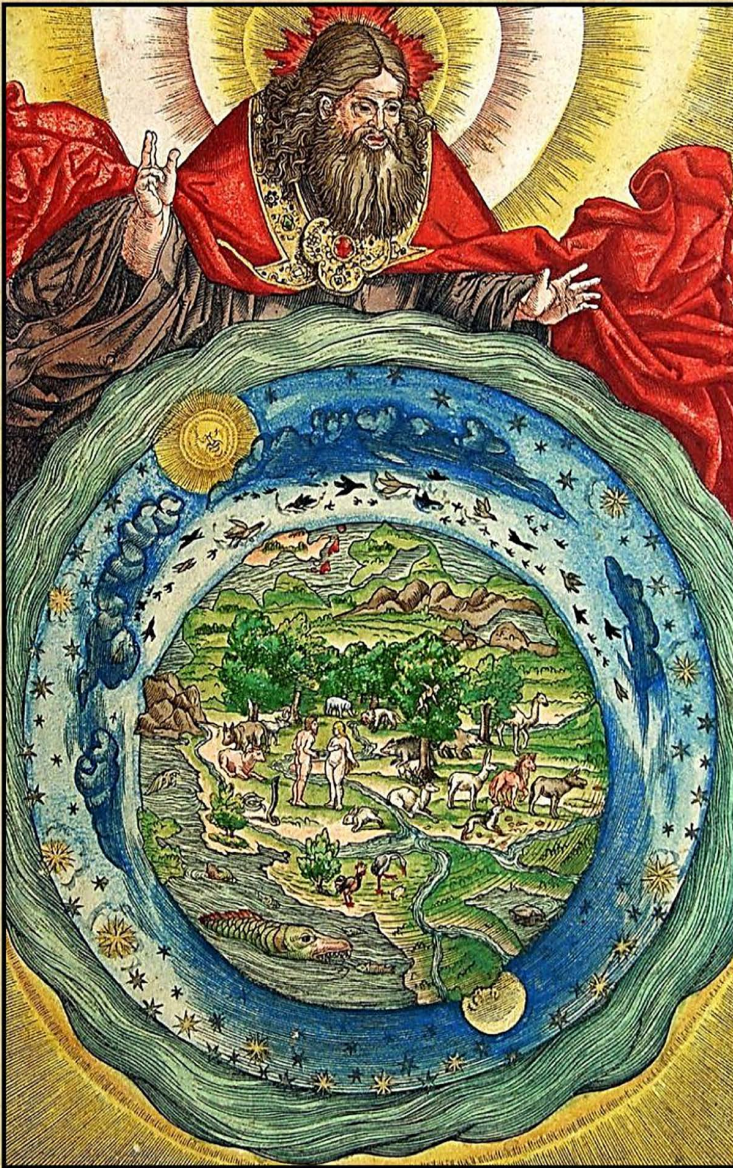


The Bible & Ancient Science

Principles of Interpretation



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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.

Dedicated to my Mom

By God's grace, she prayed me into the Kingdom,
instilled a burning desire for the Word of God, and
through her life I experienced the unconditional love
of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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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 *ēgeomai* 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.

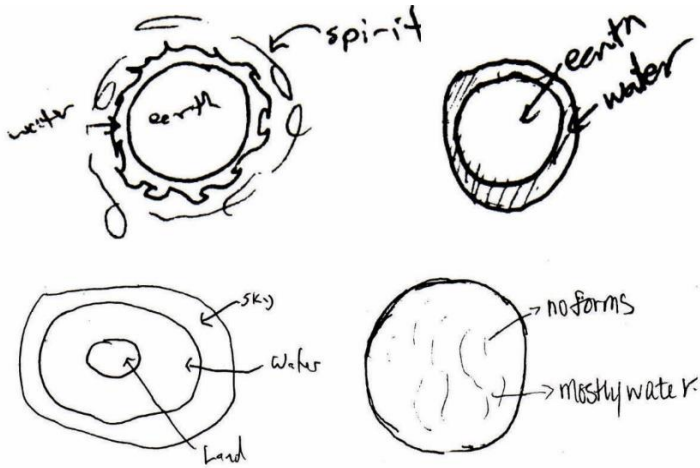


Figure 4-1. Student Diagrams of Genesis 1:2

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.

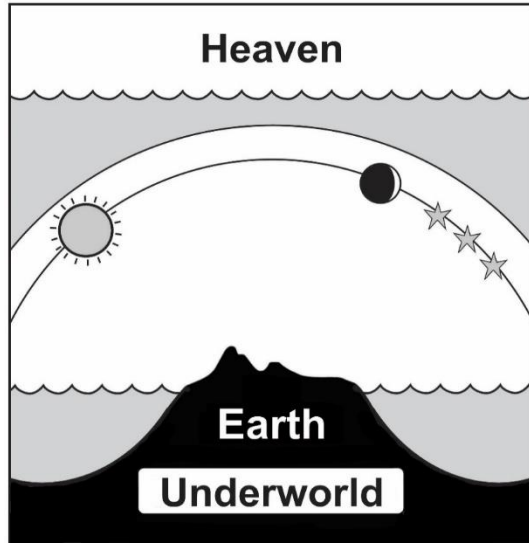


Figure 4-2. The 3-Tier Universe

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.*

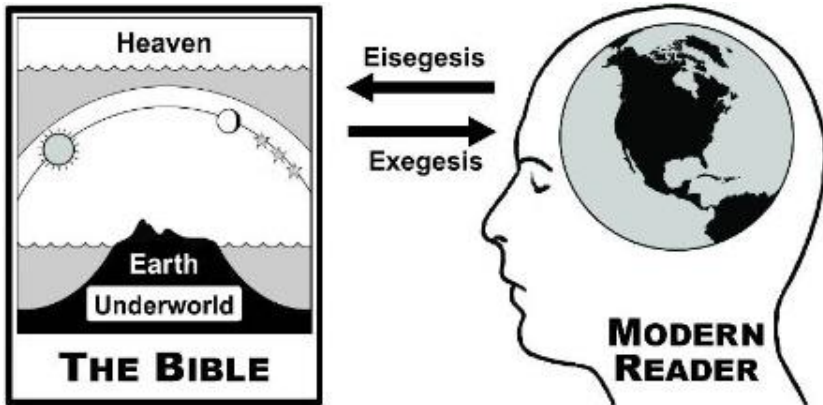


Figure 4-3. Hermeneutical Horizons & the Structure of the World

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.

The Message-Incident Principle

Let me now introduce the most important interpretive principle in this book on hermeneutics—the Message-Incident Principle as shown in Figure 6-1. It will help us understand passages in the Bible that refer to the physical world. I want to emphasize that this hermeneutical principle has a limited application. It is restricted to statements in Scripture that deal with nature, and it is in no way a concept that can be applied to every passage in the Bible. For example, this interpretive concept cannot be used with biblical texts dealing with the attributes of God such as his holiness (Rev. 4:8), Jesus’ two great commandments (Matt. 22:37-40), or practices within the church like communion (1 Cor. 11:23-26).

I am convinced that most Christians already accept the basic idea behind the Message-Incident Principle in some implicit way. For instance, we all believe that the main purpose of the Bible is to reveal messages of faith and life-changing spiritual truths. I doubt that there are many Chris-

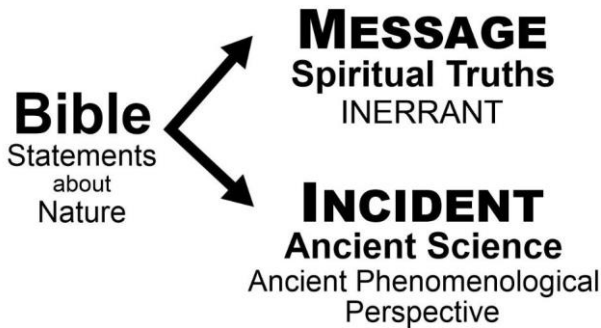


Figure 6-1. The Message-Incident Principle

tians who go to Scripture primarily to discover scientific facts about the natural world. Does anyone use Ecclesiastes 1:5, Psalm 19:4-6, or the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:45 as evidence that the sun literally moves across the sky and that every day it actually rises and sets?

First and foremost, the Message-Incident Principle asserts that spiritual truths in the Bible are *inerrant* because they are totally and absolutely true. The word “inerrant” means “to be completely free from error.” Throughout history these messages of faith have consistently impacted the lives of men and women. They have assisted us in developing our personal relationship with the Lord and have provided joy, comfort, and purpose. The inerrant truths in Scripture are the foundational beliefs of the Christian faith. To use Genesis 1, the central messages of faith include: God is the Creator of the universe and life (v. 1), only men and women have been created in the Image of God (v. 26-27), and the marvellous world that God has made is very good (v. 31).

This fundamental hermeneutical principle also recognizes that statements in Scripture regarding the physical world feature an *ancient science*. More specifically, the inspired biblical writers and their readers understood nature from an ancient phenomenological perspective. They did not enjoy sophisticated scientific instruments like telescopes and microscopes as we do today. Their view of the creation was limited to their natural senses, such as observation through the naked eye. Nevertheless, Scripture features the best science-of-the-day in the ancient world of the biblical peoples. Had we lived at that time, we would have embraced their ancient scientific ideas, like the literal movement of the sun across the sky every day.

The Message-Incident Principle states that the ancient science in Scripture is *incidental* because God’s central purpose in the Bible is to reveal messages of faith, and not scientific facts about his creation. The word “incidental” has the meaning of “that which happens to be alongside” and “happening in connection with something more important.” In this way, the ancient science in Scripture is found “alongside” the

“more important” inerrant spiritual truths revealed by the Holy Spirit to the biblical writers.

Though the ancient science in the Bible is ultimately incidental to the messages of faith, it plays a *critical role* in delivering these spiritual truths. The ancient scientific ideas are similar to a cup that holds water. Does it really matter whether a cup is made of glass, plastic, or metal? No. The material that it is made of is incidental. What matters is that a vessel is needed to bring water to a thirsty person. Similarly, the incidental ancient science in Scripture is like a cup that delivers the life-giving spiritual messages to our thirsty souls.

Let’s apply the Message-Incident Principle to Philippians 2:9-11. As we noted, a more precise translation of these verses by the apostle Paul states, “Therefore God exalted him [Jesus] to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, [1] in heaven and [2] on earth and [3] down in the underworld, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” The inerrant spiritual truth in Philippians 2:9-11 is clear: Jesus is the Lord over the entire creation. In order to reveal this message of faith to Paul and his ancient readers, God allowed the incidental ancient science of the 3-tier universe to be used as a vessel to deliver it.

Now I suspect there are some of you who are probably asking the question, “Did God lie in the Bible?” My answer to this question is an emphatic “NO!” In fact, Scripture states quite clearly in Titus 1:2 that God “does not lie,” and Hebrews 6:18 asserts that “it is impossible for God to lie.” Lying requires an individual to be deceptive, and the God of the Bible is certainly *not* a God of deception.

The God of Christianity is a God of truth and love. To reveal himself to an ancient people, he graciously came down to their intellectual level to communicate his life-changing spiritual truths. In Philippians 2:9-11, the Holy Spirit allowed the apostle Paul to use the ancient notion of the 3-tier universe as an incidental vessel to deliver an inerrant mes-

sage of faith. As a result, Paul and his readers would have fully comprehended that Jesus is the Lord of the whole world, because from their ancient phenomenological perspective, the 3-tier universe was understood to be the entire universe.

Of course, God could have revealed to Paul modern scientific concepts like spiral galaxies, solar systems, and neutron stars, etc. But do you think that this apostle and his readers would have understood what these astronomical structures were? I doubt it. They did not have powerful telescopes as we do today. Such a revelation would have been confusing to ancient people and most likely a stumbling block that would have stopped them from embracing the inerrant spiritual truth of Jesus' lordship over the entire creation. Therefore, God did *not* lie in Philippians 2:9-11. Instead the Holy Spirit graciously accommodated and descended to the level of ancient men and women in the process of inspiring the Bible.

The Message-Incident Principle also assists us to separate the inerrant spiritual truth in Philippians 2:9-11 from its ancient science, and then to recast this message for our twenty-first century generation by using modern science as an incidental vessel. For example, as Christians today we can proclaim that Jesus is the Lord of our massive 13.8-billion-year-old universe with its approximately 100 billion galaxies featuring about 100 billion stars in each galaxy! As science advances, every amazing discovery in nature can be viewed in the light of God's lordship over his creation.

Finally, the Message-Incident Principle sheds light on a problem that appears regularly within our churches. Most Christians are not aware that the Bible has an ancient understanding of science. They assume that statements about nature in Scripture align with physical reality. By embracing scientific concordism, they often conflate the inerrant spiritual truths in the Bible with the incidental ancient science. The term "conflate" refers to "the careless blending or mixing of distinct ideas." In this way, many Christians believe that statements about nature in Scripture are inerrant truths. To correct this situation, the Message-Incident Prin-

ciple helps us to *separate* the inerrant messages of faith from the incidental ancient science, and to not *conflate* the two together.

Biblical Creation Accounts

In a manner similar to Philippians 2:9-11 presented above, we can apply the Message-Incident Principle to the creation accounts in Scripture. As we noted in the previous hermeneutical principle, the biblical authors and their readers were very logical in believing that plants and animals were immutable. It was also quite reasonable for them to think that God had created living organisms *de novo* (quick and complete) “according to their/its kinds,” as stated ten times in Genesis 1.

Therefore, the message of faith in this biblical creation account is that the God of the Bible is the Creator of every plant and every animal. In order to deliver this inerrant spiritual truth, the Holy Spirit descended to the level of the biblical writers and allowed their incidental ancient science of *de novo* creation to be used as a vehicle to transport this foundational belief to the ancient readers of this first chapter in Scripture.

Of course, many Christians today believe that God’s *de novo* creative acts in Genesis 1 are a record of actual historical events in the origin of living organisms. Young earth creationists contend that plants were created rapidly and fully formed on the third day of creation, birds and sea creatures on the fifth day, and land animals and humans on the sixth. And each of these days were 24-hour periods. Progressive creationists also believe that the Creator made living creatures quickly and completely. They claim that these miraculous *de novo* creative events occurred at different times during the 4.6-billion-year history of the earth. According to this view of origins, the days of Genesis 1 are periods that are millions of years long (See Appendix 1).

I am certain that you have identified the problem with these two Christian anti-evolutionary views of origins. Young earth creation and progressive creation are scientific concordist positions that conflate the ancient science of *de novo* creation with the inerrant message of faith that God created all living organisms. This would be no different than to take

the spiritual truth in Philippians 2:9-10—Jesus is the Lord of the entire universe—and to conflate it with the ancient science of the 3-tier universe, and then to claim that we must accept this ancient understanding of the structure of the world. I doubt that any Christian today would embrace such a position.

The Message-Incident Principle underlines that we must not conflate the inerrant spiritual truths in Scripture with the incidental ancient science that transports them. Instead, we need to separate the two in order to focus on God’s intended messages of faith for us. It is worth noting that biblical interpreters throughout history have often conflated ancient concepts of nature in Scripture with God’s messages of faith without being aware of it. The reason for this is that the identification of ancient science in Scripture can only occur *after* the discovery of modern scientific concepts.

For example, it was only after Galileo’s work in astronomy during the seventeenth century that Christians realized biblical passages referring to the sun’s movement across the sky were based on an ancient phenomenological perspective. This historical episode is one of the reasons why we as Christians must keep up to date with the latest scientific discoveries—it allows us to be better interpreters of the Word of God.

Excursus

Are the Messages of Faith Merely Ancient Human Beliefs?

When I introduce the Message-Incident Principle to my science and religion students, they are quick to challenge me with several questions. If the science in the Bible is an ancient human understanding of nature, then is this also the case with the spiritual truths in Scripture? Since no one today accepts ancient science like the 3-tier universe in Philippians 2:9-11, why should we believe the message of faith in this passage that Jesus is Lord of the entire cosmos? And are we not being inconsistent if we reject the ancient phenomenological perspective of the world in the Bible but accept the spiritual truths? I suspect that many of you are probably asking the same important questions.

My response to my students is simple and rather obvious. I say to them: The fact that you are sitting here in a class on Christian theology two thousand years after the Bible was composed is proof of the power and eternal truthfulness of the messages of faith. The ancient science in Scripture such as the 3-tier universe is not the reason you are in my course. For that matter, before you entered my classroom, most of you were not aware that the Word of God includes this ancient understanding of the structure of the world.

Instead, it is inerrant messages of faith, such as the divine revelation in Philippians 2:9-11 that Jesus is the Lord of the whole universe, that have led you to become a Christian. In fact, it is the power of the spiritual truths in Scripture that has caused men and women throughout history to be born-again and to change their lives in dramatic ways. This reality of the impact of Scripture on humans is clearly stated in Hebrews 4:12. "For the Word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." And this indeed is my personal experience when reading the Bible.

If the messages of faith in Scripture were merely ancient human ideas about spirituality similar to those in other ancient religions, then they should have died away like most of these religions a long time ago. Take for example some of the religious beliefs in ancient Mesopotamia.¹ In one creation account, a god murders a goddess and then splits her body in half to make heaven and earth. The reason humans are created in many of these stories is to relieve the gods of their work. One justification for a worldwide flood in some Mesopotamian accounts is that humans were too noisy and the gods could not sleep. During the flood the gods suffer from hunger because there are no humans to feed them sacrifices. I think everyone will agree that the gods in these Mesopotamian stories are quite pathetic and the spiritual truths just as sorrowful. It is not surprising that these religious beliefs passed away and have had no influence on later generations.

In sharp contrast, the God of the Bible is a majestic, powerful, and holy God. He is in complete control of the universe with no other gods in existence to challenge him. The Lord does not require men and women to meet his needs. As Acts 17:25 states, God “is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything.” The Lord values humans and creates us in his likeness and image (Gen. 1:26-27). Amazingly, the Creator of the entire universe is in a personal relationship with us. And human sin is the reason for divine judgment. The attributes of the God of Scripture—such as holiness, love, and truthfulness (Rev. 4:8; 1 Jn. 4:8; Heb. 6:18)—are so far above and beyond the attributes of the pagan gods of nations that surrounded ancient Israel and the earlier Christians. In fact, there is no comparison between our God and their gods.

Moreover, what is quite remarkable about the Bible is that God began to reveal himself to humanity through a small and insignificant tribal nation like Israel, and not a major civilization such as the Mesopotamians. Jesus then used twelve mostly uneducated men as disciples to preach the gospel that he died for the sins of men and women. The Lord did not employ the powerful Romans or Greeks. If the biblical messages of faith were merely ancient human ideas of irrelevant and inconsequential ancient people, then they should have disappeared along with these small communities and never gained prominence around the world. However, the spiritual truths in the Bible are “alive and active” (Heb. 4:12), and they have deeply struck human souls throughout history and continue to do so today.

Proof that the messages of faith in Scripture are not just ancient human beliefs about religion is demonstrated by the fact that you are reading a book on biblical hermeneutics. For me, this means that the Bible has impacted you in a very profound way and that you want to improve your interpretation of the Word of God. It is not the ancient scientific idea of a 3-tier universe that has led you to a personal relationship with Jesus. Rather, it is the eternal and inerrant spiritual truth that Jesus is Lord of the entire world that has powerfully changed your life. Do you agree?

Biblical Accommodation

The verb “to accommodate” has the meanings “to adapt,” “adjust,” “help out,” and “make fit.” Within the context of biblical hermeneutics, the principle of accommodation refers to God adapting his revelation to the level of humans in order that we may understand his inerrant spiritual truths. To explain this principle, let’s look at three passages where Jesus uses an ancient view of botany as an incidental vessel to deliver messages of faith.

In the well-known parable of the mustard seed, the Lord asks his disciples in Mark 4:30-32, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

Is the mustard seed “the smallest of all the seeds on the earth”? No. Orchid seeds are much smaller. So did Jesus make a mistake? Or worse, did he lie to his disciples? No, not at all! Instead the Lord was adapting or accommodating his message about the kingdom of God to his ancient audience. In other words, he was using the botany-of-the-day, which for his listeners included the idea that the mustard seed was the tiniest of all plant seeds on the earth. The parable in Mark 4:30-32 is prophetic. The kingdom of God would begin with a small number of disciples, and then grow into a great body of believers—the church.

Jesus offers another teaching about God’s kingdom in the parable of the growing seed. In Mark 4:26-29 he states, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day,

whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

As everyone knows today, the soil does not produce grain “all by itself” because DNA in the seed is a significant contributor in the growth of a plant. Once again, Jesus did not lie to his disciples, nor did the Holy Spirit make a mistake while inspiring the biblical writer of the Gospel of Mark. This is another example of God accommodating to the level of ancient people by using their understanding of botany to deliver an iner-rant spiritual truth. Mark 4:26-29 reveals that though we do not fully understand the spiritual growth of those in the kingdom of God, the Lord will gather us together at the end of time.

In John 12:23-24, Jesus speaks to disciples about his imminent death and resurrection. “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” Modern science has discovered that seeds are alive and functioning at a very low metabolic rate. If a seed died, it would never germinate.

Think about what happens to the outer shell of a seed prior to germination. It breaks down and rots. Therefore, from an ancient phenomenological perspective, it was reasonable for ancient people to assume that seeds die before they germinate. In John 12, Jesus used this ancient botanical idea as a vessel to deliver the message of faith that he would be put to death, and that later he would be resurrected physically from the grave, leading many people to have faith in him.

I need to make a few more comments about these passages with Jesus employing an ancient knowledge of plant seeds. Most importantly, I must emphasize that the Lord did not lie. As we noted in the previous interpretive principle, Titus 1:2 asserts that God “does not lie” and Hebrews 6:18 states that “it is impossible for God to lie.” Jesus had no intention whatsoever to deceive anyone. Instead, in order to reveal spiritual truths at the level of his ancient listeners, he accommodated by using the botany-of-the-day in his teaching.

We must also remember that Jesus is God and that he is the Creator of the world. John 1:3 records that through Jesus “all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” Similarly, in referring to the Lord, Colossians 1:16 states that “all things have been created through him and for him” And Hebrews 1:2 records that God spoke through Jesus, “whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.” Being the Creator of everything including plants, Jesus certainly knew that the mustard seed is not the smallest seed, the soil is not the only factor in plant growth, and seeds do not die before germination.

Finally, I think that most Christians would agree that the Lord did not come to earth to teach scientific facts about plants and their seeds! Instead, in Mark 4:26-29, Mark 4:30-32, and John 12:23-24, Jesus used the botany-of-the-day that was familiar to his listeners in order to communicate messages of faith as effectively as possible.

It must be mentioned that some Christians complain that the principle of biblical accommodation “weakens” or “waters down” the Scriptures. I certainly appreciate their concern. But here are six reasons for accepting the belief that accommodation is a feature of the Word of God.

First, divine revelation by necessity requires God to accommodate. Stated another way, for an Infinite Creator to communicate with finite creatures, he must come down to our level. Otherwise we would never understand. The mind of God is so much greater than the mind of humans. As the Lord states in Isaiah 55:8-9, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts . . . As the heavens are higher than the earth . . . so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts.”

Second, the greatest act of divine revelation is the Incarnation. The Latin noun *carnis* means “flesh.” John 1:14 states that Jesus “became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” Similarly, Philippians 2:7-8 asserts that the Lord “humbled himself” and “made himself nothing” in order to become a man. In other words, God accommodated by taking on human flesh, and through this ultimate act of accommodation, the Lord revealed his unfathomable love for us by dying on the Cross for our sins.

Third, Jesus often employed parables in his teaching. Simply defined, parables are earthly stories with heavenly messages. The Lord included “earthly” ancient scientific notions-of-the-day, like the mustard seed being the smallest of all seeds, in order to deliver inerrant spiritual truths about the kingdom of God.

Fourth, the Lord was fully aware of the limitations of humans. Following his parables of the mustard seed and growing seed, Mark 4:33 comments, “With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, *as much as they could understand*” (my italics). Clearly, the Lord accommodated to the intellectual level of his disciples and audience in order to teach his messages of faith.

Fifth, Christians experience accommodation when they pray. Most would agree that God meets us exactly where we are at in our life, and that he talks to us at our level of comprehension. As we grow spiritually over time, the Lord then reveals himself using spiritual beliefs that are more mature. God knows us better than we know ourselves and knows the best way to communicate his inerrant truths so that we can fully grasp them.

Finally, everyone at some point uses accommodation because it is an effective and natural way to communicate. For example, when a 4-year old asks where babies come from, parents answer by coming down both physically to their knees and intellectually to the level of understanding of the child. They communicate the message of faith that a baby is a gift from God without presenting the incidental details of sexual reproduction. In other words, *it is possible to reveal inerrant spiritual truths without using actual scientific facts.*

Biblical Creation Accounts

Here are a few questions I would like you to think about regarding biblical accommodation. Are the statements about origins in Genesis 1 and 2 similar to the incidental ancient botany used by Jesus in his teaching? Did the Holy Spirit accommodate by allowing these biblical writers to use their ancient view of origins? And is it possible that God revealed

inerrant spiritual truths in Genesis 1 and 2 without employing modern scientific facts about how he actually created the universe and living organisms?

In my opinion, the principle of accommodation is one of the most important hermeneutical concepts for interpreting statements in Scripture that deal with the physical world. The Bible is the Holy Spirit-inspired Word of God. As 2 Timothy 3:16 states, “All Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” But we must always remember that the inspired biblical writers were ancient people. In order to reveal the inerrant spiritual truth that God was the only Creator of the world, the Holy Spirit had to descend to their level of comprehension and accommodate by using the origins science-of-the-day.

Let me further explain. Assume for a moment that you are God and that you have decided to reveal yourself to the world through an ancient community like the Hebrews about 3500 years ago. Being God, you have the power to inspire writers to record your every word and thought in Scripture. And let’s also assume that you created living organisms through an evolutionary process. In your creation account, would you have inspired the biblical author to write: “In the beginning God created plants and animals through evolution.”

I doubt that ancient men and women thousands of years ago would have understood the meaning of the term “evolution.” The theory of biological evolution was only accepted after the scientific discoveries of Charles Darwin in the late nineteenth century. In fact, many surveys of American adults today show that even though we are the most scientifically informed generation that has ever lived, about half of us reject evolution.¹ So it seems highly unlikely that ancient people would have understood a creation account about God creating living organisms through an evolutionary process.

Instead, I suspect that if you were God and wanted to reveal to an ancient community that you were the Creator of plants and animals, you would use their understanding of origins. From an ancient phenomeno-

logical perspective, they saw that living organisms were immutable and never changed. It was perfectly logical for them to think that these creatures were created *de novo* (quick and complete). Therefore, by accommodating to the intellectual level of ancient people, would you not say that you created plants and animals rapidly and fully formed? And isn't this exactly what the Holy Spirit did by revealing that the God of Christianity was the Creator of life in Genesis 1 and 2?