or How I grew up with two parallel cosmologies

Much has been said in cognitive approaches to religion about the co-existence in believers of beliefs that may seem blatantly inconsistent. The way religious ideas about the heavens co-exist with Space Age understanding the Universe is an interesting case in point that has not yet attracted much attention.

In reading Biblical texts as an adult, I have assumed that the New Testament writers (but not necessarily the writers of the Hebrew Bible) conceptualized themselves in a three tier universe: "the heavens" above (clouds, the sky, Sun, planets, stars), earth in the middle, and the underworld (Hades, the nondescript realm of the dead) below. I thought that this general cosmology was shared (more or less–medieval Europeans substituted Heaven for the heavens and Hell for Hades) until the development of modern astronomy.

I was surprised to find recently that this cosmology was already regarded as metaphorical, at least by some, much earlier. In The Cloud of Unknowing, an anonymous treatise in the Christian contemplative tradition from the fourteenth century, the author warns the reader at length not to confuse the direction up with approaching heaven. He writes (Chap. 60), "For spiritually, heaven is as close down as up, and up as down, behind as in front, in front as behind, on one side as on the other." Moreover, he attributes the same understanding to Paul, one of the New Testament writers.

This may help explain how Biblical discussions of the heavens and Hades have been so unproblematically preserved in the Space Age: metaphorical interpretations were already available in the larger tradition. As a child in a Christian fundamentalist church, I do not recall receiving any instruction in reconciling the Biblical cosmology with what I was taught in school. I don't think anyone thought it posed a problem. Looking back, I think I personally grew up with two parallel cosmologies, and did not wonder about how to reconcile them until I was an adolescent, even though I sensed their tension somewhat earlier. But I don't know how reliable my memory is.