

CHAPTER 6

THE ARGUMENT FROM FICTITIOUS COSMOGRAPHY

*“Oh, if only I knew where to find him,
(if I) could come to his dwelling...
Look, I go to the east and he is not there
and to the west and I do not see him.
If he is working in the north I do not behold him
and if he bows down to the south, I do not see him.”*

(Job 23:3,8-9)

6.1 INTRODUCTION

When, a few centuries ago, European astronomers looked through their telescopes and proclaimed that they could not see God anywhere “up there”, it caused a major controversy in the Church. The Church initially refused to believe the findings of the scientists whose views appeared to be at odds with the infallible revelation of the Holy Scriptures according to which the earth was flat, stationary and at the centre of the universe (cf. Tarnas 1991:215).

Eventually, however, the church changed her tunes. Over the course of several centuries after first Copernicus and later Galileo had shaken the foundations of Judaeo-Christian cosmology, biblical localities like Heaven and Hell were no longer seen as being in the sky above or under the earth beneath. These locations now became thought of as belonging to a different dimension of reality altogether (cf. Cupitt 1996:44).

Subsequently, whenever the problems pertaining to the relation between the Bible and scientific cosmology would become unheard-of yet again, concerned devotees would

be assured that nothing has changed and that modern cosmography did not falsify holy writ. It was therefore no surprise that, when only a few decades ago, atheist Russian cosmonauts also heralded the news that God was demonstrably not “up there”, many theologians sneered at what they considered to be hopelessly naïve perceptions of obviously "spiritual" realities.

Yet some theologians, at least according to the conservative religious public, went too far. In Europe, when German New Testament theologian Rudolf Bultmann claimed that the Bible’s theology, Christology, soteriology and eschatology were not literally true because the cosmology was mythical, it unleashed a torrent of conservative and critical protest (cf. Bultmann 1957). Also, when the English bishop J.A.T. Robinson confessed that he could no longer believe in a God “out there”, his confession caused a national debate on the plausibility and nature of biblical theism (cf. Robinson 1963).

Then, of course, far across the Atlantic in the United States, there were the so-called “Death of God” controversies. The radical theologians behind it made it crystal clear that realism in biblical cosmology was a non-option for contemporary normative theological discourse (cf. Kolak 1994:117). During the heyday of the so-called "God is dead" theology at Harvard Divinity School, the majority of graduates studying to become clergy in the Christian Church described their own worldview as "atheist" (cf. Kolak 1994:118).

In the years that followed, both conservative and critical theologians everywhere would mock the atheists who asserted that, since God is demonstrably not “up there”, biblical theism has been falsified empirically. In general, it would not be wholly mistaken to say that these theologians all jumped on either one of two bandwagons.

If you believed in the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, there was the need for harmonising the biblical texts with modern science (i.e. scientific creationism, cf. Morris 1974). Many conservatives would claim that, what appeared to be mistaken primitive beliefs about the nature of the cosmos in the Bible were actually examples of phenomenological discourse that was scientifically factual after all. Numerous Old Testament texts could be quoted and reinterpreted to show what was praised as being the amazingly infallible and even modern nature of the biblical discourse about the

nature of the universe.

Alternatively, less fundamentalist and more critical scholars could often be found claiming that the biblical language was, contrary to popular tradition, never intended to be understood as literal descriptions of reality. The Bible is, so they keep on saying, not a scientific textbook. It was never intended to furnish the people of God with a perfect description of the cosmos. The people who wrote the Bible knew nothing about modern science and it would be best to take all depictions of the cosmos as secondary and peripheral to the main concern of the writings, i.e. the religious message. Even references to Heaven and Hell are, it was alleged, wholly metaphorical or symbolical. Though quite obviously mythical, this did not mean that the texts were not “true”. Because the cosmology may be scientifically incorrect does not mean that the whole Bible is now theologically worthless.

So they say. But apparently both conservative and liberal scholars forgot to mention that even the god of the Bible – i.e. Yahweh himself – knew no more about the world outside the text than his ignorant speechwriters. To be sure, there may be no “pie in the sky”, but the pernicious ability of theologians to bracket biblical and systematic theology with both the history and philosophy of religion when it comes to issues of ontology have made any serious discussion bereft of doubletalk and gobbledegook impossible.

Of course, anyone today who complains about the fact that Yahweh is not in the sky would be laughed off and will be considered as being theologically extremely naïve. Yet the devil’s advocate cannot help but wonder whether someone like the character Elijah who allegedly ascended to the skies in a chariot of fire would have find the modern cosmographical critiques of religion quite so humorous. And what about the disciples of Jesus who allegedly saw him go up into the skies with a cloud? Would they have laughed at the discovery that God did not live "up there" in the skies?

Alternatively, might the ancients not, upon encountering incontrovertible evidence that there is no heaven in the skies, no glorious old monarch above the clouds looking out for us and no netherworld underneath our feet, experience profound reality shock, severe disorientation, and extreme cognitive dissonance? Even worse, would the god

Yahweh himself not be embarrassed to learn from the offspring of the same humans who ate from the tree of knowledge, built the tower of Babylon and now frequently construct towers piercing the skies that there is, literally, no place like home (pun intended)?

In this chapter, the devil's advocate will attempt to spell out what it considers to be the devastating and indeed atheist implications of the collapse of realism with regard to the plain sense of the Old Testament's cosmographical discourse. It will be argued that the cosmography of the Old Testament is demonstrably fictitious notwithstanding conservatives' claims to the contrary. Moreover, it will be explained why liberals have to repress the fact that not only the people of the Old Testament but also their god believed in the reality of the fictitious locations featured in the biblical texts.

It will also be demonstrated that, according to the Old Testament texts (and the god Yahweh), the divine abode was indeed conceived of as being literally located in the sky above the clouds. Consequently, the devil's advocate will insist that all attempts of both conservative and liberal apologetics to circumvent the problems with realism in biblical cosmography are no more than the usual popular theological doubletalk and clearly involve strategies of evasion and repression.

In the end, the devil's advocate concludes that, since Yahweh is demonstrably not "up there" in the sky as both the Old Testament and its paramount god believe is the case, it follows that Yahweh as thus depicted has no extra-textual counterpart. He is demonstrably a character of fiction and therefore does not really exist.

6.2 OLD TESTAMENT COSMOGRAPHY

A substantial quantity of research on Old Testament cosmology is currently available. The studies by Gilkey (1961:194-205) Eichrodt (1967:186-194), Von Rad (1968:144-165), Knierim (1981:74-91), Zimmerli (1976), Stadelmann (1970), Fretheim (1984:37-44), Keel (1978:12-88), Seely (1989:20-24) and others come to mind. Yet despite this volume of research related to the particular topic, reading through the material reveals that the implications of the biblical cosmology for realism with regard to the ontological status of Yahweh-as-depicted in the texts is seldom an issue

of concern for scholars. In the present chapter, however, this very same issue will constitute the focal point of the discussion. After the introductory discussion of some obviously fictitious elements of Old Testament cosmography, the devil's advocate will attempt to address the issue of the god Yahweh's alleged and actual whereabouts in the world both within and outside the text.

6.2.1 Some examples of obviously fictitious elements Old Testament cosmography



6.2.1.1 The solid firmament

And God said, "Let there be a firmament between the waters and let it separate waters from waters." God then made the firmament and separated the waters beneath the firmament from the waters above it. And it was so. And God called the firmament "heavens". (Gen 1:6-8)

According to Skinner (1908:17), the word rendered "firmament" appears in the Old Testament a grand total of seventeen times. In each instance of its occurrence, the word represents a rendering of the Hebrew word *raqiya* and usually refers to the visible vault of the sky. The word *raqiya* comes from the verbal root *riqqua*, "beaten out".

This word was often utilised in ancient times to denote the scenario in which brass objects were either cast in the form required or beaten into shape on an anvil. A good craftsman would beat a lump of cast brass into a thin bowl. In this manner, Yahweh was believed to have beaten out the solid dome of the sky to hold back the waters allegedly above it. The dome was also useful for fixing the stars into it in order to prevent them from falling onto the earth (cf. also Stadelman 1970:56).

This picture of the cosmos is reinforced by Ezekiel's vision (cf. Hooke 1963:33). The Hebrew word *raqiya* appears five times in Ezekiel (four times in Ezekiel 1:22-26 and once in Ezekiel 10:1). In each case, the context makes it clear that what is being referred to is literally a solid vault or dome (cf. Skinner 1908:18). In the vision of the prophet, the vault appears above the "living creatures" and glitters "like a sheet of ice" (cf. Ezek 1:22ff).

Above the vault is a throne of sapphire (or lapis lazuli). Seated on the throne is "a form in human likeness", which is radiant and "like the appearance of the glory of Yahweh" (cf. Ezek 1:22ff). In short, Ezekiel saw a vision of Yahweh sitting enthroned on the vault of heaven, not unlike as is the case in the scenario described in Isaiah 40:22:

“He sits above the circle of the earth and the inhabitants thereof are like locusts. He stretches the heavens like a thin cloth and he spreads it out like a tent to dwell in.” (Isa 40:22)

The description of the firmament in Ezekiel 1:22 also appears to allude to the scenario depicted in Exodus 24:10. In the latter text, Moses and the elders are depicted as dining face to face with their god Yahweh. They also see a pavement of sapphire underneath his feet. As Exodus 24:10 definitely describes a solid firmament, one may conclude that it is the same in Ezekiel’s vision (cf. Hooke 1963:34).

This observation regarding the solidity of the firmament in the Exodus and Ezekiel texts adds presumptive evidence to the idea that the firmament in a text such as Genesis 1:7 was also presumed to be solid. To be sure, there is yet another text in the Old Testament that confirms this view. In Job 37:18, the question put to Job by Elihu reads,

“Can you spread out (*raqa*) the sky and make it as strong (or hard) as a molten (cast metal) mirror?”

The point of comparison between the sky and the mirror in this text is, specifically, the *hardness* of the metal (cf. Gray 1969:328). Furthermore, additional evidence for the supposed solidity of the firmament comes from the ancient Greek and Latin translations of the Hebrew Texts already referred to above. The LXX accordingly render “*raqia*” as “*stereoma*” (solid body) while the Vulgate translates it as “*firmamentum*” (cf. Skinner 1908:18).

The ontological problem for realism here is that, in the real world, this solid firmament in the skies does not exist. Moreover, and perhaps more important, not only the people of the Old Testament but also their god Yahweh believed in and acted as if there really is a solid dome in the sky. But if the firmament does not exist, how can the character Yahweh depicted as one who dwells above it, who himself created it and who genuinely believes in its existence be considered as anything other than a character of fiction? The devil’s advocate therefore concludes that Yahweh as thus depicted does not really exist.

6.2.1.2 The ocean of rainwater on the other side of the stars above the firmament

Parenthetically, it would be prudent to add a few words about the water that the Old Testament and Yahweh claimed could be found *above the firmament*. Surely, this is one of the issues often distorted or evaded by realists (and creationist fundamentalists in particular). In the first place, there is no evidence that the water is a mist or fog (contra Archer 1982:22-23). In the Old Testament texts, this body of water was conceived of as being the same as the sea, i.e. it is an *ocean* (cf. Gen 1:6,7).

The deep (*tehom*) of Genesis 1:2 is divided in Genesis 1:6,7 into two bodies of water. The body of water below forms the earthly sea (cf. Gen 1:9). The water above, since it is the other half of the “*tehom*”, forms an ocean in the skies *on the other side of the stars* (cf. also Psalm 148:4). The presence of the ocean in the skies can be ascertained from the fact that the sky above is blue (by day) and black (by night) - like the sea itself. Moreover, when it rains, the opening of the windows in the solid firmament allows a great deal of water to be poured out onto the earth below (cf. Gen 7:11; cf. also Stadelman 1970:46-47, 114).

It is *extremely* important to take cognisance of the fact that, according to the Old Testament (and Yahweh), this body of water is depicted as being *above* the firmament (cf. Gen 1:7; Ps 148:4). From the ancient point of view, this is a logical deduction from the fact that the blue and black heaven appears to be *behind* the sun, moon and stars. Moreover, the sun moon and stars are depicted as being part of and *inside* the solid firmament in which they are fixed so as not to fall to the earth.

This presents a severe dilemma for creationists who seem to ignore this unambiguous datum in the text and who are always arguing as if this body of water was located beneath the firmament (cf. Harwood 1992:22). It was not. This body of water, *from whence the rains come*, as far as the Old Testament texts (and Yahweh) are concerned, is on the *other* side of the solid firmament. In the world of the text, it is *further* from the earth than the sun, moon and stars. The latter is inside the firmament whilst the waters are behind it! Apparently, our rainwater comes from the other side of the known universe!

Such an extra-textual scenario does not exist. But what is its implication for the ontological status of Yahweh-as-depicted in the Old Testament?

Either Yahweh believes in this fictitious phenomenon or he does not. If he does, as the Old Testament texts suggest, then he is ignorant. Since this is inconceivable on the part of the creator of the universe, an ignorant Yahweh cannot exist. If, however, Yahweh does not believe in the waters above the firmament it follows that the deity by the same name depicted in the Old Testament texts as having created this non-existent state of affairs and as believing in its reality obviously has no extra-textual counterpart. And since we are presently concerned with the ontological status of Yahweh as depicted in the text, there is only one possible conclusion: Yahweh as thus depicted is a character of fiction and does not really exist.

6.2.1.3 Sheol - The subterranean land of the dead

The "lower story" of the Old Testament's "three-storied-universe" is depicted in the texts as being the abode of the dead (cf. Tromp 1969:01; Stadelman 1970:165-176; Spink 1986:02). However, the idea that the Old Testament itself locates this realm (called Sheol) literally *beneath* the surface of the earth is disputed by some conservatives (cf. Archer 1982:117-119). They refuse to recognise that the Old Testament and its paramount god believed in the existence of a literal netherworld underground. It is thus claimed that Sheol is just a *metaphor* for the grave (cf. Kaiser et al. 1996:106). Allegedly, the concept of an underworld merely designates the state of the dead and not their location (cf. Haley 1992:55).

According to the devil's advocate, however, these claims are untenable and simply incorrect. As such, they witness to a desperate strategy of evasion and repression by scholars who realise all-too-well the problematic implications for realism should the textual data prove to be fictitious.

To justify the devil's advocate's claim that the Old Testament's authors and their god Yahweh believed that there was literally a land of the dead underground and that, therefore, Yahweh as thus depicted is a character of fiction, it refers the reader to the text of Numbers 16:20-35. If analysed via philosophical criticism, the interpreter

concerned with matters of ontology will ask the question what the ontological status of Yahweh-as-depicted in the text may be given the ontological status of what was clearly intended to be understood as a literal account of an actual historical event.

“And Yahweh spoke with Moses and said, ‘Speak with the congregation and say, ‘Be sure that you get away from the dwellings of Korah, Datan and Abiram...But Korah, Datan and Abiram came out and stood by the door of their tents with their wives and sons and little children. Then Moses said, ‘In this you will know that Yahweh has sent me to do all these works; that they are not from my own heart. If these people die like all people and are visited with the visitation common to all people, then Yahweh did not send me. But if Yahweh creates something new and the ground opens her mouth and eats them with all that belongs to them and they go down alive into Sheol, then you will know that Yahweh abhorred these men. And when Moses finished speaking, the ground that was underneath them was torn and the earth opened her mouth and ate them with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah, including all their possessions. In this manner, with all that was in their possession, these people went down alive to Sheol. The earth then covered them and they perished from the congregation. All the people of Israel that were present then fled from their cries because they said, ‘Maybe the earth will eat us too!’ (Num 16:20-35)

In this passage, the literal earth literally opens up and Korah and his ilk literally go down alive into a very literal underworld called Sheol. Not just the men but their goods as well dropped down into the subterranean place. Obviously, this story was most certainly not intended to be understood as a figurative depiction. Men do not enter alive into a “state of death” and the material goods certainly did not enter a "spiritual dimension".

It is therefore completely incorrect to claim that, as far as the Old Testament (and Yahweh) is concerned, Sheol is merely a figurative concept used to denote the state of the dead or simply "the grave". The historically intended scenario depicted in the text

of Numbers 16:20-35 clearly does not depict this as being the case. Moreover, according to the devil's advocate in one of its more sarcastic moods, there may be at least some consolation for those who persist in their insistence on the historicity of the scenario depicted in the text. Such readers may appreciate then the possibility that, contrary to the view of the author of Psalm 49 and many a preacher, apparently you *can* take it with you. If it isn't one thing, its another.

The scenario depicted in Numbers 16:20-35 is not an isolated instance of a depiction of the literal subterranean location of Sheol. In Isaiah 14:9, Yahweh speaks to the king of Babylon saying, "Sheol beneath is moved to meet you when you come; it stirs up the shades for you, even all the chief ones of the earth". The text paints the picture, once again, of a subterranean realm of the dead. Along the same line, in Amos 9:2, Yahweh himself contrasts "*digging* down into Sheol" with "climbing up into the skies". As the sky is literally "up there", the only reasonable opposition is that its antipode – Sheol – was conceived of as being literally "down under".

Of course, the fact that in all three of the texts noted above, it is Yahweh himself speaking and acting as though Sheol is literally underground is, as far as the devil's advocate is concerned, devastating for realism pertaining to the ontological status of the deity as thus depicted. Since there is no Sheol inside or under the earth (which is, of course, in all these texts presumed to be flat), it follows that the god who believes in the reality of this state of affairs must himself be a creation of the people who held such beliefs. In other words, Yahweh as thus depicted is a character of fiction and, along with his subterranean netherworld, does not really exist.

6.2.1.4 Examples of other fictitious cosmographical features

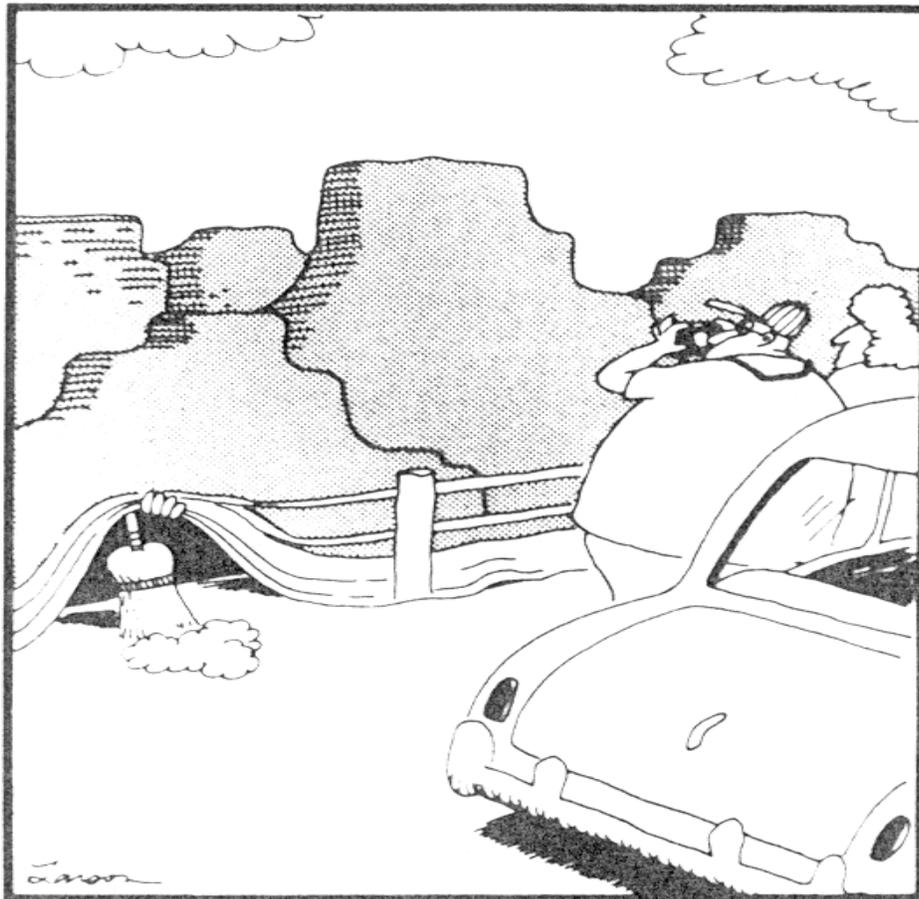
Apart from the aforementioned fictitious phenomena and locations, the following list, once again courtesy of the devil's advocate, gives an indication of some additional non-existent alleged realities. Contrary to the claims of the Old Testament authors and the god they worshipped, these places and spaces have no extra-textual counterparts.

- The young earth (cf. Gen 1-11 and 1 Chron 1-10 that, when scrutinised with regard to the dating of creation, leaves us with a 6000 year old universe);

- The order of creation (cf. Gen 1 with the creation of the sun and moon *after* the creation of the earth and its vegetation and Gen 2 with the creation of plants and animals *after* the creation of the male human);
- The duration of creation (cf. Gen 1 for six 24-hour days and Ex 31:17 for an endorsement of this belief by Yahweh himself; cf. also Gen 2 for a total duration of *one* whole day for the creation of "earth and heavens");
- The eternal earth (cf. Pss 78:69, 93:1, 104:5, 148:6; Eccl 1:4; Jer 31:35-36; however, this contradicts the view of Isa 34:4, 51:6);
- The corners of the earth (cf. Zech 6:1-4);
- The pillars of the earth and the mountains supporting the vault of the skies (cf. Job 9:5; 18:4; 26:10-11; Ps 75:4);
- The flat earth (cf. Dan 4:10-11,20);
- The ocean on which the land floats (cf. Gen 7:11; Ex 20:4; Ps 24:1);
- The storehouses and chambers in the sky for the hail, rain, snow, etc. (cf. Job 38:22; Jer 10:13; Am 9:6; etc.);
- The low starry heavens (cf. Gen 11,18; 2 Kgs 2:11; Isa 14:12-14; etc.);
- The objective reality of constellations in the sky (cf. Job 38:31-32);
- The moving celestial bodies (cf. Josh 10:12-14; Judg 5:21; Isa 38:8; Eccl 1:5; etc.);
- The unmoving earth (cf. Pss 93:1, 104:5; etc.);
- The subterranean chamber of the sun (cf. Ps 19A; Job 3:8; etc.);
- The personified sea with its dragons (cf. Job 38:8,10; Ps 104:26; Ezek 32:2; Am 9:3; etc.);
- The stars as living entities (cf. Judg 5:21; Job 38:7; Isa 14:12; Dan 8:10; etc.);
- The desert wastes that are the haunts of demons (cf. Lev 16; Isa 34:14);
- The ends of the earth just beyond Armenia (north); Iran (east); Spain (west) and Ethiopia (south) (cf. Gen 2:8-15; Jon 1:2-3; etc.);
- The sun, moon and stars as small lights beneath the waters above the firmament (cf. Gen 1:14-16; Josh 10:12-14; Isa 38:8);
- The centre or navel of the world at Jerusalem (cf. Ezek 5:5);
- Jerusalem in the far north at the source of the waters (cf. Ps 48:3);
- The Garden of Eden at the source of four rivers (cf. Gen 2-11);
- The mountain of the gods in the north (cf. Isa 14:13);

- The garden of the gods (cf. Ezek 28:12; Isa 51:3);
- The multiple levels of the underworld (cf. Isa 14:9-20; Ezek 32:19-32);
- The mountains at the entrance to the underworld (cf. Job 17:2; Ps 42:7);
- The river of the underworld (cf. Job 33:18, 36:12).

The devil's advocate would like to point out that these features "exist" only in the world of the text and inside the minds of those who read it (cf. also Brueggemann 1997:57). Once these locations and scenarios are evaluated for verification or falsification in the extra-textual realm, modern astronomy, geography, meteorology and geology have long since demonstrated that what appears on the devil's advocate's list have no counterpart in the world outside the text.



Given these fictitious elements of Old Testament cosmology, the problem for realism regarding the ontological status of Yahweh-as-depicted in the text may be articulated in the following manner:

1. The cosmography is often inextricably linked to the supposed historical narratives or words of the deity Yahweh so that it cannot be bracketed or demythologised without realism pertaining to the whole collapsing.
2. Contrary to what most theologians would want others to believe, the fact is that the unrealistic beliefs are not simply presented as being merely the views of the Old Testament authors of whom no more could have been expected given their cultural and historical location.
3. The real problem that is constantly being repressed is that, according to the texts, even Yahweh himself believes in the factuality of these erroneous conceptions of what is supposed to be his own creation.

Consequently, the only logical deduction to be made is that the deity who created and believed and acted in the fictitious world depicted in the texts must himself be a character of fiction. In other words, like his creation, Yahweh as thus depicted does not exist.

6.2.2 Where is Yahweh?

Suppose Yahweh does exist, *where* would he be? More specifically, where, *according to the text of the Old Testament*, does Yahweh himself locate his own abode in the world also alleged to exist outside the text? In response to this question, and according to the devil's advocate, several Old Testament texts seem to suggest that both the people of the Old Testament world and their god Yahweh believed that the divine abode was literally located "up there" in the sky just above the clouds.

Consider, if you will, the following examples of texts that the devil's advocate believes are enough to actually allow for the possibility of an empirical disproof of the existence of Yahweh-as-depicted in the text.

"And they said, 'Let us build for ourselves a city and a tower with a top that reaches into the heavens. Let us make a name for ourselves so that we do not spread across the earth'. Then Yahweh went down to look at the

city and the tower that the sons of man had built. Then Yahweh said, ‘There they are now, one people and one language. And this is just the beginning of their undertaking. Now nothing that they plan will be impossible for them. Come, let us **go down** and confuse their language so that the one does not understand the other. Thus Yahweh scattered them from there over the whole earth and they stopped building the city.’ (Gen 11: 4-9)

“And after he had finished speaking with him, God **went upwards** from Abraham.” (Gen 17:22)

“The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is truly great and their sin is very heavy. I want to **go down** in order to see whether they have actually acted according to the outcry that has come to me and, if not, I want to know it.” (Gen 18:20-21)

“And he dreamed and there was a ladder placed **on the earth** of which **the top reached to the** heavens while the angels of God **went up** and **came down** from it. And look, **Yahweh** stood at its **top**...Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Truly, Yahweh is in this place and I did not know it’. And he became frightened and said, ‘How fearsome is this place,...it is nothing less than a portal to the heavens!’” (Gen 28:12-17)

“Then **God ascended from the place** where he spoke to him.” (Gen 35:9-13)

“And Yahweh spoke to Moses and said, ‘Look I shall come to you in a thick cloud that the people may hear when I speak to you and so that they will always believe in you...Furthermore, Yahweh said to Moses, “Go to the people and sanctify them today and tomorrow and let them wash their clothes and keep themselves ready by the third day. On the third day Yahweh will **come down** on the mountain of Sinai before the eyes of all the people.” (Ex 19:9-13)

“And the whole of the mountain Sinai smoked because Yahweh **came down** to it in a fire and the smoke went up like the smoke of an oven and the whole mountain shook. When the sound of the horn became stronger, Moses spoke and Yahweh answered him loudly. While Yahweh **descended** onto the mountain of Sinai, onto the top of the mountain, Yahweh called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses climbed up.” (Ex 19:16-22)

“Look **down** from your holy dwelling **in the heavens...**” (Deut 26:15)

“Please, look **down** from your holy dwelling, **from the heavens**, and bless your people Israel...” (Deut 27:15)

“There is nobody like your god, O Jeshurun, who rides **in the skies** as your help, and **over the clouds** in his loftiness.” (Deut 30:26)

“...Yahweh threw great big hailstones **from the heavens** on them...” (Josh 10:10-11)

“...when the flame of the altar rose upwards, the angel of Yahweh **went up** in the flame; and Manoah and his wife saw it and they fell with their faces to the ground.” (Judg 13:15)

“Cords of Sheol surrounded me and the cords of death came upon me. When I was anxious, I called to Yahweh. I called out to my god. Out of his palace he heard me; my cries were in his ears. Then the earth trembled and shook and the foundations of the heavens shook and trembled, for he was angry. Smoke went up in his nose and a fire proceeded from his mouth; coals from within him burned. And he bent the heavens and **came down** and dark clouds were underneath his feet. He rode on a cherub and flew; yes, he appeared on the wings of the wind. He put darkness around him as huts, the collection of waters, thickness of clouds. Out of the shining before him coals burned. **Out of the skies**, Yahweh thundered; and the Most High made his voice heard. He sent out arrows and scattered

them; lightning and confused them. The bottom of the oceans became visible; the foundations of the world were revealed by the threat of Yahweh and by the blow of his nose. **Out of the heights** he stretched out his hand, he grabbed me, pulled me out of the great waters.” (2 Sam 22:5-17; cf. also Ps 18:5-18)

“Then Solomon went to stand before the altar of Yahweh...and spread his hands **toward the heavens** and said, ‘Yahweh, God of Israel, in the heavens above or on the earth beneath there is no god like you...But would God really live on earth? Look, the heavens, yes, the highest heavens cannot contain you, how much less this house I have built...may you hear every prayer **to your dwelling, to the heavens**...will you then listen **in the heavens**...If **the heavens** are locked up and there is no rain...will you listen **in the heavens...your permanent dwelling**...” (1 Kgs 8:22ff)

“And while they were walking and talking there suddenly came a chariot of fire with horses of fire that parted them. And Elijah **ascended to the heavens** in the storm.” (2 Kgs 2:11)

“Answer me, Yahweh. Answer me, so that these people can know that you are the god and so that you can let their hearts return to you. Then fire **fell from Yahweh**...and when the people saw it they fell on their faces and said, ‘Yahweh, he is god! Yahweh, he is god!’” (1 Sam 18:38-39)

“...would you then listen from **the heavens, your perpetual abode**...?” (2 Chron 6:33)

“...are you not the God **in the heavens**...?” (2 Chron 20:6)

“The **fire of God fell from the heavens** and burned among the cattle and among the servants and it consumed them...” (Job 1:16)

Is God not high in the heavens? And look how high the highest stars are. But you say, ‘What does God know? Can he judge through the darkness?’

The clouds are a cover for Him, so that he does not see...” Yet **on the firmament of heaven** he walks...” (Job 22:12-14)

“Listen! Listen to the thundering of his voice and the thundering that goes forth from his mouth. **Under the heavens**, he releases it and sends his lights to the ends of the earth...his voice roars, he thunders wonderfully with his voice...” (Job 37:2-5)

“Yahweh is in his holy palace; the throne of Yahweh is **in the heavens**...” (Ps 11:4)

“Yahweh looked **down from the heavens** onto the sons of man to see if there was one with insight...” (Ps 14:2)

“He bent the heavens and **came down**...” (Ps 18:10)

“The voice of Yahweh **is on the waters**, the God of honour thunders. Yahweh is on the great waters...Yahweh sits enthroned **on the flood**; yes Yahweh sits as king forever.” (Ps 29:3,10)

“...they will praise Yahweh because he looked **down from his holy heights**. Yahweh looked down from **the heavens** onto the earth...” (Ps 102:19-20)

“Yahweh has established his kingdom **in the heavens**.” (Ps 103:19)

“You...who have stretched out the heavens like a tent, who have laid the beams of thy chambers **on the waters**.” (Ps 104:1-3)

“Bend the heavens and **come down**. Touch the mountaintops that they may smoke.” (Ps 144:5)

“And you said in your heart, ‘I want to climb **up to the heavens**, lift my throne **above the stars** of God and sit on the mountain of meeting in the

far reaches of the north. I want to climb **up above the heights of the clouds**, make myself equal with the Most High.” (Isa 14:13:14)

“He sits **above the circle of the earth** and the inhabitants thereof are like locusts. He stretches **the heavens** like a thin cloth and he spreads it out like a tent to dwell in.” (Isa 40:22)

“If only you would tear **the heavens** and **come down**... (Isa 64:1)

“Yahweh will roar **from the heights** and lift up his voice **from the heavens**.” (Jer 25:30)

“When he lets his voice be heard there is the thundering of the waters **in the heavens**.” (Jer 51:16)

“...**the heavens** were opened and I saw visions of God.” (Ezek 1:1)

“...with **the clouds of heaven** came someone like the son of man and he came to the one, ancient of days...” (Dan 7:13)

“Look, Yahweh goes **out of his holy dwelling** and he **comes down** and steps **on the heights** of the earth.” (Mic 1:3)

“It is he who has built his chambers **in the heavens** and established his **heavens above the earth**.” (Am 9:6)

From these passages, the following facts might be seen as demonstrating beyond a doubt that Yahweh is supposed to be “up there” in the sky:

- Yahweh and his angels are often depicted as literally going “up” to the divine abode;
- Yahweh literally has to come “down” to speak with people and to intervene in

human affairs;

- During prayer, people look “upwards” or lift their hands “up” to the skies;
- Yahweh is often depicted as literally looking “down” on people;
- Thunder is considered to be literally the voice of Yahweh;
- Yahweh is depicted as being enthroned on the flood/waters (i.e. rainwater);
- The firmament, i.e. the blue skies are part of Yahweh’s abode (e.g. its pavement);
- Even though Yahweh is depicted as dwelling higher than the stars this does not make realism any less problematic since even the storehouses to the rain and hail were also believed to be above the stars;
- Yahweh’s habit of riding on clouds also implies the alleged existence of his abode "up there" in the *skies*.

Only by assuming that Yahweh was supposed to live up in the *sky* not much higher than the clouds can one make sense of these passages. Moreover, only on such an assumption can one explain why this god can become horrified at the prospect of the possibility that mortals might build a tower that can reach the heavens (cf. Gen 11:5-7). Any modern god who knew the enormous distance even to the nearest stars would have laughed at the naïveté of the builders.

Of course, the Old Testament authors cannot be faulted for believing the same superstitions as their contemporaries. Yet this changes nothing about the fact that they lied about the acts and beliefs of the one who is supposed to be a nearly omniscient god. That Yahweh himself could believe that he lived in the skies and act as if this was the case give the game away and unmask him as a product of the imagination of humans who themselves believed in such a fictitious state of affairs.

Moreover, with this data in mind, it would seem that any apologetic attempt to salvage realism must be flawed from the outset. Popular arguments based on claims that heaven was never really understood as being literally “up there”, that heaven is a spiritual dimension outside space and time, or that the language is merely metaphorical or phenomenological are all unconvincing and invalid.

The idea of God dwelling in a spiritual dimension, in the fourth dimension or even in infinite dimensional space is indeed popular among sophisticated modern believers. The belief in a fourth dimension originated at the end of the nineteenth during a time that also saw a new interest among the general population of Europe in spiritualism and the paranormal (cf. Hinton 1904:15; Abbot 1952:01; Rucker 1986:02). Somehow this led many theologians to speculate anew concerning exactly where the spiritual world was supposed to be located as scientists from the sixteenth century onwards demonstrated clearly that it was certainly not, as traditionally believed, in the sky above the earth (cf. also Reichenbach 1957:13-17).

Many scientifically embarrassed clergy capitalised on these ideas and repressed the fact that the Bible depicted Yahweh as literally dwelling in the skies. Now it was claimed that God dwelled somewhere in higher space. Based on analogies derived from higher analytical geometry, the collapse of the old cosmology of Heaven above and Hell below was repressed and the texts were reinterpreted to show that their discourse was true after all, albeit in a very different sense from what was hitherto believed to be the case (cf. Rucker 1977:105-107).

By now it should be clear that such an idea is utterly alien to the Old Testament texts (contra Ross 1993:40). Yahweh-as-depicted in the text seems to be ignorant regarding the existence of any spiritual or fourth dimension. The biblical texts were written during a time when everyone, including the god of Israel, believed that the divine abode was located somewhere high in the sky above a flat earth on which the deity could look down. The reinterpretation of obviously fictitious cosmology via the fantasy of higher dimensional space as the actual locality of the deity’s abode is therefore unconvincing as an attempt to salvage realism.

In other words, the texts of the Old Testament show quite clearly that the claims of

both the early astronomers and later Russian cosmonauts that God was nowhere “up there” should indeed have been a cause for concern. Their failure to find Yahweh’s abode in the skies is nothing less than an empirical falsification of realism in Old Testament theology. It thoroughly deconstructs realism regarding the ontological status of the god Yahweh who himself endorsed those very same fictitious cosmological beliefs.

Another unconvincing attempt to salvage realism, or at least to render it immune, can be found in the apologetic claim that the Old Testament is not a scientific textbook. As is the case with an argument claiming that the Bible is not a textbook of history or theology, this argument – whatever its merits – does nothing at all to eliminate the *ontological* problem. It merely states the obvious when it points out that the format and intention of the Old Testament and its discourse is different from that of modern day scientific (historical/theological) discourse. It can also be understood as a euphemistic way of acknowledging the presence of science fiction and scientific *errors* in the text.

In conservative apologetics, of course, the claim that the Bible is not a scientific textbook is not understood in the aforementioned manner. In that context, the claim is taken to imply that one should not expect scientific formulae and rhetorical strategies in the text – a superfluous and redundant argument since nobody actually expects this anyway. When scholars who are more critical utilise this argument, they too state the obvious but their argument contains a veiled admittance that the text contains elements of fiction. It is irrelevant that the authors of the biblical text never intended to write scientific papers. If they speak about things that do not exist, nothing changes the fact that their claims contain fiction.

In other words, any attempt by anyone to salvage realism by claiming that the Old Testament is not a scientific treatise but, through metaphorical, mythical, symbolic or phenomenological discourse, has the intention of conveying “religious” or “theological” varieties of “truth” actually distorts the issue under consideration. It is based on a misconception and a failure to appreciate the dilemma that is involved in the devil’s advocate’s concern with the ontological implications of the Old Testament’s fictitious cosmography. One is therefore forced to conclude that all such

attempts to salvage realism are useless and merely more of the same typical theological doubletalk that realists engage in when pushed into a corner.

In sum then, according to the Old Testament texts, Yahweh literally dwells in the sky just above the earth. Since, in the world outside the text, this is demonstrably not the case, realism collapses. Yahweh as thus depicted has no extra-textual counterpart and is therefore a character of fiction. In short, Yahweh as thus depicted does not really exist

6.3 CONCLUSION

The argument from fictitious cosmography as discussed in this chapter can be summed up along the following lines with regard to its implications for realism pertaining to the ontological status of Yahweh-as-depicted in the text.

1. The revelation of the acts of Yahweh (creation, abidance, and intervention) assumes the reality of particular cosmographical features.
2. These features encountered in Old Testament cosmography are fictitious since they refer to localities and phenomena that do not exist and because they depict Yahweh as literally dwelling in the sky whilst this is demonstrably not the case in the world outside the text.
3. Since the cosmography of the Old Testament that even Yahweh himself believes in is fictitious, it follows that the abode, acts and person of Yahweh depicted in relation to those features must all likewise be fictitious.
4. Therefore, Yahweh as thus depicted does not exist.

The argument from cosmographical fiction is the fifth argument in the case against realism. As the case against realism constitutes a cumulative argument against the existence of Yahweh, this particular argument should not be appropriated in isolation. Its plausibility and rhetorical strength are enhanced when viewed in relation to all the other arguments in the devil's advocate's case for Yahwistic atheism.