

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_jbl-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php)

## Note on a Hebrew Conception of the Universe

WILLIAM H. COBB

CONGREGATIONAL LIBRARY, BOSTON

QUESTIONS as to the antiquity, or the source, of cosmological ideas among the Hebrews are full of interest, never more so than now, but are outside the scope of this paper, which simply aims to show that the Hebrews did grasp, and express repeatedly in their Bible by a single word, the thought of the vast order of creation as a whole.

The contrary view is the prevalent one; it is often said that such a unitary conception is a late and difficult fruit of philosophy; the Hebrews, it is admitted, rose to the classification of all the works of God under a *two-fold* term, "the heavens and the earth"; further than this, however, it is claimed, they did not go. Two or three very brief citations should suffice to present this common belief. First, from *DB*, the Hastings (five-volume) *Dictionary of the Bible*, article "World," by V. H. Stanton. "There is no single word in OT which describes the material universe, even as it was conceived by the Hebrews. The phrase 'heaven and earth' is used to convey that notion (Gen. 1 1, Ps. 89 11, Jer. 10 12, 51 15, etc.)"

In the later one-volume Hastings, S. W. Green writes the article "World," and remarks: "In general, it may be said that the normal expression for such conception of the world as the Hebrews had reached is 'the heavens and the earth.'"

Prof. H. G. Mitchell comments on the first verse of Genesis, in *The World before Abraham*, as follows: "*Heaven and earth*; the visible universe in its original perfection. This is the natural interpretation of the verse. It is therefore the briefest possible statement to the effect that the

present frame of things owes its existence to the divinity worshipped by the Hebrews." I hold, however, and I am not alone in holding, that a much briefer statement to the same purport, a statement which comprehends these two divisions of creation under a single word, is not only possible but actual.

One of the commonest words in the Hebrew language, the word **כָּל**, translated almost always as an adjective, is yet properly, as the grammars and lexicons are careful to tell us, a noun, meaning *the whole*. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God **בְּכָל־לִבְךָ** with the whole of thy heart." "**כָּל־נוֹתְנוּ** **כַּצֹּאן** the whole of us wandered like sheep." In a few dozen cases, among its many thousands of occurrences, the word stands absolutely, preceded by the article, **הַכָּל**, the whole. Here it commonly follows a list of particulars, gathering them up into one, according to the axiom that the whole is equal to the sum of all its parts. The children of the porters in Ezra 2 42 are assigned to six different families, "*the whole* 139." The three standard English versions, A. V., R. V., and A. R., read *in all*, which is an equivalent but not a strict translation. In the previous chapter, Sheshbazzar receives 80 platters of gold, 1000 platters of silver, and many other kinds of vessels, amounting to 5400; the account adds, "*the whole* Sheshbazzar brought up." The three versions say "all these," as though it were **כָּל־אֵלֶּה**. The Hebrew idiom in these cases is precisely like the English, and the usage is not confined to late Hebrew. The king of Egypt took from Rehoboam (1 K. 14 28) the treasures of the house of Jahve and the treasures of the king's house; "yea, he took the whole." In 1 Sam. 30 18-20 we read that David recovered from the Amalekites his wives, sons and daughters, flocks and herds, all manner of spoil; David brought back **הַכָּל** *the whole*.

It goes without saying that the extent covered by **הַכָּל** depends in any case on the object in view. That object may be as small as a single animal. Lev. 1 9, the law of the burnt offering, enumerates the various parts of the bullock, and continues: "the priest shall burn the whole on the

altar." This, by the way, is one of five or six occurrences of **הַכֹּל** which R. V. and A. R. render accurately; everywhere else they give *all things*, or *all*, or *all this*, or some such expression.

On the other hand, **הַכֹּל** may refer to something as large as all nature or all humanity; thus at its first occurrence, Gen. 16 12, Ishmael's hand is against *the whole*, *i. e.* the whole race; parallel, the hand of all against him. Koheleth gives us the result of a wide induction. He made great works, builded houses, planted vineyards, and so on, through a long list. Then he looked on all his works, and beheld **הַכֹּל הִבָּל**, the whole—vapor. In Ps. 14 3 Jahve looked down from heaven upon all humanity; his verdict is registered in the next verse, **הַכֹּל קָר**, the whole strayed.

The point we are now to consider is whether this word **הַכֹּל** may refer to an object even wider than nature or humanity. About fifteen years ago, when preparing for this Journal an article on the "Servant of Jahve," I was struck with the elasticity of the term "Servant (or servants) of Jahve," which is applied now to Abraham and again to Nebuchadnezzar; now to a certain class and again to a whole people. Finally, I came upon a still larger application, in Ps. 119 89-91. Vs. 89 mentions a relation of Jahve to heaven, vs. 90 to earth, vs. 91 to both: "they abide this day according to thine ordinances, **כִּי הַכֹּל עֲבָדֶיךָ**." The collective here as often takes a plural predicate; "for the whole are thy servants," LXX τὰ σύμπαντα δούλα σὸς. Some render otherwise the first member of vs. 91; "as for thine ordinances, they abide this day"; but even these translators agree that **הַכֹּל** means "heaven and earth," which was the point to be proved. The whole is equal to the sum of all its parts; all parts of the world combine in the concept **הַכֹּל**. In this little word of three letters, we reach a distinct view of the universe as one. Important religious and philosophical inferences suggest themselves, but I leave these to others.

The passage just examined is by no means an isolated one. We read in Ps. 103 19 that Jahve has established his throne in the heavens; forth from that centre his kingdom

rules כָּבֵל over the whole. The lexicon of Gesenius (Buhl's ed.) renders הַכֵּל in that place *das Universum*, and gives the same equivalent in Jer. 10 16=51 19, יָצַר הַכֵּל הוּא, "Fashioner of the whole is He," LXX *ὁ πλάσας τὰ πάντα*. Cf. Eccl. 11 5, "Thou knowest not the works of God, who maketh הַכֵּל," LXX *τὰ σύμπαντα*. BDB, the Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon, gives the same account of these and similar passages: "all, whether of all mankind, or of all living things, the universe (*τὸ πᾶν*)." The first definition of כָּל in Siegfried and Stade is "die Gesamtheit, das Ganze, Alles."<sup>1</sup>

Before leaving the subject I wish to ask, very tentatively, whether this conception may not clear up a puzzling passage in Isaiah. We moderns bandy about very glibly the abstract terms which the Hebrews used but sparingly. If you do anything that attracts public notice, the reporters are likely to beset you with requests to give the newspapers your philosophy of life, or your outlook on things in general. The Hebrew prophets did not deal in philosophy, but they had an outlook on the world; they called it *vision*. It was the gift of God. It was often claimed unwarrantably. These false leaders, says Isaiah, are as helpless to interpret the will of God as a man with a book that is sealed. And what is it that he compares to a sealed book? It is קְוִיַּת הַכֵּל, *the vision of the whole*, Isa. 29 11.

King James's translators render this, "the vision of all," which is ambiguous if not unintelligible. The English and American revisers, determined to be clear at all costs, produced the outrageous mistranslation, "all vision," for קְוִיַּת in the construct and הַכֵּל with the article. Where was their scientific conscience? I remark in passing that קְוִיַּת is in the construct state, though it has not the usual construct form;

<sup>1</sup> Since this paper was read before the Society, in December, 1909, Professor Torrey has published his "Ezra Studies," in which he proposes (p. 45, n. 10) to emend Dan. 11 2 so as to read יְהוָה יִרְאֶה אֶת מְלְכוּת יָוָן, "the Lord of all will raise up the kingdom of Yāwān." Professor Torrey refers to his previous discussion of the point in *JAOS* [1904], vol. xxv, pp. 310 f., where this view is ingeniously defended. Another instance is *Ben Sira*, 43 22, "Jahve hath made the All," אֵת רֵבֶל עָשָׂה יְהוָה. See, too, vs. 7, though the rendering of רֵבֶל by "the All" is disputed by Kautzsch and others.

see the grammars of Böttcher and Olshausen, both of whom give several parallels, including *חזיתם* Isa. 28 18. *BDB* translates 29 11 correctly, "the vision of the whole," but instead of putting the phrase under subclass (*b*), where *הכל* is used in its widest sense, brings it under subclass (*a*), "where the sense is limited by the context to things or persons just mentioned." No wonder it adds in parenthesis ("peculiarly"). Cheyne in the Polychrome Bible gives "the vision of all these things," making it equivalent to *כל-אלה*. He regards the whole paragraph as a later addition, a view which might naturally affect the exegesis. Duhm shares this view, and expresses it quite characteristically. He translates, "das Gesicht von dem allem," and interprets as follows: "'the revelation concerning all the future occurrences'—a clumsy and lifeless manner of expression." And yet it is probable that Isaiah wrote the phrase, and Isaiah is far from clumsy or lifeless. Marti follows Duhm; vs. 11 and 12 he calls a prosaic appendix, and *חזית הכל* is "the foretelling all these things." Delitzsch, Skinner, and Box translate "the revelation of all this" as though it were *כל-זה*. Whitehouse, in the Century Bible, comes nearer the mark. Keeping R. V. in his text as usual, he comments thus: "*all vision* is a wrong rendering. Render 'vision (or revelation) of the whole.'" "The simile" (of the sealed book) "is used to describe the general incapacity of the ruling classes to understand God's revelations through his prophet." That is to say (as appears more plainly in the context of the citation), the vision of the whole means the vision of God's future plan as a whole. Dillmann and Kittel present an interpretation closely akin to this. I think the evidence is pretty evenly balanced between that view and the one I have suggested, the vision of the universe.