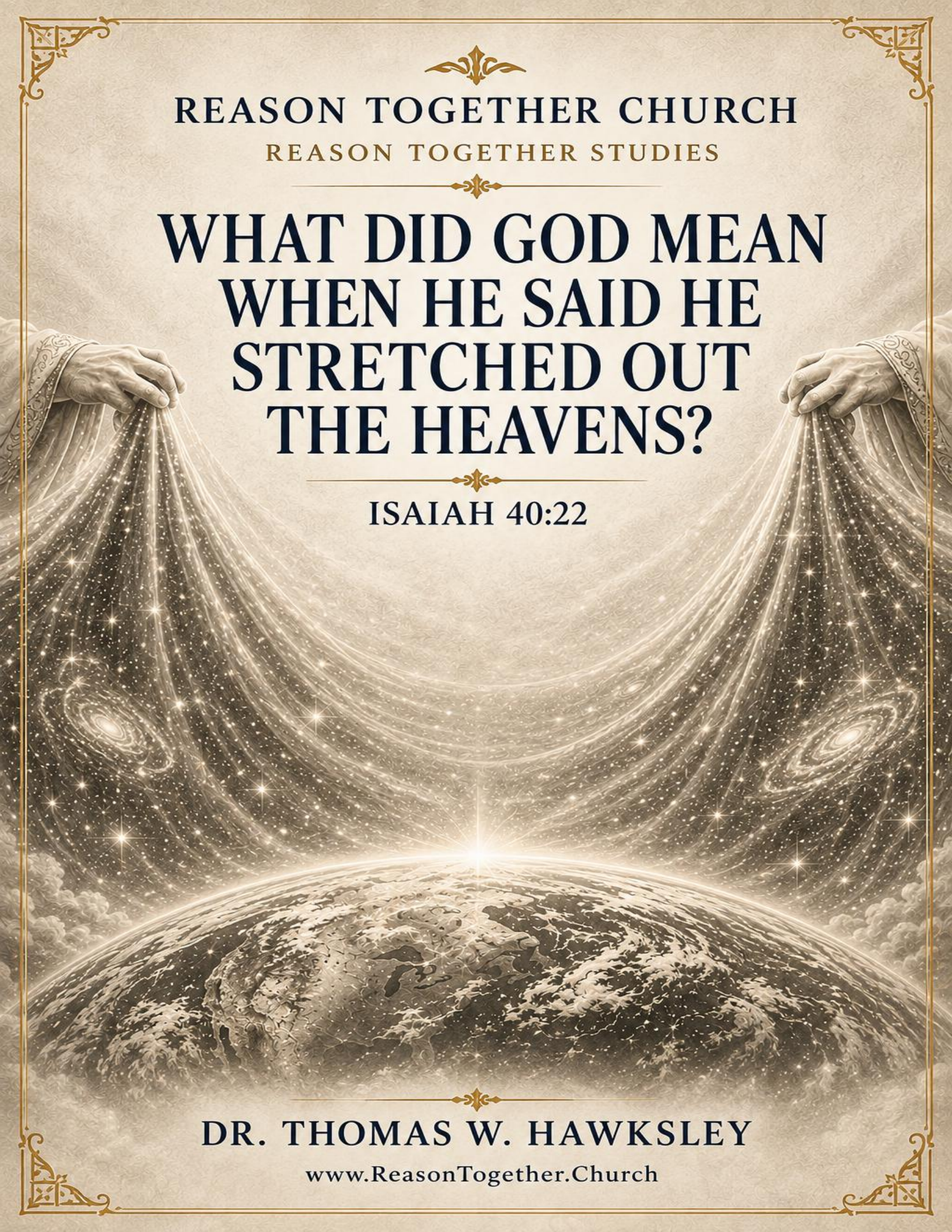




REASON TOGETHER CHURCH  
REASON TOGETHER STUDIES

# WHAT DID GOD MEAN WHEN HE SAID HE STRETCHED OUT THE HEAVENS?

ISAIAH 40:22

DR. THOMAS W. HAWKSLEY

[www.ReasonTogether.Church](http://www.ReasonTogether.Church)

**REASON TOGETHER CHURCH**

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SERMON TRANSCRIPT



# **WHAT DID GOD MEAN WHEN HE SAID HE STRETCHED OUT THE HEAVENS?**

*Isaiah 40:22 KJV*

*“That stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in.”*

**Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley**

Reason Together Church

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*Bring your questions. Open your Bible.  
Let's Reason Together the Word of God.*

Aloha.

Welcome to Reason Together Church.

Whether you have worshiped with us many times or whether this is your first time with us, I am grateful that you are here.

We are especially honored by our guests today.

We will never ask you to stand, introduce yourself or do anything that might embarrass you.

You are welcome to listen.

You are welcome to ask questions.

You are welcome to open your Bible and reason through the Word of God with us.

That is why we say, "Bring your questions. Open your Bible. Let's Reason Together the Word of God."

After the service, I hope you will join us in the Reason Together Cafe.

The coffee is free and so are the refills on conversations.

If you have keiki with you, our Keiki Kids Center is available for them as well.

Before we begin the study, let me briefly mention giving.

There is a giving box in the back for members of Reason Together Church who want to give as the Lord leads them.

Our guests are never expected to give.

If you are a member of another church, we encourage you to give through your home church.

The Bible teaches that giving should be cheerful and never under compulsion.

Over the past several years, I have noticed that we Americans seem determined to make almost everything bigger.

The fountain drinks at fast-food restaurants have become bigger.

Some of them are no longer drinks.

They are buckets with straws.

Movie-theater popcorn used to come in a little paper bag.

Now you can buy a container large enough to feed everyone in the theater.

Television screens have become bigger.

Vehicles have become bigger.

Houses have become bigger.

There was a time when a family might raise several children in a small two-bedroom house.

Brothers and sisters shared rooms.

Sometimes several of them shared the same room.

Today, we often think every child needs a separate bedroom, a private bathroom and enough electrical outlets to charge everything they own.

Our paychecks have become bigger too.

Unfortunately, the price of everything else appears to be expanding a little faster.

Even some of our waistlines have expanded.

I will not spend much time on that one because I am trying to keep everyone listening.

When we look at all these things, we might begin to think that the whole world is getting bigger.

The physical Earth is not actually growing larger because we ordered a bigger soda, bought a bigger house or needed a larger belt.

But if someone tells you that the universe itself is getting bigger, that person may be more correct than many of us realize.

Astronomers have discovered that, on the largest scales, the distances between distant galaxies are increasing.

The universe is expanding.

That discovery is fascinating by itself.

But it becomes even more fascinating when we open our Bibles and discover that long before modern telescopes, redshift measurements or the Hubble-Lemaitre law, Scripture repeatedly described God as stretching out the heavens.

Isaiah chapter 40 and verse 22 says:

*"It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers;  
that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in."*

What did God mean when He said He stretched out the heavens?

Was He simply giving people an image they could understand?

Was He describing what He did during the original creation?

Is He still stretching out the heavens?

And does that ancient Biblical language correspond in any meaningful way with what astronomers now describe as an expanding universe?

Those are our questions today.

We are not going to force modern science into an ancient verse.

We are not going to pretend that Isaiah carried a telescope or wrote equations about distant galaxies.

We are going to place what Scripture says beside what astronomy observes.

Then we are going to reason through the evidence carefully.

The first thing we need to notice is that Isaiah 40:22 is not an isolated statement.

The Bible describes God stretching out the heavens again and again.

Job chapter 9 and verse 8 says:

*"Which alone spreadeth out the heavens, and treadeth upon the waves of the sea."*

Psalms 104 and verse 2 says:

*"Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment: who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain."*

Isaiah chapter 42 and verse 5 says:

*"Thus saith God the LORD, he that created the heavens, and stretched them out."*

Isaiah chapter 44 and verse 24 says:

*"I am the LORD that maketh all things; that stretcheth forth the heavens alone; that spreadeth abroad the earth by myself."*

Jeremiah chapter 10 and verse 12 says:

*"He hath made the earth by his power, he hath established the world by his wisdom, and hath stretched out the heavens by his discretion."*

Zechariah chapter 12 and verse 1 describes the LORD as the One:

*"Which stretcheth forth the heavens, and layeth the foundation of the earth, and formeth the spirit of man within him."*

This expression appears in Job.

It appears in Psalms.

It appears repeatedly in Isaiah.

It appears in Jeremiah.

It appears in Zechariah.

It appears in wisdom literature, worship and prophecy.

Sometimes the writers look back upon what God did.

Sometimes they describe God as the One who stretches out the heavens.

We should never build an entire scientific theory upon one poetic expression.

But we should not dismiss language that the Holy Spirit deliberately placed throughout Scripture.

The repetition tells us that the picture matters.

So what does "stretching out" mean?

The principal Hebrew word is natah.

It can mean to stretch out.

It can mean to spread out.

It can mean to extend.

It can also describe bending, inclining or pitching a tent.

We do not have to guess at the basic picture because Isaiah explains it for us.

God stretches out the heavens as a curtain.

He spreads them out as a tent in which to dwell.

The people who first heard Isaiah did not need to understand galaxies, redshift or spacetime.

They understood tents.

They understood fabric.

They knew what it meant to take something folded and extend it across a greater area.

Imagine someone taking a large piece of cloth and spreading it out overhead.

Isaiah says that what would be difficult for us is effortless for God.

We struggle to unfold a fitted sheet.

God stretches out the heavens.

The original purpose of the picture is to magnify the Creator.

It tells us that the enormous heavens are not enormous to Him.

The farthest galaxy is not beyond His reach.

The distance that overwhelms our imagination does not overwhelm God.

He made it.

He placed it.

He governs it.

The language definitely communicates extension and divine power.

It may describe the original act by which God established the heavens.

It may also describe His continuing authority over what He made.

But we need to be careful.

The form of a Hebrew verb does not give us a scientific measurement of continuing cosmic expansion.

It can describe what God did.

It can identify Him as the One who does it.

It can characterize Him as Creator without telling us precisely how the process operates.

We also need to understand the word "heavens."

The Hebrew word is shamayim.

Depending upon its context, it can refer to the sky in which birds fly.

It can refer to the celestial region of the sun, moon and stars.

It can refer to the heavenly dwelling associated with God.

When we read "heavens," we should not automatically substitute the modern scientific word "spacetime."

We must let each passage speak in its own context.

That gives us our first responsible conclusion.

The Bible genuinely says that God stretched out the heavens.

The first message of that language is theological and visual, not mathematical.

It tells us who created the heavens before it tells us anything about how the heavens behave.

At this point it is helpful to ask how other ancient people described the sky.

The ancient documents do not determine whether the Bible is true.

They help us understand the world in which Biblical language was heard.

One famous Babylonian creation story is called Enuma Elish.

In that story, the god Marduk fights the goddess Tiamat.

Marduk kills her, divides her body and uses part of it to construct the sky.

The sky is pictured as a roof that must be secured in place.

There is a surface similarity to Biblical language because both accounts use construction-like imagery.

But the difference is far greater than the similarity.

In the Babylonian story, creation follows violence among competing gods.

The material world is formed from the body of a defeated deity.

In Genesis, God does not fight for the right to create.

He does not defeat another god.

He does not create the heavens from the corpse of a goddess.

God speaks.

Creation obeys.

The ancient Egyptians gave us another picture.

They personified the sky as the goddess Nut.

She was commonly pictured with her star-covered body arching over the earth god Geb.

The sun traveled across or through her in a repeating daily cycle.

Again, there is visual imagery of a sky stretched over the earth.

But Scripture never tells us that the sky is a goddess.

God is not part of creation.

He is the Creator standing above and apart from what He made.

Sumerian texts frequently speak of heaven and earth being created and separated.

They demonstrate that ancient people thought deeply about how the upper and lower portions of their world became ordered.

The book called First Enoch also contains an ancient section about the movements of the sun and moon.

First Enoch is not Scripture, but it is historically valuable.

Its Astronomical Book describes heavenly gates, seasons and an orderly calendar.

It shows us that ancient observers watched the heavens carefully.

But none of those descriptions is a modern explanation of expanding space.

They describe an ordered sky.

They describe paths, gates, structures and repeated cycles.

The Bible shares some of the visual language understood in the ancient world.

But it gives that language an entirely different theology.

There is one God.

He creates without conflict.

The sun is not a god.

The moon is not a god.

The stars are not gods.

The heavens are not God.

They are the work of God.

Psalm 19 and verse 1 says:

*"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork."*

The heavens are a declaration.

They point beyond themselves to the One who made them.

Now we are ready to ask what scientists mean when they say that the universe is expanding.

Most of us hear the word "expansion" and picture an explosion.

We imagine a firecracker bursting at one location and pieces flying outward through the air.

That is understandable, but it is not the complete scientific picture.

Astronomers are not simply saying that completed stars and planets exploded away from Earth.

They are saying that on immense scales, the measured distances between gravitationally unbound galaxies increase over time.

Earth is not identified as the center of that expansion.

There is no known location within the universe from which everything is flying outward.

If an observer could stand in a distant galaxy and take the same large-scale measurements, that observer would also see distant galaxies generally receding.

The universe is not necessarily expanding into a larger empty room outside itself.

The expansion concerns the relationships and distances within the universe.

It also does not mean that everything is expanding.

You are not becoming taller because the universe is expanding.

Our church building is not becoming wider.

Earth is not being stretched apart.

The distance between Earth and the sun is not increasing merely because of cosmic expansion.

Gravity and other forces hold local structures together.

Individual galaxies, solar systems, planets and people do not simply expand along with the universe.

The observed expansion becomes important across enormous distances between unbound cosmic structures.

People sometimes illustrate this with dots on a flexible surface.

As the surface expands, each dot becomes farther from the others.

No dot on that surface has to be the center.

The illustration is not perfect because it can make us think that the universe is expanding into something outside itself.

Still, it helps us understand why expansion does not require Earth to occupy a central point.

This is where I want to make a brief comment about the Big Bang.

Some people call it the Big Bang.

I sometimes put it much more simply:

God said it, and bang, it happened.

That does not mean the Biblical account and the scientific Big Bang theory are exactly the same thing.

They are not.

We might imagine God casting the stars and planets outward from one location, causing them to spread farther apart.

God certainly had the power to do that.

But those are our words and our attempt to picture it.

The Bible does not tell us that He threw the stars outward from a fixed point.

Scientists also do not describe cosmic expansion as completed stars and planets exploding from one location.

They describe the distances within space itself as increasing.

Could God have commanded that expansion when He stretched out the heavens?

Absolutely.

Can we prove from Scripture exactly how He did it?

No.

We should never confuse what God could have done with what God has told us He did.

Psalm 33 and verse 9 gives us the truth behind that little line about God saying it and it happening.

*"For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast."*

The Biblical emphasis is not noise.

It is authority.

God did not struggle to bring creation into existence.

He spoke, and creation obeyed.

How did scientists conclude that the universe is expanding?

One major line of evidence involves light.

Light can be measured by its wavelength.

When astronomers study light from distant galaxies, they find that recognizable patterns in that light are commonly shifted toward longer, redder wavelengths.

This is called redshift.

Generally, the farther away a galaxy is, the greater its cosmological redshift appears.

One way to picture it is to imagine a wave being stretched.

As the distance across which the light travels expands, its wavelength is stretched toward the red portion of the spectrum.

This does not mean that every redshift in every situation has only one cause.

Motion and gravity can also affect measured light.

But across the universe, the large-scale pattern provides important evidence of cosmic expansion.

This relationship is known as the Hubble-Lemaitre law.

The farther a galaxy is, the faster it generally appears to recede from us.

Another line of evidence is called the cosmic microwave background.

Astronomers detect faint microwave radiation throughout the observable universe.

It is consistent with the universe having once been much hotter and denser.

As the universe expanded, that ancient radiation cooled and its wavelength increased.  
Distant stellar explosions provide another line of evidence.  
Certain explosions called Type Ia supernovae can help astronomers estimate tremendous distances.  
Their observations led scientists to conclude that cosmic expansion did not merely continue.  
At a certain point in the universe's history, it appears to have begun accelerating.  
Scientists use the name "dark energy" for the unknown cause or component associated with that acceleration.  
That name can sound more certain than the knowledge behind it.  
Scientists can measure apparent effects without yet knowing exactly what produces them.  
They do not know precisely what dark energy is.  
They continue investigating whether it remains constant or changes.  
They continue investigating what cosmic expansion means for the universe's distant future.  
There is also a disagreement called the Hubble tension.  
Measurements using relatively nearby stars and supernovae do not perfectly agree with measurements inferred from the early universe.  
That disagreement does not mean that the universe is not expanding.  
It means that scientists are still working to determine the exact rate and whether something is missing from the current model.  
This is an important lesson for Christians and scientists alike.  
We should distinguish observations from interpretations.  
We should distinguish what is well supported from what remains unsettled.  
We should never be afraid to say, "We do not know yet."  
Admitting that we do not know something is not a defeat.  
Sometimes it is the most truthful thing we can say.  
The history of cosmic expansion includes a man whose story many people do not know.  
His name was Georges Lemaitre.  
He was a Belgian Catholic priest.  
He was also a mathematician and physicist.  
In 1927, Lemaitre used Einstein's equations and observations of distant galaxies to develop a model of an expanding universe.  
Edwin Hubble later published stronger observational evidence for the relationship between distance and recession.

Today that relationship is properly called the Hubble-Lemaitre law to recognize the contributions of both men.

Lemaitre's story matters because people sometimes speak as though a Christian must choose between belief in a Creator and the honest examination of the heavens.

Here was a clergyman doing serious mathematical work about an expanding universe.

He did not believe that examining creation required him to deny the Creator.

He also warned against using a scientific theory as a simplistic proof of Genesis.

That caution is wise.

Science can investigate the physical history and present behavior of the universe.

It can measure light.

It can compare distances.

It can build models and test predictions.

But science cannot place God under a microscope.

It cannot calculate why anything exists rather than nothing.

It cannot determine the moral purpose of human life from a telescope.

It cannot tell us whether the Creator loves us or how sinners can be reconciled to Him.

Those are not scientific failures.

They are questions beyond the boundaries of what physical measurement can answer.

Faith should never fear honest observation.

Science should never be asked to answer questions beyond its reach.

Now we come to a theological question.

If the universe is still expanding, does that mean God did not finish creation?

Genesis chapter 2 and verse 1 says:

*"Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them."*

Genesis tells us that God's creative work was completed.

But completed does not mean motionless.

After the creation week, light continued traveling.

Earth continued rotating.

Stars continued shining.

Plants continued growing.

Animals continued reproducing.

People continued living, working and filling the earth.

The systems God established continued operating.

When a builder finishes a clock, the hands are supposed to move.

Their movement does not prove that the clock was unfinished.

It demonstrates that the completed mechanism is operating as designed.

In the same way, the continuing processes of creation do not mean that Genesis was incomplete.

Cosmic expansion could be one of the continuing behaviors God placed within the completed universe.

Creation being finished does not require the universe to become frozen in place.

The Bible also teaches that God did not create the universe and then abandon it.

Colossians chapter 1 speaks about Jesus Christ.

Verses 16 and 17 say:

*"For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible... And he is before all things, and by him all things consist."*

Hebrews chapter 1 and verse 3 describes the Son as:

*"Upholding all things by the word of his power."*

God is not merely the explanation for a moment in the distant past.

He is the One upon whom every present moment depends.

The universe has no independent existence separate from His sustaining power.

Every galaxy remains because He upholds all things.

Every law of nature operates within the order He established.

Every photon travels through a universe that belongs to Him.

The heavens are not beyond God because they are large.

They do not become less His because they are expanding.

They continue to declare His glory.

So did the Bible predict cosmic expansion?

There are three ways we might answer.

The first answer is that there is no relationship whatsoever.

According to that view, stretching out the heavens is only an ancient poetic picture of the sky as a tent or curtain.

There is truth in recognizing the poetry.

Isaiah clearly uses a tent and curtain as his comparison.

But we may dismiss the repeated language too quickly if we insist that it can have no meaningful correspondence with the physical heavens.

The second answer is that Isaiah directly predicted the modern expansion of spacetime. According to that view, the verses are a scientific prediction written thousands of years before modern astronomy.

That answer goes too far.

The passages contain no measurements.

They contain no equations.

They do not define galaxies, redshift or an expansion rate.

Their contexts emphasize the identity, power and wisdom of God.

The third answer is that there is genuine compatibility without forced identification.

The Bible uses meaningful imagery to describe God creating and extending the heavens.

Modern astronomy discovers that the physical universe is not static and that cosmic distances increase.

The correspondence is real enough to examine.

It is not precise enough to turn Isaiah into a modern physics textbook.

I believe that third answer is the most responsible.

We should not ignore the resemblance.

We should not exaggerate it.

The Bible's language is fully compatible with an expanding universe.

But the primary message remains much greater than expansion.

Astronomy can measure that the heavens are expanding.

Scripture tells us who stretched them out.

Isaiah chapter 40 does not mention the stretched heavens merely to satisfy our curiosity.

The chapter calls us to compare the Creator with everything we are tempted to place beside Him.

Verse 25 says:

*"To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One."*

Then verse 26 says:

*"Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things, that bringeth out their host by number: he calleth them all by names by the greatness of his might, for that he is strong in power; not one faileth."*

God tells us to look up.

He does not tell us to worship what we see.

He tells us to ask who created it.

Human beings look at the stars and create horoscopes.

God looks at the stars and calls them by name.

We struggle to count what we can see.

God knows what we cannot see.

The expanding universe should not make God appear distant.

It should make His knowledge appear greater.

It should not make us feel that human life is meaningless.

It should make us wonder at the God who rules such immensity and still knows us personally.

Psalm 147 and verse 4 says:

*"He telleth the number of the stars; he calleth them all by their names."*

The next verse says:

*"Great is our Lord, and of great power: his understanding is infinite."*

That is where this study must finally take us.

Not merely to expansion.

Not merely to redshift.

Not merely to ancient manuscripts.

It must take us to Christ.

John chapter 1 begins with words that deliberately take us back to Genesis.

John chapter 1 and verses 1 through 3 say:

*"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."*

*"The same was in the beginning with God."*

*"All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made."*

The One who stretched out the heavens entered His creation.

John chapter 1 and verse 14 says:

*"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us."*

Think about that.

The One who created light entered a world darkened by sin.

The One who made the stars walked beneath them.

The One who measured the heavens allowed Himself to be measured for a cross.

The hands that stretched out the heavens were stretched upon Calvary.

He did not come because the universe was too large for Him.

He came because our sin had separated us from God.

Romans chapter 3 and verse 23 says:

*"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."*

Every one of us has violated the will of the Creator.

We have worshiped created things instead of the Creator.

We have trusted our own wisdom instead of His Word.

We have used the life He gave us as though it belonged only to us.

The size of the universe cannot hide our sin from God.

The distance between galaxies cannot separate us from His judgment.

But neither can the size of the universe separate us from His love.

Jesus Christ came into the world.

He lived without sin.

He willingly went to the cross.

He bore the penalty our sins deserved.

He shed His blood.

He died.

He was buried.

On the third day, He rose again.

The Creator entered His creation to redeem us.

The heavens reveal His power.

The cross reveals His love.

The empty tomb reveals His victory.

You can know many facts about the universe and still not know its Creator.

You can explain redshift and remain separated from God.

You can defend Genesis and never personally trust Jesus Christ.

Salvation is not received by winning an argument about cosmology.

It is received by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Romans chapter 10 and verse 9 says:

*"That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that  
God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved."*

If you have never trusted Christ, you can call upon Him today.

You do not need to understand the dimensions of the universe.

You need to understand that you are a sinner, Christ is the Savior and He is calling you to trust Him.

I would like to give you an opportunity to do that now.

The words of a prayer do not save you.

Jesus saves.

But if these words express the sincere faith of your heart, you may pray something like this:

Lord Jesus,

I know that I am a sinner.

I believe that You died on the cross for my sins.

I believe that You were buried and rose again.

I turn from trusting myself and place my faith in You.

Forgive me.

Save me.

Help me follow You as my Lord.

Thank You for giving me eternal life.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

If you prayed that prayer sincerely, please speak with me after the service.

I would be honored to pray with you, answer your questions and help you begin growing in your relationship with Christ.

For those who already know Christ, this study gives us an assignment for the week.

Look up.

Look beyond the ordinary distractions that keep our eyes fixed upon the ground.

Look at the heavens and remember that they are not empty, accidental or uncontrolled.

They belong to God.

When you see the moon over Oahu, remember the One who appointed it.

When you see the stars, remember that God knows them by name.

When you hear that the universe is expanding, remember that expansion does not place anything beyond His authority.

Let the size of creation enlarge your understanding of the Creator.

Do not allow it to make you feel insignificant.

The God who upholds galaxies knows your name.

The God who measures cosmic distances knows the burden you carried into this room.

The God who stretched out the heavens hears the prayer you can barely put into words.

We should also carry this study into our conversations.

Perhaps someone will tell you that science has disproved creation.

You do not need to become defensive.

You can ask what they mean.

You can listen.

You can explain that the Bible does not provide a modern cosmological equation.

You can also explain that an expanding universe does not contradict a Creator.

You might say:

"The Bible repeatedly says that God stretched out the heavens. That language is compatible with what astronomers observe, but its greater purpose is to tell us who created and sustains the universe."

That may not finish the conversation.

It may begin one.

And sometimes beginning an honest conversation is exactly what Reason Together Church is supposed to do.

We do not need to claim more than the Bible says.

We do not need to fear what truthful observation discovers.

All truth belongs to God.

Where the evidence is clear, we can acknowledge it.

Where scientific questions remain unsettled, we can say so.

Where Scripture has spoken, we can stand confidently.

Where Scripture has not explained the mechanism, we can remain humble.

The universe is expanding.

The Bible says God stretched out the heavens.

Astronomy measures what the heavens are doing.

Scripture tells us whose heavens they are.

The completed study will be available in the Reason Together Studies Library at [www.ReasonTogether.Church](http://www.ReasonTogether.Church).

Let us pray.

Eternal Father, we praise You as the Creator of the heavens and the earth.

We praise You because the universe is not too large for Your knowledge or beyond Your authority.

Thank You for stretching out the heavens and upholding all things by Your power.

Thank You for giving us minds that can observe, measure, question and learn.

Give us wisdom to distinguish evidence from speculation.

Give us humility when Your Word does not reveal every mechanism.

Keep us from forcing science into Scripture or using Scripture carelessly.

Teach us to see Your glory in the heavens without worshiping the things You made.

Thank You for Jesus Christ, through whom all things were created.

Thank You that the Creator entered His creation, died for our sins and rose again.

Help us carry both truth and grace into our conversations this week.

Use us to point someone beyond creation to the Creator and beyond knowledge to saving faith in Christ.

In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Before we say aloha, remember that our prayer does not end the conversation.

Carry this question with you into the coming week. The next time you look into the night sky, remember that its vastness is creation under the authority of the God who stretched out the heavens and still upholds all things by the word of His power.

Find someone this week who has wondered whether science and the Bible must always be enemies. Do not begin an argument. Begin a conversation.

Listen carefully, ask honest questions and share what Scripture actually says without claiming more than it says.

If today's study raised a question, concern or burden for you, please remember that I am available throughout the week.

You do not need to wait until next Sunday, and you do not need to carry a difficult concern by yourself.

Please join us after the service at the Reason Together Café.

The coffee is free, and there are free refills on conversations.

Bring the question you did not have time to ask, bring the thought you are still working through or simply give us the opportunity to know you better. We would be honored to reason together with you, pray with you and walk with you through the coming week.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

Aloha Nui Loa.

**REASON TOGETHER CHURCH**

**REASON TOGETHER STUDIES**

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY



# **WHAT DID GOD MEAN WHEN HE SAID HE STRETCHED OUT THE HEAVENS?**

*An Expository Commentary on Isaiah 40:22 and Related Texts*

**Primary Text: Isaiah 40:22 KJV**

*“That stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in.”*

**Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley**

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## Introduction

The Bible repeatedly describes God as the One who stretched out the heavens. The expression appears in Job, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Zechariah. It is not an isolated turn of phrase. Across several kinds of Biblical literature, the writers look above the earth and confess that the vast heavens are the deliberate work of the Lord.

Modern astronomy also describes the universe as dynamic. On the largest scales, distances between gravitationally unbound galaxies increase. Light from remote galaxies is stretched toward longer wavelengths, and several independent lines of evidence support the conclusion that the universe has expanded from an earlier hot and dense condition.

That creates a legitimate question for Biblical study. When Scripture says that God stretched out the heavens, is it merely using the familiar picture of a tent or curtain, or does the language correspond in some meaningful way with cosmic expansion? The safest answer must preserve both wonder and restraint. The correspondence is real enough to examine, but the passages are theological declarations rather than modern scientific formulas.

This commentary therefore keeps two questions distinct. Exegesis asks what the Biblical authors communicated in their own context. Science asks what physical observations reveal about the large-scale universe. The two inquiries may meet without becoming identical. Scripture identifies the Creator and the purpose of the imagery. Astronomy measures the behavior of the created order.

## 1. The Biblical Pattern of Stretched Heavens

*“Which alone spreadeth out the heavens, and treadeth upon the waves of the sea.”*  
*Job 9:8 KJV*

Job 9:8 places the spreading of the heavens among works that belong to God alone. Job is describing the Lord's incomparable sovereignty. God commands the sun, seals up the stars, makes the constellations and performs wonders beyond human discovery. The heavens are not independent powers. They are something God spread.

Psalms 104:2 uses even clearer imagery: God “stretchest out the heavens like a curtain.” The psalm is a hymn of creation. Light is God's garment, the waters are ordered at His rebuke and the earth is filled with His riches. The curtain image communicates ease, intention and mastery. What overwhelms human perception is handled by God as effortlessly as a person spreads cloth.

Isaiah returns to the expression repeatedly. Isaiah 42:5 joins creating and stretching: God “created the heavens, and stretched them out.” Isaiah 44:24 emphasizes that the Lord stretched forth the heavens alone. Isaiah 45:12 joins the making of earth, the creation of humanity and the stretching of the heavens. Isaiah 48:13 says His hand laid the foundation of the earth and His right hand spanned the heavens. Isaiah 51:13 again names the Lord as Maker of the stretched heavens and founded earth.

Jeremiah 10:12 and 51:15 connect the act with wisdom and discretion. Zechariah 12:1 places the stretching of the heavens beside the laying of earth's foundation and the forming of the human spirit. The repeated association is consistent: God creates, orders and rules. The expression is never used to make the heavens divine. It makes them dependent upon the One who stretched them.

Repetition strengthens the theological conclusion without turning the wording into an equation. The passages do not supply a rate of expansion, a cosmological timescale or a physical mechanism. They do establish that the heavens are not accidental, autonomous or eternal. Their extent and order testify to the power of their Maker.

## 2. Isaiah 40:22 in Context

*“It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in.” Isaiah 40:22 KJV*

Isaiah 40 is a chapter of comfort grounded in the greatness of God. The prophet does not comfort Judah by pretending its suffering is small. He directs the people to the Lord whose knowledge, power and faithfulness are immeasurable. Human life fades like grass, nations are as a drop of a bucket and idols are powerless objects made by human hands. God alone remains incomparable.

Verse 12 asks who measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, meted out heaven with a span and weighed mountains in scales. Verse 18 asks to whom God can be likened. Verse 22 answers by presenting Him above the circle of the earth, with its inhabitants appearing as grasshoppers. The stretched heavens belong within that contrast between the Creator and the creature.

The verse uses two domestic images. The heavens are stretched like a curtain and spread like a tent. A curtain is thin and manageable to the person holding it. A tent is intentionally extended to form an ordered dwelling. Isaiah does not portray God struggling against cosmic material. The Lord spreads the heavens with sovereign ease.

Verse 25 repeats the challenge: “To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal?” Verse 26 commands the hearer to lift up his eyes and behold the One who created the heavenly host, brings them out by number and calls them all by name. The proper response to the sky is therefore not worship of the stars but worship of their Creator.

The immediate purpose of Isaiah 40:22 is not to reveal the Hubble constant. It is to expose the absurdity of comparing God with an idol and to restore confidence in His rule. Any modern scientific correspondence must remain subordinate to that message. If a discussion of expansion causes the congregation to remember the scientific model but forget the incomparable Lord, the passage has been mishandled.

### 3. The Hebrew Language

#### **Natah: to stretch, spread or extend**

The principal Hebrew verb translated “stretch out” is natah. Its range includes stretching, spreading, extending, inclining and pitching. It can describe extending a hand, drawing a line, spreading a covering or pitching a tent. The action is familiar and concrete. The Biblical writers apply it to God's work upon the heavens because ordinary extension provides an understandable picture of divine creative action.

The verb itself does not specify the physics of what is stretched. It does not tell the reader whether the image refers to atmospheric sky, the celestial realm, the whole created expanse or what modern scientists call spacetime. Context must determine how broadly the heavens are in view. The safest lexical conclusion is that the language truly communicates divine extension and ordering.

#### **Completed and characteristic action**

Different passages use different grammatical forms. Some look back upon God's creative work as accomplished. Others describe Him characteristically as the One stretching the heavens. A participle can portray continuing or customary action, but grammar alone cannot establish continuous metric expansion. The form may emphasize who God is and what He does without supplying a technical statement about the present rate of change.

This distinction matters because an attractive argument can easily become stronger than the text. It is fair to observe that Scripture does not always speak as though the heavens were a static object placed once and never described dynamically again. It is not fair to announce that one Hebrew form scientifically proves ongoing expansion. Exegesis should carry the weight the words can bear, not the weight we wish to place upon them.

#### **Shamayim and raqia**

The Hebrew shamayim, translated “heaven” or “heavens,” can refer to the atmosphere, the celestial region of sun, moon and stars or the spiritual heaven associated with God's throne. The word has a broad Biblical range. It should not automatically be replaced in every passage with the technical term spacetime.

Genesis 1 uses raqia for the firmament or expanse separating waters and associated with the heavenly lights. The term belongs to the Biblical presentation of ordered space. This study does not need to settle every debate about whether ancient readers imagined it as solid, flexible or simply extended. Isaiah's curtain and tent comparisons already provide the controlling images for this particular question.

### 4. Ancient Descriptions of the Heavens

Ancient documents help establish the intellectual world in which Biblical language was heard. They must not be treated as additional Scripture or as proof that the Bible copied its theology

from surrounding cultures. Comparison is useful precisely because it reveals both shared human imagery and decisive theological differences.

### **Babylonian creation**

In Enuma Elish, Marduk defeats Tiamat, divides her body and uses part of it to fashion the sky. The cosmos emerges from violence and rivalry among deities. The heavens can be described through construction imagery, but the material comes from the corpse of a defeated goddess. Divine genealogy and conflict belong to the story's foundation.

Genesis and Isaiah are strikingly different. God has no genealogy, no equal rival and no need to win possession of creation from another god. He speaks, measures, stretches and names. The shared use of spatial imagery does not produce shared theology. In Scripture, the heavens are neither a deity nor the remains of one.

### **Egyptian, Sumerian and Greek pictures**

Egyptian art often portrays Nut as a star-covered sky goddess arching above the earth god Geb. The visual form communicates an extended sky, but it personifies and deifies the created realm. Sumerian texts commonly speak of heaven and earth being created and separated. Their interest lies in the ordering of upper and lower regions rather than the measured expansion of intergalactic distances.

Classical Greek cosmologies frequently pictured an ordered spherical universe with earth positioned within it. Some models were mathematically sophisticated, but the large-scale cosmos was commonly treated as stable. These traditions show that ancient people used architectural, bodily and geometric pictures to describe the heavens. None of the comparisons clearly states the modern physical concept of cosmic expansion.

### **The Astronomical Book of First Enoch**

First Enoch 72 through 82 describes courses of the sun and moon, heavenly gates, seasons, varying lengths of days and a calendar. Aramaic fragments of this material survive among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The work shows sustained ancient observation of celestial order. It does not describe galaxies becoming more widely separated because the large-scale universe expands.

The comparisons strengthen a careful conclusion. Extended, arched, separated and structured heavens were understandable ancient images. Scripture's uniqueness is not that no one else ever looked upward or used spatial language. Its uniqueness lies in the identity of the sovereign Creator and the complete refusal to make the sky divine.

## **5. What Modern Astronomy Means by Expansion**

Cosmic expansion is often misunderstood because the phrase “Big Bang” sounds like an explosion. In the standard cosmological model, completed planets and stars were not thrown from one ordinary point through an already existing empty room. The early universe was hot and dense, and the scale of space increased. Matter later formed atoms, stars, galaxies and planets within that developing history.

On sufficiently large scales, gravitationally unbound galaxies become more widely separated. An observer in one galaxy sees distant galaxies generally receding, but an observer in another galaxy would see the same broad pattern. This does not identify earth or any other ordinary location as the spatial center. The expansion is a property of the large-scale universe rather than debris flying away from one marked spot.

The statement that the universe expands does not mean everything grows. Electromagnetic forces hold atoms together. Gravity binds planets, solar systems and galaxies. A person does not become taller because intergalactic space expands, and a church building does not become wider. The effect becomes significant across immense distances where local binding forces do not keep structures together.

Illustrations can help if their limits are stated. Dots on a stretching surface become farther apart without one dot serving as the center of the surface. Raisins in rising dough illustrate increasing distances throughout the loaf. Neither picture is the universe itself. A surface can suggest an external dimension and dough expands into a surrounding room. Standard cosmology does not require the universe to expand into an outside container.

## **6. The Evidence for Expansion**

### **Redshift and the Hubble-Lemaitre relation**

Light contains recognizable spectral patterns associated with particular elements. In light received from many distant galaxies, those patterns appear shifted toward longer, redder wavelengths. Redshift can result from motion, gravity or cosmic expansion, so no single redshift should be interpreted without context. Across immense distances, the observed pattern supports an expanding universe.

The recession rate of a distant galaxy generally increases with its distance. Georges Lemaitre derived an expanding-universe solution and connected it with available observations in 1927. Edwin Hubble published stronger observational evidence in 1929. The International Astronomical Union later recommended the name Hubble-Lemaitre law to recognize both contributions.

### **The cosmic microwave background**

Microwave radiation is observed throughout the sky with an extremely uniform thermal spectrum and small variations that correspond to early density differences. Scientists interpret it as cooled remnant radiation from a much hotter and denser early universe. This line of evidence is independent of simply measuring ordinary galaxy recession.

### **Supernovae, acceleration and dark energy**

Distant Type Ia supernovae can be used as standardized distance indicators. Their observed brightness and redshift led astronomers to conclude that cosmic expansion accelerated during the universe's history. The term dark energy names the unknown cause or component associated

with that acceleration. The name should not be mistaken for a complete explanation. Its nature remains one of cosmology's major unresolved questions.

### **The Hubble tension**

Measurements of the present expansion rate do not all yield precisely the same answer. Values inferred from nearby Cepheid stars and supernovae differ from values inferred from the cosmic microwave background under the standard model. This Hubble tension may point to hidden measurement effects or incomplete physics. It concerns the exact rate and model, not whether the large-scale universe is expanding.

The standard cosmological model commonly assigns an age of about 13.8 billion years to the universe. This commentary records that scientific position accurately, but RTS-048 is not an age-of-the-universe study. Its Biblical conclusion does not require the congregation to resolve every dispute about chronology, creation days or the assumptions of a particular cosmological model.

## **7. Does the Bible Describe Modern Expansion?**

Three broad positions are possible. The first says there is no meaningful relationship. On this view, the Biblical writers used only an ancient tent or curtain metaphor. This position properly emphasizes original imagery, but it may dismiss repeated language of extension too quickly.

The second position says the Biblical writers directly predicted modern cosmic expansion. This position recognizes a striking correspondence, but it can assign technical content that the passages never state. Isaiah gives no redshift, distance relation, expansion rate or physical mechanism. Calling the language a complete scientific prediction asks poetry and prophecy to function as a modern research paper.

The third position recognizes compatibility without forced identification. The Biblical language truthfully depicts God creating, spreading and extending the heavens. Modern astronomy observes a universe whose large-scale distances expand. The physical observation corresponds meaningfully with the Biblical imagery, but the two descriptions answer different questions and should not be collapsed into one another.

The third position best preserves wonder and restraint. We need not reduce Isaiah to an empty metaphor that tells us nothing true about God's action. We also need not claim that Isaiah secretly encoded twentieth-century equations. The text communicates genuinely while speaking at the level and for the purpose God intended.

*Astronomy measures what the heavens are doing. Scripture tells us who stretched them out.*

## **8. The Big Bang and a Brief Sermon Illustration**

*God said it, and bang, it happened.*

The line works as brief wordplay because Psalm 33:9 declares, “For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast.” It makes the important theological point that creation answers

to God's word. It should be used for less than a minute and followed immediately by clarification.

The scientific Big Bang model is not simply the statement that God spoke. It is a physical account of an early hot and dense state and subsequent cosmic development. The model does not identify the speaker, explain why anything exists or establish the theological meaning of creation. It can describe a process without answering the ultimate question of agency.

It is possible to imagine God casting matter outward from a fixed location. Such an action would create increasing distances among objects. Scripture, however, does not reveal that mechanism, and motion outward through preexisting space is not identical to standard cosmic expansion. The thought may be mentioned as a possibility, but it should never be preached as though the Bible says God threw completed planets and stars from a central point.

A responsible formulation is simple. Could God have commanded cosmic expansion when He stretched out the heavens? Certainly. Can we prove from Scripture exactly how He did it? No. We must distinguish what God could have done from what God has chosen to reveal.

## 9. Georges Lemaitre and the Relationship of Faith and Science

Georges Lemaitre was a Belgian Catholic priest, mathematician and physicist. His role in the development of expanding-universe cosmology is historically significant because it complicates the common story that faith always resists science. A Christian clergyman helped establish the theoretical and observational foundation for the modern idea.

Lemaitre also resisted using his cosmology as a simple scientific proof of Genesis. Physical theory and revealed theology were related in his worldview, but he did not treat them as interchangeable. His caution is useful. Christians need not fear honest observation, and scientists should not be asked to make a physical model carry conclusions beyond its method.

Scientific theories are refined as measurements improve. Biblical doctrine should not be balanced precariously upon one proposed mechanism that may later change. The Christian confession rests upon God's revelation: He created all things through His Word, all things belong to Him and all things continue under His sustaining power.

## 10. Finished Creation and Continuing Operation

*“Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.” Genesis 2:1  
KJV*

Some hear the word expansion and assume it would contradict the completion of creation. Genesis 2:1 declares the heavens, earth and their host finished. Yet finished does not mean motionless. After creation, light continued traveling, earth continued rotating, stars continued shining and living creatures continued reproducing.

A finished clock is expected to move. Its motion demonstrates that the completed mechanism is operating. The maker did not fail to finish it because its hands continue around the dial. In the

same way, cosmic expansion could be a continuing behavior placed within the completed created order.

The New Testament adds the doctrine of divine sustenance. Colossians 1:16 says that all visible and invisible things were created by Christ and for Christ. Verse 17 says, “by him all things consist.” Hebrews 1:3 says the Son upholds all things by the word of His power. Creation is therefore not merely a remote event left to operate outside God's authority.

A lawful, continuing universe is not less dependent upon God because it behaves consistently. The laws, matter, energy and order by which it operates are themselves created realities. Every present moment remains upheld by the Lord. The heavens have never expanded beyond the authority of the One who stretched them out.

## **11. Theological and Pastoral Meaning**

### **The greatness of God**

Cosmic scale should deepen humility. Humanity now observes galaxies at distances ancient hearers could not measure, yet greater measurement does not make God smaller. Isaiah's logic becomes more forceful. If the heavens are immense, how incomparable is the One who spreads them like a curtain and calls their host by name?

### **The reliability of Scripture**

The study does not require the claim that Isaiah taught modern cosmology. Its strength lies in the fact that Scripture's theological description is compatible with an unexpectedly dynamic universe. The Bible directs wonder toward the Creator without tying faith to a primitive deity embedded inside the sky.

### **The limits of human knowledge**

Astronomy has learned much and still confronts profound questions. The precise expansion rate remains disputed, dark energy is not understood and the earliest physical conditions are reconstructed through models. Scientific uncertainty does not erase well-supported observation. It reminds both scientist and preacher to state conclusions according to the evidence available.

### **The Creator who saves**

John 1 identifies the eternal Word through whom all things were made and then announces that the Word was made flesh. The Creator entered His creation. The hands associated with making and sustaining all things were stretched upon Calvary. Christ died for our sins, was buried and rose again according to the Scriptures.

The gospel is not proved by redshift, but the expanding universe provides a fitting setting for the proclamation. The One who rules distances beyond our imagination also knows every sinner personally. The God who numbers the stars calls people to repentance and faith. Cosmic greatness does not make Him remote from the brokenhearted.

## 12. Interpretive Guardrails

First, do not claim that Isaiah supplied modern cosmological equations. The repeated phrase deserves attention, but it gives no measured rate, technical definition or physical mechanism.

Second, do not say that Hebrew grammar alone proves continuous expansion. The wording can portray God as the One who stretches the heavens, but participial form is not an astronomical instrument.

Third, do not describe the Big Bang as completed stars and planets exploding from earth or from one ordinary point inside preexisting space. That caricature does not represent the standard model and weakens the credibility of the study.

Fourth, do not preach the fixed-point casting possibility as revealed fact. God could have acted in ways Scripture does not specify, but possibility is not revelation.

Fifth, do not treat ancient noncanonical texts as additional Bible books. They provide historical comparison and demonstrate how cultures imagined the heavens. Canonical Scripture alone governs the doctrine.

Finally, do not allow scientific material to eclipse the Creator or the gospel. The center of Isaiah 40 is not a model of the universe. It is the incomparable God who gives power to the faint and renews the strength of those who wait upon Him.

## 13. Teaching the Study

The opening about American expansion works because it begins with familiar experiences: larger fountain drinks, larger popcorn containers, larger houses, larger prices and larger waistlines. The paycheck may also be larger, although it has not always expanded at the same rate as everything it must purchase. The humor prepares the congregation for the surprising thought that the universe itself may be getting larger.

The sermon should then move quickly to Isaiah 40:22. Read enough of the chapter to establish its purpose. Trace the repeated Biblical pattern, explain the tent and curtain imagery and only then describe cosmic expansion. This order prevents science from becoming the controlling lens through which Scripture is forced to speak.

The most useful recurring contrast is: “Astronomy measures what the heavens are doing. Scripture tells us who stretched them out.” The statement honors legitimate observation while preserving the authority and purpose of revelation.

A brief fitted-sheet line can supply humor without trivializing the subject: “We struggle to unfold a fitted sheet. God stretches out the heavens.” The finished-clock illustration then answers the objection that continuing expansion would make Genesis incomplete.

The final movement should return from the immensity of the universe to the nearness of Christ. The hands that stretched out the heavens were stretched upon Calvary. The Creator is not merely powerful. He is the Savior who invites sinners to trust Him.

## Conclusion

The Bible repeatedly says that God stretched out the heavens. In its immediate setting, the language portrays the sovereign Creator spreading the heavens as effortlessly as a curtain or tent. It declares His power, wisdom, uniqueness and ownership of the created order.

Modern astronomy independently observes that the large-scale universe expands. The scientific evidence includes cosmological redshift, the Hubble-Lemaitre relation, cosmic microwave background radiation and distant supernovae. Questions remain about the precise rate, the nature of dark energy and the complete history of the universe.

The Biblical phrase and the scientific observation should neither be separated absolutely nor forced into complete identity. Scripture does not teach the equations of cosmology, but its language is meaningfully compatible with a dynamic universe. This conclusion allows the church to marvel without exaggerating.

An expanding universe does not contradict a finished creation. A completed created order can continue operating while Christ upholds all things by the word of His power. The heavens may be expanding, but they remain created, sustained and ruled.

*The universe may be expanding. The authority of its Creator is not.*

## Selected Scripture Index

Creation and completion: Genesis 1:1, 6-8, 14-19, 31; Genesis 2:1-3; Psalm 33:6, 9; Hebrews 11:3.

The stretched heavens: Job 9:8; Psalm 104:2; Isaiah 40:12, 21-26; Isaiah 42:5; Isaiah 44:24; Isaiah 45:12; Isaiah 48:13; Isaiah 51:13; Jeremiah 10:12; Jeremiah 51:15; Zechariah 12:1.

The Creator and Sustainer: Psalm 19:1; Psalm 147:4-5; John 1:1-3, 14; Colossians 1:16-17; Hebrews 1:2-3.

The gospel: Romans 3:23; Romans 10:9; First Corinthians 15:3-4; Ephesians 2:8-9.

Comparative ancient texts: Enuma Elish, Tablet IV; Egyptian representations of Nut and Geb; Sumerian heaven-and-earth separation traditions; First Enoch 72-82. These sources are included for historical comparison, not as authorities equal to Scripture.