

EARTH PICTURED AS FLOATING TORTILLA

The earth looks flat. Really it's as round as a billiard ball. But it looks flat as a tortilla. A somewhat lumpy, wrinkled, half-baked tortilla perhaps, but basically flat.

And floating. The tortilla is floating on a colossal puddle. Interview any man in the street back in biblical times and he could have explained the obvious to you: The earth must be shaped something like a plate with water under, around and over it.

After all, if you walk far enough in any direction you'll run into an ocean too big to cross. So obviously the earth must be surrounded by the blue waters.

Look up and what do you see? More blue, apparently an ocean hanging above the earth. From time to time some of the water falls as rain through the bowl-shaped "firmament" which holds the ocean up there.

Furthermore, if you dig into the earth chances are you'll hit more water. Obviously the earth is floating on the waters, which can be tapped through wells and springs.

A few more details fill out the picture. Stack several mountain ranges on the tortilla to hold up the firmament and add a solid rock foundation to anchor it in the waters. Let the sun, moon and stars take their regular trips across the sky.

And round out the picture with the heavens perched somewhere above the firmament for the gods to inhabit, and perhaps a dark cave underground for the dead.

What you've got is the typical picture of the earth held by most folks in ancient times. That common picture is reflected in the Bible. It shows up repeatedly in the Hebrew scriptures.

Start with the first chapter of Genesis. This skillfully written chapter sets the stage for all creation. It opens with a dark, stormy, watery chaos. Then in six or seven bold strokes everything is set in place.

First God creates light and separates the light of day from the darkness of night. Second is the separation of the waters, some to stay above the dome of the firmament.

Third, the waters below the firmament are drawn aside so the dry land can form and so plants can sprout.

In fourth place appear the sun, moon and stars, which mark the passing of the seasons. Fifth come the fish and birds, that is, the creatures which inhabit the ocean and sky.

Last on the scene are the animals and, of course, people. The total picture corresponds pretty well with the common tortilla-on-a-puddle idea.

A second reflection of this picture is Psalm 104. All the ingredients are in this hymn of praise.

God's home is built on the waters above the tent-like sky. He drives around on the clouds and communicates with the earth through wind and lightening (verses 1-4).

The earth itself is glued to bedrock, and the oceans have been drained off. The mountains, valleys and coastlines are secure (verses 5-9).

Birds, animals, fish, vegetation, people—all have appointed places in the grand scheme of things (verses 10-23). All in all, it's a tight little package with a cozy spot for every thing and every person.

That's its chief charm even today when we've long since abandoned it. Our sophisticated picture of the universe has an earthen sphere accompanied by other planets whipping around the sun, which in turn is but one of umpteen trillion other stars tearing through the Milky Way.

So what's the point of all this? You could throw the biblical sketch out as a naïve anachronism. People don't need to be confused by the ludicrous claims of the Flat Earth Society. In our scientific age there's no room for such outdated claptrap.

Or is there? No one seriously argues that the earth is flat. In fact, that probably wasn't the point of the biblical authors. On the contrary, they were simply picturing the world as they saw it.

Then, using that picture as their starting point, they were trying to suggest that the whole thing is well-planned and secure. In other words, their descriptions of the earth—flat or otherwise—were meant to be faith-filled affirmations.

As a result, ordinary men and women who had to scratch a living out of two goats and an

olive tree could encourage each other. For they could find a secure spot for themselves in that picture.

So even though the floating tortilla doesn't offer us much help in drawing maps today, it can help us get some perspective on our lives.

For you can't help but admire people who could picture such a secure world for themselves even when so much of it was strange and threatening.

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