

# DOES THE BIBLE TEACH A FLAT EARTH?

Gerardus D. Bouw, Ph.D.

- [Introduction](#)
- [Historical Background](#)
- [Foundation of the Earth and World](#)
- [The Corners and the Ends of the Earth](#)
- [The Pillars of the Earth](#)
- [Conclusion](#)

## Introduction

"The Bible is not a textbook on science." This saying, common among the Christian intelligentsia, ...is generally quoted to "explain away" some sort of apparent conflict between science and the Bible; in particular reconciling evolution with Genesis chapter one, and the idea that the Bible teaches that the earth is flat. The saying is subsequently invoked as an excuse for why the Bible need not be believed (i.e., "taken literally") on that particular scientific point. However, II Timothy 3:16 tells us that the Bible is authoritative in all that it touches upon, science included... Creationists have recently dealt quite well with the evolution versus Genesis chapter one issue; but there is one area on which the Bible does touch which has not been well-covered and that is the shape of the earth. Most modern scholars claim that the Bible teaches an earth, flat and rectangular in shape, which is placed on several pillars which, in turn, are based on a foundation. This, scholars claim, is how the ancients thought of the earth and man, in writing the Bible, merely echoed the scientific dogmas of the time. Because of that, many have assumed that the Bible was written by men and not by God and, as a result, that the Bible is not to be viewed as an authority in science. But a careful investigation and search of the Scriptures reveals that such a model is not dictated by the wording of the Bible. On the contrary, the Bible was already hinting of the sphericity of the earth by referring to the "compass upon the face of the depth" (Proverbs 8:27) some 500 years before the nations first started to doubt the flatness of the earth. The Biblical model is one which has an earth, basically spherical in shape, with angular continents, and pillars which undergird the world. The pillars can be shown to correspond to crystalline rock, commonly called the mantle, and that there is an unspecified number of foundations to the earth which can range from the roots of mountains to the core of the earth to the very foundation, Jesus Christ himself. That this is the Biblical perspective is the purpose behind this paper. Some of the arguments presented are well over four hundred years old, others are presented here for the first time; but all purport to belie the notion that the Bible's view of the earth is that maintained by most of this world's scholars.

## Historical Background

The belief in a flat earth was widely espoused by the ancients. The Hindus, for example, have a cosmology in which the earth is taken to be a flat disk, placed on the back of an elephant which, in turn, is standing on a giant turtle which is swimming in a vast cosmic ocean. The Greeks until about the sixth century before Christ, believed the earth to be flat and placed on the shoulder of the giant, Atlas. Even before the Greek civilization, the Egyptians viewed the earth as flat, surrounded by mountains upon which was placed the solid dome of heaven. The sun, moon and planets travelled along a celestial river in that dome.

About the sixth century B.C., some astronomical observations indicated the earth to be a sphere and by the time of the Middle Ages, the scholarly opinion was for the spherical earth. Thus Christopher Columbus did not encounter opposition for sailing west to the Indies so much on the basis of the belief that his ships would sail off the edge of a flat earth as that his estimates for the size of the spherical earth were way too small.

Scholarly opinion throughout the Renaissance was divided on the issue of the shape of the earth with adherents of the spherical earth in the majority. In 1578 the French academician and naturalist Lambert Daneau in his book *The Wonderfull VVoorkmanship of the World*, wrote of the flat earth controversy as it existed in his day. After defending the sphericity of the earth on the grounds of Scripture, he turned to a geometrical argument, noting that the geometer's speaking of the *higher* and *lower* parts of a sphere parallels the Biblical references to the "higher" and "lower" parts of the earth. Daneau concludes his discussion with:

so that in these positions and kindes of places and differences are found in the world, you may conclude that which you would, to wit, that the whole receite of this worlde is not sphericall and rounde.

It should be pointed out in the above text that Daneau's use of the word "receite" means "acceptance" (literally, "recitation"). Daneau was saying that he had summarized the different positions of his time on the shape of the earth and that because of said positions, there was no consensus in the world. But since Daneau wrote his book, exploration of the Bible has revealed even stronger Bible passages than those used by Daneau in support of a spherical earth. So just what does the Bible have to say about the earth's shape? In order to ascertain the Bible's teaching on the shape of the earth we need to look at the underlying parts of the earth, too. The Bible speaks of the *foundations of the earth*, the *pillars of the earth*, the *corners of the earth*, and the *ends of the earth*.

## The Foundations of Earth and World

The Bible speaks of both the world and the earth as having foundations. The term, "world," speaks of the order of man in the earth. As such, references to foundations and pillars of the world cannot be held as very authoritative when it comes to speaking about the shape of the earth. The term "earth," on the other hand, can not only refer to the whole earth, but also to "ground" and, as we shall see, "land" or "country." So it is that a complete picture of the form of the earth in Scripture will not be manifest until all these

are considered.

Of the number of passages which relate to the foundations of the earth and world, all but three speak of the foundations of the *earth*, the other three refer to the foundations of the *world*. Of these last three, two are almost identical and they can be found in II Samuel 22:16:

And the channels of the sea appeared, the foundations of the world were discovered,  
at the rebuking of the LORD, at the blast of the breath of his nostrils.

and Psalm 18:15:

Then the channels of waters were seen, and the fountains of the world were  
discovered at thy rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of the breath of thy nostrils.

The context of both passages indicates that the foundations of the *world* are now hidden and will be discovered (or exposed) at the time of the judgment.

The third reference to the foundations of the *world* tells us just what these foundations are:

The earth is the LORD's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell  
therein. For he hath founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods. --  
Psalm 24:1-2.

Since the world is defined to be that part of the earth that pertains to mankind, there can be little doubt of the truth of the statement that the world is founded upon the seas, not built upon rocky foundations like the foundations of a building.

When it comes to the foundations of the *earth*, there are many more Bible verses from which to draw. Many of these references state that God laid the foundations of the earth, but each verse adds a little to that simple fact. Psalm 102:25 tells us that God laid the foundations "of old" with Hebrews 1:10 echoing the thought that God laid the foundations of the earth "in the beginning." Job 38:4 simply states that God laid the foundations of the earth, but the sixth verse indicates that the foundations are themselves fastened upon something else. Hebrews 1:3 names this "something else" as the Lord Jesus Christ who "upholds all things by the word of his power." Proverbs 8:29 tells us that the earth's foundations were appointed. Proverbs 3:19 indicates that the earth was founded by wisdom while Jeremiah 31:37 indicates that the foundations are unsearchable. Micah 6:2 tells us that they are strong; so strong that the earth should never be removed (Psalm 104:5).

Given the above references to the foundations of the earth there are two things which become readily apparent. First of all, the foundations themselves are fastened upon Christ, the sustainer of the universe. Secondly, they are located somewhere under the earth (Jeremiah 31:37). When it comes to scientific application there is one thing which science can thus far confirm of these characteristics (discounting obvious characteristics such as strength) and that is their insearchability. Jeremiah 31:37 is the key verse there:

Thus saith the LORD; If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the  
earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they  
have done, saith the LORD.

Whenever there is an earthquake, shock waves are propagated throughout the interior of the earth. But there is one area which the waves fail to penetrate. That area is the earth's core, the very central part or "foundation" of the earth. Is this not the very thing that the prophet Jeremiah indicates? Until recently seismologists assumed that the center of the earth was composed of molten iron. Scientists now believe that the core may be rocky. No one knows for certain. Man's concept of the outer layers of the earth's crust has significantly changed in recent years: how much more so his ideas of the earth's interior?

## **Corners and ends of the earth**

If the foundations of the earth seem to be scientifically reasonable, then what of the four corners of the earth? Isn't that proof of the Bible teaching that the earth is flat? Recent satellite results have indicated that the earth has four bulges and some Christian apologists have taken these four bulges to be the four corners of the earth, but such is rather far-fetched, especially considering that the bulges amount to only a few yards above the mean shape of the earth. The problem only arises if one ignores the dictionary definition of the word *corner*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "corner" to mean: An extremity or end of the earth; a region, quarter; a direction or quarter from which the wind blows.

The word "corner" comes from a Latin root *cornu*, meaning "horn." That this is so survives in English via such words as "cornet," "corn," and "cornucopia." Hence, the four corners of the earth can be interpreted as referring to the four cardinal directions -- north, south, east and west. In addition, the "four corners of the earth" can also be interpreted as four "horns" of the earth. One obvious example of such a "horn" is Cape Horn, the southernmost tip of South America. So the usage of the phrase "four corners of the earth" does not signify a flat, rectangular earth.

In addition to referring to the "four corners of the earth," the Bible also mentions "the ends of the earth." When it comes to the consideration of the ends of the earth the above dictionary definition contains the resolution within it. Another way of saying the "ends of the earth" is to refer to the "extremities of the earth." In this case, as is also the case for the four corners of the earth, the word "earth" refers to the land mass, country, or continents (as opposed to the globe). For an example of "earth" being used as "land" or "country," compare Exodus 10:15:

For [the locusts] covered all the face of the whole *earth*, so that the land was darkened; ... and there remained not any green thing in the trees, or in the herbs of the field, through all the land of Egypt [Emphasis added.]

with verses 12 through 14:

And the LORD said unto Moses, Stretch out thine hand over the *land of Egypt* for the locusts, that they may come up upon the *land of Egypt*, and eat every herb of the land, even all that the hail hath left. And Moses stretched forth his rod over the *land of Egypt* .... And the locusts went up over all the *land of Egypt*. [Emphasis added.]

Since the word "earth" can be used as synonymous with "land," the "ends of the earth" thus refer to the points of land most distant from some central point. For the Bible, this central point is the land of Israel. The reader can satisfy himself by examining a globe that a great circle, passing through Jerusalem and the north and south poles, very nearly cuts

the Pacific Ocean in half and leaves four continental "corners" or "ends," namely the Chukchi Peninsula of the Soviet Union (opposite the Bering Straits of Alaska), Alaska, the southeastern tip of Australia, and Cape Horn of South America. These four geographical locations, as much as any other proposal, can account for the four corners of the earth. Alternatively, since there was probably a land-link between Siberia and Alaska at the time the Bible was written, the four corners of the earth could be Norway, Newfoundland, Cape Horn and the Cape of Good Hope.

In the light of such evidence we cannot claim that the Bible presents the earth as a four-cornered square. Furthermore, there are other passages which provide evidence that the Bible teaches a round earth instead of a flat earth. The most famous of the Bible verses supporting a round or spherical earth is Isaiah 40:22 where it says of God that: 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, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in...

The fact that this verse speaks of the "circle of the earth" can mean one of three things: 1) the earth is not a flat square but a flat circle. If that is true then what of the four corners of the earth? A flat circle has no corners. 2) the earth is shaped in a way that is spheroidal but has a square cross-section somewhere, at the equator, for example. 3) the earth is spheroidal in shape. This latter opinion is further strengthened by observing the reference to the inhabitants as grasshoppers, implying a perspective from on high, particularly, the outermost heaven.

Isaiah 40:22 is not the only verse in the Bible which speaks of the circle as descriptive of the shape of the earth. Proverbs 8:27 reads:

When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth...

The word "compass" can mean a circular enclosure or a spherical envelope. Since the verse speaks of an extended area -- some three-quarters of the surface of the earth -- the spherical enclosure for "compass" is a better interpretation than a circular enclosure.

Even with Isaiah 40:22 and Proverbs 8:27 the evidence for the sphericity of the earth in Scripture is still only circumstantial. In any case, these verses serve to illustrate that a spherical earth is not necessarily inconsistent with the Bible. But there is one more passage which is far stronger. Luke 17:31-36 reads as follows:

In that day, he which shall be upon the house top, and his stuff in the house, let him not come down to take it away: and he that is in the field, let him likewise not turn back .... I tell you, in that night there shall be two men in one bed; the one shall be taken, and the other shall be left.... Two men shall be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left.

In regard to the shape of the earth, the point of these verses is this: they speak of day (verse 31) and night (verse 34) as occurring simultaneously. The activities are listed in the context of that global event, the rapture, which Paul describes as occurring in the "twinkling of an eye" (I Corinthians 15:52). The simplest explanation for this simultaneity of daylight and night is if the earth were spheroidal in shape, although one can always postulate a form of Riemannian geometry for light rays which could leave the

earth dark half the time.

Likewise in Acts 1:8, Jesus gives His commission to His disciples to be witnesses "unto the uttermost part of the earth." Note here that the word "part" is singular. A flat earth with four corners should be indicated by "uttermost parts;" but a spheroidal earth would have only one uttermost part, its opposite side or antipodes. Thus the Bible does not necessarily teach that the earth is flat.

## **The Pillars of the Earth**

If the Biblical view of the earth is that of a spheroidal earth, what then of the "pillars of the earth" which are mentioned in three passages. The first of these three is in the prayer of Hannah which can be found in I Samuel 2 starting at verse 8:

He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth are the LORD'S, and he hath set the world upon them.

Obviously this verse indicates that the earth has pillars and that the world (that which pertains to man) is set upon them, not having any pillars of its own. Note that this verse does not require that the *earth* be placed on the pillars, only that the *world* is placed thereon. We shall find this view to be consistent with the other two Scripture passages also. It does not appear to be the case, as historians Santillanna and Von Dechend recently argued in their book *Hamlet's Mill*, that the pillars of the earth are the two solstices and the two equinoxes (the *solstices* are the highest and lowest points at which the sun appears in the sky, being at the first day of summer and winter respectively; the *equinoxes* correspond to the times when the sun crosses the equator and correspond to the first days of autumn and spring).

Finally, there is one more Bible passage to consider before concluding this study on the Biblical teaching of the shape of the earth. Job 26:7 will modify any preconceived notions we may have about the pillars of the earth. It reads:

He stretcheth out the north over the empty place, and hangeth the earth upon nothing. A flat earth, upon pillars and foundations, hanging upon nothing is very difficult to imagine since one usually imagines the foundation to be the primary support for an structure. But here we note that according to this verse, in addition to the pillars and foundations underneath, the earth also hangs upon nothing. The pillars are under pressure. That they support the surface of the earth (where the world is) is clear from Hannah's song. We have already noted the earth to be spheroidal in shape and so the earth's pillars must be located between the earth's surface and the core. In particular, the pillars of the earth could simply be vertically-oriented crystalline rock.

It is widely believed that there is such a shell of crystalline rock inside the earth. This shell is generally called the *mantle* of the earth. Occasionally these crystalline forms form above the surface of the earth. In every case they are oriented vertically. There are at least two examples of such rock in the continental United States: Pinnacles National Monument in California, which is not really crystalline in nature; and

the other, more graphic example, is found in Devil's Tower National Monument, Wyoming. Thus we conclude that Job 26:7 would appear to support a spheroidal earth.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the Bible teaches that the earth is basically a sphere in shape; that there are pillars which undergird the world and which we conclude to be the crystalline rock corresponding to what we commonly call the mantle; that there are an unspecified number of foundations which range in size all the way from the foundations of the hills and mountains (called *roots* in modern science) to the usearchable core of the earth and to the very foundation which is the Lord Jesus Christ himself. This is the view of the earth which the Bible presents, not the view of a flat earth on pillars which are, in turn, placed on a foundation. Bible critics are thus shown to be wrong in their view of what the Bible teaches on the matter of the shape of the earth. Also made manifest is their inability or else lack of desire to study firsthand and in detail the teachings of the Bible on this matter in particular, and, by implication, any Biblical matter. Knowing much *about* the Bible, they know little *of* the Bible, and we are so justified in viewing with due skepticism any man who uncritically prefixes his remarks with: "The Bible is not a textbook on science."

**The Biblical Astronomer**  
4527 Wetzel Avenue  
Cleveland, Ohio 44109 U.S.A.

---