
The Geographical Meaning of “Earth” and “Seas” in Genesis 1:10

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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.

We will look closely at the immediate context of Gen 1:10 and at all the biblical data bearing upon its meaning; but, we must begin by looking at it first within its historical context beginning with what might be called the outer circle of that context, namely, the conception of the “earth” which human beings in general automatically have until they are informed otherwise by modern science.

I. The Scientifically Naive View of the Earth in Tribal Societies

Levy-Bruhl, commenting on the beliefs of scientifically naive tribal peoples, wrote [italics mine], “Their cosmography as far as we know anything about it was *practically of one type* up til the time of the white man’s arrival upon the scene. That of the Borneo Dayaks may furnish us with some idea of it. ‘They consider the earth to be a flat surface, whilst the heavens are a dome, a kind of glass shade which covers the earth and comes in contact with it at the horizon.’” Alexander similarly spoke of “The *usual* primitive conception of the world’s form” as “flat and round below and surmounted above by a solid firmament in the shape of an inverted bowl.”(1)

It is to be noted that in the usual scientifically naive conception of the universe not only is the earth flat, but the sky is understood as an inverted bowl that *literally touches the earth at the horizon*. Thus for the Thonga, “Heaven is for them an immense solid vault which rests upon the earth. The place where heaven touches the earth is called *bugimamusi*...the place

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where women can lean their [cooking] pestles against the vault.” For the Yakuts “the outer edge of the earth is said to touch the rim of a hemispherical sky.”(2)

Since the sky is usually thought by pre-scientific peoples to be a solid hemisphere

literally touching the earth (or sea) at the horizon, the earth must necessarily be thought of as flat. It is impossible to conceive of the sky as a hemisphere touching the earth at the horizon, and yet conceive of the earth as a globe. If the earth were a globe but the sky just a hemisphere touching the earth, half of the earth would have no sky. The shape of the earth is accordingly explicitly or implicitly described by all pre-scientific peoples as being flat, and usually circular—a single disc-shaped continent.

Thus, to give just a few examples, the earth of the Bavenda and Bathonga (African tribes) “is thought to be a large flat disk floating in water, roofed by the dome of the sky, *makholi*, which meets the circumference of the disk at the horizon...” Among the Australian aboriginals “there seems to be a universal belief...that the earth is a flat surface, surmounted by the solid vault of the sky.” The earth of the South American Yahomam is described as “an inverted platter: gently curved, thin, circular, rigid...” Indians both in Mexico and North America conceive of the earth “as a large wheel or disk...”(3)

Scientifically naive peoples everywhere regularly conceive of the earth as a single continent in the shape of a flat circular disc. There are rare exceptions; but, in no case have they thought of the earth as a planetary globe. The human mind, as clearly evidenced by prescientific peoples, just naturally defines the earth as flat—until informed otherwise by modern science. Even pre-adolescent children in modern Western societies think of the earth as flat until informed otherwise by modern science.(4)

1. The Ancient Far Eastern View of the Earth

Early Japanese writings do not describe the shape of the earth, but like the Ainu, it was conceived of as floating on water and hence by implication not our planetary globe.(5)

The ancient Chinese described the sky as an “inverted bowl” and the earth as flat or a truncated four-sided pyramid. In this view “Earth is still and square, while the round sky (with ‘stars fixed to the surface’) revolves:

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the *yang* sky contrasts with the *yin* earth.”(6) Later, more mundane Chinese maps represent the ocean flowing around the earth in a circle and the earth as more or less disc-shaped.(7) So although the earth in earliest Chinese thought was considered square—apparently for philosophical reasons, the concept of a circular earth was also held by many. In both cases, the earth was considered a single continent that was fundamentally flat, and never a planetary globe.

The Rig Veda shows the earliest Indian conceptions of the earth. The earth and sky are

compared to two wheels at the ends of an axle, but also to two bowls and to two leather bags. The concept of the earth as a wheel is the usual concept of the earth as a single continent in the shape of a flat circular disc. The Indian concept of two bowls or leather bags represents the earth as a right-side-up bowl covered at its rim by the inverted bowl of the sky, the two halves composing the whole universe. Gombrich concluded from this that the earth was conceived of as concave.(8) It is entirely possible, however, that the concavity of the earth-half of the universe is reflecting either the earth bulging below to contain the realm of the dead (a common conception) or perhaps, as was enunciated in later Vedic thought, part of the bulge is really a subterranean ocean. I think, therefore, that in all Indian conceptions of the earth the surface of the earth was conceived of as a single continent that was flat and circular, and in any case never a planetary globe. Later Indian thought favored the concept of the earth as a flat disc; and classical Hindu, Buddhist and Jain cosmologies are all in agreement that “our level is a vast disc...”(9)

2. The Ancient Near Eastern View of the Earth

The noted Egyptologist, John Wilson, tells us that in Egyptian thought the earth was conceived of as a flat platter with a corrugated rim. The inside bottom of the platter was the flat alluvial plain of Egypt, and the corrugated rim was the rim of mountains which were the foreign lands.(10)

H. Schäfer, although agreeing the earth was conceived of as flat, doubted there was any sure evidence for the circularity of the earth in Egyptian

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thought. Keel, however, noting that the ocean around the earth was long conceived of by the Egyptians as circular, concluded “This fact suggests that in Egypt, visualization of the earth as a circular disc was from very ancient times at least an option.” Keel noted that the concept of earth as a circular disc is supported by Egyptian evidence as early as the fourteenth century B.C., wherein the figure of Osiris or Geb [the earth god] is represented as circular.(11) In addition, contrary to Schäfer, there is evidence for belief in the circularity of the earth from the time of Ramses II (1304–1237) and III in inscriptions which speak of “...the Circle of the Earth.”(12) There is good reason, then, for believing that the ancient Egyptians conceived of the earth as a single continent in the shape of a flat circular disc; and, in any case certainly not as a planetary globe.

In ancient Sumer, according to both Kramer and Lambert, the earth was conceived of as a “flat disc.” Both scholars are aware that the Babylonian view of the universe, which thought of the earth as a disc, was probably inherited from Sumer.(13) Heidel noted that in an early version of creation in the An-Antum list of gods (which are Sumerian) “Sky and earth are apparently to

be viewed as two enormous discs....”(14)

In Babylonia one of the clearest indications that the earth was conceived of as flat is found in Tablet V of *Enuma elish*, where half the body of Tiamat, having been split in two by Marduk, is laid out as a base for mountains (lines 53, 57). Tiamat’s half-body is laid out over the deep from whence the Tigris and Euphrates flow out from her eyes (lines 54, 55). Livingstone translates line 62 “Half of her [Tiamat] he made flat and firm, the earth.”(15)

The circularity of the earth in Babylonian thought is seen directly in a sixth century B.C. clay map of the world, which most scholars believe is derived from much earlier models. Clifford noted that the world in this map is conceived of “as a disk.”(16)

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Lambert, noting that the Babylonians were “without any understanding of a round [spherical] earth,” went on to describe the Babylonian universe as several levels of discs. Heidel also describes heaven and earth in the *Enuma elish* as “two great discs....”(17)

There is no question that the Babylonians thought of the earth as a single continent in the shape of a flat circular disc. Even later when the Neo-Babylonians developed a highly sophisticated mathematical astronomy, they did not develop the concept of a spherical earth.(18)

We see, then, that in ancient Near Eastern thought the earth was always conceived of as a single continent in the shape of a flat circular disc, never as a planetary globe.

3. The Ancient Western View of the Earth

Homer’s view of the universe, as well as Hesiod’s, is the usual scientifically naive view: “The sky is a solid hemisphere like a bowl (*Il.*17,425...5,504, *Od.*3,2...15,329 and 17,565.)... It covers the flat round earth.” The earth is clearly a disc.(19) Thales (c. 600 B.C.) and Anaximander (c. 575 B.C.) both conceived of the earth as a disc. Anaximenes (c. 550 B.C.) thought it was flat, but shaped “like a table.” Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 525 B.C.) believed the earth was flat.(20)

In the beginning of the fifth century B.C., however, the idea of the earth as a planetary globe apparently began to emerge. Both the Pythagoreans (c. 500 B.C.) and Parmenides (c. 475 B.C.) are usually credited with accepting the view of the earth as a planetary globe.(21) Anaxagoras, Empedocles and Leucippus, however, (all c. 450 B.C.) supposed the earth to be flat as did Democritus (c. 425 B.C.).(22)

In addition, the majority of Greeks down to 400 B.C. still thought of the earth as

disc-shaped, as is clearly evidenced by the fact that map makers in the time of Herodotus (c. 400 B.C.) uniformly rendered the earth as a disc

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(Herodotus 4:36). As for Herodotus, Thomson says “Nowhere does Herodotus betray a suspicion that the earth may not be flat.”(23)

It is in Plato (c. 375 B.C.) that one first finds a sure clear description of the earth as a globe. Plato’s *Phaedo* describes the earth as “round” (108E) “like a ball” (110B) and as his *Timaeus* (38C,D) shows this is within the context of a geocentric universe. Thomson says, “Certainly it was Plato’s adoption that gave the globe a wider currency.” From Plato on, nearly all philosophers thought of the earth as spherical. However, nonscientific writers and common people went on believing the earth was flat.(24)

The ancient western view of the earth’s shape from Homer to Plato (or possibly the fifth century B.C.) was then most commonly that of a single continent in the shape of a flat circular disc. Further, even into New Testament times most common people continued to believe the earth was a flat single continent.

In summary we have seen that all scientifically naive tribal peoples and both eastern and western thinkers until the fifth century B.C. (at the earliest) conceived of the earth as a flat single continent, usually in the shape of a flat circular disc. No one until the fifth century B.C. conceived of the earth as a planetary globe, and even then most people went on believing the earth was a flat single continent.

II. The Historico-Grammatical Meaning of “Earth” in Gen 1:10

This brings us to the meaning of “earth” in Gen 1 and 1:10 in particular. Gen 1, regardless of when it may have been last edited, belongs conceptually to the second millennium B.C.—long before Plato’s time and the rise of the concept of a planetary globe. 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.(25) 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.

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There is also archaeological and biblical evidence that the early Hebrews were technologically and hence by implication generally scientifically inferior to the peoples surrounding them.(26) So with all the peoples around them thinking of the earth as a flat circular disc, it is highly improbable that the Hebrews were thinking of the earth in modern scientific terms as a planetary globe. Unless then we remove Gen 1 from its historical context, we must say that the historical meaning of “earth” in Gen 1:10 is very probably a single continent in the shape of a flat circular disc.

We must now examine the grammatical meaning of “earth” in Gen 1:10. The Hebrew word for earth (אָרֶץ, *'ereṣ*) in Gen 1 has several meanings in the OT, delineated in *KB* as (1) ground, piece of ground (2) territory, country (3) the whole of the land, the earth. In light of the universality of Gen 1:1, the meaning of *'ereṣ* in that verse is clearly the third listed meaning. If isolated from its historical context, *'ereṣ* in Gen 1:1 could conceivably be a reference to the earth as a planetary globe. The word *'ereṣ* in Gen 1:10 could then be a reference simply to the continents on that planetary globe especially since it is the “dry land” (יַבְשָׁה, *yabbāšâ*) in contrast to the wet sea (cf. Exod 4:9; 14:16,22,29) which God in Gen 1:10 names *'ereṣ*, “Earth.”

But, interpreting Gen 1:10 as a reference to continents on a planetary globe, although seeming quite reasonable to the modern western reader, is completely contrary to its historical context. This is bad enough to make such an interpretation improbable; in addition, there is nothing whatsoever in the biblical context—either immediate or remote—which defines *'ereṣ* in Gen 1:1 as a planetary globe. This latter meaning is derived purely from our knowledge of modern Western science and simply read into the text. Interpreting *'ereṣ* in Gen 1:1 as a planetary globe is eisegetical, not exegetical.

The *'ereṣ* in Gen 1:1 is indeed the *entire* earth; and since the *'ereṣ* in Gen 1:2 refers back to the *'ereṣ* mentioned in Gen 1:1, the *'ereṣ* in Gen 1:2 is also a reference to the *entire* earth. So, when the *'ereṣ* which had been buried in water and was barren (1:2) is separated from the water and made to sprout vegetation in Gen 1:9–12, it too is the *entire* earth. The dry land of Gen 1:10 is the *entire* earth. This fits the historical context like a hand to a glove. The writer is speaking of the *entire* *'ereṣ* as (flat) dry land, not as a globe.

The writer of Gen 1 also makes it clear in verses six through eight that he is not defining *'ereṣ* as a globe, even in Gen 1:1 and 2 . That is, in Gen 1:6–8 the entire sky is created in the form of a rock-solid firmament.(27) This firmament was understood by all peoples in OT times to be in the

shape of a hemispherical dome (or a disc) which literally touched the earth (or the sea around the earth) at the horizon. Either way, whether the sky was conceived as a hemi-spherical dome touching the earth at the horizon or a flat unbending disc above the earth, the earth below cannot be a sphere because if it were, half of the earth would have no sky. The biblical context, therefore, not only provides no basis for defining *'ereš* in Gen 1:1 as a globe (and in Gen 1:10 as the continents on that globe), it excludes this interpretation by giving us a concept of the sky which coheres perfectly with the ancient Near Eastern concept of the earth as a flat circular disc but cannot be harmonized with the modern concept of the earth as a globe.

It is worth noting also that interpreting *'ereš* in Gen 1:10 as the dry land on a globe does not fit the context of modern science any better than it fits the context of Gen 1. For according to modern science the dry land on the globe preceded the formation of the sea by millions of years; but, according to Gen 1:1–10, the sea (תְּהוֹמוֹת, *těhôm*) preceded the formation of the dry land.(28) This fact again tells us that the universe of Gen 1 is the universe as understood by all ancient Near Eastern peoples at that time and not as understood in our time. The earth of Gen 1:1, 2 and 10 is not a globe but a single flat continent in the shape of a flat circular disc.

Someone may ask, what about Isa 40:22 which speaks of “the circle of the earth”? The answer is there is nothing either in the underlying Hebrew word (חֲגִיר, *hûg*) or in the context which necessarily implies anything more than the circularity of the flat earth-disc which the historical context and Gen 1 have given us as the meaning of “earth.” If Isaiah had intended to speak of the earth as a globe, he would probably have used the word he used in 22:18 (דָּוָר, *dûr*), meaning “ball.” One may recall that the phrase, “circle of the earth,” was also used in Egypt with reference to the earth as a flat circular disc.(29)

In later biblical writings we also see that the earth was conceived of as flat. In Dan 4:10,11 (MT 7,8) repeated in 4:20 (MT 17), it is said of a tree seen in a dream that it was of “enormous height and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the end of all the earth” (“visible to all the earth,” 4:20). Daniel interprets the tree as a reference to King Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom: “your greatness grew until it reached to the sky and your dominion to the end of the earth” (4:22 [MT 19]). Nebuchadnezzar of course did not really rule the entire earth even as known at that time, but this does not mean that the phrase “to the end of the earth” should be interpreted as limited to an area less than the entire earth-continent.

Ancient Near Eastern kings, regardless of the real size of their empire, were throughout the first millennium B.C. (and earlier) regularly described as rulers of the entire earth. Thus the kings Tiglath-Pileser I (1114–1076), Shalmaneser III (858–824) and Esarhaddon (680–669) were all described

in inscriptions as “king of the world...king of (all) the four rims (of the earth).” Xerxes (485–465) says, “I am Xerxes...the king of this (entire) big and far(-reaching) earth.” Nebuchadnezzar II himself says, “...(from) the Upper Sea (to) the Lower Sea [which means the whole earth continent]” and adds, “I have made...the city of Babylon to the foremost among all the countries and every human habitation.”(30) As will be seen below ancient Egyptian kings also regularly claimed to rule over the entire earth. In all of these inscriptions it is the literal entire earth, that is, the entire flat earth-disc which is described as the extent of the king’s dominion. Interpreted within their historical context, therefore, the words, “all the earth,” in Dan 4:11 and 20 (being a description of the extent of Nebuchadnezzar’s empire) refer literally to the entire earth.

The statement in Dan 4:11 that the tree was “visible to the end of all the earth” means, therefore, that the tree was so tall it was able to be seen by everyone living on earth. Yet the fact is, no matter how tall a tree might become it will not be able to be seen by everyone living on a globe (and many people were living south of the equator in the time of Nebuchadnezzar). Nor does the fact that this tree was seen in a dream give us any reason for obviating the implication of the text that the entire earth was conceived of as flat, for the universal visibility of the tree is predicated upon its height, not upon its being seen in a dream. The statement only makes sense if the earth is defined as a flat continent. Dan 4, therefore, adds confirmation that “earth” in Gen 1 is properly defined as flat, not spherical.

Job 37:3 similarly implies that when God makes lightning, it is seen to the corners of the earth, that is, to the extent of the earth in all directions. The universality of these same terms in Isa 11:11,12 show that Job is speaking of the entire earth, not just a part of it. But lightning, no more than a tall tree, could be seen to the extent of a globe. Regardless of the hyperbole the most natural way of understanding Job 37:3 is that the author was thinking of the earth as flat.

A final verse of Scripture which testifies that the “earth” was conceived in the OT as a single flat continent is Job 38:13. In a clearly cosmological context, not just local, this verse speaks of dawn grasping the earth by its “extremity or hem” (כַּנָּף, *kānāp*; 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. The picture fits in a natural way the concept of the earth as a single flat continent.

A final OT concept which implies the earth is a flat continent, not a globe, is the belief

that it was spread out over the sea. (See the next section). In summary, there is no OT verse which implies the sphericity of the earth. Rather, all OT references which imply the shape of the earth confirm the historico-grammatical definition of “earth” in Gen 1:10: the earth is a single continent in the shape of a flat circular disc.

III. The Sea that Surrounds and Supports the Earth-Disc

As with the meaning of “earth” in Gen 1:10, one cannot expect to have a valid interpretation of the word, “sea(s)” in that verse if one removes it from its historical context. We begin, therefore, with the outermost circle of that historical context, the normal conceptions of pre-scientific minds, as seen in the thinking of tribal peoples around the world. Many of these peoples have no reported concept of the sea; but, all of those who do seem to agree that the sea surrounds the earth-disc, both around its circumference and below it.

Speaking of the nomadic Altaic peoples of inner Asia (Turkic, Mongols, Tungus), for example, Dupre writes, “The earth is thought to be a circular disc surrounded by an immense ocean.” Holmberg says all Asiatic peoples have this concept of an ocean around the earth; and then relates creation stories which show that these Asiatic peoples believed the earth floated on the sea that surrounded it. These stories all mention “the little earth-disc just formed upon the *surface* of the water,” “on the *surface* in the middle of the ocean.”(31)

Edward Seler, speaking of ancient Mexican beliefs, said, “In the manner of other peoples, the earth was conceived by Mexicans as a large wheel or disc completely surrounded by water.” The creation myths of the Chorti, Mayas of Guatamala, speak of “four seas that are surrounding and *beneath* the world.”(32)

Similarly, “according to the cosmology of the Finno-Ugrians, a stream encircles the world....” This stream is called by some of them “a vast ocean.” In their creation story the earth is “*spread out over* the primal sea.”(33)

The west African Dan tribe say heaven (an enclosing dome) “ends all around in the sea.” Another African tribe (unidentified) says, “At the beginning everything was water.” Then a god came to create the dry land, bringing some pieces of iron and earth with him. He “placed the iron *on the water*” and “spread the earth over it.” The Bavenda and the Bathonga say the earth is “a large flat disk floating on water.”(34)

In North America both the Navaho and the Zuni believed the earth was encircled by an ocean; and, the “earth-diver” myths which are often found among American Indians describe the

earth as an island that “floats upon

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the primeval waters.” The earth is explicitly described as an island floating on the surrounding sea by the Huron, the Cherokee, the Bilqala, the Winebago and the Athapascans.(35)

Island peoples naturally think of the earth as surrounded by and floating on the sea. This is documented in the reports of tribal peoples in New Guinea, New Zealand, Micronesia, Polynesia and Japan.(36)

In every pre-scientific cosmology which I have seen that mentions the sea, the earth is described as circular, floating in a circular sea. The concept of a circular earth set in a circular sea is, of course, the natural result of a scientifically naive person observing the circular horizon of both earth and sea. Since the prescientific mind naturally concludes that the earth is a flat disc, it also just naturally concludes that since this disc is surrounded by a flat circular sea, it must be floating upon that sea. Thus it is that all over the world we find the belief in the earth as a flat circular disc floating in the middle of a single circular sea.

1. The Ancient Far Eastern Belief in a Floating Earth

Early Japanese writings perceived the earth as an island in a surrounding ocean. The oldest Japanese sources also say, “of old when the land was young, it floated about as [if] it were floating oil.”(37)

The oldest Chinese view of the universe clearly involved a “rim ocean” surrounding a square earth, with the sea circular at the far edge to meet the inverted bowl-like firmament that touches down on all sides. Thai cosmology also has a clearly circular ocean surrounding the earth.(38)

There is no explicit statement in early Chinese literature which says the earth is floating, but since being surrounded by sea made the earth a large island, and since we know the Chinese thought of islands as floating on the sea, it is a fair presumption that they thought of the earth as floating. This is implied in the relatively early *Tao Te Ching* which speaks of the importance of the power of “the One” without which the “settled earth might

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sink.” In later Chinese cosmological systems we are specifically told “the earth floats on the water;” and we might add that this water is the sea that surrounds the earth.(39)

With regard to Indian thought the Rig Veda seems to refer to a surrounding ocean in texts like 1:116:5, “that ocean that has no beginning” (circular) and 5:85:6 which mentions “the one single ocean.” Sproul says the word *Rasa* in Rig Veda 10:121 is a reference to the “earth-encircling stream.” Later Vedic texts state explicitly that the earth is surrounded by water. Buddhist and Hindu cosmologies have a circular ocean around the earth.(40)

Gombrich says the concept of waters under the earth is not found in the Rig Veda though “alluded to several times in later Vedic literature, and we shall meet them in the earliest Buddhist texts.” Kuiper, in contrast, believes the Rig Veda refers to the earth floating on the primeval waters. Kuiper’s view seems to be confirmed by other scholars who interpret the word *Rasa* in the Rig Veda to mean a river that goes around the earth and surrounds the earth from below. The earth thus floats on the sea that surrounds it. I conclude that the concept of water under the earth is envisioned in the Rig Veda but only clearly enunciated in later Vedic texts such as the one which says the earth “while still floating on the surface of the water began to grow.”(41)

The concept of a floating earth was incorporated into early Buddhism. The *Maha-Parinibbana-Sutra* (c. 300 B.C.) says, “This great earth, Ananda, is established on water....” Another Buddhist sutra says, “On what rests the earth?”—“On the circle of water.” Later Hindu thought also conceived of the earth as a floating island.(42)

We conclude that although early texts are not always explicit, people in the Far East believed the earth was both surrounded by and floating on an ocean. This concept is clearly spelled out in later texts.

2. The Ancient Near Eastern Belief in a Sea that Surrounds and Supports the Earth-Disc

In ancient Egypt the primeval ocean was thought to surround the earth and was called the “the great ring” or “great circuit or circle.” This

earth-encircling sea has been directly compared by Egyptologists to the earth-encircling Greek Okeanos.(43) A Victory Hymn for Thutmose III (1490–1436) speaks of him trampling down “the ends of the lands; that which the Ocean encircles....” Similarly a stela of Amenhotep II (1439–1406) in the context of world dominion (“His borders reach the rim of heaven”) says, “His portion is that on which Re shines; To him belongs what Ocean encircles.” An inscription for Queen Hatshepsut (1486–1469) likewise lays claim to universal dominion saying “the lands were hers, the countries were hers, all that the heavens cover, all that the sea encircles.” Finally in the most explicit terms a hymn praising Ptah in the time of Rameses III (1195–1164) says,

“who founded the earth...who surrounded it with Nun, and the sea.”(44)

In addition, Morenz tells us that in the ancient Egyptian cosmology, “The earth rests on or in the primeval ocean.” The Egyptologist, John Wilson says, “This platter [the earth] floated in water. There were the abysmal waters below on which the platter rested, called by the Egyptians ‘Nun’.” Frankfort says Nun, the primeval ocean, “became Okeanos, surrounding the earth and supporting it.... the earth floats upon Nun.”(45) There does not seem to be any question that the Egyptians believed the earth floated on the ocean that surrounds it.

The idea of the earth floating upon Nun is related to the Egyptian concept of a hillock being the first earth to arise out of the primeval ocean: “The huge mound which emerged from Nun at the very beginning....” This primeval hillock was understood to be an island which floated (CT 714).(46)

That the earth was thought to rest on the primeval waters (Nun) is also seen in the Egyptian belief that Nun is the source of the Nile (and all other

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earthly waters). One Egyptian text describing the Nile as it gushes forth at its source interchanges the words “Nun” and “Nile”: “...the Nile which comes out of both mountains, the Nun, which comes out of the cavern....” Gray displays an Egyptian drawing that shows Nun “emitting the two or four sources of all waters from his mouth....”(47)

Kramer tells us that the Sumerians conceived of the earth as being surrounded by water. We also know that Babylonian cosmology was heavily indebted to Sumerian concepts, and Babylonian cosmology clearly has a sea around the earth, as mentioned in the epic of Gilgamesh which certainly goes back to Sumerian sources.(48) So, it seems probable that the Sumerians did believe in an earth-surrounding sea.

As to the earth floating on the sea, Lambert tells us that the Sumerians conceived of the earth as a flat disc which overlaid the *Apsu* [Sumerian, *abzu*]. Deimel says the *Abzu* is “the sweet-water abyss in which the earth swims.” Jacobsen says the Sumerians imagined the underground waters as a vast subterranean freshwater sea, which they called *Abzu* or *Engur*.(49) Albright defines the home of Enki (Ea), that is the *Abzu*, as “the subterranean fresh-water ocean whence the rivers flow”; and he gives a Sumerian text which he translated in part: “Water which down the pure Euphrates he (Ea) had guided, the product of the *apsu*...[Sumerian text, *abzu*].(50)

The Sumerians then believed that the earth rested on an ocean, a fresh-water ocean that

was the source of all pools, fountains, marshes and rivers, including the great Euphrates. But being fresh water does not mean that this ocean was not a part of the sea around the earth. As Tsumura pointed out, the Sumerians did not sharply distinguish their concept of water under the earth from their concept of the surrounding sea. The two concepts overlapped so that in Sumerian cosmology, as Pope said, “The sea was conceived as a single body of water.”(51) Thus the earth was thought to float on the sea that surrounds it.

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As to Babylonian cosmology, there is evidence that the Babylonians believed in an earth-encircling sea. In a neo-Assyrian version of the Etana Legend, an eagle carries Etana (a king of Kish) up to heaven. As Etana looks down, he comments on how the land and sea appear. He says, “The wide sea is just like a tub,” thus indicating that the sea was conceived of as circular in shape or at least encircling the earth.(52)

The Babylonian map of the world called the *Mappa Mundi* clearly shows the flat circular earth surrounded by water called the “Bitter River.” All scholars I have seen who discuss this map understand the “Bitter River” to be the earth-encircling ocean.(53)

Since the Babylonians inherited the concepts of the Sumerians, they also believed that the earth floated on an ocean. This is documented in a creation text apparently from Eridu which begins with a primeval sea. To create the earth Marduk constructs a reed raft “on the surface of the waters,” then creates dirt and piles it up on the raft.(54) This same picture of the earth spread out over the waters is found in *Enuma elish* where Marduk uses half of the body of Tiamat to construct the earth. Then he opens “the deep” which is obviously below her body and “caused to flow from her eyes the Euphrates (and) Tigris” (5:54,55). (Cf. the Sumerian text cited above where the Euphrates is “the product of the *Apsu*.”) That Tiamat has water below her is also evidenced by *Enuma elish* 5:56 where Marduk “closed up her nostrils, reserved the water” and in 5:58 where he “drilled fountains in her.”(55)

Other Babylonian texts also make reference to rivers coming up from the deep below. The Code of Hammurabi and several sections of the Atrahasis epic mention “floods [rising] from the abyss.”(56) In Babylonian thought then, the earth floated on an Ocean, a Deep, an Abyss (*Apsu*). This ocean was spoken of as being as deep under the earth as the sky was high over the earth.(57) Accordingly, it was an inexhaustible source of water for all springs and lakes as well as for mighty rivers like the Tigris and the Euphrates. In addition, this *Apsu* upon which the earth floated was thought of as the same sea that encircled the earth.(58)

In summary it is clear that ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians believed that the earth, a flat circular disc, was surrounded by a single circular sea. In addition they believed that the earth floated on this sea and that it was this underlying sea which supplied the water in springs, wells and all rivers including the mighty Nile and Euphrates.

3. The Ancient Western Belief in a Surrounding and Supporting Sea

In Homer (*Il* 14:200–1; 18:483–607; *Od* 11:21) the earth-disc is surrounded by Ocean. Bunbury, like other classical scholars, concluded,

There can be no doubt that Homer in common with all his successors down to the time of Hecataeus [c. 500 B.C.], believed the earth to be a plane, of circular form, surrounded on all sides by the Ocean....(59)

There are also hints in Homer (*Il* 9:183) that the sea was thought of as upholding the earth. And, just as Babylonians and Egyptians thought of the sea below as the source of springs and rivers, Homer (*Il* 21:195–7) speaks of the ocean being the source of all seas, rivers, springs and wells.

In summary, we see that all scientifically naive tribal peoples (who bring an ocean into their cosmology), all Eastern peoples and Western thinkers down to the fifth century B.C. believed that the sea was a single circular body of water that surrounded the flat earth. In addition (except for later Western thinkers) all of these peoples believed that the flat earth floated on the sea that surrounded it, and that the underlying sea upon which the earth floated was the source of all springs, wells, and rivers on earth including the great Nile and Euphrates.

IV. The Historico-Grammatical Meaning of “Sea(s)” in Gen 1:10

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. 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.(60)

It is very improbable from a historical point of view that the writer and first readers of Gen 1 defined the sea as a body of water embedded in a planetary globe; and the burden of proof lies on anyone who says they did define it that way since there is no evidence that any one in the ancient world before the fifth century B.C. defined it that way. I conclude, therefore, that only a clear statement from Scripture could overthrow the highly probable historical conclusion that the sea in Gen 1:10 was defined by the writer as a single circular body of water in the middle of which the flat earth-disc floated.

Turning to the grammatical side of our study we find that the “sea(s) (יםִיִּם, *yammim*) in Gen 1:10 is the name God gave to the “gathered waters.” The “gathered waters,” Gen 1:7 and 1:9 tell us are the waters which were “under the firmament” as a result of creating a firmament “in the midst of the waters” (Gen 1:6). “The waters of Gen 1:6 in turn refer back to “the waters” of 1:2, that is the Deep (תְּהוֹם, *têhôm*). The “Deep” (*têhôm*) as is seen in other biblical passages (Ps 104:6; Isa 51:10) and in Semitic cognates (Akkadian, Ugaritic, Eblaite) is a sea. So, the sea of Gen 1:10 is half of the sea of Gen 1:2. That it is half of the sea is the most natural interpretation; and this is confirmed by the parallel in *Enuma elish* (IV:137–8) where Tiamat is split in half.(61)

It seems odd, however, that although the lower sea is gathered into one place (1:9), God names it “seas,” plural (1:10). T. L. Fenton was so sure this was contrary to Hebrew usage, he thought the word “one” (אֶחָד, *æhâd*) was not part of the original text.(62) He argued that the Israelites would not use a plural for a single body of water.

But, *KB* lists the same singular meaning, “sea,” for the plural of *yām* as it does for the singular. Further there is good reason to believe that *KB* is correct. The city of Tyre was located only in the Mediterranean Sea, yet Ezek 27:4 and 28:2 describe the city as being located “in the heart of the seas,” plural. Further, the singular *yām* and the plural *yāmmim* are occasionally used almost interchangeably in the OT. Compare Jer 47:7 to Judges 5:17 with regard to the Mediterranean Sea. The phrase, “sand of the sea” (Jer 33:22) also seems interchangeable with “sand of the seas” (Jer 15:8).

In any case, one sea, as Judg 5:17 and Ezek 27:4 and 28:2 in particular show, can be called “seas.” Given the fact observed by *GKC* 124a that “The plural is by no means used in Hebrew solely to express a number of individuals or separate objects, but may also denote them collectively,” it is not surprising that the overwhelming majority of Hebrew scholars have had no

problem accepting the plural *yāmmim* in Gen 1:10 as perfectly good Hebrew with the singular meaning “sea.”(63)

We conclude that the Hebrew text of Gen 1:9 is sound and means that the sea of Gen 1:2, having been divided (Gen 1:6–8) into an upper and lower half, the lower half was gathered together into “one place,” which as the historical context shows, is a single circular body of water surrounding the earth-disc.

Further, there is a good reason why this one body of water surrounding the earth is called “sea(s).” It is because like the earth-surrounding Ocean in Homer’s cosmology (*Il* 21:195–7) as well as in Pliny’s geography (*NH* 2:68:173) and, in fact, in all ancient geography this single body of water surrounding the earth was thought of as connected to all inland seas.(64) Hence, it is quite appropriate to call the whole gathered collection “Sea(s).” Indeed, given the ancient concept of one earth-encircling sea with all of the known seas as inlets off of it, it is difficult to think of a more apt name to describe this single yet many-armed sea than the collective name given to it in Gen 1:9,10—”Sea(s).”

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.” Pope, I believe rightly, regards this verse as a parallel to Prov 8:27 and says it refers to the primaevial ocean of Gen 1.(65)

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 (*yām*). 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. Thus A. R. Johnson having mentioned that in the Hebrew cosmology the earth is supported on the cosmic sea said,

Moreover, it seems clear that the “bronze sea” which figured so prominently in the

furnishings of Solomon's Temple was intended as a replica of the cosmic sea....(66)

Prov 8:27, Job 26:10 and 1 Kgs 7:23, thus, testify that when the sea was gathered into one place in Gen 1:9 that one place was conceived of as circular in shape. This biblically derived definition of the "sea" as a single body of water circular in shape is in perfect agreement with its historical context.

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...."(67) 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.(68)

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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.(69)

Finally, there is reason to believe that the *yam sūp* of Scripture is not simply a reference to the Red Sea as we understand that name nor to the more popular "Sea of Reeds." Rather, it is a reference to the *yam sōp*, the "Sea of the End," that is the sea at the end or edge of the earth.(70)

The biblical data is thus in complete agreement with the historical data that "earth" and "sea(s)" in Gen 1:10 refer to a single continent in the shape of a flat circular disc lying in the

middle of a circular sea.

1. The Earth as Floating on the Sea

With regard to the earth floating on the sea, we are in the happy position of having Ps 136:5,6 and 7 refer back respectively to the events of the second, third and fourth days of creation as recorded in Gen 1. Ps 136:6 is, thus, parallel to Gen 1:10. Harris recognized this but construed Ps 136:6 as referring “to land masses above the shoreline, that surely is all.”(71)

But Harris made no attempt to exegete Ps 136:6 either historically or grammatically. Instead he lifted the Psalm out of its ancient Near Eastern context wherein the earth does float on a sea, set the Psalm down in the context of modern western science and thereby made verse 6 refer to “land masses” when, as we have seen above, the historico-biblical meaning of “earth” is a single land mass. In addition, he ignored the verb “spread out” (רָקַע, *rāqaʿ*) and thereby made verse 6 say simply “the earth is above the waters.”

The verb in Ps 136:6, *rāqaʿ*, according to *KB* can mean “stamp, beat out” (e.g., 2 Sam 22:43; Ezek 6:11) or “spread out” (e.g., Isa 42:5). The meanings of the verb are derived from working with metals which when beat out, spread out. The meaning “stamp, beat out” for the verb *rāqaʿ* does not fit the context of Ps 136:6 and virtually no one has attempted to translate it that way in this verse. This leaves the meaning “spread out,” which commentators and translators have regularly employed for this verse. We conclude, thus far, that Ps 136:6 should be translated, “[The Lord who] spread out the earth (לַעֲלֹת, *ʿal*) the waters.”

The exact relationship of the earth to the waters is expressed by the preposition *ʿal*. The preposition *ʿal* usually means “upon” and that is the first meaning given for it in both *KB* and *BDB*. Further, the other meanings

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of *ʿal* all flow out from the meaning “upon.” Thus the first thing *BDB* says about the preposition *ʿal* is that its meaning is “upon, and hence...[then follows a list of its other meanings].” The meaning, “upon,” therefore, is an appropriate translation of *ʿal* in a text like Ps 136:6 where the immediate context does not lead us to any other meaning. The meaning “upon” is also the one most often chosen by modern translators of this verse including the translators of the *NIV*, even though Harris was a major editor of the *NIV*. The Hebrew invites this translation, and there is no contextual reason to translate the verse differently.

Unfortunately, the only time the verb *rāqaʿ* is used with the preposition *ʿal* in the OT is in Ps 136:6. But, *rāqaʿ* has a close synonym, namely (רָדַד, *rādād*) which also apparently means

“beat” or “spread out;” and, this synonym is used with the preposition ‘*al* in 1 Kgs 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 Ps 136:6 (especially in the light of Isa 40:19 which uses *rāqa’* in the sense of “overlay”) means that the earth is spread out over or upon the sea. As gold *overlays* the cherubim in 1 Kgs 6:32 so the earth overlays the sea in Ps 136:6.(72)

Ps 24:2 also speaks of the creation of the earth and, hence, is indirectly referring back to Gen 1:10. The Psalm says, God “founded” the earth-continent (אֶרֶץ-תְּבֵלָה, *’ereṣ-tēbēl*, v. 1) “upon the seas.” The word, “upon,” is the same Hebrew word, ‘*al*, as was used in Ps 136:6. Modern scholars of Hebrew regularly translate ‘*al* in Ps 24:2 as “upon” and so do all English translations that I have seen (*KJV, ERV, ASV, NASV, RSV, NEB, Berkeley, Amplified, Moffat, Jerusalem, and NIV*)(73)

The verb, “found,” (יָסַד, *yāsad*) which is used in Ps 24:2 means to lay down a foundational base for a building or wall (1 Kgs 5:17 [31]; 7:10 ; 16:34 ; Ezra 3:10–12) or to set something upon a foundational base (Cant 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” (*yāsad*): 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.

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

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Gen 1:10b where God called the gathered waters of the *tēhôm* “Seas” (*yāmmim*); 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. The word, “rivers,” (נְהָרוֹת, *nēhārôt*) in 24:2b is known from Ugaritic to be simply a synonym of seas, and *nēhārôt* is clearly used to mean seas in Ps 93:3.(74)

The picture given to us in Ps 24:2 and 136:6 is quite clear; but there is still more biblical evidence that the earth was thought to float on the sea. For just as the sea below the earth was thought of in the rest of the ancient Near East as an inexhaustible source of water for springs, wells and rivers, so it is in the OT. In the blessings of Joseph first by Jacob (Gen 49:25 [MT 24

] and later by Moses (Deut 33:13) there is a reference to the “deep sea (*tēhôm*) lying below” as the source of spring and/or river water for farming.

Gen 49:25(24) speaks simply of the “blessings of the heaven above; blessings of the deep sea (*tēhôm*) lying below.” Deut 33:13 speaks more fully of Jehovah blessing the land of Joseph “with the precious dew of the heavens and with the deep sea (*tēhôm*) lying below.” Harris tried to make Gen 49:25 refer simply to the fact that seas like the Mediterranean are lower in level than the land masses.(75)

The context of Gen 49:25 and Deut 33:13, however, has to do with fruitfulness (Gen 49:22,25), especially agricultural fruitfulness (Deut 33:13–16). The “dew from the heavens above” was a prime source of the water necessary to make agriculture flourish (Gen 27:28; 1 Kgs 17:1; Hos 14:5; Zech 8:12); so the context implies that the blessing of “the deep sea that lies below” was also to make agriculture flourish (cf. Ezek 31:4). The question is then, were seas like the Mediterranean Sea a source of water to make agriculture flourish? Being salt water, the answer is, of course, no; and even if we force the text to refer to a small fresh water sea like the sea of Galilee, the answer is still, no. Harris’ interpretation of the “sea that lies below” in Gen 49:25 and Deut 33:13 is clearly out of context—both historical and biblical. In context both verses are clear references to a sea (*tēhôm*) below the earth. So these verses show us again that the earth was understood in the OT to be floating upon a sea, from which, as in all ancient Near Eastern thought, springs, wells and rivers derived their water.

There is yet another reason why we know Gen 49:25 and Deut 33:13 refer to a sea below the earth: it was customary in the ancient Near East to pair

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references to fertilizing water from above with references to fertilizing water from the sea below the earth. In the Akkadian *Atrahasis* epic D: 4:54,55, for example, we read,

Above Adad made scarce his rain
Below was dammed up the flood,
So that it rose not from its source.(76)

In the Ugaritic *Aqhat* C: 1: 45, 46, we read,

No dew. No rain.
No welling up of the Deep(77)

In Weinfeld’s instructive paper there are more examples and discussion of this ancient Near Eastern pairing of references to water from above with references to water from the deep

sea below the earth.(78) Since there is no question that the paired ancient Near Eastern references are references to the sea beneath the earth, it is most probable that when such pairing occurs in the OT, the references are also to the sea beneath the earth. This confirms that Gen 49:25 and Deut 33:13 are referring to the sea beneath the earth.

Gen 49:25 and Deut 33:13 lead us to the realization that other biblical references to water below are also references to the sea beneath the earth. For example, in Gen 2:5,6 where the 'ed-water from below is contrasted with no rain from above, we believe that Tsumura rightly concluded, "Since the 'ed-water flooded out of the subterranean water in Gen 2:6, in this regard it is related to the *tēhôm(ôt)*-water, the water of the subterranean ocean."(79)

We see the same thing in Gen 7:11 and 8:2 where the water for Noah's flood is described as coming both from above and from "all the springs of the great deep (*tēhôm*)." The great *tēhôm* is, of course, the sea mentioned in Gen 1:10 which was half of the original *tēhôm* mentioned in Gen 1:2. It has been suggested that "the springs of the great deep" in Gen 7:11 simply refer to the springs of the visible sea, not to earthly springs from a sea below the earth.(80) But, this interpretation removes the verse from its historical context wherein the phrase "springs of the great deep" would be understood as inland earthly springs. This suggestion also overlooks the fact that the pairing of this phrase with reference to the waters from above indicates biblically (Gen 49:25; Deut 33:13) as well as historically that the reference is to the earthly fresh-water springs that come up from the sea that was believed to exist below the earth. Earthly fresh-water springs were, in fact,

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so closely linked in people's minds with the great *tēhôm* below the earth (Gen 49:25; Deut 33:13) that the earthly springs were themselves sometimes called *tēhôm* (Ezek 31:4) or *tēhômôt* (Deut 8:7). In context—both historical and biblical—Gen 7:11 is speaking of the water for Noah's flood not only pouring down from above, but, as Wenham put it, "water gushing forth uncontrollably from wells and springs which draw from a great subterranean ocean ("the great deep")."(81)

Prov 3:20, another verse that pairs water from above (in the form of dew) with water from below, parallels Gen 7:11's reference to the water from below grammatically for it uses the same verb (עָרַב, *bāqa'*) to speak of splitting open the springs as was used in Gen 7:11. In addition, the springs in Prov 3:20 are called *tēhômôt* which parallels the description of springs in Gen 7:11 where they are called "springs of the great *tēhôm*." The springs of Prov 3:20 are thus identified with the springs of Gen 7:11. Since the springs mentioned in Prov 3:20 are in a context of agricultural blessing (paired with "dew"), they must be earthly fresh-water springs.

Prov 3:20 thus shows us that the springs of Gen 7:11 are also earthly fresh-water springs and reciprocally Gen 7:11 shows us that the fresh-water springs (*tēhômôt*) of Prov 3:20 were fed by the great *tēhôm* (sea) of Gen 7:11. The grammar, the historical context, and the fact that the pairing of water from above with water from below regularly refers the water from below to the sea beneath the earth, makes this interpretation sure. Scott, therefore, correctly comments on Prov 3:20: “An echo of Gen vii 11 where the water which submerged the world in the days of Noah is said to have surged up like a tide from the subterranean ocean and fallen from sluices in the sky.”(82)

Gen 2:5,6; 7:11 ; 8:2 ; Prov 3:20 (and 2 Sam 1:21 as emended by Gordis) all make reference to earthly fresh-water springs having their water supplied by a sea (*tēhôm*) beneath the earth.(83) These verses all thus indicate that the earth in Gen 1:10 was understood to be resting on a sea.

In summary, according to Pss 24:2 and 136:6 , the earth of Gen 1:10 was founded upon the sea, spread out upon the sea. The earth of Gen 1:10 is, thus, a flat earth-continent floating upon the sea. Gen 49:25 (MT 24) and Deut 33:13 speak of a *tēhôm*, a deep sea, lying below the earth; so, they also testify that the earth was conceived of as floating upon a sea, a subterranean sea which served as the source of water for springs, wells and rivers just as was believed by everyone in the ancient Near East. Various other OT references confirm still further that the earth in Gen 1:10 was conceived of as floating on a sea.

In conclusion, we see that when Gen 1 is interpreted within its biblical context, the “earth” and the “sea(s)” of Gen 1:10 do not refer to the

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continents and oceans on a planetary globe for there is no contextual basis—either historical or biblical—to see a planetary globe in Gen 1. Rather, the historico-grammatical meaning of “earth” and “sea(s)” in Gen 1:10 is that the earth is a single continent in the shape of a flat circular disk floating in the middle of a circular sea, which sea was thought to be the source of water for earthly springs, wells and rivers.

V. Post Script

One might ask the question, does interpreting Gen 1:9,10 as well as 49:25 (24); Deut 33:13; Pss 24:2 and 136:6 and others according to their historico-grammatical meaning impinge negatively on the biblical doctrine of inspiration? I think not. The biblical references to a flat earth-disc floating in a circular surrounding sea are simply references to the ordinary opinions of the writer’s day and a fulfillment as it were of the words of B. B. Warfield, who, as he defined

biblical inerrancy, said that an inspired writer could (italics ours)

share the ordinary opinions of his day in certain matters lying outside the scope of his teachings, as, for example, with reference to *the form of the earth*, or its relation to the sun [or, *mutatis mutandis*, its relation to the sea]; and, it is not inconceivable that the form of his language when incidentally adverting to such matters, might occasionally play into the hands of such a presumption.(84)

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