

# What Kind of God?

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Like many others, the stunning images which came back from the James Webb Space Telescope took my breath away. Webb is the largest optical telescope in space; because of its advanced design, we can see objects in space which we have never seen before. Before this, the best views we have seen came from the Hubble Space Telescope, which was launched in 1990.

Webb was launched on Christmas Day, 2021, and we saw the first images last month. It is circling around a point in space about 1,500,000 km beyond Earth's orbit around the Sun. By way of comparison, Hubble's orbit is a mere 550 km above Earth's surface.

Webb lets us see images from the very beginnings of the universe. Canadian author and science guy Bob McDonald reminds us that when it comes to space, distance equals time. In other words, since these images come to us from lightyears away, "the farther out you look, the farther back in time you see because it takes time for light to reach us."

Scientists measure the vast distances of the universe in light years, which is the distance a beam of light travels in a single year — just under 10 trillion kilometres. Since Webb has captured images of a galaxy which is some 13.4 billion light years away, these images come from a time when the universe was only 300 million years old.

I don't pretend to really understand this, but I trust the scientists who tell me that this is how it works.

These are beautiful and breath-taking images of the birth and death of galaxies, many of them bigger than our own, all with their own suns and stars. McDonald says, "We are seeing back to the big bang, so it's kind of like putting together a movie from the very beginning. We know how it ends because that's where we are now, but we don't know how it all started. Webb is going to really continue to do this much, much deeper than the Hubble telescope ever could."

As I saw these extraordinary images, I couldn't help but reflect on "heaven." It's a popular concept among the diverse cultures of earth. Ancient peoples imagined the world as a three-tiered universe. God and the heavenly beings lived up there; hell and the demons lived down there; and we humans lived in between on a flat earth supported by pillars sunk deep into the depths and covered by a dome which protected us from the chaos which ruled beyond the dome.

We know now that this isn't a scientific description of the universe (even though some flat-earthers still exist). Galileo and Copernicus discovered that the earth is not the centre of the universe. We learned with the great explorers that the earth is not flat, and that there are no dwelling places either "up" or "down." Astronauts have shown us pictures of our earth, a fragile blue ball spinning in the vastness of space. We live on one small planet orbiting one sun among trillions of others, in one galaxy among millions of other galaxies, a tiny rock spinning in a mystifyingly huge universe.

We have learned that instead of up or down, it's truer to talk about "out there."

It's not hard to understand why the ancients understood the universe the way they did. All they knew was what they could see. Imagine standing on the land with the vast sky above you. Every morning, the sun would rise in the east and travel across the sky — like a chariot being driven across the sky (2 Kings 23) or a strong man running his course with joy (Psalm 19). In the evenings, the sun would sink into the nether world beyond the edge of the earth opposite where it rose in the morning. The dark sky was filled with a moon and other small lights which filled the space occupied by the sun during the day. Those night bodies also seemed to move across the

canopy of space. Occasionally, in a frightening moment, the sun or the moon would be blacked out, seemingly swallowed up by darkness, possibly forever, only to reappear a short while later.

It was all so mysterious. The regular movement of the heavenly bodies was awe-inspiring, and the only way to find meaning was to search for images and metaphors which could describe it. We still use those ancient metaphors; we talk about sunrise and sunset, even if we know they are metaphors, since what is happening is that the earth is rotating on its axis.

We no longer think of heaven as a dwelling-place for divine beings up there. We are changing our ways of thinking about God. Many no longer imagine God as a being alongside other beings, no matter how powerful or all-knowing, or all-good. Rather, we've begun to understand God in new ways — an all-encompassing presence, a God who is everywhere and in everything, the warm heart of the universe, the force of love, an unnameable wholeness. We are beginning to trust that since God is in everything, then people, ants, galaxies, and microbes are in God. I'm beginning to understand the whole universe as the body of God, and Webb enriches that image in powerful ways.

And then I begin to wonder if perhaps even our new images and metaphors are inadequate in the same way as the ancient images no longer convey reality. Perhaps we can't understand God at all. Perhaps God is an intuitive sense of a personal presence who can only be sensed by a "non-rational knowing" which arises out of mystery and grace.

I end up with the thought that we are part of a mystery which words and minds cannot grasp. Perhaps the best way forward is to hold it in reverence and awe, and to hold each other with grace and compassion.