

ANCIENT LIGHTS AND THE NEW HUMANITY: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF STARS

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Introduction

What is the significance of stars in Scripture? Even a cursory reading of the Bible shows that stars are rarely an end in themselves. Stars typically point to something other than themselves. Stars bear a rich (and present) testimony to God’s power in creation, but they also carry a weighty literary symbolism in the hands of the biblical authors.

The thesis of this paper is that stars appear in Scripture as “creative” testimony with a New Creation trajectory.¹ The case for this thesis comes in two movements: first, an explanation of the term “‘creative’ testimony” followed by a survey of the two main literary uses of stars in Scripture. Second, a section tracing a New Creation trajectory through the storyline of Scripture—from the creation account of Genesis 1 to the decisive prophetic vision of Revelation 22. This trajectory includes the original creation couple Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah and the Patriarchs, the children of Israel, Jesus the Messiah, and the new covenant children of God—the Church— comprised of believing Jews and Gentiles.

A Constellation of “Creative” Testimony

The term “creative testimony” is an attempt to synthesize the two main senses in which stars appear in Scripture. Put succinctly, Scripture mentions stars in a *straightforward* way, and in a *symbolic* way. To define these two categories further: first, Scripture mentions stars as straightforward testimony to God’s creative power. Second, stars are often personified as people, and stand as symbols for the covenant people of God. The following survey of the occurrences of stars in Scripture serve to demonstrate these two categories.²

Stars as straightforward testimony to God’s creative power

The creation account of Genesis 1 attributes the existence of stars to God’s creative word. God commands “lights” to be in the heavens, and the command results in the existence of “the two

¹ The term “New Creation” is interchangeable with the term “eschatological.” I also use the term “new humanity” in the title and body of this paper within either broad sense of “New Creation” or “eschatological” humanity as summed up in Christ.

² The primary Hebrew word for this study is כוכב, which is found thirty-seven times in the OT. The primary Greek words for this study are ἀστήρ (found twenty-four times in the NT and thirty-one times in the LXX) and ἄστρον (found four times in the NT and thirty-eight times in the LXX). This paper deals with many of the occurrences of these words as found in the Hebrew OT and the Greek NT, as well as additional relevant references.

great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars” (Gen 1:16).³

Moses later acknowledges—at least implicitly—the creative power of God when he warns Israel against idolatry. He charges them not to make a “carved image” in the likeness of anything that flies in the skies or walks on the ground or swims in the seas (Deut 4:16–18). Moses further prohibits Israel from lifting their eyes to heaven, looking at “the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven” and worshipping them (Deut 4:19). The stars in their splendor were such that they could tempt Israel—like the surrounding nations—to worship them.⁴

Taking up themes from Genesis 1, David marvels in Psalm 8:3: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man, that you care for him?”

The psalmist leading the antiphonal song of Psalm 136 also alludes to Genesis 1:16 in verses 7–9: “to him who made the great lights, for his steadfast love endures forever, the sun to rule over the day, for his steadfast love endures forever, the moon and stars to rule over the night, for his steadfast love endures forever.”

After his famous prophecy of the new covenant, the prophet Jeremiah invokes the word of Yahweh, the God “who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night” as assurance that “the offspring of Israel” will continue as a nation before him forever (Jer 31:35–37).⁵

Certainly, more can be said for this category, but these examples suffice to establish the first sense in which stars appear in Scripture. In each of the above examples, stars straightforwardly testify to God’s creative power. Having established this first sense, most of the remainder of this paper relates to the second and symbolic sense of stars in Scripture.

³ (ESV). Part of the function of the sun, moon, and stars is to be regular temporal markers “for seasons, and for days and years” (Gen 1:14). This function explains the brief mention of stars in Nehemiah 4:21 (“from the break of dawn until the stars came out”) and Acts 27:20 (“neither sun nor stars appeared for many days”).

⁴ The rest of Scripture shows that Israel does not heed Moses’s words. The prophet Amos condemns Israel for worshipping stars, or images resembling stars, even while in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land (Amos 5:26; cf. Acts 7:37–43; 2 Kings 17:16; 21:3, 5; 23:4–5). Isaiah also confronts Israel for inquiring of stars instead of Yahweh the Creator and Redeemer (Isa 47:13).

⁵ This section surveys what could be termed the “positive” creative testimony to God’s power. But there is a “negative” side, a dark side to God’s power, where God’s power or judgment on nations and individuals is imaginatively portrayed as “de-creating” the stars. This negative side appears in the judgment oracles on the nation of Babylon (“the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light”) in Isaiah 13:10; and on the southern kingdom of Judah (“The earth quakes before them; the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.”) in Joel 2:10; 3:15. With reference to judgment on individuals, this negative side occurs in Job’s lament over the day of his birth (“Let the stars of its dawn be dark; let it hope for light, but have none, nor see the eyelids of the morning”) in Job 3:9; Job’s confession that no one can harden themselves against God and survive (because he “commands the sun, and it does not rise; who seals up the stars”) in Job 9:7; Eliphaz’s rebuke of Job (“Is not God high in the heavens? See the highest stars, how lofty they are! But you say, ‘What does God know? Can he judge through the deep darkness?’”) in Job 22:12–13; the Preacher’s admonition to remember the Creator “before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain” (Ecc 12:2); and Ezekiel’s oracle against Pharaoh, king of Egypt (“When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light”) in Ezekiel 32:7.

Alluding to several of the passages above, Jesus uses the same kind of “de-creative” imagery to describe the circumstances accompanying his appearance (Matt 24:29–31; Mark 13:24–27; Luke 21:25–28; See R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* [NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007] 921–923).

Stars as symbolic testimony for God's people

Stars stand as a symbol in the hand of the biblical authors. This symbolism of stars has two dimensions. First, stars are personified as people. Second, and to a greater extent, people are described as stars, both individually and corporately. The following sections will briefly address and illustrate these two dimensions.

The personification of stars appears mainly in the OT Wisdom literature.⁶ Bildad the Shuhite applies personal characteristics to stars in Job 25:5 (“the moon is not bright, and the stars are not pure in his eyes”) in order to highlight God’s holiness. When Yahweh climactically responds to Job out of a whirlwind, he charges Job to reveal “Who determined [the earth’s] measurements... when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy” (Job 38:5, 7). There are clear allusions to Genesis 1, and it would seem here that personal characteristics are again applied to the stars, even from the moment of creation. Similarly, the psalmist applies personal characteristics to stars when he commands, “Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars!” in Psalm 148:3.

On the one hand, stars are personified as people. On the other hand, people are individually and corporately symbolized as stars. Probably the most important text in this regard—and perhaps the clearest—is Genesis 15:5. Yahweh appears to Abram in a vision, and Abram asks God how his promises would be fulfilled since Abram had no son to carry on the inheritance. Yahweh’s response is to bring Abram outside and say to him “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then Yahweh climactically promises, “So shall your offspring be” (Gen 15:5). The section concludes by saying that “he believed the Lord, and [the Lord] counted it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6). Here in the pivotal scenes of Abra[ha]m’s life, his offspring are symbolized as the stars of the sky.⁷

If Genesis 15:5 is the most important, perhaps the most infamous text within this sense of symbolism is Isaiah 14:12–15. Isaiah prophesies about the day when Israel will return from exile, when “the Lord will have compassion on Jacob” (Isa 14:1). Isaiah then envisions Israel taunting the king of Babylon with these words: “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!” This text has been taken to refer to the Devil from the time of some of the earliest Christian interpreters.⁸ But the most immediate subject is the king of Babylon, as the context shows. So here in Isaiah 14, a star symbolizes a person—one of the most powerful kings on the earth in this instance.

⁶ Certainly, passages such as Judges 5:20 (“From heaven the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera”) would fit this category as well. Further, the frequent OT use of *צְבָאוֹת* (“hosts” or “armies”) referring to the “inhabitants” of the heavens (e.g. Deut 4:19; 17:3; Isa 34:4; 40:26; 45:13; cf. *κόσμος* in LXX) seems to fit this category of personification.

⁷ It is significant that Yahweh had earlier used another metaphor, “the dust of the earth,” to describe the multiplication of Abraham’s offspring (Gen 13:14–16). But it is only after Yahweh points Abraham to the stars that Yahweh acknowledges that Abraham’s offspring will be both “nations” and “kings” (Gen 17:4–6, 20; 22:17–18).

Genesis 15:5 resurfaces in many allusions throughout the canon, e.g. Genesis 22:17; 26:4; Exodus 32:13; Deuteronomy 1:10; 10:22; 28:62; Nehemiah 9:23; 1 Chronicles 27:23; Romans 4:18. God’s promise that Abraham’s offspring would be like the stars is paradigmatic not only for the Abrahamic covenant, but for the rest of Scripture. It will also be crucial in tracing the New Creation trajectory of stars later in this paper.

⁸ See John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39* (NICOT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 320.

Tracing a New Creation Trajectory

This paper has first attempted to establish some Biblical-theological parameters for the meaning of stars in Scripture. Thus far this paper has surveyed the two main senses of stars: as straightforward testimony to God's creation power, and as literary symbolism creatively communicated. Against this backdrop this paper is now able to trace a New Creation trajectory that follows the contours of the Biblical storyline. Put succinctly, stars consistently symbolize God's covenant people—individually and corporately—from the original creation to the New Creation in Christ.

Tracing the Trajectory in the OT

Where does this trajectory begin? What is its starting point in the canon? It could easily begin at the promise to Abraham in Genesis 15:5. This may be the most prominent text in the memory of the biblical authors regarding stars as a symbol for God's people. It would be a mistake not to include it as a major point in the trajectory. However, there is good evidence to begin tracing the trajectory even earlier: on the very first page of Scripture, in the creation account of Genesis 1:14–19.

The basic point to make about this passage is that Genesis 1:14–19 sets the reader up to see the sun as a symbol for Adam, the moon as a symbol for Eve, and the stars as a symbol of their offspring. The literary structure of the creation account of Genesis 1 suggests this: the creation of the sun and moon (on the fourth day—in the heavens) mirrors the creation of man and woman (on the sixth day—on earth).⁹ The heavenly bodies and the first humans have similar kingly and priestly job descriptions. The sun/moon and male/female are to “rule” (1:16–18) or “have dominion” (1:26). They are to “separate” (1:18; cf. Lev 10:10; 11:47; 20:24–26) or to “work and keep” (Gen 2:15; cf. Num 3:4, 7–8; 8:26; 18:5–6).¹⁰ Further, the remainder of the OT suggests this sort of symbolism pointing back to Genesis 1. One of the clearest instances is in Psalm 19, which begins by looking at the skies and celebrating how they “declare the glory of God” (v. 1). Just a few verses later, David personifies the sun (much like Adam in the beginning, and the last Adam in the end) as a bridegroom and as a mighty man: “[God] has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy” (v. 4b–5).¹¹

⁹ For the various other parallels between days 1–3 of creation and days 4–6 of creation, see Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016) 57. For a comparison of ANE Egyptian myths and the Genesis creation account, see Gordon H. Johnston, “Genesis 1 and Ancient Egyptian Creation Myths” *BSac* 165 (April–June 2008) 178–194.

For analysis of rabbinic midrash interpretations of Genesis 1:14–19, with the implication that the sun symbolizes Adam and the moon symbolizes Eve, see L. Juliana M. Claassens, “And the Moon Spoke Up: Genesis 1 and Feminist Theology” *Review and Expositor* 103 (Spring 2006) 331–334, 341; Barbara Ellison Rosenblit, “Midrash on the Moon: In a Different Light,” *Response* (Winter 1995) 101–105. From a vastly different perspective but affirming some of the same symbolism regarding Genesis 1, see Alastair Roberts, “Man and Woman in Creation (Genesis 1 and 2)” *9Marks Journal* (December 2019) 35–39.

¹⁰ The sun, moon, and stars are the only non-living parts of creation to be given these personal roles in Genesis 1.

¹¹ Deborah and Barak also make this connection in Judges 5:31: “So may all your enemies perish, O Lord! But your friends be like the sun as he rises in his might.” In some of the final words of David, 2 Samuel 23:4 compares a just and godly ruler to “the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning,” before whom “worthless men are all like thorns that are thrown away, for they cannot be taken with the hand...they are utterly consumed with fire.” This imagery is carried forward in Malachi 4:2 for the remnant of Israel, who are promised that “the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.”

If the sun and moon and stars stand not only as celestial bodies and testimony to God's creative work, but also as a symbol of the first humanity, then this infuses new significance into Yahweh's promise to Abraham in Genesis 15:5. Not only is the promise of offspring as numerous as the stars a powerful symbol, but it also signals a new beginning for God's creational and covenantal intent. When Adam and Eve had failed in their covenantal obligations, God chose Abraham as the new sun and Sarah as the new moon: as progenitors of the "new humanity" that would have dominion and carry forward God's purpose to bless creation.¹²

This promise echoes to Abraham in Genesis 22:17–18, and Yahweh reaffirms it to Isaac in Genesis 26:4. The Genesis narrative then begins to focus on Joseph as the "offspring" of Abraham that carries forward the promise of blessing (Gen 37:2–11). At the beginning of the story of Joseph, in a passage that sets up the remainder of the Genesis narrative, Joseph's second dream carries forward themes from Genesis 1:14–19 and 15:5. His dream is simply that "the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." His father Jacob quickly (and indignantly) interprets the dream with the rhetorical question "Shall I and your mother and your [eleven] brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?"¹³ Yet as the narrative unfolds (and as the narrator is careful to underline), this is precisely what happens. A widespread famine depletes all the storehouses except for those in Egypt under Joseph and Pharaoh. The eleven brothers of Joseph make a desperate journey to Egypt and fall at Joseph's feet, asking for grain (42:6–9; 43:26–28). The brothers bow before Joseph; not only would he "rule over" them, but he would rule over all Egypt (Gen 37:8; 45:8–9, 26) and carry on the promise of blessing (Gen 48:17–22).

Already in the storyline of Scripture, this theme of stars symbolizing offspring has exhibited a telescopic quality. The trajectory in Genesis had largely focused in on a single star—Joseph. But God's promise to multiply Abraham's offspring like the stars of the sky is far from fulfilled at the end of Genesis. In the remainder of the Pentateuch, the theme regularly continues to exhibit this telescopic quality: it continues to expand out to the multitude of Abraham's offspring, and then narrow in on a single offspring.

The children of Jacob multiply in Egypt, even as the Egyptians enslave and persecute them (Exod 1:1–20). When the children of Israel come out of Egypt and make their way to Canaan, God gives them the Ten Commandments by the hand of Moses. While Moses is on the mountain, Aaron fashions a golden calf and Israel infamously worships it, saying "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" (Exod 32:4). When God's wrath rightfully burns against his unfaithful people, Moses confronts Yahweh with his own promise: "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever'" (Exod 32:13). Moses intercedes for the multitude that Yahweh had chosen and called out of Egypt. This trajectory has expanded: the stars symbolize the host of Israelites under Moses's leadership.

¹² This also seems to be a nuance in Yahweh's promise to Abraham that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3; 28:14). "Earth" in these instances is the Hebrew noun ארץ, which is the same word used to denote the "ground" under a curse by God after the Fall (Gen 3:17, 19, 23). Because of Adam's unbelief and disobedience, the "ground" is cursed, but through Abraham's faith and obedience, all the families of the "ground" would be blessed (cf. Rom 4:13–25).

¹³ Possibly at play in the dream's symbolism is the apparent incongruity of a star—the smallest light of Genesis 1:16—having a greater prominence than the "greater lights," i.e. the sun and the moon.

It would narrow later in the Pentateuch, after a whole generation had continued in unfaithfulness to Yahweh and were consigned to wander in the wilderness. In Numbers 22–24, Balak king of Moab hires a seer, Balaam, to imprecate the newly-freed children of Israel. Balaam’s first two oracles soon have the opposite effect of what Balak had hoped. Balaam blesses Israel with Yahweh’s blessings. Balak ultimately pleads with Balaam just to shut his mouth and say nothing either good or bad (Num 23:25). In his fourth oracle, Balaam has another divine revelation. He “sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down with his eyes uncovered” (24:16). Balaam announces, “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth...one from Jacob shall exercise dominion and destroy the survivors of cities!” (24:17–19). A star again symbolizes a single offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And this offspring would reign over his enemies. Some descriptions of this ruling “star” match the description of King David, however, many Jewish interpreters near the time of Christ were looking for a future fulfillment of Numbers 24:17.¹⁴

After this narrowing in Numbers, the theme once again expands in Deuteronomy, where Moses three times celebrates Yahweh’s faithfulness in making Israel “as numerous as the stars of heaven” (Deut 1:10; 10:22; 28:62). The third occasion turns into a warning, however. If Israel would not carefully obey all the words of the Deuteronomic law, Yahweh would afflict them with the sicknesses of Egypt, make them few in number, and remove them from the Promised Land (Deut 28:58–63). Israel’s existence as the new humanity is contingent on their exact obedience in the Promised Land.

Israel subsequently failed at their covenant obligations, and the warnings of Deuteronomy 28 became their reality. While in exile, Daniel adds to the symbolic trajectory. In Daniel 8:10, he has a stunning vision of otherworldly creatures and a horn that “grew great, even to the host of heaven. And some of the host and some of the stars it threw down to the ground and trampled on them.” Daniel’s angelic interpreter Gabriel explains this apocalyptic vision as “a king of bold face, one who understands riddles” whose “power will be great” and who will “destroy mighty men and the people who are the saints” (8:23–24).¹⁵ Daniel later anticipates a time of trouble, followed by a time of deliverance, when “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan 12:2). This prophecy of resurrection is quickly followed up by yet another allusion to Genesis 1 (and perhaps Gen 15:5) in connection to God’s covenant people: “And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above, and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”

To summarize the trajectory in the OT: it begins with the sun, moon, and stars standing as celestial bodies and also as symbols of Adam, Eve, and their eventual offspring. When Adam and Eve and their offspring fail in their covenant obligations, God chooses Abraham and Sarah as progenitors of the “new humanity” that will multiply (like stars) and bless the whole earth. The trajectory then narrows in on Joseph at the end of Genesis as the one ruling Egypt and blessing his own family as well as the known world. The trajectory will later expand out in the people of Israel freed from Egypt, but the promise held a warning. In the midst of this there stood an ancient prophecy from a Gentile seer of a “star,” a ruler who would come from Jacob, destroy his enemies, and reign. Daniel recasts these themes with an apocalyptic and eschatological lens,

¹⁴ See G.K. Beale and David Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) 521–522; Grant Osborne, *Revelation* (BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 167–168.

¹⁵ This image appears also in Revelation 12:4.

prophesying of the trouble God's covenant people would encounter, and how in the last days they would shine like stars through resurrection.

Tracing the Trajectory in the NT

In the beginning of the NT, this trajectory of symbolism telescopes again on one offspring: Jesus the Messiah. Wise men from the east—Gentiles like Balaam the seer—see a great star and recognize that the “king of the Jews,” the Davidic Messiah who will rise from Bethlehem and shepherd Israel, has been born (Matt 2:1–6). This star rested over the place where the child Jesus lived (Matt 2:9–10), signaling that God's promise to Abraham and the ancient prophecies of a Davidic ruler were now being fulfilled. This narrative sets the redemptive-historical backdrop for the remainder of the trajectory in the NT.

The next two points on this trajectory are in the Pauline letters. These two texts do not explicitly use the Greek words for stars, but arguably Paul has the Abrahamic promise in Genesis 15:5 in mind in both instances. And significantly, this is the first point along the trajectory that believing Gentiles are explicitly identified as participating in the Abrahamic promise along with believing Jews.

The first instance is in Paul's discourse on Abraham in Romans 4:1–25.¹⁶ In verses 9–12, Paul makes a case that Abraham's faith came before his circumcision. This is a significant observation with implications for both Jewish and Gentile believers. This means that the believing Abraham is “the father of us all,” in fulfillment of God's promise (4:16). Paul then focuses on the power of God to bring this situation about, affirming two things about God: that he is the God who “gives life to the dead” and that he “calls into existence the things that do not exist” (4:17). Paul then returns to Abraham in verse 18, acknowledging Abraham's faith and citing the end of Yahweh's words to Abraham in Genesis 15:5: “So shall your offspring be.” Finally, Paul notes that it was this quality of belief on Abraham's part that resulted in his faith being “counted to him as righteousness” (Rom 4:22).

The significant thing to note for the purposes of this paper is that in Romans 4:13–25, Paul not only cites Genesis 15:5–6, but it seems that he also obliquely alludes to Genesis 1:14–16. It seems that Paul is reading Genesis 15:5 and Genesis 1:14–16 together. This is suggested by the two aspects of God's power that Paul underlines (that God “raises the dead” and “calls into existence the things that do not exist”). Paul later explains the first aspect in metaphorical terms as Abraham's “deadness” (because of old age) and Sarah's “barrenness” (Rom 4:19). Both old age and barrenness signal a need for God to have the power to raise the dead. But what makes sense of Paul interpreting Abraham's faith to include the reality that God “calls into existence the things that do not exist”? I suggest it is the fact that Yahweh uses “stars” to symbolize offspring in Genesis 15:5, combined with the understanding that God spoke and “called” the light and stars into existence in Genesis 1.¹⁷

¹⁶ Notably, the specific words of Genesis 15:5–6 are the clear backdrop for Paul's discussion of Abraham. The result of the promise (Gen 15:6) is repeated verbatim three times in Paul's discussion of Abraham's faith (Rom 4:3, 9, 22), the specific promise of Genesis 15:5 is cited climactically (Rom 4:18), and the verb “counted” (λογίζομαι) occurs eleven times in the chapter. Galatians 3:6 also contains the result of Genesis 15:6, and introduces a lengthy Pauline discourse on the relationship between faith and works as well as the Abrahamic promise and the Mosaic Law. Paul arrives at much the same conclusion in Galatians 3 as he does in Romans 4, but without the extensive and explicit interaction with the specific keywords of Genesis 15:5.

¹⁷ The word that Paul uses for “call” in Romans 4:17 is the verb καλέω. It occurs three times in Genesis 1 LXX (verse 5, 8, 10). There also may be an allusion here to Isaiah 40:26. If the creation (or “calling”) of the stars is in Paul's mind, the connection between Genesis 15:5; 1:16; and Romans 4 may help explain Paul's somewhat

The next point of the trajectory is also in a context charged with Jew-Gentile friction. Paul commands the Philippian believers to “Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Phil 2:14–15). Here Paul seems to be juxtaposing the judgment of Deuteronomy 32:5 on hard-hearted Israel with the image of the believers—both Jew and Gentile—being the new creation people of God. In contrast to the “dogs” of the circumcision who delight in the flesh and are a danger to each other (Phil 3:2–11), the Philippian believers are the true worshippers and the true “children of God” according to God’s promise.

In Paul’s letters, the trajectory explicitly widens more than at any other point previously in the trajectory. Paul identifies Gentile believers in Christ to be the promised offspring of Abraham, and by extension, the stars which Yahweh pointed out to the Patriarch in Genesis 15.

The final two instances of this trajectory again telescope on Jesus, but immediately hold promise for all believers. In Revelation 2:28, John has a vision of Jesus speaking to the church at Thyatira, warning against false teaching and encouraging the believers who have persevered thus far. It seems that Jesus concludes the circular letter by alluding to Psalm 2:9, Numbers 24:17, and Genesis 1:16. Jesus promises that “to the one who conquers,” he would give authority over the nations. Even more, Jesus says “I will give him the morning star” (Rev 2:28). This promise to the believers later acquires more depth when in the very last chapter in Scripture, Jesus climactically affirms that he *himself* is “the root and descendant of David, the bright morning star” (Rev 22:16). Jesus is not only the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham and David, but he is the fulfillment of Creation itself. He stands as the true morning star, the obedient Adam who gave his life on a cross and rose again to reign. He is the true New Creation, in whom both Jew and Gentile believers enjoy New Creation blessings forever.

Conclusion

To conclude this study, it seems fitting to ask the question: what does this symbolism say to God’s people about *being* God’s people? What should the church *do* if it is true that stars consistently symbolize God’s covenant people, and that Christians are included as Abraham’s children in Christ? I will suggest two implications. First, Christians should increase in godly character. The prophet Daniel affirms that God’s New Creation people must be “wise” and will be characterized by turning many to righteousness (Dan 12:1–3). This characterization suggests a degree of growth in Christlike character and wisdom is appropriate to a believer. This is certainly the application Paul makes to believers in Philippians 2:13–15, in contrast to the disobedient and unfaithful generation that Christians live among. Paul sees that “it is God who works in you” (perhaps just as the Spirit hovered over the waters at creation) and commands the believers to “Do all things” relating to their salvation “without grumbling or disputing.”¹⁸

Second, Christians should persevere in faith to see the completion of God’s promises. To state the rationale behind this implication negatively, the warning of destruction evident for the people of God in Deuteronomy 28:62 finds a NT counterpart in Jude 13 where false teachers are

enigmatic use of κόσμος to describe Abraham’s inheritance (Rom 4:17). Unfortunately, this is a connection outside of the scope of this present paper.

¹⁸ Paul seems to make similar ethical arguments rooted in a New Creation vision, in Ephesians 4:24 (“put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness”) and Colossians 3:9–10 (“Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator”).

called “wandering stars.” The real danger for those under Moses’s leadership was that their hearts would be led astray from full devotion and obedience to God. Believers in Jesus—and especially those called to teach—face the very same danger, as evidenced by Jude’s warning.

To state it positively, perseverance means “holding fast the word of Christ” until the end (Phil 2:16). And Jesus’s promise to give the overcoming believer “the morning star” motivates Christians today to persevere. To see the full blossoming of the New Creation, we must hold on in faith to the one who is himself the New Creation—the “bright morning star.”