

# THE BIBLICAL EDUCATOR

*"To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding" Proverbs 1:2*

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## THE GEOCENTRICITY QUESTION

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In 1979, Dr. James Hanson gave a pair of lectures on the topic of Geocentricity at a meeting of the Association of Christian Schools. The tape recordings of these lectures have circulated widely, and have resulted in a widespread renewal of interest in the subject in Christian circles.

Dr. Hanson argued two different issues simultaneously throughout his lectures. First, he argued that the Bible unmistakably teaches that the earth is fixed in space and that the sun and stars go around it. Second, he argued that scientific evidence tends to confirm the fixed earth position. Despite their conflation in Dr. Hanson's lectures, these are two quite different issues.

The purpose of this essay is to address the first issue only: does the Bible clearly and unmistakably teach a geocentric universe or a fixed earth (two different things, by the way, depending on whether you think the earth is rotating or not)? For our purposes, since virtually all geocentrists hold to a fixed rather than a rotating earth, we shall discuss only the fixed earth option.

The present author has run into a number of people, fortunately few in number, who are convinced that the Bible is so clear on this subject that the fixed earth position should be regarded as a test of orthodoxy. It ought to be noted that the Tychonian Society, dedicated to the promotion of the fixed earth viewpoint, does not take any such a stance. In fact, the June, 1981, issue of *The Bulletin of the Tychonian Society* contained two articles arguing from Scripture against the fixed earth position, simply in order to demonstrate that geocentricity is not a matter of Christian orthodoxy. (For a copy, send a couple of dollars to Mr. Walter van der Kamp, 14813 Harris Rd., R. R. #1, Pitt Meadows, British Columbia, Canada V0M 1P0.)

### The Hanson Lectures

The present author should make it clear that he is personally uncommitted on the geocentricity question. What I am not uncommitted on, however, is the ques-

tion of whether the Bible is being used properly by some proponents of geocentricity; and that brings me to Dr. Hanson's lectures.

Dr. Hanson states early on that "the issue is the inerrancy of Scripture." This is not the case, and is an example of argument by sloganizing. The issue is what the Bible inerrantly teaches. As we shall see below, the Bible unquestionably and inerrantly teaches that the earth is flat and square, if taken according to the principles of interpretation used by the Biblical-geocentrists.

Dr. Hanson goes on to say that as far as he is concerned, the King James Version is a God-given translation, and inerrant; there is no need to go back to the Hebrew and Greek. Now, we've heard this type of thing before; it is a way of discounting the authority of experts in the area of theology and exegesis. In contrast, Dr. Hanson a few minutes later assures his audience that he knows all about astrophysics. He says, "My business is science... It's my area." Now, we cannot have it both ways: if we are going to allow Dr. Hanson some more-than-ordinary expertise in the area of astrophysics, then Dr. Hanson is going to have to allow theologians and exegetes some more-than-ordinary expertise in the area of Biblical interpretation.

This kind of talk does not inspire confidence in the discerning hearer. I am personally relatively certain that Dr. Hanson is indeed an expert in astrophysics, and I don't mean to insult him or discount the scientific parts of his lecture. He is not, however, on a par with a trained, orthodox, evangelical exegete when it comes to the interpretation of the Bible.

Before moving to the actual question of geocentricity, however, I want to "prove" that the Bible teaches a flat, square earth. When we have come to grips with this, and what it actually means, we will be in a much better position to investigate those passages which seem to teach a fixed earth.

### The Earth is Flat

The Bible repeatedly speaks of the "ends" of the earth. Sometimes the word in Hebrew is *ephes*, which means "end, extreme limits, nothingness." Other times it is *qatsah* or *qetsev*, which means, again, "end, extremity." Deuteronomy 13:7, for instance, uses the expression "from one end of the earth to the other end." The same

expression, or a reference to the "end of the earth", occurs in Deut.28:49,64; 33:17; 1 Sam.2:10; Psalm 19:4; 22:27; 46:9; 48:10; 59:13; 65:5; 67:7; 98:3; 135:7; Prov.17:24; 30:4; Job 28:24; 37:3; Isaiah 5:26; 24:16; 40:28; 41:5; 42:10; 45:22; 48:20; 49:6; 52:10; 62:11; Jeremiah 10:13; 16:19; 25:33; Micah 5:4.

Moreover, not only does the Bible indicate that the earth is flat and has ends, but it also teaches that the earth is square and has corners. Isaiah 11:12 says that God will "gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth." Ezekiel 7:2 says that "the end is coming on the four corners of the earth." See also Revelation 20:8.

At this point, let's have a little scientific confirmation of the flatness of the earth. The geocentrist often argues that his position corresponds most with common sense, has been held by the majority of people in world history, and that scientific calculations are always done on the assumption of a fixed earth. Fair enough; but the same is true of the flat earth position. Go out and look at the land. Looks flat, doesn't it? Moreover, most people in most cultures of the earth have held to a flat earth. Even today, surveyors assume an essential flatness to the earth, and railroad tracks are manufactured in straight pieces, not in slightly curved ones. Many theologians in the history of the church, including the late Arthur Pink I am told, held to a flat earth. So, there you have it.

Convinced? Probably not. But now, how are we to understand the Biblical language at these points? Well, some references to the "ends of the earth" actually refer to the ends of the *land*, the holy land (Jer.12:12; Is.26:15), because the Hebrew word for "earth" and for "land" is the same. Similarly, some references to the fixity of the earth actually refer to the fixity of the holy land, that it would not be subject to earthquakes.

But beyond this, the phrase is used figuratively. In Job 38:13, God says He will take hold of the ends and shake, as one shakes a rug. In Psalm 61:2, David, apparently praying in his palace, for he speaks of himself as the king, says that he is calling from the ends of the earth, a figurative usage. Isaiah 43:6 refers to the lands surrounding Israel as the "ends of the earth."

How about the corners of the earth? To understand this, we have to realize that the Bible pictures the earth as a house, as in Job 38:4-6. Moreover, the Bible pictures the earth as an altar, with four corners, in Revelation 7:1; 9:13-21. All of this goes back to the Garden of Eden, which had four rivers flowing out of it to water the whole earth, headed for the "four corners." The word for "corner" in Hebrew is *kanaf*, which literally means "wings." The cherubim have four wings (Ezekiel 1). The garment worn by each Hebrew male was to have four wings or corners, so that his garment was analogous to a house or tent which he carried with him at all times (Num.15:38; Deut.22:12; Haggai 2:12).

What this gives us is a series of analogous models: the garden of Eden is like a house, and they are like an altar, and they are analogous to the human person (who is the temple of the Spirit), etc. For an extended, if somewhat

confusing to read, treatment of this subject, see Meredith Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Baker, 1980).

So, when the Bible uses language that indicates that the earth is flat, that it has ends, and that it has corners, we are to understand such language in its Biblical context. And that Biblical context is the house-model of the world, seen in the glory cloud, the Garden of Eden, the Tabernacle, the Temple, the holy land, the entire earth, the human body, the clothing of the human body, the cherubim, etc. We are *not* to try to stretch this language to answer cosmological questions which it was not intended to address.

### Heaven is a Fortress

Just as the earth is pictured as a house, so is heaven. Heaven is a separate house from earth, and is the model home that earth is to imitate. We pray, therefore, "Thy kingdom come on earth as in heaven; Thy will be done on earth as in heaven." The goal of history is for heaven to impress itself on earth, so that eventually heaven and earth are one, and there is one house.

Heaven was created in Genesis 1:1, and so was the earth. Much of the book of Revelation takes place in heaven, so we have some idea of what it is like. As Kline has pointed out (see above), the glory cloud is a sort of portable heaven-house which operates within the earthly environment.

Genesis 1:2 tells us that originally the earth was without form and empty, dark and covered with water. Then, after making light, God created a "firmament" to separate waters above and below (v.6,7). This firmament He called "heaven." Now there are two heavens, the one the dwelling place of God and the angels, made on the first day, and the second created *within the original earth* as a reminder of the original heaven. The fact that the word "heaven" is used for the firmament means that the firmament is analogous to the original heaven, is symbolic of it. But it is important to see that the firmament-heaven is actually part of the original earth of Genesis 1:1.

On the fourth day, God placed lights in the firmament-heaven, to be symbols (signs) and to act as clocks (seasons, days, and years). This means that the sun, moon, and stars are not part of the original heaven, but part of the original earth. The original earth is being differentiated into the globe on which we live on the one hand, and upper waters and lights on the other hand. On the fifth day, God created birds to fly in the firmament-heaven.

What is the firmament-heaven? Dr. Hanson thinks it is "ether," because it is an environment common to both stars and birds. This won't work, however, because the firmament is the same in Hebrew as the verb meaning to beat out or flatten out. The idea is of a shell or surface cast over the earth. A synonym for firmament (*raqia*) is *aggudah* (Amos 9:6), which means a vault made of strong bands.

Now as a matter of fact, there is no hard shell around the earth, nor do birds fly inside a hard shell. Thus, we

need to see the language here as pointing to a symbolic structure. Heaven is like a fortress, and the firmament-heaven which symbolizes the original heaven, presents an *appearance* of a hard surface, a wall, to the viewer.

After all, the Bible clearly speaks of "windows" of heaven (Gen.7:11; 8:2; 2 Ki.7:2, 19; Is.24:18; Mal.3:10). There are "doors" in heaven (1 Ki.9:35; 2 Chron.6:26; 7:13; Ps.78:23; Rev.4:1; 11:6; 19:11). Heaven has "gates" (Gen.28:17; Lev.26:19), and so does the house of hell (Matt.16:18). Heaven has stories or stairs (Amos 9:6). A study of these passages will indicate that rain and food come through heaven's windows, clearly symbolic language.

What we have here is phenomenal language, language of appearances. The Bible frequently uses phenomenal language, as when it refers to rodents, reptiles, and insects as "creeping things"; language not acceptable in Biology 101, but perfectly adequate for the Bible's purposes. This is not at all to say that the Bible is irrelevant for science; but it is to say that we must interpret the Bible correctly, on its own terms, if we are to make proper applications to the questions of modern science.

Genesis 1, for instance, clearly tells us that God created the universe in six normal days. It tells us the order in which He developed things. It tells us also that He made two lights, which we understand to be the sun and moon, but which are not called sun and moon in Genesis 1. It tells us that these lights were made to function as symbols and clocks. We understand that the sun is an energy source, a source of heat, etc.; but the Bible does not call attention to this in Genesis 1. We have to take Genesis 1, and all the Bible, as it stands, and not try to force it to say things it does not intend to say.

### **Apparently Geocentric Passages**

Recognizing that the Bible does indeed use phenomenal language, and that much of the language which speaks of heaven and earth is speaking of them in symbolic house-analogy language, let us turn to some of the specific passages which have been taken to "prove" that the Bible teaches that the earth is fixed.

If we insist that Psalm 19 teaches a fixed earth and a moving sun (v.5), we shall also have to hold that it teaches a flat earth, for it speaks of the ends of the earth and of the ends of heaven (v.4,6). I think it safe to say that the language here is symbolic; for we have seen from Genesis 1 that the sun was given in part to be a symbol.

Ecclesiastes 1:5 speaks of the sun's rising, and verses 6 and 7 certainly seem scientifically accurate. The argument is that this is not a symbolic passage, and so should be taken "literally" (that is, non-symbolically). We may agree that symbolism is not in view here, but that is no proof that phenomenal language is not being used. Moreover, many passages, such as Jeremiah 51:16, mix phenomenal and symbolic language with "scientifically accurate" language:

"When He utters His voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, and He causes the clouds to ascend from the end of the earth; He makes lightning for the rain, and

brings forth the wind from His storehouses." Note the reference to the end of the earth, and to the house imagery: storehouses in heaven for the wind. Yet, clouds do indeed ascend from the earth, and lightning does come with rain. Finally, as regards Ecclesiastes, it is well to keep in mind that Solomon uses a very extensive house-analogy in chapter 12.

Let's be clear about this. We do not hold that the Bible was written by ignorant people, nor that God was writing it to ignorant people. What we are saying is that the Bible uses symbolic, analogous, and phenomenal language purposefully, and that the Bible needs to be interpreted on its own terms, not in terms of the course outlines of Biology 101 or Astrophysics 421.

The Bible says that the earth shall not be moved, apparently speaking of the whole earth, not only of the holy land, in Psalm 93:1; 96:10; and 104:5. What is being spoken of here, however, is not an absolute fixity in space, but a relative fixity: the earth is fixed and still *for the righteous* and with respect to the floods which threaten it. As far as the wicked are concerned, the earth is not fixed at all, but is shaken (Ps.82:5). When God is angry, the earth is not still, but subject to earthquakes (Ps.60:2; Is.24:18-20; and see Ps.18:7; 46:2; 68:8; 97:4; 99:1; 104:32).

If we are going to force the Bible to speak to the issue of geocentricity, let's take Psalm 76:8, which says "the earth feared, and was still." Does this mean that the earth usually moves? You see, there are "prooftexts" on both sides. The real question is this: does the Bible intend to say anything about the fixity of the earth in space (or in the ether)? Almost certainly not.

### **Joshua's Long Day**

Finally, then, Joshua's long day. Joshua 10:12-14 says: "Then Joshua spoke to the LORD in the *day* when the LORD delivered up the Amorites before the sons of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, 'O sun, stand still at Gibeon, and O moon in the valley of Aijalon.' So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation avenged themselves of their enemies. Is it not written in the Book of Jasher? And the sun stopped in the middle of the sky (*heaven*), and did not hasten to go down for about a whole *day*. And there was no *day* like that before it or after it, when the LORD listened to the voice of a man; for the LORD fought for Israel." (Emphasis is added).

Some observations on the passage. *First*, the uniqueness of the day is said to be that God listened to a man, not in the stoppage of the sun; though clearly that is not excluded. *Second*, notice that the passage does not say the sun and moon stopped absolutely, but that they stopped *in the middle of the heaven*. By now the reader is alerted to this language: it is in the *context* of the firmament-heaven that the sun and moon are said to stop, and this context is partially phenomenal and symbolic.

*Third*, by now the reader is aware that the Bible itself presents one of the main purposes of the sun and moon to be their clock function, to measure days (Gen.1:14). That

is exactly what is in view in Joshua 10. The clocks stopped so that the *day* might be extended. That is what the passage is concerned with. That is what the language of the Bible means here. The passage is *not* talking about the fixity of the earth or of the absolute motion of the sun and moon. *The passage is speaking of the clock function of the sun and moon in their context in the firmament.*

So then, did the sun and moon really stand still? Yes, for all intents and purposes. The language here is phenomenal and earth-oriented. How do I know this? Because it says for the sun to stand still *at Gibeon* and the moon *in the valley of Aijalon*. This language is perspectival, from the standpoint of Joshua on the ground. The perspective is local, not universal. The moon was not actually located in the valley of Aijalon, it only appeared to be there. Thus, we cannot say whether the sun and moon actually stopped moving, or only appeared to stop moving. The limits of the discourse cannot be stretched beyond Biblical bounds.

One other observation on Joshua's long day. It is sometimes argued that the moon would continue in motion if all that happened was that the earth stopped rotating. That is obviously true. The problem that this raises may be answered in more than one way. First, perhaps the moon did continue in motion. Its revolution around the earth every 28 days would mean that it would only move about four degrees on the arc of the heavens during an eight-hour extension of the day. This is so slight as to be unimportant, and just as the Bible many times uses round numbers and other approximations, there is no error in the Bible's saying the moon "stood still" for the relatively brief period involved (brief compared to 28 days).

Second, of course perhaps the geocentric view is correct, and both sun and moon stopped moving around the earth. Third, perhaps the earth and the moon stopped their motion, absolutely considered. Fourth, perhaps every mo-

tion among all the bodies in the entire universe stopped. That is my guess, since I imagine the stars stopped along with the sun and moon. There is no indication of a shift in the position of the stars in literature from the ancient world, as there would have to be if they continued in motion while the sun and moon stopped.

At any rate, the passage is not concerned with these details. It simply records the viewpoint of a man on the ground, and from that perspective, the sun and moon stopped.

### Summary and Conclusion

This essay has said nothing about scientific geocentricity. The geocentric theory apparently has much to commend it: Dr. Hanson's lectures are rewarding in this respect. As far as the Bible is concerned, we must say that the Scriptures often speak phenomenally and by the use of symbolic analogies; and that any hermeneutic which seeks to prove a fixed earth from Scripture must also accept a flat earth, for the interpretive procedure which demonstrates the one will also lead to the other. Evolution and chronology are theological issues; geocentricity is not.

[NOTE: Dr. Gary North's forthcoming book, *The Dominion Covenant*, contains a valuable discussion of the Geocentricity question from an historic point of view. Dr. North points out that the Roman Catholic defense of geocentricity was based on the philosophy of a Greek chain of being extending from heaven through earth to hell. The earth was at the center, but also at the bottom, right next to hell. (Actually, hell was at the center, with earth around it.)

You can reserve a copy of this book by sending \$15.95 (this includes postage) to Institute for Christian Economics, Box 8000, Tyler, TX 75711.]

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