

Continuity and Change: Hymnody and Ecclesiastical Unity

By Kendra Haloviak Valentine

“Before the message there must be the vision, before the sermon the hymn, before the prose the poem.”

Amos Wilder, *Theopoetic*

Introduction

Hymnody plays an important role in the worship and liturgy of the Seventh-day Adventist community and therefore it has an important function in helping maintain ecclesiastical unity. The emphasis on creation in our Adventist hymnals should not be surprising. Celebrating God as Creator is at the heart of what we see as distinctive in Adventist identity and mission. The Hebrew Bible’s hymnal, the book of Psalms (sometimes referred to as the Psalter), contains many references to God as the creative source of all life. One of the early psalms celebrates the majesty of God as creator and talks of the heavens as: “the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established” (Ps 8:3). Psalm 100, another favorite source of inspiration for writers of Christian hymns, proclaims: “Know that the Lord is God, it is he that made us, and we are his” (Ps 100:3). The first hymn sung by humans in the book of Revelation is: “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Rev 4:11).

Imagery in Seventh-day Adventist hymnals reflects these rich biblical understandings of creation because hymn writers (poets) draw from the cultural and literary worlds of the biblical authors. In this paper I notice that the imagery the authors used also reflects their own diverse scientific understandings. In different eras, hymnody reflects the science of the time. Scientific assumptions enter our hymnody and thus our liturgy as new theoretical constructs make possible new language for worship.

My husband and I became more aware of this about a year ago. We often sit at the piano and sing hymns together. One day we did this after a conversation that had been reflecting on the current discussions over faith and science. Suddenly the creation imagery and scientific language of the hymns caught our attention! For several days afterwards we kept reading the lyrics of hymns whenever we had a free moment, sharing our findings with each other. “Did you find the one with ‘radiant orbs’?” “What about the one with ‘boundless curves of space’ in the title?” “I found one that mentions the ‘atom.’” “I found *two* that mention the ‘atom’!” Our discoveries launched me into a study focusing on the cosmologies (that is, various understandings of the structure of the universe) reflected in hymns found in the two most recent Seventh-day Adventist hymnals.¹ In any given hymn, what is the cosmology assumed by the poet?

The actual development of cosmological concepts and their implications for understanding the cosmos are for others such as astronomers and physicists to ponder. My goal

¹See the *Official Hymnal of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Takoma Park, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1941); and *The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1985).

in this study is much more humble: to show that there is in fact a wide cosmological diversity in Adventist hymns and this is reflected in worship when Adventists sing together.

Hymns constitute a form of poetic language that is inclusive, rather than boundary-making. Such language holds together heart and mind as it sparks the imagination, invokes wonder and celebrates mystery. It is language that retains a sense of humility before God. As Adventists wrestle with ways to describe their hopes and beliefs for a new era and their understanding of past eras, Adventists need the language of poetry in all its richness. And Adventists need to keep singing together.

Creation Imagery in Adventist Hymnody

The most important source for the hymns Adventists sing is the Christian Scriptures, both Old Testament and New Testament. This is illustrated by the tightly-lined 16-page index of “Scriptural Allusions in Hymns” (pages 791-807) included in the 1985 hymnal. Out of the total of 695 hymns, only eight do not have any scriptural allusion.²

But how is the language of scripture understood by the poets whose works are in Adventist hymnals? This study will notice both the diverse theoretical assumptions and the new scientific language which became available at different times in the approximately 300 years during which most of the hymns were composed (mid-17th century to mid-20th century). This was a period of remarkable change in scientific understandings of the universe and its basic elements, and the liturgical language of the hymns reflects these changes; that is, reflects the best science of the poets’ times. We can also see that science and worship need not be at odds with each other, but work in harmony at least within these liturgical documents we refer to as hymnals.

Hymns that place creation imagery within a three-tiered cosmology

The first set of cosmological concepts relate to what has been described as a three-tiered cosmos. The middle tier was the tier of human life. It consisted of the flat, circular (not spherical) earth (Isa 4:24; Ps 136:6; Job 38:13, 18) surrounded by the “waters below,” the firmament (or sky dome) holding back the “waters above,” and the sky in between the firmament and the earth which made life possible (Job 26:7-14; Prov 8:22-31). Biblical writers referred to the firmament as a “tent” or “canopy” (Psalm 104:2; Isa 40:22), with portals that allowed rain to occasionally come through the firmament to earth. The dry land of earth was the floor of the tent or a circle on the face of the waters (I Chron 16:30; Job 26:10; Ps 93:1; 96:10; Prov 8:27). In describing events that affected all the living inhabitants of the flat earth, biblical writers emphasized the “four corners” of the earth (Rev 7:1; 20:8). The earth was held up by “foundations” which made the earth immovable (Job 38:4-6; Prov 8:29; Jer 31:37; Ps 104:5). The sun, moon and stars existed toward the top of the sky dome, with the sun rising and setting each day (Gen 1:14-18; Eccl 1:5; Ps 19:6).³

² Hymns without at least one scriptural allusion: #58, 75, 262, 407, 452 (this one was written by James White), 471, 657, 689.

³ See *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 1, 702-703; John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Intervarsity Press, 2009), 27; Brian Bull and Fritz Guy, *God, Sky & Land: Genesis 1 as the Ancient Hebrews*

The writers of many hymns bring this cosmology into contemporary liturgy. “Praise Him! Praise Him!” written by Fanny Crosby (1869) is one example as it proclaims that “Heavenly portals, loud with hosannas ring!”⁴ The language of “portals,” “domes,” “waters above,” “beneath the skies,” “above the skies” all refer to this biblical paradigm.

Hymns that place creation imagery within a two-sphere cosmology

The second cosmology reflected in our hymns is that of Claudius Ptolemy (90-168 CE). In his work *Almagest*, Ptolemy articulated a comprehensive geocentric cosmology that would be authoritative for over 1300 years. With this careful, documented and detailed work the three-tiered cosmology was replaced with an earth-centered solar system made up of “nested” spheres. The sun, moon, stars and planets all orbited a stationary earth. Ptolemy’s calculations even allowed him to consider the dimensions of the universe and estimate the distance between planets. Another major work by Ptolemy, *Apotelesmatika* (a four-volume work translated as “Astrological Outcomes”), considered the effects of the movement of the planets on humans. Building on the work of Pythagoras (570-495 BCE) six centuries earlier, Ptolemy hypothesized that, given the mathematical proportions, precisions and harmony of the celestial bodies, sounds were created. Even if unheard by human ears, this sound could be called “the music of the spheres.”⁵

The reader familiar with Christian hymns is probably already humming the tune to “This is My Father’s World.” The first stanza exults because “to my listening ears, all nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres.”⁶ This more developed cosmology made possible new images and new language for hymn writers.

Joseph Addison’s hymn “The Spacious Firmament” is a good example of the way liturgical language utilizes different cosmologies.⁷ Like the hymnal itself, a single hymn is flexible enough (unlike other genres such as scientific journals and theological prose) to embrace and hold together contradictory views of the universe. Addison’s much loved 1712 hymn maintains the “firmament” language inspired by Psalm 19:1-3 while also assuming key elements of Ptolemy’s geocentric cosmology:

Heard It (Roseville, CA: Adventist Forum, 2011), esp. chapter 4, “‘The Vault of the Sky’: Critical for Creation,” pages 65-77. For a view that challenges aspects of this description of ancient cosmology, see Randall W. Younker and Richard M. Davidson, “The Myth of the Solid Heavenly Dome: Another Look at the Hebrew רָקִיעַ (RĀQĪA’),” in *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 1:125-147 (2011).

⁴ #645 (1941); #249 (1985). Charles Wesley’s hymn “Our Lord is Risen,” #132 (1941), written in 1741, includes the phrase “To the bright portals in the sky.”

⁵ Gregory J. Riley, *The River of God: A New History of Christian Origins* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 38-49, discusses the shift from a three-story cosmos to a cosmology of vast space and its ramifications for understanding God. Riley argues that ideas about God cannot be expressed until the human mind has the language with which to express a new idea. In this article I am making a similar observation concerning the poets of our hymns and their understanding of God as creator of the cosmos.

⁶ Maltbie D. Babcock (1858-1901), #646 (1941); #92 (1985). An interesting omitted stanza reads as follows: “This is my Father’s world. On the day of its wondrous birth, The stars of light in phalanx bright, Sang out in heavenly mirth.” See Edward E. White, *Singing with Understanding* (Warburton, Victoria, Australia: Signs Publishing, 1968), 423-424.

⁷ #91 (1941); #96 (1985).

The spacious firmament on high, With all the blue, ethereal sky,
And spangled heavens, a shining frame, Their great Original proclaim.
Th' unwearied sun from day to day Does his Creator's power display,
And publishes to every land The work of an almighty hand.

Soon as the evening shades prevail, The moon takes up the wondrous tale;
And nightly to the listening earth Repeats the story of her birth;
While all the stars that round her burn, And all the planets in their turn,
Confirm the tidings as they roll, And spread the truth from pole to pole.

What though in solemn silence all Move round the dark terrestrial ball?
What though no real voice nor sound Amid their radiant orbs be found?
In reason's ear they all rejoice And utter forth a glorious voice,
Forever singing as they shine, "The hand that made us is divine."

Addison is clearly playing with various categories—giving a nod to the cosmology of Scripture, while considering more recent understandings of the universe. A close reading of these lyrics raises the possibility that Addison is wrestling with changing concepts. While Ptolemy's cosmology moved humanity from the cosmos of the three tiers into the universe of space, it did not have the earth spinning on its axis with north and south poles. Those images are post-Copernicus. So, how many cosmologies are present in this one hymn by Addison? What is he doing in these three stanzas? What is Addison suggesting about God and our world? The third stanza's phrase "in reason's ear they all rejoice" also causes one to pause. The age of reason supplied new language for humans to understand our world. Is Addison winking at us, holding together in one hymn Scripture's firmament, Ptolemy's earth in space, and even further developments in science? "In reason's ear" the radiant orbs may not create sphere music, but they do witness to a divine creator. Science changes, wonder remains. The language of liturgy can hold these various ways of describing what is wondrous about our world and its cosmos.

Hymns that place creation imagery within Copernicus' heliocentric cosmology

The third cosmology reflected in our hymnals is that of Copernicus. The shift in cosmology from an earth-centered universe to a sun-centered universe was such a radical ideological disruption it would take terminology like "revolution" to adequately describe it. The Copernican Revolution began in 1543 with the publication by Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) of *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (*On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*) in which he articulated new understanding based on intricate mathematical calculations. The Revolution continued with the work of Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), who, pointing his telescope to the heavens found empirical support for Copernicus' new understanding of the cosmos. Two additional names warrant mention even in the briefest descriptions of the momentous shift in thinking: Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) whose laws of planetary motion included the elliptical orbiting of planets, and Isaac Newton (1643-1727) whose 1687 work *Principia* about the law of universal gravitation and its ramifications for a solar system, is often considered the logical outcome and fitting conclusion of the revolution that Copernicus started 144 years earlier. With these scientists came insightful new imagery and new language for describing the universe. The

earth in movement around the sun and spinning on its axis was a discovery that led to new considerations of the earth's north pole and south pole. The vastness of space expanded even further beyond Ptolemy's universe as humans struggled to understand the implications and reassess their place amidst new worlds and multiple suns.⁸

One example is the 1971 hymn written by R. B. Y. Scott created to use with the grand tune *Jerusalem*.⁹ The first stanza expresses well the new understanding: "O world of God, so vast and strange, profound and wonderful and fair, beyond the utmost reach of thought, but not beyond a Father's care! We are not strangers on this earth whirling amid the suns of space; We are God's children, this our home, with those of every clime and race."¹⁰

The vastness of Copernicus' space, with its spinning earth, multiple suns and new worlds inspired the poetry of many hymn writers. These hymns sit side-by-side with hymns having scriptural allusions to a three-tiered cosmos and beside hymns assuming a Ptolemaic universe. Hymns enable us to cope with scientific change while continuing to affirm faith in the creator God. Science changes, wonder remains.

Hymns that place creation imagery within an Einsteinian cosmology

In 1905 Albert Einstein (1879-1955) wrote several papers that forever changed the way scientists saw the universe. His theory of special relativity proposed that moving through space should not be thought of as moving in fixed time, like the secondary hands moving on an old wristwatch. Time was not in fact a constant. Rather, the speed of light was the constant. The speed of light was related to time in such a way that space and time should not be understood as two things, but as space-time, that is, one thing, or as two interwoven threads of the same fabric. This meant that time itself could slow down, depending on its relationship to space. He would later expand his theory to deal with gravity's effect on space-time, postulating in his theory of general relativity that space-time was curved in the presence of matter.

These insights, along with Edwin Hubble's discovery in the 1920s of innumerable galaxies spread through space, were revolutionary for cosmology, making it possible to consider both interstellar space (space within a galaxy) as well as intergalactic space (space between galaxies). The universe was now to be understood as flexible, dynamic and finite. In addition, Einstein's famous equation $E = mc^2$ argued for a unity between energy, matter and light. At their very essence, mass and energy were the same, with energy having the potential to become mass, and mass the potential to become energy. This would lead to the unlocking of the atom and nuclear research. Although Einstein resisted moving away from an unchanging universe, his own theories suggested otherwise. His physics also made possible the "big bang" theory as the beginning of an expanding and evolving universe.

⁸ The new Copernican cosmology was perceived as so highly threatening to traditional theology and the usual way of understanding scripture that it was banned by the church and its advocates identified as heretics by both Catholics and Protestants. A helpful account of why the church found it so difficult is found in Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought* (Harvard College, 1957), 185-199. It took 500 years for the ideas to become fully accepted.

⁹ Wayne Hooper and Edward E. White, *Companion to the Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1988), 129-132.

¹⁰ #80 (1985).

Quite a number of our hymns reflect the language of Einsteinian physics and the new insights from the theory of relativity. Hymn #97 in the 1985 hymnal is Albert F. Bayly's "Lord of the Boundless Curves of Space." We need not go beyond the title to recognize the influence of Einsteinian physics. The following are the first two stanzas of this 1950 hymn:

Lord of the boundless curves of space
And time's deep mystery,
To your creative might we trace
All nature's energy.

Your mind conceived the galaxy,
Each atom's secret planned,
And every age of history
Your purpose, Lord has spanned.

Bayly has captured space and time, energy and atoms all in the first two stanzas of this hymn. Talking about the "curves of space" would not make sense prior to the beginning of the 20th century. But with Einstein, such new language was possible for the hymn writer. Since time and space were connected, along with "deep space" came the concept of deep time, as the hymn writer expresses it, "time's deep mystery." Although terminology referring to the earth's "galaxy" had been used for generations, after the discovery of multiple galaxies (Edwin Hubble, 1929), the wonder of God's creation expanded far beyond what humans had previously ever even imagined. Bayly's lyrics also allude to the presence of "energy" in matter and the potential of "each atom's secret." The use of such language in liturgical hymns creates a sense of power unknown prior to the use of atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Bayly's world (our world) knows a science that biblical writers could not conceive. Even Copernicus could not have imagined the size of the cosmos seen in the 20th century, with its untold galaxies.

In 1967, Catherine Arnott Cameron wrote one of the more recent compositions in our hymnal entitled, "God, Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens."¹¹ In this hymn she reflects not only on a more contemporary understanding of the universe but also the potential for creative good and devastating destruction:

God, who stretched the spangled heavens Infinite in time and place,
Flung the suns in burning radiance Through the silent fields of space:
We, Your children, in Your likeness, Share inventive powers with you;
Great Creator, still creating, Show us what we yet may do.

Conclusion

Adventists have always been a singing people. In addition to the reading of scripture and the central place of preaching, hymn singing has been part of worship. Cherished hymns expressed the faith and hope of the community using familiar imagery that both unifies and

¹¹ #536 (1985).

allows for diversity.¹² There has been considerable change in the way the structure of the universe has been understood. The church through its hymnody has been able to cope with those changes even as it continues its biblically grounded faith in the creator of the universe.

In Adventist hymnals, diverse and contradictory cosmologies sit side-by-side, sometimes within the same hymn.¹³ Hymns reflect the scientific assumptions of their authors as they seek language with which to praise the wonder of creation and its creator.

For some, new cosmologies posed serious crises of faith. How does one take your sacred texts with you on the journey to a new cosmology? It seems tensions have always existed between science and religion. Hymns help Adventists live with the tensions. In the poetry of Adventist hymnody there is a richness that is able to hold elements of continuity and change.

Adventists need the inclusive poetic language of their hymns—with its ability to hold the past as well as have room for the possibilities of future discoveries. Adventists need poetry's ability to spark human imaginations invoking wonder and worship. Adventists need the language of liturgy—which can absorb science language in ways prose often finds problematic. Adventists need hymn language—filling the imagery with meaning while retaining humility—reminding worshipers they only have a piece of the picture. Adventists need hymns and to keep singing them together—for a church that sings together, stays together.

Epilogue

After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already cross'd,)
After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd their work,
After the noble inventors—after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,
Finally shall come the Poet, worthy that name;¹⁴

¹² Leonard Thompson, "Hymns in Early Christian Worship," in *Anglican Theological Review* 55 (1973), 458-472. For a discussion of the delightful theological diversity found in the poetry of the Hebrew prophets (with roots in the Pentateuch), see Walter Brueggemann, "The Divine as the Poetic," in *Out of Babylon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 50-77.

¹³ For a study of the colliding and collaborating ideologies present in the book of Revelation's hymns, see Kendra Haloviak, "World at War, Nations in Song: Dialogic Imagination and Moral Vision in the Hymns of the Book of Revelation," PhD diss., The Graduate Theological Union, 2002, forthcoming in a book published by Wipf and Stock.

¹⁴ Walt Whitman, "Passage to India," (1870), in *Leaves of Grass* (1900), lines 102-106. Online source: <http://www.bartleby.com/142/14.html>