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Precreation Discourse and the Nicene Creed: Christianity Finds its Voice in the Roman Empire

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Abstract

Exploring the emergence of creedal statements in Christianity about non-time before creation, called precreation rhetorolect, this essay begins with the baptismal creed called the Roman Symbol and its expansion into the Apostles' Creed. These early creeds contain wisdom, apocalyptic, and priestly rhetorolect, but no precreation rhetorolect. When the twelve statements in the Apostles' Creed were expanded into the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the first three statements added precreation rhetorolect. God the Father Almighty not only creates heaven and earth, but God creates all things visible and invisible. Jesus Christ is not only God's only Son, our Lord, but the Son is begotten from the Father before all time, Light from Light, and true God from true God. Being of the same substance as the Father, all things were made through the Son before he came down from heaven, the Son was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became human. With these creedal additions, a precreation storyline became the context for a lengthy chain of argumentation about belief among fourth century Christian leaders.

Keywords

Precreation, rhetorolect, emergence, creed, Roman Symbol, Apostles' Creed, Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, Nicaea, wisdom, apocalyptic, priestly

1. Introduction

This essay explores early Christian language about non-time before creation, which socio-rhetorical interpreters call precreation rhetorolect.¹ The essay begins with a discussion of the Roman Symbol, which is an early third century

¹ The term rhetorolect, a contraction of "rhetorical dialect," was initially formulated and defined in V. K. Robbins, "The Dialectical Nature of Early Christian Discourse," *Scriptura* 59 (1996) 353–62. Cited 5 September 2011. Online: <http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/dialect/dialect353.html>. In the essay, a rhetorolect is defined as: "a form of language variety or discourse identifiable on the basis of a distinctive configuration of themes, topics, reasonings, and argumentations" (Robbins, "The Dialectical Nature," 356).

baptismal ritual in the form of questions and answers. Next it moves to a discussion of the twelve articles in the well-known Apostles' Creed. The absence of precreation rhetorolect from both the Roman Symbol and the Apostles' Creed sets the stage for analysis and interpretation of the first three articles of the fourth century Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, hereafter called the Nicene Creed.² The first three articles of the Nicene Creed blend precreation rhetorolect into the wisdom and apocalyptic rhetorolect in the first three articles of the Apostles' Creed.³ Discussion of precreation rhetorolect in the Nicene Creed introduces the reader to some of the major implications of precreation rhetorolect in early Christian discourse. The essay does not contain a detailed discussion of the first century Christian precreation story-line in the New Testament. Also, there is no analysis and interpretation of the overall effects of the blending of precreation rhetorolect with wisdom, prophetic, apocalyptic, priestly, and miracle rhetorolect in early Christian discourse.⁴ Rather, the focus is on the wisdom, apocalyptic, and priestly rhetorolect in the Roman Symbol and the Apostles' Creed and the effect of the wording in the first three articles of the Nicene Creed that blends precreation rhetorolect into the earlier creedal assertions. The overall goal is to introduce terminology and frames of meaning that can play a positive role in discussions and debates about the remarkable role of language about an eternal non-time before creation in early Christian discourse.

2. Wisdom, Apocalyptic, and Priestly Rhetorolect in the Roman Symbol

A major result of the discussions and debates about “orthodox” beliefs in the context of the Church Councils at Nicaea (325 c.e.) and Constantinople (381 c.e.) was the formulation of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. This creed expanded the twelve articles of the Apostles' Creed (see Appendix 1), which in turn developed out of the early third century Roman baptismal creed regularly

² J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans, 1952) 344–67; cf. L. T. Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 32–38.

³ For conceptual blending of rhetorolects in first century Christian discourse, see V. K. Robbins, “Conceptual Blending and Early Christian Imagination,” in *Explaining Christian Origins and Early Judaism: Contributions from Cognitive and Social Science* (ed. P. Luomanen, I. Pyysiäinen, and R. Uro; BibIntSeries 89; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 161–95. Cited 5 September 2011. Online: <http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/Pdfs/BlendingFinland2007.pdf>. Also see V. K. Robbins, “Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament* (ed. D. E. Aune West Sussex: Blackwell, 2010), 192–219.

⁴ These will be central topics in V. K. Robbins, *The Invention of Christian Discourse*, vol. 2 (Blandford Forum: Deo Publishing, forthcoming).

called the Roman Symbol.⁵ Many of the statements in the Apostles' Creed have a close relation to creedal statements in the New Testament.⁶ The creed itself, however, appears to have developed out of a tradition of asking questions about the Trinity in the context of baptism. Hippolytus presented the baptismal tradition of the Roman Symbol (ca. 210 c.e.) as follows:

Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?
 – I believe.
 Do you believe in Christ Jesus, Son of God,
 who was born of Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
 who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died [and was buried]
 and rose the third day living from the dead,
 ascended into the heavens,
 and sat down at the right hand of the Father
 and will come to judge the living and the dead?
 – I believe.
 Do you believe in the Holy Spirit,
 and (or: in) the Holy Church,
 and the resurrection of the flesh?
 – I believe.⁷

The question and answer form of this exchange created a special kind of wisdom rhetorlect in early Christianity. The socially experienced basis for wisdom rhetorlect is a blending of God's heaven and earth with "family household," which is the place where God's wisdom is taught to children on earth, and with "people's bodies," so these bodies are able to go forth and multiply "the fruit" of goodness and righteousness in the world.⁸ The opening of the Roman Symbol introduces God as the Father Almighty, a title and description that implies God's all-powerful status as the head of a household, a Father who provides nurture, food, and wisdom to "children" whose task is to become productive of "good" like God produced in a "good" creation (Gen 1).

The middle of the Roman Symbol introduces a story-line where Jesus functions as the Son of God the Father and the Virgin Mary is Jesus' mother through the intervention of the Holy Spirit. A primary focus of this Christian wisdom rhetorlect is on a story-line about Jesus' birth, crucifixion, burial, resurrection, ascension, and coming in the future. When the story-line refers

⁵ P. Smulders, "Some Riddles in the Apostles' Creed," *Bijdr* 31 (1970): 240–250; L. H. Westra, *The Apostles' Creed: Origin, History, and Some Early Commentaries* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002).

⁶ See Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 1–29.

⁷ Smulders, "Some Riddles," 242; for a recent discussion see Westra, *The Apostle's Creed*, 21–72.

⁸ Robbins, "Conceptual Blending and Early Christian Imagination," 166–68 and V. K. Robbins, *The Invention of Christian Discourse* (Blandford Forum: Deo, 2009), 1:121–218.

to Jesus' resurrection, ascension, and coming in the future, it blends apocalyptic rhetorlect into the overall framework of the wisdom rhetorlect. The presence of apocalyptic rhetorlect calls special attention to the term "Almighty" in the opening. Apocalyptic rhetorlect raises the power of both the Father and the Son cognitively to the status of a cosmic emperor and his son. In apocalyptic rhetorlect, God has the status of emperor Father Almighty (Greek: παντοκράτωρ; Latin: *omnipotens*), which is a status higher than the prophetic concept of God as cosmic King over an earthly kingdom. God's imperial status is supported by legions of beings who function like the military network and army of the Roman emperor. In the context of the imperial power of God in Christian apocalyptic rhetorlect, Jesus has the status of the emperor's only Son. This Son was transformed into a being who could rise up from the dead, ascend into heaven, sit at the right hand of emperor God, and receive the designated power from God's right hand to come in the future to judge both those who are alive and those who have already died.⁹ One of the issues in apocalyptic rhetorlect, then, is the transformation of earthly bodies into heavenly bodies, where they receive special forms and perhaps special powers. The beginning and middle of the Roman Symbol introduce a cosmic family household headed by God as its *paterfamilias* and populated by God's authoritative Son Christ Jesus, Mary the mother of Jesus, and believers who openly state their belief in the story-line about Christ Jesus.

The end of the Roman Symbol introduces priestly rhetorlect as it focuses on the holiness of the Father's household. Through repetition of the word "Holy," the questioner links the birth of Jesus through the Holy Spirit with the role of the Holy Spirit in God's holy household, the Church. Then the final statement in the question blends wisdom and priestly rhetorlect with apocalyptic rhetorlect about transformation of people's bodies through resurrection of the dead. People "called out" (Greek: ἐκκλησία; Latin: *ecclesia*) to openly state their belief in the story-line and its implications, namely the Holy Church of God the Father Almighty, live in the apocalyptic promise of transformation through resurrection, which is grounded in Christ Jesus' rising up from the dead on the third day.

⁹ Robbins, "Conceptual Blending and Early Christian Imagination," 166–72, 178–79 and Robbins, *The Invention of Christian Discourse*, 1: 219–482. For the nature of Christian apocalyptic rhetorlect as a blend of worldly and radical rhetoric, see V. K. Robbins, "Rhetography: A New Way of Seeing the Familiar Text," in *Words Well Spoken: George Kennedy's Rhetoric of the New Testament* (ed. C. C. Black and D. F. Watson; Waco: Baylor University, 2008), 81–106.

3. Wisdom, Apocalyptic, and Priestly Rhetorolect in the Apostles' Creed

By the end of the fourth century, a tradition had emerged that each of the apostles had contributed a clause to a “Symbol of the Apostles” before they separated from each other for their special missionary work.¹⁰ This “Symbol” became known as the “Apostles' Creed” and was regularly perceived to contain twelve “articles” of faith:¹¹

- (1) I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth;
- (2) and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,
- (3) who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born from the Virgin Mary,
- (4) suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, [descended into hell],
- (5) on the third day he rose again from the dead,
- (6) and ascended to heaven,
- (7) and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
- (8) from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.
- (9) I believe in the Holy Spirit,
- (10) the holy catholic church, the communion of saints,
- (11) the forgiveness of sins,
- (12) the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.¹²

In the Apostles' Creed, the question and answer form of wisdom rhetorolect is reconfigured into the affirmative statement form of early Christian creedal rhetorolect. In accord with the underlying premise of wisdom rhetorolect, article one adds to the statement in the Roman Symbol that God is “creator of heaven and earth.” In addition, article one and seven repeat the description “Almighty” (Latin: *omnipotens*), for God the Father, producing an emphasis on the imperial status of God both in the beginning and the middle.¹³ Then article twelve ends with “everlasting” (*aeterna*), which emphasizes the ability of the power of imperial God, his imperial Son, and the Holy Spirit to sustain life into eternal non-time in the future. Beyond this, article two refers to Jesus Christ, His only Son, as “our Lord,” which is an internal part of Christian apocalyptic rhetorolect where Jesus functions as King of Kings and Lord of Lords (cf. Rev 1:5; 17:14; 19:16) in the context of God as the imperial Father Almighty.¹⁴

¹⁰ For the account in Rufinus (d. 410), see J. N. D. Kelly, *Rufinus: A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed* (London: Longmans, Green, 1955), 29–30.

¹¹ See Westra, *The Apostles' Creed*, 11–12.

¹² According to the contents of the twelve articles, Westra, *The Apostles' Creed*, 12.

¹³ For the Latin, see Westra, *The Apostles' Creed*, 21–22.

¹⁴ Cf. Rev 1: 8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22.

In the reconfiguration of the Apostles' Creed from the question and answer form of wisdom rhetorolect to the assertion form of Christian creedal rhetorolect, the overall sequence acquires an argumentative structure that was not present in the Roman Symbol. Through repetition of "I believe" in articles one and nine, the Apostles' creed creates an inductive enthymematic sequence, namely an extensive rhetorical syllogism where an overall story-line presents Cases from which Rules can be deduced in the conclusion.¹⁵ In contrast to the opening and middle of the Roman Symbol, which separate belief in God the Father Almighty from belief in Christ Jesus the Son of God, articles one through eight in the Apostles' Creed present belief in an overall story-line from God's creation of the heaven and earth to Jesus Christ's coming to judge the living and the dead. When article nine introduces "I believe" after the story-line, it implies an enthymematic sequence: (a) since I believe in the story-line from creation to Jesus Christ's coming in the future; (b) therefore I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Belief in the Holy Spirit is implied by belief in the conception of Jesus through the special role of the Holy Spirit (article 3). Belief in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, and the forgiveness of sins is implied by the blending of wisdom rhetorolect that underlies the family structure of the Fatherhood of God, Sonship of Jesus Christ, and Motherhood of the Virgin Mary (articles 1–3) with the priestly rhetorolect that establishes the holiness of the people called out by God from everywhere to gather together in communion with one another, receiving forgiveness of their sins in the context of their holy activities.

4. Precreation Rhetorolect in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

The Nicene Creed blended Christian precreation rhetorolect into the first three articles of the Apostles' Creed. The socially experienced basis for Christian precreation rhetorolect is a blending of God's created world with the emperor's household rather than with the military power of the emperor,

¹⁵ V. K. Robbins, "From Enthymeme to Theology in Luke 11:1–13," in *Literary Studies in Luke-Acts: A Collection of Essays in Honor of Joseph B. Tyson* (Macon, GA: Mercer University, 1998), 197–201 [191–214]. Cited 5 September 2011. Online: <http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/Theology/theology191.html>; and V. K. Robbins, "Enthymeme and Picture in the Gospel of Thomas," in *Thomasine Traditions in Antiquity: The Social and Cultural World of the Gospel of Thomas* (ed. J. M. Asgeirsson, A. D. DeConick and R. Uro, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 59; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 181 [175–207]. Cited on 5 September 2011. Online: <http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/SRS/vkr/ThomasPicEnth.pdf>.

which is a special characteristic of Christian apocalyptic rhetoric. The emphasis in Christian precreation rhetoric is on benefactions that come from the emperor's household to the emperor's empire, which contains many peoples, nations, kingdoms, households, rulers, kings, lords, and servants. In precreation rhetoric, the emperor's household is eternal, existing in non-time before creation and continuing always in non-time. A special characteristic of this household is the intimate relation between the emperor Father and his only Son, which is understood as "love" (*ἀγάπη*). Because the emphasis is "non-temporal" in precreation rhetoric, there is an emphasis on things becoming manifest (*φανερόω*), rather than things being revealed (*ἀποκαλύπτω*) at a particular time.

The non-temporality of Christian precreation rhetoric makes it especially difficult to discuss, since humans perceive most things in temporal sequences. Indeed, one of the special characteristics of Christian precreation rhetoric is the way it creates a story-line for non-temporal "manifestations" of God's benefactions in the context of the temporal events of creation and history. In the Christian precreation story-line, first the Father begets the Son; second the Father creates the world through this Son; third the Father sends the Son into the world as light to save the world; fourth the Son glorifies the Father by doing what he sees his Father doing both before and after the world is made; fifth those people who believe the Son, becoming friends with the Son, gain access through friendship into the emperor Father's eternal household; sixth the Father took the Son back up into his eternal household. Because certain "episodes" in particular in the story-line cannot be appropriately considered events, since they occur in a realm of eternal non-time, it will be necessarily to discuss them in some detail below.

5. The First Article in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

Through a reference to things invisible, article one in the Nicene Creed subtly blends precreation rhetoric into article one in the Apostles' Creed. A comparison of article one in both creeds looks as follows:

Apostles' Creed

(1) I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

(1) We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

A person immediately notices the English translation of the Greek *πιστεύω* and Latin *credo* in the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed as "I believe" in the Apostles' Creed and "we believe" in the Nicene Creed. This is an effect of

the priestly rhetorlect that appears in “for us men and our salvation” in article three and “crucified for us” in article four of the Nicene Creed (see Appendix 1). The references to “us” refer to God’s holy household, gathered together for communion with one another and forgiveness. In addition, a person notices the emphasis on “one God,” which is followed by an emphasis on “one Lord Jesus Christ” in article two. The emphasis on unity is an issue in fourth century Christianity that we cannot pursue here.¹⁶ In the midst of these issues, our special interest concerns the precreation rhetorlect in the opening of the Nicene Creed.

Since precreation rhetorlect is, first and foremost, an expansion of wisdom rhetorlect, the preferred names for God and Jesus in precreation rhetorlect are Father and Son. Both terms, however, signify imperial status in precreation rhetorlect, just as they do in apocalyptic rhetorlect. But now let us look more deeply into resources for discourse about visible and invisible in article one in the Nicene Creed.

Genesis 1–3 in the Hebrew Bible only shows God creating the visible universe. This visible universe is the basis for wisdom tradition that uses analogies based on the regular activities of created things like birds, fruit bearing trees, stars, the rain, and the seasons.¹⁷ Wisdom tradition, then, begins with the presupposition that it is possible to understand the nature of God and God’s world on the basis of what is visible. Genesis 1–3, which shows God’s creation of the visible world, stands conceptually at the beginning of wisdom tradition.

The book of Job in the Hebrew Bible dramatically reveals the limits of wisdom tradition. The issue becomes what is visible, and what is invisible, about God. Are there things about God that humans cannot see? The question becomes whether or not humans can see that which is invisible. The answer begins to emerge that humans, using wisdom which is in their minds, are able to create images of things that are invisible. Wisdom, then, is the agency that creates visible things out of invisible things. The question becomes, “What is wisdom that it is able to make invisible things visible.” Job states the problem forthrightly in Job 27:

Job again took up his discourse and said. . .²⁰ “Where then does wisdom come from? And where is the place of understanding? ²¹It is hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air. ²²Abaddon and Death say, ‘We have heard a rumor of it with our ears.’ ²³God understands the way to it, and he knows its place. ²⁴For he looks to the ends of the earth,

¹⁶ See L. Ayres, “On the Contours of Mystery,” in *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (ed. L. Ayres; Oxford: University Press, 2004) 273–301.

¹⁷ Robbins, *Invention of Christian Discourse*, 1: 121–218.

and sees everything under the heavens. ²⁵When he gave to the wind its weight, and apportioned out the waters by measure; ²⁶when he made a decree for the rain, and a way for the thunderbolt; ²⁷then he saw it and declared it; he established it, and searched it out.” (Job 27:1; 28:20–27)

Wisdom is “hidden from the eyes of all the living, and concealed from the birds of the air” (27:21). God, however, understands it and knows it, because God “looks” and “sees everything” (27:24). God makes invisible things visible by “understanding” invisible things. In other words, God is able to make invisible things visible to God’s self by seeing them with “the eyes of God’s wisdom.”

Biblical interpreters are accustomed to approaching precreation wisdom from Proverbs 8, where Wisdom says she was the first thing God created. Proverbs 8 does not wrestle with the issue of God’s creation of the invisible. We are accustomed, however, to the remarkable nature of wisdom as described in Wisdom of Solomon 7:22–24:

²²For in her there is a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, ²³beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent and pure and most subtle. ²⁴For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.

In all of this, wisdom is invisible, right? The next verses go on to say that she is “a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty” (7:25), a “reflection of eternal light,” and “an image of his goodness” (7:26). A pure emanation, a reflection, and an image surely are visible light on the margins of invisible light. Also, she is a spirit (7:22) and “the breath of power of God” (7:25). Spirit and breath are surely on the margins of visible and invisible air, water vapor, and wind. People sometimes see spirits, breath is visible in a cool atmosphere, and the effect of wind is visible when it is pushing clouds, fog, rain, or anything else. It appears, then, that Wisdom moves from being invisible to being visible when it takes the form of light or spirit/breath/fog/mist. But what is the specifically “Christian” view of this movement from invisibility to visibility in the Nicene Creed? This is the subject of article two in the Nicene Creed, so let us proceed to the next article.

6. The Second Article in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

Article two in the Nicene Creed adds an assertion that the “one Lord Jesus Christ” was begotten from the Father “before all time.” With the addition of

this “begetting” prior to the event of creation of the world, the Nicene Creed decisively blends precreation rhetorolect into its creedal rhetorolect.

Apostles’ Creed

(2) and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord.

Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

(2) and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten from the Father before all time, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten not made, of the same substance as the Father, through whom all things were made.

The special question for us is how the authors of the Nicene Creed conceptualized the “begetting” of the Son of God the Father. Article two asserts that the one Lord Jesus Christ was begotten “Light from Light, True God from True God.” It also asserts that He was “begotten not made, of the same substance as the Father, through whom all things were made.”

Perhaps the most surprising assertion in the second article of the Nicene Creed for a reader of the New Testament is that all things were made through the Father. The deuteropauline letter to the Colossians asserts that “in him [God’s beloved Son] all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible . . . all things have been created through him and for him” (Col 1:16). In this Christ hymn, all things were created in, through, and for God’s beloved Son.¹⁸ Also, John 1:3 asserts that “all things came into being through him [the Word], and without him not one thing came into being.” Debates about the division of John 1:3–4 played a significant role in Arian interpretation and the response in the Nicene Creed. The issue was whether Jesus always had the same substance as the Father or changed at a point where “life” entered into him.¹⁹ One can readily see how the phrase “True God from true God” could be perceived to accurately represent “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Scholars regularly see various passages in the writings of Philo of Alexandria²⁰ and the Dead Sea Scrolls as explaining the context for the development of the concept in early Christianity that wisdom/Christ could be “light from light.”²¹ In the context of the current essay, special interest lies in the relation of Christ as light to God’s creation of all things visible and invisible.

¹⁸ E. Lohse, *Colossians* (trans. W. R. Poehlmann and R. J. Karris; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 49–52; D. M. Hay, *Colossians* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 55–58.

¹⁹ R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (i–xii)* (AB 29; Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), 6–7, 25–27.

²⁰ P. Borgen, *Logos Was the True Light and other Essays on the Gospel of John* (Trondheim: Tapir, 1983), 15.

²¹ D. M. Smith, *John* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 49–54.

There is no biblical text to my knowledge that brings together the concept of God's creation of light from light and God's creation of visible things out of invisible things. But *2 Enoch*, a Slavonic apocalypse perhaps written toward the end of the first century C.E., or perhaps written during the second, third, or fourth century,²² features God telling Enoch how he created visible things out of things that were invisible. First God explains that everything was invisible and God simply moved around in them in his own invisibility. As God says:

²Enoch, beloved, all that you see, all things that are standing still or moving about were brought to completion by me. And I myself will explain it to you. Before anything existed at all, from the very beginning, whatever exists I created from non-being into being, and from the invisible into the visible. ³And not even to my angels have I explained my secrets, nor related to them their composition, nor my endless and inconceivable creation which I conceived. ⁴For before any visible things had come into existence, I, the ONE, moved around in the invisible things, like the sun, from east to west and from west to east. ⁵But the sun has rest in himself; yet I did not find rest, because everything was not yet created. And I conceived the thought [wisdom] of establishing a foundation, to create a visible creation. (*2 En.* 24:2–5)

In the context where God explains to Enoch the nature of invisible things in which God existed prior to the time when God began to create, the sun contrasts with God, because “the sun has rest in himself.” God, in contrast to the sun, moves around in the invisible things without finding rest. To find rest, God created visible things out of invisible things in the following way:

¹I commanded the lowest things: “Let one of the invisible things descend visibly!” And Adoil descended, extremely large. And I looked at him, and behold, in his belly he had a great light. ²And I said to him, “Disintegrate yourself, Adoil, and let what is born from you become visible.” ³And he disintegrated himself, and there came out a very great light. And I was in the midst of the great light. And light out of light is carried thus. And the great age came out, and it revealed all the creation which I had thought up to create. ⁴And I saw that it was good. (*2 En.* 25:1–4)

One very interesting thing is higher and lower space in the realm of invisible things! God created the visible by having an invisible phenomenon that contained light in itself descend and disintegrate into a very great light. Light came out of light, *2 Enoch* explains, through a downward movement that God commanded. Once light had come out of light in this downward movement, “the great age came out, and it revealed all the creation which I had thought up to create” (25:3). The emphasis on what God “thought up to create” signals

²² OTP 1: 94–95.

the foundational role of wisdom as the source of God's creation of all things. God made all visible things through wisdom that commanded a downward movement of light from invisible presence to visible existence.

The Christian view of God's creation of all things visible and invisible through wisdom and light involves the concept that God's wisdom is Christ. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Paul asserts that Christ is God's "wisdom before the ages" (1 Cor 2:7). According to the Nicene Creed, God created all things visible and invisible (art. 1) in a context where God "begot" one Lord Jesus Christ (art. 2). The emphasis on God as both the creator of all things and the one who "begot" Jesus Christ lies in highly nuanced and detailed debates among fourth century Christians, who faced challenges of thought about creation both from Gnostic conceptuality which separated the creator God from the Unknown God, and from emphases by Arians that emphasized the difference in nature between God the Father and God the Son.²³ God made all things visible and invisible through God's wisdom, which, as Christ, is of the same substance as God the Father and is part of the unity of God. The details of these debates and disagreements lie in the relation of the realm of precreation to the realm that God created.

7. The Third Article in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

The next topic in the Nicene Creed explains how people gained the ability to see "the substance of the Father." The answer lies in the downward movement of the one Lord Jesus Christ into the created realm where things are visible to humans. This happened as stated in the third article of the Nicene Creed:

Apostles' Creed

(3) who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born from the Virgin Mary.

Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

(3) who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became human.

According to article three in the Nicene Creed, the invisible Christ, who existed in the same substance as the Father, "came down from heaven," became "flesh," and "became human." In this fleshly form the substance of the Father was "visible" to humans and could become the basis for a "new wisdom" based on the visible. Now that which is visible can be a means for humans to "see" the invisible with their minds. What was visible now was not simply the visible universe, or God as lightning, thunder, cloud, or pillar of cloud and fire.

²³ Cf. Ayres, *The Legacy of Nicaea*, 312–24.

Rather, the image of God had become human. In other words, the image of God, out of which visible males and female had been created in Gen 1:26–27, actually itself became human in a “new Adam” who “came down from heaven, was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became human.”

The expansion of articles one through three in the Nicene Creed creates a lengthy chain of reasoning based on an extension of the Hebrew Bible storyline back into a realm of non-time before precreation. First, if Jesus was begotten before all time, his “begetting” had to be a “manifestation” of God rather than an event, because the realm of non-time had no “events.” In other words, Jesus was not part of creation, which unfolded in a series of events. Jesus was “begotten before time” as a part of the unity of God before creation occurred. Second, if Jesus was begotten before all time, His innermost nature is invisible rather than visible, because nothing was visible in the non-time realm before precreation. If Jesus would have been begotten after time began, he could, of course, possess both an invisible and visible nature. But if Jesus existed before time, His existence would have been invisible, since nothing visible existed until “at the beginning” when time began (Gen 1:1). Third, Jesus’ “begotten” nature is “in the image of the invisible God.” The “created” nature of humans is somewhat different. “Created in the image of God” (Gen 1:26–27), humans were visible from the moment they came into being. In contrast, Jesus was not visible until he became human. Fourth, Jesus came into the realm of the created world in a different way than humans, because Jesus is “of the same substance of the Father.” Humans exist in a created substance that is “in the image of God” rather than “of the same substance of the Father.” Fifth, if the Son is of the same substance as the Father, then the Son is “True God from True God.” Sixth, if the Son is true God from true God, then the Son participates fully in the Father’s creation of all things that were made. This creates an ironic relation to New Testament passages that emphasize that all things were created in, through, and for God’s beloved Son. If God’s Son is thoroughly unified with God, however, God’s creation of all things in, through, and for God’s beloved Son is simply a way to further clarify the nature of all things that were created. Seventh, if all things were made through the Son and the first thing God made was light (Gen 1:3), then it could be reasonable to think that the Son was invisible “Light from Light” before the time when “created light” was “made visible” in the world that was created.

When Christians added an “era” of non-time before the biblical creation story in Genesis, a lengthy chain of argumentation gradually seemed appropriate (might one say “reasonable”?) for belief. In other words, the addition of a precreation “non-time era” introduced a dynamic mode of elaboration of additional belief arguments. In the context of the additions, the presence of invisible things before the creation of time supports belief in God’s begetting

of his beloved Son as an invisible being with the same substance as the Father before creation. God's begetting of his Son would not be an event, because no events would occur prior to the beginning of time. There was, therefore, some kind of "timeless begetting manifestation," an eternal generation of the Son, prior to the event of creation. Humans, of course, cannot think of "manifestation" outside of time. But surely, one can reason, the limited nature of human wisdom should not be allowed to limit the nature of God's wisdom. God's inner nature surely could have "timeless manifestation" within itself, namely "eternal generations" outside of time. This reasoning is grounded in a story-line that contains an era of non-time before creation. This story-line is the basis for a more elaborated form of belief argumentation than exists in the Apostles' Creed. Articles one through three of the Nicene Creed set forth the expanded story-line and the chain of argumentation certain fourth century Christian leaders believed to be embedded in it.²⁴

8. Conclusion

Comparison of the first three articles in the Apostles' Creed with the first three articles in the Nicene Creed has helped us see the role of Christian precreation rhetorolect in arguments about the nature of God and Christ during the fourth century. For the issues under consideration in this essay, the addition of the phrase "all things visible and invisible" in article one of the Nicene Creed was highly important. The Apostles' Creed asserts simply that God made heaven and earth. When the Nicene Creed expands the statement to include God's creation of both visible and invisible things, it raises the issue of an eternal, invisible realm of non-time that existed before God created the world. Beyond the Hebrew Bible account of creation, then, article one of the Nicene Creed implies the presence of an eternal invisible realm that existed prior to God's creation of heaven and earth.

The expansion of article one in the Nicene Creed established a context for expansion of article two beyond the statement in the Apostles' Creed about "Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord." The expansion of article two addresses all kinds of issues concerning a precreation non-time realm when it confesses

²⁴ Article nine in the Nicene Creed, which concerns the Holy Spirit, raised debates about the procession of the Holy Spirit directly from the Father, or from the Father and the Son (Latin: *filioque*). Since these debates emerged out of decisions that were made about the wording of articles one through three in the Nicene Creed, rather than debates that contributed directly to the wording in those introductory articles, it has not been considered essential to discuss in this essay. For some basic insight into current discussion of the issues, see Ayres, *The Legacy of Nicaea*, 209–21.

belief in “the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all time, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten not made, of the same substance as the Father, through whom all things were made.” Article two of the Nicene Creed was related to Col 1:15–16: “He [God’s beloved Son] is the image (εἰκόν) of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things in the heavens and on earth were created, things visible and invisible.” But many more issues were at stake, including a belief in the downward movement of manifestations of God’s almighty power, which finally resulted in God’s Son coming down to earth in human form, as the Nicene Creed states in article three.

Exploring statements in articles one through three in the Nicene Creed that are not in articles one through three in the Apostles’ Creed has led, then, to some basic insights into the role of precreation rhetorlect in fourth century Christian discourse. Expansions of belief statements that added an additional era to the biblical story-line, namely a precreation era that was invisible and outside the realm of time, established a context for significantly elaborated belief argumentation about the nature of God and Christ. God’s creation of invisible as well as visible things, linked with God’s creation of light out of light, introduced reasoning patterns that could inform the nature of Christ’s movement from God’s invisible realm down to the realm of visible things God created in heaven and on earth.

Precreation rhetorlect has been a major resource for Christian reasoning, argumentation, debate, and belief over many centuries. A major effect of precreation rhetorlect is to move Christian discourse into philosophical issues. Many of these issues have been central as Christianity has spread throughout many cultures during many centuries. Some of the issues central to precreation rhetorlect have surfaced in our discussion of the fourth century creedal rhetorlect that emerged in the context of the Church Councils in Nicaea (325 C.E.) and Constantinople (381 C.E.). For some Christians, these issues are still important for Christian belief today. For other Christians, these issues may be less important than issues that come from wisdom, prophetic, apocalyptic, priestly, or miracle rhetorlect. The possibility that other issues can be more important for some Christians than the philosophical issues raised by precreation rhetorlect exhibits how complex Christian discourse has been throughout the centuries and still is today. The goal of the discussion of precreation rhetorlect in the Nicene Creed in this essay has been to point to some issues within Christian discourse that may be important for some Christians still today. For those with less philosophical orientation, perhaps wisdom, prophetic, apocalyptic, priestly, or miracle rhetorlect may be of more importance.

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Appendix 1: Apostles' and Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creeds

Apostles' Creed

(1) I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth;

(2) and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,

(3) who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born from the Virgin Mary,

(4) suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, [descended into hell],

(5) on the third day he rose again from the dead,

(6) and ascended to heaven

(7) and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;

(8) from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

(9) I believe in the Holy Spirit,

(10) the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints,

(11) the forgiveness of sins,

(12) the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

(1) We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible;

(2) and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten from the Father before all time, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten not made, of the same substance as the Father, through whom all things were made;

(3) who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became human.

(4) He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried,

(5) and rose on the third day, according to the scriptures,

(6) and ascended to heaven,

(7) and sits on the right hand of the Father,

(8) and will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead. His kingdom shall have no end.

(9) and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who together with the Father and Son is worshiped and glorified, who spoke through the prophets;

(10) and in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

(11) We confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

(12) We look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.