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Good Theology, Bad Exegesis

Scientific Foreknowledge and Three Hermeneutical Tests

Definition and History

Scientific Foreknowledge is the belief that the Bible contains truths of science that were unknown to the original authors. Their presence in Scripture, so runs the argument, demonstrates that there must be a divine mind behind the Biblical text. Henry Morris articulates it as follows:

One of the most amazing evidences of the divine inspiration of the Bible is its scientific accuracy. There are many unexpected scientific truths that have lain hidden within its pages for thousands of years, only to be recognized and appreciated in modern times. These principles are not expressed in modern technical jargon, of course, but nevertheless are presented accurately and beautifully, indicating remarkable understanding of nature by these ancient authors far in advance of their ‘discovery’ by modern scientists.¹

Similarly, Grant Jeffrey speaks extensively about the Levitical law code’s “advanced medical knowledge,” concluding, “How could Moses have written these incredibly accurate and advanced medical instructions unless God inspired Him?”² Arnold Schnabel examines an extended list of examples and concludes, “[T]he ancient Bible writers obtained scientific and historical information beyond their human ability...”³

It should be stated that this argument is based on a presupposition rooted in good Biblical theology. As Morris says, “Surely if God is really omnipotent and omniscient, and the Bible is really His revelation ... then He is able to speak through His Scriptures as clearly and truthfully with respect to earthly things as He does when He speaks of heavenly things.”⁴ Any Christian

¹ Morris, *Science and the Bible*, 11.

² Jeffrey, *The Signature of God*, 159.

³ Schnabel, *Has God Spoken?* 88.

⁴ Morris, *The Biblical Basis for Modern Science*, 20.

who believes in the Biblical portrayal of God cannot reasonably disagree with this statement.

Morris' problem, however, is that he begs the question in his application. All believe that God *can* speak this way; the assertion that needs proven is whether God *does* speak this way.

The argument itself has been around for several decades. Although my research has not been exhaustive, it seems like Morris presented the first thoroughgoing form of the argument,⁵ arguing from a variety of passages that allegedly involve astronomy, geology, oceanography, medicine, meteorology, physics, and biology. There were, however, precursors to Morris' work. For example, arguments from the medical knowledge and cleanliness laws of the Levitical Law code go back at least nine years before Morris' book to Rendle Short⁶ and, a few years later, William Vis.⁷ This particular version of the argument has shown remarkable staying power. McMillen and Stern's *None of These Diseases*, first published in 1963, is in its third edition (2000),⁸ and three essays are devoted to the topic in Montgomery's *Evidence for Faith*.⁹ Within the Stone-Campbell movement, the most significant contribution is likely Schnabel's *Has God Spoken?*, initially published in 1964 and currently in its fifth edition (2004). Although self-published, it has had remarkable staying power and boasts 50,000 copies in print.¹⁰

⁵ The first edition of *Science and the Bible* (1951) devoted a chapter to the argument, as does *Studies in the Bible and Science* (1966), but it received a full treatment in *The Biblical Basis for Modern Science* (1984).

⁶ Short, *Modern Discovery and the Bible*, 84–92.

⁷ Vis, "Medical Science and the Bible," in *Modern Science and Christian Faith*, 238–249.

⁸ McMillen and Stern, *None of These Diseases: The Bible's Health Secrets for the 21st Century*.

⁹ Cairney, "Biomedical Prescience 1–3," in *Evidence for Faith*, 127–152.

¹⁰ According to the back cover. I would note that "copies in print" is a bit more dubious of a boast than the more standard "copies sold." Even so, I can speak from personal experience to the impact that Schnabel's work has had among many rank-and-file Christians and some preachers among non-institutional churches of Christ.

Alleged Examples of Scientific Foreknowledge

Some claims of scientific foreknowledge are well known. Others, however, are a bit more obscure. The following list is far from exhaustive, but is intended to give a representative sampling of the sorts of claims that are made:¹¹

- The earth is spherical – “He who sits above the circle of the earth” (Isa 40.22)
- The earth revolves daily – “[The earth] is changed [at dawn] like clay under a seal” (Job 38.14)¹²
- The free suspension of the earth – “He ... hangs the earth on nothing” (Job 26.7)
- Stars emit sound – “The morning stars sang together” (Job 38.7)
- Ocean currents – “...whatever passes along the paths of the sea” (Ps 8.8)¹³
- Ocean springs – “Have you entered into the springs of the sea?” (Job 38.16a)
- Ocean trenches – “Have you walked in the recesses of the deep?” (Job 38.16b)
- Water cycle – “For he draws up the drops of water; they distill his mist in rain which the skies pour down and drop on mankind abundantly” (Job 36.27–28)
- All matter and energy completed at the universe’s origin – “Thus the heavens and earth were completed, and all their hosts” (Gen 2.1–2), and, “The works were finished from the foundation of the world” (Heb 4.3)
- The universe is decaying – “...the earth will wear out like a garment” (Isa 51.6; Ps 102.26)
- Life is in the blood – “for the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Lev 17.11)
- A host of Levitical laws about cleanliness, including there being a place outside the camp for excrement (Deut 23.12–13), the isolation of lepers for controlling the spread of disease (Lev 13–14), and restrictions on eating pork.¹⁴

¹¹ This list is drawn from several chapters of Schnabel, *Has God Spoken?*

¹² Here, the Hebrew word for “changed” is connected to the word for “turned.”

¹³ Matthew Maury (1806–1873) is widely considered to be the founder of modern oceanography. His work was inspired by his reading of Psalm 8. See Williams, *Matthew Fontaine Maury*.

¹⁴ Vis says, “As a scientist, Moses rises above all other Biblical characters because of his stupendous knowledge of public health and hygiene” (“Medical Science and the Bible,” 238).

Hermeneutic Tests

Although Scientific Foreknowledge has never been widely accepted by the academic world, it is far more accepted by the average church-goer. For those who first hear the argument without giving it critical examination, it can sound compelling. Further, as stated above, it is built upon a sound theological foundation. In addition to the theological truth that God would know all science, it is consistent with another widely-acknowledged truth: the Bible, where it intersects with science and speaks literally, will be scientifically accurate. It is a final assertion—the presence of scientific details that the ancients did not know proves the divine origin of the Bible—that, like any argument, must be tested. It is my contention that Scientific Foreknowledge’s downfall is evident when we move beyond the theological truths that undergird it to the exegesis of the passages it allegedly occurs in. We will apply three hermeneutical tests to Scientific Foreknowledge with the intent of showing its deficiency.¹⁵

One of the key rules of Biblical interpretation is *contextual* interpretation.¹⁶ Context can refer to a variety of things, including literary context, the larger Biblical context, and cultural context. In order for a passage to contain Scientific Foreknowledge it must pass at least these three tests. First, for something to be Scientific Foreknowledge, the information in the passage must be scientific (literary context).¹⁷ Second, for something to be Scientific Foreknowledge, the

¹⁵ Although not stated in exactly the way I do below, much of my thinking on this topic has been shaped by two of my now-deceased undergraduate professors. Phil Robers wrote a short article on the topic that I read several times online, but can no longer find. Marty Pickup has a couple of chapters on the topic in his unpublished *Making a Defense: Articles on Christian Evidences*, which sits on my bookshelf. Also, although I only have vague recollections of hearing him talk about it, my father’s take on this was also likely formative in my younger years. He wrote a popular-level article about it in *Truth Magazine* (S-C tradition), published in two parts: Keith Ward, “Overstatements about Bible Foreknowledge of Scientific Discoveries.”

¹⁶ For just one example, Kaiser and Silva devote five chapters of their hermeneutics textbook to meaning as it relates to genre (*An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, 69–158). My own professors told me that the three most important rules of interpretation were “context, context, context.”

¹⁷ As I say in more informal settings, it cannot be “if you squint your eyes and tilt your head just right, you can see how it just might be scientific.”

information in the passage must be foreknowledge; it cannot be already known (cultural context). Finally, the information in the passage must be consistent with other things the Bible teaches about that topic. That is, if the Bible says the opposite thing in another text, it raises a serious question about one text, the other, or both. For a passage to remain in contention to be Scientific Foreknowledge, we need a reason that does not engage in *ad hoc* defenses or special pleading to justify explaining away one passage while keeping the other as an example of Scientific Foreknowledge (scriptural context).

Literary Context. Although the list above is far from exhaustive, it illustrates something that is also true of most other examples: the vast majority of so-called Scientific Foreknowledge passages occur in poetry.¹⁸ Poetry is widely known for its use of figurative language (and, we might add, is not at all known for its scientific precision); nearly every book I own about Old Testament Poetry in general or one of the poetic books in particular begins with a chapter or lengthy subsection discussing figurative language and the way those figures are to be understood.

This bears out well when examining the passages where Scientific Foreknowledge is supposed to have occurred. How many people who read Psalm 8 would argue that humankind is literally crowned with glory and honor (v 5), that all creation is literally under his feet (vv 6–8), that God’s glory and strength is literally established from the mouths of infants? In this clearly figurative context, why, then, is “paths of the sea” a literal scientific truth? In Job 26, do the dead literally tremble (v 5) and are Sheol and Abaddon literally naked (v 6)? Is water literally bound in clouds (v 8) and did God literally shatter a fearsome sea monster (v 12)? Why, then, is “the earth hangs on nothing” a literal, scientific truth? In Isaiah 40, God does not literally sit on top of the globe, whose inhabitants are all literally like grasshoppers, and whose skies are literally

¹⁸ Most of those which do not occur in poetry occur in law and are the cleanliness examples, which will be discussed below.

stretched like curtains—figures are all from the very same verse that says, supposedly scientifically, “the circle of the earth” (v 22).

Further, one also wonders just how scientific some of these claims actually are. After all, no one actually believes the earth is a circle. It may be a bit nit-picky to distinguish between two-dimensional roundness and three-dimensional roundness, but if the point is God is using precise, technical language to describe scientific truths that were not known, is it asking too much for God to be accurate at that level? The proponents of the view seek to explain this away. Schnabel says, “The Hebrew word *khug* is translated ‘circle.’ A more exact connotation would be ‘sphericity’ or ‘roundness.’”¹⁹ Morris asserts, “[The word] could well be used for ‘sphere,’ since there seems to have been no other ancient Hebrew word with this explicit meaning.”²⁰

The lexicons disagree. Gesenius’ *Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon* offers “to draw a circle, as with a compass” and “the arch or vault of the sky” (263). Koehler and Baumgartner’s *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon* gives definitions pointing to the disc-like shape of the earth, the vault of the heavens, and the curved horizon over the sea (295). Brown, Driver, Briggs *Hebrew and English Lexicon* simply says “vault, horizon” (295). The furthest we are from “sphere” is a flat disc and the closest is the domed appearance of the sky—though that says nothing about the opposite side of the dome. A quick check of seven theologically conservative commentaries on Isaiah showed *zero* who took this as a reference to the spherical nature of the planet.²¹ This is not because they are closeted liberals who deny inspiration, but because they are more interested in explaining the text of Isaiah in its context than they are in ferreting out scientific details in clearly non-scientific texts.

¹⁹ Schnabel, *Has God Spoken?* 1.

²⁰ Morris, *Biblical Basis*, 246.

²¹ Keil, Hailey (S-C tradition), Leupold, McConville, Motyer, Oswalt, Young. These were gathered by the very scientific process of “what I happened to have in my library.”

Further, despite what Morris says, there *is* a Hebrew word that can be used for sphere—and *Isaiah uses it!* Isaiah 22.17–18 says, “Behold, the Lord will hurl you away violently, O you strong man. He will seize firm hold on you and whirl you around and around, and throw you like a ball into a wide land.” All of the lexicons listed above offer “ball” as a meaning of the Hebrew word in verse 18.

A final example of the lack of science in so-called Scientific Foreknowledge is Job 38’s “the morning stars sang together.”²² In addition to the clear figurative language that runs throughout the chapter, the immediate context helps us interpret this text. “Morning stars” is in poetic parallelism with “sons of God.” This paralleling shows that “morning stars” refers not to the astronomical heavenly hosts, but the angelic heavenly host (cf. Job 1.6; 2.1). This pairing would have made good sense to an ancient near eastern audience who would have immediately read it in that context. Because it is not about stars, there can be no astronomical foreknowledge in it. Further, even if it were about stars, it says that they sang at creation, not that they began to sing then and would continue to sing thereafter throughout the duration of this universe’s existence.

Scriptural Context. A second problem is aligning different Biblical texts that intersect with the same scientific truth. If we grant that Isaiah 40.22 is teaching the earth is spherical, what do we do when we run into Revelation 7.1 and the earth’s four corners? If we grant that Job is correct about the free suspension of the earth in Job 26.7, what do we do when God says, just twelve chapters later, that it has a foundation and is built on pillars. If we grant that Job 38.14 says the earth rotates, what do we do with Psalm 104.5, which not only reiterates the earth’s foundations, but also says that it will never be moved. Finally, if we grant that Job 38.7 is about the stars emitting sound, what do we do when Psalm 148 says that not just the stars, but the

²² This foreknowledge has to do with radio astronomy demonstrating that stars emit audible sounds (Schnabel, *Has God Spoken?* 15–16).

moon praises God (v 3), to say nothing of the sea monsters, deeps, fire, hail, snow, mist, wind, mountains, hills, fruit trees, cedars, beasts, livestock, creeping things, and flying birds (vv 7–10).

In order to embrace the few biblical statements that seem to match the modern scientific consensus, we have to ignore or explain away those that do not. But on what consistent, legitimate basis can we make such a distinction? Its agreement with the current consensus is a poor decider. Not only does it fail the special pleading test, it leaves open the problem of what happens if and when the consensus changes in ways we simply cannot predict at the present time. Far too frequently, Scientific Foreknowledge is a “have your cake and eat it too” hermeneutic where a passage is literal and scientific when it fits and obviously figurative when it does not fit. Meanwhile, as indicated above, context usually suggests that almost all are in the “obviously figurative” category.

The case that does not fit in the obviously figurative category are the Levitical laws. Since these do not occur in poetry, instead appearing in passages intended to be read literally, they are a separate matter. It is true that there is real medical benefit in some of the Levitical law code, and it is true that they (like the other texts discussed) are of divine origin. But before assigning those laws a special significance, there are some important questions to ask. Why did God protect the people from the foodborne illnesses of pork, but not that of other animals? Why are some of the laws not at all consistent with modern hygiene (e.g., rinsing a vessel with water to remove its uncleanness [Lev 15.12])? Why does God care so much more about ancient Israelites than he does about Christians? After all, our current understanding of good health and hygiene did not arise with the inauguration of the new covenant, where these Levitical law codes were replaced by a covenant seemingly unconcerned with ‘all of these diseases.’

The answer is what Scripture explicitly claims: the laws are about holiness. Nowhere in Exodus, Leviticus, or Deuteronomy are we ever told that the laws were about promotion of hygiene for the sake of physical health. Instead, God says things like, “For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11.44–45; cf. 22.3–9).

Cultural Context. C.S. Lewis’ well-known warning about chronological snobbery, a problem he defines as “The uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that count discredited,”²³ applies in this discussion, because Scientific Foreknowledge egregiously engages in this mistake. Consider the following examples as it relates to this topic.

Regarding the spherical nature of the earth, much of this view is rooted in the patently false notion that people believed the earth was flat until Columbus’ famous voyage.²⁴ As to specific examples that show this is not foreknowledge, an ancient Babylonian map shows a circular world;²⁵ the *äamaö Hymn*, written to the sun god, says, “You climb to the mountains surveying the earth, you suspend from the heavens the circle of the lands;”²⁶ the “Hymn to Ramses II” found on various stela inside the temple of Abu Simbel says, “like Re when he shineth over the circle of the world;”²⁷ “The War Against the Peoples of the Sea” in Ramses III’s temple of

²³ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 207.

²⁴ See Cormack, “Myth 3: That Medieval Christians Taught That the Earth was Flat” in *Galileo Goes to Jail*, 28–34 for a thorough debunking of this myth.

²⁵ Dietrich, *Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum*, part xxii, pl.48. All of the following examples are taken from the Institute for Biblical and Scientific Studies, “The Bible and Science: Do the Bible and Science Agree?” (<https://www.bibleandscience.com/science/bibleandscience.htm>).

²⁶ Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions*, 1:105.

²⁷ Erman, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians*, 258–259.

Medinet Habu says, “They laid their hands upon the lands as far as the circuit of the earth;”²⁸ and Keel shows many Egyptian drawings of a circular earth.²⁹ Notice the *äamaö Hymn* also makes reference to the lands being suspended from the heavens, which would be at least one reference to the free suspension of the earth.

The references to paths of the sea in ancient literature are almost too many to list. These few examples will suffice for our purposes. Homer’s *Odyssey* mentions it on two different occasions: “paths of the sea water” (3.177) and “paths of the deep sea fish” (4.389). Apollonius Rhodius’ *The Argonautica* talks about fish that “followed gamboling along the watery paths” (1.574). Finally, the *Sibylline Oracles* mentions “the watery paths” twice (4.76–78; 3.143–146). Either these currents were well known or this language is not intended to be a scientific reference to ocean currents.

Finally at the risk of creating an argument from silence (for I have no supporting data for these two examples), it seems highly unlikely that that seafaring people such as the Phoenicians had not yet discovered ocean currents and that the world at large had not discovered that hanging around with sick people tends to make you sick. Some of the examples of supposed foreknowledge are such common sense that it remains hard to believe that anyone could have ever been ignorant of it.

What if It is True?

A final matter for consideration relates to the application of Scientific Foreknowledge. If Scientific Foreknowledge proves the divine origin of a document, we must be ready and willing to accept the consequences of that. If true, it might sound like a nice apologetic for the Bible, but

²⁸ Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 262.

²⁹ Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 37–40.

we cannot cherry pick when we do and do not apply it. Since the same phrases that supposedly prove the divine origin of the Bible are also found in other ancient literature (including some not cited in this paper), we have, therefore, proven the divine inspiration of various Egyptian, Akkadian, Sumerian, Ugaritic, Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek, Roman, and pseudepigraphical Jewish documents. Although we might laugh that off as ridiculous, we need a good reason why it applies to some and not others. This is especially true since it is an argument used in Islamic apologetics for the divine origin of the Qur'an.

Consider how much these comments sound the arguments made Morris and Schnabel:

How could [Mohammed] then pronounce truths of a scientific nature that no other human being could possibly have developed at that time, and all this without once making the slightest error in his pronouncement on the subject?³⁰

A totally objective examination of [the Qur'an] in the light of modern knowledge, leads us to recognize the agreement between the two, as has been already noted on repeated occasions. It makes us deem it quite unthinkable for a man of Mohammed's time to have been the author of such statements on account of the state of knowledge in his day.³¹

Perhaps we could attack this apologetic by going through the Qur'an to pick apart Bucaille's examples, showing that they are not what he claims them to be. Perhaps we could show that they are not scientific, not foreknowledge, or not consistent with other teachings in the Qur'an. Of course, in so doing, we find ourselves hoist on our own petard, for no Biblical Scientific Foreknowledge text can pass those tests either.

Conclusion

The doctrine of scientific foreknowledge is rooted in sound theology: God is the author of science and knew the truth of it long before any human figured it out. But it falls prey to sloppy exegesis: it ignores genre, avoids contradicting passages, and presumes things it cannot know

³⁰ Maurice Bucaille, *The Bible, the Qur'an and Science*, 125.

³¹ Maurice Bucaille, *The Qur'an and Modern Science*, 18.

(i.e., chronological snobbery). To be sure, I have not addressed every single passage, but I am confident that none will pass all these contextual hermeneutic tests.

Perhaps even worse is how much it smacks of Gnosticism. In Scientific Foreknowledge, there is a secret, hidden knowledge buried away in the Bible for us to find. I would hazard to assert that the Bible was never intended to be some grand find-the-science scavenger hunt.

Perhaps worst of all is that reading the text through the lens of Scientific Foreknowledge inevitably and invariably misses the point of the Scripture in question. Those authors and preachers who stop to emphasize, say, the spherical nature of the earth in Isaiah 40 never seem to get around to talking about *why* Isaiah said, “God sits above the circle of the earth.” Focusing on a detail at the expense of the larger passage’s meaning is *always the wrong interpretation*.³² God revealed himself and his plan so we can know him, not so we can get hung up on minutiae and miss the point of the text. In short, Scientific Foreknowledge frequently turns into a near-blatant abuse of Scripture—something no apologist, preacher, or any other Christian should ever find himself or herself doing.

³² See the outstanding illustration of what this looks like in the introductory chapter to Silva’s *God Language and Scripture*, now published as a part of Moises Silva, ed. *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, 199–203.

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