

God and Time before Creation by Robert Hawes

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the Earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.” – Job 38:4

A question that arises frequently in discussions about God has to do with his eternal existence. It usually goes something like this: “If God has always existed, what was he doing in all that time before he created the universe and the world?”

This is an intriguing question on many levels, and I wish that I could provide a detailed answer to it. Unfortunately, the Bible is virtually silent on the matter.

The only thing we know with any certainty is that the Father and the Son shared a fellowship in which both were glorified. Jesus speaks of this in John 17:5, where he asks the Father to glorify him with the glory “which I had with you before the world was.” The Greek word translated “world” in this passage is *kosmos*. At times, *kosmos* is used in scripture to refer to what we might call “the world of man,” meaning human society at large, such as when the apostle John cautions us against “loving the world” in 1 John 2:15, but it can also refer to the entire created order, as it does in 1 Peter 1:20, where we’re told that Christ was known of the Father “before the foundation of the world.” I believe that this latter meaning is what is intended in John 17:5; Jesus was speaking of the relationship he enjoyed with the Father before creation.

Beyond this relationship between the Father and the Son, scripture tells us very little about what might have occurred in what some have chosen to call “eternity past.”

Certain passages do seem to indicate that angels existed prior to the creation, however. In Job 38:7, God says that when he created the Earth “all the morning stars sang together and the sons of God shouted for joy.” “The sons of God” is a term used elsewhere in scripture for angels (see Job 1:6; 2:1, and, likely, Genesis 6:2-4). Thus we

know that angels definitely existed at least prior to the creation of the Earth. The apostle Paul, writing in Ephesians 3, provides a subtle hint that their creation took place even earlier, however:

“To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which he carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord...” – Ephesians 3:8-11a

If God is demonstrating something to the angels in regard to his eternal purposes, which he is carrying out in Christ (through whom, John tells us, everything was made that has been made), then it would make sense to me that the angels were probably present from the very beginning of the universe, when Christ began to carry out the Father’s “purposes.” This would make them witnesses of the entire creation/redemption process.

Jesus’ reference to “glory” in John 17:5 also lends credence to this interpretation. The word “glory” is translated from the Greek word *doxa*, which in the New Testament always refers to something held in a position of honor. For the Son to be held up in a position of honor with the Father “before the kosmos was” implies that others were present from whom the Son was differentiated and before whom he was exalted.

Therefore, these others must also have existed “before the kosmos was.” Angels are the only other created beings who fit the bill here.

Beyond the question of what may have occurred before the existence of the universe, however, we should be careful in our use of the word ‘time’ in reference to it.

‘Time’ is a measurement of duration, of how long it takes something to happen. You could say that it’s the ‘space between events,’ and these events are defined by processes in the material, physical world around us. Nature is full of ‘clocks’: most

notably, the familiar cycle of day and night, the monthly phases of the Moon, and Earth's 'yearly' orbit around the Sun. All of our artificial clocks are based on these and other natural systems. For instance, atomic clocks—the most precise clocks currently in use—keep time based on the motion of atoms.

There are other, more subtle ways of 'telling time' as well. We tend not to give them any special thought because they are so commonplace and necessary in our conceptual scheme (the way in which we view and relate to our world) that we take them for granted. For instance, if you see an adult with a child, you know that those two people cannot be the same age because of the characteristics of the human aging process. By the same token, if you find a rusted-out car, you know that it wasn't made yesterday. This is because you're familiar with the fact that the processes that reduce a vehicle to that condition 'take time.'

As physical beings, we need 'clocks,' both natural and artificial. They're essential to how we understand and relate to our environment and to one another. This is why dreams can be so disorienting: they give us an illusion of the passage of time, a sense of events taking place, but they happen outside of the clearly-defined boundaries of time that are such a fundamental part of our makeup. In a dream, you may find yourself a child again, you may find yourself shifted from one location to another without any sensation of having traveled, or you may 'experience' things that appear to take place over years, only to wake up and find that you've been asleep for a mere hour or so.

It's important to understand these things because when we ask what God was doing in 'all that time' before he created the universe, we're making a subtle but crucial error in our reasoning: we're extending time, which is based on the composition of the universe, back to a point when the universe did not exist. Before the universe existed, there were no physical processes occurring, and because time is a system of

measurement based on physical processes, if there are no physical processes occurring then there is nothing to measure and therefore no time in any meaningful sense.

For this reason, time—at least ‘time’ as we understand it—did not exist prior to the creation of the universe. There were no days, no weeks, no years, and no ages.

Consequently, to ask what God was doing ‘in all that time’ before he created the universe is to ask a self-contradictory question, as it assumes time before time existed.

It’s rather similar to asking what someone was doing before they were born. Even the statement “God has always existed” makes this mistake. “Always” is a time reference, and there was no time before creation.

When we examine these matters in detail, it’s easy to see how this mistake is made.

Physical time is so fundamental to our reality that we unconsciously impose it on God, but we must remember that God’s nature is fundamentally different than ours.

We are material beings living in a material reality. We are bound by natural law, which includes the passage of time. By contrast, God is an immaterial being, meaning that he is not ‘made’ of anything; this places him outside the confines of nature and, therefore, outside of time. As mentioned previously, it is incorrect to say that God “has always existed.” It is more correct to say that he simply “is,” which, interestingly enough, is how God chose to make himself known to the ancient Hebrews. The Hebrew name for God, Yahweh, is taken from the root word hayah, meaning “to be.”

“God said to Moses, ‘I AM who I AM; and he said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” – Exodus 3:14

“Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I AM.” – John 8:58

In Christian theology, we tend to think of “eternity” as something that is yet to come, such as the “eternal state” spoken of as following the Millennial Kingdom of Christ and the Last Judgment, but the reality is that we already exist in eternity; our material-

based conceptual scheme prevents us from realizing it, however. We speak of “past,” “present,” and “future” as though they are actual, physical locations, when the truth of the matter is that they are merely concepts, and this results in unnecessary confusion. For example, people often say that “We are in the present” in the same way they might say “I am in my house,” but we must realize that there is a great difference between these two ideas: my house is a limited, physical location that I can move in and out of at will, whereas I am continuously in the present. We can never move in the past or the future, as they do not exist beyond the conceptual realm. Five minutes “in the past” is really just what was present five minutes ago, whereas five minutes in the future is what will be present five minutes from now—or you could substitute “days,” “weeks,” “hours,” “years,” “eons,” etc., as you please. The only real difference here lies in how we measure events in relation to one another. “Past” and “future” are a necessary part of our conceptual scheme, but they are only concepts; they are not places that exist now and might be visited (with all due respect to Captain Kirk and others who have traveled there in fictional settings).

So, in a very real sense, while things change, time is arbitrary and only ‘now’ exists.

This then is ‘eternity’: ‘now,’ a perpetual ‘present.’

Again, time is a system of measurement, and to measure something you need at least two points: a beginning and an end. The universe, the world, and each of us—all created things—at one point or another entered (or began to experience) ‘the now,’ if you will; we all have a beginning. The lone exception is God. As an immaterial, uncreated being (“who alone is immortal” – I Timothy 6:16), he had no beginning; thus, there is no way to measure his existence. He is ‘always’ in ‘the now.’ He IS ‘now.’ “I AM that I AM.”

This fact of God’s immaterial, eternal existence represents a conceptual scheme so radically different from ours that it will, in all likelihood, lie forever beyond our comprehension. However much it might tantalize us, our minds and our language are

inadequate to do any more than merely scratch the surface of this profound a mystery. We can no more understand the totality of God's existence than we could fit one hundred gallons of water into a ten-gallon bucket; the necessary capacity simply isn't available.

What then can we say to all of this? How should we react to the fact that God transcends our understanding? We can rebel against it, as some do, and determine that we will not submit to anything we cannot comprehend and judge for ourselves (this was essentially the sin of Eden); or we can humble ourselves, acknowledge his supremacy, and submit to his guidance:

“Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations,

Before the mountains were born

Or you gave birth to the earth and the world,

Even from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.

You turn man back into dust

And say, ‘Return, O children of men.’

For a thousand years in your sight

Are like yesterday when it passes by,

Or as a watch in the night...

So teach us to number our days

That we may present to you a heart of wisdom.” – Psalm 90:1-4, 12

*Scriptures are taken from the [NASB](#)

Robert Hawes is the author of "In Search of God: A Look at Life's Most Essential Question," as well as many articles on various subjects ranging from politics to theology and Christian apologetics. His blog is: <http://takeupyourcross73.blogspot.com>.