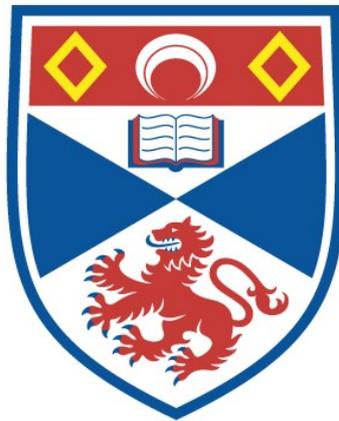


CREATION PRAISE : FROM PSALMODY TO TRADITIONAL  
HYMNODY

William David Watt

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MPhil  
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to Traditional Hymnody**

**William David Watt**



**MPhil**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the types of creation imagery used in the Psalms, looking at the historical and cultural influences that affected the Old Testament concepts encapsulated in this Psalmody, and at how traditional creation hymnody has incorporated and modified these concepts.

The first chapter examines creation psalmody and argues that there is an overall inclusiveness to be found in such Psalms, where God is viewed as working through the whole of creation and that such Psalms are generally less anthropocentric than some other Biblical texts. This immanent approach is particularly evident through the Old Testament concept of Creator Spirit.

Creation hymns are discussed in the three chapters that follow, focusing firstly on hymns of seed-time and harvest, secondly on hymns of the Holy Spirit, and thirdly on hymns with a christological perspective that deal with the main Christian Festivals around Christmas and Easter. In examining rogation-tide hymns and May Day carols, the seed-time and harvest chapter finds many similarities to the images used in creation psalmody, as well as imagery from the old traditional May Day festivals which pre-date Christianity in Britain but which contain a similar kind of natural spirituality to the Old Testament concepts of Creator Spirit. The Harvest Festival hymns, on the other hand, tend to take a more anthropocentric approach, but nevertheless do contain some of the immanent approaches from the Old Testament, in particular the Hebrew Harvest Festival. Chapter 3 examines hymns of the Holy Spirit, and I argue that it is in these hymns that we can find a more fully developed immanent type of theology. Chapter 4

looks at the christological perspectives to the natural world to be found in traditional hymnody, examining in more detail the areas of transcendence and immanence and the implications of the inevitable anthropocentric viewpoint to be found in these texts. I argue in this chapter that it is possible to take a wider and more contemporary theological interpretation of this type of hymnody, and that by doing this we find these hymns amenable to a more inclusive approach to creation as a whole.

The thesis concludes by considering the implications of this analysis for worship in the twenty first century.

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## Prologue

In this thesis, I will aim to examine the types of creation imagery used in the psalms, and then to see how these are reflected in a selection of traditional hymns.

I will start by looking at examples of creation psalmody, which in some cases are some of the oldest texts in the Hebrew culture. We will explore the world-view exemplified in these psalms in an attempt to elucidate the concepts of the ancient Near East. By examining them, I will attempt to find out how the interplay between God and creation is exemplified through this genre. I will attempt to establish how these psalms viewed the activity of God in creation and the natural world and his relationship with it. It will be important to establish whether or not they view God as being closely related within the whole of creation or more distant and separated from the natural world, i.e. do they view God as immanent within creation, part of everything that exists, or do they view God in a transcendent way, as a creator who is removed from the world, but imposes a kind of order onto the world from afar? In other words, I will aim to establish the relationship between God the creator and the natural world, as depicted in the psalms. I will also try to elucidate different ways in which they see God as being linked to the world.

Once we have established the concepts in creation psalmody, and to some extent identified the major differences and similarities between that world-view and ours in the present day, we will then go on to look at some traditional creation hymns and examine to what extent they pick up on such notions. I will attempt to establish how they have adopted and adapted the concepts from the creation psalmody to make them equate to the current beliefs at the time. It will also be interesting to see what there is

to learn by examining the images of these hymns through a hermeneutic approach based on the older images from the psalmody.

To examine the hymns, I have decided to divide them into three main categories of creation hymnody, which are:

1. hymns of seed-time and harvest
2. hymns of the Holy Spirit
3. hymns with a christological perspective.

I will start by looking at how the relationship between God and creation is reflected in the hymns of seed-time and harvest as I anticipate that this genre of creation hymnody will be found not only to contain some of the oldest images but also to be fundamentally most similar to the creation psalmody.

I will then move on to hymns dealing with the Holy Spirit, a large number of which are hymns for the season of Pentecost and will aim to elucidate how they have adopted and adapted the older imagery based in creation psalmody and similar concepts elsewhere. The area of the Holy Spirit is of fundamental importance to creation, for, as we shall see, the Old Testament links the creative process closely with the spirit of God, and the Creator Spirit was viewed as fundamental to life.

The final section will then go on to look at christological perspectives found in traditional hymnody. I will look at a selection of Advent and Christmas hymns, and then at some Easter hymns and will attempt to elucidate how such hymns portray the coming, birth, life and resurrection of Christ as affecting the whole of creation. We will see how these hymns view Christ as being connected with creation and the natural

world, and will investigate what the main differences are between this genre of hymns and the others examined.

We will consider how all these hymns show the interplay and balance between God and the natural world: the different ways in which they have viewed him as being involved as creator and moreover how creation is viewed as responding to God. We will examine the main differences between the different types of hymnody in this area, for example the balance between the importance of the relationship between humans and God and between the natural world and God. It can also be the case that hymnody sometimes reflects the beliefs amongst the people at grass-roots level, more than theological creeds or statements of belief do. Therefore, it will be interesting to see if we can glimpse some of this through examining the hymn texts here.

I believe that this area of hymnody is one of the most important themes in our worship. There is a contemporary return to ecological issues and a concern for the whole of creation. So in this thesis, we will examine the important issues that arise, and what we can learn from traditional creation hymnody.

## Chapter 1

### Creation in the Psalms

#### Introduction

The psalms are the oldest tradition of hymns and poetry extant in Christianity. Many scholars think some of the psalms may pre-date Christianity by up to three thousand years. With this in mind, it is important to recognise that this idiom of praise comes from a vastly different culture to our own, and for that matter a culture that was quite different from the culture of the early Greek church, which was later to influence much of Western thinking. Nevertheless, the early church accepted the use of psalmody (within part of Old Testament scripture), and psalms ever since have had immeasurable influence on the church's praise.

There are many psalms which speak of creation, but due to the antiquity of these texts, the meaning is often obscured, not only by time, but also by the changing ideology of the Hebrew culture and the early Christian church. It is clear that different layers of thinking can be seen in psalmody and that the images have taken on new meanings with time and the changing cultural traditions. Therefore, if we are to gain insight into the myriad of possible creation images that are to be found in the psalms, we must in this section take a cross-cultural perspective. The psalms as a collection of poems may well cover at least a thousand years of history of the Israelite culture and due to such a vast time span we can see changing approaches to the belief system of God and how he 'acts' in creation. So the book of Psalms as a whole can prove fertile ground to show the different approaches in this area. We have here by no means a single, systematic philosophical system. Many of the psalms which deal with creation come from pre-

exilic times and show some of the very early concepts of how God acts in creation, and yet other later psalms show a more systematic approach, so this chapter will identify and categorise the main creation themes in the Psalter. I will start by looking at the general psalms of praise which take an inclusive, holistic approach to nature.

### **The general inclusiveness of the creation Psalms**

There are many Psalms that speak of creation in a far more inclusive way than the Genesis text, a concept which can be seen occurring in other areas of the Old Testament. As Marshall<sup>1</sup> points out, although the Hebrew tradition is thoroughly anthropocentric, the Old Testament is more holistic in its creation imagery than the New Testament. For example:

... in Hebrew thought, in the category of living beings – *nefesh hayya* – humans are included with beasts, birds, fishes and insects. .... In reality, Jews never discounted nature as wholly bad and corrupt. They believed that morals could be derived from nature, and that the monogamy of the dove, for instance, could be a model for humanity. (p.103).

Two Psalms which give excellent examples of this type of inclusive creation imagery are Psalms 148 and 150:

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1 Marshall, P. (1992). *Nature's web: an exploration of ecological thinking*. London: Simon & Schuster.

## Psalm 148

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1 Praise ye the Lord<br>Praise the Lord from the heavens:                        | 8 Fire, and hail: snow and vapours;<br>Stormy wind fulfilling his word:         |
| 2 Praise ye Him, all his angels:<br>Praise ye Him, all his hosts                 | 9 Mountains, and all hills;<br>Fruitful trees, and all cedars;                  |
| 3 Praise ye Him, sun and moon:<br>Praise him, all ye stars of light.             | 10 Beasts and all cattle;<br>Creeping things and flying fowl.                   |
| 4 Praise Him, ye heavens of heavens,<br>And ye waters that be above the heavens. | 11 Kings of the earth, and all people;<br>Princes, and all judges of the earth. |
| 7 Praise the Lord from the earth,<br>Ye dragons, and all deeps.                  | 12 Both young men, and maidens;<br>Old men, and children.                       |

Everything that exists is called on to praise God in a universally inclusive way, as Weiser<sup>2</sup> points out:

The glorification of the Creator and Preserver of the world fulfils the ultimate depth of meaning which unites the inanimate creative things and the living creatures in a mutual relationship: to praise the sole majesty of God is the final goal which unites the whole universe in a communion of God's service. (p. 837)

Many Old Testament scholars have argued that this type of Psalm reflects the generally more holistic outlook of the Hebrew culture when it comes to man's place within the cosmos. It is interesting that the very final verse within the book of Psalms as a whole incites everything to praise God, as we shall see:

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2 Weiser, A. (1962). *The Psalms*. London: SCM Press.

## Psalm 150

- 1 Praise the Lord!  
Praise God in his sanctuary;  
Praise him in his mighty firmament.....
- 6 Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

We have here in these general Psalms of praise a far more inclusive attitude towards the whole of nature. Everything, in a sense, by its very existence, has an imperative to praise God. In many of the creation psalms, there can be seen an equality between all created beings (including humanity). The early psalms in particular do not seem to have the elements of anthropocentricity contained in some of the later psalm texts. For instance, in Psalm 148 above, kings, men, women and children are simply listed amongst the other created beings that are incited to praise the Lord. All are levelled together and all are depending on God for life and sustenance, as Bradley points out:

In the psalms, and in the latter part of the Old Testament as a whole, all creatures are placed on an equal footing in the wonderful order of God's world and human beings are not generally singled out for special treatment. At times indeed humans are radically cut down to size and reminded that they are just as frail and transitory as the rest of creation. (p.22)<sup>3</sup>

This "cutting down to size" which Bradley speaks of can be clearly seen in a number of psalms, for instance Psalm 90, verses 5 and 6:

Thou dost sweep men away; they are like a dream, like grass which is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.

Psalm 103, verses 15 and 16 similarly states:

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<sup>3</sup> Bradley, I. (1990). *God is green*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.

As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more.

We should note here that for the Hebrew culture at this time, it is likely that there was no concept of afterlife. At death, the spirit would return to Sheol, which can best be described as a place of shadows, a place of silence where it was believed that nothing happened and that there was no kind of real existence, so the end of life this psalm speaks about is in a sense the “ultimate end” of life. The Israelites saw the life of human beings in the same way as all creatures, i.e. we have life for a span and then we die. There is no elevated notion of humanity here. Only God continues forever, for only God (as we shall see in the next section) has defeated death and chaos.

Before leaving this section, let us look at one psalm on the creation theme which does seem to give man a special place, Psalm 8:

<sup>1</sup> O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth! Thou whose glory above the heavens is chanted.....<sup>3</sup> When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established. <sup>4</sup> What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him? <sup>5</sup> Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honour. <sup>6</sup> Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands, thou hast put all things under his feet, <sup>7</sup> all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, <sup>8</sup> the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea. <sup>9</sup> O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!

There are strong resemblances to the Genesis creation story here, with humans being given *dominion* over the rest of creation, and certainly humanity is elevated above the rest of life. Verse 8 states that he is *little less than God*. Some commentaries argue here that this verse can be translated as “a god” rather than “God”, and they suggest that it may allude to the early belief in the existence of an assembly of gods of which

Yahweh was king. (I will come to this idea in more detail later.) The lesser gods, possibly remnants from other neighbouring religions, were viewed as messengers or helpers of God who worked his will in the world. It could therefore be argued here that humanity is being likened to these supernatural messengers, hence the old metrical version gives this verse as *for thou a little lower hast him than the angels made*. The psalm could be pointing out that man's place is to do God's will and purpose for creation, rather than being elevated to the status of God. This is particularly plausible when we see that verse 4 of the psalm asks the ironical question *What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?* It is perhaps more likely that Psalm 8 is glorifying God for his work in creation which this time takes special note of the place of humans and their intellectual responsibilities in the world.

To sum up, this section has shown that the general psalms of praise tend to take a holistic attitude to the whole of creation and nature. Such ideas were rooted in a culture and in people that lived and depended on the land and nature for their existence. They saw themselves as dependent on creation rather than independent, and God the creator was the overall sustainer of the whole process. The whole of creation was equally dependent on God, and in a sense in relationship with God, as the general psalms of praise show. The idea that God is equally concerned with the whole of creation is implicit in such psalms and this is evident in that everything was in some sense praising God. We have here then a holistic and inclusive approach to nature which is generally not recognised by many of the critics of the Old Testament who lay the charge that it is too anthropocentric. This concept will be drawn out further in a later section, but for now let us look at another concept fundamental to the creation mythology of the Israelites and the psalms, the continual threat of chaos or destruction of God's created order. It is in psalmody of this genre that we see most clearly

illustrated the transcendent view of God the creator, so in the next section, I will elucidate the complex historical and theological issues of this type of thinking.

## **The cosmos/chaos dualism of the Ancient Near East as reflected in Psalms**

Many of the creation psalms come from very early on in the Hebrew psalmody tradition, and many of them draw on creation mythology from the ancient Near East, Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Palestinian/Syrian districts (with which Israel probably had its closest cultural connections). It is important to recognise at this point that the cosmology and world view of the ancient Near East was vastly different from the Greek church, and for that matter from ours today. A concept common to all the ancient Near Eastern cultures was the dualistic view of a cosmic struggle taking place within creation, between order and chaos. Many of the ancient Egyptian myths spoke of a kind of primeval sea or water which existed before the appearance of any material forms. The importance of water in the Ancient Egyptian creation mythology is not surprising as they were a people whose very existence was highly dependent on the Nile, and in particular its annual flooding for irrigation etc. Barnett<sup>4</sup> gives details of one type of creation myth from upper Egypt from circa 3000 BC. The cosmogony of Hermopolis starts by listing a number of deities, each concerned with different aspects of the creation myth, and then runs as follows:

The cosmogony .... concerns the nature of the featureless water before the act of creation, dealing with its negative characteristics.... Amun whose names suggest a number of qualities: hiddenness, unseen energy, air or wind.... had the hidden

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4 Barnett, M. (1997). *Gods and myths of the ancient world*. London: Regency House Publishing

potential energy to cause the disturbance that might have initiated creation from within the dark inert waters. By some means, a cosmic egg was formed within the dark waters and when it broke light came from it.... There are two versions of what came from the egg: one says that Ra, in the form of a bird of light hatched from it, another that it contained air which once released separated the sky from the earth and provided the breath of life for future creation. (pp. 56-7)

Similarly, in early Canaanite myths, the power of chaos was identified with primeval water. Before anything existed, there was only a primeval sea, un-ordered and chaotic. The ancient myth tells us that it was the power of God which caused the land to appear and ordered the sea to remain in its place. In this scheme, the earth or the dry land was viewed as a layer on top of the watery chaos, the sea was not only round about the land but also underneath it and above the sky (Genesis 1:7 and Psalm 33:7). The sea was viewed as threatening because of its natural power to cause floods etc. and became the visual symbol of the evil force in the cosmic struggle for order. L.R. Fisher (cited in Seybold<sup>5</sup>) calls this type of creation myth the "Baal type". He states it is to be found in some Ugaritic texts. In such texts, Baal, the god of the weather, conquers Yamm, the god of chaos and of the sea. He is then proclaimed king and establishes order. This idea is clearly depicted in Psalms 29, 74, 95, 104, and 148, as the following two examples illustrate:

#### Psalm 104

24 O Lord how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches. 25 So is this great and wide sea, wherein are things creeping, innumerable, both small and great beasts. 26 There go the ships: there is that Leviathan, whom thou hast

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5 Seybold, K. (1990). *Introducing the Psalms*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

made to play therein. 27 These wait all upon thee; that thou mayest give them their meat in due season.

#### Psalm 74

12 For God is my king of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. 13 Thou didst divide the sea by thy strength, thou breakest the heads of the dragons in the waters. 14 Thou breakest the heads of Leviathan in pieces, and gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness.

Seybold (*op cit.*) says that there can be no doubt about the ancient Near Eastern origin of this type of mythology, particularly since the discovery in 1929 of cuneiform writings from the North Syrian port of Ugarit. There is a close similarity between the ancient Canaanite myths in these texts dating from the 13th century BC and the creation psalms. In the psalms, God replaces Baal as creator; and Leviathan, the seven-headed sea monster, replaces Yamm, the god of the sea and chaos. The primeval struggle of the Canaanite myth is turned into the battle between God and Leviathan (Psalm 74: 14). The idea is extended further in Psalm 104: 26 when Leviathan is seen as playing in a harmless fashion, God having negated his power. It is not only in Canaanite myths we find similarities with such psalms. For example, there are striking similarities between Psalm 104:26 and the *Sun hymn of Akhenaton* (circa 1350 BC) in ancient Egyptian mythology (cited in Seybold <sup>6</sup>):

All beasts spring upon (their feet)  
Whatever flies and alights,  
They live when thou hast risen (for them).  
The ships are sailing north and south as well,  
For every way is open at thy appearance.....

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<sup>6</sup> Seybold, K. (1990). *Introducing the Psalms*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

How manifold it is, what thou hast made!

They are hidden from the face (of man).

O sole god, like whom there is no other.

(Cited in Seybold)

Guthrie<sup>7</sup> points out that the connotations of lines such as these, in their original setting, and in particular Psalm 95:1, would have been that YAHWEH has taken over the powers of the older gods of the ancient Near East. He also thinks that it is possible that Psalms 29 and 104 are straight re-workings of older Canaanite texts, which, to some extent, have been de-mythologised to meet the situation of the new Hebrew culture. It is also important to note that in these psalms, the idea of a primeval struggle is still there, as Seybold points out – there was always an implicit dualistic tendency in Hebrew thought. The idea of an anti-power was never quite lost from Hebrew cosmology. Moreover, it is possible to see a continuation of the older Near Eastern gods having some kind of existence in the Hebrew culture, for example: *For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods* (Psalm 95:3). This idea is developed a stage further in Psalm 103 verse 20: *Bless the Lord, ye his angels that excel in strength, that do his commandments, hearkening unto the voice of his word*. As Guthrie (*op. cit.*) points out:

Here, though in less explicit mythological form, the imagery of an assembly of gods, over whom Yahweh has gained dominion and through whom his orderly government of the cosmos is carried out, continues to be used at a relatively late date. (p.84)

It would not be unreasonable to argue that there is a somewhat eclectic tendency in the creation theology of the psalms and of the Hebrew culture in general. We can see

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7 Guthrie, H. H. (1966). *Israel's sacred songs: a study of dominant themes*. New York: Seabury Press.

the imagery being influenced by the neighbouring cultures, but with the importance and power of the Hebrew god Yahweh growing, to the gradual exclusion of the other gods, the one common feature being that all the gods were closely connected to nature. Nowhere is this more noticeable than in the annual harvest or new year festival. The harvest festival or feast of tabernacles in the autumn is possibly one of the oldest rituals in Hebrew religion. It was intended to mark the close of the agricultural year and the opening of the new one, which would begin with the start of the rainy season, the catalyst of new life. Many of the ideas and rituals were possibly similarly held in other Canaanite and Ugaritic religions. For instance, in the ancient Canaanite harvest festival, the rituals were closely connected with agriculture and fertility religion. Such early cultures saw the changes of the natural year as manifestations of divine power. The natural life of the world was a reflection of the divine life of the local deity. For instance, in seasons of drought, a connection would be made with the possible absence or death of the local god. Later the rainy season would bring new life, thus symbolising the return or resurrection of the deity. God was therefore proclaimed king, having defeated his ancient enemies of destruction and death. Many ancient oriental cultures had this concept. As Mowinckel<sup>8</sup> states:

The concept of the god as king is .... older than Israel. .... In the religious texts from the town of Ugarit in Phoenicia, the feast of the rains – the harvest and new year festival – signifies the revival and resurrection of the god Baal or Aleyan Baal, who, having conquered death (*Mot*), seats himself on the throne and is proclaimed king of gods and men.... These performances were apparently common to the whole of Canaan and not restricted to Ugarit. That they have been of importance

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<sup>8</sup> Mowinckel, S. (1992). *The Psalms in Israel's worship*. (2nd ed.). Sheffield: JSOT Press.

for the development of the cult of Yahweh in Jerusalem cannot be doubted.  
(p.132)

The idea therefore in the Hebrew harvest festival was based on the return of God with his people at the time of the rainy season which would bring the resurrection of new life with it. In the Hebrew culture, and in others, it was seen as the enthronement of God when Yahweh (for the Hebrews) would return to his chosen people as their king and sustainer of life. Psalm 24 gives us an excellent illustration of this concept:

<sup>1</sup> The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein; <sup>2</sup>  
for he has founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the rivers.....<sup>7</sup> Lift up your  
heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. <sup>8</sup>  
Who is the King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle!

This psalm, possibly used at the harvest festival, depicts the entry of God as the *King of Glory* (verse 7). The Lord has returned *mighty in battle* (verse 8), i.e. he has won the fight against disorder, chaos and death, the ancient enemies of creation. He therefore continues and safeguards the creative process as verse 1 states. It was therefore believed that the advent of the rainy season would be ensured. It is possible to see here hints back to the dualism mentioned earlier. In the Hebrew myth, when Yahweh returned, he was victorious over his ancient enemies who, as we have seen, were depicted as Leviathan in the cosmic struggle between order and chaos. To such ancient cultures, the re-enactment of the rituals of the harvest festival would ensure Yahweh's return and therefore sustenance, good fortune and new life would therefore follow. Many of these ancient ideas can be found in the psalms. One of the best examples of this, as we shall now see, is Psalm 65:

<sup>9</sup> Thou visitest the earth, and waterest it: thou greatly enrichest it with the river of God,  
which is full of water: thou preparest them corn when thou hast so provided for it. <sup>10</sup>Thou

waterest the ridges thereof abundantly: thou settlest the furrows thereof; thou makest it soft with the showers: thou blessest the springing thereof. <sup>11</sup> Thou crownest the year with thy goodness; and thy paths drop fatness. <sup>12</sup> They drop upon the pastures of the wilderness: and the little hills rejoice on every side. <sup>13</sup> The pastures are clothed with flocks; the valleys also are covered over with corn; they shout for joy, they also sing.

This Psalm illustrates many of the ancient concepts of the Hebrew harvest festival. In verse 9, we see the idea of God returning and *visiting* the earth, resulting in blessings and fertility and new life. It is also interesting that the second half of the very same line of verse 9 ties in the idea of water and rain with the concept of the *river of God*, which possibly is alluding to the rainy season which would follow. Verse 10 also alludes to the idea of watering and adds the further concept of softening where the earth is made soft and fertile for the new crops and for the new life. There is the concept of everything rejoicing in verses 12 and 13. The whole world and the created order of the following year are fully dependent on the power and strength of God. In the ancient ritual which this psalm alludes to, there is an implicit dualism, because it is only through the return of Yahweh and through his enthronement as king that the blessings and order of the world are continued. Verse 7 interestingly states *which stilleth the noise of the seas, the noise of their waves*. Here again we can see the old dualistic concept of an unordered chaotic sea being hinted at, but interestingly here the popular harvest verses from 9 on would seem to be asking for protection against drought or against a dry and arid landscape. This is now the antithesis to the fertile earth, which these verses speak of. It should be noted that in such psalm texts there is an implicit transcendent theology, which is unavoidable. The polarity intrinsic to this type of dualistic system distances God from creation, for it shows God imposing his creative power onto an unruly, chaotic entity which is other than God.

It would be difficult to argue that there was any kind of concept of “creation out of nothing” (*creatio ex nihilo*) in the early psalms. Rather it would seem that creation was brought about from a kind of already existing chaotic state. Such an idea has to be implicit within the structure of the ancient dualistic system. Moreover, there are a number of psalms which point to the fact that such chaos was seen as a continuous threat even although God was viewed as king. The enthronement ceremonies held each year during the new year and harvest festivals would allude to this. Many of the early Judaic writings also hint at such concepts. Mowinckel<sup>9</sup> points out that in the Mishna we are told that at the epiphany of Yahweh at the new year’s festival, Yahweh will “judge”, or set out what is to happen during the following year for the whole world, for nature and the lives of the people. Many of the psalms speak of God “judging the earth righteously”. The idea in Psalm 65 above is that Yahweh will continue the good order of creation for the following year, but it is important to note that this idea implies that there is also an alternative, for if Yahweh for whatever reason did not come to judge the earth, then there was always the threat that chaos and disorder would return. Psalm 85 gives us a good example of this type of imagery:

<sup>1</sup> Lord, thou wast favourable to thy land; thou didst restore the fortunes of Jacob..... <sup>4</sup>  
 Restore us again, oh God of our salvation, and put away thy indignation towards us!..... <sup>6</sup>  
 Wilt he not revive us again, that thy people may rejoice in thee? <sup>7</sup> Show us thy steadfast  
 love, oh Lord, and grant us thy salvation. .... <sup>9</sup> Surely his salvation is at hand for  
 those who fear him, that glory may dwell in our land. <sup>10</sup> Steadfast love and faithfulness will  
 meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. <sup>11</sup> Faithfulness will spring up from the  
 ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. <sup>12</sup> Yea, the Lord will give what is  
 good, and our land will yield its increase. <sup>13</sup> Righteousness will go before him and make his  
 footsteps a way.

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<sup>9</sup> Mowinckel, S. (1992). *The Psalms in Israel's worship*. (2nd ed.). Sheffield: JSOT Press.

There are a number of important issues for our study in this Psalm, which have their roots in very ancient cultures. Firstly, the Psalm points to a kind of continuous creation, it points to creation past and present. The first verse reminisces that God was favourable to the land in the past and verse 4 supplicates that he should return with similar blessings for the future. We can see here that the ancient Israelites were all too aware of a continuous threat from chaos and disorder. Like the ancient Egyptians who, as we saw earlier, were dependent on the annual flooding of the Nile to ensure fertile land for the following year, so the ancient Israelites could see the threat of a dry and arid landscape before the return of the rainy season. John Gibson<sup>10</sup> in his commentary on Genesis gives the following insight into this world view:

There can be no doubt that the Hebrews dreaded chaos as a reality, present in the beginning, present now, and potentially present in the future. It was especially associated in their minds with the waters now kept at bay outside the firmament and beneath the earth, but once enveloping everything. At any moment these waters could return, so that whenever a storm arose there was always the fear that the universe was about to collapse. (p. 29)

Again, it is obvious that these early civilisations received such ideas from the processes of nature and that God was very closely linked to nature. We have here a surprisingly modern idea, for it could be argued that such a continuous creation is open-ended. There is a continuous struggle between order and chaos and possibly also a continual novelty within the act of creation itself. It is also important to note that the order of creation and nature was seen as good. Verses 10 to 13 are filled with positive images of the land and of nature. Verse 10 speaks of *love and faithfulness, righteousness and peace*, and verses 11 and 12 speak of the *faithfulness* of God, envisaged in the

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10 Gibson, J. (1981). *Genesis*. Edinburgh: St Andrews Press.

springing up of new life from the ground and in God giving what is *good*. Through the return of Yahweh, the land will once again *yield its increase*. Such creation ideas could also be found in other neighbouring cultures. For instance, in Babylonia, as Mowinckel<sup>11</sup> points out:

There the gods would meet in the 'room of destiny' (*ubsukigina*) and 'lay down destiny' (*sim simti*) for the coming year, both for nations and kingdoms, first of all for Babylon itself and to all individuals. (p.147)

Here we can see the idea of a good ordered world being extended to a moral order also. It is not only the seasons and creation that God orders but also morality and society. Verse 10 of Psalm 85 alludes to this where it states: *Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other*. Creation in this Psalm therefore is not only continuous, it is extended right down to moral order and society, an idea which was fundamental to the Hebrew people. An idea central to this whole system is that God's *presence* is necessary for such an orderly creation to take place. God is seen as being *with* creation, i.e. God acts in a "creatorly" way. At the harvest festival, God is called on to judge or to decide how events unfold for the following year. It is important to note here that in such psalms we have an implicitly transcendent view of God, for throughout such psalms God is seen as acting on creation: he creates from heaven and draws order from chaos on the world below. God only *visits* the earth (as Psalm 65 verse 9 states). God acts *on* earth rather than *in* earth. Such dualistic psalms implicitly take this approach. Nevertheless, these psalms show God as closely connected to nature and nature as of fundamental importance to the religious cult.

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<sup>11</sup> Mowinckel, S. (1992). *The Psalms in Israel's worship*. (2nd ed.). Sheffield: JSOT Press.

Before leaving this section on transcendent and dualistic psalms, a more negative point should be noted. There is implicit in these psalm texts the continual concept of threat in the minds of the Hebrew people, and this threat was not always viewed as emanating from the natural elements. It is in this respect that we can see an exclusive aspect to the creation imagery within the psalms, for the threat of chaos which the Hebrews dreaded did not only come from the natural elements in this worldview but also from the other nations. The Hebrews saw themselves as the chosen people of God and they believed that their enemies were also God's enemies. Simkins<sup>12</sup> makes this point:

Whenever the Israelites were oppressed by the more powerful nations around them, they looked for God to fight in a new cosmogonic battle on their behalf.....God had fought against the Egyptians.....[he] defeated Pharaoh and his army at the sea.....These battles are modelled on God's victory over chaos in the primordial battle of creation. (p. 112)

There are a number of psalms which illustrate the exclusionary outlook of the Hebrews, where the defeat of one nation is linked in with the defeat of chaos. Psalm 135 (verses 7 to 9) shows God using the elements as weapons against the Egyptians as follows:

He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who makes lightnings for the rain and brings forth the wind from his storehouses. He it was who smote the first-born of Egypt, both of man and beast; who in the midst of Egypt, sent signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants.

Psalmody of this type illustrates the more negative side of a transcendent theology, for it is here we can see the polarity between God and the world being extended right

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12 Simkins, R. A. (1994). *Creator and creation: Nature in the worldview of ancient Israel*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendricksen.

down to relations between nations. There are a number of factors which make up a complex catalyst of this idea within the dualistic and transcendent Hebrew notions. Firstly, the very early notion that we see in some of the psalms of God being originally drawn out from, and superior to, a number of other gods possibly catalysed the initial idea of Israel's superiority. Secondly, as Simkins (*op cit.*) points out, the victory of the primordial dualistic battle of creation also symbolised the worldly battles of the Hebrew people, and this illustrates their belief that they were to some extent the centre and pinnacle of creation. It is on this point that I will argue that such texts fail to provide an entirely adequate creation theology. If we are speaking of God who created the world and all the beings, races and cultures in it, it is impossible to take such an exclusive approach. This is not simply a historical/theological problem, for in our modern society, we can still see evidence of this outlook. We have many groups and cultures who would claim to be the chosen people of God to the exclusion of everyone else. An adequate creation theology must be inclusive, containing within it everything that exists.

Within the transcendent psalms therefore we have seen, on the positive side, God closely linked with creation and the created order as good. To this extent, nature is held up in a positive light, for the abundance and plenty are provided by the will of God. However, we have also seen that due to the unavoidable dualism emanating from the polarity of God as transcendent, there was always an underlying negativity, for example the continuous threat of chaos in the primordial battle of creation. Moreover, I have argued that this idea possibly encouraged the more exclusivist theological ideas of the Hebrews. Such transcendent psalms place God *with* creation but distinct from it. In the next section, psalmody which does not contain this polarity because it places God *in* creation will be examined.

## Creator Spirit

The notion of the spirit of God in the Old Testament was quite different to the Holy Spirit of the New Testament. In the Old Testament, the spirit *Ruach* was seen as evidence of God's creative activity in the world. It was often equated with the wind. The spirit of God was also regarded as the source of life: *the spirit of God made me and the breath of the Almighty gave me life* (Job 33:4). Some Old Testament scholars think it is possible here that this imagery comes from the older Near Eastern religions, where the wind was viewed as evidence of the activity of elemental spirits at work. The first example of the spirit in the Old Testament is in Genesis 1 verses 1 and 2:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

Here in the first verse of the Old Testament, we see reference to what we could call "creator spirit". Such a notion was closely associated with the activity of nature, hence its association with the wind, but it is undeniable that it is through this "creative spirit" that order and life come into being. Some scholars have suggested connections with early Egyptian and Canaanite creation myths here, and can see similarities, for instance with the ancient Egyptian creation epic of the world hatching from an egg, which was contained within a fluid of chaos (as we saw earlier). Mowinckel<sup>13</sup> summarises an example of an early Babylonian myth which similarly uses wind as an agent of creativity where the god Marduk wages war against Tiamat, pictured as a female dragon within a primeval ocean. Marduk captures the dragon and blows his 'wind' into her jaws, then builds heaven and earth out of her body. There is an interesting similarity here between the creative 'breath' of God in Genesis and the use of the

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<sup>13</sup> Mowinckel, S. (1992). *The Psalms in Israel's worship*. (2nd ed.). Sheffield: JSOT Press.

concept of wind in the Marduk epic which is again the catalyst of creation. John Gibson<sup>14</sup> in his commentary on Genesis quotes Milton's *Paradise Lost* regarding this text from Genesis:

... thou from the first  
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread  
Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss,  
And mad'st it pregnant. (p. 35)

From the very beginning of the Old Testament therefore we have the concept of God's spirit creating, fertilising, and giving life to the whole of the natural world. Similarly, in Genesis 2, with respect to the creation of man, we read in verse 7: ... *then the Lord God formed man from dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being*. Here again we have the concept of wind or air being connected as an agent for life, but this time it is symbolised as the breath of God. Again we can see that the early Hebrews conceived God's creative activity through nature and the elements. It is of fundamental importance that they believed that the natural world was symbolic of supernatural activity.

Ezekiel gives us yet another excellent Old Testament example of this type of imagery in the story of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37. In this text, Ezekiel is led to a valley which is full of dry bones, and is asked by God whether such bones could live again. As a test of faith, Ezekiel is asked to prophesy to the wind, and the story goes as follows:

Ezek 37: 9ff Then he said to me "prophesy to the breath, prophesy, sun of man, and say to the breath, thus says the Lord God. Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. So I prophesied as he commanded me and the breath came into them and they lived and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host.

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14 Gibson, J. (1981). *Genesis*. Edinburgh: St Andrews Press.

With regard to this text, Eichrodt<sup>15</sup>, in his commentary on Ezekiel, points out:

... his [Ezekiel's] words suggest that he thinks of the spirit as being a sort of invisible fluid which pervades the whole world and communicates life to it as God commands so as to import life and growth everywhere in the created world. He is actually going back to an ancient Israelite notion according to which the mystery of natural life is comprised in spirit and the created world is assured of being kept alive by the ever-renewed pouring out of this breath of life from God (p. 508).

There is evidently the undertone of the wind having divine life-giving power, but in Ezekiel it is de-mythologised and viewed as part of the life-giving activity of Yahweh. We can find in a number of psalms references to this type of activity of the Old Testament concept of spirit. Psalm 104 verses 24 to 30 give us an excellent example of this imagery in the praise of Israel:

24	O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all; the earth is full of thy creatures.	28	When thou givest to them, they gather it up; when thou openest thy hand, they are filled with good things.
25	Yonder is the sea, great and wide, which teems with things innumerable, living things both small and great.	29	When thou hidest thy face, they are dismayed; When thou takest away their breath, they die and return to their dust.
26	There go the ships, and Leviathan which thou didst form to sport in it.	30	When thou sendest forth thy spirit, they are created; And thou renewest the face of the ground.
27	These all look to thee, to give them their food in due season.		

This Psalm, as Anderson<sup>16</sup> points out, alludes to the Hebrew concept of the body animated by the breath of life. Verse 30 alludes to the continual process of creation.

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<sup>15</sup> Eichrodt, W. (1970). *Ezekiel*. London: SCM Press.

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, A. A. (1972). *Psalms (volumes 1 and 2)*. London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott.

Here then, we have a far more inclusive creation imagery. God's spirit *Ruach* is continually creating and giving life to everything that exists. It is clear that everything is dependent on God's creative spirit for sustenance, as verse 27 points out: *These all look to thee, to give them their food in due season.* This creation imagery shows the Holy Spirit as continually renewing and sustaining everything, in a dynamic process. It is the creative energy which allows all things to grasp new potentialities, and it is not simply concerned with humanity. The panentheistic theology of Moltmann expresses such ideas well where he states:

Everything that is, exists and lives in the unceasing in-flow of the energies and potentialities of the cosmic spirit. This means that we have to understand every created reality in terms of energy, grasping it as the realised potentiality of the divine spirit. Through the energies and potentialities of the spirit, the creator is himself present in his creation. He does not merely confront it in his transcendence; entering into it, he is also immanent in it. (p.9)<sup>17</sup>

The concept of spirit for the Israelites was viewed as imbuing everything that existed. It was like the wind, everywhere and all encompassing. The author of Psalm 139 gives an example of this:

<sup>7</sup> Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? <sup>8</sup> If I ascend to heaven thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there! <sup>9</sup> If I take wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, <sup>10</sup> Even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

The psalmist sees the spirit of God as impossible to escape, everywhere present, and he even claims that it exists in Sheol (quite an extraordinary claim at the time). This psalm gives us yet another example of the Old Testament concept that the spirit is all

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<sup>17</sup> Moltmann, J. (1993). *God in creation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

encompassing, ever present and upholding all things in existence. It is possible that in these psalms we have the embryo of a very modern concept of how God acts in creation, one which, as we will see later, the early church was to lose sight of. Birch and Cobb<sup>18</sup> develop and elucidate the potential modern significance of these ancient concepts when they equate the Holy Spirit with life in general and describe it as the underlying energy sustaining everything. They state:

The 'Spirit' or 'Breath' of God, in Hebrew understanding, was the Life of God. It is that 'Breath' that is breathed into us so that we became living beings. We put it in another way, saying that it is the immanence of the divine life within us that makes us alive. The Bible sees the Spirit as the giver of life both in the sense of biological enlivening and in the sense of quickening our human experience. We, too, have insisted on the identity of the Life that does both of these things. (p.199)

If this life-giving spirit of God is in everything, then God must to some extent be reflected in everything. These psalms give a more immanent view of God as creator, for there is a sense in which God is actually present *in* creation here, unlike the dualistic psalms where we saw that God was present *with* the created world. It would be possible to take from these psalms a concept that the whole of creation somehow reflects God and contains within it a kind of divinity (an idea which in a later section we will see can be developed further in the hymns of Pentecost). When we take this concept in the context of the ancient Hebrew culture, it is possible to see that they held a healthy respect for the whole of creation, for there was a sense in which they saw the divinity of God in the whole of nature (almost akin to the elemental spirits of neighbouring cultures). Such an attitude really does not allow humanity to look at nature as simply a commodity or as something that we have dominion over. Moreover,

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<sup>18</sup> Birch, C., & Cobb, J. B. (1990). *The liberation of life*. Denton, Texas: Environmental Ethics Books.

the immanent creation theology prevents the more exclusive attitudes which emanate from the polarity within the transcendent system. This approach calls for a reverent respect towards the whole of creation, which is here inextricably linked to God.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up this chapter, which has examined how creation is reflected in the psalms, it is possible to conclude firstly that the psalms take an inclusive attitude. They convey the notion that all things are in relationship with God and are offering praise to God. The creation psalms do not see humanity as independent from creation but as a participant in creation. Humans, like creation, are dependent on God, and God upholds the whole of nature and therefore should be praised by the whole of nature. So there is a generally inclusive outlook to the psalms. Secondly, the psalms have illustrated not only an inclusive outlook to the whole of creation, but also a concept of God closely connected with the workings of nature. We can glimpse here how dependent such early cultures were on natural systems and how close their religious rituals were to the natural order of things, i.e. the harvest/new year festival and the psalms connected with it. The psalms illustrate that the Israelites saw the supernatural activity of God working through the elements and through the weather systems, e.g. thunder, lightning, wind. We have seen that new life and balanced order were viewed as evidence of divine activity. Through examining the subtle differences between the transcendent and immanent types of creation psalmody, a number of points have been illustrated. For example, the psalms which take a dualist approach show that this culture had a healthy fear that it was possible for the balance and order of creation to be disturbed. For them, disorder and chaos were always a threat. Although for this early culture this threat was due to supernatural activity, it is nevertheless a concept

that we should be more aware of in our present time. We also should have a healthy fear of disturbing the balance of the natural order of our world in the twenty-first century. On the negative side, it was argued that the polarity implicit in the transcendent theology of some psalms tends to have an exclusive bias in it. I argued that such texts are not entirely adequate as a creation theology. Finally, our examination moved from the transcendent psalms (God with creation) to psalms which took a more immanent approach (God in creation). Here we saw a more inclusive approach to the whole of the natural world. Such psalms show that the Old Testament concept of spirit was very closely connected to the elements and to nature. It is possible to see through this concept that the Hebrews retained a belief that the presence of God was in everything through the presence of his life-giving spirit or breath.

The Psalms then, we have seen, contain both transcendent and immanent ideas of the creator God. I will now, using these two models of God as a template, go on in subsequent chapters to examine different areas of traditional creation hymnody in the light of our discussion here.

## Chapter 2

### God and creation reflected in hymns on seed-time and harvest

*Here in the country's heart*

*Where the grass is green,*

*Life is the same sweet life*

*As it e'er hath been.*

*God comes down in the rain,*

*And the crop grows tall –*

*This is the country faith*

*And the best of all.*

Norman Gale, 518 in *Songs of Praise* (1931)

I am going to start our examination of creation hymnody by looking firstly at rogation tide hymns, i.e. hymns that deal with images of spring and the start of the cycle of life, hence the reference to seed-time in the title. I have chosen to start here not only because it is the beginning of life, but also because I think it is in these hymns that some of the oldest spiritual images can be found. Liturgically, such hymns could be covered by the term “rogation tide”, a season not often referred to in the church nowadays, but nevertheless full of interesting imagery for our discussion here. We will then go on to look at the harvest festival hymns, which not only follow on naturally from rogation tide but are also fundamentally important in the light of the themes developed in our previous chapter, where we saw how highly the Hebrew harvest festival featured in much of creation psalmody. In this chapter, we will examine some examples of both these types of hymnody to see to what extent they reflect the images found in the psalms. We will look to see how they see God as acting on or with creation, trying to elucidate whether they take an immanent or transcendent approach to God's activity as creator. We will consider how New Testament theology has adapted the images from the Psalms,

and to what extent christologising has altered images both from the Old Testament and from some older non biblical traditions.

### **Rogation – new life**

The idea of rogation days is a very ancient concept within the Christian church, and is much older than the relatively modern introduction of the harvest festival.

McCarthy<sup>19</sup> states that the concept of rogation actually pre-dates Christianity and is an adapting of ideas from ancient Roman religion:

The ancient Romans had an annual procession which served as supplications, either for blessings from the gods on the fruits of the earth or to avert calamities. During these processions, sacrifices were made to the god Robigus. Since the ceremony was for halting of blight, *robigo* [rust] from the crops, this day was called *Robigalia*. Christians took over this custom and baptised it. Our rogation days are a form of the ancient times of litanies of supplication. (p.74)

It seems that in times gone by, in rural areas, it was common for the church people, with the priest, to process around the fields, chanting and invoking the protection of God, the angels and saints on the newly sown fields, prayers being made for a fertile spring and for a plentiful produce at the harvest time. We can see this notion illustrated in the following hymn by Lyte:

<i>God of mercy, God of grace,</i>	<i>Let the people praise thee, Lord;</i>
<i>Show the brightness of thy face:</i>	<i>Be by all that live adored:</i>
<i>Shine upon us, Saviour, shine,</i>	<i>Let the nations shout and sing,</i>
<i>Fill thy Church with light divine;</i>	<i>Glory to their saviour King;</i>
<i>And thy saving health extend</i>	<i>At thy feet their tributes pay,</i>
<i>Unto earth's remotest end.</i>	<i>And thy holy will obey.</i>

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<sup>19</sup> McCarthy, S. (1987). *Celebrating the Earth*. San Jose, CA: Resource Publications

*Let the people praise thee, Lord;*  
*Earth shall then her fruits afford;*  
*God to man his blessing give,*  
*Man to God devoted live;*  
*All below, and all above,*  
*One in joy, and light, and love.*                    (Songs of Praise, 170)

There are a number of similarities to Psalm 85 in this hymn, for we can see that it is in the act of the people returning to God that the blessings and fertility of the crops will be wrought. We have the sense that it is through the iniquities of the people that drought and famine arise, for as verse 3 of this hymn states, *Let the people praise thee, Lord; Earth shall then her fruits afford*. It is as if the fruits of God will only be awarded to man when man returns the attention and praise to God. But verse 3 takes this notion further, for there is a sense in which this order between God and man is extended right down to the whole created order and moral order too, as the latter point of the verse illustrates: *Man to God devoted live; All below, and all above, One in joy, and light, and love*. Again, we have close similarities to Psalm 85 here, where verse 10 states *Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other*. Here, then, God has a plan for creation – what he intends for the whole created order, but it is through man’s neglect that this never comes to full fruition. In this system, when the people seek God, God will show his countenance and favour to them. As in the covenant between the Israelites and God in the Old Testament, this hymn states in the last verse: *God to man his blessing give, Man to God devoted live; All below, and all above, One in joy, and light, and love*. On the one hand, the concept of penance was a central feature to rogation days. But on the other hand, we can also see God closely linked to the natural world, in the returning of new life with the advent of Spring. The re-establishment of a right relationship

between God and his people is seen as somehow catalysing fertility, new life and growth - the beginning of the circle, which would culminate in the gathering of the harvest in the autumn. We have here many ideas which are akin to the ideas found in a number of creation psalms, and in particular, as we shall see, the harvest festival psalms, so let us look at some other hymns commonly used during this spring/rogation time. A hymn written as a litany for use on rogation days proper is Keble's hymn *Lord in thy name, thy servants plead*, and here are some selected verses of the text:

<i>Lord, in Thy Name, Thy servants plead,</i>	<i>The former and the latter rain,</i>
<i>And Thou hast sworn to hear;</i>	<i>The summer sun and air,</i>
<i>Thine is the harvest, Thine the seed,</i>	<i>The green ear, and the golden grain,</i>
<i>The fresh and fading year.</i>	<i>All Thine, are ours by prayer.</i>
<i>Our hope, when Autumn winds blew wild,</i>	<i>So grant the precious things brought forth</i>
<i>We trusted, Lord, with Thee:</i>	<i>By sun and moon below,</i>
<i>And still, now Spring has on us smiled,</i>	<i>That Thee in Thy new Heav'n and earth</i>
<i>We wait on Thy decree.</i>	<i>We never may forego.</i>

142, Hymns Ancient and Modern (1889)

There are a number of interesting concepts in this text which shed light on the rogation days and rural beliefs, with close links to be found with creation psalmody. In verse 3, we see the emphasis on the need for rain and sunshine for the fertility of the crops: which here are seen as emanating from God, and we have the concept that we can invoke these elements through worship and prayer. This was central to the ancient Hebrew concept of the harvest festival. As we saw in Chapter 1, the Hebrew harvest festival was based on the return of God with his people at the time of the rainy season, which would bring the resurrection of new life with it. Psalm 65 states:

<sup>9</sup> Thou visitest the earth, and waterest it: thou greatly enrichest it with the river of God, which is full of water: thou preparest them corn when thou hast so provided for it. <sup>10</sup>Thou waterest the ridges thereof abundantly: thou settlest the furrows thereof; thou makest it soft with the showers: thou blessest the springing thereof. <sup>11</sup> Thou crownest the year with thy goodness; and thy paths drop fatness. <sup>12</sup> They drop upon the pastures of the wilderness: and the little hills rejoice on every side. <sup>13</sup> The pastures are clothed with flocks; the valleys also are covered over with corn; they shout for joy, they also sing.

There are strong links between Keble's hymn and this very early harvest festival psalm. Both see God linked to the seasons and to the natural order. It is possible that in rogation hymns of this type we have a close connection to the ancient Hebrew concept of the harvest festival. In the ancient Hebrew concept, we see the idea of God returning and visiting the earth, resulting in fertility and new life. Similarly here, we have the idea of new life returning with the Spring, *And still now Spring has on us smiled*. We have here an allusion to the spring somehow having the power of fertility and new life. Therefore with the returning of Spring, we have the return of new life, just as in the Hebrew covenantal concept, the returning of God with his people brought a similar effect, as Psalm 24 verse 7 illustrates *Lift up your heads O gates! ..... That the King of glory may come in*. In verse 3 of this hymn text, we can also see the covenantal idea being implied in the last line where it states *all thine are ours by prayer*.

### **Spring and the Festival of May**

The rogation hymns we have looked at so far see God closely linked with creation and nature, and see the whole of nature participating in the works of God in an inclusive way. We shall now go on to examine some other hymn texts which take yet another

angle on Spring and new life. The hymns that will follow, we shall see, give Spring a kind of divinity of its own. A good example of this type of text is:

1. *Now the spring has come again, joy and warmth will follow;  
Cold and wet are quite forgot, northward flies the swallow,  
Over the sea and land and air, spring's soft touch is everywhere  
And the world looks cleaner.  
All our sinews feel new strung, hearts are light that once were wrung,  
Youthful zests are keener.....*
  3. *God is in the midst of her, God commands her duty;  
Earth does but reflect his light, mirrors back his beauty;  
God's the fount whence all things flow, great and small, above, below.  
God's their only maker: .....*
- 98, Oxford Book of Carols (1964)

Here we have the idea that Spring is the agent of new life and fertility, for from the first line, it is made clear that as Spring has come, the joy of new life will follow. It is interesting that Spring here does not only bring fertility to the soil but it is also linked to the life of human beings as well, for Spring's *soft touch is everywhere*, also bringing the benefits of new life and fresh zeal to ourselves as individuals. Spring is now being given a kind of divine or spiritual power, which is somehow catalysed through the return of God. Here again we see a close link to creation psalmody, for as we saw in Chapter 1, Psalm 85 illustrates the idea that on the return of God at the harvest festival, God's people will be restored:

<sup>1</sup> Lord, thou wast favourable to thy land; thou didst restore the fortunes of Jacob.....

<sup>4</sup> Restore us again, oh God of our salvation, and put away thy indignation towards us!.....

<sup>6</sup> Wilt he not revive us again, that thy people may rejoice in thee? <sup>7</sup> Show us thy steadfast love, oh Lord, and grant us thy salvation. .... <sup>11</sup> Faithfulness will spring up from

the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. <sup>12</sup> Yea, the Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. <sup>13</sup> Righteousness will go before him and make his footsteps a way.

So in this psalm, when God returns, blessings and fertility will follow. In the above hymn text, the said events take place with the return of Spring, but in this text the return of God and the return of Spring are seen as inter-connected. As verse 2 of the above hymn goes on to state (using wording straight from Psalm 46) God is then *in the midst of her*. This would seem to be emphasising the return of Spring and the return of God. As *Spring has come* and her *soft touch is everywhere*, thus bringing new life and fertility, so God is also in the midst, the *fount whence all things flow*. This is an intriguing connection, because we have here the divine attributes being superimposed onto the concept of Spring. There is a definite similarity here between the two subjects: God and Spring are seen as connected entities.

As we have seen, the church has never been afraid of borrowing and adapting other, often older, ideas prevailing in the culture at any given time. We have seen in this chapter that the concept of rogation pre-dates the church, going back to Roman times, and in turn the ancient Hebrews also adopted and adapted ideas from other cultures. There was a tendency, however, within the church, to claim these ideas solely for itself. An idea thus adapted was baptised and almost converted into a Christian concept, and its older routes therefore cut and forgotten. This, it seems to me, is where hymnody can give us important insights. For it is in these texts, probably more than anywhere else, that the older ideas and images can be seen. Most hymns were written by people outside of central theology, and were closer to the grass-roots level. Through examining hymns, we can get a clearer understanding of the faith of the

people, rather than the dogma of the church. As we will now go on to see, it is in hymn texts that many of the older, pre-Christian concepts are still to be found, illustrating an interesting juxtaposition of Christian faith and what the church would call pagan belief. But, as history has shown, both positions can and have co-existed, for the most part peaceably, and even to each other's benefit. We have seen how the rogation days were intended to ensure fertility of the crops and that it had strong connections with Spring in general. The hymns that follow welcome Spring's arrival and are connected with the May festivals. Like rogation, the May festivals are pre-Christian and go back to ancient times. Nearly every town and village in England would have its own May festival, and the images used were almost all pre-Christian. Frazer<sup>20</sup> points out in *The Golden Bough* that one of the central themes to the May festival, the Maypole, is going back to the very ancient idea of elemental spirits. For example, in many cultures today, trees are still given divine attributes, and we now know that this was a strong theme in early Celtic spirituality. By cutting down the Maypole, and transporting it from the forest into the village, it was intended to bring the blessings which the tree's spirit had in its power into the village. It is a re-enactment of the return of Spring. Like rogation, the re-enactment of this ceremony ensured the return of new life and fertility. Frazer tells us:

In the north of England it was formerly the custom for young people to rise a little after midnight on the morning of the first of May and go out with music and the blowing of horns into the woods, where they broke branches and adorned them with nosegays and crowns of flowers. This done, they returned about sunrise and fastened the flower-decked branches over the doors and windows of their houses. (p.121)

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<sup>20</sup> Frazer, J.G. (1922)/(1992). *The Golden Bough*. London: Papermac.

The idea here, then, was that through bringing the branches home to their houses, they were bringing, at the same time, the protection and blessings of the elemental spirits. The concept of elemental spirits in May festivals can also be found in a symbol which was at one time common throughout the country, "the green man", sometimes known as "green George". This was normally a young man of the village who was dressed completely covered in foliage. He was the epitome of the living tree spirit and was a central character. In these May festivals, the spirit of vegetation is represented by both Maypole and green man images. It was believed to be the same spirit which brought life to trees and inferior plants, that animated the whole of creation, human beings included. It was for this reason that it was nearly always the young people of the village who took on the characters in the festivals. This emphasised the idea of new life and fertility, inherent to the spirits being portrayed. Many May hymns and carols show an interesting juxtaposition of this imagery with Christian thought. We can see such ideas being christologised in the following May carol:

<i>Down with the rosemary and bays,</i>	<i>Then youthful box, which now hath grace</i>
<i>Down with the mistletoe;</i>	<i>Your houses to renew,</i>
<i>Instead of holly, now upraise</i>	<i>Grown old, surrender, must his place</i>
<i>The greener box for show.</i>	<i>Unto the crisped yew.</i>
<i>The holly hitherto did sway:</i>	<i>When yew is out, then birch comes in</i>
<i>Let box now domineer</i>	<i>And many flowers beside,</i>
<i>Until the dancing Easter Day,</i>	<i>Both of a fresh and fragrant kin</i>
<i>Or Easter's Eve appear.</i>	<i>To honour Whitsuntide.</i>

*Green rushes then, and sweetest bents,  
With cooler, oaken boughs,  
Come in for comely ornaments,  
To re-adorn the house.*

*Thus times do shift, thus times do shift;  
Each thing his turn does hold;  
New things succeed, new things succeed,  
As former things grow old.*

126, Oxford Book of Carols (1964)

In this text, we have an interesting mixing of the ideas from the May festivals and the Christian year. The first verse points to Christmas, with the images of mistletoe and holly. Holly traditionally was used to symbolise the crucifixion with the red berries as red as blood, therefore reminding us of the price of redemption. But now, at the start of spring we see other branches being used to adorn the church, and we can see the older May Day images being alluded to. By bringing in the yew and birch we are honouring Whitsuntide. We will see more of the relationship between this type of green spirituality and Whitsuntide or Pentecost in the next chapter, but for now this Spring carol gives us a good illustration of how the church adopted and adapted the older, popular beliefs. In the May Festival, the maypole celebrated the arrival of Spring and the green man image symbolised the supernatural power found in the natural world, which was the catalyst and dynamic power behind creation. It also ensured the crops and fertility of the community. The ideas in this carol are now adapted in a christological mould, for it is now through the coming of Christ and the Holy Spirit on the earth that new life and fertility come. The blessings of the tree spirits are now the blessings from God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. We also have here, as in the rogation hymns discussed earlier, the idea of cyclical order, particularly in the last verse. In this verse, we read: *thus times do shift; each thing his turn does hold; new things succeed, new things succeed, as former things grow old.* Life is here regarded as dynamic and purposeful, with an inherent order, which is a surprisingly modern (almost evolutionary) concept for such an early text.

Another May carol which clearly illustrates this type of adaptation into the church is the May-Day Garland carol:

*I've brought you here a bunch of may!*

*Before your door it stands:*

*It's well set out, and well spread about*

*By the work of our Lord's hands.*

*This morning is the first of May,*

*The primest of the year:*

*So ladies all, both great and small,*

*I wish you a joyful cheer.*

*Then take your Bible in your hand,*

*And read the scriptures through;*

*And when the day of judgement comes,*

*The Lord will remember you.*

48, Oxford Book of Carols (1964)

The Oxford Book of Carols gives an interesting footnote to this carol. It states that this might be sung in church at May time when evensong is over by one or two girls carrying a branch of may. We here see just to what extent the May images were adopted into the church when here it is suggested that may branches should be carried at evensong. If anything, the older images are even clearer in this carol than in our previous one, for the text unashamedly states that these were the same branches which were brought to adorn the doors of the houses during the May festival. The new life and fertility symbolism is also alluded to, for we are told the branches are well set out

and well spread about. But the work is no longer done by elemental spirits, for we are told that it is *the work of our Lord's hands*. It is also worth noting in this carol an interesting mix of (what could be called pagan) May festival imagery on the one hand with protestant ideology on the other, for in verse 3 we are instructed to regularly read the scriptures so that *when the day of judgement comes, the Lord will remember you*. The important issue here, though, is that yet again God's power and activity are being linked closely to creation and the whole of nature. By using May Day imagery, one is evoking a kind of implicit nature spirituality, and in so doing inevitably linking God closely to the natural world.

### **Hymns of the Harvest**

Having examined how themes associated with creation are reflected in rogation/May Festival hymns, we will now consider how these themes are approached in hymns for the harvest festival. The harvest festival season is the culmination of the cycle begun in Spring and illustrated by the hymns in the previous chapter. We will start our examination here by looking at probably the most popular harvest hymn of all, *We plough the fields and scatter*:

1. *We plough the fields and scatter*

*The good seed on the land,*

*But it is fed and watered*

*By God's almighty hand;*

*He sends the snow in winter,*

*The warmth to swell the grain,*

*The breezes and the sunshine*

*And soft refreshing rain.*

*All good gifts around us  
Are sent from heaven above;  
Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord,  
For all his love.*

2. *He only is the maker*

*Of all things near and far;  
He paints the wayside flower,  
He lights the evening star;  
The winds and waves obey Him,  
By Him the birds are fed;  
Much more to us, his children,  
He gives our daily bread.*

620, Church Hymnary: Third Edition (1973)

Immediately, the similarities to some of the creation psalms are strikingly apparent. We see God depicted as closely linked to creation. Everything that happens in nature is viewed as dependent on the will of God. In Psalm 65, one of the earliest of creation psalms, we saw how the harvest festival and the activity of God were regarded as closely linked to the natural order of the world. We saw particular links to the idea of rain, which brought fertility and new life, being linked to God's activity:

<sup>9</sup> Thou visitest the earth and waterest it: thou greatly enriches it with the river of God which is full of water: thou preparest them corn when thou hast so provided it. <sup>10</sup> Thou waterest the ridges thereof abundantly.

Likewise, in this modern day harvest festival hymn, we can see similar images to Psalm 65. At the end of verse 1, *the breezes and the sunshine and soft refreshing rain* are seen as gifts sent from God. Further on in verse 2, there can be seen yet another

striking similarity to Psalm 65, where it states: *the winds and waves obey him*. God is here viewed as in control of the whole of the natural order. Here we find similarities to the ancient Hebrew concept found in the harvest festival psalms, where God is in control of the sea and the threat of storms and chaos:

Which stilleth the noise of the seas, the noise of the waves. (Psalm 65, verse 7)

In this harvest festival hymn then, it is possible to see God as in control of the whole natural world in a similar way to the ancient Hebrew concepts highlighted in the harvest festival psalms discussed earlier. In our discussion there, we saw the activity of God closely linked to an established natural order, and we saw how such Psalms reflected the view that the sea was regarded as a threat because of its natural power to cause floods etc. In their system, the harvest festival psalms celebrated the fact that God had conquered the power of the sea (Psalm 104 verses 25 and 26 and Psalm 136 verse 6). It may be the case, therefore, that we can see hidden inadvertently in the text of this most popular of harvest hymns some of the ancient dualistic notions of the ancient Hebrew culture. In this harvest hymn, we have God viewed very much as creator and closely linked to the types of images we have found in the creation psalmody. It is very much an Old Testament notion of God.

We can see this approach in the following harvest hymn by Henry Williams Baker, which itself is a re-writing of the well-known creation hymn based on Psalm 136 by John Milton "Let us with a gladsome mind":

*<sup>1</sup>Praise, O praise our God and King;*

*<sup>2</sup>Praise him that he made the sun*

*Hymns of adoration sing;*

*Day by day his course to run;*

*For his mercies still endure,*

*For his mercies etc.*

*Ever faithful, ever sure.*

<sup>3</sup>*And the silver moon by night  
Shining with her gentle light  
For his mercies etc.*

<sup>4</sup>*Praise him that he gave the rain  
To mature the swelling grain  
For his mercies etc.*

620, Revised Church Hymnary (1927)

Again, we have similarities to the creation Psalms here. In verses 2 and 3, we see God bringing order: night followed by day, and by implication, season by season. We can see this in Psalm 74:

<sup>16</sup>The day is thine, the night also is thine: thou has prepared the light and the sun.

<sup>17</sup>Thou hast set all the borders of the earth: thou hast made summer and winter.

Likewise, then, in this modern day harvest festival hymn, God is being praised for the continuing order of the seasons. Moreover, as in the previous hymn, verse 4 of this hymn is similar to the harvest Psalm 65, where it states *praise him that he gave the rain, to mature the swelling grain*. Before we leave this hymn text, we should take into account verse 7, for here it shows a more christological imagery than the verses we have looked at thus far, and as we shall go on to see, this is an important concept in much of our harvest festival hymnody. In verse 7, we read:

*And for richer food than this,*

*Pledge of everlasting bliss*

*For his mercies etc.*

For the most part, the hymn is concerned with God the creator and provider, but here in verse 7, we have a dovetailing of Old Testament and New Testament concepts. Here we can see a christologising of the Old Testament creator God, for not only is God the provider and upholder of creation, but he is the same God who brings salvation and everlasting life to his people through the death and resurrection of Christ. We can see a connection being made here between communion, which is

illustrated as *richer food* and the harvest festival. This, as we shall go on to see, is probably the main difference between our traditional harvest festival hymns and creation psalmody.

I will now go on to examine some more harvest hymns that illustrate the issues which arise with the christologising of harvest festival praise. We have the following excellent example of this type of christological harvest hymn in *Come ye thankful people, come*:

*Come ye thankful people, come,  
Raise the song of harvest home:  
All is safely gathered in,  
Ere the winter storms begin;  
God, our maker, doth provide  
For our wants to be supplied:  
Come to God's own temple come.  
Raise the song of harvest home.*

*All this world is God's own field,  
Fruit unto his praise to yield,  
Wheat and tares together sown,  
Unto joy or sorrow grown;  
First the blade, and then the ear,  
Then the full corn shall appear:  
Lord of harvest grant that we  
Wholesome grain and pure may be.*

*For the Lord our God shall come,  
And shall take his harvest home;*

*From his field shall in that day  
All offences purge away.  
Give his angels charge at last  
In the fire the tares to cast  
But the fruitful ears to store  
In his garner evermore.*

*Even so, Lord, quickly come  
Bring thy final harvest home:  
Gather thou, thy people in,  
Free from sorrow, free from sin;  
There, forever purified,  
In thy garner to abide:  
Come, with all thine angels come,  
Raise the glorious harvest home!*

627, Church Hymnary: Third Edition (1973)

Here then, we see a major change in emphasis from God the creator and the natural world to a more christological and anthropocentric focus on sin and salvation. In this hymn, we have no direct mention of God as creator. In the first verse, we have a reference to him as provider, but from then on it moves, through using imagery of the parable of the sower, to concerns of sin and salvation. The author of *Come ye thankful people come*, Henry Alford D.D., we learn in the biographical and historical notes of the handbook to the Church Hymnary<sup>21</sup>, was an Anglican cleric and an academic who published a number of hymns and was a New Testament scholar. But interestingly, it

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<sup>21</sup> Moffat, J. (ed.) (1927). *Handbook to the Church Hymnary*. Oxford University Press.

gives us the following background on his theological views where it says:

He was catholic-spirited, a supporter of the Evangelical Alliance, and throughout his life maintained cordial relations with non-conformists. (p.251)

So we can see that the author of this most famous of harvest hymns probably had evangelical leanings, hence the emphasis on salvation and the second coming in this hymn text. It is possible to argue that in some circles of Protestant Victorian Britain, there was an attempt to move away from images of God as creator and of his connection with the natural world, and even at the harvest festival the main concern was with human salvation. In this type of harvest hymn, the natural images had become metaphors for the saved and the unsaved, as in this sombre warning to the unrepentant:

*Give his angels charge at last*

*In the fire the tares to cast*

*But the fruitful ears to store*

*In his garner evermore.*

This metaphorical approach to the harvest was quite common in harvest hymnody of this period. We can also see it in the following harvest festival hymn from the 1933 Congregational hymn book (number 631), *The sower went forth sowing*:

*One day the heavenly sower,*

*Shall reap where he hath sown,*

*And come again rejoicing,*

*And with him bring his own;*

*And then the fan of judgement*

*Shall winnow from his floor*

*The chaff into the furnace*

*That flameth evermore.*  
*O holy, awful reaper,*  
*Have mercy on that day*  
*Thou puttest in thy sickle,*  
*And cast us not away.*

We have no mention of creation for its own sake, neither do we see any concern with natural theology. The images from the natural world are purely metaphorical, with the real concern being the state of the human relationship with God. Like the psalms, there is an element of covenant to be found here, but there is a sense in which it is more exclusive, for in the psalms the natural world was closely linked with God, whereas here it could be argued it is incidental. In these two hymn texts (and in many other similar hymns of this period) God is viewed much more as a transcendent judge. This is a more anthropocentric angle, where the harvest festival is being used as a metaphor for the christological system of sin and salvation. Many harvest hymns of protestant evangelical tradition would take this view, especially some of the gospel hymns that were popular in Britain (many imported from America), where the whole theme of the harvest imagery was of repentance from sin and the second coming. The following is an excellent example of this (from Redemption Songs, number 639):

*Where are the reapers that garner in*  
*The sheaves of the good from the fields of sin!*  
*With sickles of truth must the work be done,*  
*But no one may rest till the harvest home.*

*Go out in the by ways and search them all*  
*The wheat may be there, though the weeds are tall;*  
*Then search in the highway and pass none by,*

*But gather from all from the home on high.*

*....Toil on till the Lord of the harvest come,*

*Then share in the joy of the harvest home.*

God here does not seem to be concerned with the natural world, the emphasis is on the state of humanity and a personal after-life, whether it be in heaven or hell. Some hymn writers, on the other hand, have attempted to keep both of the concepts in balance. For example, we have the following hymn by William Chatterton Dix:

*To thee, O Lord, our hearts we raise*

*In hymns of adoration,*

*To thee bring sacrifice of praise,*

*With shouts of exaltation.*

*Bright robes of gold the fields adorn,*

*The hills with joy are ringing,*

*The valleys stand so thick with corn,*

*That even they are singing.*

*And now, on this our festal day,*

*Thy bounteous hand confessing,*

*Before thee, thankfully we lay,*

*The first fruits of thy blessing.*

*By thee the souls of men are fed*

*With gifts of grace supernal;*

*Thou who dost give us earthly bread,*

*Give us the Bread eternal.*

*We bear the burden of the day,  
And often toil seems dreary;  
But labour ends with sunset ray  
And rest comes for the weary.  
May we the angel weeping o'er,  
Stand at the last accepted,  
Christ's golden sheaves for ever-more  
To garners bright elected.*

*O blessed is that land of God  
Where saints abide for ever,  
Where golden fields spread far and broad,  
Where flows the crystal river.  
The strains of all its holy throng  
With ours today are blending;  
Thrice blessed is that harvest song  
Which never hath an ending.*

616, Revised Church Hymnary (1927)

In this hymn, we have an attempt to juxtapose the older imagery found in the psalms with the christological concepts of human salvation, heaven and hell. Immediately, in the first verse we can see similarities to the harvest psalms, and we also have images here of God being connected to nature. There is even the possibility in this text of a kind of reciprocity between God and the natural world, where we read:

*The valleys stand so thick with corn,  
That even they are singing.*

This, then, is a more inclusive approach, where nature is viewed as participating in the praise of God. We have in this verse similar imagery to the harvest Psalm 65 verses 12 and 13, which state *...the little hills rejoice on every side. The pastures are clothed with flocks; the valleys also are covered over with corn; they shout for joy, they also sing.* But while we have the acknowledgement that God and nature are connected, the hymn then goes on to mention the salvation of Christ for humanity and in verse 4 the promise of heaven is set out in harvest imagery. In this hymn, we see a more balanced approach to the harvest festival, where we see God as concerned with the whole of creation, as well as the salvation of humankind. Up to this point, though, we have not seen much evidence of the more immanent approaches to God and the natural world that we saw in the Spring and May Festival hymns. The harvest festival hymns so far have seen God as concerned with creation, but in a kind of transcendent way, either as the creator and upholder of order or a kind of transcendent judge. We will now go on to see if there is any evidence in harvest hymnody of the more immanent God, one who is more closely connected to the whole of the natural world.

A hymn which more directly picks up on this imagery is the following hymn by Archbishop Benson written in the late 1800s:

*O Throned, O Crowned with all renown,  
Since Thou the earth has trod,  
Thou reignest, and by Thee come down  
Henceforth the gifts of God:  
By Thee the suns of space, that burn  
Unspent, their watches hold;  
The hosts that turn, and still return,  
Are swayed and poised and rolled.....*

*“Summer and winter shall not fail,  
Seed-time nor harvest fail”*

*Thus in their change let frost and heat  
And winds and dews be given;  
All fostering power, all influence sweet  
Breathe from the bounteous heaven:  
Attemper fair with gentle air  
The sunshine and the rain,  
That kindly earth with timely birth,  
May yield her fruits again;  
  
That we may feed Thy poor aright,  
And, gathering round Thy throne,  
Here, in the holy angels' sight,  
Repay Thee of Thine own.....*

505, Hymns Ancient and Modern (1922)

This hymn, which is partly paraphrasing Psalm 24, picks up on many images from the Hebrew harvest festival. As we saw in Chapter 2, the Hebrew harvest festival was linked to the return of God at the time of the rainy season which would bring the resurrection of new life. As Mowinckel<sup>22</sup> pointed out:

....the feast of the rains – the harvest and new year festival – signifies the revival and resurrection of the god Baal or Aleyan Baal, who, having conquered death (*Mot*), seats himself on the throne and is proclaimed king of gods and men.

The above hymn has many allusions to Psalm 24, for God is *throned* and *crowned* and *reignest*, and then there follow *the gifts of God*. It is worth mentioning that there is an

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<sup>22</sup> Mowinckel, S. (1992). *The Psalms in Israel's worship*. (2nd ed.). Sheffield: JSOT Press.

interesting new angle to the Old Testament concept alluded to here, for in the line *since Thou the earth has trod*, the author is bringing in a christological aspect to the Old Testament concept. The reigning and crowning here, it would seem, are due to the ascension and the reigning of Christ after the crucifixion, so we have an interesting attempt to christologise images from a much earlier time and culture. Nevertheless, its general ethos closely links God to nature, and the idea of God giving life to all is to be seen in verse 2: *All fostering power, all influence sweet, breathe from the bounteous heaven: Attemper fair with gentle air, the sunshine and the rain, that kindly earth with timely birth may yield her fruits again*. Moreover, this hymn points out that not only does God give life to all of creation, but this life is also purposeful, and God therefore has an intention for the world, for in the last verse we are told that the fruits and gifts of God are given that we *may feed thy poor aright*. So we see the created order becoming a moral and ethical order, which is the purpose and goal of creation. Like in the Old Testament concept of the harvest festival, though this time in christological guise, there is a kind of implicit dualism. For, as we saw in Chapter 1, it is only by the returning of God with his people that benefits and right order follow. Thus, in this hymn, it is through the salvation and ascension of Christ that creation is set aright. The idea of God enthroned and with his people can also be seen in the following harvest hymn, from the Congregational Hymnbook of 1951 (number 651), *Let all our brethren join in one*, where verses 3 and 4 state:

*Man sowed the seed and watered it*

*In sorrow and in care*

*But God alone the increase gave*

*And bade it blossom fair:*

*All praise to him whose bounty crowns  
With flowers and fruit the year;  
God is our hope and strength today,  
Therefore we will not fear.*

There are here clear images from Psalm 65, and Psalm 46 verses 4 and 5:

<sup>4</sup>There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most high. <sup>5</sup>God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved....

Here again we have the imagery of God being with his people, *in the midst*, juxtaposed with the imagery of a river, alluding to water and rain, which thus makes glad the city of God. We have here yet again the concept that where God is, new life, fertility and blessings follow, so the above harvest festival hymn picks up on Psalm 46 in a similar way to the rogation hymns in the previous section. We have here a more immanent and inclusive theology than was evident in the harvest hymns discussed previously (e.g. *Come ye thankful people, come*).

Finally, we will go on to look at some hymns which pick up more directly an immanent view of God, where God is closely linked to new life and fertility. In this last section, we will see images more akin to the rogation and May festival hymns considered at the end of the previous section of this chapter. A hymn where we can see such images being hinted at is the hymn by Alice Flowerdew *Fountain of mercy, God of love*:

<sup>1</sup>*Fountain of mercy, God of love,  
How rich thy bounties are!  
The rolling seasons, as they move,  
Proclaim thy constant care.*

<sup>2</sup>*When in the bosom of the earth  
The sower hid the grain,  
Thy goodness marked its secret birth,  
And sent the early rain.*

<sup>3</sup>*The spring's sweet influence was Thine!*      <sup>5</sup>*Seed-time and harvest, Lord, alone*  
*The plants in beauty grew*                      *Thou dost on man bestow;*  
*Thou gavest refulgent suns to shine,*      *Let him not then forget to own*  
*And mild refreshing dew.*                      *From whom his blessings flow.*

<sup>4</sup>*These various mercies from above*      <sup>6</sup>*Fountain of love, all praise is thine;*  
*Matured the swelling grain*                      *To thee our songs we'll raise*  
*And yellow harvest crowns thy love*      *And all created nature join*  
*And plenty fills the plain.*                      *In sweet harmonious praise.*

617, Revised Church Hymnary (1927)

In this hymn, we have many of the images from the harvest festival psalms. We see in verse 2 that God sends the rain (Psalm 65). Verse 5 contains the idea of a covenant between God and man, where we are told that we should not forget the God from whom the blessings flow. And verse 1, which mentions the rolling seasons, points to God's constant order and care (Psalm 85). We also see the wholehearted inclusion of all of nature in verse 6. But at this point it is worth taking a closer look at the imagery in verse 3, for it is here that there can be seen a more immanent approach than has been found in the harvest hymns considered so far. In this verse, we see the spring being given a kind of identity. It mentions *the spring's sweet influence*, attributing a kind of will to it. There is a subtle, more immanent, view being taken of the workings of God here. This type of imagery could be regarded as closer to the rogation hymns, which dealt with new life, as for example in the hymn we looked at earlier, *Now the spring has come again, joy and warmth will follow*. It is possible to see in this harvest hymn similar ideas, where the spring is the agent of new life and fertility. It may be too strong to argue that this particular hymn is superimposing the concepts of God and spring, and thus harking back to the older May Day festival type of imagery, but there

is definitely a very close link being made between the two, and spring is seen as an agent to the working of God's purposes.

The final hymn we will look at in this section I think illustrates even more clearly this type of theological position:

*Lord by whose breath, all souls and seeds are living*

*With life that is and life that is to be,*

*Fruits of the earth we offer with thanksgiving*

*For fields in flood with summer's golden sea.*

*Lord of the earth, accept these gifts in token*

*Thou in thy works are to be all adored,*

*From whom the light as daily bread is broken,*

*Sunset and dawn as wine and milk are poured.*

*Poor is our praise, but these shall be our psalter;*

*Lo like thyself they rose up from the dead;*

*Lord, give them back when at thy holy altar*

*We feed on thee, who art our living bread.*

153, More Hymns for Today (1980)

This harvest hymn speaks about the breath of God as being the agent of life in all things. Here, rather than a transcendent creator or judge of the kind illustrated in the earlier hymns, we have a more explicit immanent theology in which God is seen as being at the centre of everything that exists. This imagery is closer to the May festival hymns examined in the first part of this chapter. It could be argued that the life and spirit of the natural world and the spirit of God are becoming infused together in

hymns of this type. However, this idea is not unique to such hymns, as we shall see in the next chapter where we will examine pneumatological hymn texts.

## Chapter 3

### Creator Spirit

We come now to examine hymns which illustrate the concept of the creator spirit of God, or pneumatological hymn texts. In Chapter 1, we saw how the Old Testament concept of creator spirit was illustrated in some of the early creation psalmody. So we will now go on here to reflect how traditional creation hymnody has adopted and adapted such ideas. In Chapter 1, we illustrated how the Old Testament concept of creator spirit was closely linked to the natural world, and in particular the wind. The word for “spirit” in biblical Hebrew is “ruach”, which could be translated as “wind” or “breath”. There is no doubt that we have in this very old biblical concept a kind of elemental spirituality, where God was closely linked to the natural world. In our previous chapter, where we examined rogation and harvest hymns, we saw in some texts an almost similar kind of spirituality. We saw this evident in a number of the May festival hymns where the Holy Spirit was closely linked to new life and spring time. And in the last harvest festival hymn we examined, the breath of God was mentioned as imparting life to all things living.

It could be argued that the early church was to some extent to lose sight of this Old Testament concept of creator spirit, and was to develop quite a different doctrine of the spirit which was more anthropocentric. In the early church, the Holy Spirit would be viewed as continuing the work of Christ after his Resurrection, and would take on Christian characteristics. Paul describes this in II Corinthians 3:17: “Now the Lord is

the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” Badcock <sup>23</sup> points out here that:

In reference to the experience of Paul and the Corinthian church, Christ is the Spirit, and the Spirit who is at work is Christ..... After the Resurrection, we might say, Jesus becomes the definition, in some sense, of the Spirit's activity in the life of the church, for with the Resurrection, Christ's existence is *as Spirit*: The pre-existent Spirit of the Old Testament has taken on the character of Christ, and vice versa. (p. 24)

It is undeniable then that a distinction is being made to some extent between the Old and New Testament concepts of Spirit. From Pentecost onwards, the Spirit became viewed in a Christocentric fashion. With the concept of the Trinity and the idea of Double Procession found in the *filioque* clause (i.e. the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*) within the Nicene creed, it is possible to see a vastly different pneumatology evolving, one quite distinct from the Old Testament concepts. As the Spirit became more associated with the work of the church, its creative aspect was diminished. The important aspect of the Spirit now would be its effect on the individual believer, bringing him or her into the new mode of Christian life and into the fold of the church, and therefore the beginning of a process of Resurrection for the individual here and now. As Paul points out in Galatians 4:

<sup>6</sup> And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba, Father'. <sup>7</sup> So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir.

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<sup>23</sup> Badcock, G. D. (1997). *Light of truth and fire of love*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company.

In much of the early church's theology, the work of the Spirit would not only be limited to men but to individual believers through baptism. John 20 states:

21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I have sent you." 22 And when he said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit".

This text and other similar texts show how the early church not only anthropomorphised the Holy Spirit but in a sense viewed it in an egocentric way. For example, it would only be those who were morally worthy that would be seen as having any kind of association with the Spirit. In the *Shepherd of Hermas*, we are told that the Holy Spirit is *delicate* and unaccustomed to associating with evil. Similarly, Origen seems to be quite definite on this issue. For as Badcock<sup>24</sup> states:

The greatest Christian theologian of the 3rd century, Origen (c. 185-254), speaks at times of how the Holy Spirit dwells with the saints alone; unlike the Word and the Father who are always at work in the just and unjust alike, the spirit's activity for Origen seems to be restricted to the worthy..... since it is by the Spirit that people confess the faith of Christ, and since not all confess that faith, not all can as a matter of fact presently possess the Spirit..... (p. 41)

It is clear then that the early church saw the work of the Spirit as transforming and catalysing a redemptive process in the life of the individual.

In the light of this, I will now go on to look at some hymns on the Holy Spirit, to see how they reflect the Old Testament concept of creator spirit, which as we have seen is in many ways more inclusive of nature as a whole. We need, therefore, a pneumatology which gives adequate account of the work of the Holy Spirit in the

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<sup>24</sup> Badcock, G. D. (1997). *Light of truth and fire of love*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company.

whole of creation, while at the same time giving room for the work of the spirit within the individual. A well-balanced attitude would not only be less anthropocentric but less egocentric. As McDonagh<sup>25</sup> rightly points out:

Since the late Middle Ages, and particularly since the Reformation, there has been an almost exclusive concentration in Western theological tradition on a Fall/Redemption theology.....This theological tradition has no adequate theology of creation. The twenty billion years of God's creative love is simply seen either as the stage on which the drama of human salvation is worked out or as something radically sinful in itself and needing transformation. (p. 81)

The West therefore needs to rediscover this Old Testament pneumatology. We must regain our idea that the creator spirit of God and the giver of life is in all things.

Moltmann<sup>26</sup> states:

Everything that is, exists and lives in the unceasing in-flow of the energies and potentialities of the cosmic spirit. This means that we have to understand every created reality in terms of energy, grasping it as the realised potentiality of the divine spirit. Through the energies and potentialities of the spirit, the creator is himself present in his creation. He does not merely confront it in his transcendence; entering into it, he is also immanent in it. (p.9)

Everything that exists, exists in and through God. God then gives life to all without distinction. We will now go on and look at some hymn texts and see if there is any evidence to be found of this inclusive concept of the Holy Spirit, for I believe that many of the spirit hymns contain much of this imagery, sometimes clear and sometimes hidden in the texts. We will start by looking at the hymn *Eternal Father Strong to*

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<sup>25</sup> McDonagh, S. (1986). *To care for the Earth*. London: Cassell Publishers Ltd.

<sup>26</sup> Moltmann, J. (1993). *God in creation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

*Save*, a hymn based on the sea and sea-faring, but which in verse 3 mentions the Holy Spirit thus:

*O Holy Spirit, who didst brood  
Upon the waters dark and rude,  
And bid their angry tumult cease,  
And give, for wild confusion, peace:*

527, Church Hymnary: Third Edition (1973)

We have in this text strong reminiscences of the concept of creator spirit found in the psalms and in the creation story of Genesis, where we read that at creation “the spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1, verse 2). Here we have clear images of the Old Testament creator spirit, who is active in bringing about order from chaos and who in Psalm 104 controls the storms and sets a boundary to the sea. We have in this verse references to some of the earliest ideas of the work and place of the Holy Spirit. This is the Creator Spirit, present from the beginning of time and closely associated with nature. It is similar to the primeval struggle found in the Canaanite myths and mentioned in the psalms, as we saw in Chapter 1 (Psalm 74, verses 13 and 14), and even more so in Psalm 104 in that this hymn could almost be a straight re-working of verses 5 to 9:

<sup>5</sup>Who laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not be removed forever. <sup>6</sup>Thou coveredst it with the deep as with a garment: the waters stood above the mountains. <sup>7</sup>At thy rebuke they fled; at the voice of thy thunder they hasted away. <sup>8</sup>They go up by the mountains; they go down by the valleys unto the place which thou hast founded for them. <sup>9</sup>Thou has set a bound that they may not pass over; that they turn not again to cover the earth.

Here then, we can see clearly that this hymn is highlighting the Old Testament creator spirit aspect. We see similar ideas in another hymn *Thou whose almighty word*, where we read:

1. *Thou whose almighty word  
Chaos and darkness heard.  
And took their flight.....*

3. *Spirit of truth and love,  
Life-giving, holy Dove,  
Speed forth thy flight;  
Move o'er the waters' face,  
Bearing the lamp of grace,  
And in earth's darkest place  
Let there be light.*

494, Church Hymnary: Third Edition (1973)

We see again here the creative aspect of the Holy Spirit mentioned, for in verse 1, it is the *word* of God that draws order from chaos, and we have in verse 3 clear images again of the creative spirit moving *o'er the waters*. Although this hymn is a mission hymn, and is speaking primarily about the word of God, the Old Testament concepts are clearly being drawn on.

Another hymn which highlights the Creator Spirit is the translation of the ninth century Latin hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus*:

1. *Creator Spirit, by whose aid  
The world's foundations first were laid  
Come, visit every pious mind  
Come, pour thy joys on humankind....*

3. *Plenteous of grace, descend from high,  
Rich in the sevenfold energy;*

*Thou strength of his almighty hand,  
Whose power does heaven and earth command.*

118, Church Hymnary: Third Edition (1973)

This is a particularly interesting text, for it seems to contain the two concepts of the spirit we have been discussing. In the first verse it is highlighting the spirit's transforming and redemptive work which is evoked on *every pious mind*, while at the same time it speaks about the spirit's work as creator, from the foundations of the earth, which is evident in both verse 1 and 3. So here we see the two images held more in balance than in some spirit hymns which purely view the Holy Spirit as working on the individual.

There are many other hymns on the Holy Spirit which are also conducive to this wider interpretation, for example the thirteenth century hymn *Veni, sancte Spiritus* runs as follows:

- |   |  |    |  |
|---|--|----|--|
| 1 | <i>Come, Thou Holy Paraclete,<br/>And from Thy celestial seat<br/>Send Thy light and brilliancy.</i>       | 7  | <i>What is soiled make Thou pure;<br/>What is wounded, work its cure;<br/>What is parched fructify.</i>    |
| 2 | <i>Father of the poor, draw near,<br/>Giver of all gifts, be here;<br/>Come, the soul's true radiancy.</i> | 8  | <i>What is rigid gently bend;<br/>What is frozen warmly tend;<br/>Straighten what goes erringly.</i>       |
| 3 | <i>Come, of comforters the best,<br/>Of the soul the sweetest guest,<br/>Come in toil refreshingly.</i>    | 9  | <i>Fill Thy faithful, who confide<br/>In Thy power to guard and guide,<br/>With Thy sevenfold mystery.</i> |
| 4 | <i>Thou in labour rest most sweet,<br/>Thou art shadow from the heat,<br/>Comfort in adversity.</i>        | 10 | <i>Here Thy grace and virtue send;<br/>Grant salvation in the end<br/>And in heaven felicity.</i>          |

(13th century; translated by John Mason Neale, 1818-66. *Revised Church Hymnary*, 186)

This is one of the early pneumatological hymns and is of uncertain origin, but it is clear that its approach is more inclusive, and sees the creative aspect of the spirit as working in all things. Verses 1 to 4 emphasise the anthropocentric aspects of the spirit, as comforter and father of the poor, but the second half of the hymn takes a wider approach and one could say includes the whole of nature. Verse 7 emphasises that the Holy Spirit gives life to all things and uses the imagery of re-constitution or re-hydration, hinting at the water of life which sustains life and brings all things into fruition. Furthermore, this verse could allude to a spiritual aspect in the natural healing properties of nature, and possibly sees the healing ability of the body as the work of the Holy Spirit. There may therefore be an underlying linking of the work of nature with the work of the divine spirit. It could also be said that verse 8 (in the light of modern science) sees the spirit as, in a sense, directing and working through the processes of evolution. Such an interpretation of the imagery used in this hymn could give us a much more positive view of creation. It regains a reverence for creation which in the West is badly needed. Furthermore, as this hymn shows, it is not an alien concept to the Christian tradition, for it is to be found amongst the seminal pneumatological biblical texts. As Moltmann<sup>27</sup> points out:

As the water of life, the spirit makes what is dying and withered living and fertile.....it spreads itself out over all living things, like the waters of a flood, pervading everything. If the Holy Spirit is God's Spirit and the special presence of God, then when God's Spirit is poured out, 'all flesh' will be deified.....The divine becomes the all-embracing presence in which what is human – indeed everything that lives – can develop fruitfully and live eternally: 'You encompass me on every side and hold your hand over me' (Psalm 139: 5). (p. 12)

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<sup>27</sup> Moltmann, J. (1997). *The source of life*. London: SCM Press.

Birch and Cobb<sup>28</sup>, as we saw earlier, develop this theme further when they equate the Holy Spirit with life in general and describe it as the underlying energy sustaining everything. They state:

The 'Spirit' or 'Breath' of God, in Hebrew understanding, was the Life of God. It is that 'Breath' that is breathed into us so that we became living beings. We put it in another way, saying that it is the immanence of the divine life within us that makes us alive. The Bible sees the Spirit as the giver of life both in the sense of biological enlivening and in the sense of quickening our human experience. We, too, have insisted on the identity of the Life that does both of these things. (p.199)

Birch and Cobb argue further here in the light of modern science (cosmology and evolutionary theory, in particular), that it is the Holy Spirit as Life which is the catalyst and guiding agent behind the whole course of evolution on the planet. They state:

Life is purposeful. Indeed, it is defined by its purpose. It is not the sheer blind 'ongoingness' of things, but the cosmic aim for value.... Yet this could be easily misunderstood. Life does not aim specifically at the creation of human beings. It has no one goal for the course of evolution on our planet.... Life aims at the realisation of value, that is rich experience or aliveness. In some measure, it realises value in every living thing... To this end, it produces creatures in profligate abundance so that through the processes of selection some will emerge with greater intelligence and capacity for feeling. Life has achieved rich value in dolphins as well as in human beings. We cannot guess the forms it may have achieved on other worlds. (p. 197)

Life, then, in this sense, they argue "... favours both the fox and the hare, supporting the success of both hunter and hunted. Life favours all the runners in the race, and has

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<sup>28</sup> Birch, C., & Cobb, J. B. (1990). *The liberation of life*. Denton, Texas: Environmental Ethics.

no favourites" (p.198). If we return to verses 7 and 8 of the hymn quoted above, reflections of Birch and Cobb's ideas can be perceived:

7     *What is soiled make Thou pure;*  
       *What is wounded, work its cure;*  
       *What is parched fructify.*

8     *What is rigid gently bend;*  
       *What is frozen warmly tend;*  
       *Straighten what goes erringly.*

It is possible to see in these verses Birch and Cobb's ideas of the Spirit as Life. The sustaining and fructifying characteristics are reflected in verse 7. And there is a sense of the warmth of life in verse 8. The last line of this verse could be interpreted as hinting at the over-arching purposefulness of life and the underlying guidance of the Holy Spirit over the eons of time, an idea concisely and poetically encapsulated as follows by the twelfth century visionary and poet Hildegard of Bingen:

The Holy Spirit is life-giving life,  
Universal Mover and the root of all creation,  
refiner of all things from their dross.....  
is radiance of life, most worthy of worship,  
wakening and reawakening both earth and heaven. (cited by Moltmann<sup>29</sup>, p.54)

This hermeneutic approach (a term not normally used in the context of hymns) enables us to see hymns of this type in a wider context, and one which is pertinent to our contemporary ecological situation. Viewed in this way, hymns of the Holy Spirit, and theology of the Holy Spirit in general, will remind us that the whole of creation and of

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<sup>29</sup> Moltmann, J. (1997). *The source of life*. London: SCM Press.

life is inter-connected. The gulf between humans and the rest of creation would be bridged. It reminds us that we are all dependent on each other. We must widen our concept of "community" from our own circle of friends to the whole of creation. A detrimental effect on one part inevitably leads to a detrimental effect on the whole. As Birch and Cobb point out:

We are constituted by our relations with one another. The welfare of one is the welfare of all, and the suffering of one is the suffering of all. Of course this inter-connectedness of our lives is most apparent in our intimate circle of family and friends.....but there are no boundaries to these communities. In the words of John Donne "Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee". (p. 206)<sup>30</sup>

Many modern ecologists and theologians can see the benefits of this inclusive pneumatology. They say that we need to regain our respect and reverence for the whole of creation, and point to spirituality that can be found within other religions as a way of rediscovering the older ideas of the divinity and sacredness within all things. McDonagh gives an example of this from the T'boli people of South East Asia. He states:

Among the T'boli in the Philippines, each river, tree or mountain has its own spirit. Much of the religious ritual is geared to pleasing or appeasing spirits. The people are intent on attracting the blessings of the good spirits and warding off destruction from the evil spirits.... Even the very simple matter of cutting down a tree or building a house demands the appropriate rituals to recognise the rights of the spirit world.

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<sup>30</sup> Birch, C., & Cobb, J. B. (1990). *The liberation of life*. Denton, Texas: Environmental Ethics Books

This approach to the numinous world is also holistic. There is no cutting off the human from the natural world. Nature is not seen as raw material for human consumption to be manipulated in whatever way people choose. Rather it is filled with the spirit presence and as such must be respected. (p. 109)<sup>31</sup>

This respect and reverence for the whole of nature may well be evident in the following hymn by Cecil Frances Alexander, *Spirit of God, that moved of old*:

*Spirit of God, that moved of old  
Upon the waters' darkened face,  
Come, when our faithless hearts are cold,  
And stir them with an inward grace.  
  
Thou that art power and peace combined,  
All highest strength, all purest love,  
The rushing of the mighty wind,  
The brooding of the gentle dove.*

109, Church Hymnary: Third Edition (1973)

Again, we have clear references to the Old Testament and creation psalms with regard to the Creator Spirit; but it would also seem that the spirit that Mrs Alexander is thinking of could equate to the theological stance we are discussing here, for we can see clearly in verse 2 that we have evidence of the Spirit in the rushing of the mighty wind and the brooding of the dove. When we come to think of the issue of interdependence of the whole of the natural world as Birch and Cobb<sup>32</sup> have argued, verse 4 of this hymn could well have something to say on the issue:

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<sup>31</sup> McDonagh, S. (1986). *To care for the Earth*. London: Cassell Publishers Ltd.

<sup>32</sup> Birch, C., & Cobb, J. B. (1990). *The liberation of life*. Denton, Texas: Environmental Ethics Books

*Nor let us quench Thy sevenfold light,  
But still with softest breathings stir,  
Our wayward souls, and lead us right,  
O Holy Ghost, the Comforter.*

A modern re-interpretation of this last verse may here be possible, for we see in this verse, again using Old Testament imagery where it speaks about *softest breathings*, that this Creator Spirit can *lead us right*. This verse may therefore be pointing to a truly holistic view of the Holy Spirit, one which works with creation, but which also has the ability to draw us into that creative process, if we were to view it correctly. The Creator Spirit has the power to lead us in the correct way to live, but we must be willing to learn and re-establish our relationship with this Creator Spirit and the whole of the natural world. Another hymn which could point us in a similar direction is the well known hymn on the Holy Spirit, *Come down O Love Divine*:

*Come down, O Love Divine,  
Seek thou the soul of mine,  
And visit it with Thine own ardour glowing.....  
  
Let holy charity  
Mine outward vesture be,  
And lowliness become mine inner clothing;  
True lowliness of heart,  
Which takes the humbler part,  
And o'er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing.*

115, Church Hymnary: Third Edition (1973)

Here then we can see illustrated what the effects of living close to the Spirit would be, for the Spirit can make us aware of our selfishness and greed, and what is needed for true holistic living, as verse 3 points out, is putting the needs of others before selfish

gain. It is the Spirit that can make us aware of our “own shortcomings”. In other words, it is the same Creator Spirit that can make us aware of where we fall short of proper living e.g., exploitation of others and the natural world.

This type of holistic spirituality can be found in many other religions also. The American Indians, for instance had a strong tradition of land wisdom and earth spirituality in their traditional faiths, which nurtured within them a strong affinity with nature. For instance, in the words of Black Elk of the Lakota Shaman tribe, we find the following:

“My friend, I am going to tell you the story of my life..... It is the story of all life that is holy and is good to tell, and of us two-leggeds sharing it with the four-leggeds and the wings of the air and all green things; for these are children of one mother and their father is one spirit....

Hear me four quarters of the world – a relative I am! Give me the strength to walk the soft earth as a relative to all that is!...

Great Spirit, Great Spirit, my Grandfather, all over the earth the faces of living things are all alike. With tenderness have these come up out of the ground. Look upon these faces of children without number and with children in their arms that they may face the winds and walk the good road to the day of quiet.” (Cited in Callicott<sup>33</sup>, pp. 120-121.)

Gilmour<sup>34</sup>, in a recent study of spirituality in the American Indian Yavapai tribe, also points out in regard to their general outlook:

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<sup>33</sup> Callicott, J. B. (1994). *Earth's insights*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.

<sup>34</sup> Gilmour, I. (1999). *Earthed: a study of the Spirituality of American Indians* (Unpublished report to Presbytery of Edinburgh).

Their traditions exhibit a connectedness towards plants and animals, while the Yavapi will eat meat, they refuse fish, seeing the eating of fish as a kind of cannibalism. Traditionally, prayers were said before all hunting, requesting permission from the 'keeper of the animals', or from the animal itself for its life. These rituals before hunting did make the hunters more respectful of the creatures.... Native Americans do not see themselves as being on a different plane from the animal kingdom. (p. 40)

It is interesting that when Christianity was adopted by many of the American Indian tribes, most of them found it very easy to superimpose their traditional earth spirituality onto the Christian notion of the Holy Spirit, and by so doing were retrieving an affinity with the Old Testament concept which the church had largely lost. A hymn which one could say reflects this type of earth spirituality is a hymn by Andrew Reed:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1 <i>Spirit Divine, attend our prayers,</i><br><i>And make this house Thy home;</i><br><i>Descend with all Thy gracious powers;</i><br><i>O come, great Spirit, come!</i> | 4 <i>Come as the dew: and sweetly bless</i><br><i>This consecrated hour;</i><br><i>May barrenness rejoice to own</i><br><i>Thy fertilizing power.</i>                    |
| 2 <i>Come as the light: to us reveal</i><br><i>Our emptiness and woe;</i><br><i>And lead us in those paths of life</i><br><i>Where all the righteous go.</i>              | 5 <i>Come as the dove: and spread Thy wings,</i><br><i>The wings of peaceful love;</i><br><i>And let Thy Church on earth become</i><br><i>Blest as the Church above.</i> |
| 3 <i>Come as the fire: and purge our hearts</i><br><i>Like sacrificial flame;</i><br><i>Let our whole soul an offering be</i><br><i>To our Redeemer's Name</i>            | 6 <i>Come as the wind, with rushing sound,</i><br><i>And pentecostal grace</i><br><i>That all of women born may see</i><br><i>The glory of Thy face.</i>                 |

7 *Spirit Divine, attend our prayers;*

*Make a lost world Thy home;*

*Descend with all Thy gracious powers;*

*O come, great Spirit, come!*

(Andrew Reed, 1787–1862, *Church Hymnary 3rd Edition*, 107)

The type of spirit imagery within this hymn would possibly fit in well to the traditional American Indian spirituality, for there are a number of similar ideas to be found within the text. For example in each verse, the Spirit is equated with one of the elemental forces of nature, *as the wind* and *as the fire*. It is also equated with water in the form of the refreshing dew of morning, therefore giving rise to ideas of the life-giving properties of the “water of life”, an idea further hinted at in the *fertilizing power* of the Spirit. We can, though, as this chapter has illustrated, find this type of spirituality closer to home. As we saw earlier, our rogation hymns and many of our May Day carol texts point to a pre-Christian spirituality which was very similar to the spirituality discussed here. We saw how many of these hymn texts also saw God as closely linked to the natural elements and evoked a kind of elemental spirituality. This type of traditional spirituality fits in well with the panentheistic ideas of Moltmann<sup>35</sup> who gives the following summary of the creativity of the Spirit:

(a) The Spirit is the principle of creativity on all levels of matter and life. He creates new possibilities, and in these anticipates the new designs and blueprints for material and living organisms. In this sense, the Spirit is the principle of evolution.

(b) The Spirit is the holistic principle. At every evolutionary stage, he creates interactions, harmony in these interactions, mutual perichoreses, and therefore a

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<sup>35</sup> Moltmann, J. (1993). *God in creation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

life of co-operation and community. The Spirit of God is the 'common Spirit' of creation....

(d) Finally, all creations in the Spirit are in intention 'open'. They are directed towards their common future, because they are all, each in its own way aligned towards their potentialities. The principle of intentionality is inherent in all open systems of matter and life. (p. 100)

A hymn which strongly reflects this view of the Spirit is the ever popular *Immortal Invisible God only wise*, where we read in verse 3:

*To all, life Thou givest – to both great and small;*

*In all life thou livest, the true life of all.*

32, Church Hymnary: Third Edition (1973)

Although this hymn is not strictly of the pneumatological type, for it is based on God the creator, it contains strong echoes of this view of the Spirit as life to all. God is clearly viewed as immanent and active in the whole of creation in this text.

The hymns examined here are good examples of the type of hymns that reflect and are conducive to a wider and less anthropocentric approach to the Holy Spirit. Such ideas are not only ecologically friendly, they are more inclusive of other types of spirituality, and therefore may be in synchrony with some of the more modern approaches that have evolved in the West in recent times, particularly amongst younger people, for example the new found interest in Celtic spirituality. There is one further very interesting hymn text we should mention in this section which links very neatly the spring and pentecost hymns discussed here, the hymn by T.H. Gill:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>1. <i>The glory of the spring how sweet!</i><br/> <i>The new-born life how glad!</i><br/> <i>What joy the happy earth to greet,</i><br/> <i>A new-born, bright raiment clad!</i></p> | <p>4. <i>This new-born glow of faith so strong,</i><br/> <i>This bloom of love so fair,</i><br/> <i>This new-born ecstasy of song</i><br/> <i>And fragrancy of prayer!</i></p> |
| <p>2. <i>Divine Renewer, Thee I bless;</i><br/> <i>I greet thy going forth;</i><br/> <i>I love thee in the loveliness</i><br/> <i>Of thy renewed earth.</i></p>                         | <p>5. <i>Creator Spirit, work in me</i><br/> <i>These wonders sweet of thine;</i><br/> <i>Divine Renewer, graciously</i><br/> <i>Renew this heart of mine.</i></p>             |
| <p>3. <i>But O these wonders of Thy grace,</i><br/> <i>These nobler works of thine,</i><br/> <i>These marvels sweeter far to trace,</i><br/> <i>These new births more divine.</i></p>   |  |

618, Church Hymnary: Third Edition (1973)

Here we see the Old Testament and New Testament concepts of spirit fully infused together. Gill originally wrote this hymn for use at Pentecost, but its imagery of Spring is so misleading that some hymn books, for example the Revised Church Hymnary have actually misplaced it under the heading of "Times and Seasons: Spring". But a closer examination shows that Gill is emphasising a panentheistic spirituality which highlights the ideas discussed in this chapter. In verse 2, he speaks of the Holy Spirit as *divine renewer*, and is here emphasising the creative aspect of the Holy Spirit. From the outset, he links Pentecost with spring, when the first verse exalts *the glory of the spring* and *new-born life*. These are wrought through the spirit of God, which is here seen as closely connected to the whole of life. Gill is using the images and example of the new life at springtime as illustrations of the renewing potential of the Holy Spirit. These things point to the possibility of a similar effect on the observer, as verse 5 points out: *Divine Renewer, graciously renew this heart of mine*. So the work of the

*divine renewer* is here extended to the individual, like in the hymn *Come down O Love Divine*, where the Spirit could show us how to live correctly. The fact that the above hymn was intended for Pentecost highlights how closely life and creation and the holy spirit can be linked, for we see here the fertility images from the rogation hymns and the panentheism of the Spring and May Day carols all adopted into this Pentecost text.

We started this chapter by looking at Pentecost hymns which exemplified the Creator Spirit of the psalms in the Old Testament, where the Spirit's activity was connected with natural elements and with the wind. In the light of this, let us take a look at one final Pentecost hymn, *Breathe on me Breath of God*:

*Breathe on me Breath of God,*

*Fill me with life anew,*

*That I may love what Thou dost love*

*And do what Thou would do.*

103, Church Hymnary: Third Edition (1973)

Here is the Old Testament concept of Creator Spirit. As we saw in the chapter on psalms, it is the breath of God (Psalm 104 verse 29) which was also illustrated in Ezekiel (chapter 37, verses 9ff), where the wind gave life to the dry bones. But now we can view it, in the light of what we have said here, in a modern and contemporary way. It is an ancient and modern approach. The spirit or the "breath of God" symbolises the life of God which bears us all, and makes us all connected and interdependent on everything that exists. This life, as the hymn states, has the potential to renew our mode of existence (as in the previous hymn). By being open to the Spirit's empowerment, we will see the divine purpose of God for his creation, and thereby be more ready to act as proper stewards for a world which reflects its good creator.

To sum up this section on hymns which deal with the Holy Spirit, it is possible to say that we have seen firstly that they are open to a wider re-interpretation in the light of what we have discussed in our chapter on the creation psalms and also in our chapter on rogation and harvest festival hymns. It is possible to re-interpret these hymns by looking to emphasise more the Old Testament notion of Creator Spirit and in so doing we can take a more inclusive approach to this area of hymnody. We have seen that also with these hymns there are images of God working closely through and with the natural world. By seeing God linked to creation in this way, hymnody of this type implicitly invokes a more reverent approach to the natural world. Like the previous chapter, where we saw that the older ideas extant in the rogation and harvest hymnody reminded us of our connectedness with creation, it is also the case here that a panentheistic/immanent interpretation of hymns on the Holy Spirit can remind us of the unity of the whole of creation.

We will now go on in our final chapter to examine the way in which hymn texts have viewed the connectedness or otherwise of Christ with the natural world.

## Chapter 4

### Christological Perspectives

In this chapter, we will go on to look at some hymn texts which attempt to make a christological connection with creation. We have seen previously how some hymns have connected God closely to creation, sometimes in a mystical, panentheistic fashion, but now through examining some Advent, Christmas and Easter hymn texts, we will look at the implications of hymns which make a purely christological connection. As we shall see, a close examination of these hymn texts provides us with a number of interesting theological implications.

#### Creation and Advent

The first text we will look at is the relatively well known Advent hymn by John Ross Macduff:

<i>Christ is coming! Let creation</i>	<i>Earth can now but tell the story</i>
<i>From her groans and travail cease:</i>	<i>Of thy bitter cross and pain;</i>
<i>Let the glorious proclamation</i>	<i>She shall yet behold thy glory,</i>
<i>Hope restore and faith increase:</i>	<i>When thou comest back to reign.</i>
<i>Christ us coming!</i>	<i>Christ is coming!</i>
<i>Come, Thou blessed Prince of Peace.</i>	<i>Let each heart repeat the strain.</i>

313, Church Hymnary: Third Edition (1973)

There are a number of interesting questions we can ask about this text. For instance, how does Christ's coming affect the whole of creation? How are Christ and creation connected? What is the restoration for creation this hymn speaks about? This hymn, as I see it, picks up on some of the problematic issues in taking a christological approach

to the whole of creation, although as I shall illustrate, I do not think the problems are insurmountable. The main problematic presupposition for the inclusion of nature in this hymn text, and other similar Advent hymns, is in that they start from the concept of a human fall from grace, a concept central to Christian doctrines, i.e. the original sin and fall of Adam in the Genesis creation narratives. So we have here a theory which is purely based on an anthropocentric system. For Christ's coming is intended to redeem fallen and sinful mankind. The logic behind this is based on a moral/ethical presupposition. With this in mind, then, how does it make sense to speak of the whole of creation as fallen because of a moral flaw in humanity? We can see this problem illustrated in the first two lines: *Let creation from her groans and travail cease*. We can also see this idea reflected in Paul's letter to the Romans 8:

<sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God..... <sup>21</sup> because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. <sup>22</sup> We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now.

How then is it possible to make sense of the Pauline theology underlying this hymn text? What does it mean to say that creation is fallen? And in what sense does it need restoration? There is a danger here with hymns of this type which are strongly based on an anthropocentric premise of somehow placing a quasi-morality onto the whole of nature. For are we somehow implying that the natural world has fallen into a sinful state? The complexity of this area is compounded, as I see it, by the early church's adoption of Greek philosophy into its christology, for in making the statement that creation is fallen, they seem to be straying into a soft type of dualism. In the Platonic creation myth, the creator does not seem to have things entirely his own way, for he is

confronted with the *intractability* of matter. Plato makes this clear in a passage in the *Timaeus*:

Let me tell you then why the Maker made this world of change. He was good, and the good can never have any jealousy of anything. And being free from jealousy, he desired that all things should be as like himself as they could be. This is in the truest sense the origin of creation and of the world..... God desired that all things should be good and nothing bad **so far as this was attainable**. And so finding the whole visible sphere not at rest, but moving in an irregular and disorderly fashion, out of disorder he brought order, considering that this was in every way better than the other. (cited in Watson<sup>36</sup>, p.19)

The important sentence here is “so far as this was attainable”. This idea was central to the Platonic thinking and to the struggle between mind over matter. Plato is not saying here that matter is actually evil, rather he sees it as a kind of passive entity, but difficult to control. He thought of God as “soul”, which he described as “self initiating motion”. For him, the soul is the source of motion and is superior to matter, since matter is moved by it and not by itself. Here we have the beginnings of a soft form of mind over matter dualism. Later, neo-Platonists (more than 500 years after Plato) took this argument a stage further, for instance Plutarch (cited in Watson) states that everything that exists must have a cause, and if a good God cannot provide a cause for evil, then nature must contain in herself the source and origin of evil. It is clear that there is a stronger form of dualism developing here, and nature is now being seen as an active opponent to God's order. Such ideas, I would argue, make little sense to our thinking nowadays, when we see creation as largely amoral and in a state of natural progression towards greater complexity. So is there nowadays any sense in singing this

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<sup>36</sup> Watson, G. (1994). *Greek philosophy and the Christian notion of God*. Dublin: Columba Press.

type of Advent hymn, which attempts to make a Christological connection to the natural world from the basis of the whole of creation as fallen? There have been a number of interesting theories on this by some recent theologians. One theory which would seem to make some sense of the concepts underpinning such texts is that the whole of creation is fallen, not through any immorality inherent within it, but through the fallen and sinful state of human beings, for instance Ronald Manahan<sup>37</sup> points out that the story of the Fall in Genesis is based on the breakdown of relationships between man and God and the breakdown of relationships between man and the rest of creation. He states as follows:

Genesis 3 gives a negative picture, one of disobedience and cursing. When Adam fell, the threefold relationship unravelled. He disobeyed God (Genesis 3: 1-7) and experienced distance from him (Genesis 3: 8-10). The harmony with Eve was undone (Genesis 3: 11-16). The caring stewardship of the cosmos turned to cursing and estrangement (Genesis 3: 17-19)... The beneficence with which persons were to carry out stewardship of the earth was gone (p.52).

Manahan wants to highlight the broad implications of fallen humanity, for it impacts on all fundamental relationships – how we relate to each other and to the whole of the natural world. He points out that disobedience to the will of God leads to uncaring and abusive relationships with each other and the world. He states: “The true kingdom of God is one of harmony and care. The opposite is one of cursing and abuse” (p. 53). The implications of the Advent of Christ, here, is the restoration of mankind’s relationship to God and the whole of the above. This is what Manahan means when he states that the work of Christ has “cosmic” implications.

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<sup>37</sup> Manahan, R. (1991). Christ as the second Adam. In C. B. DeWitt (Ed.), *The environment and the Christian: What can we learn from the New Testament?* Grand Rapids: Baker.

The beneficence of these good relationships comes through the one who was fully obedient to his father, even to the point of experiencing the agony of the cross. Those who stand in the obedience of Christ have the most profound reason for practising caring relationships and stewardship. (p.54)<sup>38</sup>

I would argue that this approach helps us make sense of the type of Advent hymn we are examining here. Moreover, it illustrates that the above hymn text is possibly most helpful in illustrating the twenty-first century problem of the relationship between humanity and the environment, for it is still possible to see creation (as the hymn states) in a state of travail through the disobedience of the human race. As the hymn states, the Advent of Christ does bring with it the possibilities of renewal and restoration for the whole of creation.

On the other hand, a final point on this text is worth examining, for in the previous chapter, in which we discussed the rogation and pneumatological hymns, it was possible to see an immanent theological view of God therein. Like some of the Psalms looked at earlier, such hymn texts saw God and creation closely linked together. It would, however, be difficult to argue this point from the above text which is essentially taking a transcendent approach to God as creator. The reason for the inevitably transcendent theology in this hymn, I would argue, is the underpinning of an anthropological premise throughout the text. This problem is to some extent inevitable in Advent hymns of this type because the purpose of Christ's incarnation and resurrection is based on the redemption and fall of the human Adam, or mankind, whether historically or allegorically viewed. We have seen that the Pauline theology took the view that creation was fallen and in a state of decay because of the sin of

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<sup>38</sup> Manahan, R. (1991). Christ as the second Adam. In C. B. DeWitt (Ed.), *The environment and the Christian: What can we learn from the New Testament?* Grand Rapids: Baker.

Adam, and even in the more modern ethical approach discussed above on this text, the system is ultimately anthropocentric, i.e. it is the human being who in right relationship with God and creation is reflecting God to the rest of the created order. So even in this system, mankind is the intermediary between a transcendent God and creation. Creation psalmody, as we saw, on the other hand, viewed God and the whole of creation in a reciprocal relationship, and was less anthropocentrically orientated. I would like to now go on and look at some other examples of Advent hymn texts and see if it is possible to find a more immanent approach, one which connects Christ to creation in a more immediate sense without the dependence of homo sapiens as intermediaries.

In the Oxford Book of Carols (number 133), there is the following interesting Advent text entitled *People look East*:

<i>People look East. The time is near</i>	<i>Birds, though ye long have ceased to build,</i>
<i>Of the crowning of the year.</i>	<i>Guard the nest that must be filled.</i>
<i>Make your house fair as you are able,</i>	<i>Even the hour when wings are frozen</i>
<i>Trim the hearth, and set the table.</i>	<i>He for fledging-time has chosen.</i>
<i>People look East and sing today:</i>	<i>People look East and sing today:</i>
<i>Love the guest is on the way.</i>	<i>Love the bird is on the way.</i>
<i>Furrows be glad. Though earth is bare,</i>	<i>Angels, announce to man and beast</i>
<i>One more seed is planted there:</i>	<i>Him who cometh from the East.</i>
<i>Give up your strength the seed to nourish,</i>	<i>Set every peak and valley humming</i>
<i>That in the course the flower may flourish.</i>	<i>With the word, the Lord is coming.</i>
<i>People look East and sing today:</i>	<i>People look East and sing today:</i>
<i>Love the rose is on the way.</i>	<i>Love the Lord is on the way.</i>

Immediately in this carol we can see a close link with the whole of the natural order. We can see close similarities in the imagery used, e.g. *furrows be glad*, and *set every peak and valley humming*, to concepts found in the creation psalms in which there was a sense of the whole of creation praising God. We read in Psalm 65 verse 12 “the little hills rejoice on every side”, and elsewhere (Isaiah 55:12) “the trees of the field shall clap their hands”. In verse 5, the angels make the announcement of his coming not only to *man*, but also to *beast* and *peak and valley*. So like the previous hymn text, the advent of Christ is somehow seen as affecting the whole of creation, but a closer examination of this text will show that this hymn takes the christological involvement of nature to a more complex level. The first point to note is that there is no mention of the Fall in this text. It is possible that in being loosened from the inevitable anthropocentricity inherent within that concept, this hymn is more open to the possibility of incorporating the whole of creation purely for its own sake. We can see this illustrated in verse 2. Christ, here depicted under the title *love* is symbolised as a *rose*. Likewise in verse 3, he is depicted as a *bird*. By using such imagery, this hymn would seem to be attempting to somehow include the whole of the natural order in the beneficence of the advent of Christ. But the question is: what is the effect here of advent on the whole of creation? The key and the answer to this question I believe is to be found in verse 2 which reads thus:

*Furrows be glad. Though earth is bare,*

*One more seed is planted there:*

*Give up your strength the seed to nourish,*

*That in the course the flower may flourish.*

*People look East and sing today:*

*Love the rose is on the way.*

There is an interesting theological concept here in that Christ as a human being took on flesh and grew in a completely normal way, i.e. at the incarnation, Christ, as God the Son, was born in material form in the same fashion as every other created being, through the nourishing and fertile elements of the earth, this being alluded to in the line: *One more seed is planted there: Give up your strength the seed to nourish, that in the course the flower may flourish.* The concept here is of a special and unique seed bringing about the birth of Christ, and thus allowing God to take on a material form. The fertile earth is here efficacious and participatory in bringing about the birth of the second Adam *that in the course the flower may flourish...Love the rose is on the way.* We can immediately see a more central and active involvement for the natural order in the Christological scheme, by assuming material form God was connecting with nature in a new and unique form. The theologian Paulos Mar Gregorios<sup>39</sup> illustrates this concept in the following way:

Christ the incarnate one assumed flesh – organic, human flesh; he was nurtured by air and water, vegetables and meat, like the rest of us. His body is a *material* body – transformed, of course, but transformed *matter*. Thus he shares his being with the whole created order: animals and birds, snakes and worms, flowers and seeds. All parts of creation are now reconciled to Christ. And the created order is to be set free and to share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. (p.89)

Such a view is clearly less anthropocentric in its outlook because it is less dependent on man as an intermediary between God and nature, as we saw in the last hymn. In *People look East*, God is directly connected to the whole of nature, so therefore the whole of creation can legitimately join in the kontakion in praise of the one who comes from the East. Here, then, in verse 5, it is right to *set every peak and valley humming*

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<sup>39</sup> Gregorius, P.M. (1978). *The human presence: an Orthodox view of nature*. Geneva: World Council of Churches.

*with the word, the Lord is coming.* We have in this Advent carol an attempt to take a more immanent approach to Advent, and in a sense coming closer to concepts found in some of the earlier creation Psalms and the pneumatological hymn texts. This leads us on to looking at our next hymn, an advent hymn which is based on one of the creation Psalms (72), the hymn *Hail to the Lord's Anointed*:

<i>Hail to the Lord's Anointed,</i>	<i>He shall come down like showers</i>
<i>Great David's greater Son!</i>	<i>Upon the fruitful earth</i>
<i>Hail, in the time appointed,</i>	<i>And love, joy, hope, like flowers,</i>
<i>His reign on earth begun!</i>	<i>Spring in his path to birth.</i>
<i>He comes to break oppression,</i>	<i>Before him, on the mountains,</i>
<i>To let the captive free,</i>	<i>Shall peace, the herald, go;</i>
<i>To take away transgression</i>	<i>And righteousness in fountains</i>
<i>And rule in equity.</i>	<i>From hill to valley flow.</i>

317, Church Hymnary: Third Edition (1973)

The idea of kingship was a central concept within the religion and culture of early Israel. We have also seen how many of the harvest festival Psalms used royal imagery to illustrate the return of God with his people (see the discussion on Psalms). So in the above hymn we have an interesting merging of these two concepts. In verse 1, the advent of Christ is equated with the arrival of the expected king of the Israelite nation and of a new rule of equity and peace. But we can also descry in the other verse some of the older, more nature oriented imagery being used to describe the coming of Christ. By basing this hymn on Psalm 72, it is possible to detect a more immanent christology. We saw in the Psalms how the arrival of rain and fertility was equated with the arrival or enthronement of God who had returned to his people (Psalms 65 and 85). In the above hymn, it is possible that such an idea is being superimposed onto

the coming of Christ, in an attempt to emphasise that the God of the Old Testament and the Christ of the New Testament are one and the same. Whether or not Montgomery, the author, was intending such a panentheistic interpretation of his hymn, is not of great significance, but what is important for our discussion here is that we do have imagery in this text that makes a Christological connection to nature in a kind of early nature deity fashion. Not only is the text based on one of the early Psalms, but it also comes close to the imagery found in the rogation and pneumatological hymn texts discussed earlier, by using the metaphors of Christ coming down like showers and bringing fruitfulness upon the earth.

We have seen here, therefore, that there are a number of Advent hymns which attempt a kind of natural Christology (if such a thing is possible). But we have also highlighted that there are a number of subtle, but fairly important, theological differences to be found. The next part of this section will examine how incarnational hymn texts have approached this area. What have Christmas hymns to tell us on the theme 'Christ in nature'?

### **Creation and Christmas**

I will start by looking at one of the most important Christmas hymn texts that connects Christ with the whole of creation, *Of the Father's love begotten*:

*Of the Father's love begotten,  
Ere the worlds began to be,  
He is Alpha and Omega,  
He the source, the ending he;  
Of the things that are, that have been,  
And the future years shall see:  
Evermore and evermore.*

*At his word they were created;  
He commanded it was done;  
Heaven and earth and depths of ocean,  
In their threefold order one,  
All that grows beneath the shining,  
Of the light of moon and sun.*

591, Hymns Ancient and Modern (1981)

The importance and influence of this hymn should not be underestimated, for it has been in use in the Christian church for nearly as long as it has existed, this being an English translation of a Latin hymn, originally written by Prudentius circa 350, the original first line reading "Corde natus ex parentis". Like the Advent hymn *Christ is coming, let creation from its groans and travails cease*, we see traces here of ideas from Greek philosophical thought. The hymn is based on John chapter 1, where John speaks of the 'word' as being creator. He is intertwining here the Old Testament concept of "word" (Heb. *dabar*), the co-agent of God at creation, with the Platonic notion of "word" (Gk. *logos*) or "mind", which was an altogether more complex, systematic concept. This philosophy emphasises that the Christ of the New Testament and the Creator of the Old Testament are one and the same, Christ being seen as the *logos*. It was this *logos* that was present from the beginning of creation, drawing all things together. The second verse of the text, cited here, illustrates this idea clearly. The 2<sup>nd</sup> century theologian Irenaeus expounds this ideas as follows:

For the creator of the world is truly the word of God: and this is our Lord, who in the last times was made man, existing in this world, and who in an invisible manner contains all things created, and is inherent in the entire creation, since the Word of God governs and arranges all things... (cited in De Witt<sup>40</sup>, p.39).

We have here in Irenaeus' thinking a clear panentheistic system for he is clearly pointing out that Christ as creator is present with creation at all times. We can see similar ideas in another early Greek theologian, Athanasius, who states:

For this purpose, then, the incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God entered our world. In one sense, indeed, He was not from it before, for no

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<sup>40</sup> DeWitt, C.B. (1991). *The Environment and the Christian: what does the New Testament say about the environment?* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House.

part of the creation had ever been without Him Who, while ever abiding in union with the Father, yet fills all things that are. But now he entered the world in a new way... (cited in De Witt p.40<sup>41</sup>).

We can see in these early theologians the roots of the concepts in the above hymn. Both Irenaeus and Athanasius want to emphasise the link between Christ and creation. We can see here a kind of implicit panentheism, while both of these church fathers struggle with the concept of God's transcendence and immanence. But in Athanasius we can see that he also wants to make the point that at the incarnation Christ entered the world in a new way when he took on physical form. All of these concepts are contained in the above hymn by Prudentius, i.e. that God and Christ are one and the same. So immediately we see illustrated in this text the enigma of the incarnation where the creator, immanent in the creation from the beginning, now participates in it in a new way. Creation and Christ are here viewed in a much closer relationship. By becoming part of the material world (as we saw in the Advent hymn *People look East*), Christ is again connected to the whole of the natural world for its own sake. Such an approach avoids the over-emphasis of the position of human beings, and is much closer to the type of creation theology held in the Psalms. This (though an important concept) is surprisingly untouched by the majority of Christmas hymns, but I have managed to trace a few which do incorporate it. The Oxford Book of Carols contains the following illustration of such a text, and as we will see uses images from nature to expound the idea of immanence even further:

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<sup>41</sup> DeWitt, C.B. (1991). *The Environment and the Christian: what does the New Testament say about the environment?* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House.

### **Herrick's Carol**

*What sweeter music can we bring*

*Than a carol, for to sing*

*The birth of this our heav'nly King?*

*Awake the voice! Awake the string:*

*We see him come and know him ours*

*Who with his sunshine and his showers*

*Turns all the patient ground to flowers.*

*Dark and dull night, fly hence away,*

*And give the honour to this day,*

*That sees December turned to May,*

*If we may ask the reason, say:*

*We see him come and know him ours*

*Who with his sunshine and his showers*

*Turns all the patient ground to flowers.*

This text is from Robert Herrick and is dated 1647. It is cited in the Oxford Book of Carols (number 122) with the following footnote: "Herrick's *Hesperides* from which these words are taken was performed before Charles I". We have here an interesting example of an early English carol which contains many immanent ideas and examples from the natural order not found in our more commonly used carols from a later period. However, it is possible to see a more explicit kind of natural theology in this text compared to the previous one. The images here are more akin to that of some of the early Psalms and also some of the rogation and spirit hymns we discussed

previously. The line *that sees December turned to May* bears much similarity to the fertility images found in some of these other hymns and Psalms, the concept being of new life to the whole of the created order, but is here being re-affirmed at the incarnation. The concept is expanded further in the chorus which contains the implication that sunshine and showers which bring fertile life are also tied up with and emanate from Christ and are somehow affected in a positive and new way at the incarnation. Similar concepts can be found in this following carol:

### **Summer Carol**

*The dawn wind now is waking,  
Round go the windmill's arms,  
And sun on shadow breaking  
Lights up the sheltered farms.  
Under cows the milkmaids crouching  
In the mists of morning grow;  
Boys with heavenly horses slouching  
Down to water lumber slow;  
Grey as the rocks the stragglings shadowy flocks  
With silent shepherds go.*

*Now quickly goes the grey light;  
A slant, the sun redeems  
A whole long day of daylight;  
Gold crowd a wealth of beams.  
Chickens flutter, strut and babble;  
Running ducks the duck-ponds fill;  
Early breezes bear the gabble,  
And the light increases till  
Soon it finds beyond the rabble  
The blackbird's yellow bill.*

*Bright flowers the wood adorning  
Show earth's no longer blind,  
As once on Christmas morning,  
When snow the world did bind,  
When the shepherds and the sages  
And the kings first met their king,  
Brought him wisdom, wealth, and wages,  
Though he was their littlest thing,  
Suddenly the iron ages  
Had yielded to the Spring.*

This text, also from the Oxford Book of Carols (number 157), like Herrick's carol above, attempts to link nature and fertility to the incarnation. The last two lines are interesting in that they link the coming of spring with the birth of Christ. However, the concept is a more complex one in this carol, for by considering the previous two verses, we see images of a well ordered natural world, where everything fits into place. We have images from rural culture, from farms and from wild nature, but the underlying idea is that the whole order is working together in an orderly fashion. I can immediately see connections with some of the creation Psalmody here, where in ancient Hebrew thought God illustrates his creative activity by bringing order from a previously unordered and chaotic system where even Leviathan, that ancient symbol of chaos, plays harmlessly (Psalm 104 verse 26). Similarly, in this carol, the coming and incarnation of Christ is seen as bringing about a re-ordering of the systems of the world, and it is illustrated to us within the natural world. It is interesting that there is no evidence of fallen nature here. In this carol all things work together for good and are underpinned by an immanent and benevolent creator. It is worth quickly mentioning one final Christmas text from the Oxford Book of Carols (number 125) which is in a similar vein:

## **Rorate**

*Rorate coeli de super!*

*Heavens distil your balmy showers;*

*For now is risen the bright Day-star,*

*From the rose Mary, flower of flowers:*

*The clear Sun, whom no cloud devours,*

*Surmounting Phoebus in the east,*

*Is comen of his heav'nly towers,*

*Et nobis puer natus est.*

*Celestial fowls in the air,*

*Sing with your notes upon height,*

*In firths and in forests fair*

*Be mirthful now at all your might;*

*For passed is your dully night;*

*Aurora has the clouds pierced*

*The sun is risen with gladsome light,*

*Et nobis puer natus est.*

*Sing, heaven imperial, most of height,*

*Regions of air make harmony,*

*All fish in flood and fowl of flight*

*Be mirthful and make melody:*

*All Gloria in excelsis cry,*

*Heaven, earth, sea, man, bird, and beast;*

*He that is crowned above the sky*

*Pro nobis puer natus est.*

The Oxford Book of Carols states that this text by the ex-Franciscan and poet William Dunbar was written on the eve of the Reformation. It is worth noting that this carol was written just prior to the arrival of Reformation thought, when in Scotland in particular Christmas carols were not looked on positively by the reformers (the Kirk, as we know, restricting itself to metrical Psalmody). So this text, then, gives us interesting insight into the imagery used before the Reformation. Immediately we can see again a connection between Christ and the whole of creation. Similarly, we have a recurrence of a kind of immanent theology, where in the first verse the idea of the distillation of rain, thus leading to fertility and new life, is somehow connected with Christmas and the incarnation. The concept of the end of the old order and the start of the new is throughout this text, and this new order is viewed as affecting the whole of creation. The idea of new order is again similar to the Psalms, particularly the harvest festival psalms, which coincided with the Hebrew new year (see the discussion on Psalm 65). We have here a central concept within creation psalmody, the idea of a new era. We can also see this theme illustrated in this following Christmas hymn:

*From heaven above to earth I come,*

*To bear good news to every home;*

*Glad tidings of great joy I bring,*

*Whereof I now will say and sing, -*

*“To you this night is born a Child*

*Of Mary, chosen mother mild”;*

*This little child, of lowly birth,*

*Shall be the joy of all your earth.*

*Glory to God in highest heaven,  
Who unto man His Son hath given!  
While angels sing with pious mirth  
A glad New Year to all the earth.*

56, Revised Church Hymnary (1927)

So we can see in this text the idea that the incarnation brings about a new era, or a new ordering, for the whole of creation. Like Psalm 65, which saw a new order being ushered in at the harvest and new year festival, this text points to new order being brought about through the birth of Christ.

Another interesting Christmas carol we should look at before leaving this section is Charles Wesley's *Hark how all the welkin rings*. This is the original version of the popular *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, but it is the original version which is interesting to our discussion here. It runs:

1. *Hark how all the welkin rings!*  
*Glory to the King of Kings,*  
*Peace on earth and mercy mild,*  
*God and sinners reconciled;*
2. *Joyful all ye nations rise,*  
*Join the triumph of the skies;*  
*Universal nature say,*  
*"Christ the Lord is born today"....*

8. *Now display thy saving power,  
Ruined nature now restore,  
Now in mystic union join,  
Thine to ours and ours to thine.*

23, English Hymnal (1933)

The interesting lines of this text are the stanzas which mention nature, for in verse 2 Wesley is calling on the whole of nature to herald in the birth of Christ. And in verse 8, the incarnate Christ has restored the whole of nature, using images again from Greek philosophy, where the divine becomes joined with matter at the incarnation. It is worth noting here that the more popular version, *Hark the herald angels sing* (a later revision of the text by George Whitfield, which first appeared in his *Collection* in 1753) contains none of these stanzas and in fact takes the opposite approach for verse 2, and rather than involving nature in proclaiming Christ's birth, it is the angelic hosts who are called to proclaim, for it reads:

*...Join the triumph of the skies,  
With the angelic host proclaim  
"Christ is born in Bethlehem".*

Moreover, verse 8 is completely excluded from this popular version. One wonders whether Wesley intended to exclude the images from nature when he re-wrote the text, or whether it was simply an attempt to draw the hymn more closely into the theme of the Incarnation (since verse 2 of the original version picks up on the theme of the Resurrection). Nevertheless, it is interesting for our study here that this original version of Wesley's hymn does acknowledge the fact that the whole of nature is somehow involved with the Incarnation of Christ.

Before moving on to look at some examples of Easter hymnody, let us sum up the issues highlighted in this discussion of the Advent and Christmas texts. Firstly, in the Advent section, we saw the problem of anthropocentrism inherent in hymns which are based on the theological concept of original sin and fallen creation. We saw that it was difficult to include the whole of creation in this kind of system without either adopting a dualistic view of the world, and thereby imposing a kind of quasi-morality onto the natural order, or by viewing the Fall purely as a human problem. The latter approach avoided the tendency to dualism, but on the other hand remained ultimately anthropocentric in that it elevated humans as somehow mediating the will and purpose of God to creation. This position, I argued, inevitably led to a more transcendent view of God than we found illustrated in the creation psalmody. Secondly, we found, both in the Advent and Christmas hymns, texts which avoided this problem by more directly adopting imagery from the Old Testament creation psalmody. These hymns, rather than emphasising the concept of Fall, highlighted the unity of Christ and Creator from the beginning of time. We saw that there were many similarities in these texts to the Old Testament creation psalmody which leaned to a much more immanent and panentheistic christology. Thirdly, and again similar to the Psalms, we saw that these hymns contained the concept of a new era being ushered in, not exclusively for man but for the whole of creation. I do not think that any of the above concepts are mutually exclusive, for there is a sense in which they are complementary and interdependent. For as I see it, it is possible and necessary to not only view God as immanent in creation, but we should also be aware of the unique position we have in the world as human beings and of the responsibility such a position brings.

Having looked at hymns dealing with the Incarnation of Christ, we will now go on to examine in the final section some of the Easter hymn texts in an attempt to see if we can find similar themes.

### **Creation and Easter**

The Advent and Christmas hymns examined above illustrate that texts of this genre have made close and complex christological links to creation. We will now go on to consider whether similar links can be discerned in some selected Easter hymn texts. We saw in the Advent/Christmas section that there was a problematic issue underlying some of the hymn texts with respect to their view of nature as a whole. We saw that because such hymns were based on an anthropocentric structure, i.e. the concept of original sin, there were problems with the inclusion or otherwise of the whole of the natural world. For example, there were difficulties in speaking of creation as fallen. We saw, however, in the previous section, that some twentieth-century theologians had revisited this theological concept in the light of more modern ideas towards the created world. They argued that to speak of creation as 'fallen' was not inevitably to superimpose morality onto it (a concept which as we said earlier makes little sense to our modern mentality), rather it was fallen because of its misuse by human beings. Immediately, we are faced with the same problem in the Easter hymns which come from the same basic theological concept. Easter is the final part of the theological system, it is the culmination of the story started at Advent, for through the Resurrection, the salvation of the human race is brought into effect. We can see this concept beautifully illustrated in the hymn by John Henry Newman, *Praise to the holiest in the height* in the following words:

*O Loving wisdom of our God!*

*When all was sin and shame,*

*A second Adam to the fight*

*And to the rescue came.*

*O wisest love! that flesh and blood*

*Which did in Adam fail,*

*Should strive afresh against the foe,*

*Should strive and should prevail.*

238, Church Hymnary: Third Edition (1973)

This hymn illustrates clearly and concisely the concept underlying all of our Easter hymns, for the resurrection of Easter and the salvation it brings is based on the idea of the original sin of Adam, a system which would seem again anthropocentric. Most of our Easter hymns make this clear, for example:

*Jesus, Lord, Redeemer,*

*Once for sinners slain,*

*Crucified in weakness,*

*Raised in power to reign.*

283, Church Hymnary: Third Edition (1973)

Or the following most famous of Easter hymns:

*Jesus Christ is risen today,*

*Our triumphant, holy day,*

*Who did once, upon the cross,*

*Suffer to redeem our loss...*

*Who endured the cross and grave,*

*Sinners to redeem and save...*

*But the anguish he endured,  
Our salvation hath procured.*

264, Church Hymnary: Third Edition (1973)

Thus, we see the typical and central theme of the majority of Easter hymns. The question then is how does the salvific power of the resurrection affect the non-human creation from within a theological system which is based on an anthropocentric premise? The problematic nature of this issue was highlighted in the Advent hymn discussed earlier, *Christ is coming, let creation from its groans and travails cease*. We can see similar points arising in many of the Easter hymn texts, for in what sense can we speak of creation being in any sense 'saved' and at the same time avoid superimposing a concept of sin or morality onto it? I would argue that it is possible to re-interpret the Easter hymns in a similar way to that discussed above regarding the Advent hymns. In the Easter hymn above, *Praise to the holiest in the height*, we have *prima facie* an example of an Easter hymn text based on the concept of human sin, but a closer look at this text will show that this is not the only possible interpretation, for in verse 6 we read the following:

*And in the garden secretly,  
And on the cross on high,  
Should teach His brethren, and inspire  
To suffer and to die.*

There is opened in this verse the possibility for a re-interpretation of the anthropocentric problem, for we have hints here that salvation is brought about through the example of Christ on the cross. Therefore by following the example *to suffer and to die*, humanity is set back in a proper relationship not only to our fellow human beings but to the whole of the created order. In this re-interpretation, salvation

therefore is brought about for the whole of creation through a restored humanity. As we saw in the Advent hymns, this approach makes much more sense in contemporary thought, as it avoids the problem of superimposing concepts of good or evil onto what is now seen as an amoral natural world. In this system, Easter brings the possibility of the restoration of all things through a restored humanity. It is the restoration of the *imago Dei* in the Genesis story which is also reflected in Psalm 8:

<sup>4</sup> What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him? <sup>5</sup> Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honour. <sup>6</sup> Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands, thou hast put all things under his feet, <sup>7</sup> all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, <sup>8</sup> the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea. <sup>9</sup> O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!

As we saw in our discussion on the Psalms, this text reminds humanity of its responsibility to carry out a proper stewardship and to reflect the will of God towards the rest of creation. Easter, in the re-interpretation advocated here, restores the relationship of mankind to the whole of creation and therefore in a sense the whole of creation is affected by the Easter redemption. If we return now to the verses of *Praise to the Holiest* cited earlier in the light of what we have said here, a more inclusive re-interpretation of the text becomes possible:

*O Loving wisdom of our God!*

*When all was sin and shame,*

*A second Adam to the fight*

*And to the rescue came.*

*O wisest love! that flesh and blood*

*Which did in Adam fail,*

*Should strive afresh against the foe,*

*Should strive and should prevail.*

We see here Christ depicted as the second Adam. The hymn writer is clearly making a connection between Christ and the Adam of the Old Testament. In this verse, we read that Christ prevailed over the sin and failure of the first Adam. The first Adam, or humanity, as we read in Genesis, failed through sin to effect the kingdom of God on earth. If we read this in the light of what we have said above, and in the light of the lines *Should teach His brethren, and inspire to suffer and to die*, it is now through Christ, the second Adam, that the restoration of the kingdom on earth is made possible. As Steck points out:

The transformation of a world of Creation distorted by people begins with the believing acceptance of the gospel by people; even though God brings this about for the salvation of the nonhuman world of creation too, as Romans 8 shows particularly. By directing the saving event mainly toward people, before all other created things, the New Testament is reflecting what the Old had already grasped when it saw man as having a particular position and responsibility for the whole world of creation. (Cited in DeWitt<sup>42</sup>, p.67)

This 'particular position' that Steck speaks of is a central theme in Psalm 8 when it glorifies man and speaks of the "dominion" over the "works" of God. But this is not to emphasise mankind as a ruler or owner of creation, but rather in a uniquely responsible position within it. We have it within our power to destroy or restore our world and the kingdom of God, and through the Easter event the first Adam has the potential to be

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<sup>42</sup> DeWitt, C.B. (1991). *The Environment and the Christian: what does the New Testament say about the environment?* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House.

changed for the good of creation. We can see this idea reflected more distinctly in another Easter hymn, *Alleluia, Alleluia* where we read in verses 2 and 3:

<i>Christ is risen, Christ the first-fruits</i>	<i>Christ is risen, we are risen;</i>
<i>Of the holy harvest field,</i>	<i>Shed upon us heavenly grace,</i>
<i>Which will all its full abundance</i>	<i>Rain, and dew, and gleams of glory</i>
<i>At his second coming yield;</i>	<i>From the brightness of thy face;</i>
<i>Then the golden ears of harvest</i>	<i>That we, with our hearts in heaven,</i>
<i>Will their heads before him wave,</i>	<i>Here on earth may fruitful be</i>
<i>Ripened by his glorious sunshine,</i>	<i>And by angel-hands be gathered,</i>
<i>From the furrows of the grave.</i>	<i>And be ever, Lord, with thee.</i>

137, Hymns Ancient and Modern Revised (1950)

The idea that part, although not all, of the Easter salvation is embodied in the example of Christ's life, I argue, can be seen in verse 2 of this hymn. For we have the idea that Christ is the *first-fruits* of a future harvest which has still yet to yield abundance. Therefore in the light of our re-interpretation of the kingdom of God discussed here, it would be possible to re-interpret the concept of an abundant harvest as the bringing about of the kingdom of God on earth here and now, rather than at some future unknown date. It is possible that verse 3 also lends itself to this viewpoint when it states: *That we, with our hearts in heaven, Here on earth may fruitful be*. The kingdom of God, in the light of these words, is to be ushered in here and now. Furthermore, we can see at the beginning of this verse, that it is through the Easter resurrection that this change has been catalysed. There is also an interesting link with the Psalms here, when it uses the images of rain and dew reminiscent of the fertility images found for example in Psalms 24 and 65. As we saw in our discussion of the Psalms, the returning of rain and fertility was equated with the return of God to his

people, and a kind of re-birth of God. So in this hymn it is the re-birth of God in the Christ figure that is symbolised through the symbols of rain and dew, thus making possible the renewing of the link between God and his people. Through the transforming example of the resurrected Christ, we too have the possibility of resurrection: *Christ is risen, we are risen*. Therefore, through a reformed humanity through the Easter event, it is possible to see salvation for the whole of creation. It is this Isaiah speaks about when he states “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth” (Isaiah 65: 17).

As in the Advent and Christmas hymns, this re-interpretation of the Easter hymn texts makes humanity the link between God and nature. The hymns we have looked at so far, because of their focus on the concept of original sin and the unique position of humans within the created system, have implicitly illustrated for the most part a transcendent ideology of God. Up to now the salvific effect of the resurrection event has been viewed as being reflected onto the world via humanity, which somehow removes God from a more direct relationship with the non-human world. However, the question again needs to be asked regarding the Easter hymns – to what extent is it possible to see a closer, more immanent christological link being made regarding the whole of creation? I will now go on to look at some hymn texts which I think tend to take a more immanent approach to the ‘Christ in nature’ theme.

We saw in the previous section that, most unusually, some of the Christmas texts mentioned springtime and used imagery of new life and fertility. One of the hymns examined mentioned December turned to May, promulgating the idea that the incarnation of Christ brought new life and order to the whole of creation, and in so doing possibly pointing to the coming Eastertide. It is of course no coincidence that in

the Church calendar, Easter and springtime coincide, the two being intentionally linked. This next hymn picks up on the link between Easter and springtime:

<i>Coming from the winter</i>	<i>Gentle little flowers,</i>
<i>Into happy Spring</i>	<i>Strong to cleave the sod,</i>
<i>To our risen Saviour</i>	<i>Tell of Jesus' rising</i>
<i>Easter songs we bring:</i>	<i>Gentle Son of God.</i>
<i>Happy, happy spring-time,</i>	<i>Trees that bud and blossom</i>
<i>Happy Easter Day;</i>	<i>At the warm spring's breath</i>
<i>Jesus Christ is risen</i>	<i>Tell us life is greater –</i>
<i>And he lives for aye.</i>	<i>Greater far – than death:</i>

172, Sunday School Hymn Book of the Methodist Church (1950)

Immediately we can see the link between the new life visible all around us during spring and the idea of the new life of Christ at the resurrection. There are many uses of images from nature here to illustrate the concept of the resurrection, in the new *buds and blossom* and general life and fertility to be seen everywhere around. What exactly then is the connection this text is making between Christ and these examples from nature? I would argue that this hymn goes further than simply using these images as metaphors, for in the third verse printed here, there is a kind of implicit pantheism. We can see the notion here that this new life seems to be catalysed by the breath of Spring, a concept, as we saw in the Psalms that was always linked to evidence of the creative power and activity of God. This immanent view of God in this Easter hymn is now adapted into a specifically christological concept. The power behind creation in this text is now the resurrected Christ, a christological pantheism, if you like. There are some other Easter hymns that allude to this idea, for example:

*Hail, thou bright and sacred morn,*

*Risen with gladness in thy beams!*  
*Light, which not of earth is born,*  
*From thy dawn in glory streams;*  
*Airs of heaven are breathed around,*  
*And each place is holy ground.*

266, Revised Church Hymnary (1927).

Again we have here the idea of the ‘breath’ of God having an effect on the life of creation. Through the imagery here we see a more immanent view of Christ and the Easter story. This hymn attempts to make the point that Easter redemption does not only affect human beings but is inclusive of the whole of creation. The resurrected Christ and the Creator are one and the same, and therefore by the resurrection the whole of creation is set right again after the Fall, each place is now *holy ground*. In both of the above hymn texts, there are clear similarities to the images in the creation psalms and in the hymns of the Holy Spirit in particular. For again we see here the image of spring’s breath bringing life and *airs of heaven [being] breathed around*. Such imagery is strongly reminiscent of the concept of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament (Palm 104 and Ezekiel 37: 9ff). There are also similarities between this imagery and the themes we found in some of the rogation hymns, where we saw the Spirit viewed as the breath and life of springtime. So here, now, with these Easter hymns, we are possibly beginning to see a similar immanent theological approach being taken to the Easter theme. So, Christ as Creator is here connected with creation in a more immanent sense, discarding the need for any human mediators. It is Christ the logos we now see depicted, i.e., the creating “word” who existed from the beginning of creation. We saw such an image of Christ illustrated in the Christmas hymn discussed earlier *Of the Father’s love begotten*, where the link with Christ as the logos

magnified the idea of Christ as at one with the creativity of God. Therefore, as Van Leeuen<sup>43</sup> in his discussion of Colossians 1: 15-20 points out:

Christ created all things and redeems all things. Paul emphasised the cosmic scope of Christ's rule and redemption in every possible way... This passage stands against every sinful Christian attempt to divide reality into secular and sacred realms. All of reality is Christ's good creation, all of reality is redeemed by him. (p.62)

The kernel of the Easter texts we have here then is that it was Christ the logos, the creator, who rose and triumphed over sin and death at Easter. Through the resurrection of the creator, the restorative power of the Easter event has an effect on the whole of creation, thereby catalysing new life and a new world order. As the hymn states, *Airs of heaven are breathed around, and each place is holy ground*. The new life and restoration of the resurrection is viewed in a more immanent sense here, and by using these Old Testament images, we can see how the resurrected Christ and the Holy Spirit are being viewed as one and the same entity. Christ and the Creator Spirit are ultimately the same being, so the Easter event and the Incarnation affect the whole of the created world.

In this examination, we have seen two different approaches to the effect of Easter on creation as a whole. In the first set of hymn texts we considered, which highlighted the Fall and salvation of the whole of creation, we saw the concept of a transcendent, resurrected Christ in which the salvation and renewal was reflected on creation as a whole through a redeemed humanity. In the second set of hymns, we saw a more immanent view where Christ seemed to be being linked more closely to the creative

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<sup>43</sup> Van Leeuen, R. C. (1991). Christ's resurrection and the creation's vindication. In C. B. DeWitt (Ed.), *The environment and the Christian: What can we learn from the New Testament?* Grand Rapids: Baker.

process. This system was much more independent of the intervention of the human race. Before leaving this section on Easter hymns, I would like to turn attention to some hymn texts which seem to encapsulate both these immanent and transcendent approaches in one. Firstly, the following hymn found in the Methodist Sunday School Hymnbook:

*Joy is abroad:*

*Winter is over; 'tis Spring of the year*

*Fat buds are bursting and green leaves appear.*

*Joy is abroad:*

*Praise to the King,*

*The Creator, the life-giving Lord!*

*Joy is abroad:*

*Gardens are waking, and daffodils gold*

*Trumpet the tidings that death cannot hold.*

*Joy is abroad:*

*Praise to the King,*

*The Creator, the life-giving Lord!*

*Easter is here,*

*Telling us Jesus is living and strong,*

*Showing mankind how to conquer all wrong.*

*Joy is abroad:*

*Praise to the King,*

*The Creator, the life-giving Lord!*

*Giver of joy,  
Help us that we may be builders of spring,  
True peace and gladness and every good thing,  
To all men sing  
Praise to our Father, Creator and life-giving King.*

490, Sunday School Hymn Book of the Methodist Church (1950)

I think we have in this hymn a successful blending of both immanent and transcendent approaches alluded to in the one hymn text, which illustrates that rather than the two concepts being in opposition to one another, they can be taken as complementary. In this text, we see the concepts of the immanent Christ alluded to in each verse, where it speaks of the *King and Creator, the life-giving Lord*. This is further alluded to in the idea of Easter and spring being connected together, where new life tells us of the resurrection of Christ. But then in the final verse we read that we should also be *builders of spring*. This concept resembles the immanent view taken in some of the earlier Easter hymns examined in which salvation for the whole of creation was dependent on humanity. At this point, we see human beings being involved in the bringing about of the new order and the new life of spring, thus highlighting our responsibility within the system. The text is now coming closer to the concept of the cross and Easter being an example to inspire human beings to follow the way of suffering and self-giving, not only for our fellow men but for the whole of creation, as we saw reflected in the hymn *Praise to the holiest in the height*, where we read *Should teach His brethren, and inspire to suffer and to die*. In *Joy is abroad*, we see both the immanent and transcendent images of God entwined in the one text. Initially it seems these two viewpoints are in polarity as they are based on different fundamental premises. Therefore, a hymn text containing both perspectives would seem irrational.

But in fact I think by holding both together, this text gives us a quite profound insight into this problematic theological area. In containing both views, it seems the text is illustrating one of the mysterious truths regarding God, reality and creation. For it seems to me that to make sense of our world as we see it, we do in fact need to hold both the immanent and transcendent views of God in balance. By doing this, we illustrate that Christ as part of the Godhead is transcendent and to some extent dependent on the actions of the human race here on earth. This takes into account the responsibility of mankind who does have a unique role to play within creation; but, on the other hand, this does not necessarily rule out the immanent view in which Christ as creator is also closely connected with the whole of reality. It is only by recognising the importance of both concepts that we can come to a fuller understanding of Christ and creation.

There is one final Easter hymn which we should examine that, in my opinion illustrates the concord of the two approaches:

*Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain,*

*Wheat that in dark earth many days has lain;*

*Love lives again, that with the dead has been;*

*Love is come again,*

*Like wheat that springeth green.*

*In the grave they laid him, Love whom men had slain,*

*Thinking that never he would wake again,*

*Laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen.*

*Forth he came at Easter, like the risen grain,*

*He that for three days in the grave had lain,*

*Quick from the dead my risen Lord is seen:*

*When our hearts are wintery, grieving, or in pain,*

*Thy touch can call us back to life again,*

*Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been.*

278, Church Hymnary: Third Edition.

The imagery within this hymn illustrates well the unity between the immanent and transcendent views of God. There are immediately in the text connections being made between Christ and the natural world. Easter, the resurrection and spring are all connected together. New life within the plants and the natural world is held up as illustrating the Easter event. It is possible that the chorus illustrates a kind of christological pantheism: *love is come again like wheat that springeth green*. There are also further hints at an immanent christology to be seen in the last verse where we read in line 2: *Thy touch can call us back to life again*, this then illustrating the creative and life-giving aspects of Christ as creator. But a closer look at this text in the light of our discussion here shows that there is yet another complementary reading allowed. For in verse 2, when the hymn alludes to the crucifixion, it gives Christ the title of Love, it states: *love whom men had slain*. At this point, it seems the hymn is coming closer to emphasising the importance of the exemplary aspect of the life and death of Christ. It is now alluding back to the original sin notion, as it is *men* who have *slain* love. The example set by Christ and the message given by him were expected, the hymn states, to be ended at the hands of humanity at the crucifixion. But what Easter symbolises is that this was not the end of the story, for through the Easter event we are told *love is come again*. In other words, the Easter event makes possible the coming of the new kingdom of God here on earth. This hymn, then, highlights the

necessity of holding together the two concepts, for as the green blade riseth, Christ is immanent within the whole of creation, but nevertheless if creation is to be fully restored to the position intended for it, then human beings also need to be set in a right relationship with their creator.

## **Summary**

This chapter, which has looked at some of the christological perspectives taken by traditional hymnody to creation, has highlighted that to some extent there is a problem in that most of the Christmas and Easter hymns are mainly anthropocentric. This was similarly found in the previous chapter in some of the Pentecost hymns. Most of the Advent, Christmas and Easter hymns are dealing with sin and redemption. Many of the hymns spoke about the whole of creation as being fallen, much of this based on Greek philosophical ideas. But I have also argued that there is a new way of interpreting this, which would fit in well with a more inclusive approach that could be drawn from the imagery in these texts. In approaching the question of what it meant to say that nature is fallen and in a state of sin, we saw that many recent theologians have returned to this question, and have re-interpreted it from the premise that it only makes sense to speak of nature as fallen through the shortfalls and sins of the human race. I have argued that to take this approach makes complete sense of much of the imagery found in the hymns discussed in this chapter, which, as we saw, was of creation rejoicing, and included creation in the christological process. We found that much of this imagery spoke of the salvation of Christ affecting the whole of the universe, where it was possible to see a proper order restored and the kingdom of God being ushered in here and now. This concept of restored order we saw had its roots in some of the creation Psalmody, which spoke about God drawing order from chaos. We saw that

some of the imagery in the Christmas hymns emphasised the creative aspect of Christ, by using imagery of the word (again Greek, but also to be found in the Old Testament creation epic), and thereby linking Christ to the Old Testament concept of creator at the beginning of time, which emphasised Christ's involvement with the whole of creation in a more immanent way. Moreover, like with the spring and Pentecost hymns, we found the images of new life, fertility and springtime being linked with the hymns here. In particular, I have argued that many of the Easter hymns fitted in well with this particular immanent type of image where Easter was being linked with spring and new life. Here, the images were close to that found in the rogation and Pentecost hymns and were reminiscent of the kind of nature spirituality that we found in these hymn texts. The imagery was also similar to some of the creation psalms, in particular the harvest festival psalmody which likewise linked God's activity with the rain, fertility, and new life. Such ideas would equate well with the type of theology expounded by, for example, Birch and Cobb<sup>44</sup>, who spoke about the spirit and the life of God as being active and purposeful throughout the whole of creation. So our examination of the above christological hymns has shown that many of these texts have attempted to include the whole of creation, and many of them have used an immanent theology, which includes rather than excludes the natural world.

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<sup>44</sup> Birch, C., & Cobb, J. B. (1990). *The liberation of life*. Denton, Texas: Environmental Ethics Books.

## Conclusion

I started off this thesis with the oldest stratum of creation hymnody available to us which has influenced our views and thinking in the Church. By examining the creation psalms, I highlighted the fact that their world view was in many ways vastly different from ours today. But nevertheless, I have argued that we have much to learn from this ancient culture and from the wisdom in the psalm texts. We saw that the early creation psalmody took an inclusive approach to nature; it featured highly in their theological beliefs. We saw evidence in the psalm texts that there was a kind of implicit natural theology, where the ancient Hebrew people viewed God's creative activity being exemplified through the natural world. There was a sense in which this came close to a kind of nature spirituality, where God was viewed as being evident through the wind and the rain etc. This, I argued, led to an implicit respect for the whole of creation, for it was viewed as being closely connected to God.

It was also evident from the psalm texts that this ancient culture was very aware of their dependence on the natural world for their continued existence. The harvest festival psalms showed this in particular, where we saw in a kind of covenantal belief that when God returned to be with his people so did the rain and the fertility of new life. This was a guarantee against drought and barrenness of the land, which was always a threat in that particular part of the world. The psalms showed that the order of the seasons demonstrated God's continued care, i.e. while God was with his people, everything would be fine.

This led us on to looking at the implicit (and in some cases explicit) dualistic approach, where we saw evidence of the ancient world view of a continuous primeval struggle

against an unordered chaos (which was particularly linked with the sea). I noted with regard to this that this was an example of Hebrew psalmody drawing on other ancient Oriental cultures, e.g. Canaanite and Ugaritic creation myths, which showed influences from older and other cultures being contained in the Hebrew psalmody. Many psalms contained this type of imagery, that the order evident within creation emanated from God. The most important part, though, of Hebrew belief that was evident in the psalms was the overall inclusiveness of the whole of creation. We saw evidence of the whole of creation being linked in a kind of reciprocal sense with God, where the psalms mention the hills and valleys rejoicing, and the birds and the beasts and the whole of creation involved in this relationship with God.

The psalms also showed us that the Hebrew religion had a belief that there was a sense of everything being in its correct place. Many of the creation psalms made this clearly apparent, and moreover showed that man had a place in this order as well, when in the creation epics man was viewed as steward with the responsibility to tend and care for the whole of creation. This balanced order was highlighted in many of the psalms and in the Old Testament, and spoken of as the kingdom of God here with us now. The covenantal sense of the psalms showed that when humans fitted in properly to the system, and were aware of their covenant to God and their connectedness to the whole of the natural order, this was then working God's will and was the purpose God intended for creation.

Finally, the creation psalms help to illustrate the Hebrew concept of the Creator Spirit of God. Again, we saw a close connection of the Spirit to the whole of nature, and its activities were seen as evidential through the natural world. It was interesting to note that the Spirit was particularly associated with wind or *ruach*, which was the Hebrew word for breath. So in this ancient culture, these people had made associations

between God and the Spirit which gives life and breath to the whole of creation. They were very aware that this breath of life emanated from God and that everything depended on God for its continued life and existence. So in creation psalmody, I argued that we saw God as closely connected to everything that exists, and that although man has a place in creation, it does not diminish everything else. We see evident in these texts, a much more immanent view of God, which is closely connected to the whole of creation.

Having established some of these main and important themes from the creation psalmody tradition, I then went on to examine some key examples of our traditional creation hymnody, in an attempt to establish what similarities and differences there were. A number of interesting points have come out of this examination.

I argued in Chapter 2, where we looked at the hymns on seed-time and harvest, that particularly in the rogation tide hymns and some of the May Day carols, we could see many similarities between the images in these hymns and the psalms, and that it was also in these texts that some of the oldest imagery could be found. We saw that the rogation hymns used imagery from the old traditional May Day festivals which predated Christianity. This in a sense was similar to the psalms, which likewise contained imagery from other different cultures. I argued at this point that we could see an attempt to superimpose Christianity onto older pre-Christian concepts. This was apparent where we saw, for example, the green imagery from the May Day festivals being implicit in many of the May Day hymns. It was also evident in these hymns that God was being viewed as very closely linked to nature, and that there was a clear kind of natural spirituality found in these texts. To some extent there was an even clearer immanent theology than was found in the psalms. The use of the May Festival imagery was reminiscent of the kind of elemental spirituality which was central to the early

May Day festivals, e.g. tree spirits. It is clearly evident here that hymns of this sort illustrate the beliefs of the people at grass root level, and we could see the church's attempts to adapt and accommodate these images into its own festivals through these texts.

Moreover, the rogation and May Day hymns showed clear similarities to the Old Testament concept of Creator Spirit which was seen in many of the psalms. There was a sense in which many of these hymns contained a view of the spirit of God (or divinity) in everything, for example it used images of new life at springtime as being evidence of God's creative spirit or breath active in the world. This was very close to the ideas contained in the Hebrew harvest festival psalmody.

This led us on to looking at the harvest festival hymns where we saw many similarities where God was viewed as the provider of all good gifts. We saw that like many of the creation psalms, our harvest festival hymns also spoke of the order of the seasons and rain to catalyse the growth of everything etc.

One of the main differences, though, that we found in the harvest festival texts was that we found a tendency for them to contain a more anthropocentric focus. I argued that many of the most popular harvest festival hymns contained such imagery. We saw that they tended to use the harvest images to point towards sin and salvation, so that the natural imagery was becoming metaphorical for a more anthropocentric theme.

We also found in the harvest festival hymns the christologising of some of the older imagery from the psalmody, where the God that is spoken of as being present with his people is now held up in Christological mould. We also saw, although to a lesser extent, in this genre of hymnody, some of the more immanent types of theology where

the spirit of God was regarded as being in everything, hence a more inclusive approach to the whole of creation was being advocated.

In Chapter 3, we examined hymns on the Holy Spirit, where it was possible to see the above themes being even more evident. I argued at the beginning of this chapter, though, that there was a similar problem to the one we saw to some extent in the harvest hymns, i.e. the christological problem of anthropocentricity. We saw how some theologians also saw this as a problem, where the emphasis of the work of the Holy Spirit was now on the individual and to some extent was confined to the holy and the Godly. But a closer examination of the hymnody in this chapter has shown that this was not entirely the case, for I have argued that this hymnody contains some of the oldest images of the Creator Spirit to be found in the Bible, where some hymns, e.g. *Eternal father, strong to save*, were using imagery going right back to the Genesis creation myths. In examining these hymns, it was apparent that the Old Testament Creator Spirit God was very much in evidence. We saw examples of the Spirit bringing fertility and life to everything that existed (particularly in some of the older Latin hymns). We saw that there was an implicit, immanent view of the Spirit of God, which was not purely restricted to human beings.

This led me on to looking at some more recent theological viewpoints as to the working of the Holy Spirit, where we saw, for example in the ideas of Birch and Cobb<sup>45</sup>, that it was possible to regard the Spirit as the life and breath within everything. This tradition was also found within other religions. For example, we drew on ideas found in some American Indian cultures. I argued that in the light of this thinking on the Holy Spirit, which was similar to the Old Testament, it was possible to

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<sup>45</sup> Birch, C., & Cobb, J. B. (1990). *The liberation of life*. Denton, Texas: Environmental Ethics Books.

take a more contemporary hermeneutic approach to hymns of the Holy Spirit, and I showed that they could adapt very easily into this type of thinking. For we saw in many of the hymns examples of the Spirit of God being portrayed as active in the wind and the fire, and in the natural elements. We also found evidence yet again in these texts of the Spirit's activity exemplified through the breath of new life at spring.

Therefore, I think I have illustrated that rather than hymns of the Holy Spirit being restricted to an anthropocentric theology, the opposite can actually be the case, where we can see God working in and through the whole of creation in an immanent, almost panentheistic way. I would hold that this, again, shows a healthy respect for the whole of the natural world.

Having examined the issues that emerged from the rogation/harvest hymns and the hymns on the Holy Spirit, in the last chapter, I moved on to examine christological perspectives to the natural world in hymnody. Here again a number of interesting issues became apparent. The first problem we found again was that of the anthropocentric base that christological hymns inevitably contain.

We looked at the Advent hymns, and saw that many of them contained the theological view of creation as fallen, based on the account of original sin and the Fall in Genesis. This led me to ask the question as to what sense it makes nowadays to speak of creation as fallen. I argued that this concept was based on a very different world view to our present day one, not only having roots in the Old Testament but also in much of the Greek philosophy influential at the time, and implicit in much of the New Testament. Much of the imagery in these Advent hymns was found to be open to a wider and more contemporary theological interpretation, for if we viewed nature as fallen through the sin of human beings, i.e. through greed, selfishness and misuses of

the natural world, then it was possible to say in a sense that nature is in a fallen state because of us. This avoided the problem of superimposing a kind of morality onto the whole of creation and therefore helped to make sense of this ancient concept. I argued that in the creation psalms, there was a strong emphasis on everything being ordered, which included humanity. Man works with God in a positive way for his kingdom on earth and for creation. By taking this approach, many of the Advent and Christmas hymns made surprisingly complete modern, everyday sense. Advent brought the hope of new life not only to human beings, but to the whole of creation, for Christ came as an example for us and pointed to God's will for creation.

We also saw in the Advent and Christmas hymnody many images from the creation psalmody where the whole of creation was viewed as participating in the rejoicing of the Advent and Christmas festivals, thus taking a much more immanent approach than is sometimes commonly thought. Furthermore, many of these hymns contained images that linked Christ to the creator through using the concept of the *logos*, the creative word of God. This, then, would implicitly connect Christ with the creation from the beginning of time. We also saw in some of the earlier carols some more immanent and natural theological images, similar to the May Day and Holy Spirit hymnody. Some of these hymns mentioned the whole of creation as being involved and affected by Christ's birth, where it spoke of Christmas coming as spring unto the whole of the created order. This again was reminiscent of the new life and fertility images found in many of the harvest festival hymns.

Finally, this led us on to look at some of the Easter christological hymns, where again, although to some extent they mostly have an anthropocentric bias, we found that this was not the full story, for we saw here that many of the texts contained imagery which pointed to the possibility of the restoration of all things through the Easter event. Here

there were links to Psalm 8, where we saw the restoration of the *imago Dei*, where man is viewed as steward of all things of the earth. This Easter restoration, it is implied, is thus for the whole of creation, for it is the restoration of the proper order which God had willed from the beginning of time. It is possible to see that a proper order restored equals creation restored as well. Such a view, I hold, is implicit in much of the Easter hymnody and thus shows the possibility of a more inclusive approach.

We also saw examples of the more immanent type of imagery in this genre of hymnody, where like Christmas and Advent, Easter was being linked to spring and new life. So yet again, we had the possibility of a more immanent view of God – i.e., that the new life of Easter is evident in all things. The imagery here is very similar to the imagery of some of the creation psalmody and the May Day and Pentecost hymn texts discussed earlier.

In conclusion, then, the examples of traditional creation hymnody we have examined here have shown that this genre draws on some of the oldest concepts of God and spirituality. Not only is much of the imagery based on a kind of elemental spirituality prevalent in the creation psalmody, but also in many cases it has drawn on some older pre-Christian beliefs from closer to home. This illustrates a more immanent theological view that includes the whole of nature, and moreover argues against the charge that many have put on Christianity of being only concerned with human salvation to the detriment of the rest of the natural world. The importance of this for our worship in the twenty first century should not be underestimated, for it is only by regaining an awareness of our connectedness with the whole of the natural world that a future for our planet and ourselves can be made more secure.

We can also see from hymnody of this type that in the past the church has unashamedly drawn on older myths and beliefs held at grass-roots level, thus showing an unwillingness to be restricted purely to mainstream theological dogma. Furthermore, I think it is possible to see in these texts a surprisingly contemporary approach to creation, for it is the case that many of the issues highlighted in this study are only now beginning to find new interest from many contemporary hymn writers. Therefore, it might be the case that there will be a resurgence of interest in the hymns which contain more immanent views of God. It will be interesting to see what happens in this area over the next two or three decades, but it is possible that the hymns looked at here may well become a more useful resource again in worship for the twenty-first century.

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