

THE CONCEPT OF THE ABYSS IN  
THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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The Greek word, ἀβύσσου, which is transliterated as *abyss*, occurs seven times in the Apocalypse. Were we to discuss thoroughly the significance of the number seven in the Apocalypse we might never arrive at our discussion of the announced subject: the digression would be too great. The most casual reader, however, will note seven churches, seven lampstands, seven stars, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven angels, seven bowls of wrath, and seven spirits of God. The Apocalypse states that the Lamb of God is worthy to receive “power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing” —seven things in all—which I take to represent the totality of all good things. Suffice it to say that the number seven is of extraordinary significance in the Apocalypse. That Saint John uses the word *abyss* precisely seven times can hardly be a coincidence. It suggests that the concept of the *abyss* relates in an important way to the theme of the Apocalypse as a whole (which I think is the theme of Scripture as a whole); and that it is worth our while to take some time to try to understand the concept. Let’s begin by noting the passages in which the word *abyss* occurs. The first three occurrences are in chapter 9:

And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft

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of the abyss; he opened the shaft of the abyss, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened from the smoke of the shaft. Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth; they were told not to harm any of the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree, but only those of mankind who have not the seal of God upon their foreheads; they were allowed to torture them for five months but not to kill them. . . . And in those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will long to die, and death will fly from them. . . .

[The locusts] have as king over them the angel of the abyss; his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon [Destroyer].

The fourth occurrence of *abyss* is in chapter 11, in the account of the two witnesses who will prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days: "And when they finished their testimony, the beast that ascends from the abyss will make war upon them and conquer them and kill them."

The fifth occurrence of *abyss* is in chapter 17: "The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is to ascend from the abyss and go to apollyon [destruction]; and the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will marvel to behold the beast, because it was and is not and is to come."

The sixth and seventh occurrences of *abyss* are in chapter 20:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key of the abyss and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were ended.

I suggest that the passages containing those seven occurrences of the word *abyss*, considered as a unit, form a chiasmus structured as follows:

- A 1. The star fallen from heaven is given the key of the shaft of the abyss.
- 2. He opens the shaft of the abyss and out comes smoke that darkens the sun and moon. From the smoke comes locusts that torture men for five months. (9:1-11)
- B The king over them is the angel of the abyss, Apollyon. (9:12)
- C The beast who ascends from the abyss makes war on, conquers and kills the two witnesses. They are raised from the dead and taken up into heaven. (11:7-12)
- B' The beast goes to apollyon. (17:8)
- A' 1. The angel comes down from heaven with the key of the abyss and a great chain.
- 2. He binds Satan, throws him into the abyss and shuts it, so that Satan should deceive the nations no more for a thousand years. (20:1-3)

The center of the chiasmus is formed by the war of the beast from the abyss on the two witnesses. The two witnesses are killed; but they are raised from the dead and taken up into heaven. Before the resurrection of the two witnesses, the powers of darkness come forth from the abyss. They block the sun and moon, the lights by which men see the truth; and they torture men. Men seek death and do not find it. In other words, they despair. After the resurrection of the two witnesses, the powers of darkness are thrown forcibly back into the abyss from which they came that they should deceive the nations no more. Before the resurrection of the two witnesses, the star fallen from heaven has the key to the abyss, and he opens it. After the resurrection of the two witnesses, an angel descends from heaven with the key to the abyss, throws Satan into the abyss, shuts it, and seals it.

In reviewing these seven occurrences of the word *abyss* in

the Apocalypse, the first thing that strikes us is that the abyss is presented as an object of terror for mankind. When the shaft to the abyss is opened, smoke arises in such great quantity as to darken the sun, and from the smoke come locusts that torture men so that they wish to die but cannot. The locusts have as their king the angel of the abyss, whose name in Greek is Apollyon, which means Destroyer. A beast ascends from the abyss to make war on the two witnesses of God, and the beast conquers and kills them. The abyss is presented in the Apocalypse as something men should fear.

It seems also that the abyss is an object of terror for the fallen angels and their minions. When the shaft of the abyss is unlocked, they come out—they do not stay; and, in the end, the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, is imprisoned in the abyss for a thousand years. He has to be bound, and the abyss has to be sealed. He is unwilling to go into the abyss or unwilling to stay in the abyss or both.

The word *abyss* appears once in the gospels. In the Gospel of Luke, in the eighth chapter, the word *abyss* appears in the story of the Gerasene demoniac. Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee into Gentile territory and met a man possessed by a legion of demons. The man wore no clothes, lived among the tombs, was under guard, could not be bound by chains and fetters, and was driven by the demons into the desert. Jesus commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. A dialogue between Jesus and the demons ensued, and the demons “begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss.” They begged Jesus to let them enter a herd of swine nearby. Jesus granted that request. The demons came out of the man and entered the swine, which then rushed down the hill, into the lake, and were drowned. It is a strange sequence of events; but for our purpose it is enough to note that the demons were terrified of being commanded to depart into the abyss.

If we are correct thus far, the abyss, as it is presented in the Apocalypse, is an object of terror for both men and fallen angels. Saint John intended for his readers to fear the abyss;

and he intended for his readers to see that fallen angels fear the abyss.

So, the question I would like for us to take up is this: why is the abyss an object of terror for men and for fallen angels? Or, to phrase the question differently, why did Saint John choose the term *abyss* to denote that which men and fallen angels are to fear?

In seeking to answer this question, let's begin by taking note of the literal meaning of the term *abyss*. Literally, the term *abyss* means without a bottom. It is the bottomless. To say that the abyss is the bottomless is to say that one descending into the abyss could never reach a bottom, for the abyss is without a bottom. If the abyss has no bottom, then it is infinite in depth. If it is infinite in depth, then it also must be infinite in height. If it is infinite in height and depth, then it also must be infinite in length and width, otherwise the infinity in height and depth must be confined by walls or sides of infinite length, which is impossible. So, literally, the abyss is the infinite in height and depth, length and width.

Milton makes two attempts, in Book II of *Paradise Lost*, to describe the abyss. Near the end of the synod of fallen angels, after the vote by the fallen angels to take their revenge on God by seducing man to their side, Beelzebub asks, “Who shall attempt with wandering feet The dark unbottomed infinite abyss . . . ?”<sup>1</sup> Thereafter, when the portress of Hell, Sin, who is Satan's daughter and the mother of Death, opens the gate of hell

Before their eyes in sudden view appear  
The secrets of the hoary deep, a dark  
Illimitable ocean without bound,  
Without dimension, where length, breadth, and highth,  
And time and place are lost[.]<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book II, 405-6.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 890-94.

The abyss is the infinite—without dimension. Yet, the term given us is not the *infinite* but the *abyss*, which is the bottomless, the without-a-bottom. While logically the term *abyss* may demand infinity in all directions, our attention is drawn by the term itself specifically to one direction, the bottom, or the absence of a bottom. Our attention is drawn downward by the term *abyss* in a way that it would not be by the term *infinite*. *Abyss* makes us think of a descent or a fall. It makes us look downward, whereas the term *infinite* makes us look outward. So, we have this peculiarity: the abyss is logically the equivalent of the infinite, yet, unlike the term *infinite*, the term *abyss* connotes downwardness.

The peculiarity turns out to be a paradox, or perhaps an oxymoron, when we reflect further on the nature of the infinite. In the passage just quoted, Milton describes it as the infinite, without dimension, where length, breadth and height and time and place are lost. Note first that place is lost. Aristotle says in the *Physics*, “the species and differences of place are up and down and before and behind and right and left. And these are determined not only in regard to us and by position but also in the whole itself. However it is impossible that these be in the infinite . . . it is impossible that place be infinite.” *Physics*, 205b31–206a1. Commenting on this passage, Saint Thomas says:

He proves as follows that it is impossible for there to be an infinite place. To be in place and to be in some place are convertible, just as to be man and to be some man, and to be quantity and to be some quantity, are convertible. Therefore, just as it is impossible for quantity to be infinite because it would then follow that some quantity is infinite, e.g., two cubits or three cubits (which is impossible), so also it is impossible for place to be infinite because then it would follow that some place is infinite, either above or below or the like. And this is impossible because each of these signifies some limit. . . .<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, book III, lect. 9, para. 369.

For us modern men, this seems an odd argument. We are accustomed to thinking of the universe as infinite, and we are also accustomed to thinking of places in the universe. We seldom pause to consider whether these two customary ways of thinking are compatible. Let's do that now. Let's pause to consider, as modern men, the notion of place. Let's ask, for instance, in what place is the planet Pluto? Is it up or down, above or below, to the right or to the left, of the Earth? *The World Book Encyclopedia*, which is the source of my astronomical knowledge, states the distance of Pluto from the Sun, but not whether it is up or down, above or below, to the right or to the left of the Earth or of the Sun or anything else. Even if we say that both Pluto and the Earth are in motion and are not constantly in the same relation to one another, at any given moment we should be able to say that at this moment Pluto is up or down, above or below, to the right or to the left of the Earth or the Sun or something—provided we could find a point of reference from which up and down, above and below, left and right can be determined; but we cannot. *The World Book Encyclopedia* does not say so explicitly, but I gather from what I read there that the modern conception of the universe is such that no point of reference exists from which up and down, above and below, left and right, can be determined. Which is to say, if these are the six species of place, in the modern conception of the universe, place cannot be determined.

A place is where something is. If, in the modern conception of the universe, place cannot be determined, modern man cannot say where something is. No doubt, someone is saying, “I really don't care where Pluto is or whether we can say anything about Pluto's place.” So let's ask a more personal question—or, as some modern thinkers would phrase it, an existential question. Where am I? I am at the podium. Where is the podium? It is in the lecture hall. Where is the lecture hall? It is on the campus. Where is the campus? It is in the city. Where is the city? It is in the state. Where is the state? It is on the Earth. Where is the Earth? It is in the solar system.

Where is the solar system? It is in the galaxy. Where is the galaxy? It is in the cluster. Where is the cluster? It is in the supercluster. Where is the supercluster? I have no idea. Of course, my knowledge of astronomy is limited—limited, in fact, to what I can learn from *The World Book Encyclopedia*. Someone with real knowledge of astronomy might have the capacity to carry this sequence a few steps further, but, on the assumption that the universe is infinite in all directions, ultimately the outcome must be the same for an astronomer as for me—ultimately, the answer becomes, “I have no idea.” Everything in this sequence is located ultimately in relation to something that cannot be located in relation to anything else. If I do not know where the final term in the sequence is, I do not know where the intermediate terms in the sequence are; which means I do not know where the first term in the sequence is. I am the first term in the sequence. As a modern man, I do not know where I am. More precisely, as a modern man, I cannot know where I am.

Perhaps the first person to appreciate the implications of the modern conception of the universe was Pascal, whose portrait of the predicament of modern man remains unparalleled:

When I see the blind and wretched state of man, when I survey the whole universe in its dumbness and man left to himself with no light, as though lost in this corner of the universe, without knowing who put him there, what he has come to do, what will become of him when he dies, incapable of knowing anything, I am moved to terror, like a man transported in his sleep to some terrifying desert island, who wakes up quite lost and with no means of escape. Then I marvel that so wretched a state does not drive people to despair.<sup>4</sup>

Again:

<sup>4</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Fragment 198, transl. by A.J. Krailsheimer (Penguin Books: 1966).

I see the terrifying spaces of the universe hemming me in, and I find myself attached to one corner of this vast expanse without knowing why I have been put in this place rather than that, or why the brief span of life allotted to me should be assigned to one moment rather than another of all the eternity which went before me and all that which will come after me. I see only infinity on every side, hemming me in like an atom or like the shadow of a fleeting instant.<sup>5</sup>

Once more:

The eternal silence of these infinite spaces fills me with dread.<sup>6</sup>

Pascal echoes Milton's comment on the abyss—that time and place are lost—but he gives voice in a way that Milton could not do to the dread, the terror, that comes from the loss of time and place; and he connects the two. Modern man cannot explain why he is here rather than there; and, for the same reason, he cannot say why, in all the eternity that has gone before and will come after, the brief span of life assigned to him is assigned to one moment rather than another. Just as the infinite universe is not a whole in the light of which a part may be located, so, too, time without a beginning and without an end is not a whole in the light of which a particular moment may be located; and just as the infinite universe lacks a fixed point in reference to which one's place may be determined, so, too, time without a beginning and without an end lacks a reference point by which the significance of other moments may be determined.

I once worked for an agency that determines whether persons who apply for social security disability benefits are disabled. That job required me to spend most of the day reading medical reports, including, occasionally, reports from psychiatrists. Generally, the psychiatric reports began by stating, “patient is oriented times three,” or words to that effect. A

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*, Fragment 427.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*, Fragment 201.

person who is oriented times three knows who he is, where he is, and what day or year it is; which means he can identify himself in relation to other persons; he can locate himself in relation to place; and he can locate himself in relation to time. These are the questions the trainer asks of a football player who suffers a head injury—or to use the football technical term of art—who has had his bell rung. Who are you? Where are you? What day is it or what year is it? The player who cannot answer those questions correctly is not going back into the game. We would say that he has had his senses knocked out of him. An adult person who lacks the capacity to identify himself in relation to other persons, to locate himself in relation to place, or to locate himself in relation to time, has a serious disability. He has lost his senses, or has had them knocked out of him. He has a kind of insanity, whether temporary or permanent. He has lost the use of his rational faculties. Most of us would agree that losing the use of our rational faculties is a terrifying prospect. Each of us has had some portend of what it must be like to lose our rational faculties on occasion when we have found ourselves lost, not knowing where we are, not recognizing any familiar points of reference, and therefore not knowing how to find where we need to be. When that happens, we are disoriented; we are unable to orient ourselves in regard to place; and we are afraid.

We should note also that place relates to significance. The more significant a thing is, the more careful we are about its place. We observed a moment ago that someone may not care where Pluto is, but we would not say the same thing about ourselves. The difference is that Pluto is or may be insignificant to us, but we cannot help but regard ourselves as significant. You may not care where the Center Point Missionary Baptist Church is, but I do, for my mother is buried in the cemetery there. My mother is significant to me, and, hence, I know exactly where she is buried. We order our homes so that significant things have a place; but, at least in America, we do

not order the garbage that we discard into the garbage dump. The items in the garbage dump, by definition, are items to which we attribute no significance, and, so, we do not order them so that each item has a place. One of the horrors one sees in the films about Nazi concentration camps is that the bodies of the dead were dumped at random into great heaps like garbage dumps; and that is horrifying because we think in our minds and feel in our hearts that human bodies are significant and that it is a sacrilege to dump them in heaps as though they were garbage.

Time, like place, relates to significance. We commemorate significant dates, such as the anniversaries of our weddings, birthdays, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the surrender of Germany in the Second World War, and the like. We scarcely remember dates when nothing significant occurs. Someone with important things to do will keep up with the time as the events approach; someone with nothing to do, or nothing significant to do, may pay little or no attention to time. The whole world has divided time into two parts: before Christ and after the Lord—before and after the most significant person in history.

So, the loss of place and time is also a loss of significance. It is this loss of significance that most troubled Pascal. The loss of place and time implies that man has lost significance; Pascal gave voice to the despair that comes with the loss of man's significance. At the same time, he fought to overcome that despair by finding a significance for man in a universe in which significance has no place.

It is not in space that I must seek my human dignity, but in the ordering of my thought. It will do me no good to own land. Through space the universe grasps me and swallows me up like a speck; through thought I grasp it.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*, Fragment 113.

We come, then, to this preliminary conclusion. The abyss is presented as an object of terror for men and for fallen angels. Logically, the term *abyss* implies infinite space. In infinite space, the concepts of up and down, above and below, left and right, have no meaning; which means that place has no meaning in infinite space. Part of what it means to be of sound mind is to be able to locate one's self in time and place. One who lacks the capacity to orient himself in time and place has lost the use of his rational faculties, the faculties that define us as human. The modern conception of the universe is, or until recently has been, one of infinite space and infinite time. An infinity of space and time is tantamount to the absence of place and time. Modern man can give no account of where he is. Moreover, the loss of place and time implies a loss of significance. If man has no place and cannot locate himself in relation to time, the meaningfulness of his existence is in doubt. At the dawning of the modern conception of the universe, Pascal saw that this conception of the universe meant that modern man is, necessarily, disoriented and without significance. Pascal gave voice, either on his own behalf or on behalf of modern man, to the fear and dread that properly corresponds to the predicament in which modern man finds himself.

Throughout this discussion, we have referred to the modern conception of the universe, to modern man, and to the predicament in which modern man finds himself because of the modern conception of the universe; all of which implies some alternative. It implies a conception of the universe that is pre-modern, and it implies that the pre-modern man did not find himself in the same predicament. Thus, the very terms we have used in the discussion imply not only that there is an alternative to the modern conception of the universe, but also that the alternative is, or may be, in some decisive respect superior to the modern one.

We implied what must be an essential characteristic of the alternative to the modern conception of the universe at the

beginning of the discussion of the infinite when, following Aristotle and Saint Thomas, we noted that place is incompatible with the infinite, so that, if, as most moderns have it, the universe is infinite, it follows that place cannot be determined. The converse also must be true: if place can be determined, the universe must not be infinite. If I understand correctly, this is substantially the argument of Aristotle and Saint Thomas. Saint Thomas explains:

But in the whole universe up and down are determined by the motion of heavy and light things; right is determined by the rising motion of the heavens and left by the falling motion of the heavens; before is the higher hemisphere and behind is the lower hemisphere; up is the meridian and down is the northern region. These, however, cannot be determined in an infinite body. Therefore, it is impossible for the universe to be infinite.<sup>8</sup>

The conception here is dramatically different from the modern conception of the universe, for not only are up and down determined by nature, so are right and left. Place can be determined; indeed, it is so certain that place can be determined that this certainty forms the premise for the conclusion that it is impossible for the universe to be infinite. In the ancient and medieval view, not only can place be determined, as C. S. Lewis explains, "Everything has its right place, its home, the region that suits it, and, if not forcibly restrained, moves thither by a sort of homing instinct[.]"<sup>9</sup>

Since everything has its right place, and since everything moves to its right place by a sort of homing instinct, it follows that this pre-modern view is orderly. Indeed, the Greek word used to describe the Whole—*cosmos*—means order. Hans Jonas explains:

<sup>8</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, Book III, Lecture 9, para. 368.

<sup>9</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, (Cambridge University Press: 1964), 92.

The very word [*cosmos*] by its literal meaning expresses a positive evaluation of the object—any object—to which it is accorded as a descriptive term. For *cosmos* means “order” in general, whether of the world or a household, of a commonwealth or a life: it is a term of praise and even admiration. Thus when applied to the universe and becoming assigned to it as its eminent instance, the word does not merely signify the neutral fact of all-that-is, a quantitative sum . . . but expresses a specific and to the Greek mind an ennobling quality of this whole: that it is order.<sup>10</sup>

For our purposes, the best description I have found of this cosmos is the following by C. S. Lewis:

The *world* (or . . . *kosmos*) [the pre-moderns] had in mind was that depicted by Greek and medieval science, with its unmoving spherical Earth, a tiny speck, at the centre and the successively larger and swifter spheres or ‘heavens’ revolving round it, and the *Primum Mobile* encircling the whole. This [*cosmos*] had its internal diversities: a realm of air and change and chance which extended up to the lowest sphere (that of the Moon), and beyond that the immutable realm of ether and necessity. But these made a pattern that could be easily grasped and the whole system had the unity in multiplicity of a vast building. When Marlowe spoke about ‘the wondrous architecture of the world’, the word *architecture* was hardly a metaphor. The world was the great work of art, matchless . . . in its ‘elegance’; perfect: neither needing nor allowing any addition.

The language of some text-books carries the suggestion that this model differed from its Newtonian successor principally by being smaller. I think that misses the real point. The important differences were two. First, it had an absolute Up (away from Earth) and Down (towards Earth). This meant that whereas to us the night sky suggests the highly abstract conception of distance, it suggested to our ancestors that very special, and far more concrete, sort of distance we call height. It was a vertiginous world. Secondly, it was both

<sup>10</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 2d ed. (Beacon Press: 1963), 241.

unimaginably large and unambiguously finite. It therefore had shape. The emotional and imaginative difference between this and Newton’s universe is accordingly very great. The old *kosmos* humbled you by its size, but exhilarated you by its symmetry: the mind could rest in it with full satisfaction. The Newtonian model is less like a building than a forest; illimitable, without horizons. . . . Hence the numerous sky-wanderings in Dante, Chaucer and others never once strike that note of lost bewilderment, loneliness, and agoraphobia which the idea of ‘space’ has aroused in Pascal and other moderns.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to the modern universe, which provokes loneliness, the old cosmos inspired exhilaration; and, in contrast to modern universe, in which the mind feels a sense of lost bewilderment and agoraphobia (or, in Pascal’s word, *dread*), in the old cosmos the mind could find full satisfaction. Man in the modern universe finds himself lost in an alien wilderness; man in the old cosmos felt himself at home. The difference, in part, is that man in the old cosmos could locate himself in reference to a center—he could find his place; whereas, as we have observed at length, man in the modern universe is of necessity disoriented—he has no place. Place cannot be determined, for the modern universe has no center and no limit.

This line of reasoning tends, it seems, toward two conclusions. One is that the abyss in the Apocalypse is a kind of foreshadowing or an anticipation of the modern conception of the universe; the other is that the old notion of cosmos is superior in at least one respect to the modern conception of the universe; for man could orient himself in the old cosmos in a way that is impossible in the modern universe; and he had a significance in the old cosmos that he does not have in the modern universe.

<sup>11</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 2d ed. (Cambridge University Press: 1967), 250–51.



Before we adopt these conclusions, however, we should note a gap in our argument. We have considered what Saint John says about the abyss; we made some observations about what that concept entails, which led us to think of the modern concept of the universe; and then we contrasted the modern concept of the universe with the old notion of the cosmos. Yet, we have not considered what Saint John says about the cosmos. We are reminded that the word *cosmos* appears frequently in Saint John's writings, particularly in his Gospel and in his Epistles. Saint John employed the term *cosmos* more frequently than any other writer in the New Testament. In fact, he employed the term *cosmos* more frequently than all of the other New Testament writers combined. By my count, the term *cosmos* occurs a total of one hundred and seven times in Saint John's writings: eighty times in his Gospel; twenty-three times in his first Epistle; once in his second epistle; and, significantly, three times in the Apocalypse.<sup>12</sup> You will be pleased to know that I do not intend to comment on each of these one hundred seven occurrences of the term *cosmos*; but, it would seem that we cannot conclude our deliberations without some consideration of what Saint John has to say about the cosmos.

Let's begin with two passages from the Gospel of John and one from his first Epistle. In the seventh chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "The cosmos . . . hates me because I witness of it that its works are evil." In the fifteenth chapter, Jesus says to his disciples, "If the cosmos hates you, know that it hated me before you. If you were of the cosmos, the cosmos would love its own; but because you are not of the cosmos, but I have chosen you from the cosmos, therefore the cosmos hates you. . . . The one who hates me also hates

<sup>12</sup> Rev. 11:15; 13:8; 17:8. The first of these passages says that the kingdom of the cosmos has become the kingdom of our Lord. The second and third refer to the foundation of the cosmos. All three assert the contingency of the cosmos and the superiority of the Christian God to the cosmos.

my Father." In 1 John 5:19, Saint John writes, "the whole cosmos lies in evil."

These passages represent an extraordinary indictment of the cosmos. Earlier, we noted the observation of Hans Jonas, who said that the term *cosmos* "by its literal meaning expresses a positive evaluation of the object—any object—to which it is accorded as a descriptive term." Saint John converts this term of praise into a term of disapprobation; what by definition was good is now said to lie in evil. This transvaluation of the cosmos is not peculiar to Saint John but is common in the New Testament. Saint James says that friendship with the cosmos is enmity with God. Saint Paul contrasts the wisdom of God with the wisdom of the cosmos and the Spirit of God with the spirit of the cosmos. So successful were the New Testament writers in transvaluing the term *cosmos* that, among Christians, the terms *worldly* and *worldliness* are used primarily as terms of disapprobation; and, in society at large, the only remaining use of the derivatives of *cosmos* in the original sense of order is the word *cosmetic*, which relates to appearances, to the superficial, rather than to the substance of a thing. Cosmetic changes are superficial, unimportant, and perhaps deceiving—they are not ennobling, praiseworthy changes that relate the intrinsic worth of the thing changed.

Now, one might object that all of this is far from our point of departure, that these pejorative uses of the term *cosmos* by Saint John and the other New Testament writers have nothing to do with the differences between the old cosmos and the modern universe, and that these pejorative uses of *cosmos* relate to human affairs rather than to the order of the heavens and the earth. It is a fair objection. The objection has some merit, which we will consider in due course, but the objection is open to at least two responses.

First, we would note that the distinction implied by the objection between the order of the heavens and the earth and the order of human affairs was not drawn so sharply in the ancient world as the objection implies. Commenting on Cicero,

Jonas notes "the connection between cosmology and ethics, between the apotheosis of the universe and the ideal of human perfection; man's task is the theoretical one of contemplating and the practical one of 'imitating' the universe. . . ." <sup>13</sup> Jonas specifies the relation between the cosmos and man as the relation between the whole and the part, but with a difference: "man's proper relation to the universe is that of *adequating* his own existence, confined as it is as a mere part, to the essence of the whole, of reproducing the latter in his own being through understanding and action." <sup>14</sup> In a similar vein, Eric Voegelin explains that the ancient polities understood themselves as imitating or representing the cosmic order:

All of the early empires, Near Eastern as well as Far Eastern, understood themselves as representatives of a transcendent order, or the order of the cosmos; and some of them even understood this order as a "truth." Whether one turns to the earliest Chinese sources . . . or to the inscriptions of Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, or Persia, one uniformly finds the order of the empire interpreted as a representative of cosmic order in the medium of human society. The empire is a cosmic analogue, a little world reflecting the order of the great, comprehensive world. Rulership becomes the task of securing the order of society in harmony with cosmic order; the territory of the empire is an analogical representation of the world with its four quarters; the great ceremonies of the empire represent the rhythm of the cosmos; festivals and sacrifices are a cosmic liturgy, a symbolic participation of the cosmion in the cosmos; and the ruler himself represents the society, because on earth he represents the transcendent power which maintains cosmic order. <sup>15</sup>

Thus, the ancients did not draw the distinction between the cosmic order and human affairs as sharply as we moderns are

<sup>13</sup> Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 245.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*, 246-47.

<sup>15</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, (University of Chicago Press: 1952), 54.

went to do. The cosmos was the whole of which the individual person and human society were parts with the responsibility of replicating in themselves the order of the whole. Even if we say that the New Testament's transvaluation of the term *cosmos* from a term of praise to a term of disapprobation is aimed primarily at human affairs, that transvaluation necessarily implicates the cosmos in the sense of the whole, for human affairs are a part of that whole and are intended to represent that whole.

Moreover, it is not so clear that, even in the modern world, the distinction between the order of the universe and human affairs is so sharply drawn. For example, the noted Cambridge physicist, Stephen Hawking, wrote *A Brief History of Time* in search of a theory that would unite the general theory of relativity and quantum mechanics. Hawking gives two reasons for pursuing this search for a unified theory. He first notes that, in accord with Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest, a unified theory of physics may aid in our chances of survival; but he does not place a lot of stock in that possibility. Hawking's principal defense of the search for a unified theory is this:

The discovery of a complete unified theory . . . may not aid the survival of our species. It may not even affect our lifestyle. But ever since the dawn of civilization, people have not been content to see events as unconnected and inexplicable. They have craved an understanding of the underlying order in the world. Today we still yearn to know why we are here and where we came from. Humanity's deepest desire for knowledge is justification enough for our continuing quest. And our goal is nothing less than a complete description of the universe we live in. <sup>16</sup>

We should digress a moment to note the structure of Hawking's defense of his enterprise. In classical and medieval terms,

<sup>16</sup> Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, (Bantam Books: 1988), 13.

he attempts to justify the search for a unified theory of physics both as an aid to the practical life and as part of the theoretical life. For our purposes, however, the important thing to note is that Hawking assumes that "the underlying order in the world" is significant not only for understanding the inanimate world but also so we can "know why we are here and where we came from." In other words, Hawking assumes that "a complete description of the universe we live in," as he puts it, will give us insight into the origin and significance of mankind.

By the same token, it is not so clear that the notion that human affairs are an analogue of the cosmic order is confined to the ancient world. We have noted that the old cosmos was ordered such that place could be determined. In it, a distinction could be made between the higher and the lower. For the most part, human society in ancient and medieval times likewise was ordered such that a man had a place. In human society, a qualitative distinction could be made between the higher and the lower, the more noble and the less noble. The modern universe does not admit of place. The higher and the lower do not exist in the modern universe. What characterizes the modern universe is extension, size, magnitude. Likewise, in modern society, a man does not have a fixed place. In modern society, we do not make a qualitative distinction between the higher and the lower, the more noble and the less noble. The principal distinctions we recognize are quantitative: men rule, not because they are higher than others, but because they receive the greater quantity of votes; privilege is accorded to wealth or fame, which are quantitative measures, not to nobility, which is a qualitative distinction. Perhaps the similarity between the modern universe and modern society is mere coincidence, but I doubt it. The egalitarian formlessness, the absence of fixed place in modern society, mirrors the modern universe as well as, and perhaps better than, ancient and medieval societies mirrored the old cosmos. We could draw much the same conclusion regarding contemporary art,

music and poetry, and draw much the same comparison between them and pre-modern art and poetry.

Still, while modern society may mirror the modern universe, the fact remains that modern man does not consciously look to the order of the universe as a norm for the ordering of human affairs. Instead, he looks to history. Voegelin writes:

The self-understanding of a society as the representative of cosmic order originates in the period of the cosmological empires in the technical sense, but it is not confined to this period. Not only does cosmological representation survive in the imperial symbols of the Western Middle Ages or in continuity into the China of the twentieth century; its principle is also recognizable where the truth to be represented is symbolized in an entirely different manner. In Marxian dialectics, for instance, the truth of cosmic order is replaced by the truth of a historically immanent order. . . . Its order is in harmony with the truth of history . . . the opponents run counter to the truth of history. . . .<sup>17</sup>

Marxism replaces the truth of the cosmic order with the truth of history. As ancient cosmology postulated a fixed place in reference to which man could locate himself, Marxism postulates an absolute moment in reference to which man can locate himself. That absolute moment is the end of history—the realization of socialism on Earth.

The ancients looked to the cosmos to ascertain the significance of man; modern man looks instead to history. We might say that ancient man looked for significance primarily in place; modern man looks for significance primarily in time.

For Americans, human affairs are not ordered in reference to the end of history, but the notion that history provides a reference point for judgment is no less prevalent. The political commentators solemnly and repeatedly inquire, "How will history judge President Clinton?" The question presupposes the coming in time of some absolute point of reference

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 59.

from which some other moment in time can be judged. The truth is that, in the future, historians will form judgments of President Clinton which may or may not coincide with the judgments made today; but those historians, themselves, will form those judgments at some point in time, which will be followed by other points in time when still later historians will judge those historians; and, still later, other historians in time will judge the earlier historians; *ad infinitum*. The problem, as we noted earlier, is that just as it is impossible in an infinite universe to find a fixed point for determining the place of things, so in an infinite history it is impossible to find an absolute moment for the final judgment of other moments. The popular notion that history provides a source of true judgment attempts surreptitiously to avoid this unavoidable problem. As we noted earlier, the modern universe admits no qualitative distinctions; it is characterized by extension. Extension is the ultimate reality. History is entitled to judgment because it represents a greater extension in time. Hence, the appeal to history, in its popular American form, is but another reflection of the nature of the modern universe.

Art imitates nature: it did so in the ancient and medieval worlds, and it does so today. The difference seems to be that the ancients and the medievals knew they were imitating nature; they did so self-consciously. We moderns also imitate nature, but not so self-consciously as our forefathers. Human art—and here I use the term broadly—seems inevitably to imitate nature. Perhaps the reason is that nature is not self-interpreting; nature does not hold lectures and explain itself to us humans. We have to work at understanding nature. The product of our understanding of nature is, itself, in some measure a work of art or science. However true and accurate, a cosmology is conceived by the human mind, not given by nature without the mediation of the human intellect. If so, it is not so surprising that the mind that understands the cosmos as a carefully ordered whole in which the higher and the lower can be discerned would also understand human af-

fairs in much the same way; and a mind that understands the universe in quantitative terms without qualitative distinctions would also understand human affairs in much the same way.

We began this discussion as a response to the objection that the pejorative uses of the term *cosmos* in the New Testament generally, and in Saint John's writings specifically, were directed at human affairs rather than at the manner in which men in the ancient world conceived the cosmos. Our point in this response is not that the objection is wholly without merit, but that the objection draws too sharply the distinction between the manner in which men conceive the cosmos or the universe and the manner in which they order human affairs.

Moreover, a close look at some of the passages where Saint John uses the term *cosmos* reveals that he did not draw a sharp distinction between the cosmic order and human affairs. For example, in the prologue to his Gospel, Saint John writes:

The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the cosmos. In the cosmos he was, and the cosmos through him came to be, but the cosmos did not know him.<sup>18</sup>

That the cosmos did not know him could be taken as a comment on human affairs; but that statement is immediately preceded by the statements that he was in the cosmos and that the cosmos came to be through him, which seem to refer to the cosmos in the larger sense.

By the same token, scripture unites human affairs and the cosmos or universe in a single redemption. Saint Paul tells us:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only

<sup>18</sup> John 1:9-10.

the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.<sup>19</sup>

A moment ago we said that it is a mistake to draw too sharp a distinction between cosmology and human things since our understanding of human affairs is likely to reflect our understanding of natural things because both are products of the same intellect. Saint Paul gives us another reason for being careful not to draw that distinction too sharply. We are bodily creatures. Our bodies are an inseparable part of the natural order. Our redemption is a redemption of the whole person, including the body. Since the body is an inseparable part of the natural order, the redemption of our bodies implies the redemption of the natural order.

Saint John makes the same point in the Apocalypse:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had gone away, and the sea was not any longer. And the sacred city [πόλις] I saw descending from the heaven of God having been prepared as a bride that has been adorned [κεκοσμημένην] for her husband. And I heard a great voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and his people they will be, and he will be God with them, God of them, and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will not be any longer; nor grief, nor mourning, nor suffering will be any longer.<sup>20</sup>

Note the order: the new heaven, then the new earth, then the holy city in which God will dwell, and then the redemption of mankind from death and suffering. The redemption of the natural order precedes the redemption of human affairs.

We began this lengthy consideration of the connection between human affairs and the natural order as a response to

<sup>19</sup> Rom. 8:19-23.

<sup>20</sup> Rev. 21:1-4.

the objection that the pejorative uses of the term *cosmos* by Saint John and the other New Testament writers has nothing to do with the differences between the old cosmos and the modern universe, and that these pejorative uses of *cosmos* relate to human affairs rather than to the order of the heavens and the earth. We concluded that the distinction between human affairs and the order of the heavens and the earth was not sharply drawn in ancient times, nor is it as sharply drawn in our day as we are prone to suppose. We also noted that Scripture connects the redemption of mankind and the redemption of the natural order.

Still, all of this responds to only half of the objection—that the pejorative uses of the term *cosmos* relate to human affairs rather than the order of the heavens and the earth. Nothing we have said suggests that Saint John or the other New Testament writers' pejorative use of the term *cosmos* had anything to do with the differences between the old cosmos and the modern universe, nor that Saint John or the other New Testament writers believed that the ancients had described the natural order inaccurately. I said earlier that the objection had some merit, and that we would come to the merit in the objection in due course. I am not aware of anyone who argues, nor of any reason to believe, that the pejorative uses of the term *cosmos* to which we have alluded have anything to do with the differences between the structure of the old cosmos and the structure of the modern universe; or that Saint John and the other New Testament writers intended anything they said as comments on the sciences of physics and astronomy.

Yet, it remains true that Saint John and the other New Testament writers seized the word *cosmos*, which by its literal meaning was a term of praise, and converted it into a term of disapprobation. We have to ask, why? Why did the sacred writers take the term *cosmos*, which was the ancient term for the whole and which was in its literal meaning a term of praise, and convert it into a term of disapprobation?

A possible answer is suggested by C. S. Lewis, who says that the New Testament writers, due to the nature of their circumstances and their ignorance of Classical Greek, confused *cosmos*, the Greek word for world, with *aion*, the Greek word for age. Here is what Lewis had to say:

The New Testament writers themselves do not consistently use *kosmos* for the one concept and *aion* for the other. They were not consciously collaborating in the production of a work. They worked far apart in place and time and there was no question of meeting to hammer out an agreed terminology. And none was writing in his native language. They wrote the sort of Greek which scholars have called the *koinè*, a deracinated and internationalised Greek used all over the Levant for business and government. It was not a barbarous corruption like Pidgin nor a contrived language like Basic. It was more like the sort of English in which two educated Indians who had no mother-tongue in common might converse today; grammatical but unidiomatic, lacking in *nuance* and in precision, cut off from the associations of the nursery, the hearth, and also the library. The *koinè* is the speech of people who are living linguistically from hand to mouth; grabbing at 'any old word' which, however roughly, will, at a particular moment and for a particular audience, serve the wholly practical purpose they have in view.

As a result we find *kosmos* used where *aion* (the present evil 'set-up') must be meant. Examples are 'The world (*kosmos*) cannot hate you, but it hates me because I give evidence that its behaviour is evil' (John vii.7); 'the spirit of the world (*kosmos*)' in I Cor. ii.12; or 'unspotted from the *kosmos*' (Jas. i.27).<sup>21</sup>

This represents, unfortunately, one of the few occasions, perhaps the only occasion, on which Lewis succumbed to the easy way out of a difficulty with understanding a text. The easy way out is to attribute the difficulty to the text—to say that the author made a mistake. Even apart from the doctrine

<sup>21</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 232-33.

of the inspiration of scripture, it will not do to treat great books as though the difficulties we encounter in understanding them result from defects in the text rather than our own inadequate understanding. Moreover, we have already seen that Saint John is a careful writer, that he used the word *cosmos* in a way that encompassed human affairs, that he did so because humans are creatures with bodies that are inseparably part of the cosmos, and that the whole cosmos, not just the human soul, is the object of Christ's redeeming work.

While we cannot agree with Lewis that the New Testament uses *cosmos* to connote disapprobation because its authors were careless writers who had an inadequate grasp of the language in which they wrote, we should pause to thank him for one insight, namely, that the New Testament writers sometimes used *cosmos* to include *aion* or history. That observation will help us momentarily.

If the easy way suggested by Lewis is not open to us, we must find another answer to the question, why did Saint John and other sacred writers convert the term *cosmos* from a term of praise to a term of disapprobation? Let's consider more closely some of the things we have already said.

We noted earlier C. S. Lewis's description of the ancient view of the cosmos. Lewis said of the old cosmos, "the mind could rest in it with full satisfaction."<sup>22</sup> We summarized Lewis's description by saying that man in the old cosmos felt himself at home. We also noted Hans Jonas's statement that, for the ancients, the practical task was one of imitating the cosmos.<sup>23</sup> These three statements—that the mind could rest in full satisfaction in the old cosmos; that man in the old cosmos felt himself at home; and that, for the ancients, the practical task was one of imitating the cosmos—call to mind three corresponding statements of Christians. The first statement—that the mind could rest in full satisfaction in the old

<sup>22</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 251.

<sup>23</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 245.

cosmos—calls to mind Saint Augustine's, "you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."<sup>24</sup> The second statement—that man in the old cosmos felt himself at home—calls to mind the Southern Gospel song, "This World Is Not My Home." The third statement—that the practical task of the ancients was one of imitating the cosmos—calls to mind the imitation of Christ. The suggestion is that the cosmos assumed a place in man's heart that rightly belonged to God. The mind rested in full satisfaction in the cosmos instead of resting in God; man was at home in the cosmos instead of at home with God; and man imitated the cosmos instead of imitating God. Jonas says, "this bounded physical universe denoted by the name 'cosmos' was considered a divine entity and often called outright a god, finally even *the* God."<sup>25</sup>

We noted earlier that Saint John and the other New Testament writers converted the term *cosmos* from a term that was by definition a term of praise into a term of disapprobation. If, in fact, they viewed the cosmos as somehow in competition with God for the hearts of men, that fact would explain the necessity for making that transvaluation.

Saint John writes in his first Epistle:

Do not love the cosmos, nor the things in the cosmos. If someone loves the cosmos, the love of the Father is not in him. Because all that is in the cosmos, the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and the pretentiousness of life, is not from the Father but is from the cosmos. But the cosmos passes away, along with the desires of it. But the one doing the will of the Father remains into eternity.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps "the desires of the flesh" refers to that which gives direction to the practical life and "the desires of the eyes"

<sup>24</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. I, ch. 1, trans. John K. Ryan (Image Books: 1960).

<sup>25</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 242.

<sup>26</sup> 1 John 2:15-17.

to that which gives direction to the theoretical life. If so, the first thing that this passage says is that the cosmos and the things in it give direction both to the practical life and to the theoretical life.

The second thing that this passage says consists of two comments on the fact that the cosmos and the things in it give direction to the theoretical life and the practical life. First, Saint John calls the things in the cosmos the ἀλαζονεία τοῦ βίου, which I have translated as "the pretentiousness of life." Liddell and Scott define ἀλαζονεία as "false pretense, imposture."<sup>27</sup> The ἀλαζον "is the one who 'makes more of himself' 'than the reality justifies, 'ascribing to himself either more or better things than he has, or even what he does not possess at all'; who 'promises what he cannot perform' [.]'"<sup>28</sup> Saint John's second comment is that the cosmos passes away, along with its desires. The cosmos and all that is in it are transitory; they come into being, and they pass away, whereas the one who does the will of the Father remains into eternity.

We were asking why Saint John and other New Testament writers seized the term *cosmos*, which by definition was a term of praise, and converted it to a term of disapprobation. Let's propose this answer: when Saint John used the term *cosmos* as a term of disapprobation, he meant to include whatever is in the world and whatever is in history that makes a pretense to be more than it is by claiming to serve as the final end of man's practical life and the point of reference for understanding in the theoretical life. Whatever is in the world and whatever is in history that makes such a claim is an impostor. It is a transitory, contingent being whose coming to be and whose passing away depends upon something else or Someone else. In truth, it should point beyond itself; in this fallen world, it

<sup>27</sup> Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford University Press: 1968).

<sup>28</sup> Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., vol. I (W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: 1964), 226.

becomes an impostor, like the ass in C. S. Lewis's *The Last Battle*, who was dressed by the ape in a lionskin and presented to the Narnians as Aslan. Saint John and the other New Testament writers used the term *cosmos* to include whatever in the world or in history that could be presented as man's final end and the ultimate point of reference because the cosmos, itself, was the one object, if we can call it an object, that could most plausibly be presented as such. The cosmos was more beautifully ordered, more filled with wisdom, than anything else known to man and therefore was what most plausibly could be considered divine, and it was, in fact, said to be divine by Varro and perhaps by Cicero.<sup>29</sup> So, Saint John's pejorative use of the term *cosmos* was not a comment on astronomy or physics; it was a comment on theology.

The *apologia* of the early Church was directed first toward the Jews and later toward the Gentiles. In the argument with the Jews, the apostles argued that the first covenant, by its own terms, was destined to pass away; and that what the Jews sought from obedience to the law actually was to be found in Christ. Saint John's arguments are directed toward the Gentiles, but the structure of the argument is the same. He argues that the cosmos and the things in it are destined to pass away; and that what the Gentiles sought from the cosmos actually is to be found only in Christ.

Saint John's argument here is a bridge between the Old Testament and the subsequent Christian apologetics. The Old Testament writers, especially the prophets, argued that it was foolish for a man to orient his life in reference to any created thing because every created thing is transitory and therefore contingent. Isaiah summed up the argument with unmatched brevity and eloquence: "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand for ever."<sup>30</sup> Grass is some-

<sup>29</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 245. For Varro's opinion, see Augustine, *The City of God*, bk. VII, ch. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Isaiah 40:8.

thing we use; it relates to the practical life. The flower is something we look at; it relates to *theoria* or the theoretical life. The grass and the flower, like the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes, are placed in contrast to the word of God; they are transitory; the word of God will stand forever.

We could restate the argument this way. All that is in the cosmos is contingent, which means it is contingent on something else. Anything in the cosmos that men take as the point of reference for the practical life or the theoretical life is contingent on something else. So, anything in the cosmos that men take as the point of reference for the practical life or the theoretical life points beyond itself to that upon which it is contingent. If we proceed from the first point of reference to the second, we encounter the same problem—we are pointed to a third point of reference, which is also contingent, and so on into infinity; which means that nothing in the cosmos can serve as the ultimate point of reference because nothing in the cosmos is ultimate. Thus, we are of necessity pointed beyond the cosmos to something or Someone who is not contingent on anything else. When the cosmos claims or is claimed to be an ultimate point of reference, it is an impostor—it is making a false pretense. This, as I understand it, is the argument made both by Saint John and by the prophet Isaiah.

As to why the cosmos, which should point beyond itself to the *logos* from which it comes into being, has become an impostor, making a false pretense to be the point of reference by which man can locate himself and in which he can find his ultimate fulfillment, Saint John does not give an explicit answer. However, he left clues. In his Gospel, he mentions on three occasions the prince or the ruler of this world. First, in the twelfth chapter of the Gospel of John, after the Greeks had asked to see Jesus and after a voice from heaven had spoken, Jesus said, "Now is the judgment of this cosmos; now the ruler [ἄρχων] of this cosmos shall be cast out."<sup>31</sup> Secondly,

<sup>31</sup> John 12:31.



at the Last Supper, Jesus said, "I will not talk with you much longer, for the ruler [ἄρχων] of this cosmos is coming."<sup>32</sup> Thirdly, also at the Last Supper, Jesus said that the Paraclete would come and prove the world concerning judgment, "because the ruler [ἄρχων] of this cosmos is judged."<sup>33</sup> Saint John does not name the ruler of the cosmos, but elsewhere in the Gospel Jesus tells his Jewish opponents that they are of their father, the devil, whose desires they do; and he says that the Devil is "the father of lies."<sup>34</sup> It seems fair to assume that the ruler of the cosmos and the Devil, the father of lies, are one and the same.

We were asking how the cosmos became an impostor, making a false pretense to be the point of reference in place of God. What we come to is that somehow this falsehood is the responsibility of the ruler of the cosmos, the Devil, who is a liar and the father of lies. He is the ape in *The Last Battle* who dresses the ass in a lionskin and presents him as Aslan.

If so—if the ruler of the cosmos and the Devil, the father of lies, are one and the same—that conclusion brings us back to the concept of the abyss. Before the resurrection of the two witnesses, the "star fallen from heaven" has the key to the abyss. The star fallen from heaven appears to be a reference to Isaiah 14:12-15:

How you are fallen from heaven  
 O Day Star, son of Dawn!  
 How you are cut down to the ground,  
 you who laid the nations low!  
 You said in your heart,  
 'I will ascend to heaven;  
 above the stars of God  
 I will set my throne on high;  
 I will sit in the mount of assembly in the far north;

<sup>32</sup> John 14:30.

<sup>33</sup> John 16:11.

<sup>34</sup> John 8:44.

I will ascend above the heights of the clouds,  
 I will make myself like the Most High.  
 But you are brought down to Sheol,  
 to the depths of the Pit.

The "star fallen from heaven" is the source of the notion that someone or something could take the place of the Most High. He is the Father of the Big Lie. If so, he is the ruler of the cosmos in the Gospel of John and the angel of the abyss in Revelation 9. He is the dragon, the devil and Satan, the Destroyer. He is the one who is bound for a thousand years so he will deceive the nations no more.

In his Gospel, Saint John tells us that the ruler of the cosmos is cast out but not where he is cast into. We learn in Chapter 20 of the Apocalypse that he is cast into the abyss.

Earlier, we said that the abyss logically is infinite—in Milton's words, "without dimension, where length, breadth, and highth, and time and place are lost[.]" We also said that a sane man, a man with his rational faculties intact, is oriented in time and place; but that is impossible in the abyss. And we said that we determine significance in reference to time and place, nature and history. Now, Satan, as a fallen angel, is not a bodily creature and so does not occupy place in the way that men occupy place; but he is a rational creature with intellect and will and so must desire truth and happiness. He is also a finite creature who must find the point of reference for truth and happiness outside himself. He must orient himself by something. For angels, as for men, no contingent thing can serve as the point of reference for truth and happiness—only God can do that. The Devil, as the father of lies, must be the father of the lie that men and angels can orient themselves in reference to something other than God. He is the ape who has dressed the cosmos and history in the garb of the final end of man, the garb of the *logos* by which man's significance is determined. Having chosen to reject God as the point of reference by which he orients himself; having chosen to find

his significance in reference to something other than God; and having deceived others into doing the same, the logical consequence must be that Satan is left without any point of reference for determining significance. For, in truth and in fact, nothing other than God can be the final end or the point of reference by which a rational creature can determine his significance. These other things—nature and history—pass away. The abyss is the condition or the state in which time and place, nature and history, are lost. The abyss is the nothingness that remains for someone who has rejected God when heaven and earth, the cosmos and all that is in it, have passed away. It is the state of being without any point of reference, where all possibility of orientation, all meaning in life, all significance for existence, are lost. It is the state of ultimate despair. It is the state in which a rational creature has lost the use of his rational faculties, not due to the loss of his rational nature, but due to the loss of the point of contact by which the rational faculty can orient itself.

The Dominican theologian, Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange, has summarized our point: "To wish to get along without God, first Cause and last End, leads to an abyss; not only to nothingness, but also to physical and moral wretchedness that is worse than nothingness."<sup>35</sup>

Chesterton says that "the chief mark and element of insanity . . . is reason used without root, reason in the void. The man who begins to think without the proper first principles goes mad. . . ."<sup>36</sup> This insanity that Chesterton describes—reason without root, reason in the void—is the abyss. It is the fall from first principles, a bottomless fall, with no place to catch one's self, no place to land, and no hope of an end to the fall. The intellect and the will continue to exist in this void,

<sup>35</sup> Rev. R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, vol. I, (B. Herder Book Co.: 1947), 5-6.

<sup>36</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Image Books: 1959), 27. Cf. Romans 1:18-2:5, also a chiasmus.

this abyss; they desire truth and happiness but they cannot obtain them, for they have rejected the source from which truth and happiness flow. If a man or an angel chooses the cosmos or history or anything else other than God as the first principle of the intellectual life or the last end of the practical life, he is ultimately left with nothing. He continues to think, and he continues to seek happiness, but he is without a first principle and without a last end and so can find neither truth nor happiness. "In those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will long to die, and death will fly from them."

Before we close, let me relate to you two brief stories. The first is told by Stephen Hawking on the first page of *A Brief History of Time*:

A well-known scientist (some say it was Bertrand Russell) once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the earth orbits around the sun and how the sun, in turn, orbits around the center of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said: "What you have just said is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise." The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, "What is the tortoise standing on?" "You're very clever, young man, very clever," said the old lady. "But it's turtles all the way down."<sup>37</sup>

Having told this story at the beginning of his book, the great physicist develops, at the end of the book, a theory, based on imaginary numbers and imaginary time, whereby the universe is contingent yet dependent on nothing other than itself.

Lev Shestov relates the following:

The Abbé Boileau tells us of Pascal: "This great intellect always thought that he saw an abyss on his left side, and used to have a chair put there to reassure himself. I have

<sup>37</sup> *A Brief History of Time*, 1.

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this story at first hand. His friends, his confessor, his director, told him in vain that there was nothing to fear, that it was only the terror of an imagination exhausted by abstract and metaphysical studies; he agreed with them in all their arguments, yet a quarter of an hour afterwards he again laid open the abyss which terrified him."<sup>38</sup>

In his *Pensées*, Pascal writes, "We run heedlessly into the abyss after putting something in front of us to stop us seeing it."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Lev Shestov, *In Job's Balances*, transl. Camilla Coventry and C. A. Macartney (Ohio University Press: 1975), 290-91.

<sup>39</sup> Fragment 166.