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THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Worship: The Center of the Three Angels' Messages

Part 2¹

By Kwabena Donkor

Introduction

In the first part of this article, we pointed out that the larger context of Revelation 14:6-12 is centered in conflict over worship. In Revelation 14:7 we read: "Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water."² While introducing and setting the stage for what the reader should expect in chapters 12-14, chapter 12 provides a summary of chapters 13 and 14 and clearly depicts a conflict between Christ and Satan. In chapter 13 worship themes are evident. The sea beast receives near worldwide worship and he is set on speaking great things and blaspheming against God, His sanctuary, and those who dwell in heaven (Rev 13:3-6). Furthermore, verse 8 depicts a polarity where all who dwell on the earth worship the sea beast except those whose names have been written in the Lamb's book of life. On his part, the land beast's attention to worship is patently evident. It is for these reasons that the message of the three angels, which is God's counter move to the actions of the satanic trinity, focuses on worship.

Continuing the discussion from the first part of this article we will now focus on God and the righteousness of His demand for worship as well as the fairness of His judgment on those who engage in false worship.

Elements of Biblical Creation Theology and the Worship Imperative

When we think about creation theologically there are several elements that come together to create what

we may call a worship imperative for creatures.

The first thing to consider is the very nature of what we see creation to be as we examine the Bible. It is significant to observe that Revelation 14:7 looks back to the creation account in Genesis 1. In the Bible creation refers to an act of God that brought into being things other than God—things that, while not coinciding with the being of God, acquired their being from God.³ Furthermore, Genesis 1:1 requires an understanding of creation as an event that began at a definite, historic point in time. Hence mythical interpretations or ideas such as emanationism or pantheism ought to be denied. If creation had an absolute historical beginning, then it is contingent on account of its temporal beginning, and subsequently in its ongoing dependence on God's providence. The biblical idea is therefore correctly expressed in the view that "though the universe has a being and integrity of its own, its contingency indicates that the universe is neither self-sufficient nor self-explanatory nor self-subsisting."⁴ In other words, the universe and the things in them are genuinely real and exist authentically, yet they do not exist independently of the Creator. They are contingent, in the sense that without the Creator they would not have come into existence, and they depend on the Creator for their ongoing subsistence. Several New Testament passages mention creation's contingency with reference to Christ: "All things came to be through Him, and without Him not one thing has come to be that exists" (John 1:3). "In Him all things hold together" (Col 1:17). "He upholds all things by the word of His power" (Heb 1:3).

The contingency of creation means that creation is not a *necessary* phenomenon in the sense that it *had* or *has* to continue to be. It provides an answer to the question why there should be a world at all by proposing that God voluntarily and lovingly willed the world to be. Creation then is an intentional act expressing “among other things, the unhindered freedom, sovereignty, and graciousness of God.”⁵ Since contingency has to do with how two things relate to and with one another, the theological significance of the absolute temporal origin and hence contingency of creation cannot be overemphasized. Here we bring into focus the relation of the creation to the Creator, showing how the created order is connected with, conditioned by, subject to, and dependent upon God. Put simply, a historical creation by virtue of its contingency initiates a relationship between Creator and creatures.

The second element to consider about creation and the worship imperative is the idea of “creation *ex nihilo*” (creation out of nothing). This notion is related to the previous point that all reality had an absolute, temporal beginning. Several theologians from a wide spectrum of the theological landscape have expressed themselves on the biblical concept of creation out of nothing. A few attestations to this truth may be worth rehearsing. One scholar states states, “It is correct to say that the verb *bârâ*, ‘create’ contains the idea both of complete effortlessness and creation *ex nihilo*, since it is never connected with any statement of the material. The hidden pathos of this statement [Genesis 1:1] is that God is the Lord of the world.”⁶ In his analysis of Genesis 1 another theologian concludes, “The idea of *creatio ex nihilo* is a proper theological inference derived from the whole fabric of the chapter.”⁷ Concerning the thrust of the Old Testament’s understanding of creation one scholar observes,

The limitation of this word to divine activity indicates that the area of meaning delineated by the root [of *bârâ*] falls outside the sphere of human ability. Since the word never occurs with the object of the material, and since the primary emphasis of the word is on the newness of the created object, the word lends itself well to the concept of creation *ex nihilo*, although that concept is not necessarily inherent within the meaning of the word.⁸

The reverberation of the Old Testament idea in Hebrews 11:3 has been captured by another theologian who states that “the reference seems to be to creation *ex nihilo*, the *visible* having come into being out of the *invisible*.”⁹ Regarding John 1:3, another scholar writes,

“John 1:3 unambiguously states that all things—that is, ‘the material world,’ came into being through the Word. The implication is that all things (which would include pre-existent matter, if that were applicable

to the creative process) exist through God’s agent, who is the originator of everything. This is borne out by the fact that though the Word *was* (*ên*), the creation *came to be* (*egeneto*).”¹⁰

Of the New Testament as a whole one theologian remarks, “Creation out of nothing by the Word explicitly or implicitly underlies the NT statements.”¹¹

The concept of creation out of nothing is particularly relevant to the theme of worship. To the extent that worship by nature requires on the part of the “subject” a disposition of awe and reverence that leads to paying homage to the “object,” it seems that a creature bestowing worship onto another creature involves a categorical confusion or mistake. The idea of creation “out of nothing” is relevant because it prevents us from placing matter at the same eternal level as God and thereby risking our falling prey to idolatry—namely, engaging in the false worship of the world itself or of particular things in the world (Exod 20:3–6; Rom 1:18–23). The idea is relevant also because it creates a true atmosphere within which God’s grace and a spirit of gratitude may be cultivated and nourished. “For here we may see how the Father has given Himself to us, with all that he has created, and how abundantly he has cared for us in this life.”¹²

A third element to reflect on in connection with creation and the worship imperative has to do with the fact God as a “personal” agent is the God of creation. This fact is clearly attested in the Bible. From the Old Testament’s witness: “You alone are the Lord. You have made the heavens, the heaven of heavens with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them and the heavenly host bows down before You” (Neh 9:6, NASB). “Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, and the one who formed you from the womb, “I, the Lord, am the maker of all things, stretching out the heavens by Myself and spreading out the earth all alone” (Isa 44:24, NASB). “Ah Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You” (Jer 32:17, NASB). Several New Testament texts reflect the Old Testament’s viewpoint: “You should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them” (Acts 14:15, NASB). “And, You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the works of Your hands” (Heb 1:10, NASB). “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created” (Rev 4:11, NASB).

Clearly the concept of creation out of nothing denies worship to creatures while affirming God’s credentials to receive worship. Not being part of the creation, He is sovereign and stands above it (transcendent), without in any way being incapable of personally governing and sustaining it (immanent). As

a transcendent sovereign Creator He evokes awe, reverence, respect and worship. And in His immanence as judge (Ps 99:4; Isa 61:8), king (Ps 29:10; 96:10; Mark 1:15), warrior (Exod 15:1–18; Deut 1:30), father (Exod 4:22; Hos 11:1; Rom 8:15–16; Gal. 4:6), healer (Exod 15:26; Jer 30:17), gardener (Num 24:6; Isa 5:7), mother (Isa 49:15–16; 66:13), and shepherd (Ps 23), He elicits gratitude, adoration, and worship from creation. It does not stretch the imagination much to understand the worship worthiness of God through the images of father, gardener, mother, and shepherd. The imagery of judge and warrior, however, require a comment. In both roles, God works for the good of His people. For example, in Isaiah 61:8, God’s role as judge is presented in the context of preventing acts that deprive anyone of his or her goods or money by unjust judicial action. Against the backdrop of Exodus 15:1–18, the idea is that God, who fights for the helpless, is worthy of our adoration and praise.

A final element worth reflecting upon in connection with creation and the worship imperative is the thought of a purposeful creation. This is the idea that creation was brought into being for a reason. Such reflection should begin, as we have done already, by taking into account the nature and manner of creation’s origination as well as the agency by which it came to be and continues to subsist. It has been rightly observed “the beginning determines the end. Etiology determines teleology. . . . What the universe is derived ‘out of’ determines the purpose that it proceeds ‘unto.’ The *ek* determines the *eis*. If you know where it comes from, you can know where it’s going.”¹³ The Genesis creation account describes God as bringing things into being with the divine word repeatedly affirming alternately, “God said,” “and it was good.” Here is implied the purposeful act of the Creator. It must be underlined that from the biblical perspective creation was not brought about out of a necessity in God. Creation is a purely voluntary act of God, born out of love. That God was not forced to create is a reasonable deduction from what theologians call “the contingency of creation.” The contingency of creation means that creation is not a necessary phenomenon in the sense that it *had* to be. The biblical concept of creation stands alone in the world of thought in answering the perennial question about why there should be a world at all. Biblical creation proposes that God willed the world to be. Creation then is an intentional act that expresses among other things, the unhindered freedom, sovereignty, and graciousness of God.

One scholar observes that in the Genesis story “the ‘and it was good’ belongs to the creative act itself: things are, in that they are judged good by God. *Tov* in Hebrew works just like ‘good’ in English: it says ‘good for’ something. Things are good in that God determines that they are good for his purposes.”¹⁴ Isaiah 45:9 employs the creation metaphor of “potter” where the “clay protests the potter’s *intentions*”¹⁵ (emphasis supplied). The point is, simply, that the Creator has constituted the creation purposefully, for good and

beauty. Creation is purposeful, but for what good?

In Colossians 1:16 we read concerning Christ that “it is *through* him, as the *Agent* in creation, and *with a view to* him or *for* him as creation’s *Goal* that they owe their settled state. . . . *All* creatures, without any exception whatever, must contribute glory to him and serve his purpose.”¹⁶ Ultimately, the good and beauty of the creation is for the purpose of glorifying God. This purpose holds true for all creation but more so for humans. Hence God, through Isaiah, speaks in reference to “everyone . . . whom I have created for My glory” (Isa 43:7).¹⁷ The idea that creation exists for the glory of God is bolstered by the frequent placement of creation in the context of praise throughout the Bible, and especially in the Psalms. Psalm 148 is particularly significant in calling all creation, not just humans, to praise. This universal call to *all creation* unto praise is significant because it is consistent with the view that all creation exists for the purpose of glorifying God—“The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands” (Ps 19:1, NASB). In Revelation 4:11, when the twenty-four elders join in the song of the four living creatures, “the content of the song was new, a song in praise of God as Creator.”¹⁸ It would be a gross mistake, however, to construe this worship imperative as pettiness or egoism on the Creator’s part. Such a construal would ultimately represent an imposition of extraneous ideas, logic, and meaning on the biblical picture. Egoism, at least psychological egoism, claims that each person has but one ultimate aim: his or her own welfare. Although the Bible is clear that creation exists for God’s glory, this may not be interpreted egoistically, as defined above. Such an idea cannot be sustained in view of Psalm 8. The Psalm shows clearly that though made in the image of God, man is still inferior to God. Yet, man is crowned with “glory and honor” (Ps 8:5), a fact that causes the Psalmist to burst into the praise of God (Ps 8:9). The internal “theo-logic” of biblical creation makes and depicts worship by creatures as a meaningful, free, responsible, and grateful response to the Creator who is utterly good and loving.

Conclusion to the Three Angels’ Message, Creation Theology, and Worship

If our analysis of the elements of creation theology is accurate, then one is brought to the point where it becomes meaningful for the Creator to require worship of His Creation, and especially to insist on the wrongfulness of worshipping anything besides the Creator. The question is appropriately asked: how else is creation “to respond to the Trinitarian God in whose giving is their beginning, sustenance and end?”¹⁹ In his analysis of creation in the book of Amos, one scholar writes about the apparent contradiction where “what begins as a hymn of praise for YHWH the Creator becomes a threatening description of YHWH the Judge.”²⁰ The apparent contradiction disappears in view of the theological connection between creation and human responsibility, creation

and eschatology, creation and judgment. Humanity, like the rest of creation, is configured and fitted for worship, and neglect precipitates judgment:

Fear God, and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come; worship Him who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of waters . . . If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God (Rev 14:7, 9, NASB).

Worship and creation go hand in hand. It is an acknowledgment, in praise, that is aroused by an appreciation of the profundity of the gift of creation in its goodness, beauty, and glory.²¹



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¹ The first part of this article appeared in *Reflections* 60, October 2017, 6–10.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are from the NKJV.

³ Robert W. Jensen, “Aspects of a Doctrine of Creation” in *The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History and Philosophy*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 18–23, expresses the notion of creation as the absolute origination of reality with the following theses: 1. There is indeed another reality other than God, and it is really other. 2. That there is another reality other than God depends entirely on His will. 3. All of the above is held precisely in the present tense. The world at any moment would exist had God not willed it. 4. The reality other than God has an absolute beginning.

⁴ Paul Copan and William L. Craig, *Creation Out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1961), 47.

⁷ Kenneth A. Mathews *Genesis 1–11:26*, New American Commentary 1A (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 139.

⁸ Thomas McComiskey, “*bārā*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason J. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980), 1:127.

⁹ C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: University Press, [1959] 1968), 168.

¹⁰ William Lane Craig, *Creatio ex nihilo: A Critique of the Mormon Doctrine of Creation*, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/creatio-ex-nihilo-a-critique-of-the-mormon-doctrine-of-creation#ixzz3nNRmCnda> (accessed September 30, 2015).

¹¹ Werner Foerster, “*ktizō*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965) 3:1029.

¹² *Luther's Works, I, Lectures on Genesis chapters 1–5*, ed.

J. Pelikan (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1958), 98; quoted in Colin E. Gunton, “The End of Causality? The Reformers and their Predecessors,” in Colin E. Gunton, ed., *The Doctrine of Creation* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 72.

¹³ James A. Fowler, “The Teleology of Creation,” <http://www.christinyou.net/pages/creattle.html> (accessed, May 8, 2015).

¹⁴ Jensen, “Doctrine of Creation,” 22. The sense of purposiveness is heightened further with a careful consideration of the Hebrew word *tov*. Jacques Doukhan demonstrates that the word’s meaning goes beyond the idea of function to include aesthetic beauty. He notes furthermore that “the word may also have an ethical connotation (1 Sam. 18:5; 29:6, 9; 2 Sam. 3:36)—a sense that is also attested in our context of the creation story, especially in God’s recognition: “It is not good that man should be alone.” This divine statement clearly implies a relational dimension, including ethics, aesthetics, and even love and emotional happiness.” See Jacques Doukhan, “When Death was Not Yet,” in Gerald Klingbeil, ed., *He Spoke and it Was: Divine Creation in the Old Testament* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2015), 331–332. It is difficult to escape the sense of intentionality and purposiveness, a creation that envisions not only the good in a functional sense but also beauty and happiness.

¹⁵ John D. W. Watts, *Word Biblical Commentary, Isaiah 34–66*, vol. 25 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 157.

¹⁶ W. Hendriksen and S. J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 73.

¹⁷ See Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1952), 15. “When Adam came from the Creator’s hand, he bore, in his physical, mental, and spiritual nature, a likeness to his Maker. ‘God created man in His own image’ (Genesis 1:27), and it was His purpose that the longer man lived the more fully he should reveal this image—the more fully reflect the glory of the Creator. All his faculties were capable of development; their capacity and vigor were continually to increase. Vast was the scope offered for their exercise, glorious the field opened to their research. The mysteries of the visible universe—the ‘wondrous works of Him which is perfect in knowledge’ (Job 37:16)—invited man’s study. Face-to-face, heart-to-heart communion with his Maker was his high privilege. Had he remained loyal to God, all this would have been his forever. Throughout eternal ages he would have continued to gain new treasures of knowledge, to discover fresh springs of happiness, and to obtain clearer and yet clearer conceptions of the wisdom, the power, and the love of God. More and more fully would he have fulfilled the object of his creation, more and more fully have reflected the Creator’s glory.”

¹⁸ William H. Shea, “Creation,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 439.

¹⁹ Daniel W. Hardy, “Creation and Eschatology,” in Colin E. Gunton, ed., *The Doctrine of Creation*, 127.

²⁰ Martin Klingbeil, “Creation in the Prophetic Literature of the Old Testament,” in Gerald Klingbeil, ed., *He Spoke and it Was: Divine Creation in the Old Testament* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2015), 150.

²¹ Hardy, 127.

“Praise the Lord, for the Lord is good.” (Psalm 135:3, NKJV)

The Sealing of Humans in Revelation 7:2-3 and 9:4

By Ekkehardt Mueller

In Revelation 7:2–5, 8 and Revelation 9:4 the divine sealing of humans is mentioned. The first passage belongs to the section on the seven seals; the second belongs to the trumpets. Are these two passages talking about the same event or do they refer to different processes of sealing? This question is quite important for the direct interpretation of the verse. The way it is answered may also influence one's decision whether to opt for recapitulation of the seals by the trumpets or to choose progression. Depending on our decision, the outcome in terms of understanding historical events and end-time events could be quite different.

Sealing in Scripture and in Revelation

The term “seal” (*sphragis*) in Scripture describes literal seals (e.g., Exod 35:22; 1 Kgs 20:8 LXX) and metaphorical seals (e.g., humans, Songs 8:6; Hagg 2:23; 1 Cor 9:2; the seal of righteousness, Rom 4:11; God's firm foundation, 2 Tim 2:9). In Revelation, seven seals are mentioned with which the scroll in God's hand is sealed.¹ Twice humans receive a seal (Rev 7:2; 9:4).

The verb “to seal” (*sphragizō*) is used for the sealing of objects (e.g., Est 8:8; Job 24:16; Isa 29:11; Jer 39:10; Dan 12:4; Matt 27:66), words (Dan 12:9; Rev 22:10), transgressions (Job 14:17), thunders (Rev 10:4); the abyss (Rev 20:3), but also humans (e.g., Songs 4:12; 2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13; 4:30), including Jesus (John 6:27). In Revelation, the servants of God are sealed (Rev 7:3), the 144,000 (Rev 7:4–5, 8).

So in Revelation humans come in two groups: (1) the 144,000 as God's servants in Revelation 7:2–8 who are sealed under the sixth seal, while others are not sealed, and (2) those in Revelation 9:4 who have not received the seal of God and consequently are tortured by the symbolic locusts under the fifth trumpet.

In our opinion, the opening of the first seal describes events beginning in the first century AD.² The subsequent seals run through human history, reaching Christ's second coming and at least the Millennium after the Parousia—perhaps even the New Earth.³ The trumpets begin at the same time as the seals and reach to the time of the final establishment of God's kingdom. The seven seals and the seven trumpets are roughly parallel. The sealing in Revelation 7 is a sealing in connection with the time immediately preceding the Parousia. But this may be different, with the sealed and unsealed humans in the fifth trumpet, which precedes the last events of human history. Thus,

we are back to the question of whether the sealing in Revelation 7:2–5, 8 and the one in Revelation 9:4 are identical.

Similarities Between the Sealing in Revelation 7:3 and the Seal in Revelation 9:4

A number of striking similarities can be found in the two texts. These similarities comprise the following:

- *Harm.* Both texts use the same verb “to harm” (*adikeō*), although in different verbal forms:
legōn: mē adikēsēte (“saying: do not harm,” Rev 7:3)
kai errethē autais hina mē adikēsousin (“they were told not to harm,” Rev 9:4)
- *Three elements of nature.* Both texts mention “earth” and “trees,” although in Revelation 9:4 “earth” comes only in the phrase “the grass of the earth.” So in one case the earth is affected, while in the other case the grass (of the earth) is mentioned.
mē adikēsēte tēn gēn mēte tēn thalassan mēte *ta dendra* (“do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees,” Rev 7:3)
ton horton tēn gēn oude pan chlōron oude pan dendron (“the grass of the earth nor any green thing nor any tree,” Rev 9:4)
- *Vocabulary related to sealing.* Both texts mention a process of sealing or the non-possession of a divine seal.
- *Foreheads.* In both cases, the seal is related to the foreheads. Both instances allude to Ezekiel 9:2–4. Based on these similarities and a non-historicist approach to Revelation by the vast majority of Revelation scholars, the sealing and the non-sealing of Revelation 7 and 9 are more or less directly associated with each other.⁴

Dissimilarities

A careful study of biblical texts that share similarities does not only look for what these texts or passages have in common but also what distinguishes them from each other. Therefore, one has to ask: what are the differences between Revelation 7:3 and 9:4? There are a number of marked differences in spite of close similarities. These differences include the following:

- *Divine action versus demonic action.* In Revelation 7:2 four angels are commanded to refrain temporarily from doing harm to elements of nature, while in Revelation 9:4 the locusts are command-

- ed not to do harm to certain elements of nature.
- *The scope.* These elements of nature are somewhat different. In Revelation 7:3 one finds the earth, sea, and trees, while Revelation 9:4 refers to the grass of the earth, anything green, and any tree. These descriptions may indicate that Revelation 7:3 is dealing with a larger or universal issue. It deals with creation in general and not only with vegetation.
- *Harmed objects versus harmed persons.* In Revelation 7:3 those who will be harmed are these symbolic elements of nature, while in Revelation 9:4 it is those humans who do not have the seal of God.
- *Sealing in the future versus non-sealing in the past.* In Revelation 7:3 the servants of God still need to be sealed, while in Revelation 9:4 the humans affected are those who do not have the seal of God. Obviously, they have not received the seal in the past and therefore do not have it, while it is assumed that there are other persons who have already been sealed in the past.
- *The focus.* The group that is to be sealed in Revelation 7:3 is positive. It is the “servants of our God.” The group in Revelation 9:4 is negative. These are “human beings” who do not have the seal of God. Thus, the focus is different: the sealed versus the non-sealed.
- *The vocabulary.* In Revelation 7:3 the verb “to seal” is used in connection with the “servants of our God.” In the previous verse the noun “seal” appears. The angel ascending from the east has this seal, and it is obviously this angel who is involved in the sealing process of true believers. In Revelation 9:4 only the noun “seal” is employed in connection with humans (*anthrōpos*). No angel is reported to be involved in any kind of sealing process.
- *The context.* The trumpets are directed against the earth dwellers (Rev 8:13) throughout the Christian era, while the seals seem to deal more directly with the people of God. Therefore, the emphasis is different as the following points will indicate. The earth dwellers appearing in the fifth trumpet do not have the seal of God as contrasted with true believers. However, since earth dwellers in the book of Revelation are not limited to the last period of human history (Rev 6:10; 11:10; 13:8, etc.), their counterpart—the people of God having the seal of God—should not be either. In contrast, the 144,000 sealed with the seal of God are clearly an eschatological group experiencing the second coming while alive.⁵
- *The protection of the trees.* It could be argued that Revelation 9:4 refers to a later stage than the one implied in Revelation 7—namely a stage in which the redeemed have already been sealed, while in Revelation 7:3 they are still waiting to be sealed. However, this does not seem to work well. In both cases the trees are preserved. In Revelation 7:3 the trees are preserved until after the sealing of the servants of God. However, in Revelation 9:4 trees are still completely protected. If Revelation 9:4 were a later stage—namely after the sealing of Revelation 7:3—we would expect that the trees should no longer be protected.
- *The time frame.* Revelation 7:3 is part of the sixth seal. Revelation 9:4 is part of the fifth trumpet. Revelation 7:3 deals with events just prior to the Second Coming, because those being sealed are the ones who are able to stand when Jesus returns (Rev 6:17). They are the 144,000 which are an end-time group only (Rev 7 and 14). Revelation 9:4, as part of the fifth trumpet, takes place in the time prior to the sixth trumpet and obviously also prior to the sixth seal. The expansion of the sixth trumpet concentrates on the time after the forty-two months or the 1,260 days (Rev 11:3–4). The end of this period of the 1,260 prophetic days takes us to AD 1798 when the two killed witnesses will be raised from the dead.⁶ This event will lead to conversions among humanity. Therefore, the fifth trumpet should happen in the time prior to AD 1798, while Revelation 7:3 is later and more universal in nature.
- *Two different sealings.* Revelation 7:3 refers to the eschatological sealing of the servants of God. Revelation 9:4 refers to those who in historic time have not accepted the seal of God. The seal of God is given to those who believe in Jesus in the biblical sense throughout church history. Paul repeatedly speaks about such a seal:
 - (1) “And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee” (2 Cor 1:21–22, ESV).
 - (2) “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph 1:13, ESV).
 - (3) “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Eph 4:30, ESV).⁷

Results

Having compared similarities and dissimilarities between the two references to sealing in Revelation it seems that the differences surpass the similarities. Revelation 7:3 and 9:4 do not refer to the same time in human history, and Revelation 9:4 does not follow 7:3 chronologically. However, the two texts may describe similar situations—namely settings in which humans are threatened to be harmed.

Yet persecution, suffering, or whatever negative events there may be are not limited to a specific time of humanity’s existence but occur in more or less all periods of human history. Therefore, the two texts seem to speak to different situations. Revelation 7:3 describes the protection of God’s children through the

eschatological sealing process, while Revelation 9:4 depicts the harm done to those who did not make a decision for God and Jesus and therefore never received the divine seal that all believers receive at conversion.

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¹ Revelation 5:1–2, 5, 9; 6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12; 8:1.

² For a discussion of the time frame of the seal vision, see Ekkehardt Müller, *Der Erste und der Letzte: Studien zum Buch der Offenbarung*, Series: *Adventistica: Forschungen zur Geschichte und Theologie der Siebenten-Tags-Adventisten*, vol. 11 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011), 143–144.

³ For an explanation of the sixth trumpet including its expansion and the seventh trumpet, see *ibid.*, 162–172.

⁴ See, e.g., David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, Word Biblical Commentary, 52B (Dallas, TX: Word, 1998), 528–529; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 495–496; Ian

Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2006), 143; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 366.

⁵ See Ekkehardt Mueller, “Who Are the 144,000 and the Great Multitude?,” in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, Biblical Research Institute Studies, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Pfandl, (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010) 433–437.

⁶ On the 1,260 days see, e.g., Ekkehardt Mueller, “The End Time Remnant in Revelation,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 11/1–2 (2000): 196–198; Ekkehardt Mueller, “The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 13/2 (2002): 32–33, 37–38, 43; William H. Shea, *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation, Daniel & Revelation Committee Series*, (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 1: 56–93, 116–123.

⁷ Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 6: 1029, commenting on the seal mentioned in Ephesians 4:30 states: “The reception of the Holy Spirit at conversion is God’s authentication that the believer is accepted, that the approval of Heaven rests upon his choice and experience.” On Ephesians 2:13 the commentary states: “There is an orderly change in the believer’s life: first there is the hearing, then the believing, and then the sealing that puts upon him, as it were, an impression or stamp” (p. 1001).

SCRIPTURE
APPLIED

Lessons from Matthew 2

By Clinton Wahlen

Matthew 2 continues the presentation of Jesus begun in chapter one, but the focus shifts from Jesus as “the Son of Abraham” (Matt 1:1) to His being “King of the Jews” (Matt 2:2). As we saw in “Lessons from Matthew 1,” David is introduced as “the king” (Matt 1:6) and Jesus is introduced as “the Son of David” (Matt 1:1). This title for Jesus, which in the Old Testament almost always refers to Solomon (1 Chr 29:22; 2 Chr 1:1; 13:6; 30:26; 35:3; Prov 1:1; Eccl 1:1), came to designate the messianic successor to Israel’s throne (Isa 9:6–7; Jer 23:5–6; 33:15; Matt 22:42) and appears more often in Matthew than anywhere else in the New Testament (Matt 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30–31; 21:9, 15). Matthew’s genealogy calls Joseph “the son of David” (Matt 1:20) to further underscore that Jesus is the rightful King of Israel.

By contrast, Herod was viewed as usurping the throne because, as an Edomite, he was descended not from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but Esau. Like the previous chapter, which established Jesus’ lineage and mission as a fulfillment of prophecy, Matthew 2 shows the place of Jesus’ birth and the place of Jesus’ upbringing as also fulfilling God’s revealed purpose (Matt 2:5, 17, 23).

Structure of the Chapter

That the first two chapters of Matthew combine to tell the story of Jesus’ nativity, is evident from a consideration of their larger structure, which moves from Jesus as the Son of Abraham (Matt 1:2–17) to Jesus as the Son of David, the Messiah (1:18–2:23). Jesus is not just the next significant figure in Israel’s history; as Messiah (Matt 1:1, 16–18, 2:4), He is God’s messianic Son (Matt 2:2, 15, 23)—the focal point of *all* history, as the twin allusions to Genesis suggest (Matt 1:1, 18).

Matthew 2 itself is divided into three main sections, each introduced in Greek by a genitive absolute construction (vv. 1, 13, 19) and further divided into smaller units:

- 2:1–12 Wise men seek and find Jesus
- 2:1–6 The King of the Jews is born in Bethlehem
- 2:7–12 Wise men find the Child King, give gifts, and head home
- 2:13–18 Jesus survives Herod’s massacre
- 2:13–15 Joseph takes the Child to Egypt
- 2:16–18 Herod massacres the children
- 2:19–23 Jesus returns to Israel
- 2:19–21 Joseph returns with the Child to Israel
- 2:22–23 Joseph settles in Nazareth

Interestingly, although Herod is mentioned by name nine times in this chapter (vv. 1, 3, 7, 12, 13, 15, 16, 19, 22), the central figures in the story are actually: (1) the wise men (named in vv. 1, 7) with whom the first section begins and ends; (2) Joseph, who is named at the outset of the next two sections (vv. 13, 19); and (3) the Child, mentioned twenty times, around whom everything and everyone revolve.

Herod himself, though made king by Rome, feels threatened by the young Child and is powerless to find and destroy Him. He relies on the chief priests and scribes to learn where the Child would be born (v. 4). He relies on the wise men for the time and exact location of His birth (vv. 7–8). Finally, because Herod feels deceived by them, he lashes out at helpless babies (v. 16).

Interpretation of the Chapter

1. Verses 1–12

- In agreement with Luke 1:5, Jesus was born before Herod the Great's death, which occurred in either 4 BC or 1 BC—depending on how historical sources are evaluated. Jesus is no longer a baby (Luke 2:12, 16; cf. v. 7) but a “Child” (Matt 2:8–9, 11, etc.), since up to two years may have passed since His birth (see v. 16).
- Matthew states that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of *Judea*, which distinguishes the city of David just south of Jerusalem from a town of the same name near Nazareth. It may also allude to the prophecy that the “scepter” would not depart from Judah until the messianic King should come (Gen 49:10). This allusion prepares the way for the quotation of Micah 5:2, which mentions Bethlehem by name (v. 6; cf. John 7:41–42).
- Although the Greek word that describes Jesus as a “Ruler” (*hēgoumenos*) is related to the word commonly used for the “reign” (*hēgemonia*) of the Roman Caesars (Luke 3:1; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.211, 219, 224, 234, etc.), God's King will “shepherd” His people (Matt 2:6; cf. Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:1–4).
- The “star” was ideal for attracting the attention of the wise men, especially in light of Balaam's prophecy (Num 24:17). But this was no ordinary celestial phenomenon because it guided them precisely to the place where Jesus was and “stood over” it (v. 9). Sometimes “stars” in Scripture refer to angels (e.g., Job 38:7; Isa 14:12, ESV; Rev 12:4), so this moving “star” seems to refer to a company of angels (cf. DA

60), like that which sang at the time of Christ's birth (Luke 2:13–15).

- The gift of gold is fit for a King (Ps 72:15; Isa 60:6), as were the wise men's other gifts. But, in retrospect, the frankincense (Exod 30:34–38; Lev 2:1–2, 14, 16; 6:14–18, etc.) and myrrh (Mark 15:23; John 19:39) also witness to Christ's divinity and coming sacrifice, showing Him worthy of our worship (Matt 2:3, 8, 11).

2. Verses 13–18

- The wise men gone, Joseph now takes a leading role in the rest of the chapter.
- God initially led Jacob/Israel and his twelve sons into Egypt to save them from famine (Gen 47:1–6, 27; 50:20), just as God led Jesus there to save Him from Herod's destruction (Matt 2:13–14).
- Herod's massacre of children in Bethlehem recalls the destruction and exile of God's people by the Assyrians and Babylonians (v. 18 quotes Jer 31:15; cf. 40:1). Just as ancient Israel brought judgment upon themselves, so postexilic Israel's failure to fully return to God, and their misconstruing that the promised Messiah would come to destroy their enemies, prepared the way for Herod as a great pretender to David's throne and the extermination of the children in Bethlehem (Matt 2:16–18; cf. DA 65). This typological correspondence highlighted by Matthew suggests that Jesus, as the messianic Son of David, is to bring Israel's exile to an end.

3. Verses 19–23

- Just as God called His “Son” Israel out of Egypt (quoting Hos 11:1 in Matt 2:15), so Jesus, as the ultimate fulfillment of this historical type, came out of Egypt to initiate a “new exodus” of salvation for God's people.
- Joseph, always exemplifying faith in the divine instructions given by the angel and obedient to them (unlike Zacharias, Luke 1:18–20), returns to Israel after being told that “those who sought the young Child's life are dead” (Matt 2:20). This refers principally to Herod (v. 19) but the plural echoes God's instructions to Moses (Exod 4:19), whom Matthew portrays as a type of Christ.
- Originally, Herod had willed Antipas as his heir but altered it shortly before his death, appointing him instead over Galilee and Berea, and Archelaus over

Judea (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.188). The latter was indeed ruthless, and Joseph's fears were confirmed by the angelic instruction not to return there, leading to the family's settling in Nazareth of Galilee (Matt 2:22–23). This will later be mentioned as a fulfillment of prophecy (Matt 4:14–16; cf. John 7:40–43, 52).

- Recent excavations support a first-century Jewish occupation of Nazareth. Matthew discerns Jesus' settling there as a fulfillment of prophecy based on the similarity in sound between "Nazarene" and the Hebrew word *netzer*, "branch," which is a familiar messianic image in the Old Testament (Isa 11:1; cf. 4:2; Jer 23:5; 33:15; Zech 3:8; 6:12) and in Hebrew writings of the first century (1QH^a XIV.15; XV.19; XVI.6, 8, 10; cf. the interpretation of Isa 11:1 in 4Q161 8–10 III.11–25).

Application of the Chapter

Some lessons that can be drawn from this chapter are:

1. The Scriptures are God's clear and reliable means of communicating His will and purposes to us, though sometimes God communicates more directly (e.g., through dreams or visions). God's communication both with Joseph, the son of David, and with wise foreigners seeking greater light shows that it is not our origins but our openness to God's revelation and willingness to receive and act on it that counts (see DA 59, 62–63).
2. A partial, distorted knowledge of the Bible may be worse than no knowledge of it at all. The chief priests and scribes knew the place of Christ's birth but, together with King Herod, were troubled at the news because it did not fit *their* expectations and this new, potentially disruptive, political power threatened their positions.
3. As prophecy is fulfilled, it testifies to "present truth"—the truth whose time has come in God's advancing plan of salvation. Jesus as God's Son, in fulfillment of prophecy, successfully recapitulates Israel's history, thereby becoming their (and our) true Shepherd and King.



Robert A. Muthiah The Sabbath Experiment: Spiritual Formation for Living in a Non-Stop World

(Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015),
106 pp.
US\$15.00



Robert A. Muthiah, professor of Practical Theology at Azusa Pacific Seminary and member of the Pasadena Mennonite Church, has written a delightful little book about practical Sabbath observance. It provides valuable insights into the riches and blessings the Sabbath has in store for busy Christians. The book is written in an inviting way and helps to put into practice what it means to keep the Sabbath. As such it is an experiment and exercise in spiritual formation. In seven engaging chapters, each followed by a short postscript on "slowing down" that ends with several practical questions to help reflect the content of the chapter, Muthiah unfolds his understanding of the Sabbath and its blessing for modern human beings.

He starts capturing the Sabbath spirit by exploring the Sabbath as divine gift and picturing the Sabbath as a queen that invites us to make deliberate choices to celebrate the holiness of the Sabbath. He draws his insights from Jewish authors like Abraham Heschel and Samuel Dresner, but also is conversant with recent Christian authors like Walter Brueggemann and Marva Dawn, who have written on the Sabbath. Muthiah focuses on what it

means for modern people to slow down. He points out the blessings the Sabbath has in store for us in an age of digital connectivity and suggests ways to connect with God by deliberately disconnecting from digital gadgets on the Sabbath (pp. 29–42). He aptly shows that in our hectic lifestyle "we can't simply add Sabbath rest on top of everything else. It needs its own space in time" (p. 19). Thus, we need to make a deliberate decision to keep that time holy.

He also widens our horizon for ethical implications of Sabbath rest when he discusses how the Sabbath changes the way we relate to our work, to consumerism that captivates much of our attention, and to justice for others. In a very insightful discussion on how our brains work he points out a blessing of the Sabbath that we often do not think about: "By entering into Sabbath time and by making choices that encourage the spirit of Sabbath, we may strengthen certain parts of our brains in ways that allow us to be more focused, think more deeply, and be more compassionate at other times of the week too" (p. 39). Indeed, the Sabbath is "freeing us for a counter-cultural way of living as followers of Christ" (p. 63).

There is much to be learned (even for Seventh-day Adventists) from what

Muthiah writes. He can help us to gain a new love for the Sabbath and a mindset that delights in the Sabbath rather than seeing it as a mere fulfillment of duty. Throughout the book there are short testimonies of people who have started with the experiment to have Sabbath in their lives and recount new insights and blessings they have received. For this Muthiah is to be congratulated and the book will be appreciated by all who have lost the beauty of the Sabbath blessing or who want to regain it.

While Muthiah promotes the Sabbath in beautiful, important, and very practical ways, there is something significant missing in the book that will make Sabbath observance even more rewarding and meaningful. There is a biblical-prophetic aspect to the Sabbath that goes far beyond what Muthiah so eloquently describes. Contrary to Muthiah, who thinks that “through historical and theological development, the Sabbath, the Lord’s Day, and Sunday have become one” (p. 4) the Bible is clear that there is a particular day of the week that is designated as God’s holy Sabbath-day. Thus, the Sabbath is not just a Sabbath principle of rest that can be moved to others days of the week, but a specific day of the week that is designated by God to be the Sabbath-day. The bibli-

cal importance of this insight is missing in Muthiah’s description of the Sabbath. In fact, he tells of people and pastors who keep their “Sabbath” on Monday or on other days (pp. 24, 93) as their work schedule permits. His understanding of what constitutes work on the Sabbath seems equally flexible. In doing so Muthiah misses a biblical dimension of the Sabbath that is prophetically very meaningful: in the Bible, the Sabbath is depicted as a special sign and seal that indicates our commitment and loyalty to God, who is our redeemer and creator, when competing powers court for our allegiance during the end time. That the Sabbath plays a special role in this final conflict of allegiance makes the particular Sabbath-day even more special and meaningful to the believer. Of course, this is connected to a certain historical and biblical understanding of the Sabbath that is absent in this book. Despite this deficiency the book is to be recommended for anyone interested in keeping the Sabbath more deliberately, meaningfully, and joyfully and who wants to experience the blessing of the Sabbath in new areas of life.

Frank M. Hasel
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NEWS

Death Penalty: An Opinion BRIEC September 2017

The Biblical Research Institute (BRI) of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has been asked for an opinion on capital punishment and its promotion within local Adventist churches. It was decided to take the request to the Biblical Research Institute Ethics Committee (BRIEC), discuss it there, and send it for review to BRI. Here is the result of our current deliberations:

1. The Bible does not ignore the insurmountable suffering and loss of those touched by horrendous crimes. Neither does the Church. It suffers with those who suffer and seeks to help them in whatever way possible, as long as this is consistent with Scripture. However, such suffering may raise the question of whether capital punishment would be an appropriate response to serious forms of crime.
2. The subject of capital punishment has been discussed from various philosophical, sociological, practical, and biblical-theological perspectives. It is, for instance, no question that the implementation of capital punishment is often fraught with procedural difficulties: that at times circumstantial evidence is used to convict a defendant, who may not be guilty; that minorities and the lower strata of society are disproportionately represented on death row; and that the result of its imple-

mentation—that is, the taking of human life—is irreversible. This should make us very cautious. But apart from these and other valid reasons, we are most interested in the biblical view of capital punishment.

3. The issue of capital punishment must be studied from the perspective of individual biblical texts and passages found in Scripture in various contexts. It must also be studied and understood from the perspective of a robust biblical anthropology, which is broader than exegesis and also deals with biblical principles. Over the years the Seventh-day Adventist Church has issued official statements—for instance, against violence, war, and euthanasia and in favor of tolerance and noncombatancy. The Church shares the biblical teaching of the immense value of all life and the sanctity of human life especially, which was created in the image of God. The Church seeks to preserve and protect human life. This is reflected in its strong emphasis on stewardship—God being the owner of all life and Christ being our Savior—comprehensive health care and instruction, as well as humanitarian aid. Adventists promote and encourage humanity’s fullest development—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritual-

ly—through education and the proclamation of the message of the gospel of Christ, who came “so that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10, ESV). The discussion of the subject of capital punishment must be placed in such a context.

4. Adventists believe that violence and capital punishment have no place within the Church. In other words, it is not the task of the Church to take human life. While in the Old Testament under the theocracy the death penalty is mentioned in a variety of cases—for example, in connection with killing a human being (Exod 21:12), striking or cursing a parent (Exod 21:15, 17), kidnapping and selling a person (Exod 21:16), Sabbath profanation (Exod 31:14–15, Num 15:32–35), child sacrifice (Lev 20:2), adultery (Lev 20:10), incest (Lev 20:11), homosexuality (Lev 20:13), sodomy (Lev 20:15–16), spiritualism (Lev 20:27), blasphemy (Lev 24:16), idolatry (Deut 13:1–5), and premarital sex (Deut 22:23–24)—in the New Testament this legislation is not applied to the Christian church, which is spread among the nations. With His first advent, Jesus brought to an end the Jewish theocracy and established His kingdom ethics, as proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7) and in other places (e.g., Matt 26:52). The case of the man involved in incest in 1 Corinthians 5 shows that capital punishment is no longer practiced by the people of God. Instead, the church has the responsibility to approach blatant sinners with the goal of winning them back to Christ-like behavior and the acceptance of biblical teachings. If this fails, following Jesus’ mandate in Matthew 18:15–20, unrepentant sinners are to be disfellowshipped from the community of believers. However, even after their separation from the church, the local congregation should reach out to win them back. Therefore, killing heretics, as practiced by some Christian churches in the past, is not only unwarranted but absolutely wrong and unlawful from a biblical perspective. Nonetheless, this phenomenon will reappear when at the end of time evil powers will shed again the blood of the saints. God Himself will judge these powers (Rev 16:6; 19:2).
5. What about governments and capital punishment? We recognize that two biblical texts in particular have been used to support the death penalty as it is being executed by governments: Genesis 9:5–6 and Romans 13:4. The first text (“Whoever

sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed.” ESV) is spoken to Noah after the flood and precedes the Israelite theocracy. Therefore, it is not limited to the theocracy. But is this text a command, a prophecy, or a proverb that describes what normally happens if one purposefully or unintentionally ends human life? If it is a command, who is to do the killing of a murderer according to text or context? How should the larger setting of Scripture be understood where even in the Old Testament exceptions to the execution of the death penalty occurred (e.g., Moses and David) and where we find cities of refuge for those who had accidentally killed another person?

The second text is a statement by Paul as he addresses the relationship of Christians to governments and talks about the sword that these authorities carry. The context deals with paying taxes and being submissive to governments. It may imply obedience as long as governments do not force Christians to disobey God (see Acts 5:29). There is no question about the legitimate role of governments in the civil use of the law, but is the mention of the sword enough to imply capital punishment? Does the carrying of weapons by modern police forces automatically imply and legitimize the death penalty?

The two texts must be carefully studied, taking into consideration, for instance, their literary contexts and settings, the thrust of the argument in the passage, and the Hebrew and Greek vocabulary and grammar. Currently, there is no agreement on the interpretation of these texts in the larger Christian community or in the Adventist Church. Consequently, there is also no agreement on the issue of whether, from a biblical perspective, governments are allowed or even required to institute capital punishment. But in view of the fact that capital punishment has no place in the Christian church, it is not right for the church to be seen as a quasi agent in advocating capital punishment, even though the state might carry it out.

We recommend supporting the practice of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in valuing human life as described above. Therefore, we would recommend that church members do not get involved in any campaign promoting the death penalty. The mission of the Church is not to promote death but to announce life and hope.

September 27, 2017

“Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:31–32, NKJV)

Index to *Reflections*

The first issue of *Reflections* was published in January 2003. Since then, we've published many articles.

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