

Chapter 5

“All Things Bright and Beautiful” – Singing *Creation* through the Ages

C. Michael Hawn

Theological Introduction by Geoffrey C. Moore

Our survey of theological themes in congregational song begins with one of the most crucial issues of our day, the nature of creation and the role of humanity in the participation in God’s natural created order and responsibility for sustaining it. Even in the small sampling of songs that follows, one may note that sung reflections on creation correlate in part to the poet’s time in history, place on the planet, social position, and faith tradition. Hymn writers agree that God’s creation is good – very good. Readers will observe a gradual move toward a more active role for humanity in creation and sustained partnership with God for the good of the planet. Furthermore, rather than dominion over the earth, the poets promote a theology of stewardship, implied in earlier centuries and explicitly advocated beginning with the last decades of the 20th century. The introduction sets the stage for understanding many of the key issues in singing a theology of creation.

Theological Introduction

The two major issues at stake in the doctrine of creation are the God-creation relationship and the human-creation relationship. With respect to the God-creation relationship, the key questions center on determining the status or nature of creation and how and why God creates. Clear answers, however, are complicated by the fact that the Bible provides multiple creation accounts (Genesis 1:1-2:3; Genesis 2:4-24; Job 38:1-41) that differ in some important details. Job’s lyrical account of creation includes music. These should not be read as historical or scientific explanations, but part of a broader biblical understanding about the nature of God, God’s relationship with creation, the nature of created things. In other words, these are narratives about God’s grace in which creation is simply the first act in a large-scale drama depicting God’s covenantal relationship with creation, a drama in which the entire cosmos serves as the stage. When read from this perspective, rather than about the mechanics of the creation event, it becomes clear that all creation is good and destined for a redemption that God’s intends for the entire cosmos.

Clear answers can also be elusive with respect to how God creates. Though the Hebrew text is somewhat ambiguous as to whether or not God creates *ex nihilo*, or out of nothing—an ambiguity manifest in the many different English translations of the opening of Genesis 1—what is clear from the biblical account is that there is no conflict between God and God’s creative act. This absence of conflict stands in stark contrast with other ancient Near Eastern creation myths in which the creation of the world results from a struggle between two opposing forces. In Christian doctrine, by contrast, creation is the free, uncompelled, loving act of God accomplished through God’s own facile and unimpeded speech. Thus, creation is an external, or *ad extra*,

operation to God and, therefore, exists apart from God. And because it has a beginning, creation does not exist eternally alongside, or **co-eternal** with, God. Nevertheless, the biblical account is clear that all creation is wholly and intrinsically good, and in its early development, the doctrine of creation also had to address the claims of **Gnosticism**, a philosophy marked by the view that all matter is evil, and **Platonism**, a philosophy which asserts that created things are copies of transcendent ideas or forms, and that these ideas, not created things, are the objects of true knowledge. Both of these philosophies, contrary to the biblical assertion, lead to a devaluing of creation.

Further consideration of the doctrine later gave rise to other ways of articulating the God-creation relationship. While the historical concept of **theism** asserts that creation emerges *from* a single source, God, **pantheism** asserts that God is identical with everything and everything is identical with God. During the Enlightenment, the concept of **deism** emerged, asserting that God ceased to be directly involved in the universe after creating it, while the later concept of **panentheism** asserts that God is *in* everything, though still distinct from it, which often leads to the additional claim that God and creation share a mutual dependency. In the end, one must decide whether the Bible seeks to provide an account of the mechanics of God's creative act, or whether it seeks to provide an account of the origin of creation in the very being and act of Godself. In other words, does the Bible attempt to provide a map of the universe or a description of what animates and gives life to the universe? It has been suggested by some that, rather than a doctrine of creation, the Bible offers a doctrine of the Creator.

How one understands the God-creation relationship will largely determine how one answers the central question in the human-creation relationship, namely, what is our relationship to and responsibility for creation? Closely related to and behind this question is the question of God's purpose for creation: Is the goal of the story the creation of humanity or the Sabbath day of rest? Stated differently, is creation for the benefit of humanity or for the glory of God? Answers to these questions tend to be shaped by one's understanding of the biblical claim that humanity is created in the image of God, or **imago Dei**, (Genesis 1:26-27) which, in turn, is influenced by the two major world-views that have shaped Christian thought from the very beginning: the Hebraic and the Hellenistic. The Hebraic world-view, concerned largely with the concepts of role and relationship, tends to conceive of the *imago Dei* in terms of humanity's role as God's representative. This view, largely oriented by the Genesis 2 account, sees the goal of creation as Sabbath rest—understood both originally and eschatologically—and thus God's glory. This view therefore understands the human-creation relationship as one of covenantal **stewardship** where humanity is to exercise careful and responsible management of creation on behalf of God as God's representative. The Hellenistic world-view, concerned largely with the concepts of nature and substance (e.g., an immortal soul, freedom, reason, etc.), tends to conceive of the *imago Dei* in terms of humanity's characteristics and powers. This view, largely oriented by the Genesis 1 account, sees humanity as the goal and crowning achievement of creation and thus as the center of God's created

order. This view therefore tends to be more *anthropocentric* and understands the human-creation relationship as one of *dominion* where humanity is to exercise sovereignty and control over creation.

Given our particular context, a word should be added about the *music*-creation relationship, for the Bible states, among other things, that the stars, desert, mountains and hills did or shall sing and that the floods and trees shall clap their hands (Job 38:7; Psalm 98:8; Isaiah 35:2, 55:12). Though often taken as metaphorical, one must ask whether these statements should be any less truth-bearing than biblical assertions such as God “called” (“*amar*” in Hebrew meaning “to bear forth” or “utter”) creation into being, created humanity “out of the dust of the earth,” or “breathed” life into it.

Selected Hymns

“O Strength and Stay Upholding All Creation” (“*Rerum Deus tenax vigor*”) (c. 4th cent., c. 1871)

Our understanding of the narrative of creation theology throughout Christian hymnody begins with this 4th-century Latin hymn of uncertain authorship, though sometimes associated with Ambrose of Milan (c. 339-397), the founder of Latin hymnody. The hymn was used in monastic communities for None, the ninth hour (3 PM), the hour of Christ’s death. The two stanzas and doxology were translated in the 19th century by Church of England priest John Ellerton (1826-1893) and his fellow Trinity College, Cambridge, classmate F. J. A. Hort (1828-1892), who jointly translated the first two stanzas with Ellerton providing the third.

While creation was celebrated in the early monastic tradition in selected psalms such as Psalms 8, 19, 148, hymns on the creation of the world per se are a later occurrence. The cycles of creation, both the days and the seasons, provided a framework for understanding the relationship between God and humanity. In this case, the fading light “in due gradation/from hour to hour” correlates with the fading afternoon light at the time of Christ’s death. Stanza two associates the natural cycle of evening followed by morning with death that gives way to the “dawning glories of eternal day” or eternal life.

“Now Praise the Protector of Heaven” (“*nu scylun hergan hefaenricaes uard*”) (c. 750, 1987)

This short Old English hymn foreshadows the spirit of St. Francis’ 13th century poem and is the earliest known hymn in the English vernacular. Known as Cædmon’s Hymn, manuscripts between the 8th and the 12th centuries include it as a transcription of oral tradition. What is known of Cædmon (b. 7th cent.; d. c. 670-680) comes to us through *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Angelorum* (731) by the Venerable

| Bede (c. 673 – 735), who provides a Latin translation, “Nunc laudare debemus uctorem regni cælestis” of the hymn.

Christopher Idle (b. 1938), a leader of the *Jubilate Group**, provides a three-stanza versification of the text in “Now Praise the Protector of Heaven” (1987). The “Protector of Heaven” is also our “Guide and Defender and Guard.” The Almighty “appointed the middle earth [for the] lands of men” – a name for the inhabited earth, *oikoumene*, from Germanic origins. Idle translates this as “fashioned the earth for our home.” Cædmon captures the *paradox** of the omnipotent One of the heavens who demonstrates care and protection for humanity by providing the earth as a place designed for us.

“All Creatures of Our God and King” (“Cantico di Fratere Sole”) (c. 1225, 1919)

| The 13th-century ascetic St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1182-1226) was born into a wealthy Italian merchant family and lived at the time of chivalry, knights, and the Crusades. After riotous youthful years, he renounced his inheritance and family, and followed Lady Poverty, pursuing an itinerant ministry of preaching from village to village to anyone who would listen. Yet his influence extended to the seat of political and spiritual power in Rome and even to Jerusalem where he proclaimed peace to a Muslim leader at great personal peril.

For much of his life, he lived an austere existence among the elements of nature, seeking refuge in caves where possible. This lifestyle may have led to the composition of his *laude spirituale**, a popular Italian spiritual song used outside the liturgy, entitled “Cantico di Fratere Sole” (“Song of Brother Sun”) or “Cantico della Creature” (“Canticle of the Creatures”) written near the end of his life c. 1225. Several English language translations are available, but William Henry Draper (1885-1933), a rector in Adel, near Leeds, England, provides a free versification written for the procession on a children’s Whitsuntide Festival, published in the *Public School Hymn Book* (1919). Draper preserves the familial relationship that Francis expresses with nature though some alterations of Draper’s text eliminate the various brother, sister, and mother images. A recent free versification “All Creatures Worship God on High,” prepared for *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006), maintains familial relationships but avoids monarchial images.

The hymn can be viewed in many ways, but for the purposes of this chapter, we will highlight the aspects that provide a glimpse into Francis’s theology of creation. The poem appropriately begins by addressing the “most high, most powerful, and good Lord” (*Altissimu, onnipotente, bon Signore*). Howard Chandler Robbins (1876-1952) less familiar translation captures the Italian *incipit**, “Most High, Omnipotent, Good Lord.” Indeed, humanity joins all creatures in praise (“*Laudato si’, mi’ Signore, / cum tutte le Tue creature*”), perhaps a natural expression of one who, according to tradition, preached to birds and calmed wild beasts.

Drawing upon Psalm 148 and Genesis 1, Francis addresses the four natural elements that provided the basis for science until the 17th century:

Earth (*nostra matre Terra*) – our mother earth

Fire (*frate Focu*) – brother fire

Air (*frate Vento*) – brother wind (air)

Water (*sor'Acqua*) – sister water

Furthermore, reflecting the creation narrative in Genesis 1, Francis incorporates the firmament of the heavens into his family:

Sun (*frate Sole*) – brother Sun

Moon and stars (*sora Luna e le stele*) – sister Moon and stars

He completes the life cycle with a reference to “*sora nostra Morte corporale*” or “our sister (bodily) death,” perhaps reflecting the poet’s impending death.

It would be an error to refer to Francis as a 13th century ecologist or even a proto-ecologist. Even so, the interrelationship of the natural created order and all creatures is apparent in his poem. For Francis, God (“Signore” or Lord) is surely the source of creation, and the implied role for humanity in creation is stewardship, a Hebraic perspective, rather than domination, a Hellenistic understanding. The inclusivity demonstrated in this the poem extends to a perfect gender balance – brother and Lord versus sister and mother. There is no mention of “King” in the Italian though the Signore is indeed most high and most powerful. While the varied gender references for the constituent parts of nature may have been common in Francis’ time, for the 21st century singer, gender inclusivity signifies a close familial relationship between the Creator and created as well as humanity and the natural created order. The result is a bio-centered understanding of creation rather than the more standard anthropocentric model.

Regardless of the original intent of the poet, we, with 21st century sensibilities and perspectives, may ask certain questions upon singing this hymn: What would our earth be like today if we cared for the elements of the created order as we would our family? Would the pollution of water and air, increasing scarcity of resources, and the impending extinction of many species of plants and animals be as critical if we truly saw all creatures as part of the family of creation generated by God? Do we see ourselves as the crown of creation or as an integral part? How do we see ourselves and the rest of creation in relation to God? How do we see death as a part of God’s created order?

“I Sing the Almighty Power of God” (1715)

Isaac Watts (1674-1748) provides one of the standard English-language hymns on the theme of creation. Aptly titled "Praise for Creation and Providence" in *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language of the Use of Children* (1715), this hymn, the only one still in common use from this collection, expresses a solid Calvinist doctrine of creation. While not specifically a hymn based on the Apostles' Creed according to the preface, a child in Watts' day who sang the hymn would likely think of this hymn as a theological amplification of the first article of the Creed: "I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." Even the opening line of the hymn, "almighty power of God," echoes the beginning of the Creed.

The opening stanzas offer many images from Genesis 1 and 2 that would stir the visual imagination of children (*hypotyposis**): "mountains," "flowing seas," "lofty skies," as well as the sun, ruling by day, and the moon by night." God "filled the earth with food" and "formed the creatures with His word" suggesting an anthropomorphic representation of the Creator consistent with the biblical witness. Consistent with the biblical account, God "pronounced [creation] good." This affirmation of created matter certainly flies in the face of any Gnostic tendencies.

Originally in eight four-line stanzas, the strong Calvinist theology of creation characterized by the total sovereignty of God is apparent throughout. Furthermore, concepts of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence indicate that God continues to be actively involved in creation beyond the initial creative impulse, thus indicating no trace of deistic philosophy.

God's omniscience is evident in this stanza:

*I sing the wisdom that ordained
The sun to rule the day;
The moon shines full at His command,
And all the stars obey.*

The following stanza speaks of God's omnipotence:

*There's not a plant or flower below
But makes Thy glories known;
And clouds arise and tempests blow
By order from Thy throne.*

God's omnipresence rounds out the Calvinist understanding of the total sovereignty of God:

*Creatures (as num'rous as they be)
Are subject to thy care;
There's not a place where we can flee,
But God is present there.*

On first glance, one might think that this stanza indicates pantheistic tendencies. However, God's presence is one of care and Watts does not indicate that God resides in the natural created order, but that the elements of nature bear witness to the Creator – "make Thy glories known." An omnipresent God could seem oppressive to a child of any age. Watts's final stanza, however, concludes the hymn with a *rhetorical question** that stresses the benevolent side of this almighty God, a God who also guards, guides, and loves us:

*God's hand is my perpetual guard,
He guides me with His eye;
Why should I then forget the Lord,
Whose love is ever nigh?*

Though playing an important role in the broader understanding of the Christian narrative on creation theology, this hymn raises some interesting questions for the 21st century singer: 1) What is the role of humanity in Watts's creation theology? It is to observe, admire, and enjoy it as the following stanza expresses:

*Lord, how thy wonders are displayed
Where'er I turn mine eye,
If I survey the ground I tread,
Or gaze upon the sky!*

Watts paints a grand painting, or perhaps a series of paintings, through which we may view somewhat objectively the grandeur of creation in all its magnificence. We are visitors in the grand gallery or museum of the galaxy. God has painted this resplendent cosmic landscape and we are the beneficiaries of God's beneficence toward us.

2) God's power is expressed in an example that may be troubling for the 21st century singer:

...
*And clouds arise and tempests blow
By order from Thy throne.*

This may make theological sense to an early 18th century citizen of Great Britain, a seafaring power that ruled the waves. How else might one explain the disappearance of ships, without a trace or an apparent reason? Many 21st century singers, however, will not be willing to ascribe present-day devastations wrought by tsunamis, typhoons, earthquakes, hurricanes, and other natural disasters to God as a destructive force. Watts certainly allowed for this view in a nearly universally omitted stanza:

*In Heaven he shines with Beams of Love,
With Wrath in Hell beneath:*

*'Tis on his Earth I stand or move,
And 'tis his Air I breath[e].*

Watts' hymn expresses the sovereignty of God as an active and pervasive force in nature. Compare this hymn with one by his contemporary Joseph Addison (1672-1719), "The Spacious Firmament on High" (1712). Addison's text reflects more closely the philosophy of **deism**, a God who, following the creative impulse, lets the creative order continue on its own. God's divinity is acknowledged in the final line – "The hand that made us is divine." – but does not claim any further involvement in the natural created order.

While there is much discussion about the forces of nature and the role of humanity in effecting changes in climate in the 21st century, current scientific thought and theological discourse certainly indicates that this hymn, even in its highly edited form as it appears in most hymnals, cannot express a complete theology for today. Nevertheless, this hymn raises the question: how do we relate God as Creator to God as Sustainer, Governor, and Sovereign?

"All Things Bright and Beautiful" (1848)

Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-1895), a Dublin native, wrote a series of hymns on the Apostles' Creed published in *Hymns for Little Children* (1848). This highly educated poet, born into an Irish family of financial means, was also known for her charity and devotion to the poor and sick.

The hymn, an elucidation of the second phrase of the Apostles' Creed, "Maker of Heaven and Earth," begins with one of the most recognized stanzas in all of Christian hymnody, a stanza that has become the refrain when sung to the tune ROYAL OAK:

*All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful,
The Lord God made them all.*

Author James Herriot (1916-1995), a British veterinary surgeon, wrote a series of semi-autobiographical works based on each line of this stanza beginning with *All Creatures Great and Small* (1972), followed by *All Things Bright and Beautiful* (1974), *All Things Wise and Wonderful* (1977), and *The Lord God Made Them All* (1981).

Wonder and beauty are ascribed to the physical aspects of God's creation, the antithesis of a Platonic ideal that true beauty resides only in forms and ideas and not in things. Written during the *Romantic period** of poetry, the author engages our senses as we experience nature. Stanza two focuses on creation in miniature – "little

flower”, “each little bird” with “tiny wings.” Stanza four takes in the grandeur of the natural world – see the “purple-headed mountain”, hear the “river running by”, and wonder at the “sunset, and the morning.” In stanza five we feel the “cold wind in the winter” and the “pleasant morning sun.” Stanza six describes a lovely Irish meadow (or perhaps the Lake District in England). We can see the “tall trees in the greenwood” and the “rushes by the water.” The scene is painted so effectively that we seem to be a part of it. Whereas Isaac Watts, nearly 150 years earlier, painted a cosmic landscape for us to view, Mrs. Alexander seems to invite us into the meadow for a walk.

What is the theology of creation proposed by Alexander? God reigns over the entire created order. Humanity participates fully with all senses in God’s creation, and we are the beneficiaries of the Almighty’s creative beneficence. The final stanza indicates that through God’s creation, our role is to bear witness of the One who “made all things well” – a paraphrase of Genesis 1: “. . . God saw that it was good” (KJV):

*He gave us eyes to see them,
And lips that we might tell,
How great is God Almighty,
Who has made all things well.*

From the perspective of the 21st century, it may also be noted that the topography described in this hymn generally situates it in the northern world, especially in Europe and parts of North America. *Together in Song: Australian Hymn Book II* (1999) experiments with several stanzas, some say questionably, that describe this continent, one of which follows here:

*The many coloured corals,
the creatures of the sea,
of bushland, field or desert,
on farms, or roaming free.*

While there are those who say that it is advisable to compose a new text rather than adapt an existing hymn, especially a long-time favorite, singers in the 21st century are increasingly aware that the earth has diverse ecosystems that are interdependent and that no one topographical perspective, especially when the planet is viewed from space, is dominant. How does our physical location on the planet affect our perspective of creation?

“Many and Great, O God, Are Thy Works” (“Wakantanka taku nitawa”) (1846, 1930)

This hymn by Joseph Renville (1779-1846), the son of a French Canadian trader and a Dakota Native American mother, is arguably the most familiar Native American hymn to appear in many hymnals. It appears in "Dakota downanpi kin" (1846), a supplement to the first Dakotan hymnal, *Dakota Odowan* ("Dakota Hymns"), a words-only collection (1842), with the designation following stanza seven, "Mr. R". Jeremiah 10:12-13: "He hath made the earth by his power, he hath established the world by his wisdom, and hath stretched out the heavens by his discretion. When he uttereth his voice, there is a multitude of waters in the heavens, and he causeth the vapours to ascend from the ends of the earth; he maketh lightnings with rain, and bringeth forth the wind out of his treasures." (KJV)

Philip Frazier (1892-1964), whose parents were full-blood Sioux Indians, paraphrased the first and last stanzas and presented it for the National Convention of the YWCA in 1930 in Detroit, Michigan. The tune LACQUIPARLE (Lake that speaks), named after the Dakota Lac qui Parle Mission in Chippewa County, Minnesota, was listed in the original publication as a "Dakota Native Air."

The *incipit** of the hymn begins with "Great Spirit God, the things which are Thine." A literal translation by Sydney H. Byrd of all seven stanzas found in *The Hymnal 1982 Companion* (1990) resonates with the Dakota belief in "*Wakan*," a Power greater than people.

The first stanza paraphrases the ideas of Jeremiah 10:12-13. Coming from a people whose wellbeing depended on an intimate understanding the seasons and maintaining a balance between the resources offered by nature and their needs for survival, the relationship with God is both one of awe ("though you transcend the stars") and intimacy ("close to us and stay by our side"). This *antithesis** is found in several places in the Old Testament. The first creation account in Genesis 1 stresses the cosmic God where the second account in Genesis 2 is the intimate God who walks with human beings in the garden. Stanza two parallels an understanding of God found the psalter where God's presence ranges from the cosmic majesty of Psalm 8:1 ("O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! Who hast set thy glory above the heavens.") to the intimate understanding of the One who responds to us more intimately found in Psalm 139:13 ("For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.").

A paraphrase of additional stanza by Frazier not found in hymnals emphasizes humanity's utter dependence upon the Creator:

*Your will, mysterious and so strong,
Brings growth to all the earth.
Food for our souls and clothing to wear
Are like your cup that blesses and fills.
Provide for us each day of our lives
Sufficient for our needs.*

Spiritual and physical needs are in perfect balance and unity indicating no trace of Platonic, docetic, or Gnostic philosophies. Plentiful nature and personal requirements for sustaining life are interdependent. This hymn expresses a relationship with *Wakan* that extends beyond the natural created order on earth to a seamless transition to the next life – “life that never shall end, eternal life with you.” “Many and Great” contributes a creation theology that expresses the spiritual and physical oneness of the entire created order. The created being and the natural created order are inseparable both in earthly and eternal life. How may urban dwellers relate to this hymn?

“Rise to Greet the Sun” (清晨歌) (1931, 1946)

The collaboration between a Chinese theologian and an American missionary couple led to the composition of the hymn “Rise to greet the sun.” Chao Tzu-chen (1888-1979) was a well known theologian, educator, poet, and author. He was born in Zhejiang Province, China.

An ecumenist, Chao attended the interdenominational Missionary Council three times – 1929 in Jerusalem, 1939 in Madras, India, and 1947 in Whitby, Canada. [He was elected as one of six presidents of the World Council of Churches in 1948, the founding year of the Council.

Bliss (1895-1975) and Mildred (1898-2001) Wiant were American music missionaries from the Methodist Episcopal Church. They served in Peking (now Beijing), China, where Bliss as head of the music department at Yenching University and later as a professor at Chung Chi College, Chinese University, Hong Kong. He was musical editor of the first edition of *Hymns of Universal Praise* (1936), a union hymnal project of several denominations and, along with Mildred, translated many Chinese hymns into English. This watershed hymnal, now in its third edition, contained not only 400 western hymns in translation but also included 62 hymn texts by Chinese Christians and 72 tunes of Chinese origin or by Chinese composers. “Rise to Greet the Sun,” with its pentatonic (five-tone) tune LE P’ING (“peaceful joy”) by Hu Te-ai (b. c. 1900), a music student at University of Peking, first appeared in *Hymns of Universal Praise*.

Another translation by Francis (Frank) W. Price (1895-1974), “Golden Breaks the Dawn” (1953), is also in use. The Wiants’ translation, however, preserves more of the original images of the hymn. The first stanza paints a beautiful picture of the rising sun, ascribing to it anthropomorphic characteristics: “warrior-like and strong, comely as a groom.” This image is drawn directly from Psalm 19:4-5: “Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun, which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race.” (KJV) It is under this powerful light

that birds fly, flowers thrive, and humans toil. As the day begins, the singer prays for safety and faithful and good “conduct, actions calm and mild” in stanza two. The Asian cultural perspective is apparent as the singer prays both to “venerat[e] age and teach . . . youth” as appropriate service. A focus on right conduct may indicate the underlying ethics of Confucian philosophy. The final stanza asks for God to bless the day. By trusting Jesus, the singer will be “freed from ill [under] fair blue sk[ies].” God will supply the simple things – a “cotton coat” and “plain food”—satisfying “all my countless needs.”

In this survey of creation theology, this hymn reminds us of the interrelationship between the Creator who shapes the seasons and the farmer who works the land, a model of stewardship rather than dominion. The gifts of creation are received with thankfulness and responsibility. God is actively supporting the farmer and his family, thus no deistic tendencies. Just as God sustains the farmer through creation, the farmer honors his neighbors and family. Humility and a simple lifestyle sustain the farmer in both his physical needs and his relationships. Does this perspective still have meaning in the world of corporate farming and grain commodities? What is our ethical responsibility to each other as well as to the land?

“Morning Has Broken” (1931)

Sometimes a melody provides the impetus for a hymn text. Percy Dearmer (1867-1936), editor of *Songs of Praise* (1931), requested a thanksgiving text from the poet Eleanor Farjeon to the lilting Gaelic tune BUNESSAN. Indeed, the melody cannot be separated from this poem.

Eleanor Farjeon (1881-1965) was born in Westminster, London, England. She was the daughter of a novelist and had around 80 works to her credit including *Nursery Rhymes of London Town* and *The Glass Slipper*.

“Morning Has Broken” appeared first in the United States in *The Hymnbook* (1955) of the Presbyterian Church, but it was not until Cat Stevens (now Yusuf Islam) sang it on his triple platinum album *Teaser and the Firecat* in 1971 that the song became well known and, as a result, has been included in most hymnals since that time. This is a rare, though not unique, example of a Christian hymn receiving acclaim through the popular media.

The tune BUNESSAN demands a lesser-used *dactylic** poetic meter grouped in threes. The result, according to British hymnologist J. R. Watson, is a “springy rhythm... [and a] beautifully sustained... poem [that] makes a delightful and charming morning hymn.” It was first printed in Lachlan MacBean’s *Songs and Hymns of the Gael* (1888).

A product of the *Romantic** period of poetry, the author engages virtually all the

senses. In stanza one, we hear the sounds of the blackbird, an echo of the “Word” that called forth creation in Genesis 1 and the voice of the Incarnation itself in John 1.

In the second stanza, the poet appeals to our sense of smell – “Sweet the rains new fall” – the touch of the warm sun, and “the first dewfall on the first grass.” The stanza closes with a reference to God walking in Eden through the garden – “where his feet pass,” an *allusion** of Genesis 3:8: “And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.” There is, however, no hint in this idyllic account of the fall of humanity that follows, perhaps an indication that all was well before humanity “polluted the environment.”

The final stanza fills our sight with the brightness of the morning sunlight. The poet personalizes this experience: “Mine is the sunlight! Mine is the morning.” The author shifts back and forth in time between the garden of creation, Eden, and the unspoiled, picturesque garden that we imagine today. We share in the freshness and possibility of the “one light Eden saw play.” Our response is unbridled “elation” for “God’s re-creation (or is it recreation?) of the new day.”

At first glance, this “Morning has broken” may seem naïve in our current polluted environment of waning fresh water supplies, greenhouse gases, and smog. Surely, she was aware of the filthy conditions of urban London and the industrial district of England in her day. Be that as it may, unlike the early 20th century when Farjeon penned this poem, we now know that the earth’s resources are limited and its beauty is ours to preserve and foster. Yet, we all dream for a day when the beauty of the earth may be restored and that the rising of the morning sun will be a symbol of hope where all will share in the earth’s abundance. Can we sing this hymn with theological integrity in the 21st century or might it be seen as ecological escapism?

“How Great Thou Art” (“O Store Gud”) (c. 1885, 1939)

The complicated origins of this hymn begin with Swedish pastor Carl Boberg around 1885. Boberg (1859-1940) was a leading evangelist of his day and the editor of an influential periodical *Sanningsvittnet* (“Witness of the Truth”). He served in the Swedish parliament and published several volumes of poetry, including hymns, helping compile the first two hymnals for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sweden.

Boberg’s inspiration is said to have come one day when he was caught in a thunderstorm in the southeastern coast of Sweden. The violence of the storm followed by the return of the sun and the singing of birds left him falling to his knees in awe. Soon he penned the nine stanzas of the original version in Swedish beginning with “O Store Gud, nar jag den varld beskader.” It was several years later

when Boberg unexpectedly heard his poem sung by a congregation to an old Swedish folk melody.

The subsequent history of the poem is somewhat unclear, but nonetheless interesting. An earlier literal English translation of four of the stanzas by E. Gustav Johnson (1893-1974) in 1925 began "O mighty God, when I behold the wonder." This version never caught on, however, though it may be found in some hymnals.

In 1907, Manfred von Glehn (1867-1924) translated the text from Swedish into German. It became the hymn, "Wie gross bist du." In 1927, a Russian version by the evangelical leader Ivan S. Prokhanoff (1896-1935) appeared in *Kimvali* ("Cymbals"), a collection published by the Baptist Press in Poland. English missionary Stuart K. Hine (1899-1989) and his wife heard the Russian version sung as a vocal duet in the Ukraine.

As the Hines' crossed into Sub-Carpathian Russia, the mountain scenery brought back the memory of this song. The first three stanzas were composed while in the Carpathian Mountains. When war broke out, Hines and his wife were forced to return to England in 1939. They used the first three stanzas in evangelistic endeavors during the "Blitz years." The fourth stanza was added after the war.

Baptist hymnologist William Reynolds cites comments by George Beverly Shea (1909-2013) on the hymn's introduction in the United States through the Billy Graham Crusades: "We first sang [it] in the Toronto, Canada, Crusade of 1955. Cliff Barrows [1923-2016] and his large volunteer choir assisted in the majestic refrains. Soon after, we used it in the 'Hour of Decision' [radio broadcasts] and in American crusades. In the New York meetings of 1957 the choir joined me in singing it ninety-three times!"

The first two stanzas establish the grandeur of God's creation while the refrain establishes our response, "How great thou art!" In stanza three, the God of the natural created order continues the creative act by sending God's Son to redeem a lost humanity. With this stanza, the primary theological perspective shifts from creation to atonement. While the first two stanzas express humanity's awe at the natural created order, this is not the ultimate goal of this hymn. Human sin has marred the gift of the Creator. The vivid description of nature in the first two stanzas finds its fulfillment in heaven or when we escape the earth. The final stanza, however, may be seen as the completion of the story of creation and human redemption on an eschatological note; the fulfillment of creation takes place in heaven. Thus, this hymn embodies the sweep of the redemption story from Genesis to Revelation. Given the sweeping and shifting theological territory covered in this hymn, the refrain ties all of the themes together with the reiteration of the hymn's central premise four times, "How great thou art!"

“For the Fruits of This/All Creation” (1970)

With “For the Fruits of This Creation” (originally, “For the fruits of his creation”) our discussion of creation theology takes a significant turn. Written in 1970, Fred Pratt Green (1903-2000) shifts the perspective from the admiration of the natural created order, to the sustainability of creation, the interdependence of all nations, and the partnership between the Creator and humanity in caring for the earth and for each other.

Published as “Harvest Hymn” in the British *Methodist Recorder* in August 1970, this hymn combines our gratitude to God for the bounties of the earth with our responsibility to care for our neighbor through “the harvests we are sharing” (stanza two). Green’s concern for justice and a social gospel is often evident in his hymns.

The form of this hymn is a sung *litany** with a recurring response, “Thanks be to God” (stanzas one and three) and “God’s will is done” (stanza two). Each stanza alludes to our responsibility to care for all the earth and its people: Stanza one cites God’s “good gifts to every nation.” Stanza two mentions “our worldwide task of caring for the hungry and despairing.” Stanza three continues this thought: “the good we all inherit.”

Appropriately, this harvest hymn speaks with the hope every table at Thanksgiving will reflect the bounty of several parts of the earth, not just local food. This also implies our ecological interdependence as we use the earth’s resources wisely, considering “future needs in earth’s safe-keeping.”

Creation is an ongoing event in the theology of this hymn. God continues to be actively involved in the future of the planet through the sustainable activities of humans and the natural resources stored for our “future needs.” The poet replaces the nearly ubiquitous use of past tense present in earlier hymns – “God made” – with present participles in the first stanza implying that creation is indeed still happening on the living organism that we call earth:

*For the plowing, sowing, reaping,
Silent growth while we are sleeping,
Future needs in earth’s safe-keeping . . .*

While most of the earlier hymns imply stewardship of the environment, stewardship is an explicitly explored by Pratt Green. The Hellenistic dominion philosophy finds no role in this hymn.

Stanza two, beginning, “In the just reward of labor . . .” fosters an understanding of dignity in human work (“plowing, sowing, reaping”) rather viewing the tilling of the soil as a curse or punishment of humanity after the fall.

Though not stated explicitly, this hymn is shaped by a Trinitarian theology. Stanza one speaks to the God of creation; stanza two references Christ's twin commandments in Matthew 22:38-39 including, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Stanza three alludes to the "harvests of the Spirit" – a reference not only to the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, but also to the Jewish season of Pentecost, the closing festival of the Passover season and a time of harvest.

Perhaps the most stirring part of the hymn is the last half of the final stanza:

*For the wonders that astound us,
For the truths that still confound us,
Most of all that love has found us,
Thanks be to God.*

This amazing *tercet** not only displays a poetic tour de force, but also suggests homage to one of the great hymns by Charles Wesley. Note the transcendent mystery that characterizes both poets. Wesley concludes "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" with these familiar lines:

*Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise.*

Both poets display a Wesleyan wonder at the love of God manifest in creation (Green) and in the Incarnation of Christ (Wesley) using a language that goes beyond the literal to the awe-inspiring. Looking more closely at this hymn, how does it reflect current ecological thinking in ways that previous hymns have not?

Though "For the Fruit of This Creation" was written for the well-constructed tune EAST ACKLAM, composed in 1957 by British composer Francis Alan Jackson (b. 1917) in the grand English cathedral style, some hymnals prefer the more familiar Welsh tune AR HYD Y NOS.

"I Am Your Mother" ("Earth Prayer") (1993)

New Zealander Shirley Erena Murray (b. 1931) engages the singer directly in the struggle for the survival of the earth and, as a result, the very existence of humanity. Originally titled "Earth Prayer," the singers encounters the earth as a mother who gives life to her children, but receives in return only "neglect" (stanza one), destruction (stanza two), "abuse" (stanza three), and denial (stanza four). While the language is raw and the message desperate, the tune EARTH PRAYER composed by Swedish Lutheran pastor and musician Per Harling (b. 1948) contrasts and complements the text by suggesting a lullaby to comfort a sickly earth.

She began to write hymns in the 1970s to undergird her husband's progressive theology and the work of Amnesty International. The first independent publication of her hymns was *In Every Corner, Sing* (1987), a collection that featured many themes that she would continue to develop. Fellow New Zealander and hymnwriter, Colin Gibson (b. 1933) highlights these themes: "the search for peace, justice and human rights, inclusiveness, the honoring of women and the feminine element in spirituality, celebration of the natural world and the New Zealand environment, a call to social responsibility and a life of faith lived out with compassion and hopefulness." A lament on humanity's abuse of the earth, this hymn reflects the growing awareness of mutual interdependence of all humanity and reliance on God's creation for our survival. The scientific community is virtually unanimous in its assertion that the earth has a diminishing window in which to make significant changes in order to avoid global catastrophes that will affect all of its inhabitants.

One of the most unusual aspects of the text is the *point of view** of the hymn; it is written from the first person singular perspective of the earth that suffers because of humanity's abuse of her resources. Yet, it is not entirely clear to whom the pronoun "I" refers in the first three stanzas. In correspondence with the author, Murray explains, "I wrote it in the first person out of a sense of desperation that eco-theology was not being regarded seriously in 1993. Maybe that's changed."

The author stresses our mutual interdependence on God's creation for our survival throughout the hymn. Stanza one states "my breath is your breath,/my death is your death. . ." Successive stanzas continue this approach: "my good is your good, /my food is your food" (stanza two); "my health is your health,/my wealth is your wealth" (stanza three).

The final stanza reveals the referent for the pronoun "I" – "Do not deny God." This clarifies that "I" is not Mother Earth or Gaia – a Greek personification of the earth, but that our "neglect," "destruction," and "abuse," is directed toward our Creator. By postponing the reference to God until the final stanza, she increases the dramatic poignancy.

Shirley Murray gives much attention the structure of her hymns. This is evident in the urgency in line two of each stanza – "neglect," "destroy," "abuse," "deny." Furthermore, the last line of the first three stanzas suggests a progression of thought, gradually and literally lifting our eyes:

... *ashes to ashes, dust into dust.* (stanza one)

... *water and flower, branches and fruit.* (stanza two)

... *shining with promise, set among stars.* (stanza three)

Thus she moves us from humus with the words spoken at graveside services, to the greening of the earth through its water and flora, to the hope of humanity in the heavens. As scientists tell us, we are literally made of the stuff of the stars.

It is the final line, however, that sets this hymn apart from earlier hymns on this theme. Classic *strophic** hymns usually wrap up the theme of the hymn in some fairly conclusive way. Shirley Murray redefines traditional hymn structures to make her point. Reprising the first line of the hymn, she then concludes with an ellipsis (. . .) rather than the expected final punctuation mark that signifies closure.

I am your mother, tears on my face . . .

Regretfully, hymnals do not preserve this feature of her original poem, an alteration that weakens the effect of the hymn. The use of ellipsis suggests that as abusive as humanity is to each other and to the earth that cradles us, we literally still have the opportunity to write another stanza. What will our next stanza look like?

Perhaps, this hymn approaches panentheism as nearly as any reviewed in this chapter. The survival of “mother” and the humanity are mutually dependent. To deny our mother is to deny God according to the final stanza. This is not pantheism. God is a part of creation but still distinct from it. God is working for our good in the world, but requires the stewardship of humans to sustain the earth created for us.

“God of Wonders” (2000)

Our journey takes us to the 21st century with “God of Wonders” (2000) composed by songwriters Steve J. Hindalong and Marc Byrd, and performed by contemporary Christian artist Chris Tomlin (b. 1972). Reminiscent of St. Francis’ hymn 800 years earlier, this song praises the “Lord of all creation/of water, earth, and sky” – a references to three of the four elements of medieval earth science. The final line of the first stanza, “Glory to the Lord on high,” parallels the “most high” (“*Altissimu*”) Lord of Francis’ paean and echoes Luke 2:14.

At first glance, it might appear that textually this song adds nothing new to our discussion of creation theology. The key difference is the composers’ reference to the “God of wonders beyond our galaxy . . . the universe declares your majesty.” The 21st-century singer has seen images of the earthrise. YouTube interpretations of this song display images available from the Hubble telescope that probe the depths of the known universe. Our understanding of the heavenly realm has moved beyond the sun, moon, and stars of 18th can 19th century hymns to the incomprehensible universe. The finite role and limited dimensions of human understanding contrasts inversely with our exponentially increased awareness of the vast size and scope of the infinite holy God, made possible through scientific exploration of the universe.

This song does not deal theologically with the origins of the universe, refer to the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2, the role of humanity in sustaining it the resources of earth, or with any understanding of God's continuing role in creation such as that posed by deists. The response is simply one of awe, "You are holy, holy."

"How Miniscule This Planet" (2011)

Thomas H. Troeger (b. 1945), J. Edward and Ruth Cox Lantz Professor of Christian Communication *Emeritus*, Yale Divinity School and Yale Institute of Sacred Music, often focuses on the integration of scientific thought and faith. Reflecting relatively recent computer-enhanced images of untold galaxies in the vast universe from the Hubble Telescope, the poet chooses the word "miniscule" to describe earth. Employing *tautology** to make his point, he further describes the minute nature of our planet with three further images:

...
*a mote that floats in vastness,
mere dust that catches light . . .
this tiny, mite-sized earth.*

In spite of the size of earth in the grand scheme of the universe, God counts "all creatures who inhabit" this planet to be of "boundless, precious worth."

Not content to foster a divide between faith and scientific advances, Troeger sees them working together to "extend what we can see/and amplify our wonder . . ." He employs scientific terminology in hymns integrating the language of science with theological concepts:

... *energy and matter
have coalesced in space
as consciousness and meaning,
and hearts that yearn for grace . . .*

In the following stanza, Troeger repeats key words of stanza two – "matter" and "energies" with the deeper theological significance of the incarnation:

... *the Christ in whom all matter,
and energies cohere,
is born upon this planet
and dwelling with us here.*

Reiterating a theme found in other hymns on this theme such as "Each Breath Is Borrowed Air," the poet stresses the inner-connectivity of all matter in the universe in the final stanza, resulting in ultimate values of existence, "light and life and love":

*By Christ we are connected
to every shining star,
to every atom spinning,
to all the things that are,
and to your very being,
around, below, above,
suffusing each dimension
with light and life and love.*

Thomas H. Troeger

copyright © 2011 Oxford University Press

Conclusion

Generally, hymns on the theme of creation do not directly address the nature of God's creative act, either *ex nihilo* (from nothing) or *ad extra* (apart from God). As indicated in Watts's "I Sing the Almighty Power of God" and Renville's "Many and Great, O God, the sovereign, all powerful God speaks and worlds come into being. The hymns selected for this study do not entertain any Gnostic misgivings about the evil of the material world. Neither are Platonic or **docetic** perspectives apparent. The material world is good – very good. From the middle of the 19th century forward, hymns such as Farjeon's "Morning Has Broken" and Hine's "How Great Thou Art" offer a fuller empirical experience, calling us to embrace God's creation with all our senses. The hymns chosen for this chapter generally avoid any traces of deism, asserting to varying degrees, God's continuing work in the world ranging from total sovereignty to more general gratitude for the changing seasons. While God is the single source of creation, the recognition that God is still at work in the world is universally implied and increasingly explicit as we approach the last half of the 20th century. Hymnal editors are generally careful to avoid pantheism in hymns. Traces of **panentheism** are apparent in earlier hymns, especially in those by Chao and Renville, indicating that the natural created order is the result of God's direct action and an extension of God's love, but not identical with God. "Many and Great, O God" and "Rise to Greet the Sun" assert an interdependence between the Creator and those whose survival is contingent upon hard work and a good use of the land. It is not until later in the 20th century that hymns such as those by Fred Pratt Green and Shirley Murray explicitly affirm a modern ecological perspective that clearly eschews humanity's dominion over the earth and advocates for a covenantal partnership between God and humanity. These hymn writers as well as a growing number of others are aware that human survival is contingent upon the interdependence of all nations and global stewardship of the earth and its resources. "God of Wonders" and "How Miniscule This Planet" return us to the wonder of the universe, each reflecting the spirit of Psalm 8 but in different ways. In doing so they may reflect panentheism, distinguishing between the universe and God, but clearly reflecting the eternal love and light of the Creator from whom all life originates.

Index of hymns cited in selected current hymnals and *Panorama*.

Additional hymns on this theme (provisional)

The spacious firmament on high, Joseph Addison, 1712
O worship the King, Robert Grant, 1833
For the beauty of the earth, Folliott Sandford Peirpoint, 1864
This is my Father's world, Maltbie Babcock, 1915
Great is thy faithfulness, Thomas Chisholm, 1923
Praise our God above, Chao Tze-chen, 1931
God, whose farm is all creation, John Arlott, 1950
O Lord of every shining constellation, Albert Bayly, 1950
God, who gives to life its goodness, Walter Farquharson, 1970
The earth is yours, Michael Seward, 1971
Creating God, your fingers trace, Jeffrey Rowthorn, 1979
Cantemos al Señor, Carlos Rosas, 1983
O God who shaped creation, William Watkins Reid, 1987
We are not our own. Earth forms us, Brian Wren, 1987
Touch the earth lightly, Shirley Erena Murray, 1991
Stars and planets flung in orbit (NCH)
Above the moon earth rises, Thomas Troeger, 20??
Each breath is borrowed air, Thomas Troeger, 2002
The earth belongs to God alone, Adam Tice, 2006
For the dawning of creation, Delores Dufner, 20??

Sources for further reading.

Citations from *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology* are available by subscription and often contain additional sources at the conclusion of each article.

Gaunt, Alan. "Isaac Watts." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/i/isaac-watts>.

____. "I sing the almighty power of God." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/i/i-sing-the-almighty-power-of-god>.

Andrews, John S. "O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/o/o-lord-my-god,-when-i-in-awesome-wonder>.

____. "Stuart Keene Hine." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/s/stuart-keene-hine>.

Gibson, Colin. "Shirley Erena Murray." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/s/shirley-erena-murray>.

Harris, Maureen. "For the fruits of his creation." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/f/for-the-fruits-of-his-creation>.

_____. "Fred Pratt Green." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/f/fred-pratt-green>.

Hsieh, Fang-Lan. "Chinese Christian hymnody." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/c/chinese-christian-hymnody>.

Kimbrough, S T, Jr.. "Ivan Stepanovich Prokhanoff." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/i/ivan-stepanovich-prokhanoff>.

Watson, J. R. "All things bright and beautiful." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/a/all-things-bright-and-beautiful>.

_____. "Cantico di frate sole." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/c/cantico-di-frate-sole>.

_____. "Carl Gustav Boberg." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/c/carl-gustav-boberg>.

_____. "Cecil Frances Alexander." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/c/cecil-frances-alexander>.

_____. "Eleanor Farjeon." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/e/eleanor-farjeon>.

_____. "Golden breaks the dawn." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/g/golden-breaks-the-dawn>.

_____. "Morning has broken." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/m/morning-has-broken>.

____. "Thomas Troeger." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/t/thomas-troeger>.

Young, Carlton R. and J. R. Watson. "Joseph Renville." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/j/joseph-renville>.

____. "Many and great, O God, are thy works." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/m/many-and-great,-o-god,-are-thy-works>.