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# The Theology of Creation in the Book of Revelation

GREGORY STEVENSON

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The Book of Revelation appears an odd choice for thinking through the issue of caring for God's creation. It is more commonly read as a tale of divine devastation of the earth and the ultimate destruction of the cosmos. In John's vision, mountains are uprooted, forests are burned, and rivers polluted with blood and poison. What could a book that envisions the end of the world as a part of God's divine plan possibly say to us regarding care for his creation?

Historically speaking, different theological systems have drawn very different conclusions from Revelation regarding how Christians are to interact with their world. The system known as *premillennialism* asserts that Christ will return to usher in his millennial rule (20.4) only after a period of widespread destruction known as the Tribulation. The unfolding of these events is understood to be divinely decreed and thus inevitable. Evil will continue to run rampant, moral decay will increase, and the world will steadily get worse and worse until Christ returns. This pessimistic outlook on the state of the world can result in indifference to social and political structures of evil and to any concern for the state of the environment. A common justification for such a stance is often espoused with the question, "Why polish the brass on a sinking ship?"

Whereas premillennialism expects Christ's return *prior* to his millennial rule, the system known as *postmillennialism* envisions Christ's return occurring *after* the advent of his millennial rule. Christ's return, however, is dependent upon the followers of Christ first fulfilling the evangelistic mission he gave to the church and so preparing the world for his return. The church must transform society through the power of preaching and Christian activity. This more optimistic vision of Christian progress and worldly improvement lends itself to a more positive evaluation of creation care as a part of that mission.

The problem with both of these approaches to Revelation is that they filter everything through a manufactured eschatological timetable. The value of creation is important mainly as it relates to the predicted return of Christ. Revelation 20 thus becomes the single lens through which to read the whole of the book.

A better approach is to examine Revelation's theology of creation. Revelation is not an environmental text in any way; it makes no claims regarding Christian responsibility to care for creation. Frankly with its focus on the high stakes struggle of Christians trying to maintain faithfulness in Roman Imperial society, Revelation has more critical issues to grapple with. Nevertheless, creation as a theological concept is a central component of the book and an exploration of that concept allows for some broader implications regarding God's creative activity.

One difficulty posed by its theology of creation is the frequently negative characterization of the earth. Revelation communicates through dualism—the dividing of reality into two opposing camps. One manifestation of this is the use of spatial dualism in which locations represent opposing categories. Earth versus heaven and the kingdom of God versus the kingdom of the world are examples of this dualistic structure. In Revelation *earth* and *the world* represent those forces opposed to God's divine will. So the wicked can be characterized as "the inhabitants of the earth" (3.10; 6.10; 8.13; 11.10; 13.8, 12, 14; 17.2, 8), the kingdom of the world as the domain of Satan, and the earth and cosmos as the recipient of divine judgment (6.12–17; 8.5–12; 16.3–4).

This seemingly negative depiction of the earth and cosmos is not, however, a value judgment on creation. The dualism of heaven/earth is primarily about spiritual orientation. Heaven is the locus of God's kingdom,

while the earth is the domain of the kingdom of the world. One's faithfulness or unfaithfulness to God determines whether one belongs to heaven or to earth. Consequently, the phrase *the inhabitants of the earth* identifies not those who live on the physical earth, but only those who have aligned themselves spiritually with the kingdom of the world. In this sense, here the *earth* is not so much presented as God's creation, but more as a co-opted locus of opposition to God. Revelation describes the earth as corrupted by the actions of the wicked in their opposition to God (18.24, 19.2). Consequently, the judgments of God poured out upon the earth and the cosmos are not about bringing destruction to the earth, but about judging those who belong spiritually to what the earth represents as the symbolic place of opposition.

God is sovereign over all creation and this includes the earth. The wicked have corrupted God's earth through their actions, but he will reclaim it through faithful witness and judgment. In chapter 11 it is the faithful witness of Christ and the church that leads to the declaration: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Messiah" (v. 15). God's creation is under his sovereign control and though the wicked may corrupt it, God will act to redeem not only his people but his creation. As is announced in verse 18, God's "wrath has come and the time...for destroying those who destroy the earth."

## Revelation's Theology of Creation

### God as Creator

The term *apocalyptic* evokes thoughts of destruction and end-of-the-world devastation. This, however, is a modern conception based on centuries of religious interpretation that has connected end-of-time speculation with Revelation. Yet the primary focus of the book is not the end of time, but the creative activity of God that transcends time. Revelation is more about creation than it is destruction; or, to put it another way, it is about how an ending leads to a new beginning, how the old gives way to the new.

The foundational text for Revelation's creation theology is 4.11. The scene is God's heavenly throne room and the characters in residence are his heavenly court. At the end of the scene, the four living creatures and twenty-four elders fall down before the throne of God, toss their golden crowns at his feet and extol his worthiness to receive all glory, honor, and power. This scene is strongly reminiscent of the ancient practice of awarding honor to notable benefactors. When an individual or group acted as benefactor to others, the customary response was to display one's gratitude by publicly declaring the worthiness of the benefactor and by granting them honorary awards—most commonly a golden crown. The message of Revelation 4.9–11 is that God is worthy to receive all honor, glory and power because he is the ultimate benefactor. In fact verse 11 identifies the reason why God alone is the supreme benefactor: "for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created." As Creator, God is the giver of all things and sovereign Lord over all things.

Throughout the book God is hailed as Creator (5.13; 10.5–6; 14.7). This is not just a description of what God has done in the past, but a statement of divine identity. Because God is Creator, he continues to create. Creation is a fundamental component of who God is. Accordingly Revelation frames the main visionary material of the book with declarations about God's creative activity. At the opening (4.11) John lays the foundation for God's sovereignty by describing his status as supreme benefactor due to his past creative activity ("you *created* all things," emphasis added). At the end of the visions the declaration by God himself states his creative activity in present tense: "I *am making* all things new" (21.5, emphasis added). God's creation of a new heaven and a new earth (21.1) is a testament that God's creative activity was not a one-time event, but an intrinsic part of his nature.

Revelation presents creation, whether that of the old earth or the new earth, as a gift of God. God is the benefactor, we are the recipients, and creation itself is the gift. Part of what it means to be a faithful follower of God is to receive his gracious gifts with gratitude and care.

### The Alpha and the Omega

Revelation uses three parallel phrases to identify God and Christ in Revelation, sometimes applying the phrases to God and other times to Christ. They are *the Alpha and the Omega*, *the first and the last*, and *the beginning and the end*. With *alpha* and *omega* representing the first and last letters—the beginning and the

end—of the Greek alphabet, these three phrases state the same reality in different words. Furthermore, in line with their meaning, they structurally mark the beginning and end of the book (1.8, 17; 21.6; 22.13).

These phrases are essential for understanding Revelation's theology of creation. The phrase *Alpha and Omega* is not simply a reference to the starting point and ending point of the alphabet. They mark the parameters that contain everything in between, much like our contemporary phrase *from A to Z*. Similarly *the first and the last* and *the beginning and the end* are not temporal titles marking the starting and concluding moments of time, but are cosmological titles that identify God's relationship to all of creation. These titles assert that all of creation, from beginning to end and everything in between, fall under God's sovereign rule and divine care.

In particular the title *the beginning (arche) and the end (telos)* grants insight into Revelation's vision of creation. The Greek word for *beginning*—*arche*—refers to the first cause of something. It can represent the foundation upon which something is built. The term for *end*—*telos*—identifies the goal towards which something is heading. The term *end* here is therefore not so much the cessation of something, but the culmination of something. Stating that God is the *arche* and the *telos* means that God has put something into motion for a specific purpose and that something is heading towards a predetermined goal. That goal, in Revelation, is new creation. So Revelation is not about the end of the world but about the beginning of a new one.

What must be stressed here is that the new creation of Revelation 21–22 is not an afterthought or a sequel. These titles stress continuity with what came before, not discontinuity. The premillennialist notion that this world is ultimately inconsequential because it is destined for destruction misses the point. The old creation (the alpha, the beginning, the first) is intrinsically connected to the new creation (the omega, the end, the last) much like A is connected to Z. One is the *fulfillment* of the other rather than a replacement.

These titles suggest that God has an all-encompassing plan for his creation and Revelation certainly bears that out. This plan, however, is not only for his people but for creation itself. Because God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, it is not surprising that the *end* creation strongly echoes the *beginning* creation. John's description of the new earth, complete with new Jerusalem, is intentionally reminiscent of the Garden of Eden. It contains "the river of the water of life" and "the tree of life" (22.1–2). Most striking is the distinct absence of any curse (22.3). The curse that marred the first creation has no place in the last creation. So when we come to the end of Revelation, we find ourselves where we began in the early pages of Genesis—back in the garden. The story has come full circle. The Alpha has merged with the Omega; the beginning has achieved its goal. By connecting the new earth to the Garden of Eden from Genesis 1–2, Revelation informs us that God's entire story has been about creation.

## Resurrection

The concept of resurrection is also fundamental to any deliberation on Revelation's theology of creation. By its very nature resurrection is about new creation. One life ends and a new life begins. In chapter 1 Jesus connects resurrection with the all-encompassing plan of God highlighted above when he states that he is "the first and the last" and then equates that with having been "dead," yet now "alive forever and ever" (17–18). If the story of Christ ended with the cross, there would be no hope. Hope is born out of the empty tomb. Christ's physical body died only to be resurrected as a "new creation" body—a body that would never die or decay and a body that would no longer know suffering.

Christ's resurrection provides a model for understanding the new creation of Revelation 21–22. It is interesting to notice that there is no ultimate destruction of the earth recorded in Revelation. Instead earth and heaven *flee* from God's presence at the final judgment (20.11). Later John states that "the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (21.1). John describes the ending of the first heaven and first earth in terms reminiscent of a death. In light of the resurrection of Christ, however, death becomes merely an ending that inaugurates a new beginning. In his resurrection Christ defeated death not only for humanity, but for creation as well. Just as the death of Christ's body effected the resurrection of that body as a new creation no longer subject to suffering and decay, the passing away of the first heaven and the first earth leads to "a new heaven and a new earth" which is no longer subject to death or pain (21.4).

As the story of Christ is incomplete without the resurrection, so too is the story of creation incomplete without resurrection. Again the emphasis here is on continuity. God's new creation is the completion and fulfillment of the old creation (the goal) just as our resurrected bodies are the ultimate goal for our bodies. The end goal (*telos*) of this story is that God makes all things new.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Revelation presents God as the Creator for whom creation is a fundamental component of his identity and activity. He is both the divine benefactor who bestows creation upon us as a gift and the sovereign Lord who rules over that creation faithfully. As God will not abandon his people, he also will not abandon his creation. Furthermore, God's vision for his creation is all-encompassing (from the alpha to the omega) and leading towards a predetermined goal—a goal which itself is all about creation.

Being a faithful follower of such a God means taking creation seriously. Appealing to an end-time destruction of the world as a justification for non-involvement in its care or improvement ignores Revelation's witness to the continuity of God's creative activity from beginning to end. We share with creation the hope of resurrection. It is that ultimate goal that invests life with meaning. The fact that our bodies will one day die is not a basis for mistreatment of our bodies now. We should care for our bodies not only as an act of self-preservation, but because our bodies are a gift of God's creative activity and, though they are frail and decaying, God will one day redeem our bodies. Revelation implies a similar rationale for creation.

As stated earlier Revelation has no environmental agenda and is not advocating any action (other than faithful witness) on behalf of the world around us. Yet the theology of creation contained within the book allows for certain implications to be drawn regarding how Christians think about and engage the world around them. In Revelation the earth itself is not evil or belonging to Satan. God is sovereign over *all* his creation. However, the earth is aligned with "the kingdom of the world" because it has been corrupted through the actions of the wicked. Idolatry, violence, immorality, and oppression have made the earth symbolic of a place opposed to God's divine will. Revelation calls us to make a choice between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world and the warning attending that call could not be clearer. We can stand with God's faithful witnesses or with those who corrupt God's earth through vile actions. Revelation not too subtly informs those who would choose the latter that God will destroy those who destroy the earth (11.18).

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