

Nonscientific Language in the Bible

By Martin Pickup

Ancient people commonly described the world as a flat, stationary land area surrounded by oceans and covered by a vaulted firmament where the sun, moon and stars moved daily from one side of the sky to the other. Such language was not what we today would call “scientific,” but the ancients described the universe as it appeared. Today we know that our world is actually a spherical planet, and instead of the sun and stars moving above the earth, our planet rotates and revolves around the sun. The stars are distant “suns” of their own, located at the center of their own solar systems.

How does the Bible depict the world? Does it describe it from a modern scientific perspective? No. The biblical writers describe nature as it appears—just as other ancient people did. Because of this fact, modern skeptics charge the Bible with error. They assert that the Bible is unacceptable to the modern mind because it speaks unscientifically of the natural world. In their book, *Fundamentalism: Hazards and Heartbreaks*, Rod Evans and Irwin Berent state that Scripture presents a “primitive cosmology” that is “scientifically inaccurate,” and so the Bible must be rejected as the inerrant, authoritative word of God.

Yet it is the skeptics’ reasoning that is in error, not the Bible. Speaking nonscientifically about nature is not the same thing as speaking falsely. Even in our modern age we do not always describe the world scientifically. When we talk of the sun rising in the east and setting in the west, we are describing things phenomenally—as they appear—just as the Bible does. We do not err when we depict things in this manner, for we are

describing nature outside of a scientific context. It would be foolish for someone to charge us with speaking falsehoods. If we today do not deserve to be branded as errorists when we use nonscientific language to speak of nature, then surely God should be afforded the same prerogative.

A careful reader of Scripture will observe that the biblical writers spoke of the world using many of the same types of descriptions that their ancient contemporaries used. The Bible speaks of the earth as a flat land area, surrounded by oceans, with a vaulted sky overhead (Psa. 104:2-5; Amos 9:6; Gen. 1:6-10; Job 22:12-14; Prov. 8:25-29; 1 Sam. 2:8; Phil. 2:10; Rev. 5:13, et al.). Instead of describing the earth as a planet that moves around the sun, Scripture says things like, “He established the earth upon its foundations, so that it will not totter” (Psa. 104:5). We read that God “has placed a tent for the sun ... Its rising is from one end of the heavens, and its circuit to the other end of them” (Psa. 19:4-6). Such language is a poetic description of the way the world looks to our eye, and most assuredly it is not a scientific description. But that does not mean that such descriptions are wrong! They are accurate statements of the way our world appears.

Some Bible believers throughout history have been slow to recognize a difference between the way in which the Bible describes nature and the scientific reality of nature. For example, as Columbus and other Renaissance explorers began to traverse the globe, some people clung to the notion that the world was flat because they knew that the Bible did not describe the world as a sphere. Even today there exists a Flat Earth Society. They believe that the Bible’s portrayal of a flat earth below a vaulted cosmos must be the scientific

reality of things. In the 16th century Martin Luther branded the new heliocentric theory of Copernicus as heresy, because Scripture portrayed the sun and the other heavenly bodies as moving around a stationary earth. Luther said,

There was mention of a certain new astrologer who wanted to prove that the Earth moves and not the sky, the Sun, and the Moon ... So it goes now. Whoever wants to be clever must agree with nothing that others esteem. He must do something of his own. This is what that fellow does who wishes to turn the whole astronomy upside down. Even in these things that are thrown into disorder I believe the Holy Scriptures, for Joshua commanded the Sun to stand still and not the Earth. (*Luther's Tabletalk*)

A recent book by a Bible-believing scientist still disavows the heliocentric view because, he says, the word of God speaks of the cosmos circling an immobile earth (*A Geocentricity Primer*, by Gerardus D. Bouw).

These Bible believers unwittingly make the same mistake that modern theological liberals make: they think that any depiction of nature that is nonscientific would necessarily be an erroneous depiction. But that is not true. It is not an error for God to use the language of appearance in His revelation to man, anymore than it is an error for us today to speak nonscientifically of the world when we are in a nonscientific setting. Our all-knowing Creator certainly has complete knowledge of all scientific facts, but the Bible is not a science textbook and God never intended it to be. One cannot hold Scripture to a standard of scientific precision in its language that only a science book could fulfill. There is conflict, to be sure, between some modern scientific theories (such as the theory of evolution) and express biblical statements about how and what God did in creation. But there is no conflict between scientific facts and the way in which the Bible describes the world.

God has always oriented His message to the perspective of His human audience. It is the only effective way for Him to communicate to man. How could the ancient Israelites have understood the prophets' messages if God had inspired His prophets to speak of the earth as a spherical mass spinning in space and orbiting the sun? Such a startling idea would needlessly have impeded the Israelites in their understanding of the real aim of God's revelation, that of instructing them about how they should live.

We need God's revelation—not so that we may gain insight into the scientific realities of the universe, but so that we may learn what God has done in history and what we must do to live acceptably in His sight. Liberal skeptics who assert that the Bible errs when it fails to describe the world scientifically are making a bogus criticism. They only display their own folly. Bible believers can be confident that the word of God is accurate in everything it says.