

Chapter 8

FUTURE VISIONS OF CREATION AT PEACE

In the previous two chapters we have begun, unavoidably, to focus on texts and traditions that are essentially future-orientated, or *eschatological*; that is to say, that they are concerned with God's future transformation of the world. A central early Christian conviction was that this promised future transformation had already begun; the final act in the drama had commenced, announced and inaugurated by the ministry and especially the resurrection of Jesus. Of course, it is not only in the New Testament that we find future visions of the transformation God will bring about. On the contrary, the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament, contains a range of prophetic visions of the imminent or distant future, visions which influence and inform the New Testament depictions, as we have already seen in the discussions of Jesus and Paul above.

These future visions have an obvious relevance to discussions of ecology and the environment, for at least two main reasons. First, because discussions of environmental pressures and ethical dilemmas often have a clear future orientation too. Of course, they have a present (and past) dimension as well – in the impact on ecosystems and human welfare that is already evident and measurable, and in the awareness of species already lost forever – but they are often concerned with how to avoid possible future scenarios: how to avoid the most catastrophic effects of global warming, how to preserve endangered species and habitats, and so on. Second, because biblical eschatology, especially as interpreted in some Christian traditions and denominations, seems to raise certain questions about the whole basis for any need to preserve and care for the earth, or to consider the welfare of future generations (see chs 1–2 above). If Jesus might imminently return, and rescue (only) the elect, and if the earth is to be replaced by a new earth (along with a new heaven, as is implied in some of the texts we shall examine), then why bother to protect the environment or conserve future resources? Thinking about what kinds of future visions the Bible offers, and about their possible ecological implications, is, then, a crucial task.

There is another reason why eschatological material needs to be given full and careful consideration, at least in the context of a discussion of the implications of such material for Christian interpreters. Just as eschatological convictions were central to early Christian faith, so they remain fundamental to Christian theology and ethics. While some of the Bible's ethical material has no necessary eschatological frame – such as the command to love of neighbour or other aspects of the Jewish Law – the conviction that God's action in Christ constitutes the decisive event in a plan of salvation is so central to the Christian story that it fundamentally shapes the understanding of what Christian ethics is about. As Helmut Thielicke writes: "Theological ethics is eschatological or it is nothing" (Thielicke 1966: 47). Or, as Victor Paul Furnish writes with regard to Paul, "eschatology is not just one motif among numerous others, but helps to provide the fundamental perspective within which everything else is viewed" (Furnish 1968: 214).

In this chapter and the following one, we shall consider a few examples of these visions, taken from both the Old and New Testaments. I have divided the texts into two types, one to be considered in each chapter. The first type concerns visions of a renewed creation at peace, visions which might, at least in certain respects, seem to offer a rather positive ecological vision of the future. The second type concerns texts which present images of cosmic destruction and therefore immediately raise rather difficult questions for any attempt to derive a positive ecological vision from the Bible. It is important to stress not only that this is, unavoidably, only a restricted treatment of selected texts, but also that the division of the texts into these two types is a somewhat arbitrary decision, not least since the categories and images are blurred and overlapping. In other words, the division into two types, treated separately in these two chapters, does not reflect a division between two recognized types of biblical material, but only a division which is useful in terms of separating two different kinds of ecologically relevant issues that arise.

There is, however, a distinction made by biblical scholars which we should note here concerning types of literary material: the distinction between prophecy and apocalyptic. Broadly speaking, prophecy was a form in which both official figures (e.g. royal court or cult prophets) and unofficial critics voiced oracles or words from God/the gods, in ancient Israel and other contemporary cultures and civilizations. These prophetic declarations were often related to their immediate circumstances and historical context, although sometimes seem to relate to a more remote and distant future (or were certainly later interpreted in this way). Apocalyptic – derived from

the Greek word *apokalupto*, meaning to reveal or uncover – was “the form which prophecy took during the Graeco-Roman period” (Rowland 1990: 34). Apocalyptic literature is characterized by imminent expectation, a strong dualism of good and evil embodied in the contrast between the old age, soon to pass away, and the new eternal age to come, which will be brought in by decisive divine intervention. Apocalyptic “sets out to reveal things as they really are in the world at large” (Rowland 1990: 35); that is, by depicting – often through visionary experiences – what a heavenly perspective shows about the way the world is and about the things that will soon come to pass. Since most scholars would see apocalyptic as a development of the prophetic tradition, it is unsurprising that there is no hard and fast distinction between the two types. And apocalyptic imagery can be used in texts which are not, in terms of their overall type, usually classified as apocalyptic (e.g., Mark 13, discussed in the following chapter). Indeed, one of the prophetic books we shall discuss briefly in both this chapter and the next, Joel, is often seen as standing at the transition between prophecy and apocalyptic. At the very least, Joel seems to represent a collection of prophetic material in which apocalyptic imagery is quite prominent. We turn first, though, to the book of Isaiah.

The renewal of creation in the book of Isaiah

The book of Isaiah has been enormously influential upon Christian theology, from the earliest days. Prophecies concerning a woman bearing a child called Immanuel (Isa. 7:14) and a future ruler, the prince of peace (Isa. 9:6), were quickly interpreted in a messianic way (cf. Matt. 1:23); these texts are well known to Christians as a part of the series of Christmas readings, taken to announce the coming of Christ. And Isaiah's depiction of a suffering servant (Isa. 52:13–53:12) was soon read as a description of the sufferings of Christ (Acts 8:30–35; 1 Pet. 2:21–25). It is likely, however, that these prophecies originally related to the more immediate circumstances of the time. Moreover, scholars have long recognized that the book of Isaiah contains material from a range of historical periods. Consequently, the book has been divided into three main sections: chapters 1–39, stemming, at least in part, from the eighth century BCE, 40–55 and 56–66 reflecting the later context of the return from Exile (sixth century BCE and later). Hence, many scholars refer to Isaiah, Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah, or use other equivalent terms. Even within each section of the book there is debate about how much of the material might derive from the original historical context of one prophetic figure. While the book can be read as a

canonical whole (e.g., Childs 2001), it contains a compilation of materials from a wide variety of contexts and originators.

Among a number of visions of a future peace (under an ideal future ruler) from the first section of the book, Isa. 11:1–9 calls for our attention, due to its inclusion of non-human animals within the scope of this peaceable vision. After a section predicting the rise of a future Davidic ruler, “from the stump of Jesse” (v. 1), who will rule with righteousness and justice (vv. 3–5), the vision continues:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. (Isa. 11:6–9, ESV)

It is uncertain whether these two sections of the vision (vv. 1–5, vv. 6–9) were originally related, but they are clearly brought into close relationship by their juxtaposition in the text: the reign of the anticipated righteous ruler will bring not only social justice (v. 4) but also an end to enmity and violence among animals, and between humans and animals. “The effect of the righteous rule of the Messiah is depicted in terms of an age of universal peace that embraces both the human and animal world” (Childs 2001: 103). Various aspects of the text invite a comparison with the stories in Genesis we have already examined (see chs 3–4). The first creation account in Genesis 1 depicted both animals and humans as originally functioning on a vegetarian/herbivorous diet, a (mythical) vision of pre-history which is here depicted as a future ideal state. And, as Otto Kaiser notes, “if suckling and little child play with the most poisonous snakes, without their mother finding them dead, the old enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the snake has been removed (Gen. 3:15)” (Kaiser 1983: 260). So this future peace is, in some ways, depicted as a return to the Edenic paradise.

This vision of peace among the animals is echoed again in Isa. 65:25, using very similar language, and perhaps appears also in Hos. 2:18, but, according to Kaiser, nowhere else in the Old Testament. The description of the good fortunes of the person whom God reproves in the book of Job also includes the theme of peace between humans and animals, with the promise that such a person will “not fear the beasts of the earth. For you shall be in league with the stones of the field, and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with you. You shall know that your tent is at peace, and you shall

inspect your fold and miss nothing" (Job 5:22–24, ESV). Kaiser also notes a different tradition, which depicts the peaceable future in a land from which wild animals have been driven away, in order that people may dwell in safety (Ezek. 34:25; Isa. 35:9; Lev. 26:6; cf. Kaiser 1983: 259).

Later Jewish and Jewish-Christian literature also picks up this theme. Philo, the first-century CE Jewish philosopher (c. 20 BCE–50 CE), speaking of the need for real obedience to the commands of God and of the enmity between humanity and animals, says that no one can end this enmity, except God, through his election of certain persons as saviours of their race. Philo is here presenting this vision in terms of a philosophically-shaped discussion, focusing on the need for virtuous living. If such good entered the world, he suggests, the wild passions in the human soul would be tamed, and so also would the wild animals:

Therefore we need not give up hope that when the wild beasts within us are fully tamed the animals too will become tame and gentle. When that time comes I believe that bears and lions and panthers and the Indian animals, elephants and tigers, and all others whose vigour and power are invincible, will change their life of solitariness and isolation for one of companionship, and gradually in imitation of the gregarious creatures show themselves tame when brought face to face with mankind. They will no longer as heretofore be roused to ferocity by the sight, but will be awe-struck into respectful fear of him as their natural lord and master. (Philo, *On Rewards and Punishments* 88–89, trans F. H. Colson)

Philo goes on to describe how venomous creatures will keep their poison inoperative, the river animals that attack people will become tame and gentle, and among the sea creatures "the virtuous man will be sacred and unhurt, since God honours virtue and has given it immunity from all designs against it as a proper reward" (§90, trans C. D. Yonge).

A more direct appropriation of the Isaianic imagery is found in the Sibylline Oracles, a composite Jewish-Christian collection which contains material from a wide range of dates. The third oracle, however, is largely a Jewish composition dating from the second-century and probably originating in Egypt (Collins 1983: 354–55). Speaking of the eschatological kingdom which the great and living God will raise up, the oracle says:

Wolves and lambs will eat grass together in the mountains. Leopards will feed together with kids. Roving bears will spend the night with calves. The flesh-eating lion will eat husks at the manger like an ox, and mere infant children will lead them with ropes. For he will make the beasts on earth harmless. Serpents and asps will sleep with babies and will not harm them, for the hand of God will be upon them. (*Sib. Or.* 3:788–795, trans J. J. Collins)

As we have already noted (pp. 69–70), Richard Bauckham draws attention to this theme of messianic peace with the animals, suggesting that this tradition underpins and informs the brief reference in Mark 1:13: "he [Jesus] was with the wild animals". Jesus, Bauckham argues, establishes his messianic peace in the wilderness.

It is clear enough (especially in Job 5:24, quoted above), and hardly surprising, in a pre-industrial agricultural economy, that the desire underlying such visions is "the longing for a life with no danger. The fact that the beasts of prey feed with domestic animals means that the farmer will no longer have losses among his herds. If a young child can look after the flocks, being a shepherd has become a peaceful idyll" (Kaiser 1983: 260). In the sixteenth century, Calvin could still depict wild animals as a serious threat to human welfare (see above, p. 46). Yet in a modern Western context, this motif has inspired a different kind of ethical and ecological reflection.

For obvious reasons, Isa. 11:6–9 (and the other related texts), along with Gen. 1:29–30, are particularly significant texts for Christian vegetarians (cf. Webb 2001: 59–81; Linzey 1994: 125–37). The vision of a future (non-predatory) peace is seen as a return to the Creator's original intention, and a commitment to vegetarianism is seen as a way of living eschatologically, in step with, and anticipation of, the realization of God's peaceable kingdom (see Horrell 2008).

From a somewhat different perspective, John Olley finds many of the Earth Bible Project's ecojustice principles (see pp. 13–14) exemplified in the Isaianic material. The many references to animals in the book of Isaiah imply, according to Olley, "the principle of intrinsic worth" (Olley 2001: 221), and the inclusion of animals among those who praise God suggests the principle of voice (p. 222). Furthermore:

Throughout the book of Isaiah animals are more than recognized as part of the Earth community. Whether wild or domestic, their integrity and diversity is affirmed. The vision of the future worshipping life on the holy mountain includes animals. For Isaiah the distinctive core of the future is not temple worship but an Earth community where all live in mutuality, where all is right and there is no harming or destroying. "Harmful" animals are not banished, rather they share in the transformation with humans (principles of interconnectedness and purpose). All participate in the "knowledge of YHWH" on the "holy mountain." (Olley 2001: 227)

When it comes to the possible present relevance of such visions of the future Olley notes that "prophetic portrayals of the future are not designed merely as predictions or to satisfy curiosity, but rather are means of

encouraging appropriate behavioural responses in the present" (p. 228). The force of the Isaianic visions is that "one must respond to a moral claim to do what is possible to minimize violence and enhance harmony now" (p. 229).

An earlier article by Sibley Towner, from which Olley quotes, also sees this prophetic material as a vision of "the transformed ecosystem of the new age": this renewed world is characterized by abundance, peace, long and vigorous life, and an end to death (Towner 1996: 29–30). Because such visions cannot be seen as scientific or historical as such, Towner sees their relevance fundamentally as "moral imperative":

If peace is the hallmark of the new age (Isa. 11:1–9), then our work in this time of tribulation is to abolish war and to effect reconciliation between people, as well as between people, wolves, and snakes ... The biblical pictures of nature in the future function as incitements toward a style of ethical living in the present that is holistic, interdependent, non-hierarchical, and one that does not reject flesh and matter as corrupt because God does not reject them. (Towner 1996: 33; see also Olley 2001: 229)

Just as Isaiah's vision of a future in which people "beat their swords into ploughshares" (Isa. 2:4) has been a rallying-call for non-violence and pacifism, so one can see how the vision of peace throughout the animal kingdom is an inspiring ecological and ethical vision. Yet, inspiring though this vision might be, there are also difficulties in discerning what its ethical implications ought to be. How is any kind of "reconciliation" between wolves and snakes to be brought about? And how desirable would it be anyway? Does it imply that humans should organize nature into sanitized zoos, where the violence and bloodshed of predation is absent (or at least hidden from view)? As Olley and Towner acknowledge, our scientific understanding of the ways animals function shows us that carnivores simply cannot subsist by eating grass. The insights science has given us into evolution also make it impossible to conceive of an historical time when animals (let alone humans) existed in a pre-predatory herbivorous paradise. The very shape and form of the animals we know – both hunter and hunted – reflect their activity in the chains of predation. Lions would not be lions – have lion-like jaws and lion-like limbs – if they did not hunt prey and tear it apart. Gazelles would not be sleek and swift if they did not have to run from predatory lions.

So this vision of eschatological transformation cannot be achieved, nor is it even desirable to achieve, in the world as we know it. It makes no ecological or ethical sense to envisage a moral imperative to bring predation

to an end. It is of course possible for human beings – at least, those with adequate resources and opportunities – to nourish themselves on a vegetarian diet, but there are at least questions to discuss about whether this is the most appropriate ethical response to the call towards peace and reconciliation (cf. Southgate 2008a; Horrell 2008; Pollan 2006: 304–33). Once again we find that material with some apparently positive contribution to make to an ecological theology and ethics does not easily translate into clear instruction or responsibilities. This future vision may indeed inform and inspire an ecological worldview, but will require some careful (and scientifically informed) reflection to do so.

Another important and influential aspect of the future visions of the book of Isaiah is the motif of the new heavens and the new earth. Much material in Deutero-Isaiah (chs 40–55) offers a rich and varied portrait of the renewal and restoration into which God is leading the people, a redemption generally associated with the return from exile facilitated by the Persian ruler Cyrus in the sixth-century BCE (see Isa. 45:1). Along with an insistence on Yhwh as the incomparably great creator (e.g., 42:5–8; 43:10–21) and a polemic against the "idols" which other peoples worship (e.g., 44:9–18), we find reference to the "new thing" God is doing (Isa. 43:18–19). This idea is often seen as an influence on the more specific motif of the "new heavens and new earth", found explicitly in Isa. 65:17: "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind" (ESV; cf. also Isa. 66:22). Similar phrases occur in later Jewish and early Christian literature, such as "new creation", found in *Jubilees* 4:26, *1 Enoch* 72:1, and in 2 Cor. 5:17 and Gal. 6:15 (these latter two being the only occurrences of "new creation" as a phrase in the entire Bible). These phrases evidently refer to some kind of eschatological transformation. Scholars disagree about whether the references in Paul, for example, refer primarily to the transformation (through conversion) of the individual believer (so Hubbard 2002) or to the cosmic new age inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Christ (so Mell 1989). What is also of particular relevance for ecological interpretation is to consider whether this image of eschatological transformation implies the end of the current earth or rather its renewal. We shall consider this question, among others, when we turn shortly to the book of Revelation, where the Isaianic phrase "new heaven and new earth" is used to describe the culmination of the seer's vision. However, first we turn briefly to the book of Joel.

The book of the prophet Joel, part of the "book of the twelve" in the Hebrew Bible, sometimes called "the minor prophets," is a rather enigmatic and difficult book. Scholars disagree over whether it should be seen as a unity or as a collection of diverse material, perhaps from various periods. The date and context are also uncertain, though most scholars favour a date in the post-exilic (Persian) period (see Barton 2001: 4–18). Whatever one's conclusions about unity and date, it is widely agreed that there is a basic division between 1:1–2:27 and 2:28–3:21 (Barton 2001: 5–14). The latter section, with its distinctive eschatological imagery, will be considered in the following chapter. We are concerned here with the opening sections of the book, and with 2:18–27 in particular.

The opening sections of Joel present a repeated pattern in which some situation of disaster is presented, followed by a call to rituals of lament and an expression of lament. John Barton sees the structure of this repeated cycle in 1:2–2:17 as follows (Barton 2001: 14; cf. Mason 1994: 99):

1:2–4	Details of disaster	2:1–11	Details of disaster
1:5–14	Call to lament	2:12–17a	Call to lament
1:15–20	The lament	2:17bc	The lament

The first depiction of disaster is of a plague of locusts, perhaps intended literally, or perhaps intended as an image of an army's invasion (cf. 1:6); the second presents images of fire, horses, chariots, and so on, to depict in apocalyptic terms the invasion of an army, associated with a terrible "day of the Lord". While some have seen these two disasters as different events, Barton argues strongly that the two descriptions relate to the same enemy, the locusts: "What is predicted is a perfectly literal locust invasion, described with magnificent poetic hyperbole" (p. 70).

A striking aspect of these depictions of disaster is the devastation of the land: "The fields are devastated, the ground mourns; for the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil fails" (1:10, NRSV). This is, of course, entirely understandable as a prominent and, for the people, life-threatening consequence of the locust plague (note the prominent references to agricultural produce in 1:10–12, 16–20). But this motif of the land/earth mourning is encountered in a number of places in the prophetic literature (Isa. 24:1–20; 33:9; Jer. 4:28; 12:4, 11; 23:10; Amos 1:2; Hos. 4:3; see Hayes 2002; Braaten 2008: 68). This reflects a theme we have already noted, namely the extent to which the fortunes of the land are seen as inextricably bound up with the changing state of human fortunes. As Katherine Hayes suggests,

"the metaphor of earth mourning can be seen as conveying a theological message about the interrelationship of human beings, God, and the cosmos" (2002: 243). When humans become corrupt or degraded, or turn away from God, animals and the land become degraded and devastated too (cf. Gen. 3–8; ch. 4 above). When humans are restored and righteous, the land flourishes and is fertile (cf. Isa. 11:1–9, discussed above). Here in Joel, the prophet depicts the threat – or the reality – of a time of devastation and famine. For any society, such problems are calamitous, and are understood here as God's doing. Consequently, the prophet calls for rituals of lament (1:13–14; 2:12–13) which may hopefully lead to God's mercy, and consequent restoration (2:14). Interestingly, Joel (unlike some of the other prophets) does not specify any way in which the people have sinned as such, though 2:13 might imply that they need to repent. Perhaps the fact of devastation of the land is, by itself, indication of a situation of desperate need, when the people need to mourn and lament, in the hope of bringing about an act of restoration and mercy on God's part (cf. 2:18).

In an explicitly ecological reading of these chapters, Laurie Braaten takes this argument further. In Joel 1, he suggests,

Earth and God (through the prophet) clearly mourn the crisis at hand, yet the people have not yet responded ... Earth is suffering and mourns. In the process, Earth serves as a model for proper human mourning, and calls for humans to identify with Earth's suffering. Earth also condemns human sin; Earth's suffering stands as a sign to humans that they have not repented of the damage they have done to Earth ... Earth has suffered collateral damage in God's judgment against human sin. (Braaten 2008: 68–70; cf. also Braaten 2006)

Certainly one may see in this passage, from a modern ecological perspective, a strong sense of the "interconnectedness" of all the members of the earth community, human and non-human (cf. p. 14 above). This text (and others) powerfully depicts a devastation that affects the whole land and (thus) affects humans too, and also implies that human response, in the form of a turning or appeal to God, may reverse this dreadful fate. But it is perhaps less convincing to see in this text any explicit indication that humans have damaged the earth (the locusts are the prime culprit here), or that their sin – hardly specified or mentioned here, as we have noted – is exposed and condemned. And while the image of earth mourning is indeed a provocative and powerful one, it is perhaps stretching a point to try and see here any indication that this is presented as a "model for proper human mourning", and that earth leads the way where stubborn humans need to go – towards a proper expression of lament and repentance.

These depictions of disaster and lament are followed in 2:18–27 by God's response, in which the people are promised a restoration of their fortunes and a recompense for "the years that the swarming locust has eaten" (2:25). "All the destruction that was foretold in the preceding material now goes into reverse: the pastures grow green again; the fig trees and vines yield fruit; and there is rain once more" (Barton 2001: 89). As Barton notes, the address, "Be not afraid ... be glad", is directed first to the land (2:21), then to the animals (2:22), and then to the people (2:23). In this positive vision of restoration, as in the negative depiction of mourning and lament, the land is a central character, fully active in both mourning and rejoicing. As with the motif of creation's praise, explored in Chapter 5, this is certainly a theme that invites ecological reflection. Not only is there a profound sense of interconnectedness – land, animals and humans bound up in a common and connected fate – but also a sense of earth as a character, addressed, valued, and transformed by God. Far from a vision of salvation for human souls, rescued from a corrupt and expendable material realm, this kind of vision is one of holistic transformation, with the restoration of land and people inextricably part of what future hope entails.

Yet at the same time as these are thought-provoking and ecologically relevant images, it should equally be clear how far they reflect the context and concerns of an agriculturally-focused ancient society where the struggle for subsistence was an everyday issue for the vast majority. After all, just as the depiction of the land's destitution focuses on its lack of produce (1:5–20), so too the picture of its flourishing is clearly anthropocentric, stressing the fertility and bounty which will result in the people having plenty to eat (2:26). The emphasis falls firmly on the land's productivity and plentiful yields, so it is hard to say that the ecojustice value of the "intrinsic worth" of all things is evident here; it is the value of the land for humans that is most strongly apparent.

New heaven and new earth in the book of Revelation

The Christian Bible opens with the creation accounts of the book of Genesis (see ch. 3 above) and closes with the book of Revelation and its vision of the new Jerusalem descending from heaven to earth (Rev. 21:1–22:5). Once again there are motifs that tie these depictions together: the tree of life and the river (22:1–2, cf. Gen. 2:10), the promise of an end to pain and death (Rev. 21:4, cf. Gen. 2:17; 3:3, 16–19). The new Jerusalem is, as John Sweet comments, "paradise regained" (Sweet 1979: 308). The book of Revelation as a whole, as its opening phrase implies, is an example of apocalyptic

literature: "the revelation (*Gk apokalypsis*) of Jesus Christ", given to John (1:1). Full of enigmatic imagery, it depicts the cosmic conflict between the power of God and the Lamb and the power of the dragon and the beast, showing the things that must unfold as God's final and ultimate victory is brought about. This imagery, mysterious and difficult as it is, has, of course, fostered a huge array of interpretation through the ages (see Kovacs and Rowland 2004). Precisely because it is full of images and coded depictions, the book allows readers to apply its symbolism to whatever threats and oppositions they currently encounter: the Pope, the Communist countries of the (now former) Soviet Union, the new American empire, and so on (see Hays 1997: 170–71).

The final vision, of "a new heaven and a new earth" (21:1), at the centre of which stands the new Jerusalem, is, of course, enormously influential in Christian tradition and hymnody. In this future vision we again find inspiring and hopeful words, depicting a coming existence free from suffering and hardship:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." (Rev. 21:3–4, NRSV)

In the context of the present study, focused on the ecological implications of biblical texts, one key question is whether this vision is, or can be interpreted as, a positive ecological vision of the earth's future. Does the description of a "new heaven and a new earth" imply that the old earth is simply destined for destruction, a temporary home from which humanity may hope to be redeemed? And what kind of place is the new Jerusalem intended to be?

In a discussion of these closing chapters of the book of Revelation, under the heading of the question, "What does God's good future look like?", Steven Bouma-Prediger argues that a positive ecological vision does emerge (Bouma-Prediger 2001: 110–16). He makes a number of claims based on this text: "First, God's good future is earthy. It includes a renewed heaven and earth" (p. 114). Indeed, we might add, the vision is not one in which people get taken up into heaven, but one where the city from heaven descends to be on the earth (21:2–3). The "new heaven and new earth" does not, Bouma-Prediger argues, imply the destruction of the old cosmos and the emergence of a new one, but rather "connotes new in quality" (p. 114). Bouma-Prediger quotes from the commentary of Eugene Boring:

Even though the first earth and the first heaven have passed away, the scene continues very much as a this-worldly scene ... The advent of the heavenly city does not abolish all human efforts to build a decent earthly civilisation but fulfils them. God does not make "all new things," but "all things new" (21:5). (Bouma-Prediger 2001: 114, quoting Boring 1989: 220)

Second, "in God's good future God himself will dwell with us and all our creaturely kin" (p. 114; cf. Rev. 21:3). Furthermore, the separation between heaven and earth is overcome, and evil and its consequences are no more (pp. 114–15). And the new, holy city is "a most unusual city":

The holy city is precisely that – holy – for God is everywhere ... nothing in this city is profane; nothing is not sacred. All is for the service of God. And this city is a garden city. In this city flows the crystalline river of life, watering (among other things) trees that line its banks ... People of all kinds stream into this city, whose gates never close and whose light never ceases. (p. 115)

Thus, in the words of George Caird, it is the most eloquent statement in the New Testament of "the all-embracing scope of God's redemptive work" (p. 115, quoting Caird 1966: 280). So, Bouma-Prediger proposes, this is "an earthly vision of life made good and whole and right, because of God's grace. Heaven and earth are renewed and are one. God dwells with us, at home in creation ... In short, a world of shalom" (pp. 115–16). Finally, he quotes George Caird's comment on the phrase "making all things new" (Rev. 21:5):

This is not an activity of God within the new creation, after the old has been cast as rubbish to the void; it is the process of re-creation by which the old is transformed into the new. In Smyrna and Thyatira, in Sardis and Laodicea, in all places of his dominion, God is forever making all things new, and on this depends the hope of the world. (p. 116, quoting Caird 1966: 265–66)

However, in this positive ecological reconstruction, certain aspects of the vision have been somewhat overlooked. Stressing the continuity rather than discontinuity – renewal not replacement – is somewhat difficult given the statement that "the first heaven and the first earth had passed away", and that the new creation no longer has any sea (21:1) nor any night (21:25). This new creation, then, has to be radically different from the functioning earth-systems as we know them. Moreover, the focus of the new heaven and earth is overwhelmingly urban, with the detailing of impressive measurements showing how vast is the city's size and scale (21:16–21). It is cubic in shape, extending for around 1,500 miles in each direction – truly

a megalopolis if ever there were one! What is more, immoral people (and dogs!) are firmly excluded from the city (21:8, 27; 22:15).

Duncan Reid is somewhat more candid about the ambivalent ecological legacy of this text, but also argues that renewal rather than replacement is its theme: "This world is not 'raw material' to be annihilated in the process, but is honoured in the new creation that descends from 'heaven' to transform and renew the earth" (Reid 2000: 242). Reid acknowledges that the vision is "anthropocentric" and that "[t]he new Jerusalem is not an ecological city" (p. 243). However, he suggests that "we need not read this simply as a neglect of 'nature' for two reasons":

First, cities are never without non-human plant and animal life, both domestic and wild. It is quite probable that this non-human presence is simply assumed in the description of the new Jerusalem ... Secondly ... the notion of an "eco-city" tends to colonize "nature" by rendering it safe and tame... Revelation 21–22 refuses just this temptation. For all its vast size, the new Jerusalem does have its limits, its city walls ... And though wild non-human creatures may well be found within the walls – as they are in any ancient or modern city – there is a preserve for non-human creation beyond the walls. No city exists without its hinterland, and the non-human creation is surely there, enjoying its own domain. It is afforded a respectful textual silence in Revelation; the silence underlines that non-human nature is free – it has not been assimilated into the urban, human habitat. (Reid 2000: 243–44)

There are no particular reasons, however, for reading the author's silence as "respectful"; it is simply silence. John has no interest in the animals and plants, the "non-human creation" that might – or might not – be "enjoying its own domain" outside the city. The vision, as with the others we have considered, is shaped by its context. In the context of an agricultural or pastoral community, Isaiah and Joel presented visions that related to the most obvious desires and needs of the people: for an end to the threat to livestock and people from marauding predators and poisonous snakes, for fertile ground and bountiful production. John, writing to the urban churches in the province of Asia (near the Western coast of present-day Turkey), envisioned a city of God that would far exceed the riches and glory of Rome's most extravagant constructions. John's vision might be of some relevance to questions of urban planning – though his philosophy would seem to be that "big is beautiful" – but does not directly convey any ecological vision for the whole earth.

Many interpreters, keen to avoid the implication that John's vision might support an anti-ecological view of earth as a temporary domain to be cast away and replaced, have, as we have seen in the examples above, stressed that the vision is one of transformation, not replacement. This is seen as a crucial point to stress in recovering a positive ecological theology and ethics from the Bible (cf. also ch. 9 below). In a broader study of the motif of the "new heavens and new earth", for example, David Russell states that:

The apocalypticists and biblical writers anticipated the renewal of creation. However, this hope did not reflect negatively upon the *present* natural order. Indeed, it actually affirmed its significance as a part of God's redemptive plan ... God is both creator *and* redeemer who has not abandoned his creation but fully intends to bring it to fulfillment ... Christians who take seriously their participation in God's *cosmic* work of salvation must so order their lives in accordance with this universal scope of redemption ... God's creation is worth preserving, and whatever the transformation of the new heavens and the new earth may involve, it includes primarily a cleansing of all that opposes God and perverts creation's purpose. (Russell 1996: 210, 212–13)

Likewise, in a study of evangelical eschatologies and the environment, Thomas Finger puts considerable effort into showing that the biblical texts imply significant continuity between old and new creation, on the assumption that "[i]f the present creation will not be destroyed but renewed, it would seem important to care for it today" (Finger 1998: 1; cf. also Lucas 1999; Moo 2006). However, it is not so clear that a vision of transformation is necessarily more ecologically positive and relevant. We have already briefly touched on this issue in relation to Rom. 8:19–23 (see ch. 7). Even if we accept that the "new heaven and new earth" stand in some continuity with the existing (heaven and) earth, and that the old will not simply be cast away, the transformation in view is so radical that it changes the world into something utterly removed from the world of our experience. Lions will eat straw; no-one will die. And this transformation is something that God – and only God – can and will bring about. Not only does this imply that God can and will bring about this (re)new(ed) creation whatever mess humans have made of the old one, but also that such a radically different creation cannot be achieved by any amount of eco-friendly action on the part of humans. Does this then imply that the visions of future peace and fertility, of a bountiful earth and renewed creation, cannot shape an ecological theology and inform an ecological ethics? Once again, I do not intend to imply that this is the case. But the difficulties and questions

should at least alert us to the fact that such a theology and ethics are not simply to be found within the pages of the Bible. Indeed, when we turn in the next chapter to a rather different set of future visions, the difficulties become all the more apparent.

Further reading

- Mason, Rex, *Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Joel* (OTG; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994).
 Barton, John, *Isaiah 1–39* (OTG; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).
 Bauckham, Richard J., *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge: CUP, 1993).
 Olley, John W., "The Wolf, the Lamb, and a Little Child: Transforming the Diverse Earth Community in Isaiah", in Norman C. Habel (ed.), *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets* (EB 4; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 219–29.
 Townner, W. Sibley, "The Future of Nature," *Interpretation* 50 (1996) 27–35.
 Bouma-Prediger, Steven, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 110–16.
 Reid, Duncan (2000), "Setting Aside the Ladder to Heaven: Revelation 21:1–22:5 from the Perspective of the Earth", in Norman C. Habel (ed.), *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (EB 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 232–45.