedonia to tutor a twelve-year old boy named Alexander. Historians would later name this lad "the Great", although it seems in retrospect that only his iniquity deserves the designation of greatness.
4. Although his tutor's views differed in several important ways from Plato, Alexander was groomed with a very specific, potent way of viewing the world rooted in the foundations of Platonism. His remarkable military conquests that would follow afforded the opportunity for the dissemination of Hellenistic ideas in an unparalleled way. The scope of influence, the depth of its penetration, and the swiftness with which it occurred is simply astonishing (lamentably). Everywhere he went, Alexander founded cities that acted as bastions for Greek culture and thought to be established and spread within the region that had been overtaken by his conquests.
5. What became his most famous city was located at the mouth of the Nile in Northern Egypt – the city of Alexandria. Alexandria had quickly become a thriving center of commerce, learning, and religion and continued to be so for centuries. From the time of its founding until its eventual demise, the bedrock of its foundation was Hellenism and as its structures grew and its inhabitants multiplied the city took every step forward on those tenets. Yet part of its success as a city was its inclusiveness – welcoming people of different backgrounds both culturally and religiously and slowly assimilated them in to their way of thinking as they marinated in the Hellenistic atmosphere.

Origen of Alexandria

1. In the post-exilic period the Jewish people developed quite a presence in Alexandria, boasting a huge population. It was there that the Septuagint was commissioned and translated, and it was there that the infamous Philo set out to synthesize Platonic thought with the Jewish faith – so pertinent to you, though you may not realize it.
2. The history of syncretism and tolerance continued into the Christian era as well. Followers of Jesus were so numerous in the city that Alexandria rivaled Antioch and Rome in its significance in the early period of Church history.

3. And so it was in 185 A.D., nearly five-hundred years after the young Macedonian ruler had commissioned its founding, Origen was born into this storied city of Alexandria. His birth place was fitting, for he would secure his enormous influence in history precisely through an intellectually brilliant but theologically disastrous fusing of Hellenistic philosophy and Christianity. You may have never even heard of Origen of Alexandria but he has dramatically shaped the way you think about reality. Together with his predecessor, Clement of Alexandria, Origen would found a school of biblical interpretation that would radically influence the way Christians viewed reality for centuries to come.⁷
4. This naturally leads to the questions, “*how did Origen come to impact 21st century American Christians significantly enough to warrant talking about him?*” and “*why is he the threshold for understanding the integration of Hellenistic thought into the tradition of the Church?*”
5. Before answering these questions we will simply give heed to statements concerning the almost incomprehensible influence Origen would come to have. We have yet to consider the actual substance of Plato’s philosophy (and similar figures) and precisely what it was that Origen was so successful at assimilating into Christian thought.
6. Learning of Origen’s great sway *before* surveying the substance of the error will impart a heightened sense of alertness as we do. His significance must be kept in the forefront of our minds when we turn to see the ideas he propagated because of how profoundly they would affect the subjects we are considering.
7. The vast scope of Origen’s impact on the history of the Church came *after his lifetime* through *other people*. The defining crisis of the first five-hundred years of the Church is something most Christians have never heard of. The *Origenist Controversy* was a crossroads at which the early Church stood as the radical ideas of Origen gained momentum following his death (c. 254).
8. An enormous volume of literature now documents the conflict that raged during this theological impasse and its profound implications. Official

⁷ “So called because of its origin in the city of Alexandria (Egypt), this Christian center of scholarship was led first by Clement of Alexandria in A.D. 190 and then by Origen in A.D. 202. The Alexandrian school was influenced by the philosophy of Plato and understood the task of biblical interpretation as seeking out its literal, moral and allegorical senses. In other words, the Alexandrian theologians taught that although the Bible was literally true, its correct interpretation lay in the moral or allegorical senses more than in the literal sense.” (Grenz, S., Guretzki, D., & Nordling, C. F. (1999). *Pocket dictionary of theological terms* (8). Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.)

ecclesiastical condemnations of Origen would come in 400, 543, and 553. These were important, but also deeply insufficient.

9. While some of Origen's more obvious heretical conclusions were countered, the methodical framework for coming to those conclusions had already been widely embraced and went unquestioned. Later church fathers would not share all of Origen's conclusions about Jesus, but they would share his view of the world. Tragically, the body of Christ in the west went down the wrong path and the teaching of Origen had successfully paved the way for centuries of error.

The Legacy of Origen

1. The Swiss theologian, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, a man of towering intellect and rare breadth of learning, stated "*there is no thinker in the Church who is so invisibly all-present as Origen.*"⁸
2. Without knowing anything else about Origen such a dramatic statement should cause you to quake at the thought that it just might be true. While others in the successive generations would further the flow of the toxic conceptions of Plato into the streams of Church history, they were all just natural progeny of the collision Origen wrought.

"Through Origen, the Greek spirit poured in a torrent into the Church, and would never afterward be expelled."⁹

3. Augustine, for example, is unquestionably among the most formative individuals in the collective theology of the Church throughout the ages but he was deeply influenced by Origen's writings and was himself "profoundly...under the spell of Platonism,"¹⁰ as one author aptly put it.

"Nevertheless...Origen's influence was immense...through them and others [referring to various church fathers including Augustine] Origen became the father of scriptural study and systematic theology in the Christian tradition."¹¹

⁸ B. McGinn, FM Vo1 1, p 130

⁹ Walter Nigg, *The Heretics* (New York: Knopf, 1962) 48.

¹⁰David Noel Freedman (editor), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996, c1992), 5:380.

¹¹ David Noel Freedman (editor), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996, c1992), 5:47.

The Foundation of the Greek Worldview

1. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle together form the foundation of the Greek philosophical tradition. No original writings of Socrates survive but we know of his teaching through what is recorded of him by Plato. Although Plato and Aristotle are by far the two most significant, Socrates must be included because of the sense in which the tradition began with him.¹²
2. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all propagated very different conclusions in their respective philosophies. The feature that unites them is the attempt to answer all of the major questions that form the conceptual framework of a worldview through *human reason*. In this way it stood as the ancient precursor to modern rationalism.
3. While the Enlightenment tradition was influenced in varying degrees by the competing conclusions of Plato (Renaissance/Enlightenment) and Aristotle (Middle ages), this was the central and most potent feature that stood as the driving method for the formation of the modern Western worldview.
4. Plato in particular takes the role of prominence in our study because:
 - a. His ideas were more overall influential related to worldview
 - b. His influence on the Christian tradition was immense
 - c. His impact on the redefinition of “spiritual” things was overwhelmingly significant.
5. The cornerstone of Platonism¹³ (as it relates to the present context) is “a strong distinction between two levels of reality.”¹⁴ Plato termed the world accessible to our senses the ‘perceptual realm’ and that which is beyond our observation ‘the intelligible realm’.
6. In his program of thought the intelligible realm consisted of idealized ‘forms’ and ‘ideas’. It was, in other words, a conceptual and ethereal division of

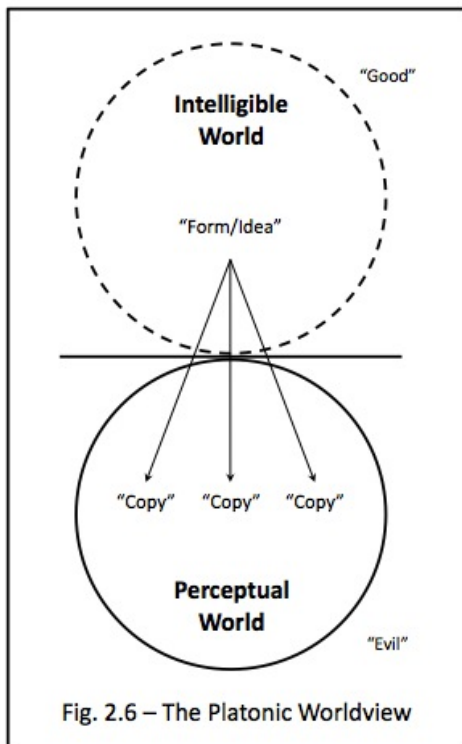
¹² Tertullian, one of the prominent Ante-Nicene fathers who argued against heresy, very plainly reveals what seems to be the common knowledge that Socrates was influenced by a demon in the formation of his philosophies: “And we affirm indeed the existence of certain spiritual essences; nor is their name unfamiliar. The philosophers acknowledge there are demons; Socrates himself waiting on a demon’s will. Why not? since it is said an evil spirit attached itself specially to him even from his childhood—turning his mind no doubt from what was good.” Roberts, A., Donaldson, J., & Coxe, A. C. (1997). *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. III : Translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* (36). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.

¹³ If being precise one would need to differentiate between the writings of Plato himself and Platonism, the latter being a religious and philosophical system spanning many centuries and therefore containing considerable diversity that was not always reflective of its namesake.

¹⁴David Noel Freedman (editor), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996, c1992), 5:379.

existence that was immaterial, incorporeal and insubstantial. There was nothing concrete about it whatsoever. It was conceived of as a pristine, inert plane of reality presided over by the Supreme Good who was itself conceived of in the most abstract terms, often as the sole self-thinker.

7. Such was the quintessential Hellenistic view of divinity and the unseen dimension of existence. In stark contrast and on the other side of a very wide chasm was the perceptual realm. The latter was the domain of matter – what could be seen, felt, and heard – and thus the functional opposite of the intelligible realm in all essential aspects.¹⁵
8. What must be stressed is that the governing feature inherent in this potent, comprehensive worldview *divides existence into two very dissonant expressions of reality*.¹⁶



¹⁵ This included the strong current within Platonism (and specifically its offspring Gnosticism) that things of matter and substance are inherently corrupt and evil. Though Origen would distance himself from the major theological heresies of Gnosticism his writings are riddled with this perspective.

¹⁶ While the other major characteristics of Platonic philosophy not relevant to the present context are without question influential and systemic, it must be understood that the singular, governing feature is the cosmological definition of reality. All other elements of Platonism, including the dualism of body and soul (which upon a cursory glance of scholarship on the subject would seem to take precedent), are really just an outworking of this underlying premise.

Origen and Christian Platonism

1. Recalling now the statements of Origen's role in injecting Platonic philosophy into Christian thought, the question this should raise is, "*how was it possible for Origen's views to be so aggressively advanced until they gained dominance?*" We began to answer this with the mention of the Origenist Controversy. Now we return to briefly resume the historical odyssey.
2. Increasingly over time the center of gravity in the early church shifted from authoritative Jewish leadership to being heavily slanted in the direction of the Gentiles. As the second century turned into the third century, there were very few Jewish leaders and the chief proponents of the faith were entirely Greek in their background and worldview.
3. The absolutely disastrous effects of the supposed conversion of Constantine and the institutionalizing of Christianity under the Roman Empire only galvanized this trend. Thus, there was enough distance between the advent of Christ and the height of the influence of the Alexandrian school that when the trends of Hellenization were being advanced there was not sufficient resistance. Too few arose in protest and objected that the patriarchs, the prophets, and the apostles of old weren't from Athens and when they spoke under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit it meant something entirely different than Plato.
4. Many significant developments would occur in the fifteen-hundred years to follow in the relationship between worldview, philosophy, and Christian teaching. Yet for all this it is not too simplistic to say that once Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory, and the post-Nicene 'doctors' of the Church gained dominance, the synthesis of Christianity into a platonic worldview that had been wrought by Origen and the Alexandrian school was irreparably settled.¹⁷

All Christian theology [during this general period] is dependent, to an extent at least, on contemporary Greek philosophy, primarily Platonism, but some Christian thinkers fall particularly strongly

¹⁷ "The beginnings of an interweaving of Platonism with Christian thought go back to Clement of Alexandria and Origen. Of perhaps even greater moment for the history of Christian theology was the fact that the thought of St Augustine was radically influenced...by Platonic doctrines. The authority accorded to his teaching throughout the Middle Ages did much to secure for many Platonic notions a permanent place in Latin Christianity. Henceforward the Platonic Forms were regularly reinterpreted as the creative thoughts of God, as they had been by pagan Platonists from shortly before the beginning of the Christian era." F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. rev., 1309 (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

under Platonic influence, and properly merit the title of Christian Platonists.¹⁸

5. A dualistic worldview became the norm - informing interpretation and enslaving exegesis from that point forward. As the centuries passed it would only be a question of degree of error and different versions of wrong, but never again would the Church so starkly face right and wrong as it did with the Origenist controversy.
6. The Reformation corrected some grievous abuses in praxis and belief, but it only reformed back to Augustine. The movement did not fell the tree at its very roots and then burn the stump. Instead, it merely lopped off some wild branches, leaving the ideological root system of Platonism almost completely intact.
7. The worldview that saturates all contemporary culture and society as we know it is built entirely upon the movements beginning in the 15th century in Europe called the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Of this heritage it has been observed:

“The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”¹⁹

8. Still today, many centuries later, we unwittingly subsist in the wake of the way Origen incorporated biblical truths into a Hellenistic worldview. We are still waiting and yearning for the LORD to bring about another reformation – one which will lead His people back to apostolic doctrine, drawing a severe line of demarcation between the faith once for all handed down to us and the radical distortion of truth that has masqueraded as orthodoxy. Let us not grow weary of purging from our minds this influence, failing to tolerate any foul breeding of truth and error. It would be difficult to improve upon this admonition from Tertullian centuries ago:

These are “the doctrines” of men and “of demons” produced for itching ears of the spirit of this world’s wisdom: this the Lord called “foolishness,” and “chose the foolish things of the world” to confound even philosophy itself. For (philosophy) it is which is the material of the world’s wisdom, the rash interpreter of the nature and the dispensation of God. Indeed heresies are themselves instigated by philosophy... Unhappy Aristotle! who invented for these men

¹⁸David Noel Freedman (editor), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996, c1992), 5:380.

¹⁹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1929); corrected edition, ed. David R. Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (Free Press, 1979).

dialectics, the art of building up and pulling down; an art so evasive in its propositions, so far-fetched in its conjectures, so harsh, in its arguments, so productive of contentions—embarrassing even to itself, retracting everything, and really treating of nothing! Whence spring those “fables and endless genealogies,” and “unprofitable questions,” and “words which spread like a cancer?” From all these, when the apostle would restrain us, he expressly names philosophy as that which he would have us be on our guard against. Writing to the Colossians, he says, “See that no one beguile you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, and contrary to the wisdom of the Holy Ghost.” He had been at Athens, and had in his interviews (with its philosophers) become acquainted with that human wisdom which pretends to know the truth, whilst it only corrupts it, and is itself divided into its own manifold heresies, by the variety of its mutually repugnant sects. What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? what between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from “the porch of Solomon,” who had himself taught that “the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart.” Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.²⁰

Origen’s Redefinitions

1. The first example from Origen’s many works is within a portion addressing the fate awaiting the saints following physical death. After describing how believers who die will remain in a “school for souls” on the earth until they are enlightened enough to pass into the heavens, Origen says:

If any one indeed be pure in heart, and holy in mind, and more practised in perception, he will, by making more rapid progress, quickly ascend to a place in the air, and reach the kingdom of heaven, through those mansions, so to speak, in the various places which the Greeks have termed spheres, i.e., globes, but which holy Scripture has called heavens; in each of which he will first see clearly what is done there, and in the second place, will discover the reason why things are so done: and thus he will in order pass through all

²⁰ Roberts, A., Donaldson, J., & Coxe, A. C. (1997). *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. III : Translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325 (246–247)*. Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.

gradations, following Him who hath passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, who said, "I will that where I am, these may be also." And of this diversity of places He speaks, when He says, "In My Father's house are many mansions." He Himself is everywhere, and passes swiftly through all things; nor are we any longer to understand Him as existing in those narrow Limits in which He was once confined for our sakes, i.e., not in that circumscribed body which He occupied on earth, when dwelling among men, according to which He might be considered as enclosed in some one place.²¹

2. Origen is clearly equating the Greek conception of spheres/globes with the scriptural use of the word "heaven", making them interchangeable. Because he views the spheres/globes as the "heaven" of the Bible, he overtly endorses the heresy that Jesus shed His human body at His ascension. Thus in Origen's schema, just as Christ shed His body and its 'limitations' to pass into the heavens so we, too, will follow suit once our intellects have been sufficiently enlightened.
3. The next quote comes from a different section of Origen's writings but has thematic similarity. As he expounds upon the promise of the future culmination of all things, what was implicit in the previous text emerges as explicit:

For it has been said that we must suppose either that an incorporeal existence is possible, after all things have become subject to Christ, and through Christ to God the Father, when God, will be all and in all; or that when, notwithstanding all things have been made subject to Christ, and through Christ to God...then the bodily substance itself also being united to most pure and excellent spirits, and being changed into an ethereal condition in proportion to the quality or merits of those who assume it (according to the apostle's words, "We also shall be changed"), will shine forth in splendour; or at least that when the fashion of those things which are seen passes away, and all corruption has been shaken off and cleansed away, and when the whole of the space occupied by this world, in which the spheres of the planets are said to be, has been left behind and beneath, then is reached the fixed abode of the pious and the good situated above that sphere, which is called non-wandering, as in a good land, in a land of the living, which will be inherited by the meek and gentle; to which land belongs that heaven (which, with its more magnificent

²¹Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Clevel and Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. IV : Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 299.

extent, surrounds and contains that land itself) which is called truly and chiefly heaven, in which heaven and earth, the end and perfection of all things, may be safely and most confidently placed...²²

4. Therefore, Origen “safely” and “most confidently” identifies “heaven” as it is referred to in scripture as “the realm above the non-wandering sphere”,²³ and proposes that in order for the pious and good to abide there, either an incorporeal existence must be possible or the substance of our existence must be united to pure spirit, changing us into an ethereal condition.²⁴
5. One final segment of Origen’s serves as a remarkable example of Hellenistic philosophy incorporated into biblical understanding. In some senses it is the most troubling but also the most illustrative, for it clearly demonstrates how one’s preconceptions about the heavens effect the interpretation of scriptural accounts of it. While discussing the opening of the heavens in the account of the baptism of Jesus, Origen goes on to say:

... in a dream impressions have been brought before the minds of many, some relating to divine things, and others to future events of this life, and this either with clearness or in an enigmatic manner,—a fact which is manifest to all who accept the doctrine of providence; so how is it absurd to say that the mind which could receive impressions in a dream should be impressed also in a waking vision, for the benefit either of him on whom the impressions are made, or of those who are to hear the account of them from him? And as in a dream we fancy that we hear, and that the organs of hearing are actually impressed, and that we see with our eyes—although neither the bodily organs of sight nor hearing are affected, but it is the mind alone which has these sensations—so there is no absurdity in believing that similar things occurred to the prophets, when it is recorded that they witnessed occurrences of a rather wonderful kind, as when they either heard the words of the Lord or beheld the heavens opened. For I do not suppose that the visible heaven was actually opened, and its physical structure divided, in order that

²²Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. IV : Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 275.

²³ On a different occasion Origen asserts that Moses was perhaps obscurely referring to the spheres as envisioned by Plato when he wrote of Jacob’s experience in Bethel described in Genesis 28 (See *Origen Against Celsius*, Book VI, Chapter 21)

²⁴ Prior to this excerpt Origen distances himself from a pure Platonic view of a world of only ideas and forms but still clearly evidences that he is working from a substructure of Platonism with the quoted words and arrives at conclusions saturated with those philosophical premises.

Ezekiel might be able to record such an occurrence. Should not, therefore, the same be believed of the Saviour by every intelligent hearer of the Gospels?—although such an occurrence may be a stumbling-block to the simple, who in their simplicity would set the whole world in movement, and split in sunder the compact and mighty body of the whole heavens. But he who examines such matters more profoundly will say, that there being, as the Scripture calls it, a kind of general divine perception which the blessed man alone knows how to discover...²⁵

6. Although there is absolutely no justification for it exegetically, Origen arrives at the conclusion that both the prophets of old and Jesus Himself were not actually encountering anything real in their experiences of heavenly things. Instead, through the faculty of enlightened knowledge (divine perception), they merely received communication similar to a waking dream for their benefit and those who would hear them.
7. While this should be profoundly disconcerting in the gravity of its error, at this point it should not come as surprising. Origen's views of heaven, formed and governed by Platonism, necessitate these conclusions. In other words, his worldview enslaved his exposition of scripture.

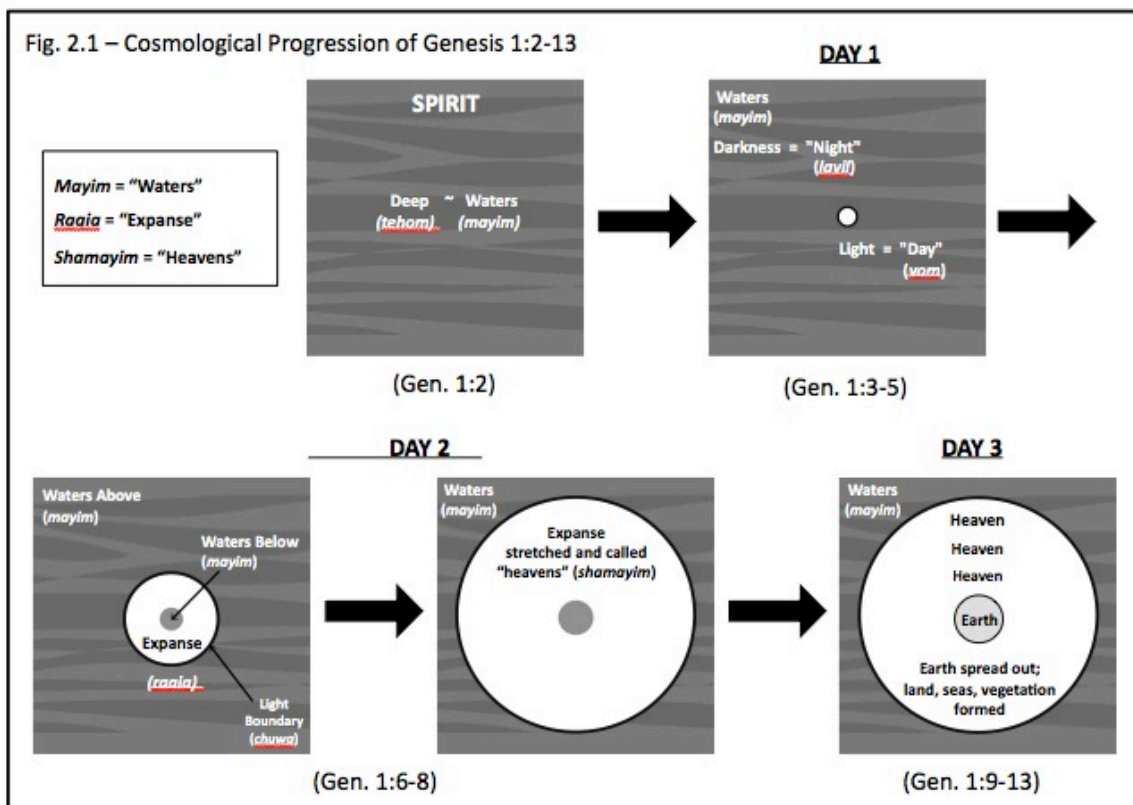
The Biblical Worldview

**“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”
(Genesis 1:1)**

1. The Bible begins with a simple, clear description of the *playing field* of our existence - *the heavens and the earth*. Everything from angels, demons, animals, plants, humans, and God Himself play on this field. The heavens and the earth and all that is contained within them are referred to biblically as “all things” (Isaiah 44:24; John 1:3; Acts 3:21; 1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:10; 3:9; Colossians 1:16f; Hebrews 1:2; 2:10; 2 Peter 3:4; Revelation 4:11; 21:5).
2. A simple summary of the “playing field” given in the creation account is as follows:
 - a. On day 1, the Spirit of God hovered over the “waters” and light was created, presumably within the waters.

²⁵Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. IV : Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 416.

- b. On day 2, God created “an expanse in the midst of the waters” (Genesis 1:6). This separation left water above and below the expanse (Genesis 1:7; 2 Peter 3:5). He called this expanse “the heavens” (Genesis 1:8). This process is often referred to as “stretching out the heavens” (Psalm 104:2; Job 9:8; Isaiah 42:5; 44:24; 45:12; 51:13; Jeremiah 10:12; 51:15; Zechariah 12:1).
- c. On day 3, God gathers the waters under the heavens and dry land appears. The land brings forth plants, trees, and vegetation. (Genesis 1:9-13)



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²⁶ Fully aware of the limitations of a two dimensional diagram, especially its circular nature, we simply acknowledge the limitations of mortality. Though the biblical language of the heavens being “up” or “above” is incompatible with a spherical earth, there may be an issue of dimensionality at work, akin to how a three-dimensional coordinate would relate to a two-dimensional coordinate. The diagram is simply an attempt to faithfully portray the primary aspects of the nature and relations of the heavens and the earth, which are inherently meaningless except for their theological implications in the extrapolating of a “new heavens and new earth” (Is. 65:17; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). Conversely, modern anthropocentric cosmology is also inherently meaningless except for the false theology it produces. It is analogous to calling a turtle a potato—inherently meaningless until you actually pick up the turtle and try to eat it because you truly believe it is a potato. A disillusionment caused by broken teeth generally follows.

Understanding the Heavens

1. The heavens are described by the Scriptures as *plural*. The Hebrew word for heavens (*shamayim*) is used over 400 times in the Old Testament, and is *always* in the plural form.²⁷ Translators arbitrarily render *shamayim* as singular or plural in modern translations. This is often because one's *worldview* enslaves one's *interpretation*.
3. The Bible's delineation between the heavens and the earth is not a *metaphysical* one (as it is in Platonism and Christian Platonism) but a *functional* and *governmental* one.
4. Despite the fact that scripture almost categorically describes things in the heavens with the most tangible, vivid terms it remains in the minds of many believers *abstract* and *insubstantial*. The reason for this is not because that is what the Bible reveals but rather because what is said about the heavens is filtered through a worldview that eliminates the possibility of something that we cannot see being palpable. In the Bible, "invisible" does not mean immaterial.
5. This false idea corresponds almost identically to the intelligible realm of Platonism where all things were envisioned as incorporeal and immaterial.
6. Biblical cosmology is based on the idea of height, with the earth being the reference point in the middle. Everything over or above the earth was thought to be part of the *shamayim*, including both what is visible to us and what is beyond our sight. Beginning with what was observable, the heavens are presented as continuing upward in ascending gradations. In Jewish tradition from Second Temple period the heavens were often thought to be seven in number. Yet the only figure that is validated biblically is three (2 Corinthians 12:2), allowing for the heavens to be divided conceptually into *the first heavens, the mid-heavens, and the third-heavens*.

²⁷ The Greek word for heaven(s), ouranos, is used almost 300 times in the New Testament, approximately one-third in the plural and two-thirds in the singular. This is not because they were sloppy or because they had converted to a Hellenistic understanding of the universe. The singular use is simply referencing one heaven of the heavens (usually God's dwelling place) or the heavens as a "collective singular," i.e. referring to all that is above. The distinction is clear when both noun forms are used together (e.g. Mt. 6:9f; 24:29; 2 Cor. 5:1f). For example, in the Lord's Prayer, "our Father" is in "the heavens" (plural), while the hope of the kingdom is that the will of God would be done on earth as it is in "heaven" (singular), i.e. the heaven of heavens where God sits enthroned, since the will of the Lord is not fully obeyed presently in other parts of the heavens.

7. The heavens are *continuous* – the first being the abode of birds (Genesis 1:20; 2:19; Daniel 2:38), of clouds, rain, and thunder (Genesis 8:2; Job 38:29; Isaiah 55:10), of the sun, moon, and stars (Genesis 1:14; Deuteronomy 4:19; Psalm 8:3); the second containing angels, demons, and powers (Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 3:24; Isaiah 24:21); the third being the area where God Himself dwells (Deuteronomy 26:15; 1 Kings 8:30; Psalm 2:4).
8. The heavens are *positionally* related to the earth – the heavens are “above” and the earth is “below” (Genesis 6:17; Deuteronomy 4:39; 1 Kings 8:23; Psalm 50:4)²⁸. This is how God can “look down” from the heavens upon His creation (Psalm 33:13; 53:2; Deuteronomy 26:15; Psalm 80:14; 102:19; Isaiah 63:15).
9. Are we really to conceive of the mid-heavens and the third heaven as above us, just as we think of the skies, the clouds, and the stars? Though there is no need to flatly deny or ignore the images of the world around us that have come about through the technological age, one should be very wary of simply dismissing the views of the ancients as primitive and naïve.
10. The conviction that the Bible is the inspired, infallible word of God means that it is far too simplistic to chalk up the cosmology of scripture as merely reflective of more general ancient near-eastern religious beliefs, discounting its relevance in the process. Certainly the authors of scripture were real men in a real historical context and the orthodox view of scripture does not view the channels through whom God inspired His word to be obliterated in the process.
11. Yet there was a reason that those very authentic personalities in antiquity thought the way they did about the world and it wasn't because they possessed crude mental capacities. It was the LORD Himself who gave them that impression through His revelation and by continually coming down from the sky and going back up in Old Testament theophanies.
12. This continues in the New Testament, including the ascension of Christ when He was taken up into the clouds and at His glorious return when He will split the sky and come down. Consider for a moment the following statements of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of John:

²⁸ A fuller list would include: Gen. 6:17; 7:19; 11:4; 28:12; Ex. 20:4; Deut. 4:39; 5:8; 11:21; 30:12; Jos. 2:11; 1 Ki. 8:23; 2 Chr. 7:1; Job 28:24; Ps. 50:4; 85:11; 113:6; Is. 14:12; 24:21; 44:23; 51:6; Jer. 10:11; Mt. 3:16; 28:2; Jn. 1:51; 3:13; 6:33ff; Acts 1:9ff; 2:19; 7:55f; 10:11ff; Eph. 4:8ff; 1 Thess. 4:16; Rev. 12:10ff; 18:1; 21:2.

For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world...For I have come down from heaven, not to do my will, but the will of Him who sent Me...I am the living bread which came down from heaven...Does this offend you? What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before?...Even if I bear witness of Myself, My witness is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going...You are from beneath; I am from above.

13. In our intellectual arrogance are we truly prepared to supersede the wisdom of the One who formed the human brain and then took on flesh for our sake? Jesus' view of the world was not a product of His socio-historical context. By Him and through Him all things were made, in Him all things consist, and by His word He upholds all things. As Jesus walked the earth He knew all things, as the fourth gospel repeatedly states, and He knew where He came from and He said it was *up*.

What is "spiritual"?

1. In general a great error occurs when recognizing that we do not have complete revelation of the heavens, or that such an epiphany transcends the ability to describe, we go on to conclude that we do not have a concrete revelation of the heavens.
2. We certainly do not know everything, but what we do know is clear. The heavens are filled with real sights, real sounds, real creatures, and real objects. Although we are not able to see everything there right now, they are all very much able to be seen because they have a distinct form and substance that doesn't not change from one moment to the next as though they were some sort of heavenly hologram.
3. Angels say things, hold objects in their hands, interact with people, fly from place to place, and reside in a place with real dimensions. In the practical sense we would say that heaven possesses physicality, the furthest thing from ethereality.
4. *Physicality* is often set as an opposite against *spirituality*, yet this is Platonic philosophical juxtaposition rather than a biblical one.²⁹ *Spiritual*, in the biblical sense, simply refers to *something that is divinely authored or that is invisible* (which means not able to be seen by us, *not* that it cannot be seen at all).

²⁹ The NKJV renders the original text as "physical" only three times in the entire Bible. The ESV just twice, both occurring in Romans 2:27-28 where the term is descriptive and has no theological connotations whatsoever.

5. Spiritual wisdom is that which is given by God, not wisdom that is ethereal or intangible.³⁰ The spiritual body we will inherit in the resurrection refers to the physical form that originates directly from God rather than that which was given us through human procreation.
6. Thus, it is accurate to say that the heavens are thoroughly spiritual, but that does not in any way exclude the assertion that they are tangible and substantial. Unfortunately the term *spiritual* also suffered the fate of *heaven* in the Platonic exchange brought about by Origen and his counterparts and came to mean something the authors of scripture never intended.

“It is high time that this perfectly good term should be rescued from the abuse it has suffered at the hands of theologians who, either consciously or otherwise, have been under the spell of Platonic philosophy.”³¹

God, Creation, and the Heavens

1. Though extremely foreign to the modern mind because of Platonism, the Bible continually declares that God dwells *within creation, not outside of it.*³² Isaiah says:

**“Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.”
(Isaiah 40:21–23 ESV)**

2. Just as man dwells within a tent or a house, God dwells *within* creation. Why does this matter? When God is near, we relate to Him differently than if He was in a distant, disconnected realm “outside of time and space”. The Scriptures reveal a God that is *near* because He actually lives *within His creation*. He loves what He has made, and it is *very good* in His sight.

³⁰ In context the contrast is not between spiritual wisdom and physical wisdom, but spiritual wisdom and carnal wisdom. The latter clearly does not simply refer to the body, but has sinful connotations.

³¹ Alva McLain, *the Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lakes, IN, BMH Books: 1959), p 66

³² A fuller list would include: Gen. 28:12f; Deut. 26:15; 1 Ki. 8:30, 39, 43, 49; 1 Chr. 16:31; 21:26; 2 Chr. 2:6; 6:18, 21, 27, 30, 33, 35, 39; 30:27; Neh. 9:27; Job 22:12, 14; Ps. 2:4; 11:4; 20:6; 29:9f; 33:13; 68:5; 102:19; 103:19; 104:2f; 113:5; 123:1; 135:6; Eccl. 5:2; Is. 40:22; 57:15; 63:15; 66:1; Jer. 23:24; 25:30; Lam. 3:41, 50; Dan. 4:35; 5:23; Zech. 2:13; Mt. 6:9; 23:9; Acts 2:33; 3:21; 7:49, 55; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3; 10:12; Rev. 4:2; 20:11; 22:3.

3. God dwelling *within* His creation in no way compromises His rulership over it. God is not limited or shackled by his creation, yet His greatness in sovereignty is only magnified by his nearness of presence. As Isaiah says,

**“For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.”
(Isaiah 57:15 ESV)**

4. God also rules from a *real throne*. Just as the heavens are concrete and tangible, so also is the throne of God (Isaiah 6:1; Ezekiel 1:26; Revelation 4:2). The Bible universally speaks of the divine throne as they would any throne of an earthly king. The throne of God is not a metaphor or something intended only to refer to a figurative “reign of God”. Rather, it is a real chair in a real place in real time from which God rules over a real domain.
5. The Bible means quite literally that God is the “great King” (Psalm 47:2; 95:3; Jeremiah 10:10; Malachi 1:14) and the “everlasting King” (Jeremiah 10:10), for his dominion includes all of creation. Not only is he the “Most High” (Isaiah 14:14; Daniel 7:18; Luke 6:35), but he is also God “Almighty,” (Gk. pantokratōr - Revelation 4:8; 16:7; Zechariah 1:3; Habakkuk 2:13; Zephaniah 2:10), i.e. “the ruler over all things”. Thus the eternal declaration,

**“Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all.”
(1 Chronicles 29:11 ESV)**

6. God’s domain is the whole of creation, i.e. the heavens and the earth (cf. Deuteronomy 10:14; 1 Chronicles 29:11; Psalm 24:1), which is his “universal kingdom,” so to speak (Psalm 103:19; 145:13; Daniel 4:34). As David said, “The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.” (Psalm 103:19)

Modern Christoplatonism

1. Today, modern believers reinterpret Genesis 1:1 in a way like Origen did: “In the beginning, God created the *natural* and the *supernatural*.” However, these two words (and thus the meaning attached to them) simply do not exist in the Bible. The continued use of them is *unhelpful* and *destructive*, not to mention *untruthful*. Biblical terminology like “divine”, “miraculous”, or

“heavenly” is much more profitable. Unbiblical terminology makes it difficult to truly understand the story of the Bible. *If we want to get into the Bible’s world, we must use the Bible’s language.*

2. Unless we begin with worldview and the Bible’s *playing field*, we will never be successful at the game. When trying to identify the lack of correspondence between the Bible and modern presentations of the Gospel, we must begin with worldview. Once the field of play is changed, all the rules and the whole game are thus confounded. This is what happens when trying to place Biblical ideas into a Greek worldview.

