

The Flat-Earth Bible

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When I first became interested in the flat-earthers in the early 1970s, I was surprised to learn that flat-earthism in the English-speaking world is and always has been entirely based upon the Bible. I have since assembled and read an extensive collection of flat-earth literature. The Biblical arguments for flat-earthism that follow come mainly from my reading of flat-earth literature, augmented by my own reading of the Bible.

Except among Biblical inerrantists, it is generally agreed that the Bible describes an immovable earth. At the 1984 National Bible-Science Conference in Cleveland, geocentrist James N. Hanson told me there are hundreds of scriptures that suggest the earth is immovable. I suspect some must be a bit vague, but here are a few obvious texts:

1 Chronicles 16:30: "He has fixed the earth firm, immovable."

Psalm 93:1: "Thou hast fixed the earth immovable and firm ..."

Psalm 96:10: "He has fixed the earth firm, immovable ..."

Psalm 104:5: "Thou didst fix the earth on its foundation so that it never can be shaken."

Isaiah 45:18: "...who made the earth and fashioned it, and himself fixed it fast..."

Suffice to say that the earth envisioned by flat-earthers is as immovable as any geocentrist could desire. Most (perhaps all) scriptures commonly cited by geocentrists have also been cited by flat-earthers. The flat-earth view is geocentricity with further restrictions.

Like geocentrists, flat-earth advocates often give long lists of texts. Samuel Birley Rowbotham, founder of the modern flat-earth movement, cited 76 scriptures in the last chapter of his monumental second edition of *Earth not a Globe*. Apostle Anton Darms, assistant to the Reverend Wilbur Glenn Voliva, America's best known flat-earther, compiled 50 questions about the creation and the shape of the earth, bolstering his answers with up to 20 scriptures each. Rather than presenting an exhaustive compendium of flat-earth scriptures, I focus on those which seem to me the strongest. I also comment on some attempts to find the earth's sphericity in the Bible.

Scriptural quotes, unless otherwise noted, are from the *New English Bible*. Hebrew and Greek translations are from *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. The Biblical cosmology is never explicitly stated, so it must be pieced together from scattered passages. The Bible is a composite work, so there is no *a priori* reason why the cosmology assumed by its various writers should be relatively consistent, but it is. The Bible is, from Genesis to Revelation, a flat-earth book.

This is hardly surprising. As neighbors, the ancient Hebrews had the Egyptians to the southwest and the Babylonians to the northeast. Both civilizations had flat-earth cosmologies. The Biblical cosmology closely parallels the Sumero-Babylonian cosmology, and it may also draw upon Egyptian cosmology.

The Babylonian universe was shaped like a modern domed stadium. The Babylonians considered the earth essentially flat, with a continental mass surrounded by ocean. The vault of the sky was a physical object resting upon the ocean's waters (and perhaps also upon pillars). Sweet (salt-free) waters below the Earth sometimes manifest themselves as springs. The Egyptian universe was also enclosed, but it was rectangular instead of round. Indeed, it was shaped much like an old-fashioned steamer trunk. (The Egyptians pictured the goddess Nut stretched across the sky as the enclosing dome.) What was the Hebrew view of the universe?

The Order of Creation

The Genesis creation story provides the first key to the Hebrew cosmology. The *order* of creation makes no sense from a conventional perspective but is perfectly logical from a flat-earth viewpoint. The earth was created on the first day, and it was “without form and void (Genesis 1:2).” On the second day, a vault the “firmament” of the King James version was created to divide the waters, some being above and some below the vault. Only on the fourth day were the sun, moon, and stars created, and they were placed “in” (not “above”) the vault.

The Vault of Heaven

The vault of heaven is a crucial concept. The word “firmament” appears in the King James version of the Old Testament 17 times, and in each case it is translated from the Hebrew word *raqiya*, which meant the visible vault of the sky. The word *raqiya* comes from *riqqua*, meaning “beaten out.” In ancient times, brass objects were either cast in the form required or beaten into shape on an anvil. A good craftsman could beat a lump of cast brass into a thin bowl. Thus, Elihu asks Job, “Can you beat out [*raqa*] the vault of the skies, as he does, hard as a mirror of cast metal

(Job 37:18)?”

Elihu's question shows that the Hebrews considered the vault of heaven a solid, physical object. Such a large dome would be a tremendous feat of engineering. The Hebrews (and supposedly Yahweh Himself) considered it exactly that, and this point is hammered home by five scriptures:

Job 9:8, “...who by himself spread out the heavens
[*shamayim*]...”

Psalms 19:1, “The heavens [*shamayim*] tell out the glory of
God, the vault of heaven [*raqiya*] reveals his handiwork.”

Psalms 102:25, “...the heavens [*shamayim*] were thy
handiwork.”

Isaiah 45:12, “I, with my own hands, stretched out the
heavens [*shamayim*] and caused all their host to shine...”

Isaiah 48:13, “...with my right hand I formed the expanse
of the sky [*shamayim*]...”

If these verses are about a mere *illusion* of a vault, they are surely much ado about nothing. *Shamayim* comes from *shameh*, a root meaning to be lofty. It literally means the sky. Other passages complete the picture of the sky as a lofty, physical dome. God “sits throned on the vaulted roof of earth [*chuwg*], whose inhabitants are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the skies [*shamayim*] like a curtain, he spreads them out like a tent to live in...[Isaiah 40:22].” *Chuwg* literally means “circle” or “encompassed.” By extension, it can mean roundness, as in a rounded dome or vault. Job 22:14 says God “walks to and fro on the vault of heaven [*chuwg*].” In both verses, the use of *chuwg* implies a physical object, on which one can sit and walk. Likewise, the context in both cases requires elevation. In Isaiah, the elevation causes the people below to look small as grasshoppers. In Job, God's eyes must penetrate the clouds to view the doings of humans below. Elevation is also implied by Job 22:12: “Surely God is at the zenith of the heavens [*shamayim*] and looks down on all the stars, high as they are.”

This picture of the cosmos is reinforced by Ezekiel's vision. The Hebrew word *raqiya* appears five times in Ezekiel, four times in Ezekiel 1:22-26 and once in Ezekiel 10:1. In each case the context requires a literal vault or dome. The vault appears above the “living creatures” and glitters “like a sheet of ice.” Above the vault is a throne of sapphire (or lapis lazuli). Seated on the throne is “a form in human likeness,” which is radiant and “like the appearance of the glory of the Lord.” In short, Ezekiel saw a vision of God sitting throned on the vault of heaven, as described in Isaiah 40:22.

The Shape of the Earth

Disregarding the dome, the essential flatness of the earth's surface is required by verses like Daniel 4:10-11. In Daniel, the king “saw a tree of great height at the centre of the earth...reaching with its top to the sky and visible to the earth's farthest bounds.” If the earth were flat, a sufficiently tall tree *would* be visible to “the earth's farthest bounds,” but this is impossible on a spherical earth. Likewise, in describing the temptation of Jesus by Satan, Matthew 4:8 says, “Once again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world [*cosmos*] in their glory.” Obviously, this would be possible only if the earth were flat. The same is true of Revelation 1:7: “Behold, he is coming with the clouds! Every eye shall see him...”

The Celestial Bodies

The Hebrews considered the celestial bodies relatively small. The Genesis creation story indicates the size and importance of the earth relative to the celestial bodies in two ways, first by their order of creation, and second by their positional relationships. They had to be small to fit inside the vault of heaven. Small size is also implied by Joshua 10:12, which says that the sun stood still “in Gibeon” and the moon “in the Vale of Aijalon.”

Further, the Bible frequently presents celestial bodies as exotic living beings. For example, “In them [the heavens], a tent is fixed for the sun, who comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, rejoicing like a strong man to run his race. His rising is at one end of the heavens, his circuit touches their farthest ends; and nothing is hidden from his heat (Psalm 19:4-6).” The stars are anthropomorphic demigods. When the earth's cornerstone was laid “the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted aloud (Job 38:7).” The morning star is censured for trying to set his throne above that of other stars:

You thought in your own mind, I will scale the heavens; I will set my throne high above the stars of God, I will sit on the mountain where the gods meet in the far recesses of the north. I will rise high above the cloud-banks and make myself like the most high (Isaiah 14:13-14).

Deuteronomy 4:15-19 recognizes the god-like status of stars, noting that they were created for other peoples to worship.

Stars can fall from the skies according to Daniel 8:10 and Matthew 24:29. The same idea is found in the following extracts from Revelation 6:13-

16:

...the stars in the sky fell to the earth, like figs shaken down by a gale; the sky vanished, as a scroll is rolled up...they called out to the mountains and the crags, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of the One who sits on the throne...”

This is consistent with the Hebrew cosmology previously described, but it is ludicrous in the light of modern astronomy. If *one* star let alone all the stars in the sky “fell” on the earth, no one would be hollering from any mountain or crag. The writer considered the stars small objects, all of which could fall to the earth without eradicating human life. He also viewed the sky as a physical object. The stars are *inside* the sky, and they fall *before* the sky opens. When it is whisked away, it reveals the One throned above (see Isaiah 40:22).

Weaker Arguments

Flat-earthers also offer some scriptural arguments that are (in my view) weak, ambiguous, erroneous, or irrelevant. (Ironically, it is these that apologists for sphericity usually choose to deal with in their rebuttals to the flat-earthers!) The weak and ambiguous arguments can help support a cumulative picture but are insufficient on their own.

One of the weaker scriptural arguments is that the sky literally has openings (windows) which God can open to let the waters above fall to the surface as rain (see Genesis 7:11, Genesis 8:2, Isaiah 24:18-19, Jeremiah 51:15-16, and Malachi 3:10). While the idea and scriptures are certainly consistent with the flat-earth cosmology, they could (for instance) refer to openings in a spherical shell surrounding a spherical earth. The same applies to the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11:4, often cited as an attempt to literally reach the heavens.

Likewise, flat-earthers frequently cite the numerous Old Testament verses referring to the earth's foundations (see 2 Samuel 22:16, Job 38:4, Psalm 18:15, Proverbs 8:29, Isaiah 24:18, and numerous others). Foundations are, however, fairly well-covered by geocentricity. No one would argue for a flat-earth solely on the basis of “foundations” quotes.

Another less-than-conclusive argument that the Bible is a flat-earth book is its references to the earth's “corners.” For example, “After this, I saw four angels stationed at the four corners [*gonia*] of the earth holding back the four winds...(Revelation 7:1).” Spherical apologists are quick to point out that the Greek *gonia* can refer to regions rather than points. Most translations of the Bible opt for points (the King James version says “on

the corners of the earth”), implying that the writer viewed the habitable earth as a four-cornered area. (This was indeed the way many early churchmen interpreted it [Cosmas, 548]. The modern flat-earth model doesn't have literal corners.) The corners could, however, be those regions at the ends of the earth referred to by Jeremiah: “[H]e brings up the mist from the ends of the earth, he opens rifts for the rain and brings the wind out of his storehouses (Jeremiah 51:16).” We shall return to the ends of the earth.

The Biblical view of the universe is relatively clear and consistent. Biblical statements bearing on cosmology are (with one possible exception yet to be discussed) consistent with the well-known flat-earth cosmologies of the ancient Near East, but they are often flatly contradicted by modern science. How do spherical apologists reply?

Spherical Apologetics

Those who claim Biblical support for a spherical earth typically ignore this forest of consistency and focus on one or two aberrant trees. Some take refuge in audacity. Henry Morris, president of the Institute for Creation Research, cites one of the more explicitly flat-earth verses in the Old Testament Isaiah 40:22, the “grasshopper” verse quoted earlier as evidence for the sphericity of the earth. Quoting the King James version “he sitteth upon the circle of the earth” Morris ignores the context and the grasshoppers and claims “circle” should read “sphericity” or “roundness” [1956, 8]. This divide and conquer strategy is poor scholarship and worse logic.

Heroic efforts have been made by apologists to explain away the firmament, which encloses the celestial bodies, has waters above it, and is a masterpiece proving the Creator's craftsmanship. The late Harold W. Armstrong argued that it is empty Newtonian space, and that the “waters above” still surround the edges of the universe, though perhaps not in liquid form [1979, 26]. This simply ignores difficulties and invents evidence. Gerardus Bouw tried to identify the firmament as a mathematical plenum [1987]. In my view, it is a grave error to reinterpret ancient documents to force their authors to speak with modern voices. Gary Zukov [1979] and Fritjof Capra [1976], for instance, read modern physics into the teachings of eastern mysticism. I consider all such attempts equally suspect.

Perhaps the scripture most frequently offered as evidence of the earth's sphericity is the King James version of Job 26:7, “He stretcheth out the north [*tsaphon*] over the empty place, *and* hangeth the earth upon nothing [*beliyamah*].” (The New English Bible translates it, “God spreads the canopy of the sky over chaos and suspends earth in the void.”) It is not

clear what this means. The Hebrew *tsaphon* literally meant hidden or dark, and it was used in reference to the northern regions. *Beliymah* literally means “nothing.” That would contradict all of the scriptures which say the earth rests on foundations, but that interpretation is not necessary. We will return to Job 26:7 later.

Speaking of foundations, Gerardus Bouw, in an undated paper entitled “The Form of the Earth,” cites a barrage of scriptures about the foundations of the earth or world as evidence for sphericity. All (or nearly all) of these verses have traditionally been used by flat-earthers to prove the earth flat. If one views the earth as an architectural structure with floor, curtain walls, and a roof, it is natural to assume it has foundations (and, I might add, a cornerstone). Why a sphere would have foundations escapes me. Bouw's argument that these scriptures refer to the earth's core seems strained at best. Also strained is Bouw's interpretation of “the ends of the earth” as the points most distant from Jerusalem, and his identification of the Chukchi Peninsula of the Soviet Union, Alaska, Cape Horn, and the southeastern tip of Australia as the “four corners” of the earth.

Bouw's most interesting argument for sphericity is based on the gospel of Luke. He compares the King James version of Luke 17:31 and 17:34. The former says “In that *day*, he which shall be upon the house top...” and the latter “in that *night* there shall be two men in one bed...” (italics added). Bouw then cites 1 Corinthians 15:52 to argue that the events are simultaneous, claiming simultaneity is possible only on a spherical earth. First of all, the latter claim is wrong. The modern (though not the ancient) flat-earth model has day and night occurring simultaneously at different points on earth. Second, the Greek *hemera* was used much like the English “day.” It could mean the daylight hours, a 24-hour day, or (figuratively) an epoch of unspecified length. Third, Luke appears to have been writing figuratively, and citing Paul to prove otherwise begs the question.

One more spherical argument deserves notice. The 1985 National Creation Conference in Cleveland ended with a formal debate on the relative merits of heliocentricity and geocentricity. Richard Niessen of Christian Heritage College, defending the Copernican view, remarked that the Bible teaches a spherical earth because it treats north and south as absolutes, but east and west as relative. As evidence of the latter, he cited Psalm 103:12 which says, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he put our offences from us.” Again, the modern flat-earth model holds that north and south are absolutes, but east and west are relative. In the ancient flat-earth model, however, east and west were about as far apart as you could get, which seems to be the image Psalm 103:12 was

intended to invoke.

In my view, all arguments to prove the Bible teaches a spherical earth are weak if not wrong-headed. On the other hand, the flat-earth cosmology previously described is historically consistent and requires none of the special pleading apparently necessary to harmonize the Bible with sphericity.

The Book of Enoch

The cosmology previously described is derived from the Bible itself, following the 19th century flat-earthers. Some of the evidence is more ambiguous than we would like. Ambiguities in ancient documents can often be elucidated by consulting contemporary documents. The most important ancient document describing Hebrew cosmology is 1 Enoch (sometimes called the Ethiopic Book of Enoch), one of those long, disjointed, scissors and paste jobs beloved by ancient scribes. For a dozen or so centuries, European scholars knew 1 Enoch only from numerous passages preserved in the patristic literature. In 1773, the Scottish adventurer James Bruce found complete copies in Ethiopia.

Numerous manuscripts of 1 Enoch have since been found in Ethiopian monasteries. Turn of the century scholars concluded that parts of the book are pre-Maccabean, and most (perhaps all) of it was composed by 100 B.C. [Charles, 1913]. These conclusions were largely vindicated when numerous fragments of 1 Enoch were found among the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran. There have been two major English translations of 1 Enoch, the 1913 translation of R. H. Charles and the 1983 translation by E. Isaac. All of the quotations that follow come from the newer translation.

The importance of 1 Enoch is poorly appreciated outside the scholarly community. Comparison of its text with New Testament books reveals that many Enochian doctrines were taken over by early Christians. E. Isaac writes:

There is little doubt that 1 Enoch was influential in molding New Testament doctrines concerning the nature of the Messiah, the Son of Man, the messianic kingdom, demonology, the future, resurrection, final judgment, the whole eschatological theater, and symbolism. No wonder, therefore, that the book was highly regarded by many of the apostolic and Church Fathers [1986, 10].



The cosmos as described in the book of Enoch.

Picture © 1992 by Robert Schadewald.

First Enoch influenced Matthew, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, and several other New Testament books. The punishment of the fallen angels described in 2 Peter seems to come directly from 1 Enoch, as does much of the imagery (or even wording) in Revelation. The Epistle of Jude contains the most dramatic evidence of its influence when it castigates “enemies of religion” as follows:

It was to them that Enoch, the seventh in descent from Adam, directed his prophecy when he said: “I saw the Lord come with his myriads of angels, to bring all men to judgment and to convict all the godless of all the godless deeds they had committed, and of all the defiant words which godless sinners had spoken against him (Jude 14-15).”

The inner quote, 1 Enoch 1:9, is found in the original Hebrew on a recently-published Qumran fragment [Shanks, 1987, 18]. By attributing prophecy to Enoch, Jude confers inspired status upon the book.

First Enoch is important for another reason. Unlike the canonical books of the Bible, which (in my view) were never meant to teach science, sections of 1 Enoch were intended to describe the natural world. The narrator sometimes sounds like a 2nd century B.C. Carl Sagan explaining the heavens and earth to the admiring masses. The Enochian cosmology is precisely the flat-earth cosmology previously derived from the canonical books.

The Ends of the Earth

The angel Uriel guided Enoch in most of his travels. They made several trips to the ends of the earth, where the dome of heaven came down to the surface. For instance, Enoch says:

I went to the extreme ends of the earth and saw there huge beasts, each different from the other and different birds (also) differing from one another in appearance, beauty, and voice. And to the east of those beasts, I saw the ultimate ends of the earth which rests on the heaven. And the gates of heaven were open, and I saw how the stars of heaven come out...(1 Enoch 33:1-2).

(The sharp-eyed reader will note what I suspect is an editing error in the Isaac translation. The earth resting on the heaven makes no sense. R. H.

Charles has “whereon the heaven rests.”)

Again, Enoch says, “I went in the direction of the north, to the extreme ends of the earth, and there at the extreme end of the whole world I saw a great and glorious seat. There (also) I saw three open gates of heaven; when it blows cold, hail, frost, snow, dew, and rain, through each one of the (gates) the winds proceed in the northwesterly direction (1 Enoch 34:1-2).” This accords well with Jeremiah 51:16 which says, “he brings up the mist from the ends of the earth, he opens rifts for the rain and brings the wind out of his storehouses.” In subsequent chapters, Enoch journeys “to the extreme ends of the earth” in the west, south, and east. In each place he saw three more “open gates of heaven.”

There were other things to be seen at the ends of the earth. Earlier, we deferred discussion of the King James version of Job 26:7, “He stretcheth out the north over the empty place, *and* hangeth the earth upon nothing.” On several occasions when Enoch and the angel are out beyond the dome of heaven, Enoch comments that there is nothing above or below. For instance, “And I came to an empty place. And I saw (there) neither a heaven above nor an earth below, but a chaotic and terrible place (1 Enoch 21:1-2).” Could this be the kind of nothingness referred to in Job?

An angel also showed Enoch the storerooms of the winds (18:1) and the cornerstone of the earth (18:2).

The Sun and Moon

And what of the sun and moon? Psalm 19:4-6 (quoted earlier) suggest that the sun holes up at the ends of the earth until it is time to rise. Enoch expands upon this idea. In 1 Enoch 41:5, he “saw the storerooms of the sun and the moon, from what place they go out and to which place they return...” Further, “they keep faith one with another: in accordance with an oath they set and they rise.”

Enoch discusses the solar and lunar motions at length, explaining why the apparent azimuths of their rising and setting varies with the season. The explanation, found in the section called “The Book of the Heavenly Luminaries,” begins thus:

This is the first commandment of the luminaries: The sun is a luminary whose egress is an opening of heaven, which is (located) in the direction of the east, and whose ingress is (another) opening of heaven, (located) in the west. I saw six openings through which the sun rises and six openings through which it sets. The moon also rises and sets through the same openings, and they are guided by the

stars; together with those whom they lead, they are six in the east and six in the west heaven. All of them (are arranged) one after another in a constant order. There are many windows (both) to the right and the left of these openings. First there goes out the great light whose name is the sun; its roundness is like the roundness of the sky; and it is totally filled with light and heat. The chariot in which it ascends is (driven by) the blowing wind. The sun sets in the sky (in the west) and returns by the northeast in order to go to the east; it is guided so that it shall reach the eastern gate and shine in the face of the sky (1 Enoch 72:2-5).

The openings in the vault of heaven in the east and west are matched to the seasons. On the longest day of the year, the sun rises and sets through the northernmost pair. On the shortest day, it rises and sets through the southernmost pair. The return routes of the sun and moon are *outside* the dome. Perhaps they rest in their “storerooms” during their time off.

The Stars

Like the Bible, 1 Enoch typically depicts stars as living, anthropomorphic beings. The Sons of the Gods are also dealt with in 1 Enoch, and they are associated with stars. This is consistent with Job 38:7, which says that when the earth's cornerstone was laid “the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted aloud.”

As mentioned earlier, Matthew 24:29 and Revelation 6:13 deal with stars that fall to earth. The image comes from Enoch, but Matthew and John omit some details. In 1 Enoch 88:1, a star that fell from the sky is seized, bound hand and foot, and thrown into an abyss. A few verses later, other stars “whose sexual organs were like the organs of horses” are likewise bound hand and foot and cast “into the pits of the earth (1 Enoch 88:3).”

Most stars just go through their motions night after night. Some stars never set, and Enoch was shown their chariots (1 Enoch 75:8). Stars that do rise and set do so through openings in dome, just like the sun and moon. God, according to 1 Enoch, runs a tight universe, and stars that do not rise on time are thrown into the celestial slammer. Showing Enoch a hellish scene, the angel Uriel explains:

This place is the (ultimate) end of heaven and earth: it is the prison house for the stars and the powers of heaven. And the stars which roll over upon the fire, they are the ones which have transgressed the commandments of God from the beginning of their rising because they did not

arrive punctually (1 Enoch 18:14-15).

Enoch was not told the sentence for tardy rising, but Uriel later shows him other stars “which have transgressed the commandments of the Lord,” for which they were doing ten million years of hard time (1 Enoch 21:6). Enoch also was shown an even more terrible place, a fiery prison house where fallen angels were detained forever (1 Enoch 21:10).

1 Enoch deserves study for its cosmology, but there is much more of interest. It profoundly influenced Christian eschatology, and it is necessary reading for anyone trying to understand Hebrew religious thought at the dawn of the Christian era.

Conclusion

From their geographical and historical context, one would expect the ancient Hebrews to have a flat-earth cosmology. Indeed, from the very beginning, ultra-orthodox Christians have been flat-earthers, arguing that to believe otherwise is to deny the literal truth of the Bible. The flat-earth implications of the Bible were rediscovered and popularized by English-speaking Christians in the mid-19th century. Liberal scriptural scholars later derived the same view. Thus, students with remarkably disparate points of view independently concluded that the ancient Hebrews had a flat-earth cosmology, often deriving this view from scripture alone. Their conclusions were dramatically confirmed by the rediscovery of 1 Enoch.

Notes

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