
The ecological violence of apocalyptic eschatology

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Summary: This paper considers the ecological status of Christianity's eschatological worldview. Using the apocalyptic view of history in Revelation, the nature of God's sovereignty is explored as an eschatological category, particularly the relationship between God's judgment of humanity and nature. Then, the goal of God's sovereign purpose is explored using two themes: the transforming of the creation linked to the New Testament theology of transfiguration, and the healing character of God's dominion. The implications for moral action are then considered.

Résumé : Cet article présente le statut écologique de la vision eschatologique du christianisme. En examinant la perception apocalyptique de l'histoire dans l'Apocalypse, on explore la nature de la souveraineté de Dieu en tant que catégorie eschatologique, en particulier le rapport entre le jugement de Dieu de l'humanité et du monde naturel. On étudie ensuite l'objet du but souverain de Dieu à travers deux thèmes : la transformation de la création liée à la théologie de la transfiguration du Nouveau Testament et le caractère curatif de la domination de Dieu. On considère enfin les implications pour l'action morale.

In the wake of widespread environmental degradation in the 20th century, Christian doctrine has been scrutinised in a variety of ways to see how it is related to the conditions that have given rise to this problem. While much of the debate has concentrated on the meaning of dominion in Genesis there has also been a critique of eschatological expectation. Though some like John Haught (1993) attempt to understand ecological issues in light of eschatological hope, the assumption of many critics has been like Thomas Berry's (1988: 204): that millennial expectations and the prophetic tradition in the Hebrew Scriptures, which inspired millennialism, are not desirable elements of Christian belief, and certainly are not ecologically responsible.

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According to such accounts, an apocalyptic vision of creation produces a pessimistic view of "this-worldly" things and a postmillennial focus to the detriment of ecological faithfulness. Yet, Christianity offers both eschatological and apocalyptic visions. How should these visions affect the understanding of creation in terms of both future expectations and contemporary moral action? In particular, is there a relationship between the eschatological portrayal of God's dominion and human moral action? A decisive source to aim these questions is also the most controversial and complex expression of apocalyptic hope: Revelation.

Among its themes, this letter calls upon persecuted Christians to remain faithful to God in their actions because of eschatological hope. In doing so it does not support a pessimistic account of creation, but implies that the faithful must act in accord with God's goal for the creation. By examining how the apocalyptic vision of Revelation is presented with respect to the status of nature, one finds that other scriptural resources for positive ecological practice (such as the Sabbath and jubilee laws) can then be understood within the apocalyptic framework. Apocalyptic eschatology does not negate, but supports such resources.

God's kingdom and judgment

One of the main themes of Revelation is the sovereignty of the transcendent God who has created all things. In the Gospels, God's sovereignty is referred to as the kingdom of God. In Revelation, the establishment of the kingdom of God culminates in the descent of the heavenly city to earth in chapter 21. A corollary of the final establishment of the kingdom is God's judgment of the world, in order to make a suitable place for the holy city, populated with those whom God has judged as righteous.

The final judgment of humanity is presented as a future event, the culmination of history. For example, the martyred saints' prayers for justice (6:9-11), while effective (8:3-5), are acted on according to God's timetable. Hence, they are given white robes and told to be patient (6:11), since the fullness of time has not yet been reached. Ultimately, judgment is portrayed in Revelation as against those who have rejected God's sovereignty (14:14-20; cf. Joel 3:13 and Matt. 13:24-30), so that God may live with the creation (21:3). Judging the evil and the good distinguishes between those who accept God's rule (having the name of the Lamb on their forehead, 14:1) and those who try to usurp it (the beast in 13:12; on the christological nature of judgment see Roloff 1993: 220-21).

The basis for this vision of the final judgment lies in part in the concepts of holiness and righteousness in the Hebrew Scriptures (see Von Rad 1962: 203-12, 272-79). Holiness, being a basic element of God's nature, was a terrifying and dangerous aspect of the divine because of its absolute exclusion of all that is impure from the divine presence (Exod. 33:20). The earliest presentation of holiness comes from the priestly writers, reflecting the relation-

ship between cult and purity. The prophets linked moral overtones to holiness and righteousness (Isa. 6:5), which were assumed in the New Testament as well. Those who by faith live in fellowship with God are judged as righteous and thereby are able to live in God's presence. This righteous living is possible as an act of mercy bestowed by the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ. The final judgment is where humanity is declared righteous or unrighteous, and accordingly blessed or damned.

Such an explanation of the judgment of humanity is clearly central to the main point of Revelation's portrayal of God as the final judge (e.g., 11:17-18; 15:3-4; 16:5-6; 19:1-8). In Revelation, God's justice is the final end of history, and no satanic beast or empire can stop it from unfolding. Much less clear—indeed, only implied—is the judgment of nature. Certain language seems to indicate a judgment of nature, though indirectly. In 7:3 the angels are commanded, "Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads." It is implied that God's judgments are not exclusively upon persons, but that they are also cosmically directed. God is not simply executing judgment by means of a natural disaster, but is actually damaging the earth. Though turning the sea, rivers, and springs to blood (16:3-4) has a judgment of humans in focus (16:6), nevertheless, "every living thing in the sea died" (16:3). One is reminded of Exodus 33:20 and Isaiah 6:5 again, that death is the ultimate judgment of God.

A glimpse at other more explicit New Testament texts can strengthen the notion implied in Revelation that nature stands under God's judgment. In Romans 8:19-23, Paul describes the creation as being "subjected to futility" by God (v. 20) and thus in "bondage to decay" (v. 21). This happened as part of God's will, exercised in the "hope that the creation itself will be set free" (v. 20). This language echoes the story of Adam and Eve, where God said, "cursed is the ground because of you" (Gen. 3:16-17). Prior to the first sin, the relationship among God, humanity, and nature was paradisaical. After the fall fellowship with God was broken, and the lack of God's presence became a curse, in part, because the relationship between the land and humanity was now understood in terms of struggle and futility (Olson 1993).

The second passage which helps explain why nature is open to the damaging judgments of God is 2 Peter 3:7-13. Here Peter describes how the heavens and the earth are being kept until the Day of the Lord, to be judged by fire (v. 7). They will be dissolved and everything disclosed (v. 10). Because this final judgment precedes the new heavens and the new earth (v. 13), one implication is that this fiery judgment is not destructive but cleansing or transformative in nature (Herde 1997). What God judges are those things that are against God. They are dissolved, leaving nothing but that which is pure and holy, and thus a place where God's presence might dwell.

What is explicit in these two apocalyptic passages with regard to the judgment of nature is likely implicit in Revelation. The creation has been cursed by God and is subject to divine judgment, which has a transformative value

rather than a merely destructive one. That is why the expected new earth, open to the descending, heavenly Jerusalem with its healing trees of life, is described as no longer having anything accursed in it (Rev. 22:3). Such analysis of the judgment of nature and humanity, clarifies certain aspects of the nature of God's sovereignty, but does not do justice to the early Christian understanding of the interrelatedness of nature and humanity under God's judgment.

To understand the curse of humanity as implicating nature might suggest that divine judgment is capricious and that apocalyptic eschatology is founded upon a logic of violence (Moore 1999; Moyise 2001). However, the relationship between the divine judgment of humanity and nature rests in the idea that people are always located within a land, and that a disruption within humanity will naturally disrupt the land which they are in. This is not without parallels in contemporary understandings of the interrelatedness of the components of ecosystems. This interrelatedness will be explored in the next section.

Nature and the mediation of God's judgment

When the role of nature in Revelation is extended to include how it mediates God's judgment, an abundance of passages can be cited (6:8-17; 7:1-3; 8:3-19; 11:13, 19; 16:3-20). Some of these passages use nature as symbols of human and angelic powers, but all appear to involve nature as a point of mediation between the divine realm and creation. The mediatory function of nature does not mean that God is simply using nature as a means to an end with no consideration for nature as an end in itself. It already has been shown that nature stands under judgment. God's actions serve as a judgment upon both, even if the judgment of humanity often seems to be the primary focus for the writer of Revelation. The effectiveness of nature as a point of mediation for God's judgment lies in the basic unity of the people and the land, despite their struggle against each other as a result of sin.

Several scholars have identified the unity of people and land as a theme that permeates the Bible, particularly the Hebrew Scriptures. Walter Brueggemann has shown that the land is a key part of the covenantal promise of God to Israel (1977: 15-27). Indeed, the promise of land was tied to the living out of the Torah. To reject the Torah is to reject the covenantal promises, and in turn the land (1977: 47-59).

This intense relationship between people and their promised land is exemplified in the Hebrew Scriptures through the threat of loss of land. In Leviticus 18:25-28 (and 20:22), God declares that if the people do not follow the covenant, then they are guilty of polluting the land, by making it profane and thus unacceptable for God's holy presence. When this happens the land will "vomit them out." Similarly, in Hosea 4:1-4 the writer indicates that violation of Torah causes the land and sea to mourn, which is expressed in

natural calamity. Through faithlessness or disloyalty to God, a disruption occurs not only between God and the people, but also between nature and the people, and nature and God. The natural actions of vomiting and mourning are not only signs that the land itself is violated when God's covenant is violated; they are also threats that foreshadow the divine judgment. On the other hand, the eschatological covenant promised in Hosea 2:18 is presented both as the restoration of Israel's right relationship to God, and as a restoration of the original relationship to the promised land: "I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground." This prominence of land suggests that human relatedness to it is essential for understanding the nature of humanity and its ends. The sabbatical and jubilee laws of Leviticus 25 make it clear that human fulfilment can happen only in a right relationship to the rest of creation (Dunham and Coward 2000: 58-64).

The importance of a balanced relationship between God, humanity, and land is also identifiable in Revelation, which calls for balance in the exercise of power for selfish gain. The whole eschatological thrust of Revelation is toward a final judgment where the beastly empire is once and for all overthrown. Those who wield the power of selfish gain in spite of its effects—those with evil political intentions (e.g., 6:5-6; 18:1-24)—will be stopped in their faithless ways.

The book of Revelation is often read as an encouragement to live faithfully, to persevere in living a righteous life, despite the problems and chaos that threaten to overwhelm (e.g., 1-3; 13:9-10; 16:15). By recognising that progress at the expense of justice is negated by the eschaton, one can also appreciate that faithful living will endure into the eschaton. For example, in one of the hymns of judgment (11:15-18) "those who destroy the earth" are listed among the people who will experience the wrath of God. The converse of this is that those "who fear your name" will be rewarded (v. 18). The conclusion one can draw from such a hymn is that those who do not fear the Lord have lived destructive lifestyles—ones that destroy the earth. By carrying the implication of this conclusion to its logical end, a conclusion not explicitly stated in the hymn, one can then argue that those who do fear the Lord—even in the midst of persecution for their faithfulness to him—treat the earth with love and respect. If such eschatological judgments are expected for actions done in the present, then presumably God values the earth, and wants humanity to treat it according to its destiny as a part of God's kingdom. Selfish conceptions of the human exercise of power are not justified in the face of apocalyptic eschatology.

Such a relationship between divine judgment and human action highlights the tension in the relationship between God and creation. If the neglect and abuse of nature transgresses ordained limits, then divine justice is challenged. God must act according to the character of divine righteousness in the face of ecological injustice. The hymn in Revelation 11:15-19 is a

description of God's victory over evil: "the circle begun in chap. 4 is now closed: there praise of the Creator was at stake, but here the dominant theme is thanksgiving that this Creator has not deserted his creation but rather has established his justice in its sphere" (Roloff 1993: 136). The disasters leading to the parousia are part of the establishment of divine justice, not by sending ecological disaster as punishment, but rather where God uses humanity's sinful actions that lead to ecological disorder to accomplish other ends. The victory over evil is against those who go beyond their divinely mandated roles in the creation, but it is also an affirmation that God's justice is directed beyond merely human punishment and toward the establishment of divine grace and mercy.

The rhetoric of apocalyptic eschatology, with its strong emphasis on judgment, is often rejected by those who see it as unnecessarily vengeful and violent. Despite the promise of renewal in Revelation 21, the militaristic imagery of battles and destruction of foes (e.g. chap. 19) seems to counteract any potential for true renewal, by presenting God's authoritative action as simple destruction and over-riding power that merely replaces the oppressive Roman power. It has already been argued that God's judgment of human sin through nature is in part because human sin disrupts the nature in which humanity was created, causing an unnatural and violent relationship between humanity and nature that was not intended. The divine response to a disrupted creation is to judge it with mercy. Such an argument also forms the basis for answering the objection that the rhetoric of Revelation is not really oriented to healing, but rather to destruction.

David Toole suggests that the apocalyptic vision of the judgment of humanity and creation must be seen not as mere punishment, but as a merciful judgment. According to Toole, nature (which includes humanity) is under the judgment of God because it is in rebellion against the peace of God. Rather than seeing "natural disasters" and the environmental crises of our day as "natural" he suggests that there is a fundamental violence in nature which is brought about by sin. Through sin, the creation is prone to descend into chaos and dissolution, because of the disruption of the relationship of the divine to the created order (Toole 1998: 549-54). However, "God holds back the chaos evoked by human wickedness so that the natural rhythms can proceed" (Aukerman 1993: 31). That life continues is a sign of God's mercy. Divine judgments of humanity through nature are not simply destructive, then, but are signs that the life-renewing intentions of God are at the heart of judgment. Toole does this by recalling Paul's argument in Romans 3 that God's judgments are a part of his integrity, such that "[integrity] is but God's attempt to save creation by realigning it with God's peaceful purposes" (Toole 1998: 558). In other words, God's mercy is only felt through his judgments. In nature this happens as God both reins in nature's violence and "commandeers our violence for the overriding chess-like strategy of his [peaceful and merciful] purposes... [otherwise,] "the violence

would be total" (Toole 1998: 556). One cannot separate the language of mercy and renewal from the language of judgment. Any attempt to do so will yield the suspicion that the rhetoric of apocalypse is unmercifully violent, but miss the point of why judgment is a sign of God's mercy.

So far, it has been shown how Revelation describes the dominion of God: that judgment of the creation is part of the apocalyptic movement of history, and that nature is both a mediator of God's judgment as well as itself subject to those judgments. The judgment of humanity and nature cannot be separated. Finally, there is the question of what the goal of God's dominion in Revelation is, and how it is characterized, both from an ecological perspective and its relationship to human dominion.

The goal of God's judgment—the christological nature of dominion

The nature of dominion can be approached from two perspectives. On the one hand, one can ask, "What is the goal of God's dominion?" in an attempt to understand dominion from its anticipated effects. On the other hand, one can also perceive the nature of dominion revealed in the sovereign actions leading to that goal. Both perspectives are found in Revelation: specifically, the goal of transformation anticipated in chapter 21, and the actions of this transformation described in chapter 22 as blessing and healing.

The account of the triumphant dominion of God over the history of sin and evil occurs in the concluding chapters of Revelation. After describing the final judgment of Satan and those who follow him (20:7-15), the text turns to the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy about the new earth and the new heaven (Isa. 65:17 and 66:22). The judgment of creation concludes with its renewal, whereby something new happens with the old creation. It is transfigured, into a reality that is again holy, as heaven and earth are now brought together.

Part of the purpose of the divine dominion in history is to allow the whole creation to worship God fully and freely. In Revelation 4:6-8, "the living creatures who lead the worship of the whole creation are not portrayed as anthropomorphic beings.... Their representative function is to worship on behalf of all creatures, and therefore it is fulfilled when the circle of worship expands to include not only humans, but 'every creature'..." (Baukham 1993: 33-34). As the ultimate *telos* of God's creation, any discussion of the character of God's dominion must be compatible with this end. The transformation of the creation from unrighteousness and corruption into heavenly perfection is part of this doxological goal. It is also why the judgment of unrighteousness by God in Revelation is not a vengeful annihilation, but a renewing, purifying judgment.

If heaven is the "domain of God" (Roloff 1993: 235) then the descent of the New Jerusalem from heaven to earth signifies that God's domain is now indisputably recognised throughout the creation. The kingdom preached by

Jesus is now completely visible. The earlier discussion of holiness and righteousness applies here: the new heaven and the new earth represent that which God has made holy, so that the fullness of the divine presence might dwell there. The voice of God declares that "The home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God" (21:3). Here reference is made to God dwelling amongst the chosen people, because they have had their unrighteousness erased under the terms of the new covenant of the Lamb's blood (7:14-17). What has happened is a renewed, intimate fellowship of the creation with its creator, reminiscent of the hope in Hosea 2:18 for an eschatological covenant.

The image of the transfiguration of Jesus, as recounted in 2 Peter, can provide further clarification of the goal of dominion in Revelation 21. When 2 Peter 1:16-18 refers to the transfiguration of Jesus, it brings together the writer's hope for the second coming of Christ as Lord (v. 16) with the basis for that hope in God's blessing and confirmation of Jesus on the mount of transfiguration (v. 18). Second Peter's concern is to demonstrate that the promised return of Christ is rooted in the divine ordination of Jesus' ministry, to which the transfiguration accounts witness (Trites 1994: 31-33). The transfiguration indicated an implied, but basic, affirmation of the body. The writer also used Hellenistic ethical language in the call to his readers concerning faithful living according to Christ's example, which forms part of his overall discussion about the hope of the church in verses 1:3-11 (Bauckham 1983: 192-93, 216-22). All of this is contextualised by the expectation of the new heaven and earth in chapter 3. Moral action is rooted in eschatological hope in Revelation because of the continuity of the old heaven and earth with the new by way of the incarnation, using the image of the slain Lamb, just as it is in 2 Peter where Christ is explicitly named. There is the recognition that what was seen in Jesus—both the judgment of God as well as the hope of God's mercy—is the basis for understanding and orienting one's life in recognition of the end times, when final judgment and resurrection to new, transfigured life happen. And it is in this continuity from old (judged by death) to new (redemption and transfiguration) that exists part of the imperative for an ecological ethic.

If part of the goal of dominion is the transfiguration of creation, so that God might dwell in it, God's actions as sovereign creator in the renewed world also reveal what divine dominion means in a state of postjudgment. The dominion of God in history is the dual act of judgment and mercy. In eternity, dominion is expressed in this way:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. (Rev. 22:1-3)

God's presence replaces the sea of chaos and seething evil with a river of life that flows out of Gods' self. As well, the tree of life returns from Genesis—this time as two trees—whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.

Conclusion

God's dominion is described not only as the final judgment in Revelation (the wrath of the lamb, 6:16), but also as mercy and love (through the resurrected Christ, the slain lamb, 7:17). As argued earlier, judgment and mercy need to be understood together in Revelation. Is it possible that the mandate to have dominion over the earth, which humanity was given in Genesis 1:26-28, might best be characterised in this manner as well? Concerned about the action of human dominion in the context of Revelation, Richard Bauckham (1993: 44) writes that, "the image of sovereignty is being used to express an aspect of the relation between God and his creatures which is unique, rather than one which provides a model for relationships between humans." While God's omnipotent sovereignty is expressed in dominion through the judgment of sin by death, thus making the analogy for finite humans seemingly impossible, perhaps there is more room to manoeuvre than Bauckham concedes. His concern is with those many instances in history that have seen people try to execute the power of omnipotent divine sovereignty. Naturally such analogies, based on categories of absolute power, are wrong and are a reason for the repeated illustration of human failure throughout Revelation (e.g., 9:20). This problem of trying to usurp a divine, absolute power is also a source of ethical concern for those who look at the creation stories in Genesis 1-2, where the misuse of the "image of God" is attempted by means of patriarchal and violent connotations, which are then applied to the concept of dominion (Middleton 2000). Welker, whom we follow below, will take a similar path as Middleton does in his interpretation of the Genesis texts as *care-taking*.

But if the character of God's dominion is the focus, rather than God's absolute power over life and death, then approximations of dominion can be made. The limiting factor for how the example of divine dominion can be used rests in the unity of humanity and nature. That unity prohibits any definitive human transcendence of nature as might be expressed through a judgment of nature's value as if people were not part of it. The Genesis account of human dominion over nature assumes that humans and animals are not equal, but it does not assume human transcendence over nature. Michael Welker (1999) argues that dominion should be understood as *care-taking* of the creation in Genesis, emphasising the close relationship expressed there between dominion and the image of God in 1:26. Is this care-taking not similar to the understanding of the character of God's dominion in Revelation—bringing peace to the creation by exhibiting love and mercy? Dominion in Genesis would seem to correspond to these reflections on Revela-

tion, which links appropriate human dominion to the character of God's dominion through the example of the transfigured Jesus—the perfect *image* of God.

Even despite the violent rupture between nature and humanity, this concept of stewardship should characterise human dominion. Otherwise, the tension and enmity between humanity and the rest of creation threatens to destroy everything. The message of the faithfulness and perseverance of the saints is not only about resistance against those who do evil (e.g., chaps. 2-3) but also of positively pointing toward and embodying the true way of living, by having mark of the Lamb clearly displayed in their lives. David Barr's narrative reading of Revelation brings out a call for such action against the powers that resist Christ: "...those powers are incarnate as the beast of Roman rule (13:1-18) and a central part of John's purpose in writing is to persuade the audience to resist those powers. To worship God alone. To imagine that God alone will one day end injustice in the world is to ignore our own duty to change the world we live in" (1997: 371). Again, however, the issue of how the apocalyptic rhetoric of militaristic violence is to be lived out must be addressed. John's attempt to unmask the nature of the reality of violence that churches are facing requires naming it (Wink 1997). At the same time, the violent imagery is inverted continually when God's actions are shown, so that the bloody victories and conquests are from the position that would not seem capable of such victory. The wounded lamb defeating the beast is an uncommon image meant to suggest that those faithful to the worship of the crucified Jesus in their actions are those who will experience God's future empire of healing and renewal.

From the apocalyptic perspective, human dominion, when it is faced with the character of divine sovereignty as expressed in Jesus, sees the goal not as an exercise of absolute power, but rather one of suffering and sacrifice. This identification of Jesus' suffering as essential to his mission is one of the meanings implied the transfiguration accounts (Trites 1994: 45-48, 55-57, 75-78). That is why Christ is pre-eminently the obedient, wounded Lamb in Revelation, a remarkable cosmic image that is meant to provide the "clue to which kinds of causation, which kinds of community-building, which kinds of conflict management, go with the grain of the cosmos, of which we know... that Jesus is both the Word... and the Lord..." (Yoder 1994: 246). The eschatological significance of this imitation of Christ is guided by the hope in, and the faithful perseverance in bringing about, a renewed, redeemed creation where unity and peace are natural, rather than chaos, divisiveness, and unnatural forms of autonomy.

One way in which the reminder that Jesus' eschatological lordship in Revelation can be imitated, contributing to the renewal of heaven and earth, is by noting the implications of Jesus' teaching from the Hebrew Scriptures. The centrality of jubilee (Lev. 25) as part of Jesus' teaching provides just such a grounding. While focussed primarily on social liberation in Jesus' ministry

(Ringe 1985), jubilee also has practical consequences for the wider creation, which has been explored in various contemporary settings including the Canadian fisheries (Dunham and Coward 2000). The eschatological promise of Sabbath and jubilee teaching in the Leviticus tradition, as well as Jesus' ministry (Sloan 1977), make them useful in their example of how the eschatological faithfulness Revelation can be understood with regard to nature.

This examination of divine dominion in Revelation has worked on two levels. First, on the transcendent level, the goal of God's dominion is transformation that accomplishes healing for the whole creation. Second, on the human level, the character of divine dominion is linked to how Christians ought to live out their eschatological hope based on the message of faithful perseverance in Revelation. The imitation of the transfigured Christ, the Lamb, is linked to the hope of a transformed creation at the apocalypse, when the eschatological sabbatical and jubilee will bring justice and release to the whole creation. This hope is of cosmological proportions, with a sense of the divine mercy toward creation and corresponding expectations of human actions that are ecologically responsible in the present.

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