

Reflections on Joseph Haydn's Creation Oratorio



Fig. 1: Portrait of Joseph Hayden by Thomas Hardy, 1791.

RADU GHEORGHITA

*Associate Professor of Biblical Studies
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Kansas City, MO 64118
rgheorghita@mbs.edu*

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”

There are few phrases in the history of civilization that can match the impact of the first stitch of the Hebrew Scriptures. The entirety of Judeo-Christian belief, practice, and values has its origin in and foundation on this axiomatic statement that stands as an imposing gateway to the Scriptures. These words had been so deeply etched in the mindset of Second Temple Judaism, especially in the thought of the New Testament writers, that John the Evangelist even borrowed them for the opening statement of his Gospel. *ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.* (In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God) is an unmistakable echo of the Septuagintal form of Genesis 1:1,

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. It would have been difficult to find a more suitable parallel by which the Evangelist could have pointed out that the new Creation he was to herald in his Gospel was meant to redeem and restore the first Creation through the life and work of Jesus, the One and Only Son of God.

An echo of this millenary phrase, this time in a different language, “*Am Anfang schuf Gott Himmel und Erde,*” and, indeed, employing a different medium of communication—music—can be clearly heard in “*Die Schöpfung*” (The Creation), the Oratorio of Joseph Haydn, whose life and work was commemorated in 2009, the bicentennial of Haydn's death.

The Creation narrative of Genesis 1—the primary source for the Oratorio—reveals a message of such profundity that generation after generation has been challenged to grasp its meaning and explore its significance. The idea of a magnificent and fascinating universe created by God is repeated numerous times in the canonical writings of the Jewish Scriptures. It is developed along liturgical lines in the book of the Psalms—the second major source of inspiration for the Oratorio—to be used in the prayers and praise of God's people. Furthermore, it is explored as a major theme in the corpus of wisdom literature, especially in the books of Proverbs and Job. Prophetic literature continues to sound the creation account, often alluding to it as the legitimate and logical foundation on which the legal disputes between God, as the creator and the covenant giver, and the people of Judah and Israel, the two kingdoms marred by moral decline and apostasy, must be settled.

The theme of Creation emerges again under various facets in the vast treasure of Judaic extracanonical writings and Western literature. Its footprints can be found anywhere, from the Targumic literature, the paraphrased translation of the Hebrew Scriptures in Aramaic, through the riches of the reflections on creation found in the Jewish Writings of the Second Temple, including, but not limited to Philo, Josephus, the Book of Jubilees, to the various treatments in the literature of the Western Civilization, such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost*—the third major source of inspiration for the text of the Oratorio.

The Creation Oratorio, which Haydn composed between 1796 and 1798, offers the audience a masterpiece “in the image and after the likeness” of the Creation narrative in the book of Genesis.¹ It is a

¹ Needless to say, there are scores of exceptional recordings of the Creation Oratorio. While no recording can match the impact of a good live performance,

musical icon that reflects the majesty and the grandeur of the creator God and of His Creation. Just as “the heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps 19:1), a verse taken up in perhaps the most well-known chorus of the Oratorio, *Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes* (The heavens declare the glory of God), Haydn offered his contemporaries the words and sounds they can employ in their own act of glorifying God. They are summoned to stand in awe and to voice their gratitude for God’s handiwork, an invitation extended nowhere more incisively than in the lively chorus of the tenth movement, *Stimmt an die Saiten!* (Awake the harp!).

The Oratorio has so many memorable movements that to mention just a few of them would do great injustice to the masterpiece as a whole. Consideration of space, however, leaves no other option than to focus on a representative selection. After the daunting overture, *Die Vorstellung des Chaos* (The Representation of Chaos) the first movement depicts the very moment in which God created the light, with an impact on the audience unsurpassed by any other passage in the annals of classical music. When the choir’s fortissimo on “*Licht*” (Light) erupts into the hitherto pianissimo “*Und der Geist Gottes schwebte auf der Fläche der Wasser,*” (And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters), no listener can be left unstirred. Similarly, the creation of the sun and the moon, the twelfth movement *In vollem Glanze steigt jetzt die Sonne* (In full splendor the sun is now rising), juxtaposes the radiant sunrise with the gentle moonrise, proving again that music can create by its own language the same awe-inspiring experience as the visual splendor of a beautiful sunrise or moonlight. The twenty-fourth movement, *Mit Würd' und Hoheit angetan* (In native worth and honor clad), the aria dedicated to the creation of man and woman, marks another highlight of the Oratorio and continues to be a cherished treasure of any tenor’s repertoire.

The Oratorio discloses a God full of majesty, glory, power and wisdom, perhaps best depicted by the chorus at the end of Day Five, *Der Herr ist groß in seiner Macht* (The Lord is great in his might). This is the God before whom the only appropriate answer from his creatures is one of praise, adoration, exultation, trust and obedience, summed up beautifully in the pair of choruses marking the end of Creation, the closing movements of Part Two, *Vollendet ist das große Werk* (The great work is complete).

there are several classic interpretations that deserve attention. Among them, my personal favorites are those of John Eliot Gardiner, with the Monteverdi Choir and the English Baroque Soloists, and of Herbert von Karajan, with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, both of them released under the Deutsche Grammophon label.

The Genesis narrative of Creation, which provides the content and the form for the Oratorio, was born in a context of ideological crises similar to those that confront modern man. The Jewish people, newly redeemed from Egyptian slavery, found themselves in the wilderness where their character and allegiance to God would be tested and tried. These experiences were intended to forge in them the qualities, both individually and communally, needed not only to enter the Promised Land, but also to survive there. Both the land of Egypt, which they were leaving behind, as well as the land of Canaan, the place waiting to be conquered, were quintessentially pagan contexts. The cultures were infused with beliefs and myths of Creation that were in direct conflict with the worldview God would shape for his people, Israel. In order to survive as a nation, the political liberation just achieved had to be founded on a cosmogony decontaminated by the cosmologies of the Egyptian or Canaanite pantheons. A people's cosmogony ultimately embodies the central tenet around which the entirety of their religious life will gravitate. As Bruce Waltke contends,

At the heart of Moses' creation theology lies this revolutionary message: One personal, benevolent God overcomes a primordial chaos of an abyss blanketed in darkness to create a habitable world and its inhabitants. ... He creates and sustains it all by the power of his own being. This assertion that God is the Creator of all that is good and Ruler of the universe is the ultimate statement of the creation narrative. He is just, righteous, and faithful on behalf of what is good.²

In a very profound way, the message of the Creation narrative in Genesis, echoed by Haydn's Oratorio, is every bit as actual and necessary now during Haydn's memorial year, as it has always been, not least because 2009 happened to be Charles Darwin's commemorative year as well. The Austrian composer died in the same year that the father of the theory of evolution, Charles Darwin, was born.

The Oratorio in its own way can very effectively reclaim lost ground in the dispute between the biblical worldview described in Genesis and the worldview based on the theory, or more precisely, the philosophy of evolution. This philosophy, atheistic to its core, has been aggressively and systematically pushed as the norm in all walks of life. It completely eliminates God from all considerations: he is neither the creator nor

²Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 176.

sustainer of his creation. Those who embrace it are offered instead a world and a universe conducted by impersonal and random laws, with no absolutes, moral or otherwise, with neither origin nor destiny. Its so-called good news cannot amount to more than the depressing message that we are simply a rearrangement of ever-present matter, not qualitatively different than the essential elements that characterized the chaos at the moment God's active word brings forth his creation according to his divine purpose.

It is surprising that Haydn stopped after the first two chapters of Genesis, and gave no thought to the fateful chapter three. He restrained his perspective to present a world "that was very good," one in which the reality of sin was completely absent, although faintly anticipated in the last, deeply wistful recitative:

*O glücklich Paar, und glücklich immerfort,
Wenn falscher Wahn euch nicht verführt,
Noch mehr zu wünschen als ihr habt,
Und mehr zu wissen als ihr sollt!*

Oh, happy pair! and happy evermore
if false conceit will not tempt you
to desire more than what you already have
and to know more than what you should.

This conditional promise made to Adam and Eve was left unfulfilled due to their disobedience. Thus the world that was repeatedly declared to be "very good" in Genesis 1 becomes, after only three chapters, a world blighted by curse, pain, suffering, and death.

In Christian Theology, the undoing of this archetypal disobedience of Genesis 3 was entrusted to Christ. In Him and through Him, the God of the First Creation has engaged unequivocally all the malefic forces that have marred it and has decreed to redeem it as his New Creation. The reality of this new Creation is amply described in John's Apocalypse, the closing book of the Christian canon. The message with which the book ends, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth..." (Rev 21:1), depend heavily on the Genesis 1-3, which are now read from a distinctly Christian perspective. The whole of Creation that was systematically and profusely tainted by sin will once and for all be redeemed from sin, decay, and death. In the new heaven and new earth, the curse will be replaced with blessing, death with life, tears with joy, and foremost the sun and moon and the Temple itself will be replaced with the very presence of God in the midst of his redeemed people, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, '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' ” (Rev. 21:3, ESV).

It would be an unpardonable mistake to end these reflections without mentioning the third remarkable personality commemorated in 2009, the French Reformer Jean Calvin, born in 1509. From his thinking emerged one of the most memorable formulas describing the destiny of humankind, echoed in the Westminster shorter catechism. The first question in the catechism “What is the destiny of man? receives its answer “to praise God and enjoy him forever.” That is precisely the theme and purpose of the last chorus in the Oratorio, *Singt dem Herren alle Stimmen!* (Sing the Lord, all you voices), ending in a double fugue on the words “*Des Herren Ruhm, er bleibt in Ewigkeit*” (The Lord's praise will endure forever).

A thoughtful engagement with Haydn's Oratorio will help the audience to embrace this truth. When it does so, the musical heritage left by Haydn climaxed in his Creation Oratorio would most certainly have found its *raison d'être*.



Dr. Georghita punting in front of King's College, Cambridge