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Does the Bible Affirm Scientific Errors? A Reply to Denis Lamoureux

In recent years a number of scholars have argued that numerous biblical texts affirm what we now know are erroneous scientific notions. The sort of arguments they use and the biblical texts they cite have been well summarised in the writings of Denis Lamoureux. Lamoureux argues that these texts affirm erroneous notions concerning a three-tier universe, the movement of the sun across the sky, a solid firmament, flat earth, the mustard seed being the smallest seed, the death of the seed during germination, preformatism and creation de novo. I show that Lamoureux has not adequately considered Beale's distinction between what the texts affirm and what the author believes. I develop various arguments based on this distinction and demonstrate that Lamoureux's arguments fail to refute Beale's position concerning biblical inerrancy and rule out an alternative view of divine accommodation which uses ancient common ways of expression without affirming scientific errors.

Keywords: divine accommodation, scientific errors, biblical inerrancy, three-tier universe, geocentrism, firmament

Introduction

In recent years there has been intense debate concerning whether the Bible affirms scientific errors. A number of scholars¹ have argued that numerous biblical texts affirm what we now know are erroneous scientific notions such as a three-tier universe, a flat earth and so on. Many of them have appealed to theologian John Calvin for their view of divine accommodation. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Calvin himself would have thought that divine accommodation involves the affirmation of errors.² On the other hand, many Christians today

1 e.g. Lamoureux, D. 'Lessons from the Heavens: on Scripture, science, and inerrancy', *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* (2008) 60, 4–15; 'The erosion of biblical inerrancy, or toward a more biblical view of the inerrant Word of God?' *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* (2010) 62, 133–138; *Evolution: Scripture and Nature say Yes*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan (2016); Enns, P. *Inspiration and incarnation: Evangelicals and the problem of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic (2005); Sparks, K. *God's Words in Human Words*. Grand Rapids: Baker (2008); Miller, J. & Soden, J. *In the Beginning We Misunderstood: Genesis 1 in Its Original Context*, Grand Rapids: Kregel (2012); Parry, R. *The Biblical Cosmos*, Eugene: Cascade (2014); Greenwood, K. *Scripture and Cosmology*, Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press (2015).

2 Balsarak, J. *Divinity Compromised: A study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin*, Dordrecht: Springer (2006), pp. 163–168.

would use the concept of divine accommodation to defend Scripture against the charge of error. For example, consider Psalm 19:5-6 which says that the sun 'rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other'. They would argue that passages like this can be understood as an accommodative, phenomenological and common way of expressing how the movement of the sun appears to people on earth. Just as phrases in the same Psalm describing the sun is 'as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber' (verse 5) are not intended to be taken literally, so such expressions should not be taken literally either. Galileo himself utilised the concept of divine accommodation during the Galileo Controversy.³ Contrary to many who think that Galileo demonstrated a conflict between science and the Bible, Galileo himself thought that 'The holy Bible can never speak untruth—whenever its true meaning is understood'.⁴

Woodbridge observes that 'The principle of accommodation carries with it no logical concomitant to an errant biblical text ... A father, particularly an omnipotent and omniscient One, can speak true thoughts simply.'⁵ Contemporary biblical inerrantists believe that the omniscient and omnipotent God who inspired the Scripture would be able to guarantee the truthfulness of scriptural statements and believe that he had indeed done so when he inspired the biblical texts thousands of years ago.

Other Christians might object that the biblical texts themselves (such as Luke 1:1-4, John 20:30-31, and 2 Tim. 3:15-17) affirm that the declared purpose of the Bible is to instruct for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus, and that this purpose only requires the Bible to be inerrant with regards to theological statements concerning salvation, but not with regards to statements concerning the physical world. However, biblical inerrantists might reply that, while the declared purpose of the Scripture is to instruct for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus, there is no verse in the Scripture which says that the truthfulness of Scripture is only restricted to matters concerning salvation. They would argue that, on the contrary, the truthfulness of the Scripture with regards to other issues is related to salvation because the biblical message is a holistic one in which the spiritual and physical are not compartmentalised.⁶

Biblical inerrantists have also argued against a restricted inerrancy view by referring to passages such as Matthew 5:18, 24:35 and John 10:34-35, which they interpret as implying the claim that what scriptural texts affirm are factu-

3 McGrath, A. *Science and Religion: An Introduction*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell (2010), chap. 3.

4 Galileo, *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina of Tuscany*, 1615.

5 Woodbridge, J. *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan (1982), p. 34

6 Montgomery, J.W. 'A reply to Lamoureux's review of Beale's The erosion of inerrancy in evangelicalism', *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* (2010) 62, 302-303.

ally true.⁷ One might object that Matthew 5:18 refers to ethics, John 10:34-35 is about a theological issue, while Matthew 24:35 is about historical events. None of these verses support the claim that what the Bible says about scientific matters is to be taken as inerrant. However, a biblical inerrantist might reply that Matthew 24:35 is not just referring to theological statements but to events that have happened or will happen in the world, and issues such as the creation of the world, living things and human beings belong to this category. The context of John 10:34-35 concerns human nature: Jesus was arguing that humans can in some sense be called gods.⁸ While the context of Matthew 5:18 concerns ethics, a biblical inerrantist might argue that the underlying assumption is that Scripture is telling the truth in whatever matters it touches on, such as events (Matt. 24:35), human nature (John 10:34-35) and ethics (Matt. 5:18). The question is not whether the Bible teaches science, but whether the Bible is truthful in all that it affirms.⁹

Against the view that biblical inerrancy began as a reaction among American fundamentalists in response to the challenge of modernists' arguments, Woodbridge¹⁰ argues that many theologians throughout church history—including early church theologians such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Theophilus of Antioch and Augustine of Hippo—were concerned to defend the factual accuracy of Scripture. For example, he notes Augustine's statement that 'whatever they (the man of physical science) can really demonstrate to be true of physical nature, we must show to be capable of reconciliation with our Scriptures'.¹¹

One must be careful to note, however, that the kind of inerrancy the early church theologians affirmed is not necessarily the same as what many Christians affirm today. For example, Franke¹² observes that Origen often used non-literal interpretation and defended only the inerrancy of deeper spiritual meaning. In fact, Origen claimed that the biblical text is often incoherent and so compelling us to find the deeper spiritual meaning. Likewise, Augustine prior to his conversion rejected the Bible until he encountered the spiritual allegorical interpretations of Ambrose.¹³ While Augustine did eventually believe that

7 <http://defendinginerrancy.com/historical-evidence-for-inerrancy/>.

8 Köstenberger, A. 'John', in Beale, G. & Carson, D. (eds.) *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids: Baker (2007), p. 466.

9 Grudem, W. 'Theistic Evolution undermines twelve creation events and several crucial Christian doctrines', in Moreland, J.P., et al. (eds.) *Theistic Evolution: A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Critique*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway (2017); Non-Inerrantists sometimes point to grammatical errors in the Greek of the NT, but these are irrelevant because such errors do not imply an affirmation of factual errors.

10 Woodbridge *op. cit.*, (5).

11 Augustine *Gen.ad.litt.* 2.18.38.

12 Franke, J. 'Recasting Inerrancy: The Bible as witness to missional plurality', in Merrick, J. & Garrett, S. *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan (2013), pp. 77-78.

13 *ibid.*

truths concerning the natural world should be reconcilable with Scripture, he was willing to do this by reading Genesis 1 in a figurative way as something other than a straight chronological account. Augustine also said that questions about 'the motion of the heavens ... how the stars are fixed in it' and so on are not matters relevant to salvation, and so he did not discuss them.¹⁴

Nevertheless, many contemporary scholarly defenders of biblical inerrancy are aware of the need to consider non-literal interpretations, though they would argue that there are cases where a literal interpretation should be preferred.¹⁵ A contemporary biblical inerrantist may or may not agree with Augustine's figurative reading of Genesis 1, but would argue that their motivation is nevertheless the same as Augustine's, namely to refrain from attributing error to Scripture. Augustine's refusal to discuss matters not directly relevant to salvation is not contrary to this motivation, which Lamoureux et al do not share. Contemporary defenders of an unrestricted inerrancy view who do share this motivation include not only protestant Evangelicals, but also many (though not all) Roman Catholics¹⁶ and Eastern Orthodox¹⁷, with reasonable qualifications about the need to consider various interpretations (literal and non-literal) and the distinction between the errancy of our understanding and the inerrancy of Scripture.

It is beyond the scope of this article to settle the complicated debate concerning the motivations for biblical inerrancy. Suffice to note that it is of importance for many Christians today and that their motivations for holding it cannot be so easily dismissed. Against the assumption that the biblical text should be treated like any other Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) texts, Wenham¹⁸ observes that Genesis 1–11 (for example) is often highly critical of ideas current in the ancient world about the natural and supernatural world. Those who object to biblical inerrancy must be careful not to beg the question against the inerrantist's view of divine inspiration by assuming that the Bible would contain erroneous science simply because it is an ancient text. Rather the objectors would have to cite evidence to prove that the Bible contains erroneous science, and indeed many have attempted to do so. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a response to all the objectors who have so argued. Thankfully, the sort of arguments they use and the relevant biblical texts they usually cite have been well summarised in the writings of Denis Lamoureux, who has attempted to provide a systematic and comprehensive case for this conclusion in previous

14 Augustine DGaL 2.10.

15 e.g. concerning the bodily resurrection of Jesus see Merrick & Garrett *op. cit.*, (12).

16 <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/is-scripture-inerrant>.

17 http://www.orthodoxcanada.org/qa_archives/question7.html.

18 Wenham, G.. *Genesis 1-15 (WBC)*, Waco, Texas: Word Books (1987), p. xlvii

publications.¹⁹ Thus in this article I shall engage with Lamoureux as my main dialogue partner.

Lamoureux identifies himself as an Evangelical Christian and he has defended his views in a number of publications, such as a critical review of inerrantist Greg Beale's book *The Erosion of Inerrancy*²⁰ and his latest book *Evolution: Scripture and Nature say Yes*.²¹ He cites numerous biblical texts and argues that these affirm what we now know are erroneous notions concerning a three-tier universe, the movement of the sun across the sky, a solid firmament, flat earth, the mustard seed being the smallest seed, the death of the seed during germination, preformatism and creation *de novo*. Beale has not yet responded to Lamoureux's criticisms; meanwhile, John Montgomery²² responded by raising a number of arguments against the theological adequacy of Lamoureux's views concerning inerrancy, but he does not reply to Lamoureux's arguments from these texts.²³ In this article, I shall contribute to the discussion by replying to Lamoureux's arguments from these texts utilising a distinction found in Beale's book which Lamoureux has not adequately considered, namely the distinction between what the texts affirm and what the author believes. I shall elaborate on this distinction and develop a number of arguments to show that Lamoureux has failed to refute Beale's position concerning biblical inerrancy. Note that the purpose of my article is not to prove that the Bible is without error.²⁴ Rather my purpose is merely to show that Lamoureux has not succeeded in proving that the Bible contains error. I shall address the issues in the order listed above, moving from the greater and more universal issues to those more specific to the earth and to biology. A hot topic in recent discussions and one with which Lamoureux is also involved concerns the historicity of Adam. To address that issue adequately would require a whole book and is beyond our present scope. In what follows I shall address Lamoureux's main arguments on issues other than the historical Adam, and I shall show that they are unconvincing. I shall address his arguments against the historicity of Adam in another publication at a later date.

19 e.g. Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2008, 2010, 2016

20 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1). 2010.

21 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1). 2016.

22 Montgomery *op. cit.*, (6).

23 Lamoureux, D: 'Lamoureux' response to Montgomery', *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* (2011) 63, 72

24 A biblical inerrantist might try to prove that on the basis of other premises not discussed in this article: e.g. try to argue that belief in biblical inerrancy is justified as a deduction from other well-justified truths see <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/question-answer/P20/what-price-biblical-errancy>.

On a three-tier universe

According to Lamoureux,²⁵ God accommodated to the level of ancient humans in the process of inspiring the Bible, allowing them to use the best—but what we now know are erroneous—scientific notions of the ancient world as incidental and erroneous vessels to convey inerrant central messages of the Christian faith. For example, according to Lamoureux, the Bible ‘affirms the ancient astronomical concept of a heavenly body of water’ which includes a solid firmament (see below), which we now know is erroneous.²⁶ According to this view of divine accommodation:

(1) the biblical texts affirm what we now know are scientific errors, while affirming inerrant spiritual truths.²⁷

Compare this with an alternative view of divine accommodation, according to which God accommodated to the level of ancient humans in the process of inspiring the Bible, such that

(2) the biblical texts use ancient ways of expression common to their era to affirm inerrant spiritual truths without affirming what we now know are scientific errors.

It should be noted that there is a fine distinction between ‘using ancient ways of expression’ and ‘affirming what we now know are errors’. To illustrate this distinction, consider one of Lamoureux’s favourite texts taken from Philippians 2:10-11 ‘At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and in the underworld, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.’ According to Lamoureux,²⁸ God accommodated to allow the text to affirm a three-tier universe (which we now know is an erroneous understanding of the universe) for the purpose of conveying the inerrant truth concerning the lordship of Jesus over all of creation. According to the alternative view of divine accommodation, God accommodated to allow the text to use ‘in heaven and on earth and in the underworld’ as a common means of expression to convey ‘all of creation’, for the purpose of conveying the inerrant truth concerning the lordship of Jesus.

Against the alternative view of divine accommodation, it might be argued that, for Paul and his generation, the entire universe was a three-tier universe, thus this is not merely a common way of expression. For ancient people like

25 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2010, 136.

26 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2008, 5.

27 In personal correspondence, Lamoureux claims that ‘accommodation is rooted in the Incarnation. God came down to the level of humans by taking on human flesh in the person of Jesus.’ However, as argued in Loke, A. *A Kryptic Model of the Incarnation* London: Routledge (2014), the Incarnation does not imply accommodation to error; Jesus can limit himself without having (what we now know are) erroneous beliefs.

28 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2016, p. 90.

Paul, the phrase ‘in heaven and on earth and in the underworld’ reflected the ancient belief that the world was made up of three tiers.²⁹ Thus the text is affirming what we now know to be a scientific error.

In reply, we need to draw a distinction between what the text affirms and what the author believes. Greg Beale helpfully explains this distinction as follows:

Distinction should be made between the recorded observation in Scripture and the broader cosmological view behind it (if there was a clear one), since what is inspired is the written expression and not the writer’s full thoughts on the general topic on which the expression is a part. Biblical writers are inspired in what they write, but they may certainly be wrong about many of their beliefs that are not recorded in Scripture, even beliefs connected with what they write. This is to say that biblical writers were inspired only in their prophetic capacity of writing Scripture but not in everything they said or believed outside of that task. Thus, a writer could record the observation that the sun traversed the horizon, but his belief about why he thought that happened is external to the text.³⁰ (I shall call this ‘Beale’s Distinction’)

It should be noted that what Beale meant by prophetic capacity is not only applicable to spiritual truths, but also to ‘recorded observation in Scripture’. Moreover, Beale’s Distinction is distinct from Lamoureux’s Message-Incident Principle³¹, according to which the Bible affirms inerrant spiritual truths but incidental erroneous ancient science. Whereas according to Beale’s Distinction, the Bible affirms inerrant truths including observations about nature. Beale admits that the human biblical author might hold erroneous explanations for and/or beliefs related to these truths; for example, the author might believe that the explanation for the observation that the sun traversed the horizon is that the sun literally moves around the earth. These explanations are external to the text in the sense that these explanations are not affirmed by the text.

To illustrate Beale’s Distinction with another analogy: suppose there is a nineteenth century text which says ‘the stone falls to the ground as a result of gravity’. Should we conclude that this is an erroneous statement? The science of nineteenth century understood gravity in a Newtonian way, but we now know that Einstein has shown that the Newtonian understanding of how gravity works is flawed. Nevertheless, the text is merely affirming the effects of gravity (the functional aspect), thus we should not conclude that the statement is erroneous. ‘Newtonian understanding of gravity’ is flawed but ‘the stone falls to the ground as a result of gravity’ is not, because the first concerns how

²⁹ Lamoureux expressed this objection to me in personal correspondence.

³⁰ Beale, G. *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway (2008), p. 201, n. 21.

³¹ Lamoureux *op. cit.*,(1), 2016, pp. 88-89.

gravity works while the second concerns the effects of gravity. One should say that the text correctly affirmed the effects of gravity, even though the author probably had erroneous beliefs about how gravity works. To demand that the beliefs relating to a statement must also be true in order for the statement to be true is unnecessary and has consequences which Lamoureux himself would not accept. For example, it would imply that, contrary to evolutionists like Lamoureux, Darwin was wrong to state that humans evolved from simpler organisms, because he believed erroneously that the units of inheritance between ancestors and offsprings are gemmules (hypothesised minute particles of inheritance thrown off by all cells of the body; this erroneous idea was subsequently replaced by the concept of genes).³² Evolutionists would say that Darwin was correct to state that humans evolved from simpler organisms, even though his beliefs concerning how that happened were erroneous.

The ancient Jews might have believed that the entire universe was a Three-Tier Universe, while also using 'in heaven and on earth and in the underworld' as a common form of expression to convey 'all of creation'. As noted earlier, given Beale's Distinction, the beliefs of an ancient author do not matter for Beale's view about inerrancy. Beale would admit that the human biblical authors might hold erroneous beliefs related to the Bible affirmations concerning nature. However, these affirmations themselves are not necessarily erroneous because they can be understood at the level of purpose, which is to convey 'all of creation'.

Authors use statements for a variety of purposes. To show that the biblical authors might not be affirming what we now know to be errors, sceptics of Lamoureux's position do not need to prove that the science during biblical times did not accept a three-tier universe. They only need to show that there is insufficient justification for ruling out the possibility that they were using those statements for other purposes. Using the terminology of speech-act theory, a sceptic of Lamoureux's position might argue that the Bible's inerrancy is properly located in its illocutions, that is, the truths that the human and divine communicators intended to convey by means of the words used.³³ One might agree with Lamoureux that the biblical authors use language derived from their misunderstood conception of the material universe to convey a spiritual truth, but disagree with his view that the biblical authors are affirming this misunderstood conception of the material universe in the text. For example, one might agree with Lamoureux that Paul was affirming the Lordship of Christ over all of creation using language derived from his conception of three-tiered universe in Philippians 2:10-11, but disagree that Paul was affirming that the universe is 3 tiered in Philippians 2:10-11. (Another reasonable interpretation is offered by Collins, who argues that Paul is referring to three groups of beings

32 <https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/charles-darwins-theory-pangensis>.

33 Van Kuiken, J. 2015, 679.

rather than talking about the topology of the cosmos).³⁴ Likewise, one might agree that the biblical authors thought the sun was moving, but what Scripture is affirming—and what the author intended to convey—could just be the appearance of movement. ‘Thought’ and ‘intended to convey’ are distinct. As explained earlier, there could be many things an author thought, believed and assumed about, but they may have intended to focus only on a certain aspect of what they thought about and affirm only that particular aspect when they wrote something. This view does not separate the meaning of Scripture from the author’s intent, for on this view what the Scripture affirms and what the author intended to convey is the same.

Referring to biblical passages which speak of stars falling from heaven (Matt. 24:29; Isa. 34:4; Rev. 6:12-14) Lamoureux³⁵ claims that the biblical texts imply that stars are tiny specks attached to a solid firmament (see below) which is part of a three-tier universe. However, various commentators³⁶ note that these passages belong with Jewish apocalyptic literature in which stars often symbolise evil human or angelic powers, and thus these passages are likely to be figurative in which the language of cosmic collapse symbolises God’s judgment resulting in political reversal. Lamoureux³⁷ cites Isaiah 40:22 ‘God sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in,’ and he interprets this text as affirming a three-tier universe for the purpose of conveying inerrant truths about God being Creator. In reply, one can agree that the purpose of the text is to convey the inerrant truths about God being Creator, while disagreeing that the text is affirming a three-tier universe. The ancient biblical author and readers may have believed that (as noted by Beale’s Distinction), but the written text is affirming the phenomenological aspect of being ‘like a canopy.

On movement of the sun and earth

Now Lamoureux³⁸ distinguishes between (1) Ancient Phenomenological Perspective and (2) Modern Phenomenological Perspective. He argues that what the ancients saw, they believed was literal and actual; for example, the sun literally and actually moves across the sky daily, and the earth literally and actually does not move. The ancient author did not think this was just a ‘phenomenological expression’ in the same way we do today. When we say that ‘the sun

34 Collins, J. 2017. ‘Recent Inerrancy Studies and the Old Testament’, Evangelical Theological Society Annual Conference.

35 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2016, pp. 100-101.

36 e.g. Beale, G. *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (1999); France, R.T. *The Gospel of Matthew*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (2007).

37 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2016, pp. 93-94.

38 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1). 2016, pp. 87-88.

rises/sets', we know this is merely a phenomenological expression and that it does not convey the meaning that the sun literally and actually rises/sets.

In reply, it is not clear that every time an ancient Hebrew said 'the sun rises/sets,' the intention is to convey that the sun literally and actually rose/set. That the sun literally and actually rose/set may well be what he/she believed. However, as noted earlier, given Beale's Distinction, the beliefs of an ancient author do not matter for Beale's view about inerrancy. When an author makes a statement, there are different aspects to it, such as 'what the author believes about the statement' and 'what the purpose of the statement is.' Moreover, ancient authors sometimes focus on the functional/phenomenological aspect; one example would be Isaiah 40:22 'like a canopy' as explained above. Beale would admit that the human biblical authors might hold erroneous beliefs related to the Bible's affirmations concerning nature. They might believe that the sun literally and actually rose/set (which is erroneous), and also use 'the sun rises/sets' as a common form of expression to convey, for example, the marking of the beginning/ending of daytime and the phenomenology of orderliness of the natural world (which is not an erroneous observation about nature). The biblical affirmations themselves are not necessarily erroneous because they can be understood to be conveying the marking of the beginning/ending of daytime and the phenomenology of orderliness of the natural world.

Walton points out that ancient Jews were more concerned about function rather than ontology (although they did have ontological ideas)³⁹ What matters for function in this case is phenomenology. Of course, the ancient Jews did believe that the sun actually rises/sets; this is consistent with the fact that the idea of the earth spinning on its axis did not become accepted until the 1600s. But that does not mean it was not the function (e.g. marking the beginning/end of daytime) and phenomenology which the ancient authors were focusing on in certain texts. One might object that the 'phenomenological perspective argument' was not used until after the 1600s.⁴⁰ However, that does not mean that the argument is therefore invalid; the reason the argument was not used prior to the 1600s is that there was no clear evidence of heliocentrism prior to the 1600s that would require making the argument concerning the valid distinction between literal and phenomenological.

What I have said above does not conflate (1) Ancient Phenomenological Perspective and (2) Modern Phenomenological Perspective. Rather, I am arguing that, even from an ancient perspective, people did know the distinction between ontology and function/phenomenology, and the biblical authors may well be focusing on the later aspect when they described sunrise and so forth. I am not assuming that the ancients used 'the sun rises/sets,' as a figurative

39 Walton J. *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*, Downers Grove: IVP Academy (2009).

40 Lamoureux expressed this objection to me in personal correspondence.

expression in the same way that we do today. In other words, I am not saying that the ancients knew (as we do) that it wasn't literally true that the sun rises but use the expression figuratively. What I am saying is that the ancients sometimes focused on the functional and phenomenological aspects of events.

To support his view, Lamoureux⁴¹ cites numerous biblical passages such as those which state that 'The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved' (Ps. 96:10), 'God set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved' (Ps. 104:5), 'The foundations of the heavens shook and trembled, God was angry' (2 Sam. 22:8) and 'The pillars of the heavens quake, aghast at God's rebuke' (Job 26:1). Such expressions, however, can be understood as figurative expressions to convey the usual stability of natural order, based on the theological understanding of the heavens and earth as a temple and the earth as an imitation of the four cornered tabernacle.⁴² This theological understanding also fits well with Lamoureux's⁴³ observation that ancient Hebrews used a tent to describe physical reality, such as a domed canopy of heaven and flat floor of earth; see Ps. 104:2-3; 19:4-5; 18:16, 2 Sam. 22:16). One might object that these are not just figurative expressions, rather they reflect the science-of-the-day in the Ancient Near Eastern world.⁴⁴ However, as noted earlier, given Beale's Distinction, the beliefs of an ancient author do not matter for Beale's view about Inerrancy. Beale would admit that human biblical authors might hold erroneous beliefs related to the Bible's affirmations concerning nature, so they might, for example, believe that the earth was indeed set on pillars and foundations and immovable. But they also understood the heavens and earth as a temple. The affirmations themselves are not necessarily erroneous because they can be understood at the level of the purpose, which is to convey the stability of natural order.

Lamoureux⁴⁵ raises a number of objections to the view that the biblical authors understood the cosmos as a temple. He argues that Beale presents a temple that reflects a two-tier universe (the heavens and the earth) when in fact ancient Near Eastern peoples embraced a three-tier cosmos--the heavens, the earth and the underworld. He objects to Beale's argument that the seven lamps on the lampstands in the Holy Place represent seven heavenly light sources, and the Holy Place representing the visible heavens, and claims that biblical support for the cosmic temple view is lacking.

In reply, instead of saying that the biblical authors understood the cosmos as a temple, one can say that they understood 'the heavens and the earth' as a temple, as I did in the paragraph above. The view that the ancient biblical

41 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2016, pp. 92, 97-98, 143, 147.

42 Beale *op. cit.*, (30), p.213.

43 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2016, p.99.

44 Lamoureux expressed this objection to me in personal correspondence.

45 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2010, 134.

authors understood the heavens and the earth as a temple is not dependent on the arguments from lamps and the Holy Place; it can be argued for on the basis of other analogies mentioned by Beale. For example, in Psalm 104:9 God is then said to have ‘stretched out heaven like a tent *curtain*’ (v.2) and laid ‘the beams of his upper chambers’ (v.3). This psalm uses words (e.g. curtain) and phrases which are often associated with the temple in the Old Testament, and it also has similarities with other temple scenes such as portrayed in 2 Samuel 22:7-15.⁴⁶

On the firmament and the waters above

Lamoureux⁴⁷ notes that Beale⁴⁸ writes ‘I have no problem in viewing the waters “above the expanse [firmament]” to be literal atmospheric waters from which rain comes,’ and he accuses Beale of a concordist hermeneutic. However, Beale is not trying to concord with modern science because—as he emphasises—his interpretation fits with ancient science as well. As Beale goes on to note, ‘Part of this “expanse” was certainly understood even by the ancients to contain water that was separated from the waters “below” on earth, as, for example, the hydraulic cycle described in Job 36:27-29 makes clear (evaporation of water from earth forms clouds from which rains upon the earth come).’⁴⁹ Lamoureux objects ‘if the writer of Gen 1 had intended the waters above to mean clouds, vapor, or mist “from which rain comes”, then there were three well-known Hebrew words (‘*ānān*, *ēd*, *nāsī’*; Gen. 9:13, Jer. 10:13, Gen. 2:6, respectively) that he could have used. But the inspired author never did. Instead, he employed the common term for water (*mayim*) five times in Genesis 1:6-8.’⁵⁰ In reply, it should be noted that the writer of Genesis 1 is focusing on the setting up of the water cycle, thus he uses the word for water (which ancients knew composed the clouds) consistently.

Against Beale, Lamoureux claims that the ‘Scripture clearly states that the firmament (expanse) was *under* the waters above, not *in* them or *part* of them.’⁵¹ However, Beale argues that many ancients ‘would have viewed the *rāqīa’* to have various layers (first air, then multiple levels of clouds filled with water with a further uppermost air space above).’⁵² Some layers could be under the waters above. As indicated by the quotation from Beale above, Beale’s reason for thinking that the biblical authors understood the *rāqīa’* to have various layers is the inference he draws from their understanding of water cycle.

⁴⁶ Beale *op. cit.*, (30), pp. 210-213.

⁴⁷ Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2010, 134.

⁴⁸ Beale *op. cit.*, (30), p. 204

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*

Lamoureux⁵³ objects that the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians believed the firmament to be a single layer and a solid dome. However, as Beale argues, 'we just do not know that all ancients believed the sky was a solid dome or that there was anything near unanimity on this point'.⁵⁴ He explains

Lamoureux cites an illustration of the Egyptian view in which the sun god Re travels by boat on the top of a dome shaped sea of the heaven, which is represented by a deity bending over. But there is another Egyptian depiction where the god of the sky, Nut, is held up by Shu, which represents the air itself. Neither the fluid heavenly sea represented by Nut, nor the air symbolized by Shu, are solid materials. Therefore, rather than considered as a completely solid substance the *rāqîa'* is perhaps best thought of as diaphanously spread out and transparent. Thus, 'expanse' may be the best translation. The word has this notion in Isaiah 42:5 and 44:24. Even in Exodus 39:3, the verbal form is used for hammering out gold into gold leaf; i.e. the emphasis does not appear to be so much on the substance but on the spreading out of it. Thus the focus is on the expansive nature, in that the *rāqîa'* which Genesis 1:8 defines as 'heaven' is spread out from horizon to horizon'.⁵⁵

Lamoureux⁵⁶ mentions other arguments for thinking that the *rāqîa'* is a solid dome:

(1) biblical passages in which *rāqîa'* and its cognates appear (e.g. 'Can you join God in spreading out [*rāqa'*] the skies, hard as a mirror of cast bronze?' Job 37:18);

(2) The translation of this word in Bibles over time (Greek Septuagint: *stereōma* based on *stereos* which means 'firm/hard'; Latin Vulgate: *firmamentum* based on *firmus* which means 'firm/hard'), and

(3) The traditional interpretation of this word for 1500 years of church history.

However, the issues are not as straightforward as Lamoureux makes them out to be.

(1) Nouns and verbs of the same root do not necessarily contain the same semantic range or character.⁵⁷ While Elihu talks about the solid sky in Job 37, he is expressing his personal opinion which is not necessarily the same as being affirmed by the inspired biblical author(s). There are statements in Job attributed to others, for example to Satan in Job 1, with which the author[s]

53 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2016, pp. 97-103.

54 Beale *op. cit.*, (30), p. 208.

55 *ibid.*

56 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2010, 135.

57 Walton emphasised this point to me in personal correspondence.

would not have agreed. Moreover, the word translated 'skies' is not *rāqîa'*—it is *šeḥaqîm*. *Rāqîa'* can be understood as referring to the 'air bubble' in which we live.⁵⁸ In Genesis 1:8 the *rāqîa'* was named *shamayim* 'heaven(s)' in which the birds fly (Deut. 4:17), this seems to indicate that it is not solid. Gordon Wenham's classic commentary on Genesis⁵⁹ notes that the nature of *rāqîa'* is disputed.

As for (2) and (3), it can be argued that translations and commentaries during the intertestamental period were affected by Hellenistic ontological views and their erroneous cosmology, and thus the subsequent translations and interpretations following them went wrong.

Against the view that the Jews thought of the firmament as a solid dome in which the sun, moon and planets are embedded, Beale argues

Biblical writers and ancient astronomers were aware of the five visible light sources – Venus, Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, Mars – which moved at different rates and sometimes different directions (retrograde motion) from each other and from all the other stars. This might be feasible if each star were embedded in its own separate dome, but not if each is rooted in the same solid dome that houses the other stars. The ancients knew about the moon and sun, which travel at different rates from each other and from all the rest. To accommodate all this complexity of motion would, therefore, require eight domes, each with independent rates of rotation, if the ancients thought of these celestial objects as fixed in a solid firmament. Such a view of multiple domes, however, cannot be found to have existed in the ancient world.⁶⁰

Lamoureux objects: 'Beale seems to forget that the sun, moon, and stars are placed *in* (Hebrew *b*) the firmament on the fourth day of creation. Following his model of the universe's structure, these astronomical bodies should be in the earth's atmosphere!'⁶¹ In reply, one can agree with the Functional Creation view proposed by Walton⁶² that these astronomical bodies were 'in' the firmament to serve as signs. The purpose of Genesis 1:14-19 is to affirm the function and the corresponding phenomenology. While Walton agrees that creation can be both Functional and Material, he also argues that it can be either Functional or Material. Lamoureux would need to bear the burden of proof to exclude the Functional alternative if he wants to prove his view with regards to the fourth day of creation.

58 see Excursus on Job 37 in Walton, J. *Job: The NIV Application Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan (2012).

59 Wenham, G. *op. cit.*, (18), pp. 19-20.

60 Beale *op. cit.*, (30), pp. 198-199.

61 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2010, 135.

62 Walton *op. cit.*, (39).

On whether the Bible affirms that the Earth is flat

In support of his view that the Bible affirms a flat earth, Lamoureux⁶³ notes that numerous passages in the Bible state that the Earth has ‘ends’.⁶⁴ In reply, Holding⁶⁵ notes that the Hebrew word most often translated ‘earth’ in the Old Testament is *‘erets*, which is used to refer to some specific nation or territory, like the ‘land of Havilah’ (Gen. 2:11), or to a defined plot of land, like the one purchased by Abraham (Gen. 23:15). Beale⁶⁶ offers an alternative argument that the ends or corners of the earth can be understood on the basis of theological and non-literal understanding of the earth as a four cornered tabernacle. The affirmations of ‘ends’ can also be understood at the level of the purpose, which is to convey remote places using common ways of expression. Citing Matthew 4:8, ‘The devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world,’ Lamoureux⁶⁷ argues that this verse makes sense only if it assumes that the world is flat. However, other commentators⁶⁸ have noted that this passage can be understood as a visionary experience and thus not intended to convey information about physical geography. Citing biblical passages which speak of God inscribing a circle on the surface of the waters (Job 26:10, Proverbs 8:27), Lamoureux⁶⁹ claims that the biblical texts affirm that the earth is flat and surrounded by a circumferential sea, stating that this was the geography of the day as indicated by an ancient Babylonian world map and Egyptian literature. However, the verses cited are vague; they only affirm ‘circle’, and ‘surface’ does not imply circumstantial surrounding land. They may well refer to the horizon of the ocean, which was already understood to be circular by certain ancient peoples with whom the biblical authors may have been in contact with (e.g. the Ancient Greeks).

On biology and the Bible

Lamoureux⁷⁰ notes that Mark 4:30-32 states that the mustard seed is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth, and he argues that we now know this is erroneous given that orchid seeds are much smaller. However, the word ‘all’ (Greek *pas*) does not always mean ‘all’ in biblical texts;⁷¹ to interpret ‘all’ we need to

63 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2016, p. 94.

64 e.g. Is. 41: 8-9; Gen. 11:31.

65 Holding, J. ‘The Legendary Flat-Earth Bible’, *Christian Research Journal* (2013) 36(3).

66 Beale *op. cit.*, (30), pp. 208-213.

67 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2016, p.96.

68 e.g. Manson, T.W. *The Sayings of Jesus as Recorded in Gospels according to S. Matthew and S. Luke*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (1979), p. 44, cf. 1 Enoch 24-25; 2 Baruch 76:3.

69 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2016, pp. 92-97.

70 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2016, pp. 104-105

71 e.g. Mark 1:5 ‘And there went out to him all the land of Judea, and they of Jerusalem and were all baptized in the river Jordan’; surely this does not include the high priest and Herod

consider the context. Given the context of Jesus' audience he may well be referring to the smallest seeds a first century Jewish farmer would plant in the field.

Lamoureux⁷² refers to John 12:23-24 'unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds,' and he concludes that we now know that this is erroneous because seeds do not die before they germinate (they are alive and function metabolically at a low rate). However, the ancient Jews' definition of death may well be different from Lamoureux's; it would have been evident to them that the outer part of the seed (e.g. the shell) does die and is discarded, and they might have defined this as death of the seed.

Lamoureux⁷³ observes that the ancients viewed the origin of humans like the origin of plants, noting that the Greek word *sperma* refers to the seed that farmers sow in fields and also to the seed that males release during sex, and that the Hebrew verb (*zāra'*) refers to sowing seed in fields and also to making a woman pregnant ('a woman shall be seeded [*zāra'*] with seed [*zera'*]' Num. 5:28). He argues that the science of reproduction assumed by biblical writers is that an entire human being is tightly packed within the 'seed' of the male (preformatism), and the female is like a 'field' in which male seed grows. Children are called the 'fruit of the womb' (Ps. 127:3), a barren woman is like hard ground on which seed does not germinate (Lk. 1:42), and women were assumed to be the cause of infertility. In reply, the biblical texts use 'seed', 'barren women', 'fruit of the womb' and so forth as common ways of expression. They do not actually affirm preformatism, even though the human biblical authors may have believed and assumed that. As explained earlier, given Beale's Distinction, the beliefs and assumptions of an ancient author do not matter for Beale's view about inerrancy.

Lamoureux⁷⁴ argues that the biblical texts affirm that creation is '*de novo*': it happens quickly within days, it is brand new from the start and results in fully mature forms; it does not happen through an evolutionary process. However, as Walton argues, the seven days of Genesis 1 can be understood as seven twenty-four hour periods in which the universe with the pre-existent stars and planets (including the environment of planet earth) and living things were organised (or re-organised) by God to function in a way that was ideal for the appearance of the first humans. Walton argues that the Hebrew word *bara* which is translated as 'create' in Genesis 1 can be taken to mean functional rather than ontological creation (hence, the apparent inconsistency between the chronological sequence of Genesis and evolutionary science [e.g. concerning whether

who eventually killed John the Baptist?

72 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2016, p. 105.

73 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2006, 106-109.

74 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2006, 108.

the earth or the sun was made first] can be easily resolved).⁷⁵ The implication of Walton's view is that Genesis does not say when the universe (with the sun, the moon, the stars, and the living things) began to exist. It could have been in existence for millions or billions of years, and then be reorganised just before the creation of the first humans. Unlike Lamoureux, who claims that the Bible affirms that God did not create through an evolutionary process, Walton⁷⁶ argues that the Bible does not tell us so.

Lamoureux⁷⁷ further argues that according to Genesis 1 creation and reproduction of living things is 'according to their kinds', and that in the eyes of ancient people, a goat gives birth to a goat, which gives birth to a goat, which gives birth to a goat, and so on, and goats never change. In reply, Hess⁷⁸ points out that, while 'according to their kinds' affirms that God created various biological life forms following the kinds which he had planned, this does not imply unchanging species. As noted earlier, given Beale's Distinction, the beliefs of an ancient author does not matter for Beale's view about inerrancy. Beale would admit that the human biblical authors might hold erroneous beliefs related to the Bible affirmations concerning nature, for example, they might believe that species never change. However, these affirmations themselves are not erroneous: as Hess argues, the meaning of *mîn* in the biblical text does not imply fixity of species. On the other hand, Moritz observes concerning the Hebrew words *yatsar*, *asah*, and the biblical description of the creation of animals and humans and the formation of a human being in the womb (Ps. 139:13–16, Isa. 44:24; 49:5, 44:2) that

The same Hebrew words (*yatsar* and *asah*) which describe the 9-month-long process of development from two single cells to a fully formed human being is used to describe the earth's creation of the different types of animals in direct response to God's command. In other words, in the emergence of plant and animal life through earth history, we find the same general trajectory as in the formation of an embryo in the womb: first single cells, then multicellularity, and then more complex organisms... the exact same Hebrew words (*asah* and *yatsar*) that describe God's forming of embryos in the womb, and God's forming of plant and animal life, are used to describe God's forming of the human species. The use of these words implies (or at the very least, does not rule out) that God's forming of humankind was a process and not an instantaneous event.⁷⁹

75 Citing Walton's views concerning function does not imply that I agree with Walton on everything concerning the interpretation of Genesis

76 Walton *op. cit.*, (39), p. 168.

77 Lamoureux *op. cit.*, (1), 2006, 104.

78 Hess, R. 'The Meaning of *mîn* in the Hebrew Old Testament', 2012 <http://biologos.org/blog/the-meaning-of-min-part-1>; <http://biologos.org/blog/the-meaning-of-min-part-2> Accessed 17/8/2017.

79 Moritz, J. 'God's Creation through evolution and the language of Scripture', *Theology and*

Conclusion

Lamoureux attempts to provide a systematic and comprehensive case for the conclusion that numerous biblical texts affirm what we now know are erroneous scientific notions concerning a three-tier universe, the movement of the sun across the sky, a solid firmament, flat earth, the mustard seed being the smallest seed, the death of the seed during germination, preformatism, and creation *de novo*. However, he has not adequately considered Beale's distinction between what the text affirms and what the author believes. In this article, I develop various arguments based on this distinction and show that Lamoureux's arguments have failed to refute Beale's position concerning biblical inerrancy and rule out an alternative view of divine accommodation, according to which the biblical texts use ancient common ways of expression without affirming scientific errors.⁸⁰

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Science 2013 11, 1-7.

80 For other helpful insights on these matters, see Collins, C John (2018). *Reading Genesis well: Navigating history, science, poetry, and truth in Genesis 1-11*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan (2018), chapter 9. In particular, Collins cites the Letter of Aristeas as an example of what affirming scientific errors (rather than merely using ancient common ways of expressions) looks like: 'Leviticus is famous for its catalogue of unclean animals; it never really gives a general rationale for why some are clean and others unclean. The "weasel" (Lev 11:29 RV; the ESV has "mole rat"; the Heb. is holed; the Gk. has $\gamma\alpha\lambda\eta$, "weasel") was unclean and thus ineligible for sacrifice and eating. Although Leviticus gives no rationale, the Letter of Aristeas explains that it "conceives through the ears and brings forth through the mouth" (Letter of Aristeas, 165-66; see also Barnabas 10:8). That this was taken to be authentic natural history becomes obvious when we find that Aristotle refuted it, saying that "Anaxagoras and some of the other physiologers" had alleged precisely this; Aristotle dismissed their work as based on "insufficient evidence and inadequate consideration" (Aristotle, *Gen. an.*, 3.6 [756b])' (Ibid, Section 9.E).