

DOES THE BIBLE TEACH GEOCENTRICITY?

Bert Thompson, Ph.D. and Trevor Major, M.Sc., M.A.

Does the Bible teach that the Sun revolves around the Earth, in contradiction to modern scientific knowledge on this matter?

The medieval Catholic Church maintained that the Bible taught geocentricity (i.e., that the Sun and planets revolve around the Earth) as opposed to what we now know as the Copernican idea of heliocentricity (i.e., that the planets all revolve around the Sun). This situation began when Claudius Ptolemy of Alexandria restated the ancient Ptolemaic geocentric theory in the second century after Christ, and was able to predict the motion of the celestial bodies with far greater accuracy than the existing theory of heliocentricity. Somewhere along the line, scientific dogma became enshrined in theological dogma, and passages in the Bible were found to consecrate Ptolemy's theory. According to the theologians, man was the focus of God's creative act, and therefore the Earth must be the center of God's creation. After all, if we were dwelling on one average planet, rotating around one average star, in one average galaxy in an infinite Universe, how could we be the sole focus of God's attention, and why should His only Son be sent just to this middling planet, as the Bible suggests? According to astronomer Paul Steidl:

The truths of God's word and the work of Jesus Christ in no way depend on our position.... If anything, our lack of a unique position in the natural universe is only an illustration of the natural man's lack of a unique position before God (1979, p. 6).

In other words, the presence of our material selves in the material Universe is not as important to God as our immortal souls. On the other hand, it is difficult to doubt that God has placed our planet in just the right place, and set it in motion in just the right way, to benefit the survival of humanity.

Copernicus submitted his ideas in the early sixteenth century, stating that geocentricity was incorrect after all. Some of Copernicus' ideas could not be defended scientifically, but science generally had little to do with the attacks on this theory. Calvin, for instance, criticized Copernicus by appealing to passages in Joshua and Psalms that supposedly show the fixity of the Earth relative to the Sun. Galileo came along a hundred years later and firmed up the Copernican theories with better mathematics and with more accurate and numerous measurements. Unlike Copernicus, Galileo was persistent, arrogant, and prepared to stand up to the wrath of the Inquisition. Galileo's assertion that the Bible should be interpreted in light of man's knowledge of the natural world, and that Scripture should not have authority in scientific controversies, did little to endear him to church leaders. Thus, rather than being the case of "science versus the Bible," it was "dogmatic scientist versus religious dogmatism." This, of course, is not all the story; the remainder would be covered in a good history book.

One of the passages used to defend the biblical basis of geocentricity was Joshua 10:12-14 (and later references to the same event), in which Joshua prayed, "Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; And thou, Moon, in the valley of Aijalon" (v. 12), that he might defeat the numerous armies assembled against his people. God immediately answered Joshua's prayer, and in the following verse he wrote: "And the Sun stood still, and the Moon stayed." Keil and Delitzsch have suggested that either the day appeared long to the warriors of Israel because of the greatness of the task they performed (i.e., defeating the enemy), or that God miraculously caused the day to be lengthened so the Lord's army could perform its task. The former is consistent with similar language in other

parts of the Old Testament, and the latter explanation is totally consistent with God's infinite power over the Universe (see Keil and Delitzsch, 1982, 2: 106-112). In any case, as Joshua went on to say in verse 14, "there was no day like that before it or after it." Thus, whether miraculous or not, to say that these verses teach that the Earth continues to stand still, and that the Earth is the center of the Universe, is both a gross misinterpretation and a misapplication of the verse. This passage does not teach geocentricity, despite Calvin's claims to the contrary.

In addition to Joshua 10, Calvin used Psalm 93:1 in defense of geocentricity. The verse simply suggests that the Earth is stable, and cannot be moved. But is it trying to say that the Earth is totally motionless in every sense? Since the passage is concerned primarily with God's majesty and power, it is more likely that the psalmist is saying, "Who but God could move the Earth?" Besides, the Earth is set in an unchanging orbit around the Sun, all the while rotating at a steady speed on a fixed axis.

Psalm 19:6 is a passage that often is cited as another example of Scripture teaching pre-Copernican astronomy. In this verse, the Sun is said to move, rather than the Earth, and therefore is said by some to suggest that the Sun revolves around the Earth. There are numerous other verses in the Bible that talk about the Sun "going down" or "rising up." This hardly should be surprising, however, since events in the Bible often are written in accommodative or "phenomenal" language—i.e., the language used to express phenomena as man sees them. Even today we teach our children that "the Sun rises in the east and sets in the west," and astronomers and navigators use the Earth as a fixed point for purposes of simple observation, expressing distances and directions in relation to it. The weatherman on the evening news often will state that the Sun is going to "rise" at a certain time the following morning, and "set" at a certain time the following evening. Why does no one accuse him of scientific error? Because we all are perfectly aware of, and understand, the Copernican view of the solar system, and because we likewise understand that our weatherman is using "phenomenal" language.

In addition, scientific foreknowledge could be claimed from Psalm 19:6 if a more literal interpretation was applied in the following way. Astrono-

mers now know that the Sun moves in a gigantic orbit around the center of the Milky Way galaxy; traveling at a rate of 600,000 miles an hour (its current estimated speed), it would take the Sun 230 million years to make just one orbit! It also is believed that our galaxy is moving with respect to other galaxies in the Universe. Indeed, the Sun's going forth is from one end of the heavens to the other. But in any case, there is no way to substantiate the claims that the Bible teaches geocentricity, or that it promotes any other anti-scientific concept.

REFERENCES

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