

# THE WORLDS OF THE BIBLE

The Bible presents us with a very different political, social, cosmological, and religious world from that of today. Better yet, the Bible, written over at least 800 years in multiple parts of the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean, contains multiple worlds. This information will help make sense of the cultures of the people who wrote the Bible and the people about whom the Bible is written.

Many cultures of the Bible were very concerned with increasing honor for oneself and one's community. For some, honor functioned as a kind of currency and was perhaps as important as material wealth—and at times perhaps more important.

## HONOR



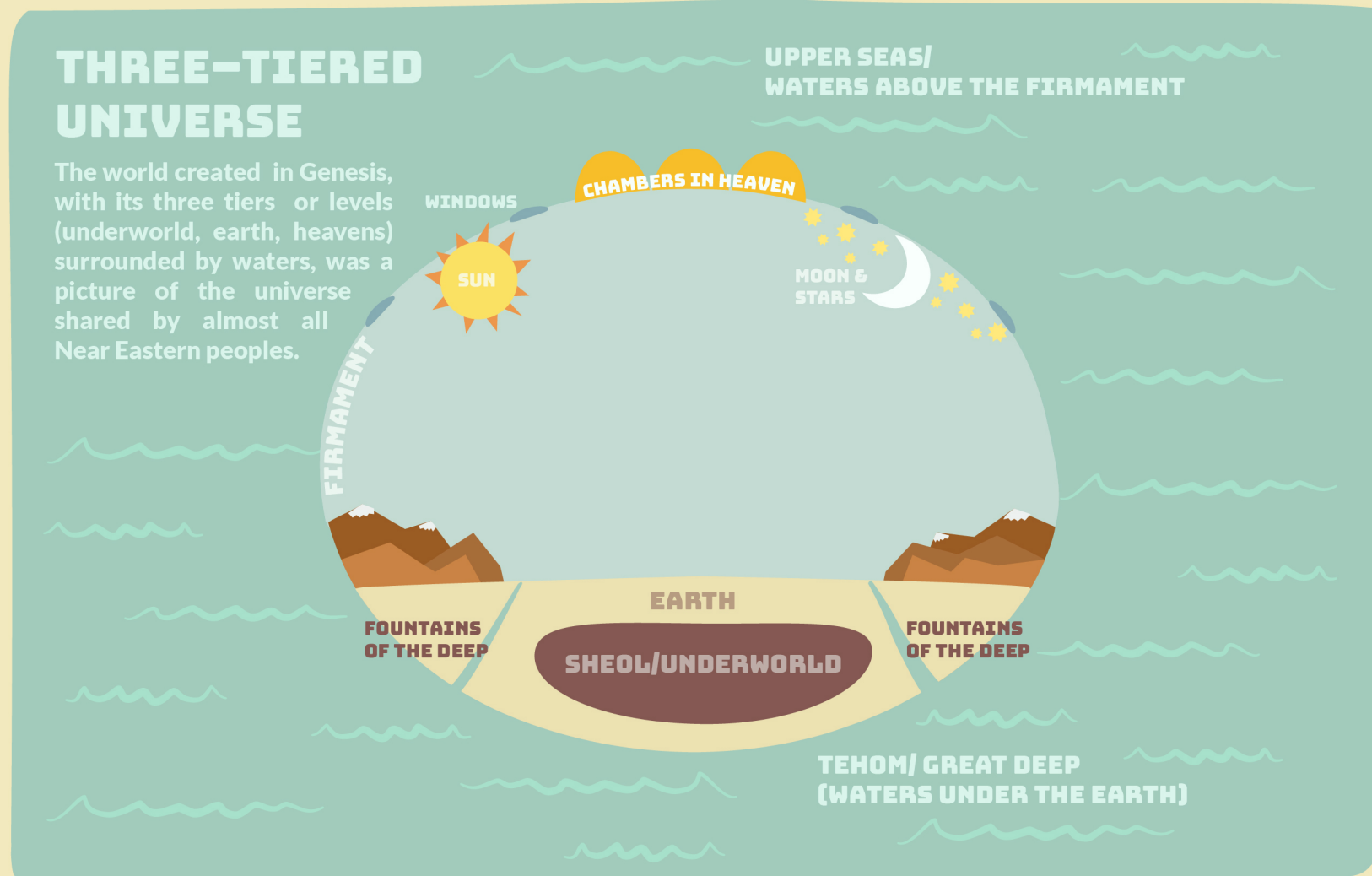
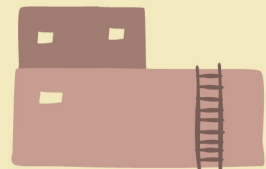
## SLAVERY

Slavery was a universal reality for the cultures of the Bible, as attested to by texts in both the Old and New Testaments. By the time of the New Testament, up to one in four people in the Roman Empire were slaves. People were enslaved because of debt or as prisoners of war. Race-based chattel slavery was unknown in the ancient world: Slaves could have relatively comfortable positions as scribes, tutors, etc., and many secured their freedom. Still, slaves were subject to their masters' wills, and some suffered severe physical and sexual abuse at their hands.



## FAMILY & COMMUNITY

Biblical cultures were much more communal than contemporary Western society. Modern beliefs about privacy were virtually non-existent. Family and larger group belonging determined identity, often more than individual features. Polygamy (multiple wives) was common during most of the time described in the Old Testament. While some elites during the Roman era still practiced polygamy, monogamy had by then become the norm.



## POLYTHEISM



Judaism and Christianity were quite unusual in their monotheism (belief in only one God). Nearly every other culture, whether Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Canaanite, Greek, or Roman, worshiped many gods and goddesses.

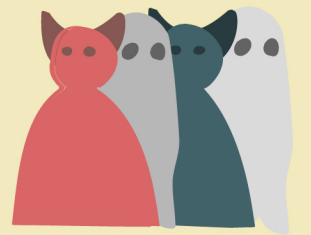
## AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY

While large urban centers existed in the Ancient Near East, Israel remained largely a rural farming culture. Israel tended to have less class stratification than its neighbors (although inequality was certainly known in Israel). However, relative economic equality did not mean that people were free from poverty. Farming as an economic base meant that people were only a few bad harvests away from poverty or even starvation. While the Roman era brought more urbanization, most people continued to live as rural farmers.



## SPIRITS & SICKNESS

For the people of the Bible, the "natural" world was filled with living things like spirits, gods, and demons—even the heavenly bodies were alive. Natural phenomena weren't caused by universal laws but resulted



from the willful actions for good or for ill of these various beings—and, for the Israelites, the will of the one God. There was no concept of illness caused by microbes, genetics, or chemical reactions; people got sick because of gods (God), demons, spirits, or the activity of heavenly bodies. Belief in The Evil Eye—the idea that some beings, including humans, could harm or destroy anything in their



gaze—was pervasive. The eyes were thought to literally express the intentions of the heart, so hearts full of envy created The Evil Eye. This was related to the idea that the eye produced its own light to let people see. People used amulets, often in the likeness of eyes, to protect themselves.

## LAW & COVENANT

Israel had a series of covenants with the one God that ensured Israel would be God's people and God would in turn protect them. In return, they were expected to keep a set of ritual and moral laws that set the Israelites apart from other peoples. Many scholars see these covenants as based on Suzerain Treaties made between kings and their vassals.



## POLITICS



Monarchy was nearly universal. Often rulers had absolute authority and were considered divine intermediaries, if not gods themselves. Israel was unusual in seeing its kings as normal human beings, even if they were anointed by God. Another persistent reality was empire: Kingdoms constantly sought to increase their power and land holdings by conquering other, previously independent lands.