

Chapter 9

APOCALYPTIC VISIONS OF COSMIC CATASTROPHE

In the previous chapter we considered some examples of texts which depict creation in the future, renewed and at peace. Although these texts offer visions of the future which are in some ways ecologically inspiring and can perhaps function to inform moral goals, they also raise difficult questions about how such depictions can translate into policies and practices relevant and meaningful to the "real" world. The kind of visions we shall examine in this chapter raise even more difficult questions, since they depict catastrophic and cataclysmic events on a cosmic scale as part of the future eschatological scenario, events that will herald the arrival of the new creation or the new heaven and new earth. As we saw in Chapter 2, when surveying the various approaches to interpreting the Bible in relation to ecological issues, these texts may support, or may be used to support, a form of Christian eschatology which stresses the possibility of Jesus' imminent return, a return which will be heralded by signs of cosmic collapse and lead to the salvation of the human elect. If this is the Christian hope, it may be argued, then those who call for environmental care may be working against God's purposes, since they are trying (in vain, of course) to delay the process by which the End will come. So just as the Bible's opening story of creation, with its mandate for human dominion over the earth (see ch. 3), raises difficulties for an ecological theology, so too do the Bible's visions of the future, especially those which envision some form of cosmic catastrophe as the necessary prelude to the arrival of the new creation.

In this chapter I shall first present a brief survey of three examples of such texts of cosmic catastrophe; this will help to indicate what the key issues and difficulties are, and the extent to which the texts do or do not support the kind of fundamentalist reading mentioned briefly above (and in ch. 2). I shall then illustrate the different approaches to interpreting such material among biblical scholars and ecological writers. Finally, I shall consider some of the possible ways of handling this material, in the context

of our attempt to assess the Bible's contribution to our thinking about issues of ecology and the environment.

"Portents in the heavens and on the earth": Joel 2:28–3:21

In the previous chapter we have already considered some aspects of the visions of the renewal of the land in the book of Joel (esp. 2:18–27). The future visions of the book continue again from 2:28 onwards, and whether commentators read this as part of a unified continuation of the same prophetic work (e.g., Coggins 2000: 17–19) or as a later collection of oracles (Barton 2001: 5–14, 92–93), most agree that a distinct section, with new imagery, begins here. The sayings collected in this final section of the book do not appear to have a clear or coherent thread (cf. e.g., 2:28–29 and 2:30–31), and some bear a close relationship to what are probably earlier oracles in other prophetic books (cf. e.g., 3:10 with Isa. 2:4; Mic. 4:3), but, at least in parts, the eschatological imagery here becomes more apocalyptic in character.

As with the earlier sections of the book, the focus is on the people of Israel (3:2, 16), centred on Jerusalem (2:32; 3:1, 6, 16, 20), and the future restoration of their fortunes. The images of cosmic catastrophe depict what will accompany "the great and terrible day of the Lord" (2:31), a day of judgement and reckoning (3:1–15), which will lead to a time of salvation, peace and fertility in the land (3:18–20). It is clear that these images of fertility and plenty are tied to a vision of Israel's vindication and restoration: Judah's "mountains shall drip with sweet wine and the hills shall flow with milk", while "Egypt shall become a desolation and Edom a desolate wilderness" (3:18–19, NRSV).

The images that particularly call for our attention in this chapter are found in 2:30–31 and 3:15–16:

I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. (2:30–31)

The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth shake. (3:15–16, NRSV)

As John Barton notes, "[t]here is a long prophetic tradition identifying the darkening of the sky as a portent of disaster in the human world" (Barton 2001: 98, citing Isa. 13:10; 34:4; Jer. 4:23; Ezek. 32:7–8; Amos 8:9). The images of blood, fire and smoke, Barton suggests, might imply either

popular reading?

"natural disaster (perhaps earthquake or volcanic eruption) or invasion and war" (p. 98). More than this, the signs of cosmic collapse – the darkening of the sun, and so on – together with the shaking of the heavens and the earth, imply "that the stability of the whole established world is under threat" (Adams 2007: 47). Yet through and beyond this time of upheaval and judgement, God's people are assured of protection and salvation (3:16–21).

"Heaven and earth will pass away": Mark 13

Imagery from Joel, and from other Jewish texts (such as the book of Daniel) is taken up in Mark 13 (paralleled in Matt. 24:1–44 and Luke 21:5–36). In this section of Mark, sometimes known as the Markan apocalypse, Jesus utters his longest section of teaching in the Gospel, in response to his disciples' observation about the temple. There are many complex questions about the sources, historicity and meaning of this discourse (see Adams 2007: 133–66; Yarbro Collins 2007: 591–619). Most scholars, though not all, take it to refer both to the destruction of the temple in 70 CE – an event thought to be either already complete or at least inevitable when Mark wrote – and to the future coming (Gk *parousia*) of the Son of Man, identified with Jesus the Messiah. As Morna Hooker puts it:

The fact that Mark puts two questions into the mouths of the disciples in v. 4 and separates the events in Judaea from the cosmic events in vv. 24–7, suggests that he regards the two as linked together, yet not identical ... Mark seems to regard it [the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE] as the beginning of the tribulation which will continue till the End arrives ... The temple's desolation was the sign of disaster and destruction for Israel, but it was not the End of all things. Of that End there will be no more signs until the heavens themselves presage the arrival of the Son of man. (Hooker 1991: 302–03)

Again, natural and human disasters are seen as a necessary part of the sequence of events that will herald the dawning of these eschatological times: earthquakes, wars and famines (Mk 13:7–8). Most relevant for our concerns is a section in which the imagery of cosmic catastrophe, reminiscent of Joel and other earlier texts, appears once more:

But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. (Mk 13:24–25, NRSV)

At this time of crisis, the Son of Man will come, and send his angels to "gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven" (13:27). And when Jesus assures his listeners that "this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place", he insists that "heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (13:30–31).

"The heavens will pass away": 2 Peter 3:10–13

In the second letter of Peter, widely seen as one of the later letters of the New Testament, probably not written by Peter himself but at some point after his death, the author responds to "scoffers" who doubt that the promised coming of the Lord will ever materialize (2 Pet. 3:3). The key arguments of these so-called scoffers would seem to be that the time when the promise should have been fulfilled is now past and that the world continues as it always has done, with no sign or likelihood of dramatic divine intervention (3:4). The author responds to these arguments with counterarguments of his own. He insists that God's timescale is not the same as that of humans (3:8–9, drawing on Ps. 90:4). More significantly, he counters the notion that the world is destined to continue as a stable system by appealing first to God's creation of the world "out of water and by means of water" (3:5) and second to God's subsequent destruction of that world with water (3:6), alluding, of course, to the flood story of Genesis 6–8. This previous cycle of events serves, in the author's view, to establish a pattern that will be repeated, this time through a destruction by fire. In each case the action is done "by the word of God."

But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless. (3:7, NRSV).

This time of fiery destruction is associated with the day of judgement and the day of the Lord, as is the imagery of destruction in Joel and other prophetic texts.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. (3:10, NRSV)

Finally, the author appeals to this pattern of future events as a reason for his readers to live holy and godly lives,

walking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire ... But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. (3:12–13, NRSV)

There are many difficult exegetical questions concerning these verses (see Adams 2007: 200–35; Bauckham 1983: 303–26, for full discussions). But two aspects of the text are particularly noteworthy and relevant here. One is the depiction of a coming destruction of the cosmos by fire. Drawing on both biblical traditions and on Stoic cosmology – which envisaged periodic destruction and reconstitution of the cosmos by water and by fire – the author emphasizes that a future destruction of the world is coming, a destruction analogous in some ways to the destruction wrought by the Noachic flood. The second is the appeal to readers to “hasten the day”, through their holy and godly living. God is delaying the day of reckoning out of patience for the ungodly, but believers should live in a way that will hasten its arrival, since after the fiery destruction comes a “new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (3:13).

Interpreting texts of cosmic catastrophe

It is clear, then, at least on an initial reading, that some biblical texts, like the examples we have briefly surveyed above, present a vision of cosmic catastrophe and cataclysm as part of the final day of judgement and prelude to the arrival of the new age of righteousness and peace. Some, like Mark 13, refer also to the rescue of the elect (cf. also 1 Thess. 4:13–5:11), or in various ways assure the righteous people of God of their safety and future blessing through and beyond this time of judgement and transformation (Joel 3:16–21). One can understand why some Christians take these texts to inform a set of eschatological hopes which focus on the imminent return of Jesus (cf. Mk 13:30; 2 Pet. 3:9–10), the rescue of the elect (cf. Mk 13:27), and the destruction of the old earth, the old heavens, and all the wicked and ungodly (2 Pet. 3:7, 10, 12). What does this mean for any attempt to find biblical support for environmental care? What are the alternatives for interpreting these texts?

One way to make sense of the imagery of cosmic catastrophe is to regard it as an established set of Jewish metaphors for depicting a time of momentous socio-political change. N. T. Wright is a prominent contemporary proponent of this interpretative option (see esp. Wright 1999). For Wright, the apocalyptic language depicting a contrast between this age and the age to come does not refer to the literal “end” of the space-

time universe. When first-century Jews and early Christians “used what we might call cosmic imagery to describe the coming new age, such language cannot be read in a crassly literalistic way without doing it great violence ... The ‘kingdom of god’ has nothing to do with the world itself coming to an end” (Wright 1992: 284–85). What is envisaged is “an end to the *present world order*”, not the “end of the space-time world” (p. 299); “the eschatological expectation of most Jews of this period was for a renewal, not an abandonment, of the present space-time order as a whole” (pp. 331–32). Discussing Mark 13 in particular, Wright proposes:

It is crass literalism, in view of the many prophetic passages in which this language denotes socio-political and military catastrophe, to insist that this time the words must refer to the physical collapse of the space-time world. This is simply the way regular Jewish imagery is able to refer to major socio-political events and bring out their full significance ... The reference to heaven and earth passing away must not, of course, be taken as an indication that the discourse has after all been about the end of the space-time universe, but as another typical Jewish metaphor. (Wright 1996: 361, 364; cf. 1999: 9)

What Mark 13 is essentially about, then, is the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and the (related) vindication of Jesus and his followers. The language of cosmic catastrophe is used to depict, in vivid and established metaphorical terms, the earth-shattering consequences of such a historical moment.

Similar in some ways to Wright’s interpretation, though presenting a very different socio-political reading of Mark, Ched Myers also argues that we should interpret Mark 13 as a depiction of historical transformation, not the end of the world as we know it. Since the age to come overlaps with the present age, this cannot be a matter of chronology, as if a new world were set to replace the present one (cf. Myers 1988: 338). “Mark advocates neither fatalism nor escapism, but a revolutionary commitment to the transformation of history, which always demands political vigilance and discernment ... [he] envisions the renewal of *everything* in the universe” (pp. 341, 344).

For obvious reasons, those seeking to find ecological wisdom in the Bible tend to favour something like this kind of interpretation, stressing that the imagery of cosmic catastrophe and imminent end does not imply the rejection and destruction of the existing earth, but rather its renewal. While Mark 13 raises certain difficulties in this regard, 2 Peter 3 is widely recognized as the most “difficult” example. Nonetheless, arguments are mounted to show that it, too, emphasizes renewal not destruction.

Richard Bauckham, commenting on 2 Pet. 3:13, accepts that “[s]uch passages emphasize the radical discontinuity between the old and the new, but it is nevertheless clear that they intend to describe a renewal, not an abolition, of creation” (Bauckham 1983: 326). In an essay on “New Testament teaching on the environment”, Ernest Lucas confronts the apparent difficulties of 2 Peter 3. First, Lucas notes that the most likely reading of 3:10 is not that the earth will be “burned up”, as some manuscripts and English translations have it, but that it will be “found”, or exposed for judgement (cf. NRSV, ESV; Lucas 1999: 97). Second, he argues that the “elements” (Gk *stoicheia*) in 3:10 refers not to the physical universe, but to spiritual powers or heavenly beings. More generally, he argues that the author is likely using “figurative” language about cosmic events: “Hence we should be wary of reading it as a literal account of the end of the physical cosmos”. The primary focus is on God’s judgement, for which the metaphor of fire is used in the Old Testament (p. 97). And since the author uses the Greek word *kainos* (new in quality) rather than *neos* (new in the sense of previously non-existent), Lucas argues that “although 2 Peter 3 is speaking of a radical transformation of the heaven and the earth, it is a renewal through transformation, not a total destruction of the old and its replacement by something quite different”. Thus, Lucas argues, “[i]t is certainly not a basis for arguing against Christian concern for, and involvement in, ecological issues” (p. 97).

A similar defence of 2 Peter 3 is mounted by Steven Bouma-Prediger (see also Finger 1998: 3–6). Like Lucas, Bouma-Prediger notes that many translations render 2 Pet. 3:10 as a reference to the earth being “burned up”. He sees this as “perhaps the most egregious mistranslation in the entire New Testament” (Bouma-Prediger 2001: 77). This hyperbolic comment does not do justice to the fact that it is more a textual than a translational question (cf. Bouma-Prediger 2001: 196 n. 43), since some ancient manuscripts – including those that represent the established Byzantine tradition reflected in the KJV, etc. – do read *katakaēsetai* (“will be burned up”), while others read *heurethēsetai* (“will be found”). It is indeed much more likely that this latter word represents the original text (cf. Bauckham 1983: 303). So, Bouma-Prediger asserts, “the text rightly rendered speaks of a basic continuity rather than discontinuity of this world with the next ... Biblical eschatology affirms the redemption and restoration of creation” (p. 77).

Such attempts at what we have labelled readings of recovery (see ch. 2) are not, however, the only ecologically orientated approach to these texts. In an essay in the Earth Bible series, Keith Dyer presents an attempt

“to retrieve some of these ‘texts of cosmic terror’ from the grip of both fanatical and scholarly apocalypticism, to re-evaluate them in light of Earth Bible principles, and to wrestle with those texts that seem to persist as words against Earth” (Dyer 2002: 44). After outlining a set of “biblicist eschatological principles” (quoted on p. 11 above), Dyer turns to issues in the interpretation of Mark 13. Challenging what he calls the “distorting polarities” of the modern “apocalyptic paradigm” – an approach which stresses dualities between earth and heaven, present and future – he argues that “[t]he cosmic events of Mk 13:24–25 can be understood ... as reflecting the falling leaders and powers immediately preceding Mark’s day” (Dyer 2002: 52). “All these things” (Mk 13:30) refers to a series of events “in the recent memory and current experience of the Markan community” (p. 53).

However, despite his belief that some aspects of Mark 13 can be “retrieved”, other parts of the text, Dyer proposes, cannot plausibly be read as earth-friendly. Mark 13:31 – “heaven and earth will pass away” – “does affirm the prerogative of the Creator to decreate the cosmos” (p. 54). And even if the language of 2 Peter 3 can be taken to refer to the renewal of earth rather than its annihilation and replacement, it still “presents insurmountable problems for a retrieval of the text from the perspective of Earth ... since [such texts] also exhort the hearer to actively desiring, if not hastening (2 Pet. 3:13), that day. Texts that at the most maintain the prerogative of the Creator to de-/re-create the creation (Mk 13:31; Rev. 21:1) here have become texts that encourage our eager expectation of, and even participation in, that process” (p. 55; cf. also pp. 48–49).

The more negative conclusions to which Dyer comes are broadly reinforced and developed much further in an important and comprehensive study of New Testament texts of cosmic catastrophe by Edward Adams (2007). Setting these texts in the context of Jewish and Greco-Roman literature and thought, Adams argues that texts like Mark 13 and 2 Peter 3 (and others, such as Heb. 12:25–29 and Rev. 6:12–27), do depict the real collapse and disintegration of the present cosmos. Adams stresses that this does not imply the complete annihilation of the earth, since this was not a conceivable option within the categories of first-century cosmology. But it does mean that this is not merely imagery describing momentous socio-political transformation, whatever we might wish. 2 Peter 3, in particular, Adams argues, is influenced by the Stoic doctrine of cosmic conflagration, in which the cosmos is reduced to its basic elements and then reconstituted. In a sense this is indeed a renewal rather than an annihilation, a “recycling” of the elements of the universe, but it is a renewal which involves a destructive end followed by a reconstitution (Adams 2007: 200–35).

What then are the possible ways of interpreting these texts and of dealing with their theological and ethical implications?

One way is to accept, along with Adams, that these texts really do depict a coming cosmic catastrophe, an effective end for the present earth. As we have seen, the texts which add to this an appeal for believers to "hasten" the day only increase the difficulties for any reading orientated to valuing and preserving the earth. But, lest we think 2 Peter's language here injects a particularly pernicious difficulty, it is worth pointing out that *any* eschatological vision of hope, peace, justice, and so on, is presumably one for which believers should yearn and towards which they should earnestly work.

One possible ethical implication that might follow from such a reading is indeed that there is no point in any Christian vocation to care for and preserve the earth, since it will eventually be renewed and recreated. It deserves to be said, however, that this is not necessarily the implication to be drawn. As Adams points out, none of the New Testament writers sees their expectation of coming cosmic catastrophe as reason to devalue the current material world or to desist from ethical and upright living (Adams 2007: 258–59). Indeed, Bouma-Prediger insists that "[i]t is a non sequitur to argue that because the earth will be destroyed in the future, humans, therefore, should exploit it in the present. To use an analogy, is it permissible for me to plunder your house just because some time in the future it will be torn down?" (Bouma-Prediger 2001: 78). Or as Douglas Moo suggests, using the analogy of the individual's body and the hope of resurrection: "I may believe that the body I now have is destined for radical transformation; but I am not for that reason unconcerned about what I eat or how much I exercise" (Moo 2006: 484). Nonetheless, if earth is to be destroyed, or the body resurrected, or a house torn down, then it is hard to find in these beliefs any significant or positive *motivation* or reason to care for and preserve the earth (or body, or house). To pursue Bouma-Prediger's analogy, if a house really does have an imminent demolition order, the owners are unlikely to repaint the bedrooms or refit the kitchen.

Given these and other difficulties, it is understandable that many ecological writers have taken a second approach, arguing that texts such as those we have surveyed in this (and the previous) chapter do not depict a final destruction of the earth but rather its renewal. As we have seen, this is a common strategy among those who argue that the Bible can be a source of positive ecological wisdom and provide the basis for an environmental

ethic. However, there are major difficulties with this approach. For a start, it does not deal adequately with the content and likely meaning of the key texts. Bouma-Prediger's treatment of 2 Peter 3, for example, deals only with the textual point concerning whether the earth will be burnt or "found", and does not begin to consider all the other places in the text where the imagery of cosmic destruction is presented. Adams' thorough and historically informed analysis raises very serious doubts about whether one can plausibly deny that real cosmic collapse is what is envisaged in this and other New Testament texts. Moreover, as I have already stressed, even to conclude that what we have is a picture of renewal not of destruction – often presented as the crucial conclusion to support an ecological reading – does not resolve the difficulties. For the transformation in view is so radical and complete that it does not seem to matter how bad the previous state of the world had become, and anyway is something achieved by God, who turns the world into something very far removed from the functioning world as we know it.

A third approach, which Adams also hints at, is to acknowledge that the Bible contains different eschatological perspectives, rather than one consistent vision. Adams argues that alongside the vision of "unmaking and remaking" found in the cosmic catastrophe texts, there is "another strand ... represented above all by Rom. 8:18–25 ... that envisions the cosmic future in a different way ... This passage seems to anticipate a non-destructive (yet radical) transformation of the existing creation" (Adams 2007: 256). Here, in contrast, say, to Revelation 21–22, "the redemptive activity itself is conceived differently: as an act of transformation rather than de-creation and re-creation" (p. 257). As I shall show in Part III of this book, I think it important to acknowledge the diversity of biblical material and to articulate reasons why certain texts and traditions might be prioritized and favoured over others. From the perspective of an ecological theology, there may indeed be good grounds to place Romans 8 centre stage – as indeed many ecotheologies have done (see ch. 7 above). But, as indicated above (and already in ch. 7, pp. 78–80), this does not by any means suffice to resolve the difficulties: even the radical transformation of Romans 8 leaves issues to be considered about what role (if any) humans might have in the process of liberating creation and what (if any) environmental ethical responsibilities this might imply.

It seems, then, that the biblical texts leave us with an uncertain and ambivalent legacy when it comes to the possible contribution of their future visions to theological and ethical views of the environment. None of the three strategies outlined above deals adequately with the difficulties, nor

provides robust reason not to follow what an increasing majority find to be an unacceptable position: that the exploitation of earth should simply continue apace in view of God's imminent rescue. This is something of the interpretative challenge to which I now turn, in the final section of this book.

Further reading

- Wright, N. T., *New Heavens, New Earth: the Biblical Picture of Christian Hope* (Cambridge: Grove, 1999).
- Adams, Edward, *The Stars Will Fall From Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and its World* (Library of New Testament Studies 347; London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2007).
- Dyer, Keith D. (2002), "When Is the End Not the End? The Fate of Earth in Biblical Eschatology (Mark 13)", in Norman C. Habel and Vicky Balabanski (eds), *The Earth Story in the New Testament* (EB 5; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 44–56.
- Finger, Thomas (1998), *Evangelicals, Eschatology, and the Environment* (The Scholars Circle; Wymewood, PA: Evangelical Environmental Network).
- Lucas, Ernest (1999), "The New Testament Teaching on the Environment", *Transformation*, 16:3: 93–99 (reprinted in Sam Berry *et al.*, *A Christian Approach to the Environment*, The John Ray Initiative, 2005).
- Moo, Douglas J. (2006), "Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology and the Environment", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49: 449–88.

Part III

DEALING WITH AN AMBIVALENT LEGACY: PROPOSALS FOR AN ECOLOGICAL HERMENEUTIC