

Chapter Seventeen

Did God Create a Flat Earth?

Consider another specific, obvious example of an astronomical error and omission in the Bible—the geometrical shape of the earth. For centuries, Bible-believing Christians incorrectly thought that the earth was flat. As we shall see, in various places, the Bible suggests that the earth is flat. Did God really intend that? Again, is the Bible limited to the incomplete human understanding at the time when it was originally written? If so, can it be regarded as only divinely inspired or influenced, rather than as the exact, true Word of God? Or did God purposefully not reveal the complete truth about the universe to Moses and the other writers in order to test our faith in the written word of the Bible so that when we would learn more about the universe and how scientific knowledge is often not consistent with the Bible, we could still “pass the test” if we just maintained faith in the Bible’s deficient and often blatantly incorrect explanations?

Should Christians therefore not regard the Bible as the *complete* revealed word of God because when Moses was writing the Book of Genesis, he either did not have or was not given full information? It might be that Moses simply got much of what he was receiving wrong. In contrast, maybe Moses could not understand what God was telling him, so he did not record it all correctly or completely when he relayed the information God gave to him in writing Genesis.

But it all seems rather farfetched to argue that whenever a literal explanation in Genesis is either lacking or dubious, it is done so on purpose by God just to test our faith, as if there were a biblical disclaimer that read, “What this book says is true, unless it is wrong, in which case it is only wrong *on purpose* to test your faith. At other times, it is not really wrong, however, but just seems wrong or lacking, for now, but such mysteries will all be explained later when we get to Heaven.” Doesn’t “the Bible may be wrong here, but if so, it is on purpose just to test your faith” smack of a very weak rationalization?

Even if the Bible were not to explain every detail of the story of creation, why not explain even just a few key facts in Genesis (like the earth is a sphere that revolves around the sun)? At least that would have avoided the seriously mistaken belief that the earth is flat and static instead of being part of a solar system of planets revolving around the sun. Such a simple explanation about the earth, not to mention how our solar system works, if it had been provided in the Bible at that early point in history, would have supported at least an inference that the Bible might be the inerrant divine Word of God.

Aristotle and Eratosthenes (Greek philosophers and scientists from 250 BC) appear to be the first ones to at least suggest scientifically that the earth is a sphere. Their work was all done BC

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(before Christ), pre-New Testament. This is significant because in the New Testament Gospels of Matthew and Luke, written around 100 AD and thousands of years after Genesis, the Bible incorrectly suggests that the earth is flat. In Matthew 4:1–11 and Luke 4:1–13, the Bible recounts how Satan tempted Jesus by taking Him up to a high mountain to show Jesus "all of the kingdoms of the world" that could be His if Jesus were simply to bow down to Satan: "[5] And the devil, taking him up into an high mountain, shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time.[6] And the devil said unto him, All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it. [7] If thou therefore wilt worship me, all shall be thine" (Luke 4:5–7).

Of course, no matter how high that mountain was, it would have been impossible to see all of the kingdoms in the world because Earth is a sphere. Stated differently, if the earth is a sphere, seeing the entire surface of Earth from one vantage point simply cannot physically be done. Additionally, there were kingdoms in China, Africa, Europe, and Central America at the time, but Matthew and Luke seem to be unaware of these other countries or the other continents of the world, because they do not refer to them.

Consider the following diagram:

Sittin' on Top of the World

**Being Able to
See It All if It
Were Flat**



**Being Able
to See Only Half, at
Most, if It Were a
Sphere**



The biblical passages in Matthew and Luke make sense only if you incorrectly assume that the world is flat. Notwithstanding the fact that the earth is not flat and therefore these accounts in Matthew and Luke are monumental biblical errors, why would Jesus, the Son of God who *is* God, even need to be taken to the top of a very high mountain to see all of the kingdoms of the world in the first place? Certainly, if Jesus truly is God, then He already would have been fully aware of all of these kingdoms of the world.

It also does not follow that Satan was more in control of all of the world's kingdoms than God was, with the result that Satan had the power to grant wishes to God (Jesus) if God would just

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bow down to him. If Jesus really had wanted to, couldn't He have just taken control of all of these kingdoms anyway without having to bow down to Satan? Was Satan more powerful than God in this regard—with the power to grant (or deny) God's wishes? Does God play a sort of game with Satan, granting Satan the power to take his best shot at Jesus or us (as God seemed to do with Job, allowing Satan to heap any and all misfortunes on Job just to see if he could take it)? If Satan was "testing" Jesus with "temptations," how could an infallible God, Jesus, possibly fail, unless Jesus was more human than He was God? If it is a sin to lust in one's heart and thus commit adultery (Matthew 5:28: "whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart"), did Jesus commit any sin simply by virtue of being tempted by Satan? When I am tempted, do I get to blame that evil sinful thought all on Satan who is tempting me by planting evil/sinful thoughts in my mind, or do I have to take at least some responsibility for even thinking about and considering committing that evil sin—like a thought crime?

In addition to the premise that the earth is flat, Matthew and Luke lead us to the belief that the world is much smaller than it actually is, given the assumption that the top of a high mountain could facilitate a clear view of all the kingdoms on Earth. But maybe Jesus enjoyed Godly, super eyesight that could bend light to see around to the other side of the world. Or maybe Jesus had x-ray vision that could see right through the earth; however, if that were the case, why was there any need to take Jesus to a high mountain to see kingdoms that He already had the ability to see—not to mention the fact that Jesus already was fully aware of these kingdoms and therefore already would have known all about them and everyone in them?

Assuming, however, that this trip to a high mountain happened and "all of the kingdoms" were really just the kingdoms that somehow could be seen in a certain area of the earth near the Middle East, to what high mountain on Earth were the biblical writers referring? Mt. Everest (in Nepal), the highest mountain on Earth, is extremely difficult for human beings to climb, not only because of its steep, icy terrain but also because of the deadly storm conditions that swirl by the mountain nearly continually. In addition, most people cannot function or even survive in the thin air at such altitudes, as oxygen levels deplete more and more as one approaches the 29,029-foot peak. But if Satan and Jesus could easily reach the top of Mt. Everest because of their special powers and overcome all of the aforementioned obstacles, they would arrive at a place where their view of "all the kingdoms" would be blocked, as a clear view for miles is unlikely from a place that is above the clouds in almost constant precipitation. These problems would arise with almost every other very high mountain around the earth, and lower mountains require us to ask how limited the area to be seen must have been in the minds of the writers.

The flawed assumption of being able to view all of the kingdoms of the world reinforces the naive belief held by the biblical authors that the world was flat and very small and therefore endured the sunlight of day or the darkness of night *all at the same time*—the text says "shewed unto him all of the kingdoms of the world *in a moment of time*." (Emphasis added). The writers did not even realize that there are relative time zones because of the spherical shape of the earth

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so that noon in Jerusalem might be 5:00 a.m. in Mexico City and 7:00 p.m. in Japan (depending on daylight savings times). If there were any such awareness by the writers that it is always both day and night somewhere in the world, wouldn't there have been some reference to being able to view only the *half* of the kingdoms that were lit by the sun at any one particular time or to somehow being able to also view the half that was under the cover of night at a time when there were typically no bright city lights illuminating any kingdom (unless there just happened to be a bright full moon out lighting up the other half of the earth at that time)? Recall that there was no electricity and there were no kerosene lamps more than 2,000 years ago. Would the kingdoms that would have been seen at night have been seen because of their campfires or, again, because of the special eyesight of Jesus, which also could light up the dark? This brings us back to the question of why Jesus would climb a high mountain for a view He could have had without needing a mountaintop vantage point anyway or, more fundamentally, how Jesus could view the entire surface of the earth at once, even from the vantage point of a high mountaintop, when from the orbit of the space station, even the astronauts cannot see the other side of the spherical earth.

Perhaps these literal questions are inapplicable here because these accounts in Matthew and Luke are just *metaphors* about God's resistance of Satan's temptation and therefore are not intended to be taken as a literal description of an actual event. If that is the case, however, we then move away from *literal* interpretation into the wholly different world of personal, metaphorical, or private interpretation—and who is to say which biblical stories are to be taken literally, and which are mere parables and metaphors that are *not* to be taken literally? Not that it would be wrong to take any or all of the stories metaphorically only, but this move away from strict literalism represents a huge departure from those who argue for the literal interpretation of *everything* in the Bible.

Changing from the literal to the metaphorical is a very convenient "out" whenever the literal interpretation is problematic. If we step into the realm of personal interpretation and out of the world of the literal approach, then the Bible could send a very different message to each of the billions of people on the planet. And then how would we know which religious leader or which church was interpreting the Bible correctly so we could decide whom to turn to when seeking guidance in our worship? If the writers intended this story to be taken literally, then we are left with an implausible, illogical fallacy because the earth is not flat and there is no mountain or other location on Earth from which one can see all of the kingdoms of the world.

Another biblical reference makes the same mistake about the earth being flat and very small. In Daniel 4:10–11, a king reportedly saw a tree of great height at the center of the Earth: "and the height thereof reached unto heaven, *and the sight thereof to the end of all earth*" (emphasis added). One object on Earth being visible from everywhere on Earth reinforces the fact that the biblical authors, be they men or God, adhered to the incorrect assumption that the world was flat. Instead of a very tall mountain from which Jesus could view the entire world, this verse tells us that all humans in the world, none likely to have superhuman eyesight or special powers,

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allegedly could see this one tall tree *from any point on Earth*. Again, if this is just hyperbole or metaphor, how are we supposed to know when to interpret the Bible literally and when to interpret it metaphorically? Although this tree was a vision in a dream of Nebuchadnezzar, and so perhaps only metaphorical, the assumption about a flat earth is inherent in the description that such a tree, if it were tall enough, of course could be seen from every point on Earth. So, if the assumption is still literal, then it is an example of a passage in which the writer did not divine God's message correctly, or at all, or filled in incorrect information that God had not intended for him to relate. In any event, it is a clear mistake existing in an allegedly perfect, inerrant book. Did God write that mistake? If not, then a human must have.

When I told my father (who, you may recall from the introduction, is a fundamentalist pastor who promotes an absolutely literal interpretation of the Bible) about these problematic biblical verses and their mistaken flat-earth implications, interestingly, he was not bothered by them. He said, "Yes, I have heard about this 'flat-earth' charge before, only in a different context. Recall that when Jesus returns after the Rapture—in which all the saved Christians are to be taken up in the air to Heaven just before the world ends in Armageddon—the Bible, in Revelation, says, 'Every eye shall see the return of Jesus.' Of course, the only way everyone on Earth all would be able to see Jesus's return is if the earth were flat." That was a very astute observation by my dad, because it is true that the only way everyone on a spherical Earth could simultaneously see Jesus's return in the sky is if the earth were flat, which we know is not the case. I was impressed that my dad had thought of and was acknowledging this point; my dad had an explanation for this, however. He said, "Every eye still shall literally see Jesus's triumphant return, despite the earth being round, because when Jesus returns, it will be covered on live television, by stations like CNN! So the Bible accurately predicted television some 2,000 years ago! This proves the existence of God and that the Bible is accurate to each word!" I had to concede that his explanation made sense—or at least arguably *could* make sense—as every eye could literally see Jesus's return on TV and God knew live television would one day be invented. In other words, the Bible is not wrong, *and* it even predicted the invention of television over 2,000 years ago—impressive.

"OK, Dad," I said, "let's assume Jesus's return will be covered on live TV or on the Internet so that 'every eye shall see' His return simultaneously. Were there television sets and the Internet 2,000 years ago? If so, did Satan take Jesus up to a very high mountain just to get good reception on a television set [or a Wi-Fi computer] with a live feed from the other side of the world? You have simply answered your own question about how every eye shall see Jesus's return in modern times [predicted in Revelation], but you have completely ignored my original question about Jesus being able to see every kingdom of the world from a tall mountain over 2,000 years ago [in Matthew and Luke] as well as the question regarding how every human could see a tall tree from everywhere in the world thousands of years ago [in Daniel]."

In response, my dad simply said, "In the end times, son, wise men will become fools." OK, but this response can actually cut both ways. For example, if I make a bad/illogical argument against

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a literalist believer, then it is just a bad/illogical argument and I would lose on that point. If I make a good/logical argument against a literalist believer, however, then somehow, I am really just a latter-day fool engaging in foolishness, assuming that we are now living in the end times, and so I would still lose on that point. Imagine that, no matter what, I lose. How does one possibly argue with that kind of "heads I win, tails you lose"—"I am right and you are wrong, and even when you are right, you are still wrong"—mentality?

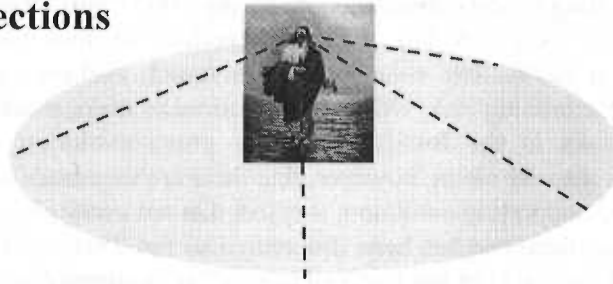
I guess my dad was really saying, without intending to do so, that it is fine to use logic to argue in support of the Bible but that if the argument ends up being inadequate in comparison to a scientific counterargument that defeats it, it is best to say, "In the end times, wise men will become fools." In this way, a bad or illogical argument in support of the Bible can still and always be considered correct. It appears that literalist believers need to be careful here, however; if they use the "wise men will become fools" response, then whenever they actually have a logical argument, it will backfire on them, as they are then themselves the wise men who will become fools—unless, of course, this observation about wise men becoming fools is something that never can apply to them, only to others. This must be what they think, even if they are not willing to admit it.

I was talking to my older brother, Ken, about this flat-earth implication in the books of Matthew, Luke, and Daniel. Like my dad, my brother is extremely knowledgeable about the Bible as well as various other related subjects. I was excited to share with him this biblical error that I had stumbled upon, irrespective of my dad's TV-in-modern-times explanation, but my brother had a unique yet equally problematic response. He explained that in the book of Isaiah, another Old Testament book, the writer suggests that the earth is round by referring to it as a circle: "It is he that sitteth upon the *circle of the earth*, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain..." (Isaiah 40:22; emphasis added). So if it says "circle," then it is close enough to mean "round," or a "sphere."

A circle, however is still two-dimensional (like a flat, circular disc), whereas a sphere is three-dimensional (like a round basketball); therefore, the word circle is not a correct description of the earth's round shape. The earth is *not* a flat circle, like a disc; instead, it is a three-dimensional, round sphere. What if the writers in this passage were to have referred to the earth as a square or triangle (flat, two-dimensional shapes) instead of as a cube or pyramid (their related three-dimensional objects)? Wouldn't the earth still be flat, even though its perimeter would now be in the shape of a square or triangle instead of a circle? If one were to go to a high mountaintop (like Jesus and Satan apparently did), one would perceive the horizon as it falls off on all sides. As such, one would see a flat earth that appears to be circular in shape, because one can see only as far as one can see from one spot, and if one looks all around, that person's depth perception would show something like the radius of a circle, with that person in the center, and thus the earth would appear to be a flat circular disc. Consider the following diagram.

As Far as the Eye Can See

Looking all *around*, where the line of vision length is equidistant in all directions



Although there apparently is no word for sphere in the original Hebrew language, if God truly is all powerful and He wrote the Bible, then perhaps He should have made sure there was a word for sphere in Hebrew. If that is what He meant to communicate, and God is infallible and the Bible is His inerrant word, why would such a simple linguistic obstacle get in God's way? After all, if God can create the universe and everything in it, He certainly could have correctly described the shape of the earth by making sure that there was a word in Hebrew that correctly described its shape. There is no disrespect intended here; I am just taking the exact language of the Bible—which asserts that the earth is a circle instead of a sphere—very seriously and very literally and interpreting it accordingly.

So, my brother brought to my attention this reference to the “circle” shape of the earth, which is a little closer to the actual shape of the earth. My brother, by the way, is not your typical biblical scholar, at least not on the surface. As I alluded to earlier, he rides a Harley, has many tattoos, is a child of the '60s, and is very much a free spirit. Like Jesus, he is a talented carpenter who cares a lot about other people. Notwithstanding the surface differences with my conservative preacher father, my father and my free-spirited brother are alike in many ways and agree on many subjects, yet a milieu of theological and other disagreements keeps them apart to this day. One thing is certain, however: They are both extremely knowledgeable about the Bible and, along with my older sister, Viki, are much smarter than I am, and in many different ways.

In any event, when my brother saw that I was about to concede the point that in Isaiah, the Bible at least *implies* that the earth is of roundish shape (a circle), he proceeded to inform me, just for fun, “You know, Isaiah may suggest that the earth is a sphere, if you interpret ‘circle’ to mean ‘sphere,’ but you should also know that in the Book of Job, the Bible definitely acknowledges the existence of, get this...unicorns.”

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"Unicorns!" I exclaimed. "You mean, like, a horse with a single, twisty, cone-like horn growing out of its forehead unicorn? You mean bedtime-story, fairytale unicorns?"

"Yeah. Interesting, huh?"

According to Isaiah, the earth is a circle (which is at least close to a sphere, so the Bible *almost* gets it right in at least one part), but according to Job, unicorns used to live on the circle Earth: "Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee, or abide by thy crib? Canst thou bind the unicorn with his band in the furrow?" (Job 39:9–10). If this is literally true, then there must be fossils of unicorns somewhere on Earth...but none have been found. Perhaps unicorn fossils are the Bible's own version of a missing link. Of course, creationists make much of the fact that there are alleged missing links in the fossil record that prove evolution is wrong in general. Evolutionary biologists actually claim, however, that there are thousands of examples of missing links in the fossil record supporting evolution; it is just that not *every single conceivable* missing link was necessarily fossilized and has been discovered so far. There will be more on this later, but the juxtaposition of the circle of the Earth (if "circle" is interpreted as round) as stated in the Bible, along with the reference to the apparent existence of unicorns (unless it was a reference to a mythical animal), is just fascinating. It is like having a scientist explain quantum mechanics at least partially correctly but then having that same scientist warn us about dangerous thunderbolts hurled by Zeus. Why would God allow such a big mistake in the Bible, not only about the shape of the earth but also about the existence of unicorns? Is it really just a way to test our faith?

Maybe the reference to a unicorn is really just a goat or a rhinoceros reference that somehow got translated incorrectly in the Bible, but a strict literal interpretation would not allow for such corrective "Monday-morning quarterbacking" to explain away the existence of unicorns. Why would an infallible God allow such a mistranslation of His Word? If it is just a mistranslation, then what other similar translation mistakes are in the Bible? If the passage in Job is just a reference to a mythical unicorn, then where does the passage in Job, or a passage anywhere in the Bible, literally say that, where would that it-is-just-a-mythical-unicorn interpretation be coming from?

Despite the incredulous unicorn reference in Job, it is still impressive that the Bible, in Isaiah, almost got the round shape of the earth right that long ago. Did the Bible as a whole, however, really almost get this shape-of-the-earth issue right? If the Bible implies in Isaiah that the earth is round (a circle), or even if Isaiah had gotten it exactly right by stating that the earth is the shape of a sphere but then later—in Daniel, as well as in Matthew and Luke—implied that the earth is flat, then, at best, the Bible is contradictory and inconsistent. It is wrong to say that the earth is *both* spherical and flat. It is either one or the other, but it cannot be both. (It can be a circle and still be flat, however.) So, which is it—spherical or flat? More importantly, why is there any inconsistency in the Bible if an inerrant God wrote every literal word? A person is not right about an assertion just because that person makes two conflicting assertions and it just so happens that *one* of those assertions turns out to be correct.

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For example, suppose a grade-school student took a science test that asked whether gravity exists. If that student were to answer, "Yes, large masses produce a force called gravity, which attracts other objects to the mass," but went on to say afterward, "There is no such thing as the force of gravity; it is only God's love that keeps us all from floating away," should that student receive full credit on the exam for the one correct answer about gravity, or would the teacher need to be worried the student was merely covering all bases because the student apparently doesn't know for sure how, whether, or why gravity exists? For our purposes, if God wrote the Bible, why would He contradict Himself in it? Why would God not speak with certainty and specificity about things like the shape of the planet he created but instead allow a contradiction or inconsistency to exist, if He is in fact in control of all things? Another possibility is that God did not write or divinely inspire the Bible and that it was written merely by fallible men. If so, perhaps God could still be God without necessarily being the one who wrote every word of the Bible.

Where does this leave us? If we go back to the text of Genesis 1:1, the creation of only the earth and the heaven, could it be that the only reason that "the heaven" and "the earth" are mentioned is simply because they were the only two things in the universe visible to the naked eye of a person writing at that time? Surely, God, as the creator of everything, would have been aware of His own creation and would have been able to correctly and consistently describe not only the correct shape of the earth but also the many biblically ignored elements and characteristics of our universe.