

## CAN ESCHATOLOGY BE GREEN?

### Setting the Scene

Eschatological beliefs are sometimes a strong motivation for action. The upsurge in evangelical missionary effort in the much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was motivated in part by a form of post-millennialism which understood the millennium as a period in which the world becomes largely Christianised through the world-wide preaching of the gospel. Only at the end of that period would Christ return. Hence the slogan which rallied many to the mission-field, ‘Evangelise the world to bring back the King!’

For a number of reasons which we haven’t time to explore, including the rise of the ‘social gospel’, the publication of the Schofield Reference Bible with its dispensational theology in its footnotes and the horror of two world wars, that kind of postmillennialism gave way among evangelicals to a form of dispensational pre-millennialism which exchanged the optimistic outlook of their forebears for a pessimistic one which expects the world to go into a spiritual and moral decline which will only be ended by the return of Christ. In the 1970’s Hal Lindsey’s<sup>1</sup> best-seller *The Late Great Planet Earth* popularised this view. Lindsey did this in the context of the Cold War policy of MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) and the consequent threat of nuclear holocaust. He confidently equated the Battle of Harmagedon (Rev. 16:16) with World War III and a nuclear holocaust<sup>2</sup>, ‘It is extremely important to note the accuracy of the Bible prophecy in relation to this last conflict ... Imagine cities like London, Paris, Tokyo, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago ... obliterated! John ... predicts that entire islands and mountains would be blown off the map. It seems to indicate an all-out nuclear attack of ballistic missiles upon the great metropolitan areas of the world.’ He went on to say<sup>3</sup>, ‘As the battle of Armageddon reaches its awful climax and it appears that all life will be destroyed on earth – in this very moment Jesus Christ will return and save mankind from self-extinction.’

In the early 1980s this kind of outlook surfaced among politicians in the USA. For example, President Reagan commented<sup>4</sup>, ‘You know, I turn back to your ancient prophecies ... and the signs foretelling Armageddon and I find myself wondering if we’re the generation that is going to see that come about. I don’t know if you’ve noted any of those prophecies lately, but believe me, they certainly describe the times we’re going through.’ It is suggested by some that this kind of outlook encouraged an attitude of nuclear brinkmanship among some US political pundits. The slogan had

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<sup>1</sup> H. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> H. Lindsey, *op. cit.*, 153, 155.

<sup>3</sup> H. Lindsey, *op. cit.*, 157.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in S. J. Greutz, *The Millennial Maze*, Downers Grove, ILL: IVP. 1992, 19-20.

changed from ‘Evangelise the world to bring back the King!’ to, ‘Nuke the world to bring back the King!’

The end of the Cold War led to the spectre of nuclear holocaust disappearing from the news headlines. Before long it began to be replaced by warnings of various forms of environmental catastrophe, especially those associated with global warming and climate change. The eschatological outlook which led some evangelical Christians to have an almost fatalistic attitude towards a nuclear holocaust was readily transferred to the environmental scenarios. Thurman and McCleary comment<sup>5</sup>, ‘In America the very dominant Protestant (fundamentalist) interpretation ... promotes an overwhelmingly anti-natural message, in which the text of Revelation is used to justify the destruction of the environment, because it is seen as a book of judgment.’ Similarly Tina Pippin comments<sup>6</sup>, ‘In fundamentalist interpretation of the Apocalypse in the United States believers are told not to worry about or be responsible for the possible human endings of the world through nuclear accident or environmental pollution. The Rapture will occur first and all the believers will be taken up into the clouds with Jesus and will not suffer the tribulation on earth.’

The dispensationalist, pre-millennial interpretation of the book of Revelation which encourages this attitude has been popularised among a new generation of evangelicals by the best-selling ‘Left Behind’ novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins (published 1995- ), which are read by evangelicals in the UK as well as in the USA. Against this background the question, ‘Can eschatology be green?’ is clearly one that evangelicals need to address with some urgency.

### **Christian Motivations for Environmental Concern**

Before addressing that question directly I want to put it into a wider context. It seems to me that there are at least three major motivations for Christian concern about the environment. I will call them the *Devotional*, the *Ethical*, and the *Eschatological*. The three should always be held together. I will deal with the first two motivations only briefly.

The Devotional motivation flows from the First Commandment as stated by Jesus in Mk 12:29-30, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is a command to love God with the whole of our being. When you love someone like that you will share their valuation of things,

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<sup>5</sup> R. Thurman & J. McCleary, ‘Facing the Future with Hope: A Discussion from an American Perspective’ in S. Hobson & J. Lubchenco (eds), *Revelation and the Environment AD 95-1995*, Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> T. Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies – the Biblical End of the World in Text and Image*, London: Routledge, 1999, 98.

treat things the way they treat them and cherish the gifts they give you. When we read the creation story in Genesis with this in mind there are fundamental environmental implications.

1. Six times what God has created is described as ‘good’ and finally God considers it ‘very good’. If we love God and share the Creator’s valuation of the creation, we cannot be either apathetic or fatalistic about what humankind is doing to degrade and deface it.
2. God gives dominion over this earth as a gift to humans. We should cherish this love gift and exercise that dominion as those made in the image and likeness of our Creator and so in ways that reflects God’s character and God’s evaluation of the creation – with love, wisdom, justice, compassion etc.
3. Gen. 2:15 can be translated, ‘The Lord God put the man in the garden of Eden *to serve it and protect it.*’ The only other context in which these two Hebrew verbs are used together is to refer to priestly duty in the Tabernacle. Gordon Wenham has pointed out parallels between the descriptions of the Garden of Eden and the Tabernacle and Temple.<sup>7</sup> This suggests that Adam and Eve’s care for the Garden, and so their descendents’ care for the environment, is to be seen as an essential part of living a life of devotion and service towards God.
4. The Fall has not changed these fundamental truths. The ‘creation mandate’ is re-affirmed after the Flood in Gen. 9:1-7.

The Ethical motivation flows from the Second Commandment stated by Jesus in Mk 12:31, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ If I follow this commandment I will want to avoid doing things that will have negative impacts on my neighbours’ lives and their enjoyment of God’s very good creation. Again, there are clear environmental implications here. I will seek to adopt a life-style that minimises the depletion of the earth’s non-renewable resources, and minimises the pollution and degradation of the environment which I share with them. I will also seek to do what I can to sustain, and even enhance, the goodness of the environment that God has given to us. As we try to work out what this means, and that is not always an easy thing to do, we must remember that we have neighbours in time as well as in space. So, we should be concerned not only about how we affect the environment of people living today, but also about what kind of environment we pass on to future generations.

It seems to me that each of these motivations provides a strong basis for Christian environmental concern and action. Therefore any understanding of biblical eschatology which seems to undermine or nullify these motivations has to be viewed as theologically suspect and a candidate for critical reassessment as to its biblical

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<sup>7</sup> G. J. Wenham, ‘Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story’, *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies*, 9(1986), 19-25.

credentials since it introduces a major inconsistency into our understanding of biblical theology.

### **Can Eschatology be Green?**

So, we come back to the key question, ‘Can eschatology be green?’ We need to start with a reappraisal of some biblical passages that have been used to give a negative answer to the question.

One of them is 2 Peter 3:7-13. Since this passage has been dealt with in detail in previous JRI conferences I will deal with it only briefly here. Consultation of different English translations indicates that it is not easy to understand, and commentaries confirm this. Probably the key issue is a textual one, concerning the final word of v10. There is a variety of readings in the surviving Greek manuscripts, the main options being: ‘will be found/exposed’, ‘will disappear’, or ‘will be burned up’. There is little doubt among textual scholars that the earliest and best reading is ‘will be found/exposed’. A second issue is the meaning of the word ‘elements’ (*stoicheia*) in this passage. Modern readers tend to assume it means the elements of which all physical things are composed. This is a possible meaning. However, elsewhere in the New Testament the word is used of the (hostile) spiritual powers which rule over the created order (e.g. Gal. 4:3; Col. 2:8, 20 NRSV). There is support for this meaning here in that Peter’s language is reminiscent of Old Testament passages of judgement which use cosmic language (e.g. Isa 24:21; 34:4). In them judgement begins with ‘the host of heaven’, meaning the spiritual powers. It is important to note that Peter is heir to a long tradition of *figurative* language about ‘cosmic upheavals’ which the Hebrew prophets applied to events within history, such as the destruction of Edom of the Babylonian Empire, to mark them as acts of God’s judgement. We might get some sense of how the prophets were using ‘cosmic’ language in passages like this if we compare it to the modern idiom of talking about certain events as ‘earth-shattering’. I am sure that some commentator somewhere will have written a piece saying that the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was an earth-shattering event which contributed to the ending of the Cold War. Someone reading this with undue literalism in a thousand years time might conclude that in 1989 there was a catastrophic earthquake in eastern Germany which toppled the Berlin Wall and that the scale of the destruction caused by the earthquake led the nations of Europe to put aside their hostility and learn to live together more amicably. That, of course, would be a total misunderstanding of a striking figure of speech. We must beware of doing the same kind of thing with the language of the prophets and apocalyptists in the Bible.

The judgement theme makes sense of the verb ‘will be found/exposed’ at the end of v10. In both Old Testament Hebrew (e.g. Ex. 22:8; Ps 17:3; Dan. 5:27) and

New Testament Greek (Acts 13:28; 23:9; 24:20; Jn. 18:38; 19:4, 6) the verb ‘to find’ is used in contexts of moral and judicial scrutiny. Also, in both the Old and New Testaments fire is used as metaphor of judgement which does not simply destroy, but *purifies* (Isa. 2:21-26; Mal. 3:1-4; 1 Cor. 3:12-15). So, it makes good sense to see the passage as using figurative language about God’s ultimate act of judgement which will purge the created order of all evil, both spiritual and physical. The passage itself indicates that its theme is the ‘destruction of the godless’ (not of the physical cosmos) so that there will be ‘new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness is at home’ (v7, 13). The parallel with the Flood (v5-6) suggests that while the judgement will be cataclysmic there will still be considerable continuity between the worlds before and after the purifying judgement.<sup>8</sup> This is also suggested by the Greek word used in v13 for ‘new’ (*kainos*), which refers to a newness in quality rather than to something which has not existed before (which would be expressed by *neos*<sup>9</sup>). So, this passage is not speaking of a total destruction of the present material cosmos in which we live and its replacement by another, totally different, one. It is talking about a radical purging out of all that is evil and a radical transformation of the cosmos. I like the comment which Prof. Sir John Polkinghorne<sup>10</sup> has made in more than one place that the New Creation will not be the result of another act of *creatio ex nihilo*, but will be the result of an act of *creatio ex vetere*.

But what, then, are we to make of those images of environmental disaster in Revelation to which Hal Lindsey and others appeal in arguing that such disasters are inevitable and therefore there is no point in trying to prevent them? These images are found in Rev. 8:7-13 (the blowing of the first four trumpets) and Rev. 16:1-9 (the pouring out of the first four ‘bowls of wrath’). The first thing to say is that we are dealing here with apocalyptic imagery and it is very doubtful if it should be taken literally. These are symbolic depictions of judgement. A careful study of them, for which we haven’t time, reveals echoes of the plagues of Egypt (many commentators have noted an ‘exodus theme’ running through the whole book) and also of the covenant curses of Lev. 26 and Deut. 28. In addition, it is expressly said that these are not meant to be final judgements, they are intended to provoke repentance on the part of the nations of the earth (9:20-21; 16:9-11). There is a parallel here with the Hebrew prophets appealing to such things a drought, crop blight, plague on cattle and people as evidence that the people have broken the covenant (and so are suffering from its curses) and should therefore repent of their ways and turn back to God. So, I suggest that the significance of these images in Revelation is that they warn us that when the earth is dominated by the Great Whore, Babylon, the picture of human greed for power in all its forms, military, political, economic, and of lust for material wealth, then part of the consequences will be environmental catastrophes of various

<sup>8</sup> R.J Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983, fn. 9, 49f, makes this point.

<sup>9</sup> See C. Brown, (ed.) *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 2, 669f.

<sup>10</sup> J. Polkinghorne, *Science and Christian Belief*, London: SPCK, 1994, 167.

kinds.<sup>11</sup> They are a consequence of not heeding God's laws about how we should live in his creation. The book of Revelation does not encourage 'the saints' to sit back and do nothing about this, but to be witnesses who speak out against it and warriors who fight against it. The final end in Revelation is not the destruction of the earth, but the destruction of Babylon as a judgement for all the damage she has done to the earth, its people and the saints of God and the destruction of Satan and all his hosts, for whom Babylon was a 'front'. The 'saints, apostles and prophets' are called to rejoice at Babylon's downfall (18:20). The final end, as we shall see, a new heaven and a new earth and the coming down from heaven of the New Jerusalem – presumably to earth.

I think the 'Left Behind' novels are based on a fairly common misunderstanding of passages such as 1 Thess. 4:16c,17, where Paul says, 'the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever.' It is sometimes assumed that where we shall be with the Lord is somewhere other than the earth, and so we go to meet him in the air, part-way on the journey to heaven. This, however, totally misses the point of the imagery Paul is using. In v15 he uses the Greek word *parousia* to speak of this 'coming' of the Lord at the end of the age. This is the word used of the visit of a ruler of the Hellenistic era and his entourage to a city within his dominion. A deputation from the city would go out to meet him and escort him into the city in pomp. Paul, therefore, is thinking of believers going to 'meet the Lord in the air' in order to escort him to the earth – so is that where 'we shall be with the Lord for ever'? That intriguing thought or, so I have found, shocking thought for some Christians, brings me to the point where I want to propose an eschatology that is green, but I need to build it up in stages out of a number of components.

### **Where is Heaven?**

I want to start with a question which every Christian parent who has young children gets asked at some point, 'Daddy/Mummy, where is heaven?' When I was at Sunday School we still used to sing that hymn which includes the lines, 'There's a home for little children, above the bright blue sky.' It was never helpful imagery because, as I shall argue, it is unbiblical, but it became obsolete with the advent of space flight. It was that kind of crass imagery which enabled President Nikita Khrushchev of the USSR to claim that the early Russian astronauts had gone into space to look for God, and had not found him, thus proving that he does not exist. As C. S. Lewis said at the time, some of us would have been rather worried if they *had* found God, or heaven, in outer space. My reply to the children's question 'Where is heaven?' was 'Heaven is where God is'. I'm glad to say that several years later I

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<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to an as yet unpublished paper by S. P. Woodman, 'Can the Book of Revelation be a Gospel for the Environment' for this insight.

found that an eminent theologian, Tom Wright, says the same, though he puts it in rather more sophisticated theological language. He says<sup>12</sup> that “‘Heaven’ is God’s dimension of present reality.’ He explains what he means by reference to the story in 2 Kings 6:15-19 in which Elisha and his servant are surrounded by the Syrian army. The servant says, ‘Alas, master, what shall we do?’ Elisha tells him not to be afraid and prays, ‘Lord, open the young man’s eyes’. The Lord opens his eyes and he sees the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. What had happened was a sudden unveiling of a dimension of reality that was there all along, but normally unseen. God does not exist in a totally separate reality from ours. Rather his *immediate presence*, as distinct from his *mediated presence*, which is what we normally experience, exists in a normally unseen dimension of our reality. I’ve long thought it significant that in the story of Jesus’ ascension he doesn’t simply disappear up into ‘the bright blue sky’ like a rocket leaving Cape Canaveral and dwindling away into the distance. No, he ascends some way and then a cloud ‘receives’ him. That seems pretty good imagery for moving from one dimension to another. This idea of heaven as ‘God’s dimension of present reality’ which is an unseen part of our reality shouldn’t seem strange to us since cosmologists have talked for the last twenty years about String Theory in which there are at least ten dimensions of reality, of which six are ‘compactified’ (‘rolled up’) so that we are unaware of them – not that I’m suggesting that heaven is in one of those hypothetical dimensions.

### **What is the Kingdom of God?**

In the Gospels the kingdom of God (in Matthew, kingdom of heaven) is a major theme of Jesus’ teaching. The first point to make is that there is no difference in meaning between the two phrases. The Rabbis avoided the use of the word ‘God’ (to avoid taking God’s name in vain), often substituting it by ‘heaven’. That is why in Matthew, a Gospel written in the first place for Jewish readers, the phrase used almost always is ‘kingdom of heaven’. Secondly, the word ‘kingdom’ is a bit misleading because in English it refers primarily to a place or area of territory. The Greek word used in the Gospels (*basileia*) does mean this, but it can also mean the activity of a king, his ‘rule’. In the light of what Jesus says, this makes good sense. Once we realise that what Jesus was talking about was the ‘reign/rule of God’ it becomes clear that there is continuity between his teaching and a major theme of the OT.

Several Psalms celebrate the fact that ‘the LORD/God reigns’ (Pss. 47, 93, 96-99). In the OT that reign is represented on earth by the rule of David and his successors in Jerusalem, as Ps 2 indicates. The prophets looked forward to the day when God’s rule on earth would not be limited to Israel, but would encompass all

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<sup>12</sup> N. T. Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth*, Cambridge: Grove Books, 1999, 14.

nations: ‘And the LORD will become king over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one and his name one’ (Zech. 14:9).

In the book of Daniel the final establishing of the rule of God is associated with a figure called ‘one like a son of man’ (Dan. 7:13-14). It is clear that he represents, or leads, God’s people (Dan. 7:27). Jesus often referred to himself as ‘the Son of Man’. This was not a title of humility, but an implicit claim to be the one who was establishing God’s rule on earth and had the authority to exercise that rule (Mark 14:61-64).

Most Jews in Jesus’ day were looking for God’s rule to break into the world. They were looking for ‘the end’ to come, after which ‘this age’, when Satan had a measure of control, would be replaced by ‘the age to come’, the establishment of God’s rule on earth.

### The End

This Age (Satan’s time)

The Age to Come (God’s rule)

Characterised by:

Sin  
Sickness  
Demon possession  
Evil people triumph

Characterised by:

Righteousness  
Health  
Presence of the Spirit  
Peace

Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom ‘had come near’ (Mk. 1:14) and that ‘it is among you’ (Lk. 17:20). He claimed that his exorcisms were evidence that ‘the kingdom of God has come to you’ (Matt. 12:28). In other words, God’s rule was at work in and through him.

People wondered if he really was the Messiah, the one who would bring in the Age to Come and with it God’s rule in its fullness. Then he was crucified, and all hope of this was dashed – only to be gloriously revived when he was raised from the dead. Resurrection, of course, was what was expected to happen at ‘The End’, the moment between the two ages. Surely he would now ‘restore the kingdom to Israel’ (Acts 1:6). Instead he ascended to heaven and poured out the Spirit, another thing expected to happen at ‘The End’. Yet the rule of God had not been established over all the earth. What was going on? Beginning with Peter’s speech in Acts 3 we see the early Christians coming to the realisation that Jesus had come to usher in ‘the beginning of the end’ and would one day come back to usher in the ‘final end’ (Acts

3:19- 21). Meanwhile we live between the ‘times’, between the *beginning* of the end and the *consummation* of the end, in an overlap of the ‘Ages’ Therefore we live with a tension between things that are *already* true but *not yet* perfected.

### The End

<u>This Age</u>	<u>The Age to Come</u>	<u>(never ending)</u>
The Cross and Resurrection		The Second Coming
Already:		Not yet:
Righteousness		Completely righteous
Peace		Full peace
Health		No sickness or death
Spirit		in complete fullness

An important key to understanding much of the teaching of the NT is the recognition of this *already/not yet* tension with which Jesus’ disciples have to live. What we pray for in the Lord’s Prayer is the coming of the rule of God in its fullness. It is worth noting that we pray for it to come *on earth*. Meanwhile we are exhorted to live as those who acknowledge that rule and enjoy many of its benefits in some measure, while we wait and work for its coming in its fullness.

At this point Paul’s words to the Philippians saying that, ‘Our citizenship is in heaven and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ’ (Phil. 3:20) are important. They are sometimes taken to mean that we are just temporary residents on earth and so should not get involved in its affairs. That, however, is a total misunderstanding of the imagery Paul is using. Philippi was a Roman Colony and its citizens were proud of that fact. It was a privilege that was not granted lightly. Under Roman law the colonies were part of Rome and their citizens were Roman citizens. Their function was an important one. By living according to Roman law and customs they were intended to be a ‘shop window’ for Rome, convincing the surrounding barbarians of the benefits of Roman rule, so that they would want to become Romans too. What a powerful image of the function of the church in this period ‘between the ages’! The church is a colony of heaven, intended to bring something of a taste of heaven on earth. In the light of Paul’s use of the *parousia* imagery, which we’ve already discussed, when he speaks of us awaiting the Saviour to come from heaven to transform us (v21) we might conclude that this is not because he will take us away to the ‘mother city’ but that his coming will bring the consummation of our efforts to bring the God’s rule to the earth.

## What is Eternal Life?

Outside the Gospels and Acts talk of the kingdom of God is largely replaced by talk of ‘eternal life’. One reason for this may be indicated by Acts 17:7. Some people in Thessalonica accused Paul of ‘acting contrary to the decrees of the Emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus’. Clearly, while the concept of the kingdom of God was deeply meaningful to Jews, others could easily misunderstand it in purely down-to-earth subversive political terms. Whatever the reasons for the change in terminology, for many people this seems to give the understanding of salvation a more ‘spiritual’ and less ‘material’ ethos than does ‘the kingdom/rule of God’. This however, is a misunderstanding. We haven’t time to do a detailed study of the Greek phrase which is translated ‘eternal life’ (*zōē aiōnios*) but Tom Wright sums up the essential points about it when he says<sup>13</sup>, ‘In its original Jewish context the phrase fairly certainly refers to ‘the life of the age to come.’ This, of course, fits in very well with what we’ve seen regarding Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God. ‘Eternal life’ is not life lived in some other existence, it is life lived under God’s rule. It begins on this earth now in the time when the ages overlap and will continue on the new earth when the age to come dawns in its fullness.

## Why the First Advent?

Why did God the Son come into the world as a human being? The answer might seem obvious to most Christians – he came to save us from our sins. That is true. But it is only part of the truth, or so Hebrews 2 tells us

The opening verses of Hebrews make it clear that the Son, the one who became a man in Jesus, is truly God. We’ll come back to those verses in a moment. Hebrews ch. 2 stresses that he became a true human being, he ‘partook of the same nature’ as ours (v14). He was made like us ‘in every respect’ (v17). The first advent was a true incarnation. God became a true human being in Jesus of Nazareth. Why did he do so? Hebrews 2 answers that question in a number of ways, but it is significant that the whole topic of incarnation is introduced by a quotation from Psalm 8:4-6, which itself echoes Genesis 1:26-28, where we are told of the creation of men and women in the image of God, and of God giving them responsibility to care for the rest of creation. To put it briefly, the writer is telling us that the fullest answer to the question, ‘Why did God the Son become a man in Jesus?’ is that he did so to fulfil the purpose God had when he created the world.

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<sup>13</sup> N. T. Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth*, Cambridge: Grove Books, 1999, 7.

As we've seen in Genesis 1 we are told that God created the world and then declared it to be 'very good'. Human beings were put in it to be God's representatives, caring for it and ruling over it in God's name. But, says Hebrews 2:8, that is not the situation as we see it. Humans are not really in control of the rest of creation. Something has gone wrong. That 'something' is described in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve were not satisfied with being God's representatives, they wanted to be like God. Their disobedience led to the loss of their ability to care for and rule over the world properly. As a result, the rest of creation has suffered. Its original goodness has been marred.

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God their relationship with God was broken. This affected other relationships, as Genesis 3 makes clear (diagram of broken relationships): me-myself, me-others, me-nature (expound). Of course, the heart of what Jesus came to do was to restore our relationship with God. That is fundamental. But, restoration of the other relationships flows from that. However, it does not flow from it automatically. We have to work at it. My personality was not put right overnight when I became a Christian. I did not become Christ-like at once. It will take a life-time of working with the Holy Spirit to make this real in my life. Similarly, my relationships with other people did not all get put right in a moment. That, too, requires constant effort in the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians have been aware of these things for centuries. What most have not been aware of is the need to work at the other relationship as well – the relationship between humans and the rest of creation. From time-to-time there have been Christians who have realized that this is an aspect of what our salvation means, and have tried to make others realize it too, but it has only been the environmental problems that have become apparent in the last 30-40 years that have really brought it to the attention of a significant number of Christians.

The earth and its creatures have been exploited and abused by humans seeking to use it simply for their own ends instead of caring for it as God's good creation. Now that we have been restored to a right relationship with God, we have the responsibility of working in the power of the Holy Spirit to prevent further despoiling of the creation and to try to restore some of its original goodness. To fail to do so is to go on sinning against God in that area of our life. Suppose that before I became a Christian I was a habitual liar. If, after becoming a Christian I went on lying regularly, ignoring the teaching of the Bible that God desires truth and honesty and that lying is wrong, I would be going on sinning wilfully, and Christians would all agree that that is wrong. But all of us, before we became Christians, just because of the kind of society in which we live and the lifestyle it encourages us to live, were habitually misusing God's good gifts of creation: wasting resources, using them unfairly (because we in the West use more than our fair share of them), and contributing to the despoiling of the environment in various ways. Once we become

Christians and realize that this is God's world, and that God wants us to care for it, to enhance its goodness and not despoil it, and that we are meant to use its resources wisely and justly, we ought to seek God's guidance and the power of the Holy Spirit to break with the sinful way of life of our society and to set it an example of how God wants us to care for the created world.

If that is the purpose of the First Advent, the Second Advent will mean the consummation of that purpose. It will not mean that Christians are taken out of this creation to live in quite different reality, but that we and the rest of creation will be so transformed that God's original purpose for this creation is finally fulfilled. This, I think, is the vision that Paul has in Rom. 8:19-21.

### **What will the New Heavens and New Earth be like?**

In his vision in Rev. 21&22 John sees the new heaven and the new earth and the new Jerusalem *coming down out of heaven*, presumably to the new earth. Like Peter, John uses the Greek word *kainos* for 'new' and the nature of what is happening is explained in Rev. 21:5, 'See, *new* I am making all things'. The word order, putting emphasis on *kainos*, suggests a renewing of the old by a radical transformation, not the abolishing of it to start again *de novo*.<sup>14</sup> What follows confirms this. The kings and the peoples of the nations bring 'their glory' into the New Jerusalem (v24, 26). There is a continuity with the first creation, and this is a continuity to which human endeavour makes its contribution.

It is significant that while the description of the New Jerusalem has elements that remind us of the Garden of Eden (God's presence, the river, the Tree of Life), what is presented is not a garden but a city. The city first appears in Gen. 4 as a human artefact, with Cain as the builder of the first city. That the consummation of God's purposes is presented as a city indicates that God has taken up and incorporated the best of human endeavours (which includes our dominion over the earth) in the working out of his purposes. So, what we do on and to the earth has eternal significance. Here is an eschatological motivation to take care for the environment seriously.

### **What kind of Transformation?**

What does it mean to say that the New Creation will not be the result of another act of *creatio ex nihilo*, but will be the result of an act of *creatio ex vetere*? I have no simple answer to this question. The most I can do is make two observations.

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<sup>14</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, *the Book of Revelation*, London: Oliphants, 1974, 312.

The first is to point to what Paul says about the resurrection body in 1 Cor. 15. It seems to me that even he struggles with what this means, but he uses the analogy of plant growth in order to make the point that there will be both *continuity* and *change* (v37&38). An experienced gardener can look at a bulb and say, “That will grow into daffodil, or, a tulip ... or whatever”. Even though the bulb looks quite different from the flowering plant, there is a continuity that links the two together. This is something we can only marvel at, so is it surprising that the idea of having a resurrection body that is both continuous with, but different from, our present body is mind-stretching? We see something of this combination of continuity and change in our earthly life as we grow from baby to child to mature adult. The resurrection is just the next stage of the process, even though it involves an even bigger change. What is true for us as individuals will, I am sure, be true for the rest of creation too.

The second observation is that Jesus’ resurrection body, with which he returned to heaven, is the only clear evidence we have as to what the ‘new creation’ might be like. It was both like and unlike his earthly body. He was recognisably the same Jesus, yet he could appear in and disappear from a locked room. Significantly, he still had the scars of the crucifixion - but they were not a cause of shame or limitation, but the grounds of glory. He brings the tokens of ‘his glory’, what he achieved during his life on this earth, into the New Jerusalem. We will do the same. We might be surprised by what those are!

## **Summary**

The time has come to put the components together and construct an eschatology that is green. Biblical eschatology is about the consummation of God’s purpose in the return of Christ, the Second Advent. If we want to know what that means we have to begin with the purpose of the First Advent. Hebrews ch.2 and other places in the New Testament make it clear that Christ came to bring to completion God’s purpose when he created the earth and created humans in his image and likeness to rule and have dominion over it as his representatives. There is no clear indication that the fulfilment of that purpose will involve whisking humans away from this earth and then destroying it. The coming of the rule of God was the central theme of Jesus’ teaching and there is no indication that he expected this to come to fulfilment anywhere but on this earth. The imagery inherent in the concept of *parousia* supports this. The Second Advent is not Jesus returning to remove his followers from this earth but Jesus coming to establish his rule on this earth. The imagery of Rev. 21&22 also supports this. The New Jerusalem, with the throne of God and the Lamb comes down to the renewed earth where God dwells among humans. Heaven, the dimension of God’s present reality, will come to earth. The renewal of the heavens and the earth involves a purifying judgement which purges them of all evil, spiritual and physical. The resulting transformation is one marked by

both discontinuity and continuity. Perhaps this will be partly because Heaven, that dimension of God's present reality which is now hidden from us, will become a full part of our experienced reality. We are not given a clear picture of what this transformation will mean, but it is made clear that our present labour done in the Lord will not be in vain (1 Cor. 15:58). It will come through the judgement and be taken up and play its role in the shaping of the new heaven and the new earth. This labour should have many aspects. There is the effort we should put in to becoming more and more Christ-like. After all it is clear from various places in the New Testament that God wants us to be transformed into the image of his Son (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 4:13). It is also clear that God wants us to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19-20). The aspect of our labour in the Lord that has tended to be neglected down the centuries is the one that goes right back to Gen. 1:28, that of caring for and developing God's good creation in the way he wants it done. Any balanced, biblical eschatology has to include the consummation of all these aspects, and no doubt others besides, and such an eschatology cannot be anything other than green as it gives a powerful motivation for care for the environment.

### **A Devotional Green Eschatology**

I want to conclude with one aspect of biblical eschatology that is often overlooked but which I think lifts us above the kinds of debates we have been considering. It brings together the devotional and the eschatological motivations for caring for the environment. It has its roots in Col. 1:16 and Heb. 1:2.

‘In him (Christ) all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things were created through him and for him.’ (Col. 1:16)

‘In these last days he (God) has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom he also created the world.’ (Heb. 1:2)

Both of these passages speak of Christ, God the Son, as the agent in the creation of the world and as the appointed heir of it. The earth is Christ's inheritance. As those given dominion over it we humans are the trustees of his inheritance until he comes to claim it. How well are we doing this task? Think of it this way. Suppose you heard that a distant relative had died and left you a magnificent country house and estate. The lawyers had taken a long time tracing you and meanwhile the estate had been in the hands of trustees. As soon as you can after hearing of your inheritance you go to claim it. You find that the once beautiful house has been rented out for all kinds of wild pop-concerts and similar events and has fallen into wrack and ruin. Some of the fine woodland on the estate has been chopped down and replaced by concrete car parks. The lake has become little better than a cess-pit. You'd be livid wouldn't you?

You'd be wanting to wreak vengeance on the trustees who have ruined your inheritance instead of preserving it for you. So, how will you and I feel if we have not done what we could to preserve the goodness and beauty of the earth for Christ? That alone is surely a powerful reason why as Christians we should be concerned about environmental issues as we wait for the second advent of Christ. Eschatology should be green for those who love Christ and have his interests at heart.

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