

# FLAT EARTH: WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

*That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro,  
and carried about with every wind of doctrine,  
by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness,  
whereby they lie in wait to deceive.*

*Ephesians 4:14*

The idea that the earth is flat has had a resurgence lately. Though certainly not the majority, a growing number of people are promoting the idea. Some even claim the Bible teaches a flat earth. So, what is the truth? Are we being deceived when the earth is depicted as a sphere? Is evidence being hidden? Does it even matter? And what does the Bible really say about it?

## *HISTORY OF THE FLAT EARTH IDEA*

Many people today think that ancient people believed the earth was flat until Christopher Columbus discovered the Americas in 1492, proving the earth is a sphere. As the story goes, people were concerned over Columbus' planned voyage, thinking he would sail off the edge of the earth. Though this is what many of us have heard, it is a myth. At least two thousand years before Columbus, the Greeks not only believed the earth was spherical, but also had fairly accurately calculated the size of the earth as well. Interestingly, it turns out that the debate in Columbus's time wasn't whether the earth was a sphere or not, but about how big it was, and how much empty ocean lay to the west between Europe and Asia.<sup>1</sup>

Now it is useful to note that there were ancient cultures that did see the earth as flat, such as the Egyptians and Babylonians. But the claim that the spherical earth is a modern invention is simply a false over-simplification.

## *THE BEDFORD LEVEL EXPERIMENT*

One man who had a large part in starting the modern flat earth movement was Samuel Rowbotham. In 1838 he conducted an experiment on a 6 mile straight, flat stretch of the Old Bedford River near Norfolk, England, known as the Bedford Level, supposedly proving the earth is flat. But what did he actually observe?

The premise of Rowbotham's experiment was that because of the curvature of the earth, a telescope mounted 8 inches from the surface of the water should not be able to see anything under 16 feet tall six miles down the river. So, he sent a rowboat with a five-foot-tall mast downstream, where he was able to see the boat for the full six miles. Does this mean he was right, and the earth is flat?

### OVERLOOKED REFRACTION

Not at all. You see, he did not consider the way temperature differences affect light. On warm days, over cool water, the water cools the layer of air above it, forming a divide between warm and cool air called a temperature inversion. This temperature inversion refracts or bends light, making objects visible that are below the horizon. It is a very similar idea to (though the inverse of) a mirage in a desert. It appears this is what was at play in Rowbotham's experiment, and interestingly, Alfred Wallace later repeated his experiment under different conditions and got different results. There is even a photographer who has exploited this phenomenon when the temperatures are right to take pictures of the Chicago skyline from across Lake Michigan. Without temperature inversions, distant objects sink below the horizon, even under magnification, just as we would expect on a spherical earth.

### COMMON ARGUMENTS

A common flat earth argument is that the horizon appears flat. Of course, this disregards the size of the earth, which even though a sphere, appears superficially flat from our small perspective. Other arguments are claims of faked evidence for a spherical earth. Often it is claimed that humans have never been to space, that the moon landing was fake, that we haven't put satellites into orbit, and that livestreams from the International Space Station are all staged. NASA is seen as a fake organization trying to deceive us. Quite a lot of flat earth arguments appeal to conspiracy and cover-ups, not observable evidence.

It is important to notice the enormous role of conspiracy in the flat earth idea. If true, millions of people involved in industries like space exploration, communications, astronomy, shipping, airlines, and many others must be in on the conspiracy, actively working together to deceive the world about the earth's shape.

### DOES THE BIBLE REALLY TEACH A FLAT EARTH?

Let's look at some examples of passages in scripture that are claimed to support a flat earth. First, several passages, such as Revelation 7:1, mention the "four corners of the earth". A sphere doesn't have corners, so it's argued the earth must be flat. But most flat earth models show the earth as a disc. Where are the four corners on a flat circle? It's more likely that this phrase refers to the four cardinal directions. There are also references to the "ends" of the earth such as in Psalm 22:27: *"All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the Lord: and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee."* Yes, there are no "ends" on a globe, but is this verse really saying the physical geography, the rocks and dirt of the "ends" of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord? It sounds more reasonable that this is referring to the people from the most remote parts of the world, not the earth's shape.

## *EVIDENCE FOR A GLOBE*

There is a multitude of evidence that the earth is spherical, from the shape of the earth's shadow during lunar eclipses, the movements of the sun, moon and stars in the sky, ships appearing to sink below the horizon at great distances, to the phenomenon of the 24-hour sun in Antarctica.

## *IMPLICATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES*

Why is it important to address this idea? Unlike evolution, it does not directly undermine biblical authority, so why spend time on it? Because ideas have consequences. I have personally observed belief in a flat earth to take people down a slippery slope, leading into more conspiracies, consuming their lives and alienating them from others. I have seen it harm churches, wreck families and take away Christians' effectiveness in evangelism. Often involved is a desire for "secret knowledge", something more than what God gave us in the Bible, similar to the heresy of Gnosticism, in which only a small, special group have spiritual knowledge.

Many may not take it seriously, but remember, beliefs have consequences.

## *CONCLUSION*

When encountering new ideas, we should follow the example of the people of Berea, after Paul preached the gospel to them. They "searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (Acts 17:11). We need a firm foundation for our thinking, and there is no more solid a foundation than God's Word. God has given us all we need in the Bible, including how to be saved from our sin. While our belief about the shape of the earth has nothing to do with salvation, belief in Jesus does. Do you believe in Him?

~Denton Ford

1. Danny Faulkner, "Falling Flat: A Refutation of Flat Earth Claims" (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2019) Much of the information in this article is covered in Dr. Faulkner's book in much deeper detail.