

Do Isaiah 40:22 and Psalm 29:10 Speak to Cosmological Realities?

Considering the “Waters Above” and Earth’s Cosmic Choreography

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Abstract

In a recent *CRSQ* article, Hebert (2017) analyzed some biblical passages that have cosmological relevance yet appear to be overlooked by many commentators. Hebert suggested that the Bible may teach that heaven, the abode of God, is located *directly* on the other side (i.e., outside) of the waters God placed above the expanse (Hebrew *raqîaʿ*). In other words, the “waters above” (Genesis 1:6–8) are acting as a boundary or interface between our universe and heaven itself. He also suggested that God’s throne is located above these waters but in a northerly direction, most likely the direction of the north ecliptic pole.

Here we examine two additional passages of Scripture that may provide additional support for these ideas, Isaiah 40:22 and Psalm 29:10. Although these passages may be familiar to many biblical creationists, we suggest more detailed understandings of these passages, with analysis that should be informative to students of cosmology, as well as exciting to students of Scripture. In particular, a philological study of Isaiah 40:22’s Hebrew noun *chûg* (translated “circle” in KJV) indicates that Earth moves in a choreographed circuit, as opposed to Isaiah 40:22 being a proof-text for Earth’s roundness.

Introduction

A previous *CRSQ* paper (Hebert 2017) suggested that “waters above” the expanse (Hebrew *raqîaʿ*) may actu-

ally serve as an interface or boundary between our universe and heaven, the abode of God. That paper also sug-

gested that God’s throne is located on the other side of (i.e., outside) those waters but in a generally northerly direction, most likely the direction of the north ecliptic pole. In this short article, we provide additional scriptural support for these ideas from Psalm 29:10 and Isaiah 40:22.

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Accepted for publication September 10, 2018

The “Flood” in Psalm 29:10: The Noachian Flood or a Celestial Ocean?

Because the Hebrew word used in Psalm 29:10 is *mabbûl*, and because every other occurrence of *mabbûl* in the Old Testament refers to the Genesis Flood, it is generally assumed that this is also the case in this psalm. As one respected commentator noted:

There are ten Hebrew words translated “flood” in the Old Testament, but the word here is *mabbul*, a word used uniquely to refer to the worldwide cataclysm in the days of Noah. In fact, this is the only place in the Bible where this word is used except in the story of the great Flood in Genesis 6–9, where it is always used. Therefore, it is certain that the writer of Psalm 29 was speaking of that great cataclysmic storm, and no other. (Morris, 1991, pp. 40–41)

Although this superficially seems to be a strong argument for this understanding of the passage, it is not airtight. There are certain words in Scripture that *almost* always have one particular application but with an exception that *does* depart from the almost-universal pattern.

For instance, in Genesis 1 the verb *mashal* (“rule” in Genesis 1:18) is used to describe ongoing imposition of physical forces (such as gravity and solar radiation) by which the sun and moon regulate many of the affairs on planet Earth, including photosynthesis in carbohydrate-producing plants, reproductive cycles of crabs and salmon, and all the ocean tides that are necessary for many life-forms to survive (Johnson 2011, 2015a, 2015b). Yet elsewhere in Scripture it is routinely used, scores of times, to describe the regulatory actions of human rulers—or of God’s actions as the Ruler.

Likewise, a comprehensive review of how the Hebrew verb *bara’* (“create”) is used in the Old Testament shows that it almost always refers to God’s activities during Creation Week (especially on

Day 1, Day 5, and Day 6; see Genesis 1:1, 21, 28), yet occasionally it refers to creative actions thereafter (e.g., see Psalm 102:18; 104:30).

So, it is not an airtight (or watertight!) argument that *mabbûl* here refers to the Genesis Flood. But if it is not referring to the Flood, to what is it referring? We suggest here that the “flood” of Psalm 29:10 is actually referring to the “waters above,” which God separated from the “waters below” on Day 2 of Creation Week (Genesis 1:6–8). If these waters are indeed beyond the farthest galaxies, as suggested by Humphreys (1994a, 1994b), then the amount of water contained in such a reservoir would be truly immense, even if the thickness of the watery shell were very thin. In that case, these waters could certainly be described as a great flood, or *mabbûl*!

Likewise, this psalm testifies that “the voice of the LORD is upon the waters: the God of glory thundereth: the LORD is upon many waters” (verse 3). Of course, this is consistent with the thesis that God’s throne is above this celestial ocean of water.

It is also worth noting that this psalm explicitly mentions the voice of God seven times, and states that God “thundereth.” One is reminded of Revelation 10:3–4:

And [the mighty angel from heaven] cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roareth: and when he had cried, seven thunders uttered their voices. And when the seven thunders had uttered their voices, I was about to write: and I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Seal up those things which the seven thunders uttered, and write them not.

Is there a connection between the “seven thunders” of Revelation 10:3–4 and the seven explicit references to the Lord’s voice in Psalm 29? Such a connection has already been noted by Morris (1983, p. 178). Some might argue that “seven thunders” is a reference to seven different angelic beings, not to the Lord

Himself. Note, however, that the book of Revelation repeatedly mentions the “seven Spirits of God” (Revelation 1:4; 3:1; 4:5), which seem to be a description of the Holy Spirit, *not* seven different angelic spirits. Note especially that the seven Spirits are associated with Christ Himself (Revelation 5:6):

And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth.

This same idea is found in Zechariah 4:2–10, in which seven lamps are said to represent “the eyes of the LORD, which run to and fro through the whole earth” (verse 10). Of course, one is immediately reminded of the seven “candlesticks” [literally, “lampstands”] surrounding the glorified Christ in Revelation 1:12–20. It also recalls the statement that “the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him” (2 Chronicles 16:9). Hence, we think it is still quite likely that the “seven thunders” in Revelation 10:3–4 could be referring to the Lord’s voice, as in Psalm 29:3.

This understanding of *mabbûl* in Psalm 29:10 also makes sense of the psalmist’s exhortation for the “mighty” (verse 1) to give glory and strength to the LORD. The actual phrase in Psalm 29:1 is *benê-‘elîm* (“sons of mightinesses” or “sons of powers”). If this Psalm provides us a description of God enthroned above an ocean of celestial waters, this reference to the heavenly beings in God’s court seems very appropriate. The scene described in Psalm 29 is quite unusual, so we do not dogmatically suggest that Psalm 29:1 refers to angelic beings in God’s heavenly court. We merely suggest what Psalm 29:1 portrays is not inconsistent with that scenario.

Moreover, further supporting the heavenly scenario (understanding of

Psalm 29), it is worth noticing that David mentions God's "temple" in verse 9, even though Solomon's earthly temple was not yet in existence. The underlying Hebrew noun in Psalm 29:9 is *hêkâl*, the usual Hebrew word meaning "palace" (and "temple" when used of deity), as opposed to the Hebrew nouns routinely translated "tabernacle" (*ohel* and *mishkan*). Hence, this seems to refer to God's heavenly palace, i.e., His heavenly temple (see also the multiple references to the heavenly temple in Revelation: 3:12; 7:15; 11:19; 14:15, 17; 15:5–6, 8; 16:1, 17).

"Circle" in Isaiah 40:22: A Spherical Earth or the Earth's Orbit?

Creation scientists (although themselves not Hebrew scholars) have long cited Isaiah 40:22 as an argument against the claim that the Bible teaches a flat earth, claiming that "circle" [translating *chûg*, also spelled in transliteration as *hûg*] in this verse refers to the approximately spherical nature of the earth (Morris, 2006; Lisle 2006; Thomas 2017):

It is he [the LORD] that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in.

In fact, prior to the study that this paper is based upon, both of the present writers assumed that Isaiah 40:22 referred to the roundness of Planet Earth. But based upon a thorough philological study of the Hebrew noun *chûg*, including review of its related root verb, that assumption has been discarded. This is because that assumption does not survive a concordance-based review of how *chûg* (and its etymological kinsmen) is used in Scripture. In other words, the popular assumption that Isaiah 40:22 refers to Earth's round shape, clashes with how God has chosen to use the noun *chûg* in Old Testament passages.

Accordingly, the foundational question is whether the Hebrew noun *chûg* used in Isaiah 40:22 (and translated as "circle" by the King James Bible translators) means "round" like Earth's spherical shape. By using the word "circle," it appears that the King James Bible translators did *not* think so, because they selected "circle" rather than "ball," in contrast to how they translated the Hebrew noun *dûr* to refer to a round object in Isaiah 22:18 ("He will surely violently turn and toss thee like a *ball* into a large country"). It is worth noticing that Johannes Kepler published his Copernican heliocentrism defense, *Mysterium Cosmographicum* in 1596, and later his *Astronomia Nova* in 1609, both before the King James Version was first published. Thus, Kepler's defense of Copernican heliocentrism could have been known to someone on the King James Version translation team, since the English term "circle" roughly matches that of an elliptical orbit (befitting Kepler's first law of planetary motion). Interestingly, Earth's elliptical orbit is very close to that of a circle, with an eccentricity of 0.0167 (a circle would have an eccentricity of zero).

Moreover, if God had wanted to describe Earth as a globe (i.e., a ball-shaped object) in Isaiah 40:22, why did He not use the Hebrew noun *dûr* there? Obviously that Hebrew noun was part of Isaiah's vocabulary, because Isaiah had just used that noun (*dûr*) about 20 chapters earlier in his book.

But, more importantly, the most focal question is what *chûg* means, since that is the noun (translated "circle") in Isaiah 40:22. To determine the core meaning of the Hebrew noun *chûg*, we should compare Scripture with Scripture (Johnson 2010), especially by reviewing how that same Hebrew word is elsewhere used within Scripture.

First, consider how the noun *chûg* is used in the Old Testament. There are only two other times when this Hebrew verb is used: Job 22:14 and Proverbs 8:27.

Job 22:14 says: "Thick clouds are a covering to Him, that He seeth not; and He walketh in the *circuit* of heaven." In this verse the Hebrew noun *chûg* is translated (by the King James Bible translators) as "circuit." (Question: Is "circuit" an orbit-like pattern or a spherical ball?)

Proverbs 8:27 says: "When He prepared the heavens, I was there: when He set a *compass* upon the face of the depth." In this verse the Hebrew noun *chûg* is translated (by the King James Bible translators) as "compass." (Question: Is this "compass" an orbit-like pattern or a spherical ball?)

Next, consider the root verb that this Hebrew noun is derived from, which is the Hebrew verb *chûg*, spelled the same as the noun (similar to how our English words "report" and "record" can be verbs or nouns, depending upon context). As a verb *chûg* appears in Job 26:10 ("He hath *compassed* the waters") within a context that refers to waters contained within clouds, i.e., within a context that we describe using "water-cycle" terminology.

Furthermore, it is worthwhile to investigate other related Hebrew words, such as other words that utilize the consonantal stem *HGG*, yet doing so initially introduces more questions than answers, philologically speaking. In other words, by reviewing etymologically related Hebrew words (in the Hebrew Old Testament), we acquire supplemental data for identifying the core meaning of *chûg*. Consider, therefore, these related Scriptures, each of which provides a philological "clue" regarding the core meaning of the *HGG* consonantal stem that *chûg* derives from:

And when he [Egyptian] had brought him [David] down, behold, they [Amalekites] were spread abroad upon all the earth, eating and drinking, and **dancing** [*hōgegîm* = qal active ptc. m. pl.], because of all the great spoil that they had taken out of the land of the Philistines, and out of the land of Judah. (1 Samuel 30:16)

The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the **feast** of tabernacles [*hag hassukkôth*]. . . . Also in the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when ye have gathered in the fruit of the land, ye shall **celebrate** [*tâhōggû* = qal impf. 2nd m. pl. of *hâgag*; translated “keep” in KJV here and below] a **feast** [*hag* = noun derived from *hâgag*] unto the LORD seven days: on the first day shall be a sabbath, and on the eighth day shall be a sabbath. . . . And ye shall **celebrate** [another verb derived from *hâgag*] it a **feast** [*hag*] unto the LORD seven days in the year. It shall be a statute for ever in your generations: ye shall **celebrate** [another verb derived from *hâgag*] it in the seventh month. (Leviticus 23:34, 39, 41)

Do these concepts of celebrating feasts and dancing fit the idea of Earth’s spherical roundness? Or do these concepts of celebrating feasts and dancing better fit the idea of Earth’s orbit-motions as it circles the sun, within the solar system, which itself orbits within the Milky Way galaxy? The best English word to describe the core idea here is “choreography”—an astoundingly well-ordered, orchestrated, harmonious cosmic **DANCE**. (Notice that this is like the mathematically harmonious, interactively blending, moving parts of a perfectly performed Norwegian folk dance, as opposed to a solitary frenzy of break-dancing gyrations.) It could be that this verse is simultaneously describing *both* Earth’s orbital and spin motions as a whole, much in the same way a folk dancer may engage in repetitive and circuitous motion from place to place, while simultaneously spinning about a vertical axis of rotation passing through his or her torso.

Now let us return to the basic inquiry of this review of Isaiah 40:22.

If “circle” in Isaiah 40:22 refers to the earth’s orbital and spin motions, this is a much stronger argument for divine inspiration than the mere claim that the

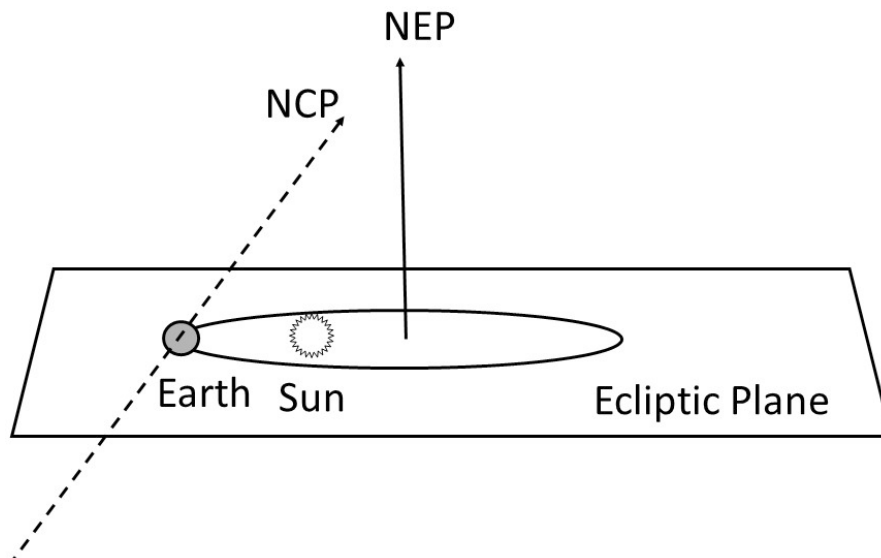


Figure 1. If one takes Isaiah 40:22 literally, it seems to suggest that God’s throne is located perpendicular to the plane of the earth’s orbit around the sun (the plane of the ecliptic). Given the multiple verses that seem to link God’s abode with the direction north (see text), we suggest that “above” the “circle of the earth” is either the direction of the north celestial pole or the direction of the north ecliptic pole. The direction of the north ecliptic pole (NEP) would seem to be the better choice, since it does not change due to precession, and because it is “above” the earth’s “dance” in its totality, not just the spinning of the earth around its axis.

earth is round. Many ancient peoples had deduced that the earth was round, but it took scientists thousands of years to realize that the earth was moving in an elliptical orbit around the sun. If the Hebrew Bible taught that the earth was undergoing some kind of circuit or dance thousands of years before the Copernican revolution, then that is *very* impressive! It is also overkill evidence to the debunking of the claim by William Dembski (and others) that the Bible demands an absolutely stationary Earth (Johnson, 2017).

As an aside, it is worth noting that Paul Seely has long contested the claim that Isaiah 40:22 refers to a spherical earth (Seely, 1997), and other creationists have responded to this charge (Holding, 2000). Seely claims that the Bible teaches a flat earth and that this particu-

lar passage is teaching that the earth is circular, although still flat. Ironically, Seely is likely correct that this passage is *not* referring to the earth’s sphericity, yet he is quite wrong in failing to recognize that Isaiah 40:22 is portraying a choreographed dance in the heavens. Thus, the correct understanding of this verse, contrary to Seely’s allegations, only strengthens the argument for the Bible’s scientific accuracy, rather than undermines it!

Furthermore, because the term “circle” in Isaiah 40:22 refers to the earth’s orbit or circuit rather than its spherical shape, the statement that God is enthroned “upon” (more literally rendered “above” in other translations) that circle indicates the direction where God’s throne is located. The preposition used in Isaiah 40:22 is ‘*al*, routinely translated

as “above” and “over,” as in Genesis 8:1 (“a wind to pass *over* the earth”) and Genesis 1:20 (“fly *above* the earth in the open firmament”). The related root verb is ‘âlâh, which indicates upward action or position, e.g., “went up” in Genesis 19:28 (“the smoke of the country *went up*”), “came up” in Joshua 2:8 (“she *came up* unto them upon the roof”), “ascended up” in Judges 20:40 (“the flame of the city *ascended up*”), etc.

In other words, Isaiah 40:22 is portraying God as “above” Earth’s choreographed circuit. The earth’s orbit lies in the plane of the ecliptic. In order to move to a position “above” the earth’s orbit, one would need to move in a direction perpendicular to the ecliptic plane, either above or below it. In other words, one needs to move in either the direction of the north ecliptic pole or the south ecliptic pole. Given the numerous passages of Scripture that suggest God’s abode is associated with the direction north (Job 37:22; Psalm 48:1–2; Psalm 75:6–7; Isaiah 14:12–14; Ezekiel 1:4), we suggest that “above the circle of the earth” is in the direction of the north ecliptic pole (Figure 1). Even if “circuit” were to refer just to the daily spinning motion of the earth, this would still indicate a generally northern direction, but in this case the direction of the north celestial pole, rather than the north pole of the ecliptic. Although both possibilities may be permitted by the text, we lean toward the possibility

that the Lord’s throne is in the direction of the north ecliptic pole, as this direction is fixed, unlike the direction of the north celestial pole, which is slowly changing due to precession. Likewise, this direction is “above” the *totality* of the earth’s choreographed dance (its orbit), rather than just one part of that dance (the earth’s orbital spin). So, this passage seems to confirm that idea that God’s throne is located in a northerly direction, probably the direction of the north ecliptic pole. Hence, we can add Isaiah 40:22 to the list of scriptural passages that seem to hint at this idea. So, it appears that these Scriptures suggest a majestic theatrical scenario: from the ultimate “true north” our great God is watching over His huge creation, including the countless moving parts of its cosmic choreography.

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