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PSALM 24: GOD'S LORDSHIP IN CREATION





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TOM NETTLES

Introduction: God's Lordship in Creation

This edition of the Founders Journal gives attention to Psalm 24. In his inspired reflections on the Mosaic account of creation, David begins with the beautiful, but definitely counter-cultural assertion, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein..” The omnipotent sovereignty of the Lord in verses 1 and 2 as manifested in his orderly and purposeful arrangement of all things presses forward to the perfect holiness of the Lord in verses 3-6. He dwells in “his holy place.” Those verses call for “those who dwell therein” (1) to approach him only with perfect holiness and righteousness. This righteousness comes to them in the gracious blessing of salvation (5). Pointing to Jacob (6) reminds us that God’s covenant rules the approach to God. Verses 7-10 describe a scene of the glorious splendor of living in the presence of the Lord “strong and mighty” who defeated all his foes in the great battle for salvation. His ascent to heaven, bringing a host of captives in his train, allowing sinners to revel in his glorious presence, culminates in his placing all things under his feet.

Scott Callaham gives an exposition of the Psalm with the skill of an experienced linguist and biblical exegete and with the sensitivity and passion of one truly adores the Lord of glory. Dr. Callaham lectured in Hebrew and Old Testament for the International Chinese Theological Seminary and has served as lead editor of *World Mission: Theology, Strategy, and Current Issues*. He is author of *Biblical Aramaic for Biblical Interpreters* in both English and Chinese. He also curates *Daily Dose of Aramaic*.

Dr. Mark Coppenger, retired professor of philosophy at The Southern Baptist Theological

Seminary and a former professor at Wheaton has given us an excellent study of how God's lordship in creation lays the groundwork for aesthetics. Mark is an effective writer and author, an engaging teacher, has served in numerous positions of service among Southern Baptists at the national and state levels and also been pastor of churches. Since the triune God is Creator and Sustainer and Owner of the earth, it is impossible that every aspect of it not reflect some element of his glory. The existence of everything is dependent on him and his power, intelligence, beauty, purpose, and glory. The study of aesthetics is the investigation of principles underlying our perception of beauty. This could be applied to art, music, poetry, physics, chemistry, or the mere pleasure of standing in awe of natural things. Mark has given a narrative of how aesthetics has its foundation in the reality that "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." He has shown the confluence of nature and art in how the beauty, symmetry, and power of the one inspires the other. His article itself is an engagement with aesthetics of language.

I have written an article on drama as an expression of God's ownership of the world. His revelation in Scripture in the unfolding of the eternally conceived covenant of redemption worked out in connected stages in history determines the elements of story. I seek to show how all good stories that grip the heart, challenge the intellect, and convict the moral consciousness find their patterns in the flow of the biblical story.

A review article of *The Mystery of the Trinity* by Vern Poythress is a fitting inclusion in this *Founders Journal*. His argument that the Trinity is "ontologically basic" perfectly fits the Psalmist's affirmation that "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." Fallenness has corrupted the mind and thus the process of reasoning making special revelation necessary for any proper understanding of general revelation. For knowledge, therefore, of God and his world, the Bible is "epistemologically basic." His argument on this issue is clearly and powerfully relevant to sorting out differences within the Evangelical/Reformed community over the subject of natural revelation vis a vis natural theology. And so, where does David's revealed observation, "The earth is the Lord's" lead us in that discussion?

Several critical passages of Scripture dealing with how God's created order necessarily declares his glory, his eternal power and godhead, his beauty and excellence, and his knowability also affirm the blinding effects of human sin. Consequently, for knowledge uncluttered by innate rebellion, creatures have an absolute dependence on special revelation; because knowledge of God is not only a matter of cognition and mental perception but purity of affections, these scriptures emphasize the necessity of holiness and righteousness and consequently redemption.

Psalm 8 early establishes the reality that only those who come to him as children and babes truly see the majesty of his name; this is set in the context of foes and avenging enemies and

the eventual rightful dominance of God's redeemed image-bearers. Psalm 19, after showing the irrepressible universality of God's revelation through nature, shows its ineffectuality without divinely revealed law leading to conviction of sin, love of holiness, consistent awareness of a deceitful heart, and constant dependence on the revealed word. Psalm 24, our text, shows that the knowledge of God embedded in his creation will become effectual only to those who find holiness and righteousness in salvation and that that comes in the triumphant work of Christ.

Acts 17 unfolds layers of revelation in the created order and in providence and God's intention that humanity should search for him and find him through induction uncorrupted by moral prejudice. Instead, fallen humanity makes idols of created things arising from fallen imaginations rather than enlightened consciences. Consequently, man cannot know God, though he is not very far from any of us, apart from repentance based on the finished redemptive transaction accomplished by Jesus Christ.

Romans 1 begins with a stern statement that among the things revealed from heaven in this world is divine wrath because the aboriginal moral instinct of man is suppression of the truth. The clarity and power of divine revelation through the "things that are made" leave humanity without excuse. The intrinsic knowledge of God along with the extrinsic compelling evidence of God's holy power is so mangled by human sin that it leads only to blatant idolatry and ongoing moral perversion.

The most sophisticated societies in philosophy and political organization have failed to produce anything in their religion that comes close to the God of the Bible. Both empirical science and human rationality have failed and cannot even be prolegomena to a true knowledge of God.

What our senses have failed to understand—what eye has not seen and ear has not heard—, and what our philosophy has miserably fallen short in perceiving—what has not entered into the heart of man—, these things God has revealed to us by his Spirit for the Spirit searches all things; yes even the depths of God.

But when grace opens the mind and the heart and one finds the wisdom of God in the face of Jesus Christ, the earth and all that is in it is transformed. Everything becomes a witness to God's power, his infinite excellence, his love, his mercy, his grace. And all that, as lovely as it is and as increasing as it is in delightful testimony pales in brilliance and glory beside the infinite wonder of redemption through the Son of God.

The editor and the contributors pray that this edition of the FJ will prompt renewed delight in seeing the joyful and exuberant power of God through the things that are made. Right thinking guided by revealed truth can unfold from general revelation abundant data for delight and

marvel. The consideration that such a knowledge in all its expansive possibilities is immeasurably below the knowledge of God in the one who “made foolish the wisdom of the world” by the cross of Christ should enhance the delight we sense in the “hope of eternal life.” All things should lead us to a posture of wonder, love and praise.



SCOTT N. CALLAHAM

Who is This King of Glory? An Exposition of Psalm 24

The Crucial Question

“Who is God?”—Ask such a question of any group, and you will likely receive a range of responses. A few respondents might reject the validity of the question and simply deny the existence of God. Most, though, will likely offer religiously-tinged answers. “God is all-knowing,” they might say. He is “all-powerful, all-loving.” A few more “all” expressions might then give way to the use of “omni,” like “omnipresent” or even the somewhat cumbersome “omnibenevolent.” Finally, the “alls” and the “omnis” may crescendo into an assertion of God’s perfection. What often gets lost in the course of the ensuing conversation is that stacking up these philosophical adjectives misses the point of the question.

Consider possible responses to “Who is the President of the United States?” Should someone answer with the words “important” and “well-dressed,” it is doubtful that the respondent actually knows much about the American presidency. In addition, despite the fact that these words accurately characterize whomever may hold that office in a general sense, it is safe to assume that the person who speaks this way and the sitting President are not mutually acquainted. Similarly, philosophical answers to the question “Who is God?” not only initially cast doubt upon whether the respondent knows of God, but also in the end upon whether the respondent actually knows God at all.

So, back to the question: “Who is God?”—or, as the psalmist puts it: “Who is this King of glory?”

The Creator-King

¹ The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, ² for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers.

Creation theology includes a number of “givens” that many in atheistically- and scientifically-minded Western cultures find nearly impossible to accept. Among these “givens” is the unmediated, direct action of God in the creation of the world. Contrastingly, in Scripture God’s direct agency in creation is never in any doubt. God created on a grand scale; his “let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens . . .” speech act (Gen 1:14–16) ignited untold trillions of fusion reactions so that stars would blaze their heat and light throughout the universe. God also created on an intensely intimate scale; he fashioned the first man from dust and the first woman from that man (Gen 2:7 and 22). These acts are “givens” behind poetic allusion to the creation of land and sea in verse 2.

All the above having been said, it is important not to miss that the “givenness” of God’s creation appears after the “for” at the beginning of verse 2. This “for” means that the logic of Ps 24:1–2 is: because verse 2 is true, verse 1 is the necessary result. In other words, the fact that God is Creator (verse 2) entails that God rules over all (verse 1—His title as “King” appears later); the Creator is creation’s rightful ruler.

Even so, English word order might lead the reader to think that “the earth” is the focal point of the verse, and therefore that “the earth” is the psalmist’s major concern. Not so. Instead, the original language places the Lord in focus. The beginning half of verse 1 is an assertion that it is the Lord who owns the earth “and the fullness thereof.” The latter half then explains what this “fullness” (“that which fills it”) is: “those who dwell therein.” Therefore, since it is the Lord who rules the earth and those who dwell therein, whatever powers those “dwellers” may exercise, they are not the rulers of the earth. If any doubt on this point were to remain, verse 2 then falls like a hammer blow. Not only does verse 2 employ the “for” logic mentioned above, but it also emphasizes “he” in the original language beyond the capacity of an English translation to reflect. The cumulative effect is something like “It is the Lord who rules the earth, not those who dwell therein, because he created it!” Sandwiching humanity between two successive focused mentions of the Lord, the psalmist puts “those who dwell” in the world firmly in their place.

The One Who Seeks God

³ Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?

In light of the absolute sovereignty of the Lord laid out in verses 1 and 2, verse 3 asks two questions for which the reader already knows the likely answers. That is to say, no one would dare to do these things! No one would climb the hill upon which the Lord's Temple would stand, and then brazenly enter into its sacred precincts uninvited. How could a mere creature of dust stand before the Lord in his holy place? Yet verse 4 jolts the unsuspecting reader by claiming that there is, in fact, such a person:

⁴ He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.

“Clean hands” refers to righteous behavior (see Job 17:9) and is surely opposite to the idea of having blood on one's hands (see Isa 59:3, Ezek 23:37): a biblical metaphor that has fittingly come over into English to expose obvious guilt. “Pure heart” then alludes to righteous motives (see Prov 20:9). Jesus's pointed assertion of adultery taking place within one's heart (Matt 5:27–28) underscores that a person can technically have “clean hands” and yet lack a “pure heart.” Indeed, these hand and heart standards in this first half of verse 4 are rather difficult to attain.

The second half of verse 4 drills deeper into the soil of what constitutes “clean hands” and a “pure heart.” The amplifying illustration of one with “clean hands” appears second; this person “does not swear deceitfully.” Entering into agreements (the purpose of swearing) with no intention of keeping one's promises displays a character completely opposite that of the Lord, who never breaks his covenants with his people (see Judg 2:1). Such a “dirty-handed” person could never ascend the Lord's hill and stand in his presence. After all, even before starting the ascent, this promise breaker has no intention to follow through on any vows made to the Lord.

Next, verse 4 describes what the opposite of a “pure heart” looks like; it is a person who “lifts up his soul to what is false.” Every other time the Psalms mention the lifting of the soul, the action has to do with worship of the Lord (see Ps 25:1, 86:4, 143:8). Accordingly, as in Jer 18:15, committing “false” worship acts can entail a false object of worship: any or all of the world's imposter false gods. That said, humans can also try to worship the Lord in a false manner. The prohibition against taking the name of the Lord “in vain” in the Ten Commandments uses the same term for “what is false” as in Ps 24:4.

We see that in just a few words, Ps 24:4 lauds a person of righteous behavior and righteous motives. Breaking promises and either worshipping other gods or presuming to worship the Lord wrongly would conflict so much with this person's character that these displays of contempt toward God would be unthinkable. So, of course, such a righteous person would be welcome in the presence of the Creator-King.

The Problem

There's just one problem. Such a person does not exist. As the weary words of Eccl 7:20 intone, "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins." Anyone who would read Ps 24:4 and glibly think, "Clean hands: check! Pure heart: that's me! I never break my promises. I worship all the time, and I worship in ways that please the Lord alone. OK, time to climb the Lord's hill and enter his presence!"—such a person would not survive that journey. As the Lord told Moses, "You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." (Exod 33:20).

So is the psalmist a sadistic dasher of hopes, setting standards that sound reasonable but that no one can actually meet? Not really. There is in fact a kind of person who may stand in the holy place of almighty God, as the psalmist claims. However, this is not someone who can by his own efforts claim cleanliness of hands, purity of heart, or any other degree of worthiness in order to be there. Verses 5 and 6 explain.

The One Who Can Enter God's Presence

⁵ He will receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation.

⁶ This is the generation of those who seek him, seeking your face: Jacob. Selah. (translation of verse 6 adjusted to reflect the original Hebrew; see the kjv)

As verse 5 reveals, righteousness of deed (hands) and intention (heart) in verse 4 does not originally derive from within the person, but from "the God of his salvation." That is to say, the person's "salvation" must take place first. Hence the Lord becomes for him "the God of his salvation." The Lord then provides blessing and the righteousness that characterizes those he delivers. This granted righteousness cleans the hands and purifies the heart. When the delivered worshiper enters the Lord's presence after ascending the Lord's hill, it is the Lord's own righteousness that allows entry.

Who is this "saved" person? In its original Hebrew, verse 6 speaks clearly, despite lack of clarity among many Bible translations. Many modern English Bible versions depart from the original language text with a rendering like the esv: "Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob." This is probably because the first half of the verse describes those who "seek him," while the second half refers to those who literally "seek your face": a sudden pronoun shift from third to second person, with both expressions seemingly referring to God. Inserting "God" before Jacob, as does the ancient Greek translation of Psalm 24, closes verse 6 by referring to the "God of Jacob" rather than Jacob himself.

This third-to-second person pronoun change should not drive interpreters to abandon the original Hebrew text as it stands, however. The Psalms are filled with artful word manipulation techniques such as pronoun shifts because the psalms are poetry. Indeed, most readers hardly notice the pronoun switch within the previous psalm, the “Good Shepherd” psalm, at Ps 23:3b–4a:

^{3b} **He** leads me in paths of righteousness

for **his** name’s sake.

^{4a} Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,

for **you** are with me;

Over the course of Psalm 23, references to God begin in the third person, shift to second, and return to third: the same pattern evident in Psalm 24. So returning to Ps 24:6, retaining the Hebrew text leads to Jacob himself as the focal point, as in the translation above: “This is the generation of those who seek him, seeking your face: Jacob.”

Jacob—the trickster who manipulated Esau to surrender his firstborn rights. Jacob—the liar who deceived his father to usurp Esau’s place for a patriarchal blessing. Verse 6 highlights his name here? Jacob seeks God’s face? Even considering the sweep of Jacob’s story in Genesis, surely he has a checkered record under the heading of “seeking God’s face.” Furthermore, he presumed to wrestle with God, and in a manner of speaking wrestled with God all his life. So how can Jacob end up as the paradigmatic name for one with “clean hands and a pure heart?” How can Jacob be the model for one who enters God’s presence on his holy hill?

The apostle Paul explains. He reminds the Roman Christians of what the Lord had said to Jacob and Esau’s mother before they were born: “The older shall serve the younger.” (Gen 25:23) According to Paul, “though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad,” this was so that “God’s purpose of election might continue.” (Rom 9:11)

The story of election indeed continued inexorably through Jacob to his descendants. The Lord had previously entered into covenant relationship with Jacob’s grandfather Abraham, whom the Lord declared to be righteous because of his faith (Gen 15:6). Jacob’s father Isaac was next in line to receive God’s covenant promises (Gen 17:19, 21). Then Exod 2:23–24 records that when Jacob’s descendants were groaning under the yoke of Egyptian slavery four centuries after his death, “God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.”

To underline this point about Jacob's election, we should remember that reference to Jacob in Ps 24:6 encompasses Israel, the entire covenant people. Yet Israel's story throughout the Old Testament contains few episodes that reflect "clean hands" and a "pure heart." After all, quite soon after experiencing dramatic deliverance from slavery in Egypt, they engaged in rank idolatry at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Prayers recorded in the late books of the Old Testament, such as in Daniel 9 and Nehemiah 9, confess that disobedience and rebellion were the norm in Israel's history, and turning to God in repentance and faith was the exception. As was the case with Jacob/Israel himself, the only hope of the people of Israel was to fall upon the mercy and faithfulness of God, receiving forgiveness and experiencing restoration in covenant relationship.

As a final step before leaving this investigation of who has the "clean hands" and "pure heart" to approach God, we should remember the human author of Psalm 24. According to the superscription, it is David. David—the man after God's own heart, and yes, David—the adulterer and murderer. There is no way of knowing at what point in his life David composed Psalm 24, whether it was before or after his great sin with Bathsheba. Yet in a sense it matters little. Before the end of his life, David well understood that no one does good or seeks after God (Ps 14:2–3 and 53:2–3), and it goes without saying that "no one" includes himself. Yet in Ps 24:6 he could write that God's chosen people, also presumably including himself, seek God's face.

Jacob, the people of Israel, David—these thoroughly compromised people of God seek his face. How? God draws his people to himself: electing them, saving them, imputing his righteousness to them, blessing them, and allowing them to come into his presence. Once God's people are in his presence, what then?

The Lord of Hosts, the King of Glory

⁷ *Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.*

⁸ *Who is this King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle!*

⁹ *Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.*

¹⁰ *Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory! Selah.*

Whereas verses 1 through 6 envision a journey of God's people into God's presence, the remainder of the psalm is about the response of God's people when he comes to them. Anyone who has witnessed a performance of Handel's Messiah cannot help but hear its musical setting of verses 7 through 10 as they read. Though Handel repurposes this passage to refer to the Messiah's victorious return to heaven following his resurrection, the spirit of these verses in the context of

Psalm 24 is similarly ebullient. We readers notice that God's forgiven, covenant people are utterly joyful at the prospect of the Lord entering their city gates. Here the Lord is definitely a warrior, but he is not coming to conquer; he is coming home. One can easily imagine the loud voice in Rev 21:3 calling out at this moment, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." The King of glory shall indeed come in.

The Response of God's People

"Who is this King of glory?" Psalm 24 both poses and answers this question. It cedes no ground to the human impulse to define God and our relationship with him as we please. Psalm 24 demands a response.

The King of glory is the Lord; he is Yahweh. That is to say, the Creator and ruler of the world and all of its people is none other than Yahweh, the God of Israel. Ascribing rule of the world to any other god—a philosophical construct of a god-being, a polytheistic "one god among many," or even some other allegedly "Abrahamic" monotheistic god—is to honor a mere pretender and to defame creation's rightful king.

Yahweh the Creator-King is sovereign, and he requires clean hands and pure hearts. On one hand he does not coddle rebels against his reign, accepting them "just as they are" with dirty hands and impure hearts. On the other hand, he also doesn't cajole them to try harder to be holy, as if endlessly attempting to clean one's own hands and to purify one's own heart could result in inching just a bit further up his holy hill.

No. For his own glory, the Creator-King chooses to redeem his creation by creating a new people for himself. He elects them, saves them, imputes his own righteousness to them, blesses them, and lets them come to him.

That's not all. Mirroring the final act in the grand narrative of all of Scripture, Psalm 24 then shifts scenes. When the Creator-King has accomplished his purposes in redemption, he comes to dwell with his redeemed people, who receive him as their King of glory.

There are many important implications and applications of the concept of the absolute sovereignty of God. Yet there is an implication and an application that stand prior to them all. This implication is that like all creation you, the reader, stand under God's sovereignty. The concomitant application is that you must turn to God from the futility of your self-directed rogue life, filled with false worship that soils your hands and poisons your heart. Psalm 24 poses its crucial question to you, and your response is a matter of life and death: "Who is this King of glory?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Scott N. Callaham gives lectures in Hebrew and Old Testament at Baptist Theological Seminary, Singapore. He is author of *Modality and the Biblical Hebrew Infinitive Absolute* and lead editor of *World Mission: Theology, Strategy, and Current Issues*.



TOM NETTLES

The Apologetic Value of the Christian Story

A Christian world view is bubbling over with resources to satisfy the aesthetic and dramatic needs of every human person. It is more capable of doing this than any other view of the world. I am not asserting that only Christians can write good literature, tell a good story, make beautiful art, or write beautiful music. Such certainly is not the case. I am saying that the Christian view of the world—“The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof”—provides such a comprehensive and inescapable view of reality that any literature or other art form that reflects that view of reality has the intrinsic possibility of satisfying the emotional and aesthetic requirements of the human spirit. I lay no claim to possessing absolute insight into this area. Rather, I am an amateur and run the risk of manifesting more aggressiveness than good sense in this assertion. Nevertheless, one need not be a great novelist or musician to discern that artistic expression is a vital area of human need. In addition, a bit of serious thought may really impress the thinker that the Christian faith embraces a multitude of possibilities for serious artistic inspiration.

Out of a staggering number of possibilities for productive interaction, elementary literary theory will provide the framework for our testing of the aesthetic power of the Christian faith. My intent is to illustrate that literary theory finds within the Christian faith a solid foundation for its assertions. One could also contend, though I will not seek to demonstrate this, that the Christian Faith provides the richest, most comprehensive background as well as the most fertile soil for the actual content of literature and other artistic expressions among the world views open to us.

This glance at literary theory obviously is not exhaustive, but only suggestive and tentative. One of the most fundamental concepts in literary theory is the idea of plot. Harry Shaw, in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms* has defined plot as “A plan or scheme to accomplish a purpose.” He says, “In literature, plot refers to the arrangement of events to achieve an intended effect.” He then describes a plot as “a series of carefully devised and interrelated actions that progresses through a struggle of opposing forces” (that is conflict) and conclude with a climax and a denouement. Shaw also points out the difference between plot and story. He employs the distinction of E. M. Forster. A story is a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence while a plot is a narrative of events in which the emphasis falls on causality. Forster illustrates: “The king died and then the queen died” is a story. “The king died, and then the queen died of grief” is a plot.

This definition of plot with its differentiation between story and plot focuses our attention upon causality. The idea of cause and effect is a fundamental characteristic of plot. In plot we do not see one event haphazardly following upon another event without any ultimate connection between the two things. If that phenomenon persists in a book, we soon lay it aside or place it on the coffee table which contains books that no one reads anyway. A plot must build and increase in intensity and complexity by introducing different sets of causes which have logical, though sometimes strange, effects. This same literary critic, Harry Shaw describes cause and effect in this way:

Much of what one reads is the result of cause-and -effect relations. When we read an answer to the question “Why did this happen?” We are dealing in causes. When we read the question “What will this do?” The answers involved deal with effects. A cause, therefore, is that which produces an effect, the person, idea, or force from which something results.

After giving examples of topic sentences in paragraphs which lead to cause and effect discussions within the paragraph Shaw concludes:

All life — and consequently all good literature — is concerned with why something begins to exist and why it exists the way it does. A cause is the reason. An effect is the result of the operation of a cause. Cause and effect are necessarily related: Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* killed Duncan because of ambition and greed; the effect of the murder is the substance of a tragedy that leads to Macbeth’s total ruin. Such a statement about *Macbeth* indicates that the total cause of any event is complex and involves an intricate joining of preceding forces and events; the total effects of any given cause extend beyond immediate results.

Therefore, in a good story an author will develop his plot by introducing a multiplicity of factors which we could define as causes, he will make clear to us the resultant effects of these causes, and will bring them all together finally in a coherent conclusion, every cause and every effect having its proper and well-defined relationship to the final solution of the story. The author who cannot accomplish this in a credible fashion has failed to produce a good work of literature.

I would propose that the reason our minds demand that sort of organization to a plot is that God has created the world to work that way, and his making humans in his image has established in the mind the necessity for all things finally to resolve into a worthy purpose. The Bible begins with the cause of all the stories when it asserts “In the beginning God created the Heavens and the earth.” When Scripture affirms in Ephesians 1:11 that God works all things after the counsel of his own will, and in Romans 8:28, “We know that all things work together for the good to them that love God and are the called according to his purpose,” then we indeed do know that all things have their designated place.

Such confidence results from the Christian doctrine of Providence. In itself it is an assertion that eventually all causes and all effects will resolve themselves into the purpose of God, the author of this story. No loose ends will remain dangling, no factors will have been brought in that do not play their own part in the development of the plot.

I am not saying that God has accommodated himself to our view of what plot should be; I am saying that we have inescapably produced an understanding of plot based upon the way the world is and our minds are only satisfied when the story is told as it really should be, that is, in accord with the way God made the world.

According to Shaw, a plot includes a “a series of carefully devised and interrelated actions.” An author must be careful to devise his actions carefully and interrelate them properly because he must bring them to a proper resolution. The Bible represents all the events of the world as reflecting the relationship and interaction of man the creature with God the Creator. Everything contributes to our understanding of the complexity of man’s involvement with sin and the ingenuity of his depravity but ultimately relates to the simple concept that man is in rebellion against the God who owns him. As this theme develops in complexity and force, a counter but complementary theme of redemption is introduced. It finds simultaneous development along with man’s depravity. It becomes so intricate that we see God’s redemptive purpose developing in the midst of man’s deceptive wickedness and even using it to bring the redemptive theme to a successful consummation. The story of Joseph’s being sold into Egyptian bondage by the evil intent of his brothers compels a complex interaction of emotion, outrage, understanding, and sympathy at the human level. Parallel to that, moreover, is the recognition that this very action

on the part of his brothers was the plan of God for saving his chosen family from starvation. Through that preservation, the messianic nation is formed. We also see the interrelationship of these apparently disparate parts in Peter's affirmation at Pentecost "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23). How much greater illustration do we need of the eventual resolution of two seemingly irreconcilable themes.

Scripture consistently presents the world story as developing a "series of carefully devised and interrelated actions." Reality works that way, because God, though infinite and ultimately incomprehensible in his intelligence and wisdom, is consistent and purposive. The human mind cannot rest satisfied with a fallacious picture of reality; we therefore require carefully devised and interrelated actions in any story, or plot, but especially in the story.

The second element of this definition of plot insists that this series "progresses through a struggle of opposing forces." A plot cannot progress without conflict of some kind. It may be severe internal strife on the part of a tragic hero. It may be the good guys vs. the bad guys, or the clever and sinister insinuation of a fiend trying to spoil the goodness and innocence of a heroine, or the opposing force may simply be the ridiculous and incongruous developments of a situation comedy. No matter what the story, some degree of conflict is necessary for resolution. That description exists because it is impossible for us to conceive of a tale of interest or of real accomplishment without conflict of some sort being involved.

For example, the following story would hold very little interest for the listeners (though indeed it may be extremely significant for the teller). "Yesterday I went to the post office and mailed my letters and went back home and drank a cup of coffee. I also read the paper and really had a nice day." Now it is wonderful to have a day like that, but not too wonderful to tell about it. Consider this option: "While on the way to the post office yesterday I had a flat tire. When I stepped out of the car, I was abducted by two escapees from the State mental asylum who thought that I was an airplane. They were convinced that they could make a quick trip to beautiful downtown Shawnee, Oklahoma, if they could only find the proper runway from which to take off. I could not convince them that I wasn't an airplane and so only escaped the trip to Shawnee by convincing them that I had already been flying all day and my arms were too tired for another trip. Eventually they were taken into custody by a couple of officers from the asylum who refused to believe that I too was not a resident of the asylum since I had spoken so convincingly about having flown all day. When they discovered their mistake, they were so chagrined that they fixed my flat tire and treated me to a cup of coffee. By this time the post office was closed and I had to wait until the next day to mail my letters. This upset my wife who was sending a special birthday card to her sister. That evening she had to call and explain why the card would not be on time. In

the conversation, she was reminded that the birthday was not till next week, and was relieved that she had not been so early with the card as to muffle its joyful impact. She forgave me and was happy I had had such an unusual day.”

This is hardly an engaging literary style but the story is worth telling and the element of conflict provides a greater degree of interest than the lack thereof. One who has read Tolkiens’ Lord of the Rings, or Lewis’ Chronicles of Narnia or his Space trilogy or, Cormack McCarthy’s Blood Meridian can readily see how numerous are the possibilities for developing conflict as a necessary, literary device. The element of conflict is a continuing reality in the Scripture from the subtle but vicious temptation of Eve by the Serpent until the twentieth chapter of Revelation when “the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Revelation 20:10). The walk of the Christian is represented as a walk of conflict in which he wears the whole armor of God, for his warfare is against principalities and powers in heavenly places.

So, on the one hand, the biblical record grandly illustrates this literary principle; but even more important, it is the truth at the back of this biblical conflict that has given rise to our understanding that a plot progresses through a struggle of opposing forces. We feel it in our bones and see it all around us, because that is the way things are.

The next element of plot is climax. The climax is that point in the play, in which it becomes clear that the central motive will or will not be successful. It becomes clear which force is going to emerge victorious in the conflict. One characteristic of many modern plays and movies is the significant absence of climax and denouement. This may not be a weakness in itself but is merely a confession on the playwright’s part that he does not know which side of the conflict should win and much less how the victory would finally be resolved into a satisfying conclusion. We see such a phenomenon in the movie of some years back called Kramer vs. Kramer. It ends the only way it could end; but the audience has some degree of frustration because both parents had compelling characteristics that won their sympathy and both had significant weaknesses. However, the very fact of frustration with that sort of ending is evidence that one’s mind does not stop there but recognizes the need for absolute judgment somewhere that will make clear what really should have happened.

The same thing would be true of the trial of Jesus if it were left at the stage of his condemnation. “When He was reviled, he reviled not in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but he trusted to him who judges justly.” That is true not only in the case of the trial of Jesus, but it is an aesthetic requirement of our minds. When climax fails to materialize in the story, our minds even unwittingly commit that judgment to the one who judges justly.

This tendency, in fact makes us restless until we can find answers to the unresolved questions that plague us. The question that we all have asked, “Did Scarlet get Rhett back or did she really not deserve to have him” gave rise to an attempt to resolve that aggravating uncertainty.

There are hundreds of examples, however, in which the climax is set forth very forcefully in the story, and the author who is successful in it and makes all the readers or onlookers feel that it justified, has the matchless gift of creation. Climax in the biblical account and in the real story of the world comes in the cross. When Jesus cried in a loud voice, “It is finished” the climax to all of history had come. In the cross the conflict between Jew and Gentile was over, God and man were reconciled, death was turned backwards, and all the demonic powers arrayed against God were put to flight. This is the victory that must occur or the world is senseless; this is the victory that must occur or every high hope and aspiration of our most noble moments is crushed to the ground and all is vanity. That unspeakable conflict entailed in the highest of all God’s creatures rebelling against the holy, righteous, and just creator and involving another of God’s high creations, man, in the rebellion came to its climax in the cross. That part of literary theory which demands climax within the plot finds its most irrefutable rationale in God’s action in the cross.

The final element of the plot is denouement. This word refers to the solution or the final untangling of the intricacies of a plot. What are the implications of a victory that is won. The made-for-TV lawyer Perry Mason did this by explaining how he discerned who was the real culprit and tying all the bits of evidence together for the astounded viewer. In Tolkien it is done by describing the righteous rule of the rightful king of middle earth, the cleansing of the shire, and the fading away of yesterday’s heroes with the sense that their purpose had been well fulfilled. Lewis sees all history culminating in the land of Narnia, and a train wreck, perhaps interpreted as tragic by those in England was not tragic at all but merely the door to Narnia, and more than Narnia, Aslan’s own country. Denouement comes in the Bible story as Christ is resurrected to defeat death and its causes and returns in glory and splendor, and he will display such matchless beauty and such awesome power that every knee shall bow of things in heaven and things in earth and things under the earth, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the Glory of God the Father. Again, the final issue of this is described for us in the book of the Revelation.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life bearing twelve crops of fruits, yielding its fruit each month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more

night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. – Rev. 20:1-5

This conclusion gives literary satisfaction and objective justification to the thesis of our text: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.” Holiness and righteousness will inhabit the final resolution which will be brought about because “the Lord of hosts, ... the King of glory” has come in. This is the model for and the foundation of all denouement. Nothing but such an infinitely excellent conclusion to all things can satisfy the mind. It is that story-ending than which a greater can not be thought. It is the truth.

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MARK COPPENGER

Psalm 24 and the Aesthetic Fullness of the Earth and World (Part 1)

The Eighth Commandment—“Thou shalt not steal”—sanctions property rights, but Psalm 24:1-2 declares that the Lord holds clear title to all there is, and that our ownership is both contingent upon his good pleasure and accountable to his principle of stewardship:

The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof;

The world, and they that dwell therein.

For he hath founded it upon the seas,

And established it upon the floods. [1]

Earth and World

Verse one employs two Hebrew words to express the extent of God's reign, the first, *aretz* ('earth'), denotes material resources; the second, *tebel* ('world'), connects the earth to human enterprise. The Septuagint tracks with this, using *gefor* 'earth' (hence, 'geology') and *oikoumene* for 'world' (connected with 'ecumenical'). Thus, the span of God's provision and sovereignty is beneficently universal.

Citing Ecclesiastes 1:4, Gregory of Nyssa observes that the earth ministers “to every generation, first one, then another, that is born on it.” [2] Matthew unpacks the extent of the earth’s “ministry,” saying,

The mines that are lodged in the bowels of it, even the richest, the fruits it produces, all the beasts of the forest and the cattle upon a thousand hills, our lands and houses, and all the improvements that are made of this earth by the skill and industry of man, are all his. . . . All the parts and regions of the earth are the Lord’s, all under his eye, all in his hand: so that wherever a child of God goes, he may comfort himself with this, that he does not go off his Father’s ground.[3]

Spurgeon speaks of its “fullness” in terms of “its harvests, its wealth, its life, or its worship; in all these senses the Most High God is Possessor of all.”[4] And Derek Kidner says the word “conjures up its wealth and fertility, seen here not as man’s for exploitation, but, prior to that, as God’s, for his satisfaction and glory . . .”[5]

“Ride, Jesus, Ride!”

Of course, materialists beg to differ (yea proudly insist upon differing). By their lights (or rather from their gloom), they deny the artistry, authority, and generosity of God in creation. They fail or refuse to grasp the obvious truth that God supplied graciously arable soil, fishable waters, and hunttable woods; flax, wool, and cotton for weaving; timber and gypsum for building; metals for machinery; fossil fuels for heating and transportation; organic compounds for medicine and palliation—salicin from the willow, quinine from the cinchona, and codeine from the opium poppy. On and on the provision extends. And, of course, it extends to the human ingenuity required to marshal these resources for our benefit.

As poet Gerald Manley Hopkins observed, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God,” [6] and blessed in the sensible person who notes it. Back in the 1970s, I heard, in a Wheaton College chapel message by E. V. Hill, who described a parishioner who was ever so aware of God’s magnificent immanence. Hill told of his own boyhood congregation’s response when tornado warnings came their way down in Texas. The church had a big basement, and the flock would rush to gather there until the winds subsided. But one time, after counting noses, they discovered that “the Old Widder Jones” was missing, so some hearty volunteers jumped into a buckboard and raced to her house. When they got there, they found the home creaking in the wind with the windows wide open, the curtains blowing straight out on one side and straight in on the other. Flinging open the door, they spied her across the room, rocking furiously in her favorite chair, exclaiming, “Ride, Jesus, ride!”

I hasten to say I'm writing this the week after a horrific tornado leveled Mayfield, Kentucky, killing dozens there and elsewhere in its path. So I don't want to suggest that Jesus initiated the ruination—and, as some might suggest, as an act of judgment on that community. (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar went down this road shamefully in Job.) But Mrs. Jones had it right when she recognized the sovereignty of God in all Creation, not just at the outset, but throughout its every age. And so should we. (Yes, I know about the Problem of Evil; I've taught whole courses on it; but here I appeal to the "Soul-Making Theodicy"—which argues that the rigors and perils of life after the Fall are perfectly ordered for God's saving and sanctifying purposes.)

The Lord's Aesthetic Purposes

We've noted the nutritional and industrial provisions of the earth, but we must also give the Lord's artistry its due. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard tells of a practice she had as a little girl, back when a penny meant a lot to her. She would hide one of these coins among exposed tree roots and other notches and then write in chalk on the sidewalk just up the way, "Surprise Ahead," with arrows leading to the treasure. She then observed that those who would take time to humble themselves and slow down to search out the beautiful in nature would be rewarded, for "the world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand." [7]

Well, as we know, the Lord has not only strewn pennies in the form of a "tremulous ripple thrill on the water" signaling the emergence of "a muskrat kit paddling from its den" (Dillard's example), but also the golden coins, indeed ingots of precious aesthetic "metal," appearing around the world. These manifestations have inspired poets and composers as well as painters and photographers. Thus we are witness to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *A Day of Sunshine*, Carl Sandburg's *Fog*, Edgar Guest's *It's September*, and to countless celebrations of nature from the likes of Frost, Wordsworth, Keats, Kipling, Blake, Tennyson, Nash, and Burns. As for picturesque program music, we enjoy Claude Debussy's orchestral piece *La Mer*, Ferde Grofé's *Grand Canyon Suite*, Bedrich Smetana's symphonic poem, *The Moldau*, and Antonio Vivaldi's violin concertos, *The Four Seasons*.

As for paintings, let's focus on a small sampling of four that suggest themselves upon a reading of Psalm 24.

Young Hare (1502), Albrecht Dürer, The Albertina Museum, Vienna, Austria.



Dürer was a contemporary of his fellow German, Martin Luther, and though the artist's roots were Catholic, he showed sympathy for the Reformer's cause. Though a great many of his works dealt with religious themes, including the oft-reproduced Praying Hands, he also had an eye for nature, as with this painting of a rabbit and also in his woodcut, *The Rhinoceros*, which he drew without having ever seen one, working only from a verbal description and another's brief sketch.

When the words 'earth,' 'world,' and 'fullness' are deployed, we typically think of matters on the grand scale—the Great Plains, the Alps, the Everglades, the Gulf Stream, the Sahara, the Amazon Rainforest. But God has filled these great sectors with equally amazing, diminutive critters, such as this hare. And for those who would demean man as an insignificant creature on a small planet in an unfathomably vast universe, C. S. Lewis replies, “[T]he argument from size, is in my opinion, very feeble”; [8] size is irrelevant to honor, for a tiny, sapient man, who alone among sentient beings has the power to appreciate the “the great nebula in Andromeda,” is more wonderful than the stupendous astronomical displays he's appreciating.[9]

The Harvesters (1565), Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, New York



Bruegel was a leading artist of the Dutch-Flemish Renaissance. This particular painting was commissioned by a Belgian merchant, one of six works representing human activity in the progression of seasons, this one focused on late summer. (Another well-known piece in this cycle is *The Hunters in the Snow*.) Though Bruegel painted religious subjects, such as *The Fall of Rebel Angels*, *The Blind Leading the Blind*, and *The Census at Bethlehem*, he was best known for his “genre paintings” of peasants. I should add that this was a time of great religious tension in Europe, as Bruegel was born just eight years after Martin Luther penned his *Ninety-Five Theses*.

The *Harvesters* records and honors both man and nature—the golden sea of wheat, crisply delineated by scythes, instruments of human ingenuity with ergonomic handles and blades the deliverance of metallurgy; the fellowship and refreshment of lunchtime, including a loaf a bread, whose substance comes from such sheaves as stand all around; the mercies of shade and a nap; and a vista easy on the eyes. It’s enough to send an artist looking for his brushes and easel.

NOTES:

[1] I use KJV here since the lyric quality of the iambic tetrameter in the first verse (which the RSV and ESV preserve) is lost in, for example, in such estimable translations as the NIV (“ . . . with everything in it . . . and all who live in it”), the HCSB (“ . . . and its inhabitants”), and the NASB (“ . . . and those who live in it”). Of course, all of them report accurately that the Psalmist celebrated the comprehensive authorship and disposition of the cosmos and its occupants.

[2] Gregory of Nyssa, “Exposition of the Psalms 24:2,” quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament VII, Psalms 1-50*, edited by Craig A. Blaising and Carmen S. Hardin, Thomas C. Oden, general editor (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 2008), 185

[3] Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible, Vol. III—Job to Song of Solomon* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1975) 319.

[4] C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David, Volume I* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1990), 374.

[5] Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1973), 113.

[6] Gerald Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur.” Accessed January 5, 2022 at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44395/gods-grandeur>.

[7] Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 14-15.

[8] C. S. Lewis, "Dogma and the Universe," *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 39.

[9] Lewis, "Dogma," 41-42.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Mark Coppenger, retired professor of philosophy at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a former professor at Wheaton has given us an excellent study of how God's lordship in creation lays the groundwork for aesthetics. Mark is an effective writer and author, an engaging teacher, has served in numerous positions of service among Southern Baptists at the national and state levels and also been pastor of churches. He is the author of a new book entitled *If Christianity is So Good, Why are Christians so Bad?* Also, he is an author/editor of a book highly pertinent to the topic of this Journal, *Apologetical Aesthetics*. Since the triune God is Creator and Sustainer and Owner of the earth, it is impossible that every aspect of it not reflect some element of his glory. The existence of everything is dependent on him and his power, intelligence, beauty, purpose, and glory. The study of aesthetics is the investigation of principles underlying our perception of beauty and awe. This could be applied to art, music, poetry, physics, chemistry, or the mere pleasure of standing in awe of natural things. Mark has given a narrative of how aesthetics has its foundation in the reality that "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." He has shown the confluence of nature and art in how the beauty, symmetry, threatening danger, and power of the one inspires the other. His article itself is an engagement with aesthetics of language.



MARK COPPENGER

Psalm 24 and the Aesthetic Fullness of the Earth and World (Part 2)

The Great Wave Off Kanagawa (1831), Katsushika Hokusai, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, New York



Featured in *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, this woodblock print captures the peril of three fishing boats tossed by a rogue wave in Sagami Bay, twenty-five miles southwest of Tokyo. In the

year this painting appeared, 1831, another great outdoor painter, John James Audubon, traveled from England to New York to begin his work on *Birds in America*; Meanwhile, over in Europe, the Impressionist artists, Monet and Renoir were still children, but they would one day be influenced by Hokusai's work.

There is much beauty in nature, but aestheticians have identified an experience that goes beyond savoring a sunset, delighting in a blanketing snowfall, or taking in the fall colors of New England. They speak of "the sublime," that which is intimidatingly splendid. It's kin to a word occurring five times Psalm 24:7-10—'glory,' as in "the King of glory." The Hebrew word for 'glory' is *kabod*, a cognate of *kebed* ("heavy"); it connotes substance and heft, the sort of awesome presence that terrified Isaiah in his chapter six. Painfully aware of his deplorable weakness, the prophet feared being "crushed" by the sovereign holiness of God.

The eighteenth-century British philosopher and statesman Edmund Burke, in speaking of the sublime, identified it as "astonishment," that is the "state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other." And, for illustration, he pointed to the ocean, which can be "an object of no small terror." [1]

In his *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant supplied other examples of the sublime:

Bold, overhanging, and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piled up the vault of heaven, borne along with flashes and peals, volcanoes in all their violence of destruction, hurricanes leaving desolation in their track, the boundless ocean rising with rebellious force, the high waterfall of some mighty river, and the like, make our power of resistance of trifling moment in comparison with their might. [2]

And so we're pointed to the oceans, whose water covers around seventy per cent of the earth and whose dynamics are quite sublime, as Hokusai knew full well.

This painting hails from the Far East, in contrast with the other three, which are Western. I include it to underscore the gospel implications for lands unknown to (even unsuspected by) the Israelites in David's day. Though Psalm 24 is Hebrew scripture delivered to God's chosen people, its reach circles the globe. As Augustine observed of Psalm 24:1-2, "This is true, for the Lord, now glorified, is preached to all nations to bring them to faith, and the whole world thus becomes his church." [3]

The Domes of the Yosemite (1867), Albert Bierstadt, The Athenaeum, St. Johnsbury, Vermont



Psalm 24:1-2 – ¹ *The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.*
² *For he hath founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods.*

Bierstadt, an eighteenth-century German-American painter was remarkable for his glorious landscapes, as were other Americans of the Hudson River School—Frederick Church, Asher Durand, George Inness, Thomas Cole, Thomas Moran, and Thomas Cole. Whether working in the Hudson Valley, the Sierra Nevadas, Yellowstone, or the Andes, these men astonished their viewers with breathtaking portrayals of God's handiwork. Bierstadt introduced many to the Rockies, helped spur the conservation movement, and has been featured on two of America's commemorative stamps.

This painting portrays California's Yosemite Valley, granted protection under Abraham Lincoln in 1864 and designated a National Park in 1890. Though romanticized, Bierstadt's rendering is nonetheless indicative of the grandeur of this site, a reality well chronicled in a series of black and white photographs by Ansel Adams, whose work is featured in a Yosemite Village gallery.

Psalm 24:2 encompasses the granite domes that define the valley, for it says the Lord founded the earth "on the seas and established it on the waters." Well, certainly, Genesis 1 says that the waters were gathered so that the dry land would appear on the third day of creation, but young-earth creationists point beyond this to Psalm 104, where we read, in verses 5-8:

Who laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not be removed for ever. Thou coveredst it with the deep as with a garment: the waters stood above the mountains. At thy rebuke they fled; at the voice of thy thunder they hasted away. They go up by the mountains; they go down by the valleys unto the place which thou hast founded for them. Thou hast set a bound that they may not pass over; that they turn not again to cover the earth.

They read Noah's Flood into this passage, for "turn not again [ever] to cover the earth" would not make sense if the psalmist were speaking only of the initial emergence of land. It would ignore the subsequent, universal immersion above the tallest mountains recounted in Genesis 7.

Beware of (and thank God for) Wadi Rum.

Worldview-wise, there are two big ways of seeing our surroundings. One is naturalistic/materialistic, regarding flora and fauna, hill and dale, you and me, as the product of chemical and physical laws at work on some sort of primordial stuff. On this model, it would take eons of dumb matter talking to itself ("dialectical materialism"), through hit or miss, to generate Handel's Messiah. It's hard to believe that folks would embrace such "seeing," given its Rube Goldberg absurdity, but they soldier on, determined to keep God's hands off the universe.

The other view regards the universe and all within as the handiwork of a multi-omni creator. Some have proffered various versions of the Anthropic Argument for God's Existence, working from the wonderful correspondence of man's needs to the Lord's earthly provision, the way that the environment is marvelously attuned to our makeup, e.g., the right mix of the gases we breathe; the distance to the sun and tilt of the earth, giving us tolerable seasons. Of course, the Darwinists counter that it fits us since we fit it; if we didn't, we'd be extinct. They venture a deflating analogy, that of the woman who marveled that God had caused great rivers—the Thames, Tiber, Seine, and Danube—to flow through the capitals of Europe.

This snappy dismissal of the wondrous correspondence between Creation and her creatures' blessings does not bear up to scrutiny, and the aesthetic provisions of nature are particularly troublesome for the materialist. (Indeed, the problem cropped up early on, when eighteenth-century art critic John Ruskin pressed Charles Darwin to explain the glories of a peacock's deployed fan.) Darwinian philosopher Denis Dutton gave it his best shot in *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*, when he played off a worldwide affinity for "blue landscapes" (with a stream winding its way through a verdant, populated valley).[4] He reasoned that this was the product of natural selection, in that creatures who migrated there more likely survived and procreated, and thus passed along their aesthetic wiring to progeny evolving through natural selection.

But this fails to explain our aesthetic appreciation for deadly settings, such as lightning storms, a cluster of icebergs, and desert regions, such as Wadi Rum in the south of Jordan, an extension of Israel's Negev. In my experience, Wadi Rum is one of the most visually enchanting places on earth. Yet, the hot, red sands under a relentless sun can make even shoe-clad walking miserable, and the expanse of desolation, replete with shear granite outcroppings, would make one despair of survival if not for the air-conditioned tour bus standing nearby.

Filmmakers have used it in *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, *Dune*, and *The Martian*, whose star, Matt Damon, remarked, “I was in awe of that place . . . One of the most spectacular and beautiful places I have ever seen, and like nothing I’ve ever seen anywhere else on Earth.” [5] But how could it be beautiful? What sort of survival-of-the-fittest story could one concoct to explain the development of an appetite for deadly landscapes?

I’m sure that Darwinians could come up with something. Actually, they have to do this, given their devotion to “methodological naturalism,” conveniently overlaying their metaphysical materialism. (Harvard biologist Richard Lewontin wrote that, no matter how contrived the scientific theories might seem, they had to stick with purely material accounts, lest a disruptive “divine foot” find its way in the doorway.) [6] Besides, nothing is foolproof since fools are so ingenious. Perhaps they can argue that the terrain is so awful that it’s a good place to hide out and have kids since no one wants to bother you there. Well, “Whatever,” and “Knock yourself out.” But far better to say that the “fullness thereof” includes not just the nutritional, hospitable, and industrially harnessable, but also the aesthetical, thanks to God’s astonishing kindness to the world’s inhabitants, to “those who dwell therein.”

NOTES:

[1] Edmund Burke, “Of the Passion Caused by the Sublime,” *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Harvard Classics, Volume 24, Part 2 (New York, P. F. Collier and Son, 1909-1914), Part II, Section 1. Accessed January 5, 2020 at <https://www.bartleby.com/24/2/201.html>.

[2] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (New York: Hafner, 1968), 100-101.

[3] Augustine, *Exposition of the Psalms 24:2*, quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament VII, Psalms 1-50*, edited by Craig A. Blaising and Carmen S. Hardin, Thomas C. Oden, general editor (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 2008), 185

[4] Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 14-15.

[5] “Ridley Scott and Matt Damon on Going to Jordan to Recreate Mars.” *Yahoo! Entertainment* (September 29, 2015). <https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/ridley-scott-and-matt-damon-on-going-to-jordan-to-230136329.html>.

[6] See Richard Lewontin, "Billions and Billions of Demons," a review of Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, *New York Review of Books* (January 9, 1997). This quote was discovered by Philip Johnson and given widespread attention in his book, *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 81.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Mark Coppenger, retired professor of philosophy at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a former professor at Wheaton has given us an excellent study of how God's lordship in creation lays the groundwork for aesthetics. Mark is an effective writer and author, an engaging teacher, has served in numerous positions of service among Southern Baptists at the national and state levels and also been pastor of churches. He is the author of a new book entitled *If Christianity is So Good, Why are Christians so Bad?* Also, he is an author/editor of a book highly pertinent to the topic of this Journal, *Apologetical Aesthetics*. Since the triune God is Creator and Sustainer and Owner of the earth, it is impossible that every aspect of it not reflect some element of his glory. The existence of everything is dependent on him and his power, intelligence, beauty, purpose, and glory. The study of aesthetics is the investigation of principles underlying our perception of beauty and awe. This could be applied to art, music, poetry, physics, chemistry, or the mere pleasure of standing in awe of natural things. Mark has given a narrative of how aesthetics has its foundation in the reality that "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." He has shown the confluence of nature and art in how the beauty, symmetry, threatening danger, and power of the one inspires the other. His article itself is an engagement with aesthetics of language.



TOM NETTLES

Book Review: *The Mystery of the Trinity*

Vern Poythress. *The Mystery of the Trinity*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2020. 688 pages with appendices A-E, a glossary, bibliography, index of Scripture, index of subjects and names.

I found this treatment of the Trinity by Poythress to be reverent, intensely biblical, relevant to tensions on this doctrine within evangelicalism, instructive exegetically and theologically, aware, engaged with historical theology, appreciative of what should be appreciated, cautious about the influence of philosophy on theology, kind to those who might differ with him on some points, and overwhelming in its scope and interaction. Also, it is clear that his straightforward critique of the intrusion of philosophy, particularly Aristotle's, on the development of the vocabulary and concepts of Christian doctrine will cause criticism and some consternation.

Some features that should be attractive to all readers include his visual diagrams of various elements of his discussion (there are many of them and they are intriguing), his prayers at the end of each chapter, his consistent practice to relate the subject of each chapter, with few exceptions, to the resurrection, his contagiously exuberant insistence on the Bible as leading us to Christ "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3 – 67, 273, 372, 456, 534, 595, 614).

The *Mystery of the Trinity* is clearly aimed at seeking clarity on some of the present tensions existent among reformed thinkers on the usefulness of natural theology as both prelude and support for the whole of systematic theology or whether systematic theology should be solely a synthesis of special revelation contained in Holy Scripture. This special revelation, of course would include inspired interpretations and explanations of the content and potential of general revelation, including the physical world and the operations of intellect and conscience. Tensions also exist in the relative emphases placed on transcendence and immanence and the sources for efforts to define those. Poythress gives specific attention to these tensions in pages 599-647. He reduces the camps to two (variations exist within each), classical Christian theists and Christian personalists (600).

Poythress plants his feet with some caution within the camp of Christian personalists, giving trenchant warnings against an undisciplined immanentism. He follows the views of Cornelius Van Til (533, 534), that we should be very suspicious of any attempt to import philosophy into theology. Particularly he has in mind Thomas Aquinas's use of Aristotle supplemented at points by Plotinus and pseudo-Dionysius. Part 5 and the first chapter of part 6 give extensive attention to the ideas of Aristotle and the real and implied impact of his philosophy on classical theism (197-290). Poythress, though he seeks to acknowledge the points at which Aristotle's philosophy crosses paths with true biblical orthodoxy, has very little patience with the degree to which "the Philosopher" has influenced the development of Christian theology. In a much less exalted judgment than that given to Aristotle by Thomas and the Thomists, Poythress employs a Pauline evaluation of pagan ingenuity in sidestepping the real implications of natural revelation in writing, "Aristotle is an illustration of the principle of Romans 1:18-23," and continues, "which tells us that pagans know God and yet suppress this knowledge" (287). Poythress identified Aristotle's flaw in his confidence in reason, "conceived of as operating independent of revelation. It is fallen reason that we are seeing in action" (287). Later, Poythress says, "Autonomous reason cannot stand the mystery of God's revelation, and refuses to submit to it" (586). Near the end, Poythress urges his readers to "utterly abandon Aristotelian metaphysics, and the technical terms attached to it, because it is too treacherous for Christian theology" (593). He understands that the precision injected into discourse by Aristotelian categories is very tempting to theologians and philosophers and the removal of the "safety net" of such methods of argument seems to invite defeat. He has specific discussions of Turretin (esp. 344-367) and Charnock (esp. 396-422) concerning the dangers in which they placed themselves doctrinally by their use of such a method. Poythress continues to opt, however, for "the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God" (595) as sufficient to protect the Christian theologian in his efforts to know God and communicate knowledge of him.

One of the large ideas that undergirds much of the theological synthesis and critique of the use of philosophy (“spiritual poison” – 455) is the affirmation that the Trinity is “ontologically basic” (203, 204, 500 et al.). Deriving the phrase as a useful concept from a philosophical attempt at defining “substance,” (203, 204), Poythress gravitated to the idea of God’s nature as ontologically basic to all other things whatsoever. “And the way he is ontologically basic is not by being pantheistically identical with the world, but by being God. He created the world. And the way in which he is ontologically basic is by being the Trinitarian God, which does not come into the discussion when philosophers are talking about substance” (209).

Another way he says this is that the Trinity is the “archetype” for understanding the finite order of creation in all of its variety. For example, he wrote, “All distinctions are ordained by God. All distinctions have their archetype in the diversity of the persons of the Trinity” (268). He suggests provocatively “that the distinction between essence and accident [an Aristotelian concept] is a reflection of some archetype within the Trinity” (328). This can be done by staying outside of Aristotle’s system and taking a “Trinitarian starting point as ‘ontologically basic.’” Then we can maintain that God’s own words about his actions, given in Scripture, are expressions of his Trinitarian nature (327, 328).

The triune God is basic to the diversity of all things in the created order. Tri-personality in one God sets before us infinite diversity within eternal oneness. The Trinity must be fundamental to all discussions of attributes, transcendence, immanence, substance, or essence for “the eternal activity among the persons of the Trinity has the potential for enhancing our insights without destroying anything in the truth of what classical Christian theism represents” (615). If we fail to give primary consideration to the biblical doctrine of the Trinity as the primary focus of discussions about divine attributes, we slide into errors that can be overcome only by introducing Christian orthodoxy through a “back stairway” (336, 337, 476, 500, 501). The philosopher “knows about a secret, hidden back stairway,” an apparently esoteric knowledge disconnected from the assumptions that have governed our philosophical god-talk.

An abstract concept of simplicity and/or immutability would call into question a dynamic and ongoing interaction of persons within deity and enervate the intimacy of his involvement with the world and his own chosen people. If we omit these—primary phenomena when we begin with the biblical picture of trinitarianism—as necessary considerations when discussing transcendence and incomprehensibility, we can present God as “a remote, uninvolved, frozen God” (615) whose “simplicity” seems to exclude the dynamic interaction of persons in the Trinity as well as God’s upholding of the world, preserving his people, and working “all things after the counsel of his own will.” This is what Poythress call the “black hole” (441) or the “frozen pond” (457) of transcendence. “We need to be aware of the black hole on our right. We begin to

slip into its pool if we think we must avoid robust language about God's activities that involve response. The suction of this pool tells us the lie that we are compromising God's absoluteness" (513).

In that same framework, a discussion of God's immanence apart from constant attention to comprehensive biblical trinitarianism has deadly dangers. He calls this "the peril of false immanence" (635). Without assuming the dynamic perfection and eternity in intra-trinitarian relationships and the implications of resurrection for both knowledge of God and infinite exaltation, immanence can lead to the "quicksand" that sucks God into the world so as virtually to be overcome and at the mercy of fortuitous circumstances. While we should not be afraid of the language that affirms that, to this created order, God responds, "we still need to constantly remind ourselves of the quicksand threatening to suck us in on the left ... We can never simply project the finiteness of human action back onto the infinite God" (512, 513). So it is for "open theists" (600).

The eternally generated Son of God also is the Word of God and is the "archetype for God's speech that creates things in the world" (252). In the logic of creation, God is the archetype, and the world's phenomena, particularly human actions, are "ectypal reflections" (513). This eternal reality is fundamental to the temporal development of and differentiations between various languages (213) including all issues of vocabulary and syntax within discreet languages. Speech itself, derived from the operations of the divine Logos within the Trinity (204) exists in the world as a reflection of an ever-communicating trinitarian God as revealed in Scripture. "In the beginning was the Word." His speech as a projection of his own internal relational logic and teleology establishes all the diversity present in the world as well as the unity present in the universal teleological connections of all things.

All our observations are partial and sometimes positively erroneous. For certain, they can never, ever match the knowledge that God has about everything or properly conceive of the final purpose for which God created the world. At the same time, Poythress claims, "we have an analogy, not an identity," between the created and the Creator. "God in his Trinitarian character is distinct from the world, but through the Word and the Spirit he is also the origin for the distinctions and structure in the world" (252). The resurrection, an idea unknown to Aristotle, is the key to that; so "Christ in his resurrection is 'ontologically basic' for the whole new world order, the new heaven and the new earth, including its human inhabitants" (240).

The fact that the Trinity is ontologically basic to discussions of the world and the nature of truth means that Scripture is epistemologically basic (585) as the fountainhead of all knowledge. As God by his word made the world, so by his word, he puts into human language truths that

fit both our finiteness and our need for knowing and believing the truth. Though Poythress scatters arguments throughout about the nature and authority of Scripture, appendix E (629-647, “The Meaning of Accommodation”) gives a detailed discussion of anthropomorphism and accommodation, setting the discussion in the form of perils of wrong understanding. A summary of the discussion is captured well on page 646: “Every text of Scripture suits the time and place and circumstances and human intermediaries who are present as contexts in which it newly comes. God’s speech is always coherent with the contexts that he himself specifies by his speech governing the universe (Heb. 1:3). That is the real meaning of accommodation” (646).

He ends the book with this prayer: “Lord of the universe, may we be wise in recognizing our limitations in receiving and understanding Scripture, and at the same time give full value to the depth of what you communicate to us. Thank you for communicating to us deeply as well as taking into account our limitations. Thank you for opening fellowship with you in your love” (647).

ABOUT THE REVIEWER:

Tom has most recently served as the Professor of Historical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He previously taught at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School where he was Professor of Church History and Chair of the Department of Church History. Prior to that, he taught at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary. Along with numerous journal articles and scholarly papers, Dr. Nettles is the author and editor of fifteen books. Among his books are *By His Grace and For His Glory*; *Baptists and the Bible*, *James Petigru Boyce: A Southern Baptist Statesman*, and *Living by Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles H. Spurgeon*.