

SCIENTIFIC FOREKNOWLEDGE AND THE BIBLE

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I have heard it said that one of the most impressive proofs for the Bible’s inspiration is its scientific foreknowledge. Yet I also have heard it said that certain passages often used as evidence of that foreknowledge have been misapplied. What is the truth of the matter?

This question provides an excellent opportunity to do some badly needed teaching on the subject of the scientific foreknowledge found in the Bible. Unfortunately, some today advance the idea that biblical information and scientific data are two mutually exclusive, diametrically opposed spheres. Some even have gone so far as to suggest that while science deals with “fact,” Scripture deals with “faith” (isn’t that usually the belief of the “man on the street”?). Nothing could be further from the truth. The God Who created nature is the same God Who is the Author of the Bible (2 Timothy 3: 16). Since God cannot lie (Titus 1:2), He will not give us two sources of information (science and the Bible) that contradict one another. Every human being has the right to expect the Bible, as an inspired revelation from God, to be accurate scientifically. While it does not purport to be a technical scientific treatise, it does speak accurately on whatever area it addresses. Inspiration guarantees no less.

Additionally, it is possible that the Scriptures, whenever they happen to touch upon a matter that relates to some phase of the material/physical Universe, even have **anticipated** scientific facts that man, by means of his own intellectual curiosity, would not discover for decades, centuries, or millennia. God’s revelation of truth is not limited by man’s development of knowledge, however slow or rapid that development may be. Scientific foreknowledge may be defined as the statement of a scientific fact at a certain time and place by someone who could not possibly know of that fact without receiving special (supernatural) revelation. This definition contains no specific implication as to the cognizance of the person receiving the revelation. That is to say, we do not necessarily have to expect that the inspired person understood what he was saying. Yet the revelation in God’s Word of certain facts known only to modern science through the use of advanced analytical methods employing sophisticated equipment is a sure sign of the presence of scientific foreknowledge in the Scriptures. Jean S. Morton observed:

Many scientific facts, which prove the infallibility of Scripture, are tucked away in its pages. These proofs are given in nonscientific language; nevertheless, they substantiate the claims of the authenticity of the Holy Scriptures.... In some cases, scientific concepts have been known through the ages, but these concepts are mentioned in a unique manner in Scripture. In other cases, scientific topics have been mentioned hundreds or even thousands of years before man discovered them (1978, p. 10).

While there are many exciting areas that provide impressive proof for the inspiration of God’s Word (prophecy, historical accuracy, internal consistency, etc.), the scientific accuracy of the Bible should not be overlooked as bringing its own weighty testimony to bear on this important topic. In fact, I have written on this very matter previously (Thompson, 1981, 1985). The present discussion is not intended to offer specific examples of scientific foreknowledge; the sources referenced above will direct the reader to such examples. Rather, this article focuses on the misuse, or misapplication, of passages that in the past have been thought by some to possess scientific foreknowledge, yet which, under closer scrutiny, do not meet the criteria for such. The question before us asks for clarification on the existence, and proper use, of scientific foreknowledge.

The matter of prescientific knowledge in the Bible has been characterized by extremes at both ends of the spectrum. Some have argued irrationally for scientific anticipation practically everywhere in the Bible. One writer suggested that the Bible anticipated: automobiles (Joel 2:3-4); airplanes (Isaiah 31:56); submarines (Revelation 9:1-11); radio (Ecclesiastes 10:20); and television (Revelation 11:3-12) [Beirnes, 1951, pp. 31-32]. On the other hand, there are those who contend that there are virtually no examples of real scientific foreknowledge in the sacred writings (Ramm, 1954; England, 1983, pp. 144-145). Bernard Ramm even has gone so far as to state that “the Spirit of God did not convey the inner constitution of things to the authors of the Bible, but...the infallibly inspired theological truth is conveyed in the cultural terms of the cultural period of the writer” (p. 86). Interestingly, Dr. Ramm was unable to explain how a “theological truth” could be conveyed through a **scientifically erroneous** cultural medium! The question must be asked: Does God use error to convey spiritual truth?

Obviously, the truth of the matter lies somewhere between these two extremes. The careful student of God’s Word never will want to portray, either purposely or inadvertently, passages in the Bible as saying more (or less) than those passages were intended to say. If there is good evidence for scientific foreknowledge in the Bible, let us present that evidence at face value. If, on the other hand, we must “reinterpret” passages, or impose on them a strained interpretation that forces them to disgorge prescientific knowledge, then let us reexamine our interpretation so that such is not necessary.

Through the years, for example, various authors have sought to establish scientific foreknowledge in the passage found in Job 26:7 where Job, in speaking of God, observed that “He stretcheth out the north over the empty space, and hangeth the earth upon nothing.” Two items from the passage are alleged to be prescientific in nature. First, appeals have been made to the fact that supposedly one can observe an “empty space” in the northern skies—a space where there are no stars, thereby corroborating Job’s statement that there is an “empty space” in the north. Second, some have suggest-

ed that since Job's phrase, "hangeth the earth upon nothing" is literally true, this is an example of scientific foreknowledge because, as everyone now knows, the Earth is suspended freely in space.

In the past, on occasion I used this verse as an example of scientific foreknowledge in the Bible, but I do so no longer because of the problems associated with such an interpretation. For example, if we attempt to convince people that this verse is to be taken literally, how do we then handle (consistently) statements in the same chapter that quite obviously are figurative (like verse 11: "The pillars of heaven tremble, and are astonished at his reproof")? Furthermore, how would someone go about determining that there is an "empty space" in the "north"? If a person stood in his back yard and pointed toward geographical north during the month of January, and then were to repeat that action again in July, he would be pointing toward two completely different regions of space (since the revolution of the Earth around the Sun results in the Earth's being on opposite sides of the Sun at those two times). Plus, during those two months the Earth is tilted differently on its rotational axis. And last, the simple fact remains that "billions of stars and galaxies extend outward in **all** directions" (DeYoung, 1989, p. 95).

Moreover, there are alternative explanations of Job's statements that seem to fit better with the overall sense of the passage. First, some scholars have suggested that Job actually was contrasting the power of Jehovah with the impotence of Canaanite deities. J.E. Hartley noted that:

In Canaanite mythology the north was considered to be the place for the meeting of the assembly of the gods. The gods assembled on Mount *Sapan* [*sapan* is Hebrew for "north"—BT].... Here Baal reigned supreme.

Job says that God stretches out the north over the void (26: 7). This statement shows that God created even the...mountain of the gods from nothing. No evil power or god or divine assembly, therefore, has any existence co-eternal with God or any power or existence outside of God's creative power (cf Ps 89:12) [1980, pp. 774-775].

Thus the passage would show that Job, a wise man of antiquity who had a close relationship with God, knew how to deal a death blow to pagan claims of mythological gods who allegedly inhabited the "north." Where these gods were supposed to have lived, there was nothing. Hence, even they did not exist! This understanding harmonizes well with the view that the phrase "and hangeth the earth upon nothing" refutes the pagan notions that the Earth rested upon the back of a turtle or an elephant.

Second, it has been suggested that Job is describing the sky in a poetical fashion similar to Psalm 104:2: "Who coverest thyself with light as a garment; Who stretchest out the heaven like a curtain." If so, then Job is saying that this northern covering (i.e., the sky) is draped over nothing (viz., there is nothing physical to support it). Thus, "the north is stretched out and sustained by the mere power of God" (Barnes, 1949, p. 40). This agrees with the latter half of the verse, which says that the Earth, too, is suspended without support. While it is true that the Earth does "hang upon nothing," proper exegesis (and considering the context of the remainder of the chapter) seemingly will not allow the statements to be viewed necessarily as scientific foreknowledge concerning such things as holes in the northern skies or Newton's law of gravity that explains how the Earth hangs upon nothing.

In fairness, let me point out that certain authors (e.g., Morris, 1988, pp. 39-40) have suggested alternative interpretations for Job 26:7 that allow for possible scientific foreknowledge while avoiding some of the problems mentioned above. Consistency with literal-versus-figurative interpretation in the same chapter, however, appears to me to remain a problem. Other authors (e.g., Jackson,

1983, pp. 123-125) believe that a partial answer to problematic passages may lie in the fact that while inspiration guided the actual writing of the book of Job, Job himself was uninspired and spoke only for himself, not necessarily for the Lord.

The honest Christian wants to defend the Scriptures with every legitimate weapon in the apologetic arsenal. However, we do the cause of Christ a disservice when we employ arguments that are extremely weak at best, and patently wrong at worst. When a mistake has been made, it should be admitted, corrected, and avoided in the future. It also should provide a valuable teaching tool on how to better examine the Scriptures in light of the context of each passage under consideration. Yes, the Scriptures **do** contain good examples of scientific foreknowledge. And yes, there have been some "misapplications" or abuses of certain passages. Let us remember two things as we strive to defend the Bible: (1) because a mistake may have been made in this area in the past does not nullify the many correct examples of scientific foreknowledge that do exist; and (2) if we are to err, let us err on the side of caution; there are too many good examples of scientific foreknowledge in the Bible for us to employ weak or spurious arguments in our defense of God's Word.

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