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## THE LEGENDARY FLAT-EARTH BIBLE

by James Patrick Holding

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“The Bible is, from Genesis to Revelation, a flat-earth book.”

—Robert Schadewald (1943–2000), former president, National Center for Science Education<sup>1</sup>

Schadewald is not alone in this declaration. Calling the Bible a flat-Earth book has been a staple of Bible critics for centuries. The American atheist Robert Ingersoll, in *About the Holy Bible* (1894), says of the Hebrews, “They thought the earth was flat, with four corners.”<sup>2</sup> The website of a modern-day freethinkers’ club says, “Many if not most people are unaware that the Bible teaches the earth is flat. All standard Bible references, all standard mainstream non-fundamentalist Bible scholarship acknowledges this.”<sup>3</sup> Often tied in with mythic representations of Columbus seeking to prove that the Earth was not flat, or Galileo bravely suffering persecution because his findings contradicted the teachings of the church, the “flat-Earth Bible” has achieved the status of an urban legend.

It is not only critics of the Bible who maintain this legend. There have been fringe Christian elements that have argued that the Bible teaches a flat Earth. One proponent, a contemporary to Ingersoll, was Samuel B. Rowbotham, author of *Earth Not a Globe* (1881).<sup>4</sup> In modern times, Charles K. Johnson founded the International Flat Earth Research Society, which, until his death in 2001, promoted flat Earth beliefs as biblical.

Is a “flat-Earth Bible” anything more than a legend? Some critics admit that the case for a flat-Earth Bible is made by inference rather than by direct statements from the Bible. The very fact that a case can only be made by inference speaks to contexts missing from the legend.

### ACCOMMODATION TO HUMAN FINITUDE

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.

Critics will agree that the notion of a spherical Earth was held by few or none at the time of the writing of the Old Testament, which is where the vast majority of alleged flat-Earth texts are found.<sup>5</sup> Reports of a spherical Earth therefore would have received the same reception as a report by Jesus of redwoods. 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.

### PLANETARY OR PARTICULAR?

Space does not permit a thorough analysis of every alleged flat-Earth biblical text, but we may refute one of the chief ideas in short order. Careful, contextual analysis indicates that exceptional care was taken in the inspired text to avoid any cosmological statements indicating a flat *or* spherical Earth. In fact, analysis yields the conclusion that the Bible's authors did not even refer to planetary Earth *at all*.

The Hebrew word most often translated "earth" in the Old Testament is *'erets*. It is used to refer to some specific nation or territory, like the "land (*'erets*) of Havilah" (Gen. 2:11). In other cases, it refers to a defined plot of land, like the one purchased by Abraham (Gen. 23:15).

It is often assumed that *'erets* is used in a third sense meaning planetary Earth, and it is this usage that leads some critics (and Christians) to infer a teaching of a flat Earth. However, close examination reveals that *'erets* never refers to planetary Earth, encapsulating the entire biosphere of land, sea, and air, but only the "land" part—and then, not inclusive of that "land" that is underwater in the seas.<sup>6</sup>

Although several passages reveal this point, the most telling is Genesis 1:10, "God called the dry land earth, and the gathering of the waters He called seas; and God saw that it was good" (NASB).<sup>7</sup> It is clear that the seas are not considered to be part of the *'erets*. Rather, *'erets* is associated with that which is "dry." Thus, in no case can *'erets* mean planetary Earth.

Another telling passage is Psalm 72:8 (KJV): "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth." This confirms that *'erets* refers only to dry land, for it categorizes "seas" differently from the land, rather than regarding "earth" as encompassing the entire biosphere.

Finally, notice the divisions laid out in Genesis 1:28 (KJV): “And have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” The division of sea from land shows that “earth” does not mean planetary Earth, because by definition, that would include the seas.

### THE END?

Having shown that there is no clear reference to planetary Earth in the Bible, many alleged flat-Earth passages lose their force in a case for an errant cosmology. Passages that refer to the “ends of the earth,” for example, are a favorite of critics. Psalm 48:10 declares, “According to thy name, O God, so is thy praise unto the ends of the earth.”

Critics assume that “ends” refers to the edges of a flat planetary disc. However, as we have seen, oceans are not part of the semantic range of *'erets*. Therefore, “ends of the earth” must refer to the shoreline, that is, where dry land (*'erets*) meets the sea. This is indicated most clearly in Proverbs 30:4 (KJV), “Who hath bound the waters in a garment? Who hath established all the ends of the earth?” The connection of the binding of the waters with the “ends of the earth” indicates that what is in view is the shoreline of the sea.

In response, critics may point to passages they believe indicate a universal meaning for “earth.” These passages are said to reflect some condition or instruction that has universal application, and so “earth” must refer to planetary Earth. Deuteronomy 13:7, for example, contains a warning to Israel against seeking false gods: “Of the gods of the people which are round about you...from the one end of the earth even unto the other end of the earth.” Critics assume that this warning is meaningless unless it is a universal prohibition.

However, this does not follow. The greatest spiritual threat to Israel at this time was the pagan religions of Canaan, Ammon, and the surrounding nations. There was no reasonable threat of Israel being tempted to follow the gods of Mongolia! Therefore, “earth” most intelligibly refers to regions in and around Canaan.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, a universal application is assumed for Job 28:24, “For he looketh to the ends of the earth,” because an omniscient deity will be able to look from one end of a flat Earth to the other. As with the prior passage, however, any limitation of meaning to “earth” — which here would most likely mean from one shore to another, within geographic ranges familiar to Job — would hardly exclude omniscience, and observation by God of lands beyond Job’s knowledge. Here again, critics should apply the observation that the inspired text accommodates human finitude.

### CIRCLE THE EARTH

A unique passage is Isaiah 40:22, which says that God “sitteth upon the circle of the earth.” Critics point to the word “circle” and suppose that this refers to a circle after the manner of a pancake. They may then appeal to other uses of the same Hebrew word (*chuwg*) as indicating perfect circularity.<sup>9</sup> In reply, some Christian apologists have suggested that *chuwg* should be understood to mean a sphere, adding that ancient Hebrew had no specific word for sphere.

Critical arguments, however, fail on much simpler grounds. It is far from clear that *chuwg* refers *exclusively* to the geometric shape we call a circle. Most biblical passages that use the word provide no contextual indication that a perfect circle is referred to (Job 22:14; 26:10; Prov. 8:27; and Isa. 40:22). The one example that does seem to refer to a perfect circle is Isaiah 44:13: “He marketh it out with the compass.” “Compass” here is a compound Hebrew word, *mechugwah*, which refers to a drawing compass. However, this context is the only thing that tells us that *chuwg* refers to a perfect circle.

A telling example is an extrabiblical one, from the intertestamental book of Sirach, 43:11–12: “Behold the rainbow! Then bless its Maker, for majestic indeed is its splendor; it spans the heavens with its glory, this bow bent by the mighty hand of God.”

A rainbow is not a full circle. Rather, it is, at most, a half-circle. Thus, it would appear that *chuwg* is better understood as relating the concept of a *circuit*, or a contiguous path. In that respect, a perfect circle qualifies as a circuit, but it is not the only possible form for a circuit.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, when Isaiah 40:22 describes the land in terms of *chuwg*, this can mean one of three things. First, it may imply that the Hebrews thought land existed in perfect circular shapes. But this is impossible, because the Hebrews knew from the regions of Palestine and Egypt that the land was not even roughly circular.

Second, it may mean that the Hebrews thought land existed in shapes that could roughly be deemed “circular” — with imperfections permitted. If this is the case, then there is nothing to dispute in Isaiah’s description. How “rough” can the circle be, before it is no longer a “circle”? Such a definition would be subjective, and not open to dispute.

A final possibility is that *chuwg* means “circuit,” and Isaiah refers to the land as a whole, indicating the shoreline’s circuit from one point to another. Isaiah, of course, would be unlikely to have known of the vastness of the “circuit” of land he dwelt on (including the Asian and African continents, as well as Europe), but that is hardly required.

Other alleged flat-Earth passages may require more detailed explanations, which we do not have space to cover here.<sup>11</sup> The examples I have provided, however, are exemplary in that they make it clear that biblical writers do not have planetary Earth in mind when they refer to the “earth.” It is fair to say that, on close examination, it is the arguments of the critics that fall “flat.”

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## NOTES

- 1 Robert J. Schadewald, “The Flat-Earth Bible,” *The Bulletin of the Tychoonian Society* 44 (July 1987). Available at <http://www.lhup.edu/~dsimanek/febible.htm>. Accessed

August 21, 2012.

- 2 [http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/robert\\_ingersoll/about\\_the\\_holy\\_bible.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/robert_ingersoll/about_the_holy_bible.html)  
. Accessed August 21, 2012.
- 3 <http://fayfreethinkers.com/tracts/flaearth.shtml>. Accessed August 21, 2012.
- 4 <http://www.sacred-texts.com/earth/za/index.htm>. Accessed August 21, 2012.  
Rowbotham wrote under the pseudonym "Parallax."
- 5 The sixth-century BC Greek philosopher Pythagoras is "generally credited with being the first to argue that the earth is a globe," based on the supposition that "the sphere was a perfect shape." By the fourth-century BC, a spherical Earth "became widely accepted among educated people." Christine Garwood, *Flat Earth: The History of an Infamous Idea* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2008), 19–20. How far this acceptance may have trickled down to the formally uneducated majority is uncertain.
- 6 The single exception in which 'erets might refer to Earth is found in Genesis 1:1–2 (KJV): "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void." However, this would be a unique case, since the seas had yet to be created, or perhaps, simply had not been designated.
- 7 The NASB is one of the only modern English versions that does not unwittingly perpetuate the confusion by capitalizing "Earth" (and also capitalizing "Seas").
- 8 This, along with Yahweh's clear claims of exclusivity in other passages, such as Exodus 20:13 ("You shall have no other gods before me"), would in any event clearly prohibit the following of false gods from any nation, by inference.
- 9 Robert J. Schneider, "Does the Bible Teach a Spherical Earth?"  
<http://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2001/PSCF9-01Schneider.html>. Accessed August 21, 2012. It should be noted that Schneider writes as a Christian, attempting to debunk arguments that the Bible explicitly teaches a spherical Earth.
- 10 Schneider, who offers this example from Sirach, also points out that the Greek Old Testament translated *chuwg* as *gyros*, which means a perfect circle. But the utility of this point is limited, as translators of the Greek Old Testament may have been influenced by Greek ideas of cosmology.
- 11 For example, Daniel 4:10–11, Matthew 4:8, Luke 4:5, and Revelation 1:7.