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The Person of God (Worldview—Biblical Theology)

A. Theme: The Person of God

*Sub-themes:

- *God as a distinct person and subject
- *God as savior
- *The relentlessness of God
- *The love of God New
- *The mercy of God

B. Purpose

Demonstrate the revolutionary distinctiveness of the Christian God, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, and by extension the uniqueness of the (Judeo-) Christian faith.

C. Evangelism, Apologetics, Education

This series offers a great opportunity to equip Christians to interact with other religions and to invite non-Christians to consider the person of Jesus Christ, who most intensely wishes to enter into a relationship with men and women.

D. Themes

Message 1

Theme: The love of God

What is love?

The difference between love and kindness (see *The Problem of Pain* by C. S. Lewis: Chapter 3, Divine Goodness)

Love seeks the good of the loved one, whereas kindness is too often the expression of a need to do good, whether it truly benefits the object of the action or not. Much of so-called charity work these days is not truly concerned about the real welfare of the recipient.

The unconditional love of God who responds to those who cry to him even when they have clearly messed up. See Psalm 107:1-19.

The love and mercy of God are intricately connected, but this first message could emphasize one aspect in the first (God's fundamental drive: "God is love"). The second aspect could be emphasized in an ulterior message (ex. the extension of God's grace to those who don't deserve it).

One can hardly speak about the love of God without alluding to its greatest expression: the death of Christ. On this point, a word of caution. The death of

Christ needs to be emphasized in terms of dealing with human sin. Increasingly, the death of Christ is viewed simply as a peaceful model of response to violence. While the concept is helpful, to reduce the significance of the death of Christ to a moral example, is to do a great disservice to the significance of this event.

Though we don't understand the precise reasons that required this action, the death of Christ was necessary to deal with the far-reaching consequences of the introduction of Sin in the universe. In order to heal the cosmic rift caused by human disobedience, an extraordinary process had to be put into place. The only process that could mend the damage subjected by the universe (see Romans 8:19-22) and human nature was wrapped in the incarnation of the Son of God, his death, and his resurrection. To reduce the imperative of the incarnation and the death of Jesus to the level of a moral lesson is to inflict a grave prejudice to the New Testament understanding of the significance of Christ's sacrifice.

Message 2

Theme: The Person of God

Genesis 1:1. A revolutionary understanding of God.

This text represents the foundation of a new worldview designed to compete with the Mesopotamian understanding of God, human nature, and the universe. To get an idea of the direction in which this message can proceed, I have excerpted a page from an article I wrote for *Direction* a few years ago (see Annex 1). My book, *Demons, Lies & Shadows. A Plea for a Return to Text and Reason* (pp. 45ff.) also presents a detailed survey of this text and its theological implications.

The relevance of this approach is linked to the tendency human beings have to develop ideologies that essentially tend to reproduce the old Mesopotamian worldview in one way or another: creation of false gods, collapse of human dignity, deification of the universe (radical environmentalism is well on its way in terms of a new articulation of pantheism today).

Message 3

Theme: The Mercy of God

Psalm 107 is a great text, because it is so much in our face and goes against the way we would naturally deal with those who get into messes through their own stupidity. There are, of course, also many New Testament texts that can be used.

We can never say enough about the mercy of God. It goes against the human grain. Human religions are not built on grace; they are built on two delusions: 1) that the living God is like a coke machine, a retribution machine that requires and demands the flesh and the blood of his slaves to live; 2) that we can somehow buy off the ravenous gods of the cosmos.

Men and women have an innate fear of the living God and will go to extraordinary lengths to create non-entities that are more to their liking even if they, in the end, are but vulgar blood suckers (there is a reason behind the lasting

popularity and the power of the Dracula myth!). The concept of God's mercy is what most often brings men and women from non-Christian backgrounds to Christ. These two delusions also explain why Christians tend to develop ever new forms of legalisms.

Men and women need to be reminded that though sin and death are intrinsic to their nature, they can live with confidence because of the mercy of God made possible by the sacrifice of Christ. The notion of God's mercy is the easiest thing in the world to neglect and forget. And once we do, those of us who are not so good naturally, rapidly become overwhelmed with guilt and a profound sense of failure. Those who have experienced massive failures in their lives need to be constantly reminded of God's love and mercy. It's literally life and death for them.

Message 4

Theme: The Relentless God. A Study of the Prophet Jonah.

When everything is said and done, there is nothing unusual about Jonah. His reaction and behavior represent the default position found in most of us. We too flee from the living God and prefer to find solace and comfort in the feeble constructions of our imagination. Were it not for that little word "BUT", we would hopelessly and inexorably slide into the black hole of our self-made delusions. This simple conjunction signals the constant intervention of this "annoying" God who, through his Spirit, passionately intervenes to rescue humanity (for more details, see my article on Jonah at: <http://www.cmu.ca/faculty/pgilbert/articles/index.shtml>).

Annex 1

Two Key Concepts from Genesis 1-3

Excerpted from “The Third Wave Worldview: A Biblical Critique,” *Direction* 29, 153-168 (<http://www.directionjournal.org/article/?1055>).

A BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW: THE CREATION ACCOUNT

I suggested earlier that the theology of the Third Wave movement should be examined and critiqued at the level of its worldview and not simply in terms of the social acceptability of specific demon-casting practices in any one community. In an effort to outline the basic tenets of a biblical worldview, I have decided first to examine Genesis 1-3.

While such a limited sample of the biblical text may seem restrictive, it is justified because of the literary nature and function of these chapters. Although it is not feasible here to present a comprehensive {158} proof, it is my contention that these texts are foundational and that biblical theology as a whole reflects the principles they contain. The following discussion is intended to clarify this assertion.

The Purpose of the Creation Story

In order to understand the presence of the creation story in the book of Genesis, it is necessary to provide some background information about the role such stories played in the ancient world. Creation stories are not unique to Hebrew literature. We find many of them in the ancient Near East, particularly in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Beyond that, they are found in every period of history and in every culture. These stories are generally called *myths*. In popular language, myth usually denotes something which is false. When scholars refer to myths in ancient cultures, however, they refer to stories which essentially provide a comprehensive and coherent view of the origin of the universe, the nature of the divine, and the origin and destiny of humankind. These stories are extremely important for they give us an insight into the very heart of a people’s worldview.

The creation story found in Genesis 1-3 plays a similar role and came into being in a very specific context. According to Exodus 5:22 through 6:8,¹⁰ Moses was given a twofold mandate: (1) to deliver the Hebrew people from the Egyptians, and (2) to communicate to this new people the essence of who Yahweh was so that the Israelites might adopt him as their God. The first part of this mandate was relatively simple, but the second part was considerably more complex, for it involved a change of mind-set, a change of heart, and ultimately a

change of worldview. This was necessary, for it appears that the Hebrews in Egypt had essentially adopted a pagan worldview.¹¹

If this is the case, then one needs to realize that Moses had to transmit to his people much more than a few truths about this new God. He had to communicate a new worldview which would in fact compete with the Hebrews' understanding of the gods, the universe, and themselves. In a real sense, the creation story is a polemical text; it is designed to persuade the recipients of the validity of the concepts associated with the new worldview which is being presented to them.

If the biblical creation story was in fact designed to provide an alternative worldview, then what was it competing against? What was the belief system the Hebrews had come to accept? It is very likely that the Israelites in Egypt had adopted the cosmology commonly found in Canaan and Mesopotamia in ancient times. The essential elements of the Mesopotamian worldview can be gleaned from different kinds of documents but are most readily found in ancient Mesopotamian myths. {159}

The most widely-known creation myths of the Ancient Near East are the Atrahasis and the Enuma Elish.¹² These stories teach that the universe was created in conflict, war, and violence and that human beings were conceived to be slaves in the service of the gods. According to these myths, the gods are fundamentally evil and unpredictable. Furthermore, human beings have no ultimate value: their fate is determined by the gods and by anonymous forces in the universe; their existence is characterized by uncertainty and fear; there is hope neither in this life nor in the one to come. The life of the average Mesopotamian is ultimately devoid of meaning. It is significant to note that the biblical creation story is indeed *good news* in that it provides a revolutionary understanding of creation, the universe, God, and humanity.¹³

Two Key Concepts from Genesis 1-3

There are two critical concepts in Genesis 1-3 which deserve to be highlighted.

The Demythologization of the Universe. By its constant emphasis on the nature and function of the physical elements of the universe, whether it is referring to the sun, the stars, the moon, the waters, or the other elements of nature, the creation story strongly affirms that the universe is “object” and not “subject.” Whereas the physical universe is perceived as the medium of divine essence in Mesopotamian cosmology, in the biblical creation account, the physical universe is devoid of consciousness. According to the narrative, the

universe is not populated by evil powers bent on the disruption of human life, and physical objects in no way represent the essence of the divine. In the biblical story, the universe is no longer an object of worship, fear, or terror. By its repeated reference to the “goodness” of creation, the author explicitly proclaims that humanity lives in a friendly universe.

The immediate implication of this text is that magic does not exist.¹⁴ Further, objects have no power in and of themselves and thus cannot mediate conscious and sentient evil influence. The notion that magic can mysteriously influence human life was one of the beliefs the author of the creation account was attempting to counteract. Moses could not have been more explicit. By emptying the physical universe of its divinities, Moses was in fact destroying the very existence of magical power and the possibility of manipulating it. In effect he declares, “A piece of wood is just a piece of wood!”¹⁵ (see Isa. 44:13-19).

The Nature of Humanity. In Mesopotamia, human existence has no ultimate significance. Humanity is created in order to be slaves of the gods. The Genesis account states the exact opposite. According to {160} Genesis 1, the creation of the universe is the result of the peaceful and benevolent intention of God. There is no hint whatsoever of conflict, violence, or war. Human beings are not created to serve as mindless slaves but to be God’s representatives (Gen. 1:26-31) and his partners in shaping and managing the world (Gen. 2:15-17). Far from being the victims of the powers of the universe, the account of the “Fall” in Genesis 3:1-24 proclaims humanity’s freedom and ability to shape its future. Once again, we have concepts in these chapters which run deeply against the Mesopotamian ideology.

An Alternative Worldview

It will be helpful to present briefly some of the basic worldview implications of Genesis 1-3. The portrait which follows also borrows from the biblical wisdom tradition, a tradition which exhibits both worldview issues and creation theology.¹⁶

1. The universe is created good by a benevolent God. The universe is ordered, predictable, and meaningful. The environment is not something to fear but the very expression of a generous God.
2. The creation of the universe finds its origin in the intention of a good God and not in a primordial, violent cosmic conflict.
3. Human beings are created with fundamental dignity and basic freedom with respect to God.

4. Human beings are responsible for their actions.
5. Human fate is in the hands of God but also in our capacity to choose that which leads to life or death.
6. Sin and the results of sin are the consequences of human choice. If sin affects us both at the level of our humanity and of human existence, it does not, however, rob us of our basic human dignity and our ability to choose God (see Gen. 4:6-7).
7. Human beings are called to embrace life.
8. The authority to determine what leads to life or to death resides in the discernment of the community of God's people. Human beings do not discern that which is true from false by consulting some guru, by drawing a precise list of dos and don'ts, by some magical formula, or in the realm of some unverifiable esoteric experience. Discerning the true from the false is more often the result of an intentional, conscious, and reasonable process.¹⁷
9. Prayer. Genesis 2:15-17 teaches that human beings are created to be in partnership with God. Humanity is given the mandate to be God's "image," i.e., to represent the suzerain God on the earth (Gen. 1:26). {161} As such, men and women are expected to be in constant consultation with God; this I take to be the basic purpose of praying. This consultation must be present at all the levels of human experience, such as the discernment of our role and sustenance in God's projects, and special strength and wisdom in times of crisis. The Bible recognizes the possibility of conflict, opposition, and difficulties in regards to life in general and the work of the kingdom in particular. That is probably what the New Testament authors mostly refer to when they allude to spiritual warfare (e.g., Eph. 6:12; 1 Pet. 5:8). The constant response to this in the biblical text is prayer to God, not rituals designed to "bind" or "limit" the work of evil spirits in our affairs (Phil. 4:4-8).
10. Prayer or Healing Ritual. Human beings have a basic need for some form of ritual in their lives, particularly in the difficult periods. My suspicion is that many people who practice deliverance ministries plug into this fundamental human need. James provides one such ritual in 5:13-16 which can be used in cases where there is an urgent need to invoke God's special intervention. The formula suggested by James for dealing with these kinds of situations could perhaps be adapted for dealing with suspected cases of demon possession or oppression. The approach would not presume on the real cause of the illness, but it would involve the community (such as the

elders) and a rational and sincere conversation about one's spiritual condition ("if he has sinned, he will be forgiven," James 5:15 NRSV).