

Edward Burne-Jones' Heavenly Conception: A Biblical Cosmos

Liana De Girolami Cheney

Independent Scholar, Boston, Massachusetts, United States;
lianacheney@earthlink.net

Abstract. Edward Burne-Jones was a Pre-Raphaelite artist and designer, who collaborated with William Morris on many decorative arts (stained glass windows, book illustrations, ceramic and tapestry designs). He was a founding partner in the firm Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company. Burne-Jones composed *The Days of Creation* between 1870 and 1876 for the Morris firm. These paintings were executed in gouache and gold paint, and cartoons were made for tile and in stained glass, for the Church of St. Editha at Tamworth in Staffordshire.

Burne-Jones' creation was highly praised and elegantly described by Oscar Wilde: "The picture is divided into six compartments, each representing a day in the Creation of the World, under the symbol of an angel holding a crystal globe, within which is shown the work of a day."

This paper will examine how Burne-Jones visualized an unusual celestial creation where angels holding magical spheres unveil the divine manifestation for the creation of a terrestrial realm. He created a cosmic utopia of the natural world.

Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898), a Pre-Raphaelite artist and designer, collaborated with William Morris (1834–1896) on many decorative arts projects such as stained glass windows, book illustrations, ceramics, and tapestry designs (Harrison & Waters 1979; Christian 2011). He was also a founding partner of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company, manufacturers and retailers of furnishings and decorative arts.

This study examines how Burne-Jones creates a celestial utopia of the world in six rectangular panels in *The Days of Creation*. He visualizes an unusual biblical creation where angels holding magical spheres unveil the divine manifestation for the creation of celestial and terrestrial realms. The theme of God's creation of the world is conceptually fascinating and stimulating to Burne-Jones, not just visually, but iconographically as well. He likely associates the traditional concept of world creation to the individual creation, paralleling God's artistic creative powers with human artistic creativity. God's conception of the cosmic world inspires Burne-Jones' visualization of such a world.

Three aspects of the Burne-Jones' *The Days of Creation* are considered here: the origin of the commission, the design of the imagery, and the meaning of the imagery.

1. The Origin of the Commission

In 1863, Burne-Jones begins his drawings for a series of biblical engravings commissioned by the Dalziel Brothers (George Dalziel, 1815–1902, and Edward Dalziel 1817–1905). They want to create an engraved *Illustrated Bible* with stories from the Old Testament. Several Pre-Raphaelite artists are involved in this project, including Ford Madox Brown (1821–1893), William Holman Hunt (1827–1910), Frederick Leighton

(1830–1896), Frederick Sandys (1829–1904), George Frederick Watts (1817–1904), Simeon Solomon (1840–1905), and Edward Burne-Jones (Bell 1903; Sewter 1975; Harrison & Waters 1979). Although Burne-Jones designs numerous drawings for this commission (now in the Birmingham Museums), for unknown reasons, he does not complete his part of the project. Regardless, George Routledge & Sons, London, publishes the *Illustrated Bible* in 1881. Burne-Jones is fascinated by the biblical narration of the first book of Genesis, which discusses God’s creation. He renders several color pencil and watercolor drawings on the subject in 1863: *The Creation of Light and Darkness* (Figure 1), *Creation of The Sky* (Figure 2), *The Creation of Water* (Figure 3), *The Creation of Earth* (Figure 4), *The Creation of Animals* (Figure 5), *The Creation of Adam and Eve* (Figure 6), and *The Seven Angels Sounding Bells* honoring God’s Creation (Figure 7).

In the middle of the nineteenth century in England, the Anglo-Catholic movement encouraged the decoration of the Gothic and Neo-Gothic churches to be embellished with stained glass windows (Parry 2010). Eager to handle this art form, in 1870, William Morris asks Burne-Jones to execute drawings for six stained glass windows with the Biblical subject of God’s creation of the world. Burne-Jones, who is already interested in this subject, collaborates on this project with Morris. From 1870 to 1876, he uses various media for the depictions of God’s six days of creation, *The Days of Creation* (Figures 8 and 9). He designs *modelli* in pencil cartoons for watercolor paintings on gouache, containing shell gold and platinum paint. In turn, these modelli are employed to compose stained glass windows and porcelain tiles for several chapels. In the discussion of these works in catalogue entries, journals, and books, the titles for this imagery vary from “The Days of Creation” to “Six Days of Creation” to “Angels of Creation” (Wildman & Christian 1998).

The archives of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge contain Burne-Jones’ personal work records for the period of 1871–1876. Here, Burne-Jones offers commentaries on aspects of the commission for Morris’ firm. He wishes to portray, “visions and dreams and symbols for the understanding of people” (Burne-Jones 1904). On completion of the paintings and to unite them, Burne-Jones designs a frame in the Renaissance style. The drawings and paintings are exhibited in 1877 at the Grosvenor Gallery in London (Casteras & Denney 1996).

Impressed by Burne-Jones’ creations at the Gallery, Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) highly praises the imagery of *The Days of Creation* (Figure 9) in the *Dublin University Magazine*. He writes:

The picture is divided into six compartments, each representing a day in the Creation of the World, under the symbol of an angel holding a crystal globe, within which is shown the work of a day. In the first compartment stands the lonely angel of the First Day, and within the crystal ball Light is being separated from Darkness. In the fourth compartment are four angels, and the crystal glows like a heated opal, for within it the creation of the Sun, Moon, and Stars is passing; the number of the angels increases, and the colours grow more vivid till we reach the sixth compartment, which shines afar off like a rainbow. Within it are the six angels of the Creation, each holding its crystal ball; and within the crystal of the sixth angel one can see Adam’s strong brown limbs and hero form, and the pale, beautiful body of Eve. At the feet also of these six winged messengers of the Creator is sitting the angel of the Seventh Day, who on a harp of gold is singing the glories of that coming day which we have not yet seen. The faces of the angels

are pale and oval-shaped, in their eyes is the light of Wisdom and Love, and their lips seem as if they would speak to us; and strength and beauty are in their wings. They stand with naked feet, some on shell-strewn sands whereon tide has never washed nor storm broken, others it seems on pools of water, others on strange flowers; and their hair is like the bright glory round a saint's head. (Wilde 2004)

2. The Design of the Imagery

In the early conception of the days of creation composed for the Dalziel Brothers' Bible, Burne-Jones imagery is projected in small rectangular studies with a sketchy drawing and limited color palette. The thematic narrative is limited to abstract forms (Figures 1–7). These Biblical compositions contrast with the large rectangular design and jewel-like colorations in watercolor of *The Days of Creation* (Figures 8 and 9). Here, Burne-Jones depicts the days of creation with a corresponding number of angels, with each angel holding a globe that corresponds to the cosmic invention of the day. All angels holding the sphere are crowned with a burning flame, an allusion to divine creativity or Pentecostal inspiration. These celestial figures stand in a flat platform that differs according to their day of creation. Fancy plumage with a variety of celestial colors decorates these angelic figures. Although their physiognomy is similar, their differences are revealed in their hair color, plumage attire, their manner of holding the sphere, and the standing platforms. The coloration of the plumage garment is associated with the angel's type of creation.

Burne-Jones carefully designs the position of the angel's hands holding the globe. Each originator angel becomes a member of the following day of creation, and is incorporated in the background scene. A feathery flame on the center of the angel creator's head distinguishes this angel from the other angels and identifies the angel in the dominant role of creation. Symbolic of their ethereal nature, all the angels are disarmed and standing on resplendent platforms.

In the Bible, the Seven Days of Creation begins: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). "The world (earth) was empty and dark" (Genesis 1:2–3). On the first day of creation, God created light and separated the light from the darkness, calling light "day" and darkness "night." The first recorded words of God that we have are, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3).

For the first day, Burne-Jones depicts, in the study for the Dalziel Brothers' Bible, three globes, a light-colored one and a dark-colored one, while the central globe in grey colors includes a dove in flight, symbol of the Holy Spirit and the mover of the creation (Figure 1). In *The Days of Creation*, Burne-Jones anthropomorphizes the abstract version for the Dalziel Brothers' Bible's imagery into a depiction of an angel, e.g., the first angel of creation is standing alone in reflective platform. The landscape is a vast extension of celestial and aquatic surfaces reflecting the heavenly realm. The angel holds a large crystal globe, which includes two other globes—one reflects light, the other displays darkness. Creation in the world is of light and darkness, thus its separation into two globes. Variations of blue and purple coloration in the angel's plumage, attire, and landscape allude to the celestial and mystical formation of heavenly reflections and the formation of light (compare Figure 1 with Figures 8 and 9).

On the second day of creation, God says, "Let there be a sky between the waters, and the sky was made by God's word" (Genesis 1:6). "This sky kept the water in the upper air apart from the waters that were underneath" (Genesis 1:6–7). "God created



Figure 1. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: Light and Darkness*, 1863, Dalziel Brothers' Bible, Birmingham Museums, UK. (© Birmingham Museums Trust)

a large area where to separate, the waters and form the sky” (Genesis 1:3–5). For the Dalziel Brothers' Bible, Burne-Jones depicts the formation of the sun, moon, and firmament in monochromatic colors of blues, grays, and gold (Figure 2). Whereas for *The Days of Creation*, his angel of the second day of creation holds a globe, which also contains two smaller spheres showing the separation of the heavens and the waters. The sphere of water is differentiated by the intense bluish sea-like coloration. But the overall tonality is similar to the first scene. The platform is more reflective of the angel's feet (compare Figure 2 with Figures 8 and 9)

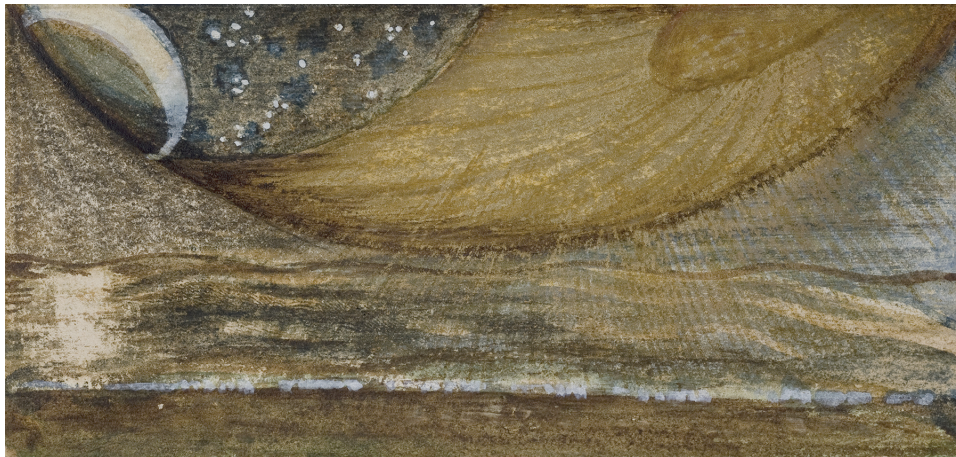


Figure 2. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: The Sky*, 1863, Dalziel Brothers Bible, Birmingham Museums, UK. (© Birmingham Museums Trust)

On the third day, God says, “Let the waters collect in one place, and let the dry land come out” (Genesis 1:9). “God called the dry land *earth*; He called the waters *seas*, God looked at all that He had made, and He saw that it was good” (Genesis 1:9–10). “God

creates dry ground available for the first plants and trees to grow in great abundance” (Genesis 1:9–13). For the Dalziel Brothers' Bible, Burne-Jones reduces the image to a single, large floating globe depicting the earth, which is separating the moon and the sun from the sky, and rising above the waters (Figure 3). Whereas for *The Days of Creation*, his third angel holds a globe wherein the earth brings forth grass, plants, and fruit-bearing trees. The plumage and garment are composed of earthly colors of gold, green, and browns. The angel stands in an opaque platform, suggesting a soil substance with flowering plants and bushes, while his companions reside in transparent and watery platforms (compare Figure 3 with Figures 8 and 9).

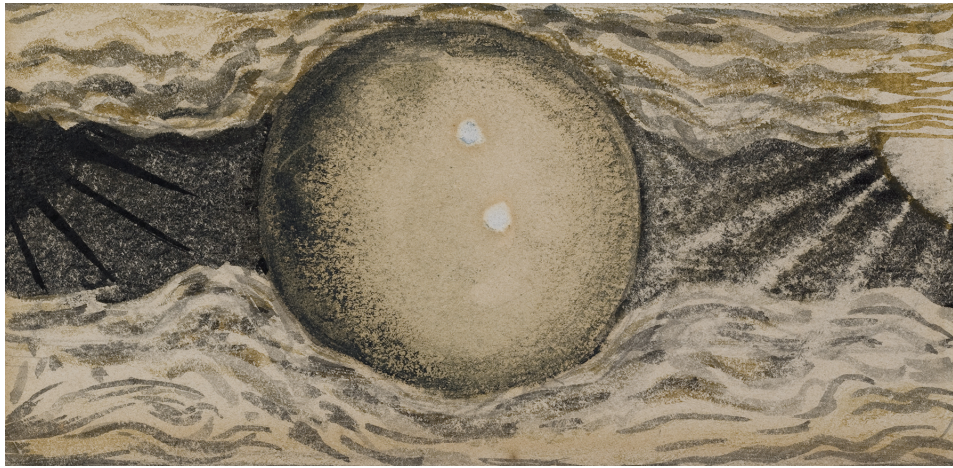


Figure 3. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: Water*, 1863, Dalziel Brothers' Bible, Birmingham Museums, UK. (© Birmingham Museums Trust)

On the fourth day, God creates two types of primary lights and many smaller ones. Thus, “He created the sun, moon, and stars” (Genesis 1:14–19). “They give light to the earth, and they mark the days, the years, and the seasons” (Genesis 1:14–19). For the Dalziel Brothers' Bible, Burne-Jones combines this imagery and the second day of creation (compare Figures 2 and 4) with another colored drawing of the moon, sun, and stars, and the creation of the earth, including nature and trees (Figure 4). Although The Fourth Day is represented in the modello drawing of *The Days of Creation*, the watercolor painting of the Fourth Day in *The Days of Creation* is missing from the collection—it was stolen from the Harvard University dining hall. From a drawing reconstruction, Burne-Jones' platform reveals the reflection of celestial and earthy colorations. The angel holds a globe with the created sun, moon, and stars giving light to earth and marking the cycles of life (compare Figure 4 with Figures 8 and 9).

On the fifth day of creation, God blesses the birds and the sea creatures and says, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth. God created great whales, and every living creature that moves, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1:20–22). And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth. And the evening and the morning were the fifth day” (Genesis 1:20–23). In the Dalziel Brothers' Bible, Burne-Jones depicts a collection of mammals, aviary, and aquatic animals (Figure 5). While in *The Days of Creation*, his angel of the fifth



Figure 4. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: The Earth*, 1863, Dalziel Brothers' Bible, Birmingham Museums, UK. (© Birmingham Museums Trust)

day stands at seashore where numerous discarded seashells are visible. The angel holds a globe showing the waters, the birds, and the living creatures. The angel of the fourth day of creation is situated on the right side holding his sphere with a luminous sun, a beautiful contrast between the reddish light of the sun and the angel's blue plumage, whose blue plumage is similar to the fifth angel of creation (compare Figure 5 with Figures 8 and 9).



Figure 5. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: Animal Life*, 1863, Dalziel Brothers' Bible, Birmingham Museums, UK. (© Birmingham Museums Trust)

On the sixth day, "God created all kinds of wild beasts and cattle, and creatures that crawl on the ground. Again, God saw that His works were good" (Genesis 1:24). After "God made the animals to fill the earth," He says, "Let us make man [and woman] in Our image and likeness, Let us make him [and her] rulers over the fishes of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, and the animals of the whole earth" (Genesis 1:26). "So God made man [and woman] in His own image and likeness: (Genesis 1:26–27). In

the Dalziel Brothers' Bible, Burne-Jones represents the creation of Adam and Eve, who both stand naked among the wild animals (lion and wolf), and domestic animals (horse and deer) (Figure 6). In *The Days of Creation*, his angel of the sixth day depicts the last day of creation. The angel holds a globe that reflects the creation of living forms such as trees, serpents, and humankind created in God's image. Adam and Eve appear in a garden, standing in front of a large tree, The Tree of Knowledge, where a prominently coiled serpent embraces the bottom of the tree trunk and turns its head toward the couple. Ingeniously, Burne-Jones places the angel of the sixth creation turning toward the angel of the fifth creation, suggesting the biblical account that man and woman will govern over the created nature, birds, fishes, and the animals of earth (compare Figure 6 with Figures 8 and 9).



Figure 6. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: Adam and Eve*, 1863, Dalziel Brothers' Bible, Birmingham Museums, UK. (© Birmingham Museums Trust)

According to the bible, on the seventh day after creation, God rests. For the Dalziel Brothers' Bible, Burne-Jones depicts the glory and the success of creation by portraying, in the heavenly blue sky, seven floating musical angels all dressed in white and with golden wings, who ardently ring sonorous golden bells in honor of the new divine design (Figure 7). But in *The Days of Creation*, Burne-Jones ingeniously depicts, at the feet of all angels, one more angel, alluding to the last day of the cycle of creation—the day of rest. Burne-Jones replaces the globe of creation with a musical instrument for the musical angel. Crowned with myrtle, this musical angel is playing a psalter. Rose bushes surround this seated musician. The angel of the sixth creation is also crowned, but with roses. These are the only two angels whose heads are decorated with natural vegetation: roses and myrtle. However, the musical angel, unlike his angel companions, is not depicted with a flaming feather, likely because his musical improvisation is a human creation and not divine like those created by the angel of creation (compare Figure 7 with Figures 8 and 9).



Figure 7. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation: The Angels*, 1863, Dalziel Brothers' Bible, Birmingham Museums, UK. (© Birmingham Museums Trust)



Figure 8. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation*, 1870–1876, pencil drawings, Private Collection. (Bonhams Auction House)

3. The Meaning of the Imagery

There are three considerations in the interpretation of Burne-Jones' *The Days of Creation*: the parallel notion of divine and human creation, the purpose of art for creating a beautiful world, and a celestial or cosmic utopia composed with angelic figures.

Burne-Jones, similar to traditional painters in the history of art from antiquity to the present, views himself as a creator—a composer of beautiful images for a perfect realm. Pre-Raphaelite painters, in particular Burne-Jones, seeking a new aesthetic ideal in their art, reflect on earlier notions of artistic theories. Concepts of creativity connected with invention, imagination, and judgment are associated with divine creation, e.g., God's creation of the cosmos: a physical and metaphysical realm, a natural and celestial world, and a human and spiritual state of being. And God's creation of the individual in His own image provides guidance not only to imitate His creation, but also



Figure 9. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation*, 1876, watercolor paintings, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. (Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College)

to confirm the artist's ability to create. If God invents and composes the world from nothingness, Burne-Jones could imitate the creative process and invent his own natural world.

Burne-Jones could visualize a mythical creation of the cosmos in drawing, painting, and stained glass. Since antiquity and through the Middle Ages, theologians and philosophers from Plato (424–324 BCE) to Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) attempt to explain the process of natural and celestial creation. In their efforts, a pagan and Christian cosmos is composed. In this process, a cosmic utopia is designed in order to explain not only the natural and heavenly phenomena, e.g., Plato's *Republic* of 380 BCE and Aquinas' *City of God* of 1245, but also the terrestrial and societal alternatives to an idealized world, e.g., Thomas Moore's (1478–1535) *Utopia* of 1516 and Thomas Hobbes' (1588–1679) *Leviathan* of 1651.

In the nineteenth century, Charles Darwin's (1809–1882) *The Origin of the Species* of 1859 and the British industrial revolutions of 1820 to 1840 and 1870 are turning points in the living structure of the individual. These significant scientific and technological transformations in human progress also affect the spiritual and psychic conception of the individual in relation to the divine. The Christian view of a world created by God is challenged by the scientifically proven principles of natural law.

As a reaction in part to this rational view, artists, especially Burne-Jones, seek to view the world in a more gentle manner, combining the artistic environment of creativity and beauty with the divine and inspirational realm. Burne-Jones becomes the promoter of the Aesthetic Movement in Britain. In an interview, he says, "The more materialistic science becomes, the more I shall paint angels: their wings are my protest in favour of the immortality of the soul" (Lutchmansingh 1989). No doubt, in *The Days of Creation*, Burne-Jones depicts winged angels as the messengers to God's creation of the world, revealing his own manifestation of a celestial utopia.

Burne-Jones' *The Days of Creation* is, at once, an aesthetic culmination of the artistic power of invention, imitation, and creation of beauty. He borrows the divine concept of world creation to formulate his own artistic creation. Selecting God's week

of creation, he empowers a daily angel to manifest the beauty and power of divine creation. Influenced by artists' quest for beauty in art and the inspiration and manifestation of the divine in art, Burne-Jones recalls the works of Italian Renaissance masters including painters such as Botticelli (1445–1510), Andrea Mantegna (1430–1506), and Michelangelo (1475–1564), and, in particular, the sculpture of Luca della Robbia's *Cantoria* of 1438, whom Burne-Jones studied in the Italian journeys (1859–1873) and Oronzio Lelli's replica at the Victorian and Albert Museum in London. He also was inspired by British artist William Blake (1757–1827) for the composition, coloration, and symbolism in his imagery. Burne-Jones selects the image of the globe for the symbolism of wholeness, perfection, and eternity (Cirlot 1962). Each Angel of Creation holds a specific globe indicating the sovereignty of the divine creation. The globes manifest God's felicity in creating the world (Cirlot 1962). Ultimately, Burne-Jones creates a cosmic utopia—a mythical, heavenly, and natural realm—where angels design a world of beauty to be emulated not only by the artist, but most of all by the viewer.

4. Conclusion

In describing what is art and what is the purpose of his art, Burne-Jones observes, “I mean by a picture a beautiful, romantic dream of something that never was, never will be—in a light better than any light that ever shone—in a land no one can define or remember, only desire—and the forms divinely beautiful” (Cecil 1969). The Dalziel Brothers' Bible and Burne-Jones' *The Days of Creation* are manifestations of artistic quests and conceptions of a divine cosmos.

References

- Bell, M. 1903, *Sir Edward Burne-Jones, A Record and Review* (London: G. Bell & Sons), 4th ed.
- Burne-Jones, G. 1904, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* (London: Macmillan)
- Casteras, S., & Denney, C. 1996, *The Grosvenor Gallery: A Palace of Art in Victorian England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press)
- Cecil, D. 1969, *Visionary and Dreamer: Two Poetic Painters, Samuel Palmer and Edward Burne-Jones* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Christian, J. 2011, *Journal of Stained Glass*, 35, 22
- Cirlot, J. E. 1962, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York: Philosophical Library)
- Harrison, M., & Waters, B. 1979, *Burne-Jones* (London: G. P. Putman's Sons)
- Lutchmansingh, L. D. 1989, in *Pre-Raphaelites Re-viewed*, edited by M. Poynton (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 123
- Parry, L. 2010, *Aglaia Coronio*, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Sewter, C. 1975, *The Stained Glass of William Morris and His Circle: Text and Illustrations, Studies in British Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press)
- Wilde, O. 2004, *Miscellanea* (Project Gutenberg eBook). URL <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/14062>
- Wildman, S., & Christian, J. 1998, *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art)