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The Heavens Declare: A Journey through the Seven Skies of Scripture and Science

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Abstract: *The notion of the seven heavens (ሰባቱ ሰማያት; al-samāwāt al-sabʿ), articulated in Ethiopian Orthodox, biblical, and Islamic traditions, has often been dismissed as prescientific cosmology incompatible with contemporary astrophysics. Such critiques, however, overlook the theological depth and symbolic intentionality embedded within these cosmological visions. Rather than functioning as empirical blueprints of the universe, the seven heavens operate as structured metaphysical frameworks that articulate transcendence, divine sovereignty, and graded ontological reality. This study contends that the seven heavens should be interpreted as a theological architecture rather than a failed scientific hypothesis. Through comparative textual analysis of the Ethiopian Book of Enoch, Pauline references to the "third heaven," and Qur'anic descriptions of layered heavens, the research demonstrates that each tradition employs vertical cosmology to express divine proximity, moral hierarchy, and spiritual ascent. A hermeneutical engagement with atmospheric science, astronomy, and cosmology further reveals structural correspondences between ancient symbolic stratification and the layered organization of the observable universe, including atmospheric divisions, galactic hierarchies, and large-scale cosmic structures. To conceptualize this relationship, the study introduces the term cognitive resonance, distinguishing meaningful structural parallelism from simplistic concordism. The findings indicate that ancient cosmologies and modern scientific models share analogous patterns of order and scale without implying literal equivalence. Consequently, the heavens function as theological symbols within scripture and as physical realities within science, representing complementary epistemic domains.*

Keywords: *: Seven heavens, Ethiopian Orthodox theology, Quranic cosmology, science and religion, cognitive resonance.*

I. Introduction

The relationship between ancient religious cosmologies and modern science has long been characterized by perceived conflict, with pre-scientific models of the cosmos often dismissed as primitive mythology (Barbour, 1997). The concept of "seven heavens" (ሰባቱ ሰማያት; al-samāwāt al-sabʿ), attested across Mesopotamian, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, exemplifies this tension (Wright, 2000). Contemporary discourse frequently frames such multilayered celestial models as obsolete artifacts of prescientific thinking, rendering them intellectually irrelevant in an age of astrophysics and cosmology. This dismissal, however, overlooks the sophisticated theological and symbolic functions these cosmological frameworks served within their respective religious traditions.

This paper argues that the "seven heavens" motif, as found in Ethiopian Orthodox and Islamic traditions, should not be viewed as a failed scientific model but as a sophisticated theological framework for conceptualizing transcendence. Furthermore, its structural logic finds compelling, though non-identical, parallels in the layered and multi-scalar universe described by modern science, offering a rich ground for interdisciplinary dialogue. Rather than constituting a literal cosmological description requiring empirical verification or falsification, the seven heavens represent what Polkinghorne (2007) might identify as a "cousinly" approach

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to understanding reality, one that, like science, seeks truthful understanding through engagement with experienced reality, albeit through different methodological lenses. This study employs a comparative textual analysis of primary sources, including the Book of Enoch (specifically the Ethiopian Metsahafe Henok), biblical references (2 Corinthians 12:2-4), and Quranic exegesis (tafsir) on verses including Surah 65:12, which explicitly correlates seven heavens with seven earths (Kitota, 2023). The investigation then utilizes a hermeneutical approach informed by Shahryari's (2025) framework of "scientific hermeneutics," which leverages semantic underdeterminacy, the gap between literal meaning and communicative intent, to permit interpretations of sacred texts compatible with scientific theories. This approach neither subordinates scripture to science nor neglects textual historicity, but rather enables principled reinterpretation through engagement with findings from atmospheric physics, observational astronomy, and theoretical cosmology.

This study engages with three key scholarly domains. First, the foundational typology of science-religion interaction developed by Barbour (1997), whose four models, conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration, provide an analytical framework for positioning this investigation within the "dialogue" model, despite recent critiques arguing for the primacy of conflict (Damper, 2024). Second, the substantial body of scholarship on ancient Near Eastern and Abrahamic cosmologies, including Wright's (2000) comprehensive historical analysis of heaven's conceptual development and Decharneux's (2023) examination of Quranic cosmology within its late antique context. Third, contemporary works on religious engagements with science, particularly Polkinghorne's (2007) demonstration of homologous rational structures between quantum physics and theology, and Shahryari's (2025) hermeneutic framework for reconciling scientific and scriptural knowledge through inference to the best explanation.

This study aims to bridge the perceived epistemological divide between ancient religious cosmology and modern scientific inquiry by examining the concept of the "seven heavens" as a case study for interdisciplinary dialogue. The specific objectives are as follows:

- To analyze the theological and cosmological structure of the seven heavens motif within its primary scriptural contexts. This involves a close textual examination of the Ethiopian Orthodox reception of 1 Enoch (Metsahafe Henok), the Pauline reference to the "third heaven" in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4, and the Quranic presentations of the seven heavens (al-samāwāt al-sabʿ) in verses such as Surah 65:12 and 2:29.
- To identify structural parallels between the layered cosmology of sacred texts and the multi-scalar universe described by contemporary science.
- To evaluate existing models of science-religion interaction (Barbour, 1997) as they apply to the specific case of the seven heavens.
- To propose a hermeneutical framework for interpreting ancient cosmological texts in light of scientific discovery.
- To contribute to interfaith dialogue by demonstrating how a shared cosmological symbol functions within Ethiopian Orthodox and Islamic traditions while engaging a common scientific worldview.

II. Review of literature

2.1 The Celestial Hierarchy: The Seven Heavens in Sacred Scripture

a. The Second Temple Legacy: The Book of Enoch and its Ethiopian Orthodox Reception

The most detailed exposition of the seven heavens in early Jewish literature appears in the Book of Enoch (1 Enoch), a composite work dating from approximately 300 BCE to the first century BCE (Nickelsburg, 2001). This text, fully extant only in Ge'ez, holds unique authority within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church as part of its broader Old Testament canon (Charles, 2019; Goshu and Ridwan, 2025a; Goshu and Ridwan, 2025b). The Enochic heavenly journeys, particularly in the Book of the Watchers (chs. 1-36) and the Book of Astronomical Writings (chs. 72-82), present a meticulously structured cosmos (Wright, 2000).

Figure 1. The Seven Heavens in Ethiopian Orthodox cosmological and theological tradition.

Figure 1 illustrates the cosmological schema of the Seven Heavens as interpreted within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo tradition. Rooted in biblical passages such as 2 Corinthians 12:2 and elaborated through apocryphal and patristic literature, including 1 Enoch and the Book of Jubilees, the layered heavens symbolize ascending degrees of holiness, angelic hierarchy, and divine proximity (Bauckham, 1998; Piovanelli, 2007). Ethiopian Orthodox theology integrates Judaic apocalyptic cosmology with Alexandrian and Syriac influences, preserving a structured, multi-tiered universe culminating in the throne of God (Cowley, 1983). The sevenfold arrangement reflects theological anthropology, moral ascent, and liturgical symbolism embedded in Ethiopian ecclesiastical art and manuscript illumination traditions (Heldman, 1993).

The cosmological schema unfolds progressively as Enoch ascends through multiple heavens. The first heaven contains the storehouses of atmospheric phenomena, snow, dew, and clouds, governed by angelic custodians (Nickelsburg, 2001). The second heaven serves as a prison for the rebellious Watchers, those angels whose descent and union with human women precipitated antediluvian corruption (Wright, 2000). Subsequent heavens house

various angelic orders: archangels administering divine governance personified celestial bodies following their prescribed courses, and the angelic liturgists perpetually praising the Divine Majesty. The seventh heaven represents the culmination, where Enoch beholds the "Great Glory" enthroned amidst the highest angelic choirs (1 Enoch 71, as cited in Nickelsburg, 2001). This hierarchical structure functions not as primitive astronomy but as theological architecture, each layer mediating between transcendent divinity and immanent creation while demonstrating cosmic order established by divine decree (Wright, 2000).

The Ethiopian Orthodox reception elevates 1 Enoch to canonical status, incorporating it within the broader scriptural corpus of eighty-one books (Charles, 2019; Goshu, 2025). This inclusion, unique among Christian traditions, reflects the text's profound influence on Ethiopian theological imagination, liturgical poetry, and iconographic traditions. The Watcher narrative provides explanatory framework for the origins of evil, while the heavenly ascension motif prefigures later Christian apocalyptic and mystical literature (Nickelsburg, 2001).

b. Pauline and Patristic Visions: The Third Heaven in Christian Thought

The Pauline corpus introduces the seven heavens tradition into Christian scripture through the apostle's cryptic autobiographical reference: "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven, whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows" (2 Corinthians 12:2-4, New International Version). This passage presupposes a multi-layered celestial cosmology familiar to first-century Jewish and Hellenistic audiences (Wright, 2000). The subsequent mention of being "caught up into Paradise" (v. 4) generated extensive patristic discussion regarding the relationship between the third heaven and Paradise, whether identical or distinct realms (Haydock, 2024).

Augustine of Hippo, engaging this passage, situates the third heaven within a three-tiered cosmological framework derived from Hebrew tradition: the first heaven comprising atmospheric space (the firmament), the second encompassing the celestial bodies (the starry heaven), and the third constituting the spiritual abode of angels and the blessed, wherein God manifests divine glory (Wright, 2000). The apostle's reticence regarding the content of the "unspeakable words" establishes an apophatic trajectory within Christian mysticism, the recognition that certain mysteries transcend human articulation (Haydock, 2024).

Later Christian cosmology reaches systematic expression in Dante Alighieri's Paradiso, which synthesizes biblical cosmology with Ptolemaic astronomy and Thomistic theology (Sullivan, 2020). Dante's nine concentric spheres, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Fixed Stars, Primum Mobile, culminate in the Empyrean, the non-material abode of God beyond space and time (Goshu and Ridwan, 2025b). Each sphere corresponds to particular virtues and hosts specific categories of blessed souls, from the inconstant (Moon) through the wise (Sun), the warriors of faith (Mars), and the contemplatives (Saturn) (Sullivan, 2020). This architectural vision represents the soul's progressive deification through intellectual and spiritual ascent, culminating in beatific vision.

c. The Seven Exalted Heavens (Al-Samawat Al-'Ula) in the Quran and Tafsir

The Quran articulates the seven heavens with remarkable frequency and consistency. The phrase "seven heavens" (sabaʿ samāwāt) occurs seven times across diverse surahs: "It is He who created for you all that is on earth, then turned to the heaven, and made them seven heavens; and He is Knower of all things" (Quran 2:29); "The seven heavens and the earth and whatever is in them exalt Him" (Quran 17:44); "Say: Who is Lord of the seven heavens and Lord of the Great Throne?" (Quran 23:86); and "Allah is He who created seven heavens and of the earth the like thereof" (Quran 65:12) (Decharneux, 2023). This linguistic pattern establishes the sevenfold structure as a fundamental cosmological datum within Islamic revelation (Siddiqi, 2023).

Classical exegetes (mufassirūn) developed sophisticated interpretations. Al-Tabari (d. 923 CE) emphasizes the heavens as signs (ayāt) manifesting divine power and creative

sovereignty, each heaven populated by angelic inhabitants glorifying their Lord (Decharneux, 2023). Ibn Kathir (d. 1373 CE) correlates the seven heavens with the seven earths mentioned in Surah 65:12, suggesting cosmic correspondence between celestial and terrestrial realms (Kitota, 2023). The Isra' and Mi'raj traditions—the Prophet Muhammad's nocturnal journey, provide narrative elaboration: ascending through each heaven, the Prophet encounters preceding prophets, Adam in the first heaven, Jesus and John the Baptist in the second, Joseph in the third, Idris in the fourth, Aaron in the fifth, Moses in the sixth, and Abraham in the seventh (Siddiqi, 2023).

Modern exegetes like Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) and Abul A'la Mawdudi (d. 1979) approach the seven heavens with hermeneutical sophistication. Mawdudi cautions against identifying Quranic cosmology with any particular scientific model, noting that human conceptions of "heavens" have constantly changed through observational and speculative inquiry (Siddiqi, 2023). What might be inferred, he suggests, is either that Allah has divided the universe beyond earth into seven distinct spheres, or that earth occupies a position within a universe comprising seven different spheres (Kitota, 2023). This interpretive restraint exemplifies Islamic theological method: affirming revealed truth while acknowledging human epistemic limitations regarding cosmic mysteries (Decharneux, 2023).

III. Research Methods

3.1 The Cosmic Tapestry: The Seven Heavens in Modern Scientific Cosmology

a. The First Heaven Re-examined: From Firmament to Atmosphere

Earth's atmosphere presents a naturally stratified structure comprising five primary layers, each with distinct physical characteristics and functions (McCabe, 2025). The troposphere, extending from the surface to approximately 8-18 km depending on latitude, contains roughly 90% of atmospheric mass and 99% of water vapour, serving as the domain of weather phenomena (Palmer, 2017). Above this lies the stratosphere, reaching 50 km, which houses the ozone layer that absorbs harmful ultraviolet radiation and creates a temperature inversion that stabilizes this region (McCabe, 2025). The mesosphere extends to approximately 85 km and serves as the "meteor burner," where countless meteoroids encounter sufficient friction to vaporize, creating shooting stars (Royal Meteorological Society, 2025). The thermosphere, reaching 500-1000 km, hosts the International Space Station and the spectacular auroras generated by charged solar particles interacting with atmospheric gases (Palmer, 2017). Finally, the exosphere represents the gradual transition into the vacuum of space, where individual hydrogen and helium atoms drift off into the cosmos (McCabe, 2025).

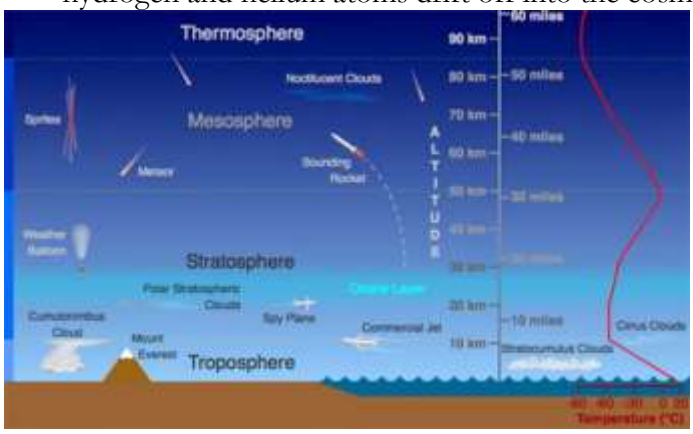

Figure 2. Schematic cross-section of Earth's atmosphere showing the five primary layers (troposphere, stratosphere, mesosphere, thermosphere, exosphere) with key features, boundaries (Kármán line, exobase), and representative phenomena (McCabe, 2025; Palmer, 2017).

This illustrative diagram depicts Earth's atmospheric stratification in concentric arcs, starting from the troposphere near the surface, containing weather, aircraft, and balloons, through the stratosphere with the ozone layer, the mesosphere where meteors burn, the thermosphere hosting auroras and satellites, to the exosphere transitioning into space, marked by the Kármán line at ~100 km (McCabe, 2025; Palmer, 2017).

This physical stratification bears remarkable structural similarity to the ancient conception of the first heaven as the repository of atmospheric phenomena, snow, dew, clouds, and winds governed by angelic custodians (Wright, 2000). The ancient intuition of a layered celestial realm mediating between Earth and the transcendent finds empirical validation in atmospheric science, though the mechanisms understood have shifted from angelic agency to physical law.

3.2 Expanding the Firmament: The Universe as a Series of Scales

Modern astronomy reveals a cosmos structured hierarchically across vast scales, mirroring the ancient intuition of ordered celestial layers. The journey begins with our Solar System, a gravitationally bound system spanning some 5.5 light-hours from the Sun to Pluto, yet constituting mostly empty space—a scale model on the National Mall would place a grapefruit-sized Sun with a 1mm Earth 15 meters distant (University of Texas at Austin, 2017). The nearest star, Proxima Centauri, lies 4.4 light-years away, demonstrating the immense gaps between stellar neighbors (University of Colorado Boulder, 2018).

Zooming outward, the Milky Way galaxy encompasses approximately 100 billion stars in a magnificent spiral structure, with our Solar System located 28,000 light-years from the galactic center (University of Texas at Austin, 2017). The Milky Way belongs to the Local Group, a collection of at least 80 galaxies including the Andromeda Galaxy (M31), which lies 2.5 million light-years distant (New Scientist, 2022). Beyond this, the Virgo Supercluster contains thousands of galaxies, and at the largest observable scales, the cosmic web emerges, vast filaments of galaxies separated by immense voids, representing the largest known structure in the universe (New Scientist, 2022).

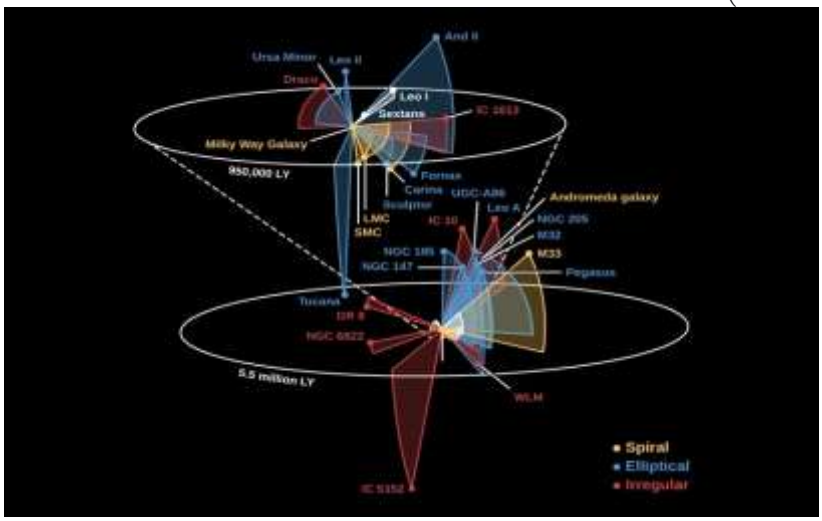

Figure 3. 3D schematic map of the Local Group, centered on the Milky Way, showing satellite galaxies and major members (Andromeda, Triangulum) with morphological types and distances up to ~5.5 million light-years.

This diagram illustrates the three-dimensional structure of the Local Group, with the Milky Way at the center, surrounded by dwarf satellites (e.g., LMC, SMC, Fornax, Draco, Leo I/II) and the dominant Andromeda (M31) galaxy ~2.5 million ly away, highlighting spiral, elliptical, and irregular morphologies within the gravitationally bound cluster extending to ~5.5 million ly (McConnachie, 2012; Karachentsev et al., 2015).

This hierarchical organization, from planetary systems to galactic clusters to the cosmic web, resonates profoundly with the ancient conception of layered heavens. While the ancient model conceived discrete, numbered heavens, the scientific universe presents continuous scales of organization that nonetheless embody the same fundamental intuition: reality is structured, ordered, and hierarchical across dimensions that transcend ordinary human experience.

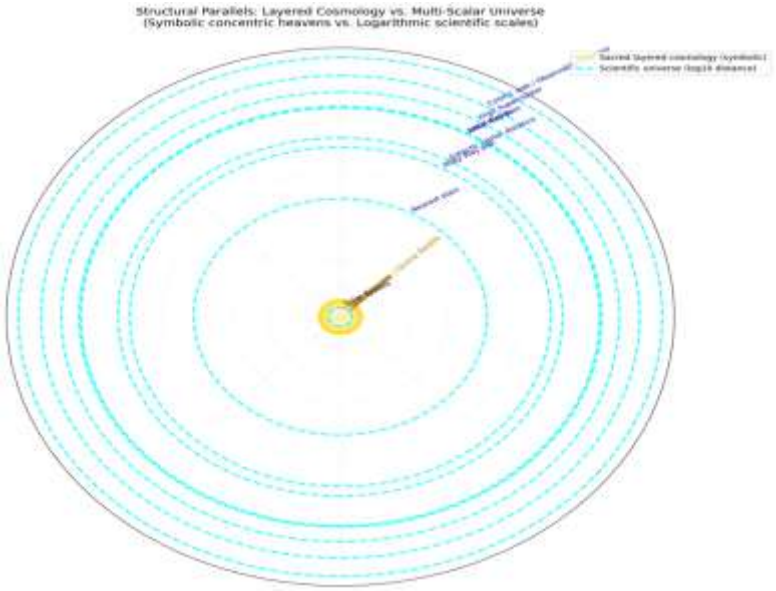

Figure 4. Concentric diagram comparing symbolic layered cosmology (seven heavens) with the logarithmic multi-scalar structure of the modern scientific universe.

This polar plot juxtaposes the traditional seven-heaven cosmology, symbolized by equally spaced concentric shells radiating from the material realm (Earth) to the divine realm, with the hierarchical, exponentially expanding scales of contemporary astronomy (Figure 4). The inner yellow-orange linear layers represent sacred cosmology's qualitative progression, while the outer cyan dashed rings mark logarithmic scientific transitions: Solar System, nearest stars (Proxima Centauri), Milky Way, Local Group (Andromeda), Virgo Supercluster, and the cosmic web/observable universe. The logarithmic radial scaling compresses vast distances, revealing structural parallels between ancient concentric models and the nested gravitational hierarchies of modern cosmology.

3.3 The Hypothetical Heavens: The Multiverse and the Limits of Science

Contemporary theoretical physics has generated speculative frameworks proposing realities beyond our observable universe. Cosmic inflation theory, particularly the "eternal inflation" model advanced by Andrei Linde, suggests that our universe may be one of

countless "bubble universes" in perpetually expanding cosmic foam (Science News, 2026). Quantum fluctuations during inflation could create regions of space with radically different physical properties, different particle masses, force strengths, or even dimensionalities, effectively constituting separate universes with distinct laws of physics (Gadgets 360, 2026). The Many-Worlds Interpretation of quantum mechanics, proposed by Hugh Everett in 1957, offers another multiverse framework: every quantum event with multiple possible outcomes generates branching realities, creating countless parallel universes wherein all possible histories unfold (Science News, 2026). These branches remain causally disconnected, with observers experiencing only one trajectory while infinite alternatives coexist.

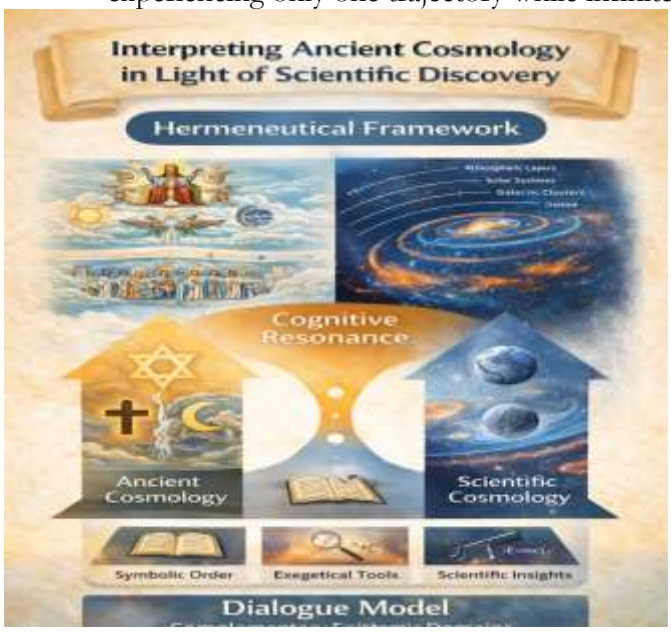

Figure 5: Hermeneutical framework illustrating dialogical engagement between ancient cosmological symbolism and contemporary scientific discovery through cognitive resonance and complementary epistemic domains.

Figure 5 presents a hermeneutical framework for interpreting ancient cosmological texts in constructive dialogue with contemporary scientific discovery. The model situates ancient cosmology and scientific cosmology as distinct yet complementary epistemic domains, mediated through what is termed "cognitive resonance." Rather than collapsing theology into empirical science or isolating them into conflict, the framework reflects a dialogical approach consistent with typologies of science–religion interaction (Barbour, 1990).

Within this structure, symbolic order and exegetical tools function as interpretive mediators, acknowledging that ancient cosmological language operates theologically rather than mechanistically. This aligns with contemporary hermeneutical scholarship emphasizing genre sensitivity and theological intentionality (McGrath, 2019). Simultaneously, scientific cosmology is presented in its hierarchical complexity, from atmospheric stratification to large-scale cosmic structures, reflecting modern astrophysical models of a dynamically structured universe (Planck Collaboration, 2020).

The central concept of cognitive resonance avoids naïve concordism while recognizing structural parallels between layered cosmologies and contemporary multiscalar models. Such resonance echoes proposals in critical AI and science–religion dialogue that advocate epistemic complementarity rather than reductionism (Stenmark, 2021). The framework thus

advances methodological integrity for both domains while encouraging interdisciplinary engagement at their conceptual boundaries.

By integrating symbolic, exegetical, and scientific lenses, the figure operationalizes a dialogical model in which ancient cosmological symbolism retains theological depth, even as scientific cosmology expands empirical understanding. The result is not synthesis but disciplined conversation grounded in epistemic humility and mutual illumination.

These multiverse hypotheses present striking conceptual parallels to the ancient seven heavens tradition, suggesting multiple distinct cosmic realms beyond our immediate perception. However, they remain profoundly speculative, facing formidable empirical challenges. Bubble universes lie beyond our cosmic horizon, and branching quantum realities are by definition inaccessible to observation (Science News, 2026). Physicist Paul Halpern notes that detecting signatures of bubble collisions in the cosmic microwave background radiation remains an unfulfilled hope, with no confirmed anomalies detected to date (Science News, 2026). Critics warn that without testable predictions, multiverse theories risk straying into metaphysics (Gadgets 360, 2026).

Thus, while scientific cosmology has expanded our conception of reality across scales and dimensions, the multiverse remains at the frontier where physics, philosophy, and imagination intersect—a modern echo of the ancient quest to understand what lies beyond the visible firmament.

IV. Result and Discussion

4.1 Dialogue and Discourse: Bridging the Two Cosmologies

a. Models of Interaction: Applying Barbour's Fourfold Typology

Ian Barbour's influential fourfold typology, conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration, has provided the foundational framework for categorizing science-religion interactions for decades (Barbour, 1997). The conflict model, epitomized by figures like Richard Dawkins and the New Atheists, posits irreconcilable epistemological warfare between scientific and religious claims. The independence model, associated with Stephen Jay Gould's "Non-Overlapping Magisteria" (NOMA), maintains that science and religion address distinct domains of inquiry requiring separate methodological approaches. The dialogue model explores consonances, methodological parallels, and boundary questions where disciplines intersect. The integration model seeks systematic synthesis, constructing unified worldviews incorporating both scientific and theological insights (Barbour, 1997; Damper, 2024).

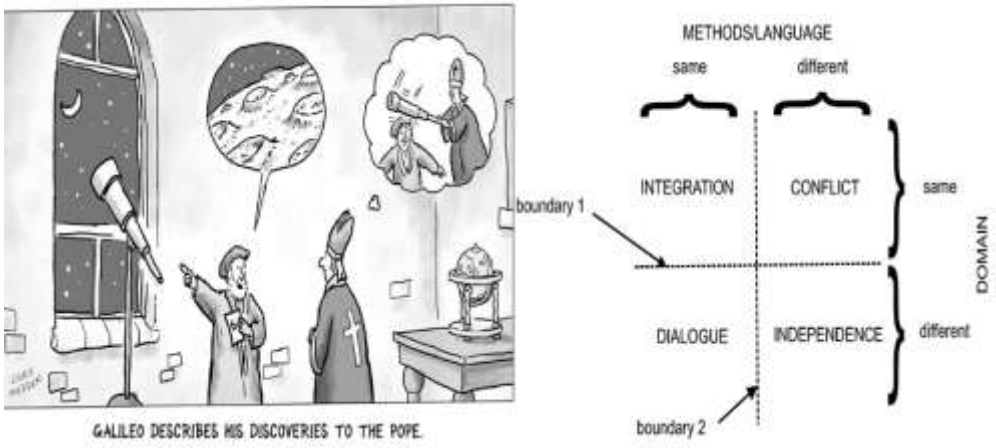

Figure 6 (left). Chris Madden cartoon depicting Galileo presenting telescopic observations of the Moon to the Pope, symbolizing historical science-religion

tension. **4 (right).** 2×2 matrix of Ian Barbour's typology of science-religion interactions, with axes of domain (same/different) and methods/language (same/different), locating integration, conflict, dialogue, and independence quadrants.

The left panel (Figure 6) shows a satirical illustration of Galileo Galilei explaining his heliocentric discoveries, revealed through the telescope, to a skeptical Pope, encapsulating the classic conflict narrative between emerging scientific evidence and ecclesiastical authority. The right panel presents Barbour's influential 2×2 framework, with the vertical axis distinguishing same versus different domains of inquiry and the horizontal axis distinguishing same versus different methods/language. This yields four models: integration (same domain, same methods), conflict (same domain, different methods), dialogue (different domains, overlapping concerns), and independence (distinct domains and methods) (Barbour, 1997). Together, the panels juxtapose historical confrontation with a systematic typology for contemporary analysis of science-religion relations.

Recent scholarship has subjected Barbour's typology to critical scrutiny. Damper (2024) vigorously defends the conflict model, arguing that theology "typically proceeds by first affirming belief in God and then seeking rationalisations that protect this belief against contrary evidence," constituting "the very antithesis of scientific endeavour" (p. 704). This critique notwithstanding, the present study argues for the dialogue model as most appropriate for examining the seven heavens concept. The dialogue model accommodates genuine engagement between disciplines without demanding the artificial separation of independence or the premature synthesis of integration. As Ahmadi and Ayatollahi (2009) observe, the dialogue model allows each discipline to maintain methodological integrity while exploring areas of shared concern, precisely the approach required when comparing ancient cosmological symbols with contemporary scientific discovery.

The seven heavens motif exemplifies this dialogical possibility. Rather than forcing concordist equivalences or retreating into isolated disciplinary silos, dialogue permits recognition that scripture and science ask different questions about the heavens: scripture addresses meaning, transcendence, and humanity's relationship to the divine, while science investigates physical mechanisms, structures, and processes. These inquiries, though distinct, intersect at the boundary where wonder at cosmic order meets empirical investigation of that order.

b. Cognitive Resonance, Not Concordism

This paper introduces the concept of cognitive resonance to characterize the relationship between ancient cosmological symbolism and modern scientific discovery. The term draws upon interdisciplinary scholarship exploring resonance between theology, neuroscience, and evolutionary theory (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014). Cognitive resonance describes the phenomenon whereby the *structure* and *complexity* of the scientific universe resonates with the *logic* and *awe* embedded in ancient religious models, without requiring literal one-to-one correspondence.

This concept deliberately distinguishes itself from concordism, the hermeneutical approach seeking direct empirical validation of scripture through scientific discovery. Concordism inevitably fails because ancient texts address realities fundamentally different from those investigated by empirical science. Cognitive resonance, by contrast, operates at the level of structural pattern and existential response. The hierarchical organization of the cosmos, from atmospheric layers through galactic structures to the cosmic web—resonates with the ancient intuition of ordered celestial realms mediating between Earth and

transcendence. The awe evoked by contemplating billions of galaxies resonates with the psalmist's declaration that "the heavens declare the glory of God."

Recent work in 4E cognition (embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended) supports this resonance framework. Religious worldviews, like scientific ones, emerge from embodied human engagement with reality, constructing meaning through dynamic coupling with environment (American Academy of Religion, 2025). The cognitive resonance between ancient and modern cosmologies reflects this shared human capacity to perceive pattern, order, and significance across scales of existence.

c. The Heavens as Symbol and System

The heavens function simultaneously as spiritual symbol in scripture and as physical system in science, complementary, not competing, epistemologies. Marcum (2005) articulates this complementarity through examination of metaphysical foundations underlying both disciplines. Science and theology operate with distinct presuppositions and values that guide theory formation and evaluation. Recognizing these foundational differences enables complementarity without conflict: "Theology without the input of science, and science without the input of theology, may lead to an impoverished world picture" (Marcum, 2005).

In scripture, the heavens symbolize divine majesty, transcendence, and covenantal faithfulness. The psalmist's declaration that "the heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1) articulates a theological claim about creation's witness to Creator. The seven heavens tradition, in both Ethiopian Orthodox and Islamic contexts, provides symbolic architecture for conceptualizing the distance between human and divine while affirming mediated access through prophetic ascent and angelic ministry.

In science, the heavens constitute a physical system governed by natural laws accessible to empirical investigation. Atmospheric physics explains the stratification protecting life on Earth. Astronomy reveals the hierarchical structure of galaxies and the cosmic web. Cosmology explores the universe's origin and evolution through the Big Bang framework. These investigations yield knowledge of mechanisms, processes, and structures.

These epistemologies prove complementary because they address different dimensions of human experience. The question "How do the heavens operate?" receives scientific answers. The question "What meaning do the heavens hold for human existence?" receives theological answers. Neither question exhausts human wonder; both remain necessary for comprehensive understanding. As Fuller, Evers, and Runehov (2022) demonstrate, "images and models" function across both domains, enabling "fruitful, synergistic, interdisciplinary conversations". The seven heavens tradition and modern cosmology thus participate in the enduring human quest to understand our place within the vast and ordered cosmos.

d. Interfaith dialogue with a shared cosmological symbol functions within Ethiopian Orthodox and Islamic traditions while engaging a common scientific worldview.

Interfaith engagement between Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and Islam can be deepened by examining shared cosmological symbols, particularly the motif of the “seven heavens,” within a scientifically informed worldview. Rather than treating cosmology as a domain of doctrinal rivalry, this approach situates the symbol within a dialogical model of science–religion interaction that respects methodological boundaries while encouraging conceptual exchange (Barbour, 1990). Theologically, the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition interprets layered heavens through apocalyptic and patristic lenses that emphasize transcendence, angelic mediation, and liturgical ascent. Islamic theology, drawing on Qur’anic cosmology and classical tafsir, articulates the seven heavens as signs of divine sovereignty and ordered creation.

Engagement with contemporary cosmology, including hierarchical cosmic structures and expanding universe models, reframes these traditions within a shared scientific horizon

without collapsing symbolic meaning into empirical description (Planck Collaboration, 2020). Such an approach reflects a multidimensional account of science–religion relations that prioritizes dialogue over conflict or independence (Stenmark, 2021).

By recognizing cosmological symbolism as theological language oriented toward meaning rather than mechanism, interfaith dialogue can move beyond apologetics toward cooperative reflection on creation, transcendence, and human responsibility within a vast universe. This model affirms that shared symbols function as bridges, not battlegrounds, when interpreted through disciplined hermeneutics and scientific literacy.

Table 1. Comparative theological and cosmological dimensions of the seven heavens across traditions.

Dimension	Ethiopian Orthodox Tradition	Islamic Tradition	Scientific Cosmology
Scriptural Basis	Enochic and patristic literature	Qur'anic revelation and tafsir	Empirical observation and theoretical modeling
Function	Spiritual ascent and angelic hierarchy	Signs of divine order and power	Description of physical cosmic structure
Epistemology	Theological-symbolic	Revelatory-theological	Empirical-mathematical
Purpose	Contemplation of transcendence	Affirmation of divine unity	Explanation of cosmic evolution
Dialogue Potential	Symbolic theology	Structured cosmology	Shared cosmic horizon

V. Conclusion

This study has argued that the "seven heavens" motif (ሰባቱ ሰማያት; al-samāwāt al-sabʿ) constitutes a powerful and enduring cosmological symbol whose meaning is enriched, rather than invalidated, by scientific discovery. Through comparative analysis of Ethiopian Orthodox, biblical, and Quranic sources, the investigation demonstrated that this ancient model functioned not as a failed scientific hypothesis but as sophisticated theological architecture for conceptualizing transcendence, divine order, and mediated access between human and divine realms. The layered structure of Enochic cosmology, the Pauline reference to the third heaven, and the Quran's seven exalted heavens each articulate, through their respective symbolic languages, the fundamental intuition that reality encompasses dimensions beyond immediate human perception.

Modern scientific cosmology, while operating within an entirely different epistemological framework, reveals a universe whose hierarchical organization resonates with this ancient intuition. Earth's atmospheric stratification, the nested scales of galactic structure, and even speculative multiverse theories all manifest the principle that physical reality is ordered across magnitudes transcending ordinary experience. This resonance, termed "cognitive resonance" in the present study, does not constitute concordist validation of scripture through science, but rather demonstrates the enduring human capacity to perceive pattern, order, and significance across scales of existence.

The implications for interfaith dialogue between Ethiopian Orthodox and Islamic traditions are significant. Both traditions share this cosmological symbol while developing distinct theological interpretations. Engaging contemporary scientific cosmology provides a shared conceptual terrain for exploring these traditions together, fostering mutual understanding without diminishin distinctive commitments. The seven heavens motif thus becomes not a point of division but a bridge for interreligious conversation on creation, transcendence, and humanity's place within the cosmic order.

Future research might fruitfully extend this framework to other ancient cosmological symbols. The "firmament" (raqia; al-samā' al-dunyā), the "waters above the heavens," the "pillars of the earth," and the "throne of God" (al-'Arsh) each invite re-examination through the hermeneutical lens proposed here. Such investigations would further illuminate how ancient religious symbol systems continue to speak meaningfully within scientific worldviews.

Ultimately, this inquiry returns to the enduring human need to look up, whether through the eyes of faith or the lens of science, and ask questions of both. The heavens above, whether conceived as seven layered spheres or as billions of galaxies, evoke wonder, humility, and the persistent intuition that reality is greater than us. In this shared act of looking upward and asking why, faith and reason find not conflict but complementarity, standing together under the same vast sky.

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