

Worship: The Center of the Three Angels' Messages

Part 2¹

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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 rightfulness 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 panentheism 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, “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, "bārâ," 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#ixzz3nNRmCmDa> (accessed September 30, 2015).

¹¹ Werner Foerster, “*ktizô*,” 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, 1, 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/creattele.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.