

About the Cover

The image comes from Martin Luther’s 1534 translation of the Bible, and it appears across from the first chapter of Holy Scripture—Genesis 1 and the creation of the world. Scientists at that time believed that the earth was spherical, immovable, and located in the center of the entire universe. This ancient understanding of astronomy is known as “geocentrism” (Greek word *gē* means “earth”). Heaven included a solid outer sphere termed the “firmament.” One geocentric theory claimed that the sun, moon, and stars were placed in the firmament, and its daily rotation caused day and night on earth.

In his 1536 *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther attempted to align the Bible with this ancient understanding of the structure and operation of the world. This approach to interpreting Scripture is called “scientific concordism” (or simply “concordism”). In commenting on the second day of creation in Genesis 1:6-8, Luther argues that God made the firmament so that “it should extend itself outward in the manner of a sphere.” He adds, “Scripture . . . simply says that the moon, the sun, and the stars were placed in the firmament of the heaven . . . The bodies of the stars, like that of the sun, are round, and they are fastened to the firmament like globes of fire.”

Martin Luther demonstrates the problem with scientific concordism and attempts to align Scripture with the science-of-the-day. As science advances, new facts about the natural world are discovered, and concordist interpretations are then proven to be incorrect. For example, no one today accepts Luther’s ancient astronomy and his geocentric view of the universe. Moreover, should any Christian cling to scientific concordism and make it an essential component of their faith, new scientific discoveries may damage their belief in both God and the Bible. In this book, we will examine a way to move beyond concordism that honors Scripture as the Holy Spirit-inspired Word of God.

The Bible & Science: Principles of Interpretation

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Eisegesis vs. Exegesis

During the first day of my college course on the relationship between science and religion, I have students read the first three verses of the Bible. “¹In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ²Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. ³And God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light.” I then ask them to draw a diagram of the scene that they envision in Genesis 1:2.

Nearly 90% of the students sketch a water-covered *spherical* earth. Some examples of their drawings appear in Figure 4-1. When reading the word “earth,” they automatically picture a globe. Yet when I ask them if they have ever heard that ancient people believed in a *flat* earth, they sheepishly say “yes” and admit that they never made the connection between the Bible and this ancient understanding of the structure of the world. I encourage them that this is one of the reasons we need to learn hermeneutical principles. They make us more aware of how to read a book written in ancient times, like the Word of God.

The interpretive error that most of my students make in picturing Genesis 1:2 as a spherical planet is known as “eisegesis.” The Greek preposition *eis* means “in, into,” and *ageomai* is the verb “to guide.” Eisegesis refers to reading our own ideas or agendas *into* a passage or book. This is a common error that all of us have made at one time, and it often occurs in biblical interpretation. This is the mistake most people make by forcing the modern scientific notion of a spherical earth into the Bible when reading the word “earth” in Genesis 1:2. Many years ago, I committed this eisegetical error when I first read the Bible as a new Christian.

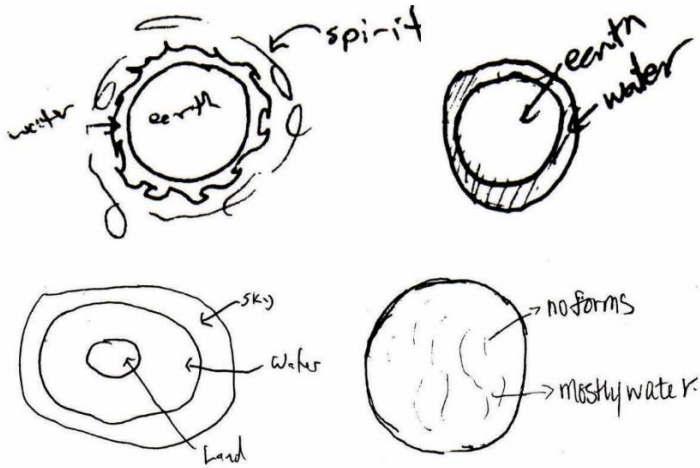


Figure 4-1. Student Diagrams of Genesis 1:2

Let's turn to another biblical passage and begin to introduce evidence that Scripture has an ancient understanding of the structure of the world. Philippians 2:5-11 is called the “Kenotic Hymn” and it is one of the most important passages in the Bible. The Greek verb *kenōō* means “to empty.” This hymn reveals a foundational belief of the Christian faith—God emptied himself and became a man in the person of Jesus in order to die for our sins. The apostle Paul writes,

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage, ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing [*kenōō*], by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, [1] in heaven and [2] on earth and [3] under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Most Christians do not notice the reference to the ancient understanding of the structure of the universe in verse 10. This is known as the “3-tier universe.” According to this ancient science, the world has three levels: heaven overhead, the surface of a flat earth in the middle, and a lower region inside the earth.

For years I enjoyed singing the Kenotic Hymn during the praise and worship service in my church, but never once did I recognize this ancient understanding of the cosmos. It was only when I began to study biblical hermeneutics in seminary that I became aware of this ancient science in Scripture.*

It was also during my training in theology that I learned ancient Greek, the language used by the apostle Paul in Philippians 2:5-11. To my surprise, I discovered that the English translation “under the earth” was not completely accurate.

The actual Greek word that appears in verse 10 is *katachthoniōn*.¹ It is made up of the preposition *kata* which means “down,” and the noun *chthonios* that refers to the “underworld” or “subterranean world.” Therefore, a more precise translation of Philippians 2:10 would be:

At the name of Jesus every knee should bow,

[1] in heaven

[2] on earth and

[3] down in the underworld.

In other words, Paul is referring to a 3-tier universe in this passage as shown in Figure 4-2.

I believe everyone will agree that the goal of reading any passage is to draw out the author’s intended meaning from it. This is termed “exegesis.” The Greek preposition *ek* means “out, out of,” and as we have noted, *ēgeomai* is the verb “to guide.” Even if we may disagree with an

* We will examine in more detail the many biblical passages that describe a 3-tier universe in Hermeneutical Principles 15-17.

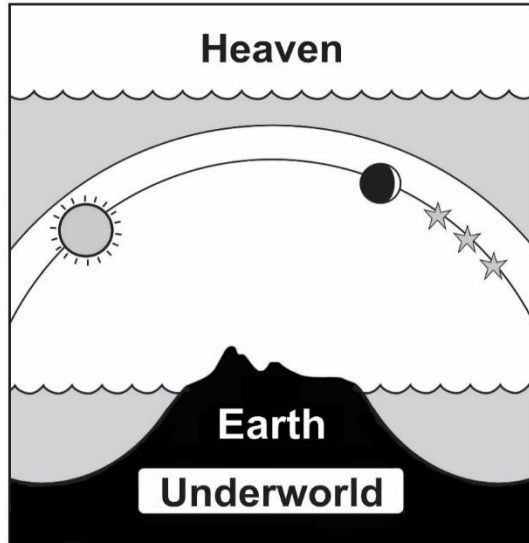


Figure 4-2. The 3-Tier Universe

author’s point of view or understanding of the natural world, we must always respect his or her original intention for writing a passage. Otherwise, we could make a passage mean whatever we wish for our own purposes.

To be sure, reading ancient texts like the Bible can be challenging and even surprising, as we have seen with verses like Genesis 1:2 and Philippians 2:10. The older a book is, the more difficult it will be for us to understand. This is because there is a greater conceptual distance between the intellectual context of ancient texts and that of modern readers.

These conceptual contexts are often called “hermeneutical horizons.” The challenge for us as twenty-first century readers, being steeped in twenty-first century science, is to suspend our modern scientific ideas, and not to eisegetically force them into the Word of God. Therefore,

*we need to read Scripture through ancient eyes
and with an ancient mindset.*

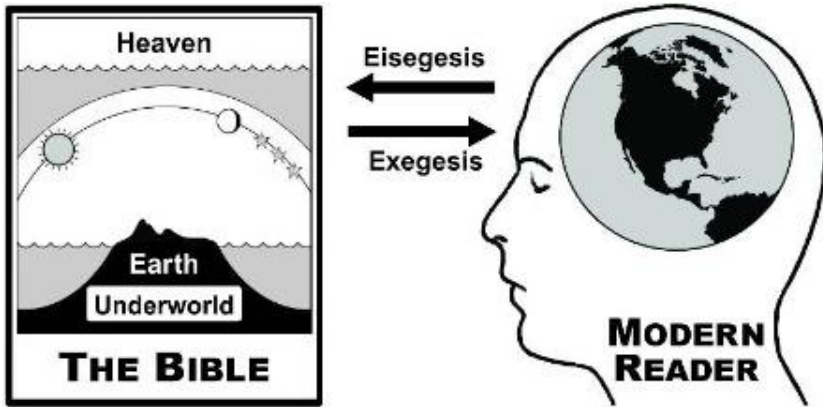


Figure 4-3. Hermeneutical Horizons & the Structure of the World

Figure 4-3 presents the hermeneutical horizons of the Bible and the modern reader with regard to the structure of the earth. This diagram also distinguishes between eisegesis and exegesis. For ancient people like the biblical writers, the universe was made up of three tiers with a flat earth. But for us today, we know the earth is spherical. Therefore, when we read the word “earth” in Scripture, there is a natural tendency for us to picture a sphere or globe. But that is eisegesis. Instead, we need to *recognize* and *respect* the ancient science in the Bible, even though we disagree with it. And we must practice exegesis and draw out from the Word of God the inspired writer’s intended meaning.

Biblical Creation Accounts

To further illustrate the hermeneutical concepts of eisegesis and exegesis, let’s look at how Martin Luther interpreted the structure of the heavens and the earth in Genesis 1. The cover of this book has a diagram of the universe found in his 1534 German translation of the Bible. It appears across from this first chapter of Scripture and the account of God creating the world in six days.

During Luther’s generation the science-of-the-day was geocentrism. The Greek noun *gē* means “earth.” This theory claimed that the earth is spherical and positioned at the center of the entire universe. It also as-

serted that the earth does not move. A sphere, termed the “firmament,” enclosed the world and separated God and the heavenly realm from the rest of creation. Luther believed that the sun, moon, and stars were attached to the firmament, and the daily rotation of this heavenly sphere caused the sun to move around the earth, creating day and night.

Luther’s sixteenth-century astronomy also appears in his 1536 biblical commentary *Lectures on Genesis*. With regard to the origin of heavenly bodies on the fourth day of creation, he writes, “Indeed, it is more likely that the bodies of the stars, like that of the sun, are round, and that they are fastened to the firmament like globes of fire.”²² In defending geocentrism and the immovability of the earth, Luther appeals to Joshua 10:12-13 and the miraculous stopping of the sun. This passage records, “Joshua said to the Lord in the presence of Israel: ‘Sun, stand still over Gibeon’ . . . The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day.” Luther argues, “I believe the Holy Scriptures, for Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and not the earth.”²³ In other words, Luther assumed the sun literally moved around the earth, and that it was the sun that was miraculously stopped by God in Joshua 10.

Now I am sure that you have identified two hermeneutical mistakes with Luther’s interpretation of Scripture. First, the illustration of the universe in his 1534 translation of the Bible is eisegetical. Like most of my students who draw a sphere when picturing the earth in Genesis 1:2 (Fig. 4-1, p. 33), Luther forces his geocentric view of the world into Scripture. Second, Luther is a scientific concordist. He uses the Bible like a book of science. In attempting to argue that the sun actually moves across the sky, Luther reads Joshua 10:12-13 as a literal scientific statement to support the motion of the sun.

There are valuable lessons to be learned from Luther’s hermeneutical mistakes (as well as our own!). I doubt there are many Christians today who believe in his geocentric understanding of the structure of the universe. And most of us do not think that the sun literally moves around the earth each day. Martin Luther demonstrates the problem with scientific concordism—Scripture cannot be aligned with science.

Another problem with concordism is that science changes over time. If one generation eisegetically forces their science into the Bible, then a later generation might discover these earlier scientific views are incorrect. And this is exactly what happened with Luther's geocentric interpretation of Scripture. No one today believes that the earth is at the center of the universe or that the sun is attached to a spherical firmament that rotates, moving the sun around the earth every day.

But there is a more serious problem with scientific concordism. Take for example the Christians who read Genesis 1 in Luther's Bible and saw the diagram of a geocentric universe across from this chapter. When it was later discovered that the earth moved around the sun, did these Christians lose their trust in Scripture? Or worse, did they lose their faith in the God of the Bible? Martin Luther's interpretive mistakes should serve as a warning to all of us that the Word of God should not be used as a book of science. Instead, the Bible reveals life-changing spiritual truths for developing a personal relationship with the God who inspired Holy Scripture.