

Worship: The Center of the Three Angels' Messages

Part 1

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Introduction

Why is it that in the Bible creation and worship themes often appear together? (See Exod 20:1–17; Job 38:7; Ps 33:6–9; 95; 104; 115; 139:1–9; Isa 40:12–31; Amos 5:8; Acts 17:22–30; Rom 1:18–25; Rev 4:11.) And why are the two themes often set in conflict? It is not only the commandment to have no other God before Yahweh in Exodus 20:3 that is set in the context of the risk of idolatry (Exod 20:4–5). Psalm 95's impassioned plea to Israel to worship (Psalm 95:1–5) shifts to a rather somber mood in the subsequent verses. Obviously, the shift in mood reflects the psalmist's sense of the danger of the community turning to worship competing gods (Psalm 95:3). It has been said that "the battle for worship lies at the heart of the very meaning of the biblical narrative itself."¹ At an existential level, worship decisions have consequences, and why should that be the case? We wish to explore these questions by examining Revelation 14:6–12 in the context of worship, noting that an objective reading of the passage raises the fundamental questions about worship mentioned above. Our thesis is that only creation theology satisfactorily answers these questions. Thus, our focus will be on the theological relationships among creation, worship, and judgment—not on controverted interpretational details. Our approach will simply assume the broad contours of interpreting the passage as generally understood among Seventh-day Adventists.

The Message of the Three Angels of Revelation 14:6–12

The message of the three angels is found within the larger context of Revelation 12–14. Although much of the Book of Revelation involves controversy, chapters 12–14 in particular are so conflict-centered that this larger context must be explored in order to obtain a proper understanding of the message of the three angels.

The Context of Revelation 12–14

Chapter 12 opens with a dramatic vision involving characters who clearly point to a struggle between the forces of good and evil. John depicts a pregnant woman, clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and in labor ready to give birth to a male child destined to "rule all the nations with a rod of iron" (Rev 12:5). Meanwhile, a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns stands before the woman, poised to devour the child to be born. The allusion of Revelation 12:5 to Psalm 2:9 has been generally recognized, pointing interpreters to see the child to be born as the Messiah. Thus is depicted a conflict between the dragon and the Messiah. The child who is born, however, escapes the capture of the dragon (Satan) and is caught up to heaven, whereupon the dragon pursues the woman who escapes into the wilderness, where she is nourished for 1,260 days (Rev 12:6; cf. Rev 12:14; 13:5; Dan 7:25). The failure of the dragon to capture the woman leads it now to attack the woman's offspring, who are identified as keeping the commandments of God and having the faith of Jesus (Rev 12:13–17).

Chapter 13 continues the dragon's attacks on the offspring of the woman mentioned in Revelation 12:17. Using the agency of a sea beast and a land beast (thus constituting a satanic trinity), the dragon heightens the element of conflict. First, the dragon is pictured as awaiting the arrival of a beast from the sea, which, like the dragon, has ten horns and seven heads (Rev 13:1). This sea beast, which seems to be a composite of the beasts of Daniel 7, has a blasphemous name on its heads (Rev 13:1). Before his appearance here, the beast had received a mortal blow "by the sword," from which wound he had recovered (Rev 13:3). From the awaiting dragon, this beast receives power, throne, and authority (Rev 13:2). And the whole earth *worshipped* the beast as well as the dragon because the dragon gave his authority to the beast (Rev 13:3–4). The sea beast speaks "great things," blasphemes God's name, His sanctuary, and those who dwell in heaven, and he fights against the saints for forty-two months (Rev 13:5–8).

The land beast is the second agent the dragon employs in his attack on the people of God. This beast is different in appearance, having two horns like a lamb, but speaking as a dragon (Rev 13:11). In his actions, the land beast

exercises all the authority of the sea beast and compels the “earth dwellers” to *worship* the sea beast. He resorts to some specific strategies to achieve this goal. First, he does “great miracles” to deceive the “earth dwellers,” and second, he causes an image to be made to the sea beast and enforces worship of the image on pain of death (Rev 13:13–15). Then he enforces a mark equivalent to the name of the sea beast through the boycott of those who refuse to accept the mark, either on the forehead or the right hand (Rev 13:16–18).

Chapters 13 and 14 have been seen as counterparts, where the latter presents God’s counter move to the actions of the dragon and the two beasts. Chapter 14 has three sections and opens with the first where the Lamb is seen on Mount Zion in the company of the 144,000, representing those who have withstood the onslaughts of the satanic trinity of the dragon, sea beast, and land beast.² The singing of the 144,000 is a clear reflection of the conflict through which they have passed and their victory over the satanic trinity (Rev 14:2–3). The second section of the chapter, the message of the three angels (Rev 14:6–12), is the focus of our study on worship, which will be explored shortly. The final section is the second coming of Christ, symbolically portrayed as the harvest of the earth, with distinct destinies for the two groups involved—the saved and the lost (Rev 14:14–20).

Worship in the Message of the Three Angels

The larger context of Revelation 14:6–12 clearly shows that the passage is centered in conflict over worship. Chapter 12—which provided the introduction, setting, and summary of chapters 13 and 14—clearly depicts a conflict between Christ and Satan. As the details of the conflict unfold in chapter 13, it becomes clear that while the sea beast receives near worldwide worship, he is set on speaking great things and blaspheming against God, His sanctuary, and those who dwell in heaven (Rev 13:3–6). Furthermore, Revelation 14:8 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 focus on worship is patently evident.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the message of the three angels, which is God’s counter move to the actions of the satanic trinity, should focus on worship.

The First Angel

Whether the “everlasting gospel” of the first angel is the same as the gospel proclaimed in the rest of the New Testament should not detain us.³ Adventists identify the two gospels as one and the same on the basis of the prologue in Revelation 1:5–7, which provides the background for the gospel the first angel proclaims.⁴ The message the angel proclaims with a loud voice is, “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” (Rev 14:7).

Theologically, the message of the first angel embodies in principle everything that may be said formally about true worship as far as humans are concerned. Notably, worship is presented as essentially a fundamental human responsibility; hence the angel’s message is given as a “command” with some key action words used in tandem: “fear,” “glory,” and “worship.” The suggestion seems to be that the responsibility humans have to worship (falling before God) *consists* in the fear of God (holding Him in reverence), which leads to giving Him glory (honoring Him). “Giving God glory is the aftereffect of fearing God,”⁵ remarks one scholar, who also summarizes the dynamics of these constituent aspects of worship:

According to Solomon, fearing God and keeping his commandments is the first duty of a human being (Eccl. 12:13). It is in the sense of obeying God and his commandments that the giving of glory to God in Revelation 14:7 must be understood. God’s end-time people in Revelation are referred to as those who fear God (Rev. 11:18; 15:4; 19:5) and keep his commandments (cf. Rev. 12:17; 14:12).⁶

But the internal motivation for worship indicated in the text should not be missed. So another writer remarks, “In the case of the command, *fear God and give him glory* is a fairly exact equivalent to “repent” (see 16:9), except that John’s vision spells out further implications of this repentance: *Worship him who made the heavens, the earth,*

the sea and the springs of water (v. 7).⁷ True worship of God, then, is precipitated by repentance which issues in the “fear of God,” meaning “reverence” and “respect” for God’s authority, that enables people to obey His commands (Gen 22:12; Jer 32:40; Ps 111:10).⁸ Such repentance also involves giving “glory” to God. While giving glory to God entails giving Him honor, praise, and homage, it should also be kept in mind that

the order to *give him glory* is a Hebraic saying appearing in both Old and New Testaments: Joshua told Achan to give glory to the LORD (Josh. 7:19; see Jer. 13:16), and the Pharisees commanded the man born blind to give glory to God (John 9:24). The phrase signifies telling the truth by sinners who appear before God’s judgment seat.⁹

The idea of “telling the truth” by sinners, as an aspect of giving glory to God, fits well with the rationale given by the angel for worship. As in the case with Paul and Barnabas in Lystra (Acts 14:15), God, as the creator of all things, is the motivation given for people “to worship” Him instead of the creation. In the context of the first angel, part of telling the truth as an aspect of giving glory to God is the truthful declaration about the rightful recipient of worship: “Him who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of waters” (cf. Exod 20:4–6, 11; Deut 10:12–15). Evidently, “giving glory to God” *by* observing the fourth commandment, rooted as it is in the biblical creation story, is ultimately an act of worshipping “Him who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of waters.”

The Second Angel

Whereas the first angel provides a sketch of true worship, the second angel gives a depiction of false worship, especially in its eschatological manifestation. We are presented with a picture of end-time idolatry and its constituent elements, particularly those factors that lead people into idolatry. The message of the angel is, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who has made all the nations drink of the wine of the passion of her immorality.”

The echo of Babylon’s fall and destruction in Isaiah 21:9 has been noted by scholars, such as one¹⁰ who takes the view that all wicked world systems take on the symbolic name “Babylon the Great.”¹¹ He may be correct in his general assessment of the universal manifestation of symbolic Babylon in wicked world systems. However, a careful examination of eschatological Babylon in the book of Revelation strongly suggests more definitively that it is “identical to the satanic trinity, consisting of the dragon, the sea beast, and the beast out of the earth—that is, paganism and spiritualism, the ecclesiastical Rome, and America with apostate Protestantism.”¹²

But it is important to observe carefully what Babylon represents in the system of false worship. Babylon is the “instrumental cause” of false worship; the reason for the judgment soon to fall on Babylon is because she “made all the nations drink of the wine that leads to passion for her immorality.”¹³ In other words, Babylon is herself immersed in immorality, but what she does is to incentivize the world with a passion for her immorality. She does this by means of the seduction of intoxicating wine. Thus, the world is misled, led astray, and deceived. In the eschatological context, however, how is the deception achieved? Comparing Revelation 14:8 to 17:2 and 18:3,

the nations’ cooperation with Babylon ensures their material security (cf. 2:9, 13; 13:16–17). Without this cooperation, security would be removed. Such security is a temptation too great to resist. Therefore, the causative idea of the verb *πεπότικεν* (“she made to drink”) means that, at least in the final, global manifestation of Babylon’s activity, the nations were forced to “drink,” to comply . . . if they wanted to maintain economic security.¹⁴

The conjunction of cooperation with Babylon (to be taken in its tripartite manifestation as mentioned above) and the promise of economic well-being seems remarkable, but cannot be fully explored here.

Comparing the first and second angels’ messages from the point of view of worship, the contrast is quite clear. First, whereas true worship consists in giving glory to and worshipping (falling before) “Him who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of waters,” false worship consists in trusting one’s security to creaturely, worldly

systems. Second, whereas true worship is motivated by repentance that results in the fear (reverence) of God thus enabling obedience to His commandments, false worship is induced by the deception of material security that leads one to “fear” worldly, creaturely systems and render obedience to their demands.

The Third Angel

With the third angel we encounter the particularization of both the “subjects” and “objects” of false worship in the end time context. The angel declares,

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, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name (Rev 14:9–11).

In the message of the second angel, Babylon falls not because she was directly the object of worship but because of her bad influence and her falling away from truth. With the third angel, the message is concerned about entities that have become objects of worship: the beast and his image. The angel also marks the subjects of false worship with particularity—those who receive a mark on the forehead or right hand. Hence, we are presented with the beast and his image as an alternative teleological principle—namely, an object of worship, in contrast to the Creator God. And the angel announces the judgment of those who embrace this alternative principle—torment with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. The message is as stark as it is clear: focusing on the wrong goal in worship leads to a dead end.

Receiving marks on foreheads and right hands may signify identification with the satanic trinity (Babylon) whom they worship. If true worship ends up with obedience, it may be correct that

in the final analysis, the mark of the beast on the right hand or the forehead serves as identification for the worshippers of the satanic trinity, as the counterpart to the seal of God. Worship of the beast and the reception of his mark stands as the antithesis to obedience to God’s commandments, the substitution of the obedience to the satanic trinity for the obedience of God.¹⁵

This assessment seems all the more appropriate in view of the conclusion to the message of the three angels: “here is the perseverance of the saints who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus” (Rev 14:12).

Summary of Worship in the Message of the Three Angels

The three angels of Revelation 14:6–11 depict a conflict of worship situation in the end time. Together, they paint a composite picture of the structure and contours of both true and false worship.

First, the fact that in the end time the whole of humanity is constituted into two opposing worshipping camps underscores the point that worship is fundamentally an essential aspect of human life. True worship places a responsibility—an imperative—on humans to worship the Creator God. In the conflict situation of the end time, however, forces opposed to the Creator God set up a counterfeit, creaturely system that demands an alternative worship.

Second, true worship is motivated by a response of repentance to the gospel that creates reverence, respect, and awe towards the Creator God and results in giving Him glory, including obedience to His commandments. On the other hand, false worship is encouraged by deception. In the end time context, the seduction is one of material security that leads a segment of humanity to “fear” a worldly, creaturely system put in place by a satanic trinity that demands obedience on the pain of death.

Third, the rightful recipient of true worship is the Creator God, who alone is worthy of worship.

The foregoing brief discussion on the theology of worship in the message of the three angels raises a significant issue that needs explication—namely, God and the rightfulness of His demand for worship and the fairness of His judgment on those who engage in false worship. This issue will be taken up in the second article of this series.

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¹ Noel Due, *Created for Worship* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications Ltd., 2005), 34.

² There is evidence to suggest that the 144,000 does not represent a literal figure. See William G. Johnsson, “The Saints’ End-Time Victory Over the Forces of Evil,” in Frank B. Holbrook, ed., *Symposium on Revelation*, vol. 2 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Committee, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 32.

³ For example, See Grant R. Osborne, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 534, writes concerning this gospel that “it is a very different gospel from the one found elsewhere in the NT, for it does not mention Jesus and his sacrifice for sin, nor is there the call for repentance as in 9:20, 21; 16:9, 11.”

⁴ See Ekkehardt Mueller, “The Last Message for this World,” <https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/nt-texts/last-message-world> (accessed: 10-04-2017).

⁵ Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 451.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ J. R. Michaels, *IVP New Testament Commentary Series: Revelation*, vol. 20, rev., 14:6 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997).

⁸ David E. Aune, *Word Biblical Commentary: Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B (Dallas, TX: Word, 1998), 827.

⁹ Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, vol. 20, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 408.

¹⁰ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 754.

¹¹ Ibid., 755.

¹² Ekkehardt Mueller, “Babylon Identified,” in Artur A. Stele, ed., *The Word: Searching, Living, Teaching* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015), 169.

¹³ Osborne, 538. See also Beale, 755: “Both τοῦ θυμοῦ (“of passion”) and τῆς πορνείας (“of fornication” or “intercourse”) are to be taken as genitives of cause, purpose, or result: “the wine that causes [or “leads to” or “results in”] passion for intercourse with her” (cf. NIV: “made all the nations drink from the maddening wine of her adulteries.”

¹⁴ Beale, 756, expands on the economic interpretation: “This economic interpretation of the nations’ intoxicating passion for Babylon is clear from ch. 18, especially 18:3, where ‘(they committed) intercourse with her’ is equivalent to ‘they became rich from the power resulting from her luxury.’ In addition, 18:9 places in conjunction ‘they committed intercourse’ and ‘they lived luxuriously [sensuously] with her.’ In line with this, it is interesting that στρῆνος and the cognate verb, occurring respectively in 18:3 and 18:9, can be translated with the sense of ‘luxury’ or ‘sensuality.’ Clearly ungodly humanity’s love for Babylon lay in her ability to provide economic prosperity (so 18:11–19). The nations ‘weep and lament’ over Babylon’s fall because they ‘fear’ that it means their own imminent demise (18:9–10, 15, 19).”

¹⁵ Stefanovic, 461.