

Is the 'erets (earth) flat? Equivocal language in the geography of Genesis 1 and the Old Testament: a response to Paul H. Seely

James Patrick Holding

Critic Paul H. Seely claims that the Bible teaches that the earth is a flat disc consisting of a single continent floating on a circular sea. In so doing, he once again makes the mistake of reading into equivocal biblical language definite statements of cosmology.

In a previous article,¹ I explored and refuted the contentions of Paul H. Seely that the Bible taught that the *raqiya* ('firmament') was a solid dome over the earth. In this study, we will address a subsequent article by Seely in which he argues that the Bible teaches that the earth is a flat disc with a surrounding sea and a continent that floats upon this sea. We find, not surprisingly, that Seely follows much the same line of argument as he did in his previous articles:

*'When a biblical text is interpreted outside of its historical context, it is often unconsciously interpreted in terms of the reader's own culture, time and beliefs. This has happened more than once to Genesis 1. To avoid distorting Genesis 1 in this way, the serious exegete will insist upon placing this chapter within its own historical context. When we do this, the meaning of "earth" and "seas" in Gen 1:10 is found to be quite different from the modern western notions.'*²

Following this statement is an impressive and informative list proving that several early 'scientifically naïve' societies thought either that the earth was flat and/or was surrounded by water on all sides, upon which the land floated. Seely determines from this data that:

'Within its historical context, therefore, the conception of the "earth" in Gen 1 is most probably that

*of a single continent in the shape of a flat circular disc. In addition the Hebrews were influenced via the patriarchs by Mesopotamian concepts and via Moses and their time in Egypt by Egyptian concepts. It is, therefore, all the more historically probable that the writer and first readers of Gen 1 thought of the earth as a single continent in the shape of a flat circular disc.'*³

*'Being a scientifically naive people, it is probable that like other scientifically naive tribal peoples the Hebrews thought of the earth as being surrounded by a circular sea and floating upon that single surrounding sea.'*⁴

Seely appears to be assuming that 'scientific knowledge', i.e. the conclusions of modern science, is the only source of true knowledge. And, amazingly for an author in a Reformed theological journal, Seely seems to be forgetting that Scripture is propositional revelation from God and therefore is also a source of true knowledge — in fact, it is the ultimate and final source of such knowledge!

Seely continues:

*'The writer and first readers of Gen 1 also inherited Mesopotamian concepts about the natural world from the patriarchs and no doubt were influenced by Egyptian concepts during their stay in Egypt. Moses, in fact, was "educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22; Exod 2:10). It is highly probable, therefore, that the writer and first readers of Gen 1 defined the sea in the same way that all people in the ancient Near East did, namely, as a single circular body of water in the middle of which the flat earth-disc floated and from which all wells, springs and rivers derived their water.'*⁴

This argument is very weak indeed. The patriarchs worshipped God and believed His Word, not Mesopotamian myths. There is absolutely no indication in Scripture that they held any such beliefs. Seely must demonstrate this, not simply assert it. Also, it is highly unlikely that Moses and the Israelites were influenced by Egyptian concepts. Although Moses was educated as an Egyptian, he was also the recipient of divine revelation which stands in stark contrast to any Egyptian teaching. Furthermore, the Israelites lived separately from the Egyptians (in the land of Goshen) and apparently maintained their culture and customs and did not intermarry with the Egyptians. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that they would have been educated alongside the Egyptians — and even more so when they became the Egyptians' slaves.

In my previous article, I demonstrated the illogic and the danger of this position in terms of biblical inerrancy, and we need not detain ourselves by elaborating on all of these points. Instead, we will proceed directly to the scriptural citations at issue and show that, once again, Seely is either misinterpreting what he is reading or else is taking advantage of equivocal terminology to read his own ideas into the text.

Gone flat

The programmatic text for this section is Genesis 1:10:

'And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called the Seas: and God saw that it was good.'

By itself this verse tells us virtually nothing about the nature of the earth and seas. It is so equivocal that one may read into the text either a flat earth or a round one. It is worthwhile to remind the reader of one point made in our earlier article, that it is just as much possible that the many pagan parallels cited by Seely are just as easily read to be distortions of the original and correct information about the nature of the earth. In other words, they could have misread the message and forced an interpretation upon the data just as Seely has done! Nevertheless, Genesis 1:10 certainly does not indicate in and of itself a flat earth.⁵

Seely next attempts to read out from the text the idea of a flat earth based on the presumption that a solid firmament is also taught; this point we refuted in our previous article. Finally, Seely deals with some Scriptures outside of Genesis that concern the nature of the earth, beginning with Isaiah 40:22:

'It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers ...'

Apologists dealing with this issue often cite Isaiah 40:22 with the explanation that Hebrew, having no specific word for sphere, may here indicate a spherical earth. Of course we may also read into the text a flat circle, as Seely does. Interestingly, Seely attempts to confirm his own interpretation by making an error exactly like that of a skeptic I once confronted on this issue:

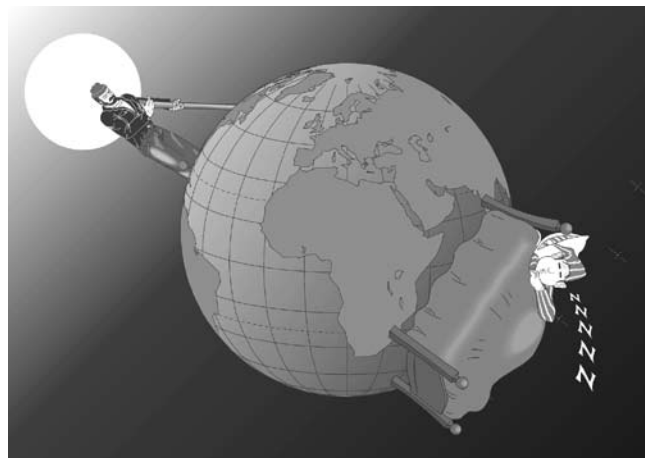
*'If Isaiah had intended to speak of the earth as a globe, he would probably have used the word he used in 22:18 (dur), meaning "ball".'*⁶

Dur, however, no-more indicates sphericity than the word used in Isaiah 40:22, for it is used by Isaiah elsewhere thus (Isaiah 29:3):

'And I will camp against thee round about, and will lay siege against thee with a mount, and I will raise forts against thee.'

Obviously, unless they were professional gymnasts as well as tacticians, the soldiers could not camp in the shape of a sphere around the city! Based on this, this word appears to be making a statement about a circular pattern rather than specifying a given shape.⁷

Seely offers two citations in support of a 'flat earth' view that we need not spend much time on: Daniel 4:10, 11 and 20, and Job 37:3. The Daniel passage is actually a statement by a pagan king, which doesn't mean that the Bible endorses that view. And it is a vision, and is therefore not intended to be a picture of reality any more than Pharaoh's dream of cannibalistic cows and even cannibalistic ears of wheat (Genesis 41). And Job 37:3 hardly requires a flat-earth



Jesus statement about his second coming (Luke 17:34–35, Matt 24:40–41) does not make sense if the world was flat. On a flat Earth, the sun would rise on everybody at the same time. You would not expect to find some people in bed, while others were out in the field.

reading — it merely states that lightning occurs all over the earth. Even if it did teach a flat-earth reading, it would prove only that Elihu believed such a thing — **not everything reported in the Bible is endorsed in the Bible.**

As is standard to note in such cases, the statements of characters in the Bible are not automatically granted inerrancy unless the speaker is either God or indicated to be inspired of God. One statement that is made by God that deserves serious consideration is found in Job 38:13:

'That it might take hold of the ends of the earth, that the wicked might be shaken out of it?'

Isolated from its context, this verse might be taken, as Seely supposes, to refer to a pancake-like earth:

*'In a clearly cosmological context, not just local, this verse speaks of dawn grasping the earth by its "extremity or hem" (kanap; cf. Num 15:38; 1 Sam 15:27) and shaking the wicked out of it. The verse is comparing the earth to a blanket or garment picked up at one end and shaken. A globe is not really comparable to a blanket or garment in this way. You cannot pick up a globe at one end. It does not even have an end.'*⁸

However, the full context of this verse makes it clear that the meaning Seely finds in it is not intended at all. How does the dawn 'grasp' anything? Is Seely also suggesting some sort of primitive belief in an anthropomorphic sun god? Are the wicked literally 'shaken' by the sunrise? Is the bringing of dawn accompanied by the sight of nighttime burglars rolling through the dusty streets of villages like tumbleweeds? Clearly this verse refers to no more than the visible horizon that the dawn 'grasps' as the sun rises. It is phenomenological and poetic in every sense of its expression.

Sea change

Seely's next assertion concerns the biblical understanding of the relationship between the land and the sea. In his words:

*'In every pre-scientific cosmology which I have seen that mentions the sea, the earth is described as circular, floating in a circular sea ...'*⁹

The Bible, Seely insists, preserves this inaccuracy. His first citation for proof is explained thus:

*'As to the shape of this one collection of seas, various OT references show that the Hebrews conceived of it as circular. Prov 8:27b, speaking of creation, says that Wisdom was present "When he (God) inscribed a circle on the face of the Deep". Job 26:10 similarly says, "He has inscribed a circle on the face of the waters as a boundary of light and darkness".'*¹⁰

Our answer here is the same as it was previously: there is no specific Hebrew word for sphere; hence these cites are equivocal. They could refer to either a pancake-like shape or to a globe.

Seely continues:

*'The bronze hemispherical (or cylindrical) sea which was set up in the temple courtyard in 1 Kgs 7:23 also seems to indicate by its shape that the earthly sea was conceived of as circular. For although a circular water container would not be unusual, this basin of water could easily have been called simply a basin or laver, as was the case with the simpler original (Exod 30:18). Instead, it was called a sea (yam). This name "sea" for the laver parallels the name of the laver which was set up in Babylonian temples and called apsu, the word for the water surrounding and under the earth.'*¹¹

This is all very interesting, and goes far in proving that perhaps Solomon or his priests had such conceptions of the world, but in terms of proving that this is the teaching of the Bible itself, it accomplishes nothing. It has no more effect than quoting the words of Nebuchadnezzar and Elihu.

This argument by Seely has somewhat more strength:

'The biblical picture of the earth surrounded by a sea seems to be reflected in several different phrases used in Scripture. Rudhardt introduces us to one of those phrases. After noting that in the cosmographies of many people waters "make up a vast expanse, in the middle of which lies the earth, like an island", he goes on to say that these surrounding waters "may be divided into two oceans, on either side of the world". ... The phrase which he thereby introduces is "from sea to sea" as found in Ps 72:8 and Zech 9:10b, both of which describe the geographically universal rule of the coming Messiah as being "from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth".'

The context of these verses which are clearly speaking of the geographically universal rule of the Messiah over all nations on earth (Ps. 72:9–11; Zech 9:10b; cf. Ps 2:8 and Mic 5:4) implies that the phrase "from sea to sea" is a reference to the "two oceans on either side of the world" which enclose

*within their grasp the entire earth, the two oceans "in the middle of which lies the earth like an island". The phrase "from sea to sea" refers to two specific bodies of water, but not to these bodies of water just in themselves but as representative parts of the "two oceans on either side of the world". This understanding of the phrase is strengthened by the fact that in Mesopotamia where a universal sea was understood to be surrounding the world, the phrase "from the lower sea to the upper sea" [both understood as parts of the sea surrounding the world] denotes the entire known world.'*¹²

It fits such a conception; but it also fits a modern conception just as easily. Once again, we encounter equivocal language in the Scripture: the size, location, and nature of these 'seas' is not defined at all. Indeed, Seely can find only one verse that comes close to making such a definition:

*'The biblical terms "eastern sea" and "western sea", especially as used in Zech 14:8, where the context is one of apocalyptic universality, also seem to refer to the eastern and western halves of the ocean that surround the earth.'*¹³

The context is indeed 'apocalyptic universality', but unless these waters also go north and south, they are hardly serving to supply the entire world — even if it is conceived as a disc! The simple fact is that this passage in no way identifies the nature, extent, or size of either sea; but they are easy to identify, and there is no conception here at all that indisputably describes the circular 'world-sea' that Seely suggests.

In the only other places where the 'western sea' is referred to, it clearly refers to the Mediterranean (Deuteronomy 11:24, 34:2; Joel 2:20); this Seely would probably not dispute.

References to the 'eastern sea' are no more plentiful (Joel 2:20, Ezek. 47:18–19), but the latter passage strongly suggests a body of water that is nearby, namely the Dead Sea — or else, it suggests a very strange sort of border!

'And the east side ye shall measure from Hauran, and from Damascus, and from Gilead, and from the land of Israel by Jordan, from the border unto the east sea. And this is the east side. And the south side southward, from Tamar even to the waters of strife in Kadesh, the river to the great sea. And this is the south side southward.'

The Dead Sea lies in a position that is right in line with the given locations. If this 'eastern sea' is indeed the sort of 'world-sea' that Seely proposes, then these borders, as described, run in a perfectly sensible line, except for a sudden and very, very narrow diversion to the east!

Float your boat

Seely's final effort attempts to prove that the Bible teaches that the land of the earth floats upon a sea of water. His verse of concern is Psalm 136:6:

'To him that stretched out the earth above the waters: for his mercy endureth forever.'

We will agree with Seely, against Harris, that this passage does not refer to *'land masses above the shoreline'*. Our agreement with Seely continues through the following:

'The exact relationship of the earth to the waters is expressed by the preposition 'al. The preposition 'al usually means "upon" ...'

Unfortunately, the only time the verb *raqa* is used with the preposition *'al* in the OT is in Psalm 136:6. But *raqa* has a close synonym, namely *radad*, which also apparently means 'beat' or 'spread out'; and this synonym is used with the preposition *'al* in 1 Kings 6:32 where it describes overlaying the cherubim with gold plating: *'he spread out the gold [over or] upon ('al) the cherubim'*. It seems very probable, therefore, that the synonymous phraseology in Psalm 136:6 (especially in the light of Isaiah 40:19 which uses *raqa* in the sense of 'overlay') means that the earth is spread out over or upon the sea. As gold overlays the cherubim in 1 Kings 6:32, so the earth overlays the sea in Psalm 136:6:

*'The verb, "found", (yasad) which is used in Ps 24:2 means to lay down a foundational base for a building or wall (1 Kgs 5:17, 6:37, 7:10, 16:34; Ezra 3:10–12) or to set something upon a foundational base (Cant [Song of Solomon] 5:15; Ps 104:5). With either meaning the most natural meaning of 'al would be its primary meaning, "upon". This is confirmed by the three other times that 'al is used in the OT with the verb "found" (yasad): Cant 5:15; Ps 104:5; Amos 9:6. In all three cases, the meaning, "upon", is demanded by the context. Ps 104:5 especially demands that 'al be translated "upon" in Ps 24:2 because just like Ps 24:2 it is speaking of the founding of the earth.'*¹⁴

Thus far, this is all quite acceptable within a creationist paradigm, as we will demonstrate. Our disagreement begins with this assertion:

*'Ps 24:2 is saying, then, that God "founded", that is, firmly placed the earth upon the seas, the seas being a foundational base. The flat earth-continent is resting on the seas. The word "seas" (yammim) reminds us of Gen 1:10b where God called the gathered waters of the tehom "Seas" (yammim); and this again tells us, as did Ps 136:6 that Gen 1:10 is saying that the flat earth-continent was founded "upon" (or on top of) the sea, fixed in place but floating on the sea, in exact accord with the historical meaning.'*¹⁵

Once again, Seely has slipped in a premise without warrant. We may agree with the idea of the land being set 'upon' the sea, but to say that it 'floats' upon that sea is not at all indicated in the text. The biblical description accords with an accepted creationist paradigm that postulates the pre-diluvian existence of the 'fountains of the great

deep' (Genesis 7:11) which produced most of the water of the Genesis Flood. It would be perfectly proper to have described the land as having been 'spread out' over this vast subterranean water source. It would also be perfectly proper for what was left of this water source to continue to be referred in the same terms after the Flood when it would still be a source for underground springs (Genesis 49:25, Deuteronomy 33:13).

Conclusion

As was the case with Seely's previous article, we have found that there is no warrant for reading an erroneous conception of the earth into the biblical text. Equivocal language, and a proper understanding of what has been written, demonstrate yet again that, unlike the arguments of the critics, *'the Scripture cannot be broken'* (John 10:35).

References

1. Holding, J.P., Is the *raqiya* ('firmament') a solid dome? Equivocal language in the cosmology of Genesis 1 and the Old Testament: a response to Paul H. Seely, *CEN Tech. J.* **13**(2):44–51, 1999.
2. Seely, P.H., The geographical meaning of 'Earth' and 'Seas' in Genesis 1:10, *Westminster Theological Journal* **59**(2):231–256, 1997.
3. Seely, Ref. 2, p. 236.
4. Seely, Ref. 2, p. 246.
5. Whether it does accord with the conception of a single continent is another matter, one not necessarily in conflict with a creationist paradigm. See Wieland, C. and Batten, D., Interview with plate tectonics expert Dr John Baumgardner, *Creation* **19**(3): 40–43, 1997; Batten, D. (ed.), Ham, K., Sarfati, J. and Wieland, C., *The Answers Book*, Ch. 11, *Answers in Genesis*, Brisbane, 1999.
6. Seely, Ref. 2, p. 238.
7. Based on other usages (Ps. 84:10, Dan. 4) which correspond with the idea of 'encampment' or 'dwelling', this word would seem to be used in reference to a 'circle' that is somehow in motion.
8. Seely, Ref. 2, p. 239.
9. Seely, Ref. 2, p. 241.
10. Seely, Ref. 2, p. 248.
11. Seely, Ref. 2, pp. 248–249.
12. Seely, Ref. 2, p. 249.
13. Seely, Ref. 2, p. 250.
14. Seely, Ref. 2, pp. 250–251.
15. Seely, Ref. 2, pp. 251–252.

James Patrick Holding, M.L.S., is a librarian, freelance researcher, and the founder and operator of Tekton Apologetics Ministries, <<http://www.tektonics.org>>.