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The Heavens are Telling the Glory of God

JOHN T. WILLIS

Genesis 1–2 contain a well-organized coherent account of God’s creation of the world. In broad strokes, the speaker describes God’s fashioning light and darkness, sky with clouds, dry land with vegetation, sun, moon, and stars, flying and swimming creatures, land animals, and human beings. The variegated, complex marvels of the universe suddenly arrest the imagination of the hearer. Later biblical orators try to capture this masterful portrait and its incomparable architect with words like “glory” (*kabod*) and synonymous terms, such as majesty, beauty, and honor (Hebrew *hadar*, *hod*, *tip’arah/tip’eret*).

ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN SOCIO-CULTURAL SETTING

Communication is possible because speaker and hearer share a common vocabulary, thought processes, and experiences in the context of their socio-cultural practices and institutions. For example, people in the United States and some other countries use dollars and cents as currency, while Great Britain and certain other countries use pounds and shillings, and many European countries use euros.

It is a great challenge to any people to attempt to describe God. In order to do this, they turn to terminology associated with institutions that seem to capture important concepts of divinity. Ancient Near Eastern peoples typically felt and attributed highest honor to their kings and high officials. Israel is no different, drawing its language about God from several spheres of life, but especially the royal court. Hence the Hebrew Bible speaks of the “glory,” “honor,” “splendor,” and “majesty” which a people bestowed on such individuals. When Joseph, now second in command in Egypt (Gen 41.39–45; 45.8), reveals his identity to his brothers who have come to him for grain, he says: “You must tell my father how greatly I am *honored* [of all my *glory*] in Egypt” (Gen 45.13). Yahweh announces through Isaiah that Hilkiyah will replace Shebna as master of the palace of king Hezekiah, saying, “he will become a throne of *honor* [*glory*] to his ancestral house” (Isa 22.23). Elsewhere, the prophet announces that Yahweh will bring up against Judah “the king of Assyria and all his *glory*” (Isa 8.7). A psalmist praises Yahweh for exalting his anointed king in Jerusalem in these words:

[The king’s] *glory* is great through your [Yahweh’s] help;
splendor and majesty you bestow on him (Ps 21.5).

YAHWEH’S GLORY IN CREATION

The first two chapters of Genesis form a prose account of creation which their final author composed from earlier traditions. Although prose, these chapters exhibit poetic qualities. In particular, Genesis 1.1–2.4 consists of corresponding panels: the creation of light on the first day (1.3–5) corresponds to the creation of lights—sun, moon, stars—on the fourth day (1.14–19); the creation of sky to separate waters above it (clouds) from waters below it (oceans, rivers, lakes) on the second day (1.6–8) corresponds to the creation of birds and marine life on the fifth day (1.20–23); and the creation of dry land and vegetation on the third day (1.9–13) corresponds to the creation of land animals and human beings on the sixth day (1.24–31). Within

this section, there are repetitions of phrases and words, word plays like “man” (Hebrew *'adam*) and “ground” (Hebrew *'adamah*) in 2.7, and a compelling flow of thought which would hold the attention of any audience willing to listen. These two chapters’ author composed them probably for use in public worship to praise and glorify Yahweh for creating and sustaining all that is. T. E. Fretheim comments on 1.1–2.4a:

[Genesis 1], with its rhythmic cadences, has a certain doxological character. Hence, the material may have grown out of liturgical use and the regular round of the community’s praise of God the Creator (see Job 38.7) . . . [However,] we should not identify this chapter as an actual liturgy. While it may be identified as a didactic account, it has been shaped by liturgical use and worship interests.

Genesis 1.26, 28 affirm that God made human beings in his own image and that he gave them dominion (rule) over the rest of creation. Thus, human beings are God’s representatives on earth, and are to emulate God, the king of the universe, by ruling under his authority over the created order. Ps 8.5b–6a, expressing the same thoughts as Gen 1.26, 28, states that Yahweh “crowned them [human beings] with *glory* and honor, . . . and [gave] them dominion over the works of [his] hands.”

The Hebrew Bible repeatedly observes Yahweh’s *glory* everywhere in creation. This is a major theme in Psalm 29, which the psalmist apparently adapted from a Canaanite poem honoring Baal and applied to Yahweh, perhaps polemically. The poet describes a Palestinian thunderstorm which begins over the waters of the Mediterranean (vv. 3–4), moves inland and strikes the anti-Lebanon and Lebanon mountains (vv. 5–7), which deflect it southward along the Jordan valley until it reaches the wilderness of Kadesh (vv. 8–9), where it plays out. One emphasis in this psalm is Yahweh’s *glory*.

Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord *glory* and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the *glory* of his name;
worship the Lord in holy splendor.
The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of *glory* thunders,
the Lord, over mighty waters.
The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is full of majesty . . .
The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, ‘*Glory!*’” (vv. 1–4, 9).

Yahweh’s *glory* here is his “majesty” as king. The terms parallel to “*glory*” are “strength” (v. 1), “holy splendor” (v. 2), and “majesty” (v. 4); and just after the loud proclamation “*Glory!*” the psalmist declares:

The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
the Lord sits enthroned as king forever (v. 10).

Prophetic texts proclaim similar pictures of Yahweh. Isaiah 6.1–5 portrays Yahweh’s appearance to the prophet at the Jerusalem temple as “the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty,” “the King, the Lord of hosts” (vv. 1, 5). One of the attending seraphs called to another, saying:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his *glory* (v. 3).

Similarly, Ezekiel 1 contains a description of Yahweh's appearance to Ezekiel in the midst of a thunderstorm as one "seated above the likeness of a throne" (hence, as king; v. 26). The prophet's summary of this experience is: "This was the appearance of the likeness of the *glory* of the Lord" (v. 28). As king of all creation, Yahweh appears in "*glory*," in royal splendor.

The Hebrew Bible is very careful to avoid the notion that Yahweh's "*glory*" appears only "in" the universe he created. Instead, Yahweh's "*glory*" is "above" earth and heaven. The composer of Psalm 148 cries out to all heavenly and earthly creatures:

Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for his name alone is exalted;
his *glory* is above earth and heaven (v. 13).

Psalm 8 begins:

O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your *glory* above the heavens (v. 1).

Psalm 57 contains the chorus:

Be exalted, O God, above the heavens.
Let your *glory* be over all the earth (vv. 5, 11; see also Ps 113.4).

YAHWEH'S GLORY AND THE ARK, THE TABERNACLE, AND THE TEMPLE

The Hebrew Bible connects Yahweh's *glory* with the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle, and the Jerusalem temple. 1 Samuel 4 reports two battles between the Israelites and the Philistines, both of which the Philistines win. After the first battle, the Israelites send to Shiloh and have the priests, Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, bring from there to the battlefield "the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim" (v. 4). In the second battle, the Philistines capture the ark and take it to the temple of their god Dagon, symbolizing for them that Dagon had defeated Yahweh. When the pregnant wife of Phinehas hears that the Philistines had captured the ark, she goes into labor and bears a son. "She named the child Ichabod, meaning 'The *glory* has departed from Israel,' because the ark of God had been captured . . . She said, 'The *glory* has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured'" (vv. 21–22). Referring to this story, the composer of Psalm 78 declares:

He [Yahweh] abandoned his dwelling at Shiloh,
the tent where he dwelt among mortals,
and delivered his power to captivity,
his *glory* to the hand of the foe (vv. 60–61).

Yahweh's *glory* here is the ark of the covenant. The last portion of Psalm 24 describes a ritual in which priests carried the ark out of the temple through certain designated stations and finally returned it to its resting place in the Most Holy Place of the temple. As the priests approach the temple carrying the ark, a worship leader cries out:

Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the *King of glory* may come in.
Who is the *King of glory*?
The Lord, strong and mighty,

the Lord mighty in battle.
 Lift up your heads, O gates!
 and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
 that the *King of glory* may come in.
 Who is this *King of glory*?
 The Lord of hosts,
 he is the *King of glory* (vv. 7–10).

The language in these texts is striking. Yahweh is king, who rides in his throne-chariot (the ark) above (on, between) the cherubim, the handle used to lift the lid (mercy seat) off the ark (a small box which housed two stone tablets on which the ten commandments were inscribed). As “Lord of hosts,” Yahweh leads his angelic armies (Pss 103.19–21; 148.2) or the armies of Israel (1 Sam 17.45) or the armies of foreign nations (Jer 25.8–9) against his enemies to accomplish his purposes.

When the Israelites housed the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle (Exod 25.10–22; 37.1–9; 40.1–3, 20–21) and later of the Jerusalem temple (1 Kgs 8.1–13), the *glory of the Lord* “filled the tabernacle” so that Moses was not able to enter it (Exod 40.34–38), and it filled the temple so that the priests could not stand to minister in it (1 Kgs 8.9–11; 2 Chron 5.11–14; 7.1–3). Thus, Zion (Jerusalem), where the temple stands, is “the city of our God,” “His holy mountain,” “the city of the great King,” “the city of the Lord of hosts” (Ps 48.1–2, 8). When Yahweh can no longer tolerate the persistent sinful lifestyle of his people, he abandons the temple and Jerusalem, leaving it vulnerable to the Babylonian invasion. Ezekiel depicts this by saying that the “*glory of the Lord*” left the temple and the city (Ezek 10.4, 18–19; 11.22–23). After the Jews had been in exile many years, Ezekiel announces that the “*glory of the Lord*” will return from Babylon to Jerusalem and again “fill the temple” (Ezek 43.1–5; 44.4).

REFLECTIONS

The glory of the Lord is a major theological theme in the Hebrew Bible. Yahweh is both perceptible and imperceptible. Simultaneously, his creatures are well aware that he is present in the universe he created, but they cannot comprehend or explain or fully imagine his nature. “No one has ever seen God” (John 1.18), yet his majesty, his power, his holiness, his incomparability, his magnificence, his brilliance, his beauty, his sovereignty, his *glory* is everywhere. “The heavens are telling the *glory of God*” (Ps 19.1)—moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day, year by year. Who can behold a sunset without experiencing God’s *glory*? Who can observe a thunderstorm without experiencing God’s *glory*? Who can gaze on a rainbow without experiencing God’s *glory*? Who can view streams of sunlight glittering through the leaves of a mountain forest or thousands of twinkling stars on a dark and cloudless night without experiencing God’s *glory*? The natural world constantly evokes a sense of awe and wonder because the Lord is there. It is his home, and so his *glory* dwells in it. “The whole earth is full of his *glory*” (Isa 6.3). The doxology at the end of Book II of the Psalter is similar:

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
 who alone does wondrous things.
 Blessed be his *glorious* name forever;
 may his *glory* fill the whole earth.
 Amen and Amen (Ps 72.18–19).

And Ps 85.9 declares:

Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
 That his *glory* may dwell in our land.

God's *glory* surrounds human beings continuously in a plethora of natural phenomena, the only appropriate response to which is worship. God's *glory* fills the tabernacle, and later the Jerusalem temple. Hence, the natural response to God in the temple is worship. Several psalms call on God's creatures to stand in awe of him, revere him, worship him, praise him for his *glory*. The composer of Psalm 63 begins his prayer:

O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you,
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and *glory* (vv. 1–2).

Similarly, the author of Psalm 66 begins his poem:

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;
sing the *glory* of his name;
give to him *glorious* praise (vv. 1–2).

The composer of Psalm 145.5, 10–12 proclaims:

On the *glorious splendor* of your *majesty*,
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate . . .
All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord,
and all your faithful shall bless you.
They shall speak of the *glory* of your kingdom,
and tell of your power,
to make known to all people your mighty deeds,
and the *glorious splendor* of your kingdom.

Psalm 96.3 and 7–8 express similar ideas:

Declare his *glory* among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples . . .
Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the Lord *glory* and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the *glory* due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts.

Just as God's *glory* inspires worship, genuine appreciation for God's *glory* also inspires godly living. Isaiah 3.8 states:

For Jerusalem has stumbled
and Judah has fallen,
because their speech and their deeds are against the Lord,
defying his *glorious* presence.

Isaiah 58.6–8 promises that “the *glory* of the Lord shall be [the] rear guard” of those who oppose injustice, feed the hungry, house the poor, and clothe the naked. The speaker in Psalm 26 (vv. 4–5, 8–10) declares:

I do not sit with the worthless,
 nor do I consort with hypocrites;
 I hate the company of evildoers,
 and will not sit with the wicked . . .
 O Lord, I love the house in which you dwell,
 and the place where your *glory* abides.
 Do not sweep me away with sinners,
 nor my life with the bloodthirsty,
 those in whose hands are evil devices,
 and whose right hands are full of bribes.

Proverbs 14.31 says succinctly:

Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker,
 But those who are kind to the needy *honor* him.

Various New Testament passages teach the same. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give *glory* to your Father in heaven” (Matt 5.16). Paul writes in 1 Cor 6.19–20: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit with you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore *glorify* God in your body.” And in 1 Cor 10.31, he writes: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the *glory* of God.” Again he says in Phil 1.9–11: “And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the *glory* and praise of God.”

Genesis 1–2 describe in masterful language and memorable pictures the magnificence of creation, which reflects the *glory* and power and wisdom of its Creator. As God finished each work, he saw that it was “good”: just right for its own purpose and in relationship to all the rest as well as very beautiful or *glorious*. The biblical proclamation of God’s *glory* emphasizes that Yahweh, the Creator, is king over all his creation, that majesty and power and splendor and magnificence radiate from him, and that his brilliance is the proper motivation for human praise and godly living. Numerous Christian hymns and praise songs exalt God’s *glory*. One appropriate song is “O Worship the King,” the first verse of which says:

O worship the King, all *glorious* above,
 And gratefully sing His wonderful love;
 Our Shield and Defender, the Ancient of Days,
 Pavilioned in *splendor* and girded with praise.

May God’s *glory* motivate all who seek to please and serve him to worshipful praise and godly living.

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