

“Scientific Foreknowledge”: Is It a Good Argument?

By Martin Pickup

Bible believers sometimes seek to prove the inspiration of Scripture by appealing to examples of “scientific foreknowledge” in the Bible. This line of argumentation claims that the biblical writers spoke of various scientific facts that were unknown in ancient times, and their ability to speak of such things proves that they had received supernatural revelation. As defenders of God’s inspired word, we must be willing to critique our own arguments to make sure that our facts and reasoning are sound. While the Bible never says anything that conflicts with true science, none of the proposed cases of scientific foreknowledge holds up under close scrutiny. Let me discuss a few of them.

Statements about a Spherical Earth?

Isaiah 40 says that God “sits above the circle of the earth” (v. 22). Job 26 says that God “inscribed a circle on the surface of the waters” and He “hangs the earth on nothing” (v. 10, v. 7; cf. Prov. 8:27). Some believers assert that these statements are miraculous declarations of the rotundity of the Earth and its suspension in space. But is this really what these verses are talking about?

The Hebrew word that is translated “earth” in these passages is *’erets*, a word that meant “land.” The Israelites did not use this term to denote what we mean today when we speak of the planet Earth—a globe consisting of the continents, the oceans and the atmosphere. *’Erets* denoted the land area of the world in distinction from the seas and the sky (cf. Gen. 1:1, 10; Prov. 8:27-29). The word for *circle* in Isaiah 40 and Job 26 is the Hebrew word

hûg, a word that designated the circular horizon at the extremity of the vaulted firmament. So when Isaiah and Job spoke of “the circle of the earth” and the “circle on the surface of the waters,” they were describing the world as they saw it: a vast land area, surrounded by the seas and domed by the sky.

We find the same description of the world throughout the literature of the ancient Near East—almost down to the very wording! Mesopotamian texts speak of “the circle of the lands” that is suspended from the heavens. Egyptian hymns speak of the sun shining over “the circle of the world.” (For further information, see Othmar Keel’s *Symbolism in The Biblical World*, 37-40). As students of God’s word, we must be fair and honest in our reading of the biblical text. If Israel’s neighbors were not talking about the rotundity of the planet Earth when they used such phraseology, there is no warrant for us to claim that the biblical writers were.

Furthermore, even if it *were* true that Isaiah and Job spoke of the world as round, that in itself would not prove that they derived their information supernaturally. Several ancient Greek philosophers and mathematicians believed that the world was spherical because of their study of eclipses and other natural phenomena. No one thinks that the Greeks got this idea by divine revelation. (Surely no one would argue that they derived it by reading the Jewish Scriptures!) So from every angle that we examine the issue, we must conclude that to argue the inspiration of the Bible on the grounds that it speaks of a spherical Earth is to make a faulty argument.

The Earth’s Rotation?

Job 38:12-14 says, “Have you ever in your life commanded the morning, and caused the dawn to know its place, that it might take hold of the ends of the earth ...? It is changed like clay under the seal.” Some people assert that this passage refers to the rotation of the planet Earth

to produce day and night. They understand Job to be saying that our planet spins like clay that is turned under a seal.

This interpretation of the passage in Job is simply wrong. It again misconstrues the meaning of the Hebrew word “earth” (*'erets*), and it is predicated upon a misunderstanding of the way that ancient seals were used. Seals (or signets) produced an image in clay by being pressed into the clay, not by turning the clay underneath the seal. The point of the Job passage is this: just as a seal changes the appearance of clay by producing a visible image upon it, so the light of dawn changes the appearance of the earth by making a visible new landscape each day. Again, we must be fair in our reading of the biblical text. This verse is not talking about the rotation of our planet.

All of the above passages illustrate the fact that the biblical writers describe nature phenomenally—as it appears—and they often do so using vivid poetic imagery. Such descriptions are decidedly nonscientific. If we think that we have found a few biblical statements that can be read as modern scientific descriptions of nature, what about the many, many places in Scripture where this is clearly not the case? Do we not feel a bit uncomfortable holding up a handful of verses as supposedly miraculous declarations that the Earth is round and rotates, when numerous other verses speak of such things as “the pillars of heaven” that support the sky, or say things like, “[God] established the earth upon its foundations so that it will not totter” (Psa. 104:5; Job 26:11)?

A Miraculous Knowledge of Oceanography?

The story is often told that Matthew Maury, the father of modern oceanography, was led to begin his lifelong search for ocean currents when he noted the statement in Psalm 8

about marine life “passing through the paths of the seas” (v. 8). “If the Bible says there are paths in the sea,” Maury reportedly said, “then I am going to find them.” The story is a bit exaggerated. Psalm 8 is not what prompted Maury to begin the search for ocean currents; a basic knowledge of these currents had been known for nearly a century. Still, it does appear that Maury, a strong Bible believer, used the text of Psalm 8 as a personal motivation for his oceanographic work throughout his life.

But can we argue that Psalm 8 foretold the existence of ocean currents long before modern oceanographers like Maury discovered and charted them? In the psalm, David is talking about man’s dominion over the creatures of the world, and his reference to the paths of the sea is simply a way of describing the course that fish take as they swim through ocean waters. The very same language was used by other ancient writers; they often spoke of fish, sea creatures, and ships traveling “the paths” of the sea. (See, for example, Homer’s *Odyssey* 3.71, 177; *The Sibylline Oracles* 4.76-78; Apollonius Rhodius’ *Argonautica* 1.574.) If we want to argue that David’s use of this language is a case of scientific foreknowledge, we’d have to say the same thing about its use by numerous authors of the ancient world.

The Number of Stars?

The Bible promises that the descendants of Abraham would be as uncountable as the stars of heaven (Gen. 15:5; Jer. 33:22). Some people argue that this statement manifests a miraculous foreknowledge of how numerous the stars are. They tell us that stargazers from Hipparchus to Tycho Brahe tried to count the stars and assign a definite number to them, but modern astronomical observations reveal how vast the universe really is, so much so that the

number of its celestial bodies cannot even be adequately estimated. So the stars truly are innumerable, just as the Bible told us all along.

But is this really a good way to argue the Bible's inspiration? Other ancient writers also referred to the innumerableness of the stars. Shalmaneser I of Assyria wrote about "the people of the land of Kuti, whose numbers are countless as the stars of heaven." Plato said that the movement of the stars was "incalculable in multitude." Many more examples could be cited. Were these authors also inspired of God? When the Bible speaks of God's people being as innumerable as the stars, it is using rhetorical language that ancient people commonly employed to designate anything of a very high number. To the ancients the stars seemed uncountable. Because modern astronomers have come to see how true this still is for us today doesn't argue that the biblical writers received divine insight about the matter.

Health and Sanitation?

The Mosaic covenant said that contracting leprosy or touching a dead body made an Israelite "unclean," and such a person had to avoid contact with others lest they become unclean also. Some people surmise from this that the purpose behind the system of cleanness and uncleanness was to ensure the physical health of Israel. Some go even further and claim that these laws manifest a miraculous foreknowledge of what modern medicine tells us about sanitation and communicable diseases.

This line of thinking is seriously flawed. First of all, ancient people were not ignorant of the fact that when sick people came in contact with healthy people, healthy people tended to get sick too. So the Mosaic system's requirement for unclean persons to seclude themselves from the community does not prove a miraculous knowledge of contagions. More importantly,

it is a mistake to think that physical health was the goal of the Mosaic cleanness statutes. Scripture expressly says that the cleanness statutes were designed to produce holiness (Lev. 11:44-45; 22:3-9); nothing is said about the promotion of health. To be sure, the idea of health and sanitation (as the ancient world understood it) may have been a basis for the symbolism of religious purity—hence the metaphorical terminology of “clean” and “unclean” and the idea of segregating an unclean person lest the community contract his uncleanness. But we must not confuse the metaphorical rhetoric of these laws with their actual purpose.

Nor can we ignore the fact that the Mosaic system speaks of many generators of uncleanness besides leprosy and corpse-contact, and one would be hard-pressed to discern any health issues here. The Law said the act of sexual intercourse made a husband and wife unclean, as did a man’s nocturnal emission, and a woman’s menstruation. When a woman gave birth to a male child, she was unclean for 7 days and partially unclean for 33 days; if she gave birth to a female, she was unclean for 14 days and partially unclean for 66 days. According to the Law, eating catfish, pork, or rabbit made an Israelite unclean. (Red meat, however, was perfectly acceptable). How do these matters relate to physical health?

And what about other Mosaic injunctions that do not coincide with modern principles of sanitation and hygiene? The Law said that the act of rinsing a vessel with water (of no required temperature) removed its uncleanness, but we all know that this procedure will not kill germs. Eating an animal that one finds dead in the wild is probably not a healthful food choice, and the Law said that anyone who did so became unclean. But the Law also said that the uncleanness was removed merely by bathing and waiting until evening. Sanitation is clearly not the purpose of these statutes.

The conclusion is inescapable: Mosaic regulations regarding cleanness and uncleanness were not designed to address the issue of health; they were designed to address the issue of holiness, just as the Scriptures state. Even if someone suggests that health concerns could have been a secondary goal in the case of a few laws, there would still be no evidence here of a miraculous foreknowledge of modern medical concepts.

The Concern of Bible Believers

Whenever someone questions the validity of scientific-foreknowledge arguments, as I am doing here, some Bible believers get nervous. They worry that if we admit that the Bible does not speak scientifically of nature and does not contain scientific foreknowledge, then that would mean that the Bible speaks inaccurately of the world and could not be inspired. But this is not the case at all. Speaking of nature in a nonscientific way is not an erroneous way of speaking. The biblical writers accurately describe our world, but they do so poetically and phenomenally. Given the fact that God did not intend the Bible to serve as a science textbook, there was no need for them to speak otherwise.

Could almighty God have empowered the biblical writers to describe nature in a modern scientific way? Of course He could have. But the supposed examples that we have analyzed here do not provide evidence of it. People who make scientific-foreknowledge arguments mean well, but again and again the so-called cases of scientific foreknowledge turn out to be nothing but misinterpretations of Scripture resulting from a failure to read passages within their historical-grammatical contexts.

We who believe in the Bible should be willing to critique our own apologetic arguments. Our faith in God's word ought not to rely upon questionable exegesis and dubious reasoning.

Let us all be careful to use only good, sound argumentation as we defend God's inspired word.

“Let him who has My word speak My word in truth” (Jer. 23:28).

(For helpful information on this subject, see the relevant articles at www.bibleandscience.com.)