

LIVING IN FLATLAND

PERSPECTIVES OF CALVINISTS AND ARMINIANS

Two-Dimensional THINKING in a Five-Dimensional WORLD

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from ROMANS 9:13-25

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the church age, the people of God have disagreed concerning particular doctrines from the Bible. There have always been differences in various beliefs concerning doctrines, even as simple as the doctrine of the church itself. For example -- there are at least three major groups/denominations today that consider themselves the Bride of Christ and the remaining believers somewhat less than the bride (I suppose). There are some Christians that consider the days of angels’ involvement in the affairs of men over and God’s working through supernatural gifts over as well. Many other groups of believers remain convinced that God still uses angels to minister to the saints and works through all spiritual gifts after his divine will. If we look at the belief systems of the Last Days it turns into something of a free-for-all. Some believe in a literal 1000 year reign of Christ and others do not. Still others say that we are right now in the midst of His reign and that the 1000 years mentioned in Scripture is merely symbolic. Even among those who believe firmly in this 1000 year reign there are differences regarding when Christ, himself, will return for his saints. There are differences among believers regarding the work and Person of the Holy Spirit, as well as differences regarding how believers should interact with the world as we endeavor to be “*not of the world*” as Jesus said. There are in fact many truths in Scripture that are general enough to leave room for debate and latitude as to what is precisely correct to believe. It almost seems as if God likes controversy among his saints.

When we approach the issue of an individual’s salvation, once again, we are not surprised to find disagreements among believers. There are differing views regarding what is referred to as “eternal security” and the possibility promoted by some groups for “losing” one’s salvation. Can you lose it? Are you automatically “in” no matter what, once you become a believer having surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, or can you so resist God after that born-again transformation that you are re-transformed back into an object of God’s wrath? I hope to begin a discussion in this by reflecting on the complex nature of such a consideration, and, hopefully, addressing, as an aside, many of the differences among God’s believing children.

APPARENT CONTRADICTIONS

I am personally fascinated with the many *apparent* contradictions in the Bible. I have listed here a few examples: We conquer by yielding (Romans 6:16-18). We find rest under a yoke (Matthew 11:28-30). We reign by serving (Matthew 10:42-44). We are made great by becoming little (Luke 9:48). We are made free by becoming His bond servants (Romans 6:17-20; 8:2). We live by dying (John 12:24-25; 2 Corinthians 4:10-11). God is our Father in heaven (Matthew 6:9) and yet he is not far from every one of us (Acts 17:27). We are in Christ (Romans 8:1) and yet at the same time Christ is in us (I John 4:13). We are informed that God cannot abide the presence of sin, to the extent that he turned his back on his Son when he became sin for us on the cross (Matthew 27:46), and yet David tells us that if we were to descend into the very pit of Hell we would find God there as well (Psalm 139:8).

These kinds of things challenge the mind and at the same time can be refreshing to the spirit. It reminds us that Truth is deeper than what we are able to absorb and process with our little brains. This is an important precedent. In pursuit of Truth and God's ways, I appreciate meditating on these kinds of biblical paradoxes. And there are more marvelous and wonderful truths than most Christians are aware of and value for their spiritual depth and application. I think it is apparent with these examples that biblical truths are not always what they seem to be on the surface. We need to look more closely and more deeply to truly perceive biblical spiritual truth. Clearly concepts such as these and others far surpass the analysis of our best mental disciplines and yet represent eternal truth all the same.

One of my favorite apparent disparities consists of the contrasting issues of what are commonly referred to as Calvinism* and Arminianism**. Ponder for a moment that after two thousand years with godly and scholarly individuals on either side of this issue we still have not resolved it. Both perspectives use Scripture to underscore the truth of their positions.

I find this to be an interesting and challenging controversy in the church. I think we are clearly missing something in this theological truth that somehow escapes us, polarizing believers into one corner or another. I don't think we need to fight over such things, and at the end of this paper it is my hope that any position you hold might be re-examined as you look a little more closely or a little deeper into this area of biblical truth. I do not think that we can get our predestined ducks all in a row at either end of the issue because, frankly, I don't think that there is an end to this issue.

If you read some things here that bother you, please be open enough to consider that a perspective other than your own may have some merit even as your perspective may have merit. My point is that we help neither others nor the cause of Christ by taking a strong stand on the far end of an issue so phenomenally complex (such as where John Calvin and Jacob Arminius have placed themselves).

It is important that we have a sense of the tools at our disposal as we approach this issue. We are all very much like the little four-year old girl who was helping her mother when her mom was sick in bed. The little girl made some tea for her and her mother was pleasantly surprised by this task (understand that this was in an age before the invention of tea bags). The Mother said, "I didn't know you could make tea." And the little girl responded by stating that she had watched her mother do it many times. She stated the simplicity of boiling the tea leaves and then straining the results into a cup and added as an aside that she could not find the tea strainer but used the fly swatter instead. Then she quickly added, "But don't worry mom, I didn't use the new fly swatter; I used the old one." The fact is that we all strain the truths of Scripture with the strainers of our own mental processes and we all have different kinds of strainers. All of our strainers (our minds) are meager by eternal standards and we are dealing with infinite truths any time we delve into the principles found in God's Word. This presents an immediate dilemma. We are seeking to grasp the fathomless. We are utilizing temporal means to understand infinite truth. We must confess to the limitations of such a situation. As serious Christians, we deal with the issue of processing God's Word and we process that eternal truth through very finite and often tainted minds. Let's be very, very careful in doing so.

*Calvinism – God chooses who is saved and who is not. **Arminianism – We alone choose our salvation.

Flatland

To understand the depth of our dilemma, I would like to use what is a *complex* but fitting illustration. A man named Edwin Abbott, in the year 1884, published a short book called *Flatland*. Abbott was a mathematician and wrote his booklet using the symbolism of geometry to ridicule the class structure of human society. He sought to illustrate our world in a two-dimensional depiction with various “classes” of people represented as squares, triangles, octagons, etc., according to varying classes or castes of people in the social structures of society. What I would like to do with this illustration is to borrow it and take a different slant with the same tool by applying it *to something much more real to our everyday lives*. The slant I would like to take is that this world called Flatland actually exists in the limitations of our ability to think through absolute truth. This *Flatland* is a very real “world.” It is our world within - the world of our mental processes.

We are familiar these days with the ideas of three-dimensional realities. Computer games are all moving in this direction so as to appear more life-like (three-dimensional). Our three-dimensional world has obvious depth. The three dimensions are up, down, and across. Our depth of perception is an important aspect of perceiving the depth and height of this three-dimensional world all around us.

In his book, Abbott describes what an actual world of two dimensions would look like. This world is aptly called Flatland. Everything in this world has both a surface and an edge (two dimensions). The natives of Flatland move around and see things on the surface of their two-dimensional space but they see all things as merely lines. They possess only two dimensions and standing from the perspective of one of those dimensions they can see nothing but the edges of everything around them in that dimension. Obviously that does not present a very clear picture of how things really are in their world. When they are looking at a square they see only one edge of the four-sided square and so miss a lot of what the square truly consists. How wonderful it could be if they could see things from above. They could see the entire square. They could see its square shape, that it actually has a second dimension. But alas, they cannot. In actuality they do not even know that there is such a thing as an “above.” In that world, there is nothing you would perceive as a solid, multi-dimensional entity, such as a sphere or a cube, much less something like a tetrahedron or dodecahedron. If there was a cube or a sphere in that realm it could not be wholly perceived in its true and full shape. Looking from the edge they would see only a slice of a square or circle as the cube or sphere passes through Flatland respectively. The two would look very much alike. The best any native could do would be to visually grasp only one minuscule plane of its coordinates. There simply is no room for more to fit in a two-dimensional line of vision and therefore there is no more to be seen (see sketch to the right).

It sounds like a science fiction type of world or an allegory created by Escher, Picasso or Dali. But I assure you, that is not the case. It is, in fact, a real place for each of us. It is the place of native logic; the place of our own world of reasoning and thinking. It is the place of mental processes in intellectual *dimensions*. Although we live in a three-dimensional world, we actually think only in terms of two dimensions and I hope to show you how that is so and then apply it to

our efforts at groping for God's multi-dimensional Truths.

Thinking People

As intelligent, spiritual people, we realize that our created world is more than three-dimensional. There is also a fourth dimension called *time*. Both time and space together make up the construction of this fourth dimension. There also is a fifth dimension called *heaven* and in quantum physics there are up to nine or ten dimensions of reality in creation. We actually exist in a creation of many dimensions. If we tend to think only two-dimensionally, and reality exists in many more dimensions, think of how much we could *misperceive and miss* by means of our mere minds.

One illustration of the distortion in attempting to perceive a three-dimensional reality in two-dimensional perspectives would be the flat maps of parts of the world that we make on flat paper--maps that are actually sketchings of the *surface* of a three-dimensional globe. The most obvious distortion is the apparent out-of-proportion size of Alaska in some maps. Its actual dimensions, taken from the sphere of the earth, must be stretched to fit the actual coordinates of the globe on a flat sheet of paper. Consequently, its coordinates are not literally correct on that flat, two-dimensional sheet of paper (see map). We all know that Alaska actually appears smaller on the globe than it appears on this flat map. This is an obvious disparity between a three-dimensional concept transferred to a two-dimensional context. Should we be surprised to find a disparity between our multi-dimensional world of God's creation and our limited thinking tool (our minds)? We should not.

We perceive things as if looking at multi-dimensional realities on the two-dimensional maps of our minds. For example, we tend to see things in terms of "good and bad," "black and white," etc. (two dimensions). If you look at the diagram on the back page you will see many different shapes on the plane of Flatland. There are squares and triangles, hexagons, pentagons and more. This represents (for my purposes) the perspectives of individuals in our mental Flatland. Some people are much more "pinpointed" and narrowly focused than others in their outlook on life. Some people are more broad-minded, and we could say hexagonal, in their perspective and some people are simply square and basic in the way they see life. We should also have lines and points (dots) in our world of Flatland. A line is of course only one-dimensional and some people fit that mold by insisting on the old "my way or the highway" mentality in their approach to life. That's pretty one-dimensional. Other people would be represented perhaps as "points" (a point is a non-dimensional entity). They see neither themselves in any *true* light nor others in any *true* sense. No perspective could be worse than this one. How many people do you think would fit in this category? I'd hate to guess, but I wouldn't come up with any encouraging number taking into consideration the Fall of man, the downward nature of the human soul, the fact that the world is virtually run by "C" students, and we are increasingly media-educated and overly simplistic in our outlooks on life, etc., etc. But that's another subject. The point is that this *perspective thing* is an important beginning to understanding how each of us interacts with this world and with Truth. I realize it has a bit of a philosophical slant to it but, as a result of studying people throughout the past 20 years of ministry, I think it's a relatively solid conclusion and quite accurate where individual perspectives are concerned.

God's Truths

Enter God's truths and God's choices. The words and principles of Scripture transcend anything else ever written. Scripture defies complete analysis by the human mind, unfolding depth-upon-depth to the searching soul time-after-time and year-after-year. The Bible is multi-tiered and multi-faceted because its truth is *eternal*, emanating from the infinite God to us (in our little world). Although we may mentally agree with that premise, we unfortunately will still try to put biblical truth into boxes. We do this for our own benefit, to organize thoughts around God's Word. That is a commendable motive but a less than perfect process. We then have a further tendency (once we have decided on a doctrinal issue such as our tribulational perspective) to plant ourselves there, with our mental achievement of that particular perception and limited understanding, thinking that we have this particular truth all figured out. This is particularly a problem when embarking on the journey of seeking to understand predestination and the free will of man as expressed in Calvinism and Arminianism.

There are many ways we might approach this conundrum. Let's start with the basic issue of God's choices, as so firmly stated in Romans chapter 9 verse 13, where God is rightfully quoted as saying, "Jacob I have loved and Esau I have hated." Now, if we are *thinking people*, we know that this does not refer to the issue of mere emotions where love and hate are concerned. When God says he loves, it means *a choice for* and when God says he hates it means *a choice against*. God loves the world and chose to give his Son for its redemption (John 3:16). God hates divorce and does not choose it or approve of it for his people (Malachi 2:16). The important point here is that love and hate refer to *choices*, not emotions.

It is stated by some commentators on this passage that Jacob was "righteous" and that's why God chose him. Since we don't see that in Scripture (quite the opposite) it would seem that this notion is very speculative. Jacob was not exactly painted in Scripture as an upstanding man. His name means *supplanter* and that's what he was, a trickster. His life showed it in every way and he eventually reaped what he sowed when the tables were turned and his own sons tricked him with regard to Joseph. Jacob lived his life in the Frank Sinatra way--his way. Jacob got what Jacob wanted by hook or by crook, and it was usually by crook! He was always looking out for himself even if at the expense of others. When heading up the caravan back home to the land of his birth he caught wind of the fact that his brother Esau was approaching with a private army mounted on war horses. Jacob's brilliant plan was to station the women and children first in his caravan to meet the presumed angry approach of Esau first! What a guy! Jacob plotted against his father, Isaac, plotted against his father-in-law, Laban, and attempted to plot with God (Genesis 28:20). Job's only saving grace was that God *chose* him. That's it! God chose him and, since God is God, he can choose whomever and whatever he wants.

In the Book of Romans, chapter nine, man's natural response to, or observation of, that divine choosing is also stated as something that we do not tend to fully understand. Our tendency is to think, "How is that fair, God?" Is God unrighteous in choosing one over the other for no apparent reason other than his independent choice? That may sound like a terrible question but it's one that a good many people ask. And the response in the Bible to that query does not explain *why* God made that particular choice. God's response is not intellectually gratifying in the least. God doesn't lead us into a dissertation of his logic and he does not explain himself to

convince us that he is just in his choices. He doesn't have to because he himself defines justice and whatever he does is just, *period*. In fact, in that passage, verses 15-18, the emphasis brings out one simple thing--the vast superiority of God's choices over our choices. Consequently, it is entirely out of line to question God's justice. Justice is what God does and justice is who God is. He defines it. For our part, we like to figure out our own ideas of justice. We like to make that determination for our own lives and our minds are drawn to making that decision for our selves in determining what is fair and what is not fair. The danger of this resides in the fact that our minds exist in Flatland. By comparison, God and his justice surpass multiple dimensions. He is dimensionless in the same way that we use the word priceless. God is beyond us and all his choices are beyond us, out of reach to our individual senses of justice and fairness.

The fact that God chooses and chooses wisely is a forgone conclusion from a biblical standpoint. The qualities of His omniscience, love, wisdom and infinite understanding leave no question as to His right and ability to choose best. That is established here clearly in Romans 9. Yet the natural mind tends to respond two-dimensionally (see verse 19) which is obviously a limited perspective but it is the natural response of Flatlanders like us (two-dimensional thinkers with two-dimensional logic).

A Major Question - Who Are You?

When it comes to such complex questions as God's choices versus our choices and other elements of Calvinism versus Arminianism, it is okay to have searching questions but it is not okay to doubt God. Doubting questions, by their nature, involve placing one's personal perspective above God's perspective. That's something that originated in Eden at the Fall of Man and the ensuing desire for autonomy (self-law). *Searching questions* are good but *doubting questions* are bad. For a good comparison of the two types of questions, you might study the different responses of Mary and Zacharias when they both questioned the messenger of God. Zacharias expressed doubt and was struck dumb; Mary expressed searching and was graciously given a response to her query.

The question that arises from Romans 9:19 communicates the awful, natural tendency of humanity to see themselves as intellectual equals with God! That's an obvious mistake, albeit a common one. For example - we often wrongly see ourselves as positional equals with others, including children with parents, employees with employers, etc., forgetting that equality of person-hood is not at all the same as having different roles in life and understanding our position as ordained by God. One benefit of understanding *our place* or role is in the greater potential of keeping our job (understanding who is the boss and who has the servant role), or the many benefits of obeying our parents, such as not getting a spanking. God places us over some and under others in various responsibilities. When it comes to God himself, we could not be more unequal with him. God's response to this two-dimensional thought in verse 19 is simple. He asks a question of incredulity, **"Who are you!?"** (see verse 20). What a fabulous question! That is often God's response to his creatures when they determine things beyond their ability or position. In the book of Job, where Job sought to affirm his own rightness before God, God came on the scene in a storm and basically said, "Who are *you*, Job?!" Job learned a vital lesson from that encounter and repented. The lesson was, *I need to not focus on me, but be sure to exalt God*. This is a key to life and a key to great depth perception as well.

Now we find a picture-perfect illustration comparing Flatlanders with their Builder: the Potter and the clay illustration quoted in Jeremiah 18 - and it *is* superb. It's to be understood (from our 2-D perspective) that some people resent being placed on the level of a pot; but, in the overall hierarchy of *being*, that's where we are compared to God. We are pots. Now here's an interesting thing about pots: Pots have no independent meaning or purpose. A pot is always and immediately connected with where it was made. There is meaning for the pot only in its origin; whether that would be China (the Chinese Ming Dynasty) or Bybee, KY. There is true meaning for the pot only in its origin.

God is the Potter (our source of origin) and we are the pots. And pots just do not say, "Hey, you should have made me differently!" That is altogether out of place for pots. Our part is to know our role and seek to fulfill that as God's pot. We are not our own (1 Corinthians 7:23). Neither can we insist on any meaning for anyone's life apart from our Maker. We are pots and the important truth of that analogy is that pots have little say about the purpose for which they were made.

To see ourselves as mere pots is a good beginning for understanding our interaction with God and his choices. It's the beginning of an accurate perspective of who we are. We are pots. Do you know how a pot is exalted? A pot is exalted through its usefulness. It is exalted when it is used. You need to know what kind of pot you are so that you can be useful and, therefore, fulfilled. That will also help to answer the question of who you are as well as providing identity and fulfillment in life. What kind of pot are you? Are you a witnessing pot? a discipling pot? a pastor pot? Are you a mom pot or a dad pot? As a Christian pot, what kind of Christian pot? Are you doing the will of God in your life? Are you completely God's pot?

The Potter Can

Now here's where it gets applicable. Verses 21-23 are quite interesting. Some take this as hypothetical and some do not. Here's the question: Can the potter make one pot to use as a cereal bowl and another pot to use as a candy bowl? Sure. Can the potter make one pot to hold flowers and another pot to hold waste products? Sure can. Can the potter make one pot a priceless vase and another pot a disposable ashtray? Yes, he can. *He's the potter*. Imagine, the potter being able to make any pot he wants for any use he wants. The nerve! He can do that and obviously God *can* do that too. That is what is clearly stated here. If you go no further with this truth then go that far. God *can* make any pot he wants for any purpose he desires. *He is the Potter*. As we understand that then the critical application here rests on an elevated perspective of God, who alone can do anything he chooses. God chooses and has all authority to choose. This is rightfully and thankfully so. Because if it weren't for His choice of mercy (for example) then no one would receive mercy; no one would be blessed because no one deserves His grace and no one can earn His choice. Thank God, he chooses. Some people are uncomfortable with such a God. We prefer our deity a little more manageable; a bit tamer than that perhaps. Unfortunately, you cannot get away from the fact that God *can* choose as he alone determines.

There are a great many difficult concepts in the Bible. There are many intellectually challenging principles and concepts that are apparent contradictions, such as those mentioned at the

beginning of this paper. Here is another important paradox: *God chooses* and, yet, Scripture is quite clear that *man chooses also* and is a free agent in doing so. “Choose you this day whom you will serve....” (Joshua 24:15). We are therefore required by Scripture to believe both in the human responsibility of choosing rightly *AND* God’s predestination in the choices he makes. We are not asked to understand it but to believe it. No one waits for understanding the process of digestion before eating do they? Nor do we wait on understanding electricity before using it. Our beginning point of better understanding of God’s ways is to first believe that somehow the sovereignty of God in his choices and the sovereignty of men in their free will can coincide peacefully with neither being compromised. It is at this point that our minds falter. It is quite difficult to grasp how this can be so. Since Scripture states it *is* so, the only recourse is to understand that there are serious limitations to our ways of thinking.

On this issue of Calvinism versus Arminianism (both of which are adhered to within the leadership ranks of the C&MA), the human tendency is to view the issue from a 2-D perspective. Some see the surface; some see the backside; none see the whole - not in this world and not with these finite brains and hearts of ours. The reason for this is that the combination of the truth of man’s choice versus the truth of God’s choice is a multi-dimensional, eternal truth and we have only two-dimensional perceiving tools.

In the spiritual side of our nature, we sense that there is something deeper here to grasp. We know that there is more to this issue than what meets the eye, but the apparatus to fully take a hold of an infinite concept is simply not a part of our equipment. Faith in God is therefore required. We must believe that He is and that He is good and that He is just. You do however begin grasping this truth more deeply in spirit by simply accepting what meets the mental eye through Scripture--God chooses.

Our response of faith and maturity, in trusting the Word of our Lord, exalts God and brings light to our hearts. This was Job’s lesson--to doubt his own perspective and to bow to God’s perspective through his Word. Job was exalted for it. We will be also.

In our two-dimensional thought-world, we seek to see God even though that is fully impossible. Yet we strive for it. As we grasp more and more of Him and His character, beholding the beauty of His face, He begins to reveal to us the world as He sees it. We see things from above even though we don’t really have the tools to accomplish an above-perspective. It’s granted to us as a gift through His eyes as we are focused on Him. It’s as if God retrofits us with additional perceiving equipment. He gives us understanding in our spirit that allows us to rest in His choices and His ways

What is stated here in Romans 9, and elsewhere in Scripture, is the unquestioned sovereignty of God. God may choose to do what he wants, when he wants, to whom he wants, how he wants. As Flatlanders, it is not rational for us to say that He cannot or should not (no matter how outlandish it may appear to us from our two-dimensional perspective). If God wants to make some in order to bless them and others in order to destroy them, he is just in doing so because he is the Potter and we are merely clay.

Final Dimensions

Elsewhere in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul refers to being caught up to the third heaven (2I Corinthians 12). The *first* heaven is the atmosphere; the *second* heaven is outer space and the *third* heaven is beyond space. The third heaven is in the immediate presence of God. Paul mentions that he doesn't even know if he was out of the body or in the body during this ultra-experience but he does know that he saw things there that are "*not lawful to speak.*" That does not mean he was forbidden to speak them. It means that there are no parameters in this world of ours that would allow him to define the things that he perceived in the third heaven, in God's immediate presence. In other words: *Flatland does not possess the parameters with which to fully define the deep things of God.*

We also see this elsewhere in Scripture where we are told that we can "*know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge*" (Ephesians 3:19). In other words, we can know a piece or a slice of something that cannot be fully grasped. In this case it's God's matchless love. From any point of view, you cannot define that love any better than Jesus Christ himself. He alone defines the love the Father has for us. His coming was like the approach of a sphere to Flatland. The Flatlanders of course only see a circle that grows bigger and bigger as it descends on and then through the flat land. Most Flatlanders consider that the circle which speaks of a sphere is something too fantastic to be believed and is, therefore, impossible. Their sense of reality discounts the sphere and misses the truth that is right in front of them because it doesn't fit their *concept* of reality. How tragic!

The sage response with all such truths is to accept them as stated, adore Him as presented and thank Him with all the heart that He chooses and we can respond accordingly with complete surrender. Light then comes and increasingly so. "*But the path of the just [is] as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.*" (Proverbs 4:18)

With these realities in mind we might just simply focus more and more deeply on the plan and heart and power of God for theological differences and not rest self-assured on our own personal doctrinal preference. That is my hope.

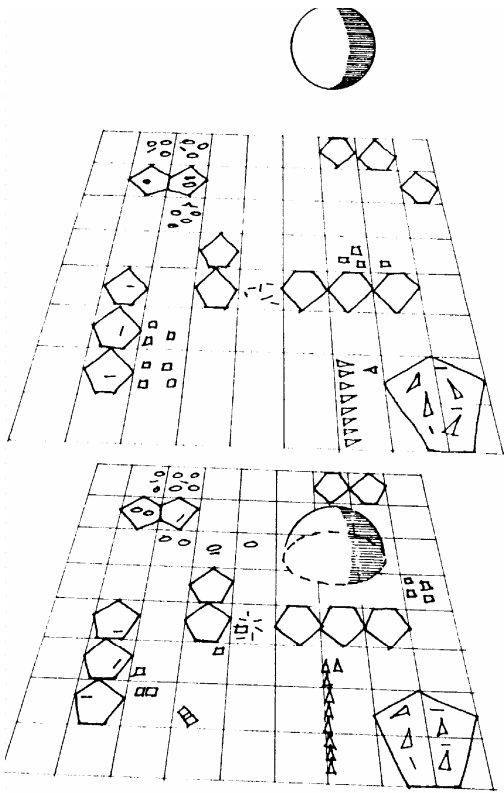


Figure A Abbotts Flatland