



A SCIENCE & RELIGION COMMENTARY

PSALM 19:4 (AND OTHERS. SEE PSALM 104:2; ISAIAH 40:22, 42:5, 44:24;
45:12; 51:13; JEREMIAH 51:25; ZECHARIAH 12:1)

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In the heavens [God] has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

You stretch out the heavens like a tent

Nine texts from the Psalms and the Prophets use a similar Hebrew expression to describe the heavens: stretched like a tent. For a number of old earth creationists, this is more than just a simile. They connect the stretched heavens with contemporary science, suggesting this expression resonates sympathetically with Big Bang theory. That the Hebrew verb for ‘stretched’ is in a form indicating continuous action on the part of God simply connects too well with an expanding universe to be happenstance.

Conceding that there is some descriptive analogy between an expanding universe and heavens ‘stretched like a tent,’ at what level does the analogy operate? There are several options:

- *Deep correlation* – in effect, this is a claim that the Bible teaches Big Bang theory using the limited, unscientific language of its time to communicate an expanding universe. For those who see the Bible, especially the prophetic literature, as laden with time-release nuggets of knowledge that simply await the proper time and state of knowledge to become clear, these perceived correlations operate as much to confirm the truth of scripture as to winnow contemporary scientific theory. Most old earth creationists stop short of arguing deep

correlation, although they are tempted to walk right up to the edge and let their readers fall over into it.

- *Consistency* – this asserts that the language of Scripture is consistent with Big Bang theory. The Biblical writers, inspired by the Holy Spirit, described the heavens in a manner suggestively consistent with the teachings of contemporary understandings of the universe. This consistency is not found in young earth creationist teaching, and hence is part of a preferential argument for old earth conceptions.
- *Poetic consonance* -- the language of scripture creates an artistic harmony between the text and contemporary cosmology. There is no formal connection between the idiom of the stretched tent and Big Bang theory. Both the Psalms and the Prophets are replete with rich, analogy-driven language. To discern the origin of the stretched-tent expression is not difficult: the canopy of the heavens displays no wrinkles and is like a translucent animal skin stretched taut over a frame.

Although the name Big Bang theory was coined in the late 1940’s by astronomer Fred Hoyle (who was himself opposed to Big Bang theory in large part because he recognized that it would be seized upon for religious purposes by creationists), the original discoveries on which it is based occurred in the early 1900’s. The implications of Big Bang theory are suggestive: a temporal beginning to the universe (t=0), the possibility of creation *ex nihilo* (or at least something very close to *ex nihilo*, such as a quantum vacuum), and the creation of time itself.

That the universe is expanding has been confirmed from multiple avenues of detection. One of the great cosmological questions of the 20th century was whether the mass (and consequent gravitational attraction) of the universe was sufficient that cosmological expansion would eventually reverse itself in a shrinking universe, or if the expansion would go on to infinity. These options were affectionately known as the Big Crunch (ultimately shrinking universe) or the Big Whimper (expansion forever). To date, it seems like the Big Whimper is the more likely scenario.

Preaching Suggestions

The texts which refer to the heavens as stretched typically proclaim the grandeur of God in relationship to the Creation. Since these occur in poetic passages – whether liturgical as the Psalms or persuasive/transformational as per the prophets – the sermon should spend at least some time in a poetic mode. Making a connection with an expanding universe can be done appropriately as long as it does not overdo the connection. Appropriately done, it creates a rich, poetic context for considering with awe and wonder God's manner of creating the universe.