

(UNIT 3) The Bible and the Environment 2: 'A New Heaven and a New Earth'

Gen 1:26-28 is not the only biblical passage to have had aspersions cast on its ecological credentials. A number of texts, in both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, have proven particularly problematic to eco-theologians keen to defend the ecological worth of the biblical tradition. More often than not, these are the texts which – at least on a superficial reading – appear to portend great disaster upon the earth as a part of their eschatological outlook (i.e. what they envisage to occur at the end of history). The Old Testament prophet Joel, for example, imagines the sun turned to darkness and the moon turned to blood on the 'great and terrible day of the LORD' (2:30-32); the Synoptic Gospels (i.e. Matthew, Mark and Luke) envisage ecological and social meltdown as a concomitant of the coming of the Son of Man (Mk. 13; Matt. 24:1-44; Lk. 21:5-36); 2 Peter 3:7-13 warns of an impending conflagration that will consume the elements; while images of divinely-sanctioned ecological catastrophe abound in the book of Revelation (8:6-9:21; 16). What is more, these images of environmental collapse tend to be accompanied by the anticipation of a new creation or new earth, a dwelling place which is radically different in character from the old, and significantly better in quality (e.g., Isa. 65:17-25; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21-22). Given such eschatological expectation, extracting any sizeable nuggets of ecological wisdom from this type of biblical material can be a laborious task. After all, what possible motivation to environmental care can there be for the believer if the current earth is destined for the proverbial scrapheap, ready to be replaced by a superior model?

That is not to say that there have been no attempts to recover some ecologically positive meaning from these texts. A number of scholars have sought to demonstrate the possibility for the kind of eschatological material mentioned above to encourage a responsible ethical stance towards the environment. Usually, this approach involves placing some emphasis on the renewal or transformation of the present earth, together with the continuity between this world and the one to come, as opposed to its complete dissolution and re-creation. Ernest Lucas typifies this thinking when he suggests that the use of the adjective *kainos* rather than *neos* in the phrase 'new heavens and a new earth' in 2 Peter 3:13 points to 'renewal through transformation, not a total destruction of the old and its replacement by something quite different'.¹ Likewise, Douglas Moo asserts that the Old Testament provenance of the language in 2 Peter 3 (i.e. the *metaphorical* language of judgement) does not mean that the passage envisions the wholesale destruction of the earth but implies 'renovation rather than replacement'.²

It should be said, however, that the difficulties associated with eschatological texts like 2 Peter 3 have proven too great for some. Barbara Rossing, for example, rejects 2 Peter 3 as ultimately unhelpful in generating biblically-informed attitudes towards the environment,

¹ E. Lucas, 'The New Testament Teaching on the Environment', *Transformation*, 16:3, 93-99, at 97.

² D. Moo, 'Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology and the Environment', *JETS* 49/3 (September 2006), 449-488, at 469.

calling it ‘the most ecologically problematic chapter in the entire New Testament’.³ Rossing finds the exhortation of v. 12 to wait for and ‘hasten’ the coming of the day of God, and with it the dissolution of the elements, especially troubling. Keith Dyer takes a similar stance, claiming that ‘the “hastening” or “earnest desiring” of the torching and dissolving of the heavens and the fiery melting of the elements’ in 2 Peter 3 ‘presents irretrievable problems for an ethical response to ecological problems’.⁴

The way in which passages such as 2 Peter 3 have been received and understood by some evangelical and fundamentalist Christians also poses significant problems for articulating a positive biblically-informed response to environmental concerns. It is not difficult to imagine how a literal interpretation of texts that envisage the collapse of the present created order and the dawning of a ‘new’ creation might generate apathy towards issues of environmental care and sustainability. Indeed, there are many millions of Christians around the world, particularly in the United States where they wield considerable cultural and political influence, who subscribe to the notion of an imminent final judgement (on the basis of a literal interpretation of the Bible) and for whom ecological degradation and environmental catastrophe are little more than ‘signs of the times’ of a not-too-distant end. American preacher Spencer Strickland encapsulates this standpoint when he writes: ‘While it is true that we are all stewards of the earth and should thus take care of it, we should also be aware of the fact that the “heavens and earth which are now” are being prevented from being destroyed by the Word of God (2 Pet. 3:7). God will one day destroy the earth with the fire of judgment, and this is the warning that Christians must take to those who are lost, in order that they might be saved through the obedience of the Gospel’.⁵ Naturally, such a biblically-inspired worldview calls into question once again the extent to which this collection of ancient texts can truly function as an aid for the formulation of a responsible environmental ethic.

Essential Reading

Your reading for this unit begins with the biblical passages discussed above, namely, **Joel 2; Mark 13; 2 Peter 3; Rev. 21-22** (note again that the NRSV is the recommended translation). *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* will provide you with some useful background information on the individual texts should you require it (link on Moodle).

³ B. R. Rossing, ‘Hastening the Day When the Earth Will Burn? Global Warming, Revelation and 2 Peter 3’, *Compassionate Eschatology: The Future as Friend*, eds. T. Grimsrud and M. Hardin (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011), 85-100, at 89.

⁴ K. D. Dyer, ‘When Is the End Not the End? The Fate of Earth in Biblical Eschatology (Mark 13)’, *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, *The Earth Bible* Vol. 5, eds. N. C. Habel and V. Balabanski (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 44-56, at 56.

⁵ S. Strickland (2008), ‘Beware of Global Warming! (2 Peter 3:6-7)’:

<https://jeremiahdanielmccarver.wordpress.com/2008/08/07/beware-of-global-warming-2-peter-36-7/> [accessed 16 July 2017].

Once you have seen for yourself how the respective biblical authors conceive of the earth's future and fate, you are instructed to read chs. 8-9 in David Horrell's *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology* (PDF file on Moodle). These chapters provide an excellent overview of attempts to engage the aforementioned eschatological texts from an environmental perspective, with Horrell concluding that biblical visions of the future leave 'an uncertain and ambivalent legacy'. The converse stance is adopted by Jonathan Moo ('**Continuity, Discontinuity, and Hope: The Contribution of New Testament Eschatology to a Distinctively Christian Environmental Ethos**' – PDF file on Moodle) and Douglas Moo ('**Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology and the Environment**' – PDF file on Moodle), both of whom argue that serious reflection on the eschatological material of the New Testament should engender a motivation to care for the earth and her non-human inhabitants.

Your reading continues with Keith Dyer's challenge to those who would consign the present earth to destruction on the basis of Mark 13 ('**When Is the End Not the End? The Fate of Earth in Biblical Eschatology**' – PDF file on Moodle). This should be followed by Edward Adam's analyses of the contribution of 2 Peter 3 and Revelation 21-22 to a responsible environmental ethic: '**Retrieving the Earth from the Conflagration: 2 Peter 3.5-13 and the Environment**' and '**Does John's Vision of a New Creation Encourage or Discourage Environmental Responsibility?**' (both PDF files on Moodle). Adams, in particular, is quick to acknowledge the difficulties with the biblical passages under inspection. In this way, his essays could be said to offer a more honest view of the ecological potential of the Bible's eschatological material than the one advanced by Douglas and Jonathan Moo.

Finally, there is the essay by Barbara Rossing, '**Hastening the Day When the Earth Will Burn? Global Warming, Revelation and 2 Peter 3**' (link on Moodle). In this piece, Rossing contrasts (what she understands to be) the positive environmental outlook of John's vision with that of the much-maligned passage in 2 Peter 3, insisting that Revelation is more about the end of the Roman imperial world than it is the end of the natural world (a dubious claim in my opinion; the end of the existing created order is, quite clearly, understood by the author of Revelation as a prerequisite for the dawning of the new heaven and new earth).

Suggested Further Reading

As with the material covered in the previous unit, the **Exeter University website** provides a lucid and very useful introduction to the topic of biblical eschatology and the environment. Again, the webpage contains links to videos and other literature of interest. Do take a look (link on Moodle)!

For those wishing to learn more about the ecological apathy supposedly generated by Christian end-time beliefs, see the article that appeared in the online magazine Grist in 2004: '**Christian-right Views Are Swaying Politicians and Threatening the Environment**' (link on Moodle). For a more nuanced analysis of evangelical and fundamentalist attitudes

towards the environment, and of the cause of the 'anti-environmental' sentiment that some such Christians appear to harbour, see the studies undertaken by Eckberg & Blocker (**'Christianity, Environmentalism, and the Theoretical Problem of Fundamentalism'** – PDF file on Moodle) and Smith & Leiserowitz (**'American Evangelicals and Global Warming'** – PDF file on Moodle).