

DOES JOHN'S VISION OF A NEW CREATION ENCOURAGE OR DISCOURAGE ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY? - EDWARD ADAMS

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THE BOOK OF REVELATION REACHES ITS CLIMAX IN 21.1—22.5 WITH JOHN'S VISION OF A NEW HEAVEN AND NEW EARTH, GRACED BY A NEW JERUSALEM. This passage has been a solace and an inspiration for Christians throughout the history of the Church, but what are its implications for the contemporary concern with the environment? Is John's vision one that can sustain environmental action? Or, does it rather discourage environmental responsibility? After all, if there is to be a *new* heaven and earth, why be concerned about preserving the present earth?

Before we can address the issue of the environmental implications of Revelation 21.1—22.5, we need to look first at the description of the new creation in this passage, and consider its relation to the existing created order.

THE NEW HEAVEN AND EARTH AND THE NEW JERUSALEM

John's vision of the new cosmic creation in Revelation 21.1—22.5 follows his account of the coming of the King of Kings (19.11–21), the thousand-year reign (20.1–6), the rebellion and defeat of Gog and Magog (20.7–10) and the final judgement (20.11–15). The vision unfolds into three scenes. The first, 21.1–8, is a vista of the new heaven and earth. The second, 21.9–27, focuses on the new Jerusalem and its architectural features. In the third scene, 22.1–5, the paradisiacal qualities of the holy city (evident to some extent in the previous scene) come more clearly into view.

In the opening scene, John sees a new heaven and earth, the first heaven and earth having passed away (21.1). That God would create a new heavens and earth was announced, centuries beforehand, in Isaiah 65.17 and 66.22. Beyond the Old Testament, the hope of a new or transformed creation was emphasised in Jewish 'apocalyptic' writings such as the *Enoch* and *Jubilees*. In the New Testament, the expectation of a new heavens and a new earth is also found in 2 Peter 3.13, though without descriptive detail. John's description bears similarity with Isaiah's portrayal (Is 65.17–25). Both focus on the restored/new Jerusalem (cf. Is 65.18). However, John's vision evinces a transcendent dimension lacking in Isaiah's prophecy.

A striking feature of the new heaven and earth observed by John is the absence of the sea. In the Old Testament, the sea is a symbol of chaos and recalcitrance (Job 38.8–11; Ps 89.9). Its restlessness and volatility serve as an image of the instability of the wicked (Is 57.20). In Revelation 13.1, the sea casts up the beast, which opposes God and his people. The disappearance of the sea thus represents the complete removal from created reality of the threat of chaos. The sea is one of five things in 21.1–5 that are said to be 'no more': the others are death (cf. Isa 25.8), mourning, crying and pain (cf. Isa 51.11; 65.19). Their absence indicates the elimination of physical evil. The catalogue of those who are excluded from the new creation in 21.8 (the cowardly, the faithless, etc.) signifies the abolition of moral evil, also underlined in 2 Peter 2.13, which speaks of the new heavens and earth as the home of righteousness.

The holy city is seen coming down from heaven (21.2). John compares it to 'a bride adorned for her husband' (cf. 21.9, 'the bride, the wife of the Lamb'), a figure he has already used for the redeemed people of God (19.7). The new Jerusalem is like a bride because its residents are a bride. The descent of the new Jerusalem 'out of heaven' signals the coming of God to reside among his people (21.3, 'He will dwell with them. . . and God himself will be with them' NRSV).

In the next scene, John is shown, from the vantage point of a great mountain (21.9), the glory of the holy city. Like the holy city seen by Ezekiel (Ezek 48.30–35), the walls of the new Jerusalem have twelve gates, three on each side, linked with the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev 21.12–13). In addition, the walls have twelve foundations on which are inscribed the names of the twelve apostles (21.14). The new Jerusalem is cubic in shape (21.16; Ezekiel's city was more square than cubed, Ezek 48.16), similar to the holy of holies in Solomon's temple (cf. 1 Kgs 6.20). Its dimensions, 1,500 miles (or more literally, 12,000 stadia), in each direction, emphasise the sheer immensity of the city. The city is constructed out of precious metal and jewels. The wall is made of jasper, while the city and its street are formed of gold so pure that it seems like crystal (Rev 21.18,21). The 12 foundations are adorned with precious stones, such as sapphire, agate and emerald (21.19–20), and each of the gates is a single pearl (21.21). John observes that there is no temple in the metropolis (21.22). Since the whole city is filled with the presence of God, no temple is necessary. Also missing are the heavenly luminaries, the sun and the moon. They are no longer required since God and the lamb provide light for the city and the nations (21.23–24; cf. Is 60.19). The light supplied by God is unceasing, so night-time is a thing of the past (21.25, reiterated in 22.5). The kings of the earth bring their glory into the new Jerusalem and people bring into it 'the glory and the honour of the nations' (21.26), fulfilling and exceeding the hope of Isaiah 60.11. The city's gates are always open, but there is no place for any unclean thing or person (Rev 21.27).

The mention of gold in 21.18 and 21 and the list of precious stones in 21.19–20 give the city a paradisiacal character: these are the treasures of Eden (cf. Gen 2.11–12; Ezek 28.13). The third scene of John's vision (a switch of scene is indicated in 21.1: 'The angel showed me . . .') reinforces the theme of paradise restored. John is shown 'the river of the water of life', which runs through the main street of the city (22.1–2). The life-giving stream is a feature of Ezekiel's vision of the restored Jerusalem (Ezek 47.1–12; cf. Zech 14.8). In Ezekiel's vision, the river flows from the temple (Ezek 47.1); here it flows from the throne of God and the lamb. In both passages, what seems to be implied is the reappearance of the river that flowed in the garden of Eden (cf. Gen 2.10). On either side of the river grows 'the tree of life' (the image of a single tree growing on both banks of the watercourse is a little awkward), plainly referring to the tree in Eden from which Adam and Eve were driven (Gen 3.22–24). The paradisiacal tree is restored. The tree produces twelve kinds of fruit and its leaves heal the nations. John's comment 'nothing accursed' is to be found in the eschatological city and world (22.3) picks up the language of Zechariah 14.21, but in this context points to the withdrawal of the curse of Genesis 3.17. The end, as John sees it, thus corresponds to the beginning. God, who is 'the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End' (21.6), at last brings to fulfilment his original purposes in creation.

John rounds off his vision with the promise that God's face, once hidden (Ex 33.20), will be revealed to his people (22.4). His name will be on their foreheads (cf. 7.3), making clear they belong to him. And, they will participate in his eternal reign (22.5).

John is not attempting to give a literal description of final eschatological conditions in the vision of 21.1—22.5; his language is symbolic and evocative. The vision evokes Old Testament promises and hopes, such as the expectation of a new heaven and earth itself, but also surpasses them.

Bearing in mind the symbolic character of the vision, it is clear that the new creation, as depicted in John's vision, is both similar and dissimilar to the world as we know it. Cities, rivers and trees are features of this world, as are materials such as gold, sapphire and emerald. The new creation is not, therefore, a totally unrecognisable place, even if the holy city that John describes is like no city the earth has ever seen. On the other hand, the absence of sea, sun and moon indicate radical environmental discontinuity. What John envisions is both a return to the original conditions of creation (signalled by the paradisiacal allusions) and a transcendence of them.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

For John, the final state is not an insubstantial sphere of existence, a realm of pure spirit. This has relevance for Christian attitudes toward the environment. There is a strand of popular Christian eschatology that sees an ethereal heaven as the final resting place of believers.¹ Such an otherworldly eschatology could foster a disinterest in nature. But John's view of the final state is not of the unearthly sort. Taking into account the figurative nature of the language, it is plain that John, like other biblical writers, conceives of the new world in very material terms. In the final blessedness, there is an earthly environment – both 'built' (the holy city) and 'natural' (the river and the tree) – for the redeemed people of God to inhabit.

As we have seen, the new earth of John's vision is continuous, in notable respects with the present earth. Again, this is significant for contemporary Christian thinking about the environment. The earth in which we live and with which we interact is not utterly forgotten when 'the first things have passed away' (Rev 21.4). The world of present human experience, to a considerable extent, provides a pattern for God's new world.

Despite the continuities, John's vision would not support the view that actions done on behalf of the environment actually carry over into the new creation. The seer makes it quite clear that the manifestation of the new heaven and earth follows the passing away of the first heaven and earth (21.1). However much the new creation recapitulates the present creation, the former does not evolve out of the latter. John envisages the dissolution of the present created order and its creation anew (cf. 2 Pet 3.10–13, which speaks of the existing heavens and earth passing away in a fiery blaze).

Yet, cosmic dissolution and re-creation do not mean for John the reduction of the present world to a state of total non-existence followed by the creation of a wholly new world out of nothing (this idea belongs to a later period of theological reflection). The destruction and re-creation of the world involves the 'making new' of all things, as the divine voice declares in 21.5. The formulation implies *material* continuity between this creation and the new creation.² So while one could not argue, on the basis of John's vision, that positive environmental actions have a continuing effect in the new creation, one could perhaps posit that they anticipate and express hope in the cosmic renewal to be effected by God himself, in which he will 'recycle' the old into the new.

The primary biblical motivation for responsible activity toward the environment is the inherent goodness of creation (Gen 1.4,10,12, etc.) taken together with the mandate given to humankind to have dominion over the earth (Gen 1.26–28). The charge to exercise dominion, as is now widely recognised, casts human beings in the role of stewards of creation, managing the earth on God's behalf. Having dominion over the earth entails caring for it (cf. Gen 2.15) and using its resources responsibly. The creation mandate is firm and unyielding and is not abrogated or compromised by subsequent biblical revelations about this world's future. The thought that we can act with complete irresponsibility toward the earth because we are looking for a new earth is a twisted theological logic belonging with other distortions such as the idea that the more we sin the more we can experience God's grace (cf. Rom 6.1). John's vision of a new heaven and earth may not, in and of itself, inspire Christian environmentalism but it can support it, as part of wider biblically informed theology of the natural world.

NOTES

1. This line of eschatology is challenged in NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007).
2. See further my book, *The Stars will Fall from Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and its World* (Library of New Testament Studies; London: T&T Clark, 2007).

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