

Rebuilding the Ladder Between Heaven and Earth

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Abstract

Christians in the late middle ages took the biblical cosmology that featured a ladder between heaven and earth and blended it with the Ptolemaic/Aristotelian cosmology that featured celestial spheres. They understood the spheres to be rungs on the ladder between heaven and earth. For centuries this cosmology provided a foundation for a meaningful Christian existence. Over time, however, the discoveries of Galileo and others tore down that ladder, and the church has struggled ever since to explain the connection between the spiritual and material worlds. This struggle has made it difficult for the Christians to sustain a sense of God's presence in their lives and world, and it helps to explain why the Church in the West is in decline and why Christians are passive in the face of environmental degradation. The challenge for Christians today is twofold: 1) to explore how the emerging scientific cosmology of the "big bang" and the biblical cosmology of God as the source of all the diversity in the created order correspond and 2) to lay a foundation for the reformation of the Church.

The Medieval Ladder

Both Catholics and Protestants in the late middle ages shared a cosmology. Many people over many years, people like Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, took the Ptolemaic/Aristotelian cosmology with its notion of crystalline spheres and the biblical cosmology with its notion of a ladder between heaven and earth and blended them together. They identified the crystalline spheres as rungs on the ladder between heaven and earth.

People in the late middle ages understood God as the source of life-giving energy that flowed from God to the world through the hands of God's angels. They depicted angels as the "children" of God, spiritual beings who shimmered with the radiant energy of God. These angels were dimly visible as the stars of heaven, both the fixed stars in the distant heavens, and the seven "stars" in the near heavens that circled the earth on the crystalline spheres—the moon, mercury, venus, the sun, mars, jupiter, and saturn.

These spheres connected heaven and earth, and the traffic between them was two-way. Angels descended through the spheres and showered blessings on earth. People ascended through them and came into the presence of God, sometimes in life and hopefully in death. Elijah had so ascended, as had Paul on the road to Damascus. Jesus, of course, had both descended and ascended.

I realize that viewing the stars as angels and the crystalline spheres as rungs on the ladder connecting heaven and earth makes no sense to Christians in the 21st century; even more, it sounds like unbiblical nonsense. Although we have many biblical texts referring to these angelic

stars and to a ladder connecting heaven and earth, when we cast our interpretative net over Scripture, it is not fine enough to draw them into our boat.

For example, we read in the revelation to John of the resplendent Son of Man in whose hand are the seven stars who are the seven angels of the seven churches (1:20). The life-giving energy of God moves from the hand of the cosmic Christ to the hands of the starry angels and finally to the churches. Churches, by the way, were not the only institutions so graced by God. Every institution on earth and every person were sustained by angelic energy in the biblical and medieval cosmology.

In another example, God brings Abraham outside at night to count the stars and says to him: "So [numerous] shall your children be" (Genesis 15). Christians today realize that the number of stars is important in this encounter but fail to realize that their being is also important. The ancient Israelites saw the stars as the myriad and angelic children of God.

The most detailed depiction of the biblical cosmology is found in the book of Genesis. Jacob has stolen his brother's blessing and birthright and is on the run. Far from home and seemingly far from the protection of the God of his fathers, he is utterly alone. But things are not as they appear to be. We read:

Jacob left Beer-Sheba and went towards Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the

earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood above it. (28:10-13)

This is not phantasmagoric revelry. Jacob is seeing past the surface of the world to its deep structure. God is the inexhaustible source of all energy. This energy is embodied in the form of angels, and these angels go forth to create and sustain the complex and interlocking systems of the world. In this vision, Jacob sees how the spiritual and material worlds are connected. Through the agency of angels, God is manifest in the whole of the created order and no one, despite his or her life circumstances, is far from God.

Jesus refreshes this cosmology for believers of his day. We read of this encounter in the opening chapter of the Gospel of John:

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!'

Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?'

Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.'

Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'

Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

(John 1: 47-51)

Everyone in Nathanael's day knew of Jacob's vision and believed that there was a ladder by which the power of heaven made its way to earth. They believed that this power was embodied in the teaching of the Rabbis, the blessing of the Sons of God/angels, and the decrees of Kings. In this encounter, Jesus told Nathanael that he was more than all these divine agents. He was the ladder itself, the very one who connected heaven and earth.

All this movement both up and down the ladder was very real to medieval Christians. In their world, heaven, purgatory, earth, and hell all had observable locations. People could walk outside at night and see the moon and the so-called fixed stars, and they would know that purgatory existed just before the moon and that the abode of God was just beyond the fixed stars. People could look down at the earth and know that the fires of hell were at the center of it, these fires breaking out every now and then in the form of volcanoes.

There was no mystery as to where people went when they died, and the Church was the institution that opened the doors to both heaven and hell. It is hard for Christians today to imagine heaven and hell with fixed locations. But Christians in the middle ages could imagine them, and such imaginings made the biblical threats and promises very real and afforded the Church tremendous power in their lives.

A cosmology in which the power of heaven makes its way to earth through the stars on their crystalline orbits is one that we today would label primitive, and the study of such starry movements and the particular

blessings that they bestowed we would label astrology. But Galileo was such an astrologer as were the Christians of his day. They carefully charted the movement of stars in order to know their exact positions and therefore the nature of the power of God passing through them at any given time. In his book, the **Starry Messenger** (1610), Galileo wrote about his discovery of the moons of Jupiter. He dedicated the book to Cosimo II and wrote:

Who, I say, does not know that [clemency, gentleness, agreeableness, splendor, majesty, and authority] emanate from the most benign star of Jupiter, after God the source of all good? It was Jupiter, I say, who at Your Highness's birth, having already passed through the murky vapors of the horizon, and occupying the mid-heaven and illuminating the eastern angle from his royal house, looked down upon Your most fortunate birth from that sublime throne and poured out all his splendor and grandeur into the most pure air, so that with its first breath Your tender body and Your soul, already decorated by God with noble ornaments, could drink in this universal power and authority. (Sobel, **Galileo's Daughter**, 34)

One of the great ironies of history is that the careful observations of "astrologers" like Galileo and others would lead the way to the rise of the science of astronomy.

Tearing Down the Ladder

When Galileo took the spyglass, invented by the Dutch for the safe passage of ships on the seas, and turned it toward the starry heavens, he soon discovered that the cosmos was heliocentric and not geocentric. This discovery along with his later discovery of the laws of motion tore down the ladder between heaven and earth. He and others began to understand

matter and motion in new ways. Angels, the symbol of God's hand and power in the world for centuries, were seen as redundant and fabrications of primitive and superstitious people. One hundred years after Galileo, Baron Paul-Henri Thiry D'Holbach (1723-1789), trained at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands and friend of Diderot and Rousseau expressed the new, emerging cosmology with utmost clarity and confidence:

For a being formed by Nature, who is circumscribed by her laws, there exists nothing beyond the great whole of which he forms a part, of which he experiences the influence. The beings his imagination pictures as above Nature, or distinguished from her, are always chimeras formed after that which he has already seen. The universe, that vast assemblage of everything that exists, presents only matter and motion: the whole offers to our contemplation nothing but an immense and uninterrupted succession of causes and effects (System of Nature, 1770).

Christians have acquiesced to D'Holbach's assertion that the beings above nature are chimeras, projections into the heavens of things seen here on earth and to the notion that the world is a self-regulating mechanism consisting only of matter and motion. With the angels gone, with no ladder connecting heaven and earth, the medieval cosmology was shattered, and Christians cast about for a new one that could account for both the biblical witness concerning the created order and the secure findings of the emerging sciences.

Slowly over time Christians came to understand that the cosmos was divided into two non-overlapping spheres—a changeless, spiritual sphere

where God resides and a changeable, material sphere of matter and motion. And they came to understand that their lives were similarly divided into two non-overlapping spheres—a private, spiritual world of values and beliefs and a public, material world of fact and science. Many gave up probing how the spiritual and material spheres were connected, and some even doubled down on maintaining a strict division of worlds, arguing that any form of blending put one on the road to idolatry.

This cosmology fails at the most basic level, since it does not qualify as a “theory of everything.” It does not account for how all the great diversity of the cosmos coheres. All the king's horses and all the king's men have not been able to put a shattered, medieval cosmology together again. A cosmology of non-overlapping spheres does not help us understand how the hand of God touches the human heart or to explore how we might be part of something larger that God is accomplishing in the world. Having lost a sense of the presence of God and a corresponding purpose, we feel an anomie in our hearts and relationships and an apathy in the face of the degradation of the natural world. If, as the Scriptures affirm, the cosmos is full of the love of God (Psalm 33:5, 119:64), if the cosmos at the deepest level is a manifestation of a loving relationship between God, humankind, and the created order, then in this non-overlapping cosmology love in all its manifold relationships slowly dies. For as we all know, love requires touch.

This incoherent cosmology has impoverished our lives on many levels. For many Christians, salvation has become a personal transaction by which God frees our eternal souls from the prison of the material world and communes with us in some disembodied state somewhere out-there. We continue to recite, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only

son...,” but such a grand affirmation fails to register very deeply in our hearts or move us to act. Galileo was already leading the Church to see salvation this way. Trying to create space for scientific investigation of the natural world while still retaining the authority of Scripture, he advanced the argument of Cardinal Baronius: “The Holy Ghost [in the Scriptures] teaches us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go.”

This cosmology impoverishes our experience of worship for we are confused about what it means to come into the presence of God. This confusion is especially pronounced during the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. A key moment, for example, in the liturgy of the Lord’s Supper is the epiclesis: “Send your Holy Spirit upon us, we pray, that the bread which we break and the cup which we bless will be to us the body and blood of Christ.” Such a blending of the spiritual and material worlds is implausible to many Christians. In a world of matter and motion, bread is bread and wine is wine. Without the anticipation that the Spirit may actually show up in our sacrament, the Lord’s Supper becomes an empty ritual, and we walk away malnourished.

This cosmology impoverishes our experience of the created order. It accommodates the current economic arrangements by blessing the notion that the created order is raw material for manufacturing and consumption. When our consumptive fever is over, when the earth has become a landfill, when untold species have become extinct, we need not worry for we will fly away to heaven to be with Jesus. This attitude of Christians more than any other is the reason why they do not care about the pending environmental

collapse and do not respond to calls to save what is left of this once abundant world.

N.T. Wright calls the Church's cosmology of non-overlapping spheres, a deistic cosmology, and he too sees its danger for Christians:

Sadly the church colludes with this [deistic cosmology] because the church basically treats [salvation] as an escape from this world off to this distant God....In the Bible, God and the world, heaven and earth, mesh together and you find Jesus in the middle of that, you find the Bible in the middle of that, and you should find yourself in the middle of that. Part of the point of being a Christian is that we are living at those strange overlap points between heaven and earth. That is what prayer and the sacraments are all about; that is what ministering to the poor in Jesus' name is all about for as Jesus himself said, "If you do it to the least of these, you do it to me."

It seems to me that we need to unpack [this deistic cosmology] and to understand how we got to where we are...all that worldview baggage from the 18th and 19th centuries.

Again:

There is a distinction in Scripture between heaven and earth. But the thing about heaven and earth is that they are supposed to overlap and have an interesting, interlocking interplay with one another. They are never supposed to be apart. In Genesis God makes heaven and earth and it appears that humans are in the earth but God is around as well. Genesis is about God making a place for himself to dwell.... [If we assume that] God is out of the mix and we observe change happening, then it must be a change that has happened [without God

and] from within the processes of the world...development of an explicitly godless kind, God out of the picture kind.” (an interview in the documentary, **From the Dust**, produced by BioLogos}

Rebuilding the Ladder

The task before the Church is to do in our day what Christians in the middle ages did in theirs. We need to take the biblical witness about the created order and the secure findings of the sciences and blend them together in a cosmology that will help us recover a sense of God’s presence not only in the human heart but in the world. With the ongoing collapse of the created order and its capacity to sustain the life of all its flora and fauna, the stakes could not be higher.

Steven Hawking and many others have written popular books about the origins of the cosmos for the benefit of amateurs like me. Their research suggests that the universe began in a singularity, an incomprehensible concentration of energy. For reasons not yet known, this singularity flared forth and expanded in what is commonly called the “big bang.” As this energy expanded, it cooled and congealed into particles. These particles coalesced over 14 billion years into the various systems that interfaced to form the universe. These same systems on the planet earth interfaced over 4 billion years to produce and sustain the abundance of life as we know it. Hawking and others have told us an intriguing story about how energy became matter and how everything in our diverse universe coheres.

The fundamental image that Hawking and others have used in this story of the universe corresponds to the image that the people of Israel used thousands of years ago in their story of the universe. They too saw God as

the singular source of all that exists. God was a person whose heart burned with inexhaustible love—a bush burning and not being consumed being their guiding image. They saw this burning love flaring forth from the being of God and congealing to form the systems that created and sustained life on the earth. They believed that the world is a manifestation of the love of God; its air, water, and food were gifts of love sustaining our lives breath by breath, drink by drink, meal by meal. Inspired by this image, they were moved to confess that the love and glory of God filled the earth and to praise God for the gift of life.

The people of Israel offered three versions of this image of God's energetic love flaring forth:

- 1) the word of life. We find this image throughout the Scriptures but chiefly in the prophetic vision at the beginning of the Scriptures. In the Israelite creation story, God is a Sovereign sitting on a throne and surrounded by angels. God deliberates and speaks six words that flare forth from the mouth of God. The words of God were the breath/spirit of God and were articulated by the mouth of God to accomplish a specific desire of God. Each word is spoken on one day of the week, and each word creates a system. As the week progresses, these systems interface to create the abundance of life on earth.
- 2) the tree of life. Throughout the Scriptures, God is depicted as a Gardener and the world as the Garden of God. God plants seedlings, and they branch out to become great trees whose branches create space for all creatures and whose fruit feeds them. These seedlings are sometimes seen as individual people (Psalm 1), nations (Daniel

4; Ezekiel 17, 31), Jesus himself (John 15), and the church (Matthew 13: 31-32).

3) the river of life. Throughout the Scriptures, God's heart is depicted as a fountainhead (Jeremiah 2:13; Psalm 36:9) from which living water flows. Often, this river is depicted as flowing from the temple where God sits enthroned (Psalm 46, Revelation 22). The farther this river flows the broader and deeper it becomes. The river of life refreshes and fructifies everything it touches, the trees on its banks and fish in its depths (Ezekiel 47). It flowed freely at the beginning of time (Genesis 2) and will flow freely again at the end of time (Revelation 22).

The cosmology expressed in these biblical images suggest that the love of God flares forth and congeals in the created order. The spiritual and material spheres overlap. If we take this cosmology to heart, perhaps we can begin to expand our understanding of salvation, perhaps begin to experience the Spirit of God in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and perhaps begin to honor the created order as a gift of the love of God. Perhaps, just perhaps, we could be part of a reformation.