

LESSONS FROM THE WITTENBERG CIRCLE

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Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them. Psalm 111:2.

ABSTRACT

This paper compares Babylon's cosmology with the cosmology embedded in the Bible. Certain aspects of Israel's cosmology persisted until the 16th century when Catholic priest Nicolaus Copernicus proposed a radically counterintuitive heliocentric model of the solar system. Despite concerns expressed by both Luther and Melancthon, the Wittenberg Circle, a group of professors at the University, indicated their strong support for Copernicus, an affirmation which was a major boost to the nascent Scientific Revolution. This paper provides a brief overview of young earth creationist cosmology, as an example of a contemporary group that mandates a pre-scientific version of cosmology. The Wittenberg Circle provides contemporary Christians with a viable model for encouraging the continued study of challenging issues despite misgivings by group leaders. It is argued that this kind of respectful compromise will benefit both faith and science.

INTRODUCTION

Biblical cosmology is a scriptural explanation of origins.¹ Israel's understanding of the cosmos was phenomenological. In other words, individuals described natural phenomena based on their senses and in the context of the cultural norms and expectations of that time.² In other words, Biblical cosmology is an ancient pre-scientific (not anti-scientific) description of phenomena as they appear to the naked eye, unconstrained by the norms of scientific methodology. Their observations were made without the assistance of modern technology. The ancient Israelites understood the earth to be a flat disk above a vast underground body of water.³ The heavens ['firmament'] were thought to be a solid dome. Above the firmament was more water. The cosmos was static, unchanging except for the occasional miracle. The ancients, Hebrew or otherwise, did not make a distinction between the material and the spiritual.⁴

Information on Babylonian cosmology is limited but there is agreement on a few important points. The Babylonians were the first to apply mathematics to their astronomical observations.⁵ They were able to predict eclipses.⁶ They could track and predict movements of the sun and the moon and a few other astronomical bodies. They gave names to many of them. Given these realities, should their observations fail to measure up in some way to modern standards, as they often do, the Biblical authors are not lying to us or in any way deceiving us. They were simply doing their best to describe what their limited human senses told them.

A PARADIGM SHIFT

In the 16th Century, the University of Wittenberg hosted scholars representing many disciplines. One of those individuals was a professor of mathematics, Philipp Melanchthon.⁷ Melanchthon (1497-1560) introduced several courses in mathematics to the university. He is best known for his contributions to Lutheran doctrinal literature. Melanchthon was a confidant of Martin Luther (1483-1546) and a significant player in events leading up to the Protestant Reformation.⁸ Melanchthon assembled a group of scholars at the University known as the Wittenberg Circle.⁹ Members included mathematician Georg Joachim Reticus (1514-1574) and astronomical educator Erasmus Reinhold (1511-1553).¹⁰ Melanchthon was a contemporary of Copernicus. He first encountered heliocentrism through Reticus and a document titled *Nerecio Prima*, written in 1540.⁹ Melanchthon maintained that there was a clear contradiction between what Copernicus (1473-1543) was proposing and the plain words of scriptures such as -

1. **Psalms 93:1:** "The world also is established, that it cannot be moved."
2. **Psalms 104:5:** "Who laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not be removed forever."
3. **1 Chronicles 16:30:** "He has fixed the earth firm, immovable."
4. **Ecclesiastes 1:5:** "And the sun rises and sets and returns to its place."

Melanchthon, like many Christians today, made it clear that his primary loyalty lay with the Bible, and if a scientific theory challenged a long-standing interpretation, the science was faulty, not the Bible. Heliocentrism made its appearance in scholarly circles in the 1530s, although a book on the topic, titled *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium*, was not published until 1543.¹¹ In informal discussions with students and others, discussions which later became known as his *Table Talk*, Luther made disparaging remarks about Copernicus.¹² Luther agreed with Melanchthon that Copernicus was a fool whose theory would turn the whole science of astronomy upside down. Luther was concerned about the potential negative impact of Copernicanism on Bible passages such as Joshua chapter 10, which talks about the sun standing still.

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The Wittenberg Circle discussed Copernicus and his theory at length. Contrary to the opinions of both Luther and Melanchthon and based on a thorough analysis of the proposals made by Copernicus, heliocentrism was declared to be scientifically valid and not a threat to the scriptures. This affirmation was a significant factor in the promotion of, and eventual acceptance of, heliocentrism. And this recommendation, gave credence to the nascent Scientific Revolution. Official acceptance of heliocentrism took a very long time, however.¹³ As we have seen, the theory was officially offered for consideration in 1543. But it wasn't until 1822, almost 280 years later, that the Catholic church officially recognized it.¹⁴ And it wasn't until 1835 that a book by Galileo defending Copernicanism was removed from the Catholic list of banned books.

YOUNG EARTH CREATIONIST COSMOLOGY

Young Earth Creationism contends that the creation narrative recorded in Genesis 1:1 to 2:2 is a trustworthy, literal description of these events, and that the creation took place in six twenty-four-hour days.¹⁵ This interpretation puts the earth's age at around 6,000 to 10,000 years. Young earth creationists reject the current scientific consensus on these matters. After all, science is based on the words of fallible humanity, while faith is based on the infallible word of God. Dr. Russ Humphreys is a spokesman for Young Earth Creationism at the present time.¹⁶ He has proposed a relativistic cosmology, arguing that the Bible provides a legitimate foundation for cosmology. He believes that the "expanse" or "firmament" is a reference to interstellar space, and that the waters above the expanse are a water boundary to the created universe. Dr. Humphreys contends that the scriptural reference to God stretching out the heavens occurred at some time in the past, which he then links with an expansion of the universe during creation week. Many Bible scholars argue that scientific concordism, that is, expecting the Scriptures to reflect modern scientific realities, is an example of eisegesis, of reading modern notions back into ancient documents, essentially awkwardly changing what the original author intended to say. Bible scholar John Walton has labeled eisegesis (and the scientific concordism that requires it) as interpretive malpractice.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Heliocentrism initiated a vigorous and extended debate in the church about hermeneutics – accurately interpreting the scriptures so as to make clear the author's intended meaning. Accurate interpretation of the whole Bible including cosmology and the topic of origins is important for a correct understanding of the texts. Heliocentrism encouraged theologians to revisit texts long understood to mean that the earth is fixed in place. Claims made by Copernicus put interpreters on the horns of a dilemma. Was Copernicus correct (and the traditional hermeneutic in error?) Or was Copernicus misled, despite scientific evidence to the contrary? For all intents and purposes, the dust has now settled on this issue. The interpretation of certain verses was revised. And the church moved on. Since 1859, however, with the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, another controversy ensued. But the stakes were now much higher because Darwin's theory spoke directly to the issue of human origins. The final chapter of that issue, of course, is yet to be written. The Wittenberg Circle certainly appears to offer a way out of the impasse. We have seen that although Luther and Melanchthon opposed heliocentrism, they did not stand in the way of further academic investigation. That kind of gracious compromise is sorely needed in the church today. The current polemical approach of groups like *Answers in Genesis* is well past its "Best Before" date. An important event from more than 500 years ago may show us the way forward.

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