

# The cosmologist's gambit

***Scripture and Cosmology: Reading the Bible between the Ancient World and Modern Science***

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Not quite twenty years ago, I wrote my first two articles for this ministry, on the subject of Paul Seely's professions that the Bible taught a flat earth, and a sky that was a solid dome.<sup>1,2</sup> Seely's primary argument in both cases amounted to this: all ancient people believed that the sky was solid and the earth was flat; therefore, the authors of the Bible must have believed this also; therefore, the Bible teaches a solid sky and a flat earth.

It is true that some things never change. Today we have something of an equivalent form of argument being presented in Kyle Greenwood's *Scripture and Cosmology*, though commendably without any of the overbearing tone of condescension that Seely offered. Greenwood's text is primarily a highly informative survey of ancient cosmological beliefs, and, to that extent, it can be taken as a valuable resource for the interested student. Greenwood also deserves commendation for ferreting out mythological additions to the roster of critical arguments, such as bogus quotations attributed to men like John Calvin, which allegedly align them with false cosmological beliefs (p. 173). However, Greenwood nevertheless preserves Seely's primary error, relying overmuch on the beliefs of others as a guide for what the Bible actually teaches, and not giving sufficient consideration to the

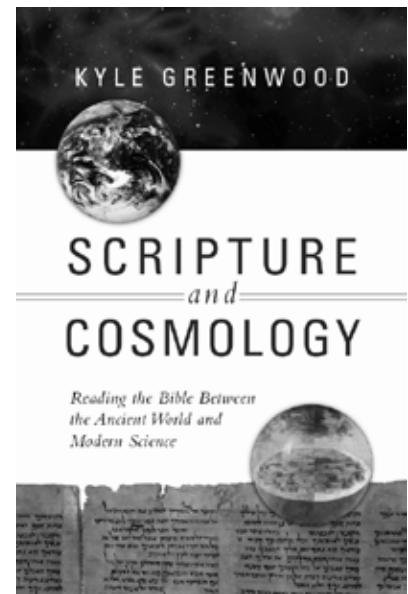
meticulous contextual realities that dictated how the Bible reported its teachings.

## The equivocation resolution

The key to this particular issue for Christians is reconciling the premise of an omniscient God, who reputedly inspired the biblical text, with statements about matters like cosmology that are inferred and argued to be at odds with what is observed in the real world. My resolution of the matter was, and is, that God inspired the authors of the Bible to use *equivocal language* that accommodated any cosmological view a reader might have. As I said in my original response to Seely:

"Rather than wave the white flag over inerrancy with this compromise over *raqiya'*, it is better served ... to realize that the inspired author of Genesis was allowed to use the only terms available to him in his language to describe natural phenomena, but was *not* allowed to offer anything more than the vaguest, most minimal descriptions of those phenomena, thereby leaving nearly everything unsaid about their exact nature. Genesis 1 was perfectly designed to allow that interpretation which accorded with actual fact, for it 'says nothing more than that God created the sky or its constituent elements' while remaining '*completely silent*' about what those elements were. It only depended upon where one started: if one starts with the presumption of a solid sky, one will read into the text a solid sky. If one starts with a modern conception, the text, as we shall see, permits that as well ...

"The cosmology has been kept so basic and equivocal that one must



force certain meanings into the text and analyze what the writer 'must have been thinking' (as well as pay no attention to the fact that God, not man, is the ultimate author of the text) in order to find error."

I developed this point further in a more recent article for the Christian Research Institute, where I specifically focused on the claim that the Bible taught a flat earth:

"The Bible was written in a time and culture remote from ours, and biblical authors were limited in terms of what they could coherently express to their audience. This is not to say that God could not have inspired an author to reveal that the Earth was a sphere. However, although inspired by God, the biblical text had to offer an *accommodation to human finitude*. "To illustrate the problem, a critic once remarked that the parable of the mustard seed (Matt. 13:31–2) would have been more impressive had Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to a redwood. Since no one in first-century Palestine knew what a redwood was, the critic argued, this would have demonstrated prophetic knowledge to the modern reader.

“Such judgments reflect a provincialism that assumes the modern reader should be a privileged target of the text. If Jesus spoke of redwood trees, it would represent a stunning anachronism that readers for hundreds of years to come would find puzzling, and potentially consider a reason to reject the Bible’s message, just as some claim to reject it today because of alleged flat-Earth passages. The modern critic demands accommodation from God at the cost of confusion for all who lived before.

“... The most efficient option for the inspired text, therefore, was to make no explicit statements about subjects such as cosmology, which is exactly what we find in the Bible. It is also why critics can only make a case for a ‘flat-Earth Bible’ by inference.”<sup>3</sup>

The element that both Seely and Greenwood miss is that if we believe the text is inspired, then God is the ultimate author of the text. To be sure, God used fallible brokers to put His ideas to paper. We may freely suppose that authors like Isaiah or Jeremiah may have *personally* held to any number of erroneous ideas about any number of things, including cosmology. However, in such circumstances, where a biblical prophet is inspired to transmit a message to a larger audience about a subject matter over which they are *personally* ill-informed, an equivocal expression of language is the proper and logical compromise for producing an inspired text. Neither Seely nor Greenwood accounts for the text as a divinely brokered product which compels this compromise.

### Yes, it is the context

Greenwood deserves praise for much of his message in this book, apart from the informative background information about the cosmological beliefs of biblical cultures. He attests that the Bible is a book of great

depth and richness, one that the serious student can spend a lifetime studying and still only scratch the surface (pp. 10–11.). He also offers a refreshing tutorial on the necessity of applying contextual information to our biblical studies (pp. 18 ff.). As a Christian apologist, I have spent much of my career refuting the claims and arguments of atheists, cultists, and other misinterpreters who read the Bible as though it were written just yesterday, in modern English. Although the Bible can be understood to some extent by a surface reading, contextual study adds a layer of depth that deepens our understanding of the text, and helps prevent abuses. It can also handily refute critical claims by opponents of Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

It is also refreshing that Greenwood counsels readers to not assume that ancient people were childishly ignorant. For example, he explains that not even pagans thought of the storm god Baal in terms of being a “man-like creature poised to unleash his electric arsenal ... . The authors of these texts were not myopic or dense in their understanding of the cosmos or the natural world” (p. 41). Critics of a particularly misotheistic persuasion are quite fond of supposing that the Bible depicts God in a similarly cartoonish fashion, as a white-haired and bearded old man with a foul temper.

Yet, in spite of these commendable lessons, Greenwood does not take this logic quite far enough. Let us grant that, for example, Jeremiah believed, as his contemporaries supposedly did, that the earth was a pancake-like surface with a solid dome over the top. This may well have been true, assuming that Jeremiah even had an interest in the subject. But if there is something to be said in an inspired text that touches on the subject, doesn’t it stand to reason that God would have employed this method when using Jeremiah as a prophetic broker?

Greenwood gets very close to the answer with his discussions of God’s willingness to accommodate a reading or listening audience. To a greater extent than Seely, Greenwood is willing to incorporate the logic of biblical contexts as a defining factor in how the Bible presents itself. He rightly notes, for example, that in missionary preaching the Apostle Paul adjusted his presentations to suit the “cultural peculiarities of his audience” (p. 197). So, for example, when he spoke to the Jews, Paul made extensive use of the Old Testament, but when he spoke to the Athenians, the Old Testament is barely visible, if it is visible at all. Especially when it came to the Gospel message, God was willing to contextualize His Word so that it could be more easily understood, while not being willing to compromise its power and truth. In contextualizing his message for groups like the Athenians, Paul struck the ideal balance between power and truth.

We ought to seek a similar solution for the matter of the Bible’s transmission of cosmological truths. Greenwood seems to think that God’s proper response would be to in some way inform Jeremiah so that his cosmology was up to 21<sup>st</sup> century standard. Indeed, Greenwood indicates as much when he comments on the text of Daniel 4:10–11. In this passage, the dream of Nebuchadnezzar is described as including a tall tree that can be seen “to the ends of the whole earth”. It is natural to assume that Nebuchadnezzar’s dream would reflect his own cosmological beliefs; or more precisely, that he would describe his dream in those terms. It is doubtful that, in his dream, Nebuchadnezzar actually walked to and fro to each end of the disc-shaped earth in order to be able to say that the tree was visible from all ends of it! Rather, he would have gauged the height of the tree and assumed its range of visibility.

Greenwood admits to this point, agreeing with the premise that “just

because the Bible describes various human perspectives, it does not mean that the divine Author endorses these positions” (p. 75). However, he then proceeds to suppose that Daniel would feel compelled to correct Nebuchadnezzar’s cosmology (p. 76)! This is misguided for reasons already explained. Such knowledge would not only be useless to Nebuchadnezzar (as well as Daniel), it would also have served to invalidate Daniel’s authority as a prophet in the eyes of his contemporaries.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, Greenwood cannot see any middle ground between God allowing the authors of Scripture to promulgate outright cosmological error and God teaching the biblical authors all the correct details about cosmic geography. The balance, as noted, is between the power of God’s

Word and the truth of God’s Word. Greenwood’s solution weighs heavily on the side of truth, but in the process, it compromises on the matter of power. The middling ground of the authors expressing such matters using equivocal language offers a far better balance between the two.

**The earth treatment**

Greenwood’s treatment of biblical texts concerning the ‘earth’ aptly illustrates the problem. He does not even consider the option I developed in my prior articles, that ‘earth’ in the Old Testament usually did not mean planetary Earth (pp. 73–79). Instead, Greenwood immediately assumes that ‘earth’ refers to the whole planet, and from there, after the manner of Seely, proceeds to read error into the text.

In some cases the results of these forced readings are comical. Job 1:7 has Satan saying that he came to God after “going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it”. Greenwood remarks that this presents “an earth that Satan can cover completely by foot ...” (p. 74). How can it have escaped Greenwood that the text presents Satan as one who has clearly made his way *into Heaven* to speak to God, a journey that could hardly have been made on foot? Is the ‘prince of the power of the air’ grounded? In this case, it doesn’t matter whether the author of Job thought the “earth” was a disc, a sphere, or a dodecahedron; Satan is presented as a supernatural being, and we can hardly imagine that he would be understood as standing at the shore of the sea thumbing for a ride

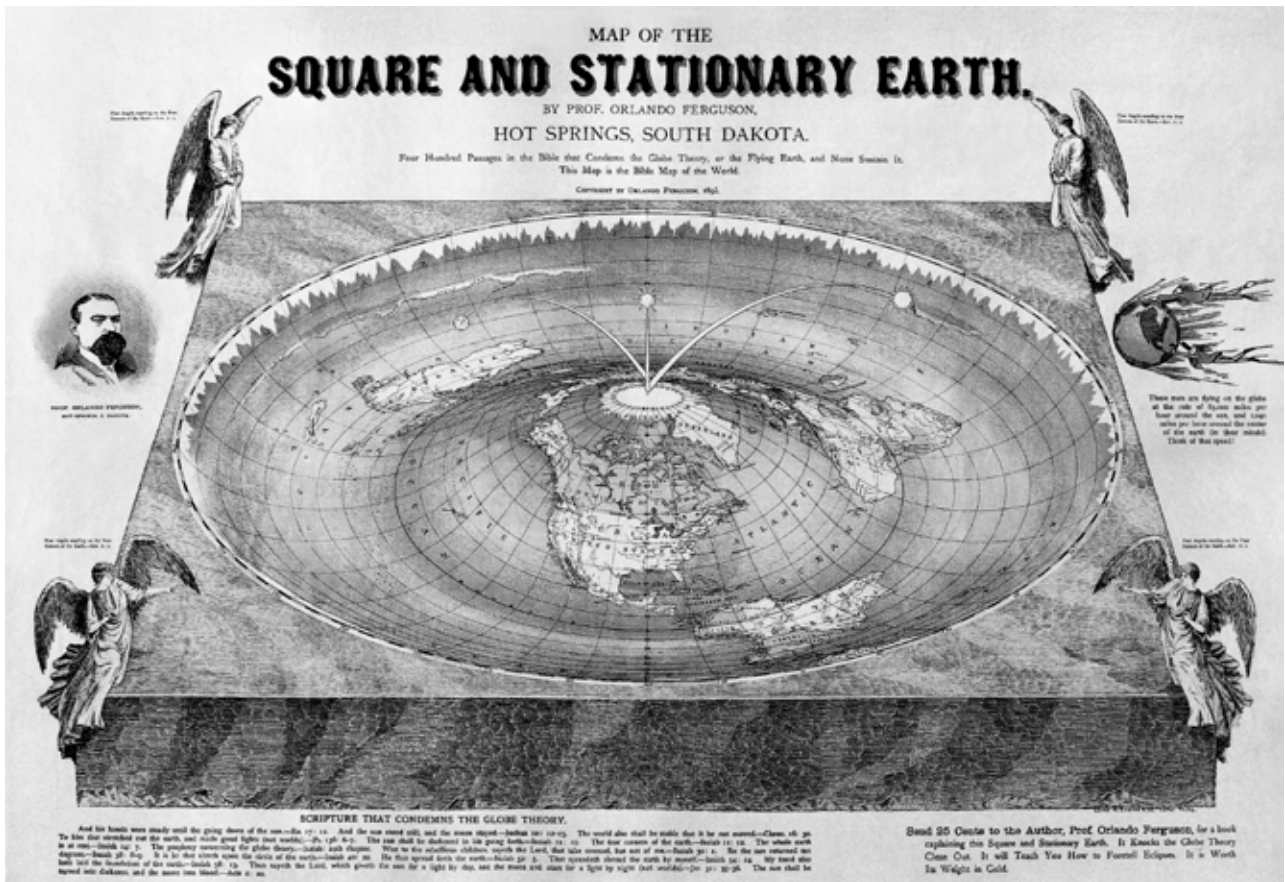


Figure 1. This 1893 rendition by Dr Orlando Ferguson was an attempt to reconcile Ferguson’s reading of the biblical text with the cosmological observations of science.

across from the Ugaritic navy. Even if the author of Job did have planetary Earth in mind, Satan's hiking habits would say nothing whatsoever about the shape of the earth as a planet.

In most cases, however, Greenwood merely presents a biblical phrase (like 'ends of the earth'), assumes his reading of a planetary Earth, and leaves it at that. My past articles deal with the several examples presented by Greenwood, and though he presents the matter in a far less condescending fashion than Paul Seely, he argues in much the same way Seely did.

### Structure and narrative

Of particular interest to the creationist is Greenwood's treatment of the creation accounts of Genesis (pp. 106 ff.). Greenwood does well to present the formulaic structures present in the text. These are the devices typically used by a society in which some 99% of the population was unable to read: they enabled the hearer of the narrative to remember more easily what was said. But do these structures say anything about the text in terms of its historical value, or whether it was intended to be understood as historical? Probably not. As the expert in oral tradition Albert Lord once remarked:

"Traditional narrators tend to tell what happened in terms of already existent patterns of story. Since the already existing patterns allow for many multiforms and are the result of oft repeated human experience, it is not difficult to adjust another special case to the flexibly interpreted story patterns. ... The fact that the Entry (of Jesus) into Jerusalem, for example, fits an element of mythic pattern does not necessarily mean, however, that the event did



**Figure 2.** Some critics, as well as some biblical interpreters, say that biblical cosmology describes an earth that is flat, rather than a globe.

not take place. On the contrary, I assume that it did take place, since I do not know otherwise, and that it was an incident that traditional narrators chose to include, partly at least because its essence had a counterpart in other stories and was similar to the essence of an element in an existing story pattern ... That its essence was consonant with an elements in a traditional mythic (i.e., sacred) pattern adds a dimension of spiritual weight to the incident, but it does not deny (nor does it confirm, for that matter) the historicity of the incident."<sup>6</sup>

To be sure, there are certain degrees of accommodation to an oral society that we may hypothesize without compromising the integrity of the Biblical account. One might readily argue, for example, that the brief conversation recorded between Eve and the serpent (Genesis 3:2–5) served as a precis for a longer and much more detailed exchange. But the question of historical accuracy, which is indirectly raised by Greenwood's material on

Biblical genre, is not resolved by a mere appeal to genre.

In summary, Greenwood exceeds Seely in terms of his willingness to factor in divine accommodation of human finitude as a factor in the composition of the biblical text. For that, he may certainly be commended as having taken a step in the right direction, away from Seely's restricted viewpoint. He may also be commended for providing an accessible resource on ancient cosmological beliefs. When it comes to the question of whether the Bible allows for the fact that the earth is a sphere, though, perhaps it could be said that Greenwood has failed to bring the question of context to a *full-orbed* conclusion!

### References

1. Holding, J.P., Is the *raqiya* ('firmament') a solid dome? Equivocal language in the cosmology of Genesis 1 and the Old Testament: a response to Paul H. Seely, [creation.com/raqiya](http://creation.com/raqiya).
2. Holding, J.P., Is the *'erets* (earth) flat? Equivocal language in the geography of Genesis 1 and the Old Testament: a response to Paul H. Seely, [creation.com/earth-flat](http://creation.com/earth-flat).
3. Holding, J.P., The Legendary Flat-Earth Bible, [equip.org/article/legendary-flat-earth-bible](http://equip.org/article/legendary-flat-earth-bible).
4. Perhaps my favourite example of this is an atheist who claimed that Deuteronomy 22:8 was ridiculous because it required houses to have barriers around their rooves to prevent people falling from them. The atheist assumed that in ancient Israel, like today, people seldom ventured onto the roof of a house. In reality, ancient peoples used their roof as an open-air room where various activities were performed. Falling from a roof was a real and recurring danger.
5. I am excluding from consideration here such arbitrary *deus ex machina* solutions as, for example, God could have caused the Holy Spirit to enlighten Nebuchadnezzar so that he came to believe in a spherical earth, and did not see that as compromising God's message. Though certainly possible in logical terms, it is clear that God seldom operates in such a compulsory way.
6. Lord, A., The Gospels as oral traditional literature; in: Walker, W.O. (Ed.), *The Relationships Among the Gospels: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, Trinity University Press, San Antonio, TX, p. 39, 1978.