

## Taking Genesis as Inspired

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Our recent paper "Genesis Reconsidered"<sup>1</sup> has been criticized by Seely.<sup>2</sup> He presupposes a model of watertight compartments of knowledge, a strict dichotomy between science and theology. He categorically rejects any legitimacy for our model of harmonization. He arbitrarily assumes that the writings of the biblical authors were absolutely bound to the science of their culture and time. But divine revelation implies the communication of contents at least some of which are unknown. Predictive prophecy concerns historical events hundreds or thousands of years ahead of time, and the retrospective prophecy of a creation account refers to events that occurred eons earlier. It was impossible for prophets to know, from their own cultural background, all of the contents of God's prophecies. They were often confronted with revelations they had to pronounce without fully understanding them (e.g. Dan.9:20-27; 1 Pet.1:10-12).

We must not impose on God's Word such artificial domains of knowledge, convenient for us, but foreign to the Bible. Should we prescribe to God which types of content he is or is not permitted to convey in his revelation? It is clear that God's revelation is intimately linked with historical events. In the Bible, it is often impossible to sort out neatly what is theological and what is historical content, and there is no fundamental difference between history and prehistory (or other areas of scientific investigation). A formulation of revelation understandable by the ancients need not imply the use or endorsement of factual errors held in their culture. Therefore, it is eminently meaningful to look for a possibility of interpretation which coincides with facts as far as we know them, even though an occasional statement may have been interpreted differently by the ancients, or may have to be interpreted differently in the future. God had the Bible texts written for people of all ages, and he wants them to be trustworthy for all readers.

We are astonished that Seely uses Matt.19:8 and Mark 10:5 to prove his theory of God's accommodating his revelation to the moral ideas of the time. God certainly did *not* accommodate himself to sin when he showed mercy and help to people fallen into sin! On the contrary, the standards remained unchanged. Jesus told the Pharisees, who were dishonestly testing him, that their interpretation of Deut.24:1-4 was wrong, that they were distorting God's original intention of Gen.2:24. God's aim may be higher than some initial learning steps in his educational curriculum of the Torah (Rom.10:4; Gal.3:24). This has nothing to do with accommodation. We did not exclude divine accommodation in the sense of divine messages being formulated in words basically understandable by ancients as well as moderns. But the inference that this implied error and myths is neither logical nor based on any facts.

In addition, Seely found fault with some particular details mentioned in our paper. As our interpretation certainly is not perfect, and some of it is quite tentative, we appreciate all comments pointing to problem areas, possibly helping us to revise — not Genesis, but our interpretation.

Seely claims that "in the scientific account, the *entire* earth is *never* covered by water" (his emphasis). This statement cannot be verified, any more than the statement that the earth *was* completely covered by water can be verified. Geologists would consider either model as speculative, unverifiable by today's limited geological understanding of the history of the very early earth.<sup>3</sup> However, from the limited geologic understanding of the early earth and other planets, one can speculate that huge impact events, like the one that might have formed our moon, would not only have evaporated any possible previous ocean, but could have also produced a global magma ocean, with hardly any elevational differences, such that subsequent cooling sufficient to allow water to recondense could possibly result in a global aqueous ocean. In any case, earth's present-day continents and deep sea basins — and earlier ones like them — were formed by plate tectonics in an environment containing liquid water in amounts which may be similar to those on today's earth. Thus, the presumption that the first continent rose out of a global ocean is not as far fetched as Seely would have us believe. Apparently, Seely assumes that, in order to be compatible with science, Gen.1 would have to mention the earth's early hot, dry surface. It is, however, obvious that a short account can never be complete — nor does this distract from the truth of the statements it does make. It should have been clear from our paper that v.2 need not refer to the original state of the earth, whose origin is dealt with in v.1 already. Verse 9 speaks of "the dry [land]", including the article, which usually indicates that the object is not new. Thus, v.9 may even hint at the dry land having existed earlier than the ocean now being separated from it. Also, the formulation of v.9 appears to be incompatible with land floating on water.

Seely's claim that the poetic descriptions of God founding the earth "upon seas" (Ps.24:2 — not 4), or spreading it out "upon the waters" (Ps.136:6), imply land floating on an ocean is not convincing. The parallel in Ps.24:2 has "upon the rivers", which are not an ocean. We may translate "above" instead of

"upon", so the expressions may just have the sense of "at a higher elevation than", an obvious phenomenological description, without any cosmological implications intended. William Shakespeare certainly did not imagine that his hometown, named Stratford-upon-Avon, was floating on the river Avon, nor do names like Southend-on-Sea indicate that the British think their island is floating on the sea.

The same preposition 'al, which usually means "on" or "above", is the subject of Seely's next concern, his belief that the ancients believed in a solid dome as a firmament above the earth. His argument that *raqia'*, which he translates as "firmament", rather than "expanse", and all of its cognate words *always* refer to objects which have solidity is not compelling, as we indicated in our endnote 34. We don't quarrel with his idea that the preposition 'al in Gen.1:20 *can* mean "in front of", and we agree that the text adds *pnee*, "face", before *raqia'*. But although *pnee*, when used without 'al, can mean "before", "in front of", the prepositional phrase 'al-*pnee* means "over", "on", "in", or "over against", rather than "in front of". But even this translation of 'al-*pnee* would not indicate a solid firmament, "in front of" which the birds fly. The sunlit atmosphere looks to us like a blue backdrop, "in front of" which we see birds flying. No matter whether they fly "on", "over", "above", or "in front of" the "expanse" or atmosphere, there is nothing in the expression to suggest a solid dome *under* which they would fly. By substituting "surface" for "face", in order to yield "on the surface of the firmament", Seely is similarly unsuccessful, as this would make the birds fly *above* the solid dome, making nonsense of the statement.

Concerning the flying creatures, we of course did not exclude birds or bats. We just insisted on the inclusion of flying insects, because they were the earliest flyers, in accordance with their placement in Gen.1. Seely seems to have missed the fact that, in our evolutionary interpretation, the first occurrence of a group of creatures does not imply that they all appeared at the same time. Thus, we agree that Gen.1:21 includes birds and bats, but they (in contrast to the insects) came later than the first land animals (v.24), just as some plants, some fish and the whales appeared later. The text says, "God created ... every winged flyer", but not, "at the same time". We showed that God's creating may refer to both a generic dimension, such as the sentient domain, and individual creatures throughout the history of life, and that he developed all groups of creatures by means of descent with modification to this day.

Finally, we did not deny that many of the ancients may have believed in a flat earth, but we argued that even in the earliest times of humanity, the idea of a spherical earth would not have been very exotic in the thinking of some people, especially if they were familiar with observations on wide plains or the ocean. There is no reason to believe that the earliest Greek philosopher known to have postulated a spherical earth had more scientific information or was more intelligent than some people 1000 or more years earlier. Written records of those times dealing with such topics are certainly sufficiently rare that we cannot claim that we should have found some if they existed. Thus, there is no reason to force biblical texts to support a flat earth mythology. Seely emphasizes that Russell did not consider views of the times when Genesis was written,<sup>4</sup> but this does not invalidate our argument against the globality of a flat-earth myth as the world view of *all* pre-moderns. Tanner refuted the idea that the Bible is talking about the earth as a *planet* like the others, but he did not discuss the question of a belief in its flatness.<sup>5</sup> In any case, whatever the ancients believed, the Bible does not support the erroneous beliefs they might have held.

In conclusion, in contrast to genuine myths, and in contrast to Seely's opinion, Gen.1 correlates in an amazing way with the scientific picture, as shown in our paper, and Seely was unable to find any substantial flaw not dictated by his prior commitment to a mythological model. His points do not at all represent the "glaring contrasts" he claimed. Space limitations for our paper prevented us from explaining in detail everything we touched on. This may have led to some misunderstandings. We welcome further contributions to the discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> A.Held & P.Rüst, "Genesis Reconsidered", *PSCF* 51, no. 4 (December 1999): 231-43.

<sup>2</sup> P.H.Seely, "Genesis Revisited or Revised?", *PSCF* 52, no. 1 (March 2000), 77-8.

<sup>3</sup> We thank C.A.Hill and S.O.Moshier for their helpful personal communications.

<sup>4</sup> J.B.Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and Modern Historians* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> W.F.Tanner, "'Planet Earth'? or 'Land'?", *PSCF* 49, no. 2 (June 1997), 111-5.