

## Scientific Creationism, Geocentricity and the Flat Earth

*These three movements have more in common than they like to acknowledge*

Robert Schadewald

*Evolution is a scientific fairy-tale just as the "flat-earth theory" was in the 12th century.*

—Edward Blick, scientific creationist<sup>1</sup>

Poor flat-earthers! Few modern intellectual movements have been so widely scorned and misunderstood. Among Christians, religious tolerance and ecumenicalism seem to break down at the edge of the earth. The opening quotation suggests the contempt that most "scientific creationists" feel for the flat-earthers. Comparing them to evolutionists is an especially low blow, since the flat-earthers have always been in the forefront of the battle against evolution.

Though flat-earthism is as well-supported scripturally and scientifically as creationism, the creationists plainly do not want to be associated with flat-earthers. In a public debate with creationist Duane Gish, paleontologist Michael Voorhies suggested that the Creation Research Society resembled the Flat Earth Society. According to a report of the debate published in the creationist newsletter *Acts & Facts*, Gish replied that not a single member of the Creation Research Society was a member of the Flat Earth Society and that Voorhies's linking of the two was nothing more than a smear.<sup>2</sup> Gish's remarks brought a rejoinder in the *Flat Earth News* from an outraged letter writer (identified only as "G.J.D.") who had read the *Acts & Facts* report. "G.J.D." contested Gish's claim that no members of the Flat Earth Society belong to the Creation Research Society, concluding, "He doesn't know what he's talking about, as I belong to both, and I am writing to him to let him know that he is wrong."<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, Gish may have created a fact. To protest this attack on the flat-earthers, "G.J.D." dropped his membership in the Creation Research Society.<sup>4</sup>

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Whether or not there are flat-earthers in the Creation Research Society, scientific creationism is little different from the flat-earth movement. Both are based on the same kind of scientific evidence and on a more or less literal interpretation of the Bible. In fact, scientific creationism, geocentrism, and flat-earthism are, respectively, the liberal, moderate, and conservative branches of a tree that has often been called "Bible-science."<sup>5</sup> The intense hostility expressed by the scientific creationists toward the flat-earthers does not extend to the geocentrists, who hover on the edge of respectability among scientific creationists. Indeed, although the Bible is, from Genesis to Revelation, a flat-earth book, the geocentrists have combined forces with liberal creationists to cast the flat-earthers into outer darkness.

Despite their internecine warfare, Bible-scientists are in broad agreement on a number of issues. They agree on the usefulness of the Bible as a scientific text, the weakness of mere theories, the duplicity of conventional scientists, and the impossibility of reconciling conventional science with the Bible. The creationist and the flat-earth movements have similar foundations and histories, and both have used similar strategies to propagate their beliefs. Indeed, both believe they are battling the same behind-the-scenes opponent.

To join the Creation Research Society, one must sign a "Statement of Belief." The statement begins, "The Bible is the written Word of God, and because we believe it to be inspired thruout, all of its assertions are historically and scientifically true in all of the original autographs. To the student of nature, this means that the account of origins in Genesis is a factual presentation of simple historical truths." The Flat Earth Society doesn't require members to sign a belief statement, but no flat-earther would object to the CRS statement. Indeed, similar sentiments were expressed by flat-earther David Wardlaw Scott, who wrote, "It [Scripture] never contradicts facts, and, to the true Christian student, it teaches more *real science* than all the schools and colleges in the world."<sup>6</sup>

Elsewhere, Scott said of his own book, "It may be that these pages will meet the need of some, who have not altogether been misled by unprovable fancies, and who will rejoice to find that the Biblical account of Creation is, after all, the only one which can be depended upon, and that Modern Astronomy, like its kindred theory of Evolution . . . is nothing but 'a mockery, a delusion, and a snare.'"<sup>7</sup>

While theories are the backbone of conventional science, Scott's phrase "unprovable fancies" seems to epitomize what Bible-scientists think of them. They want nothing but the facts. As Duane Gish once told an audience, "I have yet to find a scientific *fact* which contradicts the Bible, the Word of God. Now you and I are both aware of many scientific theories and opinions of scientific people that contradict the Scriptures. When we separate that which is merely opinion or theory or ideas from that which is established fact, there are no contradictions."<sup>8</sup> In his preface to the



creationist textbook *Biology: A Search for Order in Complexity*, John N. Moore says that “true science” requires that the data “simply be presented as it is” and that “a philosophic viewpoint regarding origins” cannot be science.<sup>9</sup>

Any flat-earthier would agree. Indeed, in his lectures and writings, Samuel Birley Rowbotham, founder of the modern flat-earth movement, repeatedly emphasized the importance of sticking to the facts. He called his system “zetetic astronomy” (“zetetic” is from the Greek verb *zetetikos*, meaning “to seek or inquire”) because he sought only facts and left mere theories to the likes of Copernicus and Newton. Rowbotham devoted the entire first chapter of his magnum opus to praising facts at the expense of theories, concluding, “Let the practice of theorising be abandoned as one oppressive to the reasoning powers, fatal to the full development of truth, and, in every sense, inimical to the solid progress of sound philosophy.”<sup>10</sup>

The fact is that Bible-scientists suspect theoretical scientists of duplicity. Scientific creationists rarely express their suspicions in plain English, but they strongly imply that much of modern science—radiometric dating, for instance—is a fraud. One prominent geocentrist, astronomer, and computer scientist, James N. Hanson, shows more candor. In a public lecture, he said of nongeocentric astronomers, “They lie a lot.”<sup>11</sup> Charles K. Johnson, president of the Flat Earth Society, is absolutely vehement about scientific dishonesty. He regularly calls scientists “liars” and “demented dope fiends” and claims that the entire space program is a “carnie game.”<sup>12</sup>

Unlike most Christians, Bible-scientists insist that, if conventional

science is true, the Bible must be false. Flat-earthier John Hampden put it plainly: “No one can believe a single doctrine or dogma of modern astronomy and accept Scriptures as divine revelation.”<sup>13</sup> Like all flat-earthiers, Hampden also accepted the doctrine of creation in six solar days. Commenting on the latter, he wrote, “If he can prove . . . that days do not mean days, then is the infidel fully justified in laughing to scorn every other phrase and every other statement, from the first verse to the last in the Bible.”<sup>14</sup> Modern creationists feel the same about evolution. As Duane Gish once put it, “You really cannot believe the Bible and the theory of evolution both.”<sup>15</sup>

Since flat-earthism is the paradigm of Bible-science, it should be discussed first. It is difficult to see how the scientific creationists, some of whom claim to discern the laws of thermodynamics in the Bible, can fail to see its flat-earth implications.

While the Bible nowhere states categorically that the earth is flat, numerous Old Testament verses clearly show that the ancient Hebrews were flat-earthiers. The Genesis creation story says the earth is covered by a vault (firmament) and that the celestial bodies move inside the vault. This makes no sense unless one assumes that the earth is essentially flat.<sup>16</sup> Isaiah wrote that “God sits throned on the vaulted roof of earth, whose inhabitants are like grasshoppers.”<sup>17</sup> In the book of Job, Eliphaz the Temanite says that God “walks to and fro on the vault of heaven.”<sup>18</sup> That earth was considered essentially flat is clear from Daniel, who said, “I saw a tree of great height at the centre of the earth; the tree grew and became strong, reaching with its top to the sky and visible to the earth’s farthest bounds.”<sup>19</sup> This statement makes no sense for spherical earth.

The New Testament also implies a flat earth. For instance, Matthew wrote that “the devil took him [Jesus] to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their glory.”<sup>20</sup> From a sufficiently high mountain, one could see all the kingdoms of the world—if the earth were flat. Finally, Revelation refers to “the four corners of the earth,”<sup>21</sup> — corners are not generally associated with spheres.

From the foregoing, it’s not surprising that flat-earthism has been associated with Christianity since the beginning. Many of the Fathers of the Church were flat-earthiers, and they developed a system with which to oppose the Greek astronomy then becoming popular.<sup>22</sup> As late as A.D. 548, the Egyptian monk Cosmas Indicopleustes was vigorously defending a flat earth in his book *Christian Topography*.<sup>23</sup> But Cosmas was fighting a losing battle, and the Ptolemaic system, based on a spherical earth, rapidly took over. By the twelfth century (despite Edward Blick’s implication to the contrary), the flat-earth concept was essentially a dead letter in the West.

The modern flat-earth movement was launched in England, in 1849, with the publication of a 16-page pamphlet, *Zetetic Astronomy: A Description of Several Experiments which Prove that the Surface of the*

*Sea Is a Perfect Plane and That the Earth Is Not a Globe!* by "Parallax."<sup>24</sup> For the next 35 years, "Parallax"—his real name was Samuel Birley Rowbotham—toured England, attacking the spherical system in public lectures. His completely original system, still known to its adherents as "Zetetic Astronomy," is best described in Rowbotham's 430-page second edition of *Earth Not a Globe*, published in 1873.<sup>25</sup>

The essence of Zetetic Astronomy is as follows: The known world is a vast circular plane, with the North Pole at the center and a 150-foot wall of ice at the "southern limit." The Equator is a circle roughly halfway in between. The sun, moon, and planets circle above the earth in the region of the Equator at an altitude of perhaps 600 miles. Their apparent rising and setting is an optical illusion caused by atmospheric refraction and the zetetic law of perspective. The latter law also explains why ships apparently vanish over the horizon when sailing out to sea. The moon is self-luminous, and it's occasionally eclipsed by an unseen dark body passing in front of it. The entire known universe is literally covered by the "firmament" (vault) so often referred to in the King James Bible.

Rowbotham and his followers made "Zetetic Astronomy" a household word in Victorian England, and the movement spread to America and the rest of the English-speaking world. Few professional academics embraced it, though there were exceptions. Alexander McInnes of Glasgow University was a vehement flat-earther. So was Arthur V. White of the University of Toronto. White, a hydraulic engineer, designed several large hydroelectric dams built in Canada around the turn of the century.

While the Bible doesn't flatly state the shape of the earth, it repeatedly says in plain Hebrew that the earth is immovable.<sup>26</sup> Thus, while churchmen found it easy to ignore its flat implications and adopt the spherical system of Ptolemy, they were rudely shaken by Copernicus and Galileo. The Catholic church's reaction to Galileo is well known. It's less well known that most of the "reformers"—Luther, Calvin, Wesley—also rejected the Copernican system on scriptural grounds.<sup>27</sup> A few Protestant Bible-scientists have been fighting a rear-guard action against heliocentricity ever since.

Unlike the flat-earthers, the geocentrists were seldom able to agree on a system. Some, like James Gillespie of Dumfries, Scotland, stuck to the Ptolemaic system.<sup>28</sup> The Mugglestonians developed their own system.<sup>29</sup> Others contented themselves with sniping at Copernicanism. Geocentrist J. R. L. Lange, author of *The Copernican System, the Greatest Absurdity in the History of Human Thought*,<sup>30</sup> pillaged flat-earth sources for arguments and actually quoted them in his text.

Modern geocentrists have more or less settled on the system proposed by Tycho Brahe, the Danish astronomer who was Kepler's mentor. The Tychonic system is essentially the Copernican system with a fixed earth. The moon and sun both orbit the earth, and the planets orbit the sun.

Except for the inner planets Mercury and Venus, the planets' orbits around the sun also encompass the earth. The geocentrists publish the *Bulletin of the Tychonian Society*. Several prominent creationists, including Harold W. Armstrong, editor of creationism's flagship journal, *Creation Research Society Quarterly*, are frequent contributors.

While geocentrism seems to be growing rapidly, the reaction among liberal creationists is mixed. The *Creation Research Society Quarterly* generally maintains a discreet silence about geocentricity, and the *Bible-Science Newsletter*, another major creationist periodical, has declared its editorial neutrality on the question.<sup>31</sup> When the geocentrists get their biblical message across, they make converts. Astronomer James N. Hanson once wound up a geocentric lecture by saying, "Geocentricity is correct, because that's what the Bible teaches." An unidentified lady responded, "I am overwhelmed. But I believe everything you say, because I believe in the inerrancy of the Bible."<sup>32</sup>

The genesis of scientific creationism is difficult to pin down. The creationists reject much of modern geology, cosmology, and evolutionary biology, but flat-earthers and other Bible-scientists were rejecting the first two before Darwin published *Origin of Species* in 1859. After 1859, the same people descended upon Darwin. Conservative religious magazines and flat-earth journals like the *Earth—Not a Globe—Review* constantly attacked geology and the theory of evolution. In 1923, the Seventh Day Adventist George McCready Price published *The New Geology*, a monumental work of Bible-science. Since Price's work had little influence outside his own sect, perhaps the birth of scientific creationism should be traced to the publication of *The Genesis Flood*, by John C. Whitcomb, Jr., and Henry M. Morris in 1961.<sup>33</sup>

*The Genesis Flood* argues that the Noachian Deluge accounts for the geological evidence better than conventional uniformitarian geology. In it and subsequent books, the creationists have offered scientific arguments to prove that the earth is only 6,000 to 10,000 years old and that all forms of life were separately created.

Soon after *The Genesis Flood* was published, two of the major creationist organizations, the Bible-Science Association and the Creation Research Society, were formed. The third major group, the Institute for Creation Research, was organized in 1970. Individually and collectively, through books, pamphlets, and public lectures, the creationists took their message to their constituents. In the early 1970s, ICR creationists began debating evolutionists whenever possible. It is a highly successful tactic. Frequently an evolutionist, up against an experienced creationist debater, looks like an unarmed man assaulting a fortress.

Other Bible-scientists have proved to be effective debaters. George Bernard Shaw described a public forum in which a flat-earther laid to waste the spherical opposition.<sup>34</sup> Rowbotham was widely known as a tiger on the platform and he was seldom bested. (The good citizens of Leeds, England,

once ran him out of town, having been unable to make a more effective reply to his flat-earth arguments.<sup>35</sup>) In Brockport, New York, in March 1887, two scientific gentlemen defended the sphericity of the earth against flat-earth M. C. Flanders on three consecutive nights. When the great debate was over, five townsmen chosen to judge the matter issued a unanimous verdict. Their report, published in the Brockport *Democrat*, stated clearly and emphatically their opinion that the balance of the evidence pointed to a flat-earth.<sup>36</sup>

Cash offers are another way Bible-scientists taunt opponents. In the 1920s and 1930s, Wilbur Glenn Voliva of Zion, Illinois, offered \$5,000 to anyone who could prove to him that the earth isn't flat. No one ever collected. At this writing, creationist engineer R. G. Elmendorf has a standing offer of \$5,000 to anyone who can prove to him that evolution is possible. Elmendorf is also a geocentrist and offers \$1,000 to anyone who can prove that the earth moves.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps someday the scientific creationists will make peace with the flat-earthers. While they disagree on details, they claim to be fighting the same enemy.

"I believe the real source of Modern Astronomy to have been Satan," wrote flat-earth David Wardlaw Scott. "From his first temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden until now, his great object has been to throw discredit on the Truth of God."<sup>38</sup> John Hampden agreed, calling the spherical theory "that Satanic device of a round and revolving globe, which sets Scripture, reason, and facts at defiance."<sup>39</sup>

Henry M. Morris, director of the Institute for Creation Research, came to precisely the same conclusion about evolution: "Behind both groups of evolutionists [theistic and nontheistic] one can discern the malignant influence of 'that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world' (Revelation 12:9). As we have seen, it must have been essentially the deception of evolution which prompted Satan himself to rebel against God, and it was essentially the same great lie with which he deceived Eve, and with which he has continued to 'deceive the whole world.'"<sup>40</sup>

According to Charles Johnson, president of the Flat Earth Society, both deceptions will soon be over. He claims that the U.S. government—perhaps the present administration—will one day officially proclaim that the earth is flat.<sup>41</sup> That day will also mark the downfall of evolution.

## Notes

1. In *21 Scientists Who Believe in Creation*, 2nd ed. (San Diego: Creation-Life Publishers, 1977), p. 7. Creation-Life Publishers, Inc. is controlled by the Institute for Creation Research.

2. *Acts & Facts* 8, no. 5 (May 1979): 3.
3. *Flat Earth News*, September 1979, p. 4.
4. Personal communications from Charles Johnson, president of the Flat Earth Society, and from "G.J.D."
5. Compare the creationist-Bible Science Association, headquartered in Minneapolis, with the nineteenth-century flat-earth Bible-Science Defense Association, headquartered in London.
6. *Terra Firma: The Flat Earth Not a Planet* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1901), p. 284.
7. *Ibid.*, p. iii.
8. Duane T. Gish, tape of a lecture given at the Lutheran Evangelistic Conference in Minneapolis, Minn., January 23, 1978.
9. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, rec. ed., 1974, p. xvii.
10. *Earth Not a Globe* (London: John B. Day, 1873), p. 8.
11. James N. Hanson, tape of a lecture given in Texas in 1979.
12. See any issue of the *Flat Earth News*.
13. Quoted by "Rectangle" (pseudonym of Thomas Winship) in *Zetetic Cosmogony; or, Conclusive Evidence That the World Is Not a Rotating Globe, but a Stationary Plane Circle* (Durban, South Africa: Y.L. Cullingworth, 1899), p. 144.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Gish, op. cit.
16. See any Jewish encyclopedia, under "Cosmogony."
17. *New English Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), Isaiah 40:21-22.
18. *Ibid.*, Job 22:141.
19. *Ibid.*, Daniel 4:10-11.
20. *Ibid.*, Matthew 4:8.
21. *Ibid.*, Revelation 7:1.
22. Andrew D. White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (New York: George Braziller, 1855), vol. 1, p. 92.
23. London: The Hakluyt Society, 1897.
24. Birmingham, England: W. Cornish, 1849.
25. London: John B. Day, 1873.
26. See I Chronicles 16:30, Psalm 93:1, Psalm 96:10, and Psalm 104:5, for instance.
27. White, op. cit., pp. 126-128.
28. See his *The Triumph of Philosophy, or, the True System of the Universe* (Dumfries, Scotland: Published by the author, 1890).
29. The system is described in Isaac Frost's *Two Systems of Astronomy* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1846.)
30. Oakland, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1901.
31. See the March 1981 issue, p. 3.
32. Hanson, op. cit.
33. Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co.
34. In *Everybody's Political What's What*, quoted by Martin Gardner in *Faith and Fallacies in the Name of Science*, (New York: Dover, 1957), p. 14.
35. *Zetetic*, 2, no. 5 (July 1873):39.
36. *The Earth; Scripturally, Rationally, and Practically Described. A Geographical, Philosophical, and Educational Review, Nautical Guide, and General Student's Manual.* #17 (November 1, 1887). p. 7.
37. Personal communication.
38. Scott, op. cit., p. 287.
39. *The Earth: Scripturally, etc.*, #8 (December 11, 1886), p. 60.
40. Henry M. Morris, *The Twilight of Evolution* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1963), p. 93.
41. Personal communication.