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The Apocalypse: An Environmental Impact Report

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James Watt, the first Secretary of the Interior in the Reagan administration, testified before the U.S. Congress that protecting natural resources was unimportant in light of the imminent return of Jesus Christ. "God gave us these things to use. After the last tree is felled, Christ will come back," Watt said.¹ While Watt's claim may be breathtaking in its presumption, and few more recent Christian commentators are willing to be quite so explicit, it is nevertheless a sad fact that a particular view of Christian apocalyptic scriptures has been a contributing factor to an anti-environment stance by many lawmakers in the USA. The same 40% of US lawmakers who received an 80% approval rating from Christian right-wing groups, were given ratings less than 10% by the League of Conservation. And while the NZ parliament is perhaps less vulnerable (some would say regrettably so) to such right-wing interpretations of scripture, similar views are probably responsible for the lack of environmental concern and action shown by many in the evangelical wing of our church. How is it that the same scriptures, which begin by placing humankind in a garden with the responsibility of tending it, can be used to justify exploitive disregard for the garden, and for the limited resources available to a swelling population? I think the blame lies chiefly not with interpretations of the mandate to "have dominion" in Genesis 1 (though that cannot be exonerated!), but with interpretations of scriptures relating to the end of the world. A text from 2 Peter in the AV puts it plainly:

7 But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men... 10 But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.

We will come back to consider this passage before we finish, but I want to first examine the book which perhaps more than any other in the Bible appears to provide divine sanction for trashing the world, the book of Revelation.

The book of Revelation comes to us from late in the first century, at a time when Christians were being faced with a dilemma about how they were to live in a pagan society. Should they accommodate to the social norms around them, including at least nominal worship of the emperor? Or should they remain separate and distinct and risk the consequences? John the apocalypticist, through a description of visions he received on the island of Patmos, seeks to move them in the latter direction, that of refusal to compromise, to maintain distinct and faithful witness to the point of death if necessary. His purpose can be summed up, to quote John Sweet, as "to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." Although he uses

¹ Glen Scherer, "The Godly Must be Crazy",
<http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2004/10/27/scherer-christian/index.html>

imagery which is recognisably drawn from a genre called “apocalyptic”, which developed from late pre-exilic times through the exilic and post-exilic periods of Israel’s history, the book is nevertheless essentially a prophetic letter, and needs to be read as such. And while the message of the book for its first audience is clear enough, it is often the imagery of the visions, and implications drawn from them, that require us to think carefully if we are not to make the book an excuse for various kinds of unethical behaviour.

Destruction unleashed by Seals, Trumpets and Bowls

Many of the most disturbing passages from an environmental point of view are part of the judgements unleashed by the three seven-series which encompass a large part of Revelation’s text, and in particular the trumpets and the bowls.

With the opening of the third seal (Rev 6:5-6) there is the suggestion of inadequate supply of food crops leading to extortionate prices. Or perhaps (if a Roman edict on land usage for vineyards and other crops is behind this) attempts to regulate the use of arable land. The fourth seal (6:7-8) unleashes Death riding a pale horse, gaining authority over a quarter of the earth. But the means of his power (sword, famine, pestilence and wild animals), which suggest a humanity ill at ease with its environment and itself, are precisely the covenant curses threatened in Deuteronomy to the people of God if they reject God’s law. With the sixth seal (6:12-17) we get the first cataclysmic environmental disaster – a great earthquake, the sun darkened, the moon turned to blood and the stars falling from the sky, the sky vanishing and all mountains and islands being displaced. Yet immediately afterwards we read of people hiding in the rocks and caves of the mountains. What seems like total destruction of the cosmos is not in fact so. The world continues. The cosmic signs are in fact part of the apocalyptic package, the standard set of signs which for centuries were presumed to precede the “coming of the day of God”. Joel 2:30-32

³⁰ I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke.

³¹ The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. ³² Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.²

But these signs are actually a metaphor of theophany, the appearance of God. Blood, fire, smoke, darkness are all present in the Exodus theophanies. And Peter on the day of Pentecost could state that this scripture was fulfilled on that day (Acts 2:16-21). Clearly the accepted interpretation of such signs was consistent with a continuing “normality” about the world around them. God had come on the day of Pentecost and the right response was “call on the name of the Lord (and) be saved”. And in our passage in Revelation precisely the same event is envisaged. The people hiding in the caves are not debating the colour of the moon or the darkness of the sun, they are terrified at the wrath of God and the Lamb. So these apparently cataclysmic cosmic events must be read, not literally, but for what they stand for – the terrifying presence of God, something which belongs both to the past and the future. It is in this same light that we should read the several references to “thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake”. (Rev 8:6 etc.)

With the trumpets and the bowls the environmental impact report makes even more disturbing reading. The blowing of the first four trumpets (Rev 8:7-12) results in the destruction of a third of the vegetation on earth, a third of the seas and the life and

²*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989 (Joe 2:30). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

commerce on them, a third of fresh water sources, and a third of the light sources –sun, moon and stars. Whatever the first century understanding of these phenomena, our post-Copernican view of the solar system and the earth's place in it prevents us from pursuing any kind of literal interpretation of the fourth trumpet, which also allows the world to continue to exist and human affairs to proceed. The point is not so much the precise events, as firstly their supernatural origin and secondly the increasing devastation (a third as compared to a quarter). And the bowl sequence increases the proportion yet further to totality. Again the marine environment and fresh water sources are struck, but this time the sun instead of diminishing is allowed to scorch people with fire. (Rev 16:3-12) The interpretive key to both these sequences is to notice the extent to which they parallel the sequence of plagues brought upon Egypt by Pharaoh's refusal to release the Israelites. Destruction of water sources, hail, disease, darkness, insect infestation – all can be found in Revelation. (See Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 808-810.)

And this leads us to a very important point. The theme of Exodus was not the destruction of the environment and people of Egypt, but rather the deliverance and vindication of the oppressed people of God. The plagues were brought on because of the intransigence of oppressive leadership. And Revelation's story is about the deliverance and vindication of the oppressed and persecuted people of God. They are invited to see their situation in the light of the ancient people of Israel – both in their initial deliverance out of Egypt and in their later deliverance from Babylon. The pictures of environmental catastrophe are not prophecy in the sense of foretelling the future, but they are prophecy in the truer sense of calling humanity to account for its actions, of the threat and warning of drastic divine intervention in judgment. They function as promise to the people of God (God is on your side and will vindicate and deliver you) and warning to all opposed to God and his people.

Positive Earth Images of protection, cooperation and justice

In the light of such a volume of negative images of the environment, it is easy to overlook a number of more positive images present in the early chapters of Revelation. There are passages where there is specific protection of the environment mandated (7:2-3; 9:3-4). The judgement of God is in fact directed against rebellious humanity, not God's earth. There are passages where the earth itself cooperates with the purposes of God to save and deliver his people (12:16). And there is a concern for justice to be dealt to those who have abused the earth. The seventh trumpet culminates in the cry from heaven celebrated by Handel in his *Messiah*:

"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord
and of his Messiah,
and he will reign forever and ever." (11:15)

But it is less noted, and perhaps not surprisingly less completely quoted in "end-time" circles, that the twenty four elders around the throne worship God with these words:

"We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty,
who are and who were,
for you have taken your great power
and begun to reign.
¹⁸ The nations raged,
but your wrath has come,
and the time for judging the dead,
for rewarding your servants, the prophets
and saints and all who fear your name,
both small and great,
and for destroying those who destroy the earth." (11:17-18)

The rule and the power of God and the Messiah is demonstrated by the judgment of all people, the reward of God's faithful servants, and recompense for the destruction of the earth.

Finally here we should consider the impact of the lament over Babylon in Rev. 18. The self-serving economic and political empire that Babylon, the great whore, represents is devastated and desolate (2). But this destruction is only appropriate justice for the devastation and destruction which she has brought about in the unrestrained pursuit of power and wealth and luxury (3, 6-8)

⁷ As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously,
so give her a like measure of torment and grief.

Since in her heart she says,

'I rule as a queen;

I am no widow,

and I will never see grief,'

⁸ therefore her plagues will come in a single day--
pestilence and mourning and famine--

and she will be burned with fire;

for mighty is the Lord God who judges her."

Client kings, captains of industry and commerce, and seafarers who themselves grew rich on her rapacious trade join in a litany of lament, with more than a hint of nostalgia and pathos for the luxurious living she extracted from the earth. If there is any passage in the book of Revelation which the materialistic hedonistic cultures of our time should hear prophetically, it is surely this one. And by "prophetically" here I mean not primarily predictively, but in the sense of a divine critique and warning. Once again, however, we should note that within the visionary rhetoric of the book of Revelation as a whole, the judgment on Babylon is because of her treatment of the people of God.

The New Heavens and the New Earth

We have suggested thus far that many of the passages describing massively negative impact on the earth's environment should be read within the context of a symbolism of theophany and judgment whose roots go back at least to the Exodus, are developed in the prophetic books, but which flowered in the post-exilic and first century period as apocalyptic literature. It is vitally important to do this if Revelation is not be taken as an excuse to exploit and trash the earth. But I suspect that the most important explanation for evangelical neglect of the environment does not lie in the negative passages, but rather in the positive ones! It is the expectation summed up in the words of the old country and western hymn:

This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through,
My treasures are laid up, somewhere beyond the blue,
The angel beckons me from heaven's open door
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.

Or the even more disturbing children's song:

Somewhere in outer space, God has prepared a place
For those who love him and obey.

It is the assumption that this world is temporary and ephemeral, and that our destiny as the people of God is somewhere else, somewhere we call "heaven". I heard it in an otherwise excellent sermon on January 2nd, reflecting on the Asian tsunami, "We don't belong here. We are destined for heaven. I don't know where that is, but God is going to take us there."

It is important not to trivialize this view, or dismiss it summarily because (unlike the “rapture”) it is built not just on one or two passages but on a network of ideas that runs throughout the Bible. It is therefore impossible in the limited time available here to investigate it thoroughly. I will limit myself to one general comment, a brief examination of relevant passages in Revelation, and will finish up on the passage we started with in 2 Peter.

Running through both testaments is a tension within the word “heaven”, or as it is most often in both Hebrew and Greek, “the heavens” (Heb: ha shamayim; Gk: hoi ouranoi). They are on the one hand that part of the universe created by God which lies above the plane of the earth, including the atmosphere, the sun and moon, stars and planets; the place where birds fly, and from which rain comes. And on the other hand, they are the place where God dwells. This tension is nicely caught in Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8):

²⁷ “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven (lit. heavens of the heavens) cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! ... ³⁰ Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place (lit. in the place of your dwelling, in the heavens); heed and forgive.

The New Testament reflects this same tension, but with a couple of additional features. The heavens are now also the abode of evil spiritual powers. But more importantly in the intervening period “heaven” has become one of the standard circumlocutions to avoid using the name of God. Thus while there are very many more references to heaven as the source of blessing, of true life and true sustenance, of the spirit etc. these all must be seen within the context of “heaven” and “God” being nearly synonymous. So too the many encouragements by Jesus to be part of the “kingdom of heaven” refer primarily to coming under the rule of God, not to travelling to some alternative location. In fact the number of references to anyone “going to heaven” is extremely small. Jesus ascends to heaven, Paul in a visionary experience is caught up to the third heaven, John in his vision is invited to come up through the door in heaven, and the two witnesses within John’s vision in Revelation 11 are taken up to heaven in a cloud. Our treasure should be in heaven, our hope is in heaven, our citizenship is in heaven, we expect heavenly bodies, but we are never said to go to heaven. Certainly not in the sense of abandoning earth in order to live in some other location. The life of heaven is life with God. And the ultimate hope described in the book of Revelation is that God comes to earth to live with humanity.

John’s apocalypse contains 52 of the NT’s 292 references to heaven (most of them, unusually, singular) and therefore needs some further attention. Firstly we must remember that this book describes a visionary experience and its visual and verbal images were never intended to be photographic representations of reality. Yet heaven and earth are both important symbolic locations. Heaven is primarily the place where John sees many of his visions taking place. It is the location of the throne of God, of the 24 elders, the 4 living creatures (yes, representatives of the animal world in heaven); it is the place from which angels come, from which loud voices are heard, and also the location from which destructive stars and hail and fire fall and where cosmic battles take place. Earth on the other hand is the location of most of the passages relating to the people of God and their struggle. It is also the domain of the unbelieving empires and their kings. It is on earth that the heavenly battle is decided. Earth is a most significant location in the whole story.

But the climax of the book, the fulfilment of all the hopes and longings through the long struggle of God’s people, is described in two interacting metaphors.

First, John records in 21:1 seeing a new heavens and a new earth:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

To understand this verse we need to see it in its context. It is part of a “mini-apocalypse” which extends from 19:11 to 21:8, filling the gap between two closely parallel visions in each of which John is guided by an angel: the vision of Babylon the whore, and the vision of New Jerusalem, the bride. The intervening series of visions (four of them) reflect the overall movement of the book of Revelation as a whole. 21:1-8 stands within this “mini-apocalypse” in the position that the longer New Jerusalem vision (21:9-22:9) takes in the book as a whole. So this shorter New Jerusalem vision stands in close relationship to the previous vision, that of the last judgment (20:11-15). It is in this context that we are to read the statement that the first heaven and first earth have “departed” (21:1)– because 20:11 has recorded them as fleeing from before the face of the Judge. This notion of the cosmos fleeing from before God’s face is clearly an anthropomorphism whose truth is not dependant on a literal interpretation of the sentence. It is also in this context that we read that the sea is no more, not as predicting an earth without its marine environment, but as expressing the end of chaos and the power of death – because 20:13 has paralleled the sea to Death and Hades as possessing the dead. Thus we are freed from some conventional assumptions about these passages, which depict *destruction* of the earth and heavens, and can readily understand the “new heavens and new earth” as the result of a divine programme of renewal, precisely as the voice from the throne states in 21:5, “See, I am making all things new.”

Secondly we have the picture of the New Jerusalem, briefly in 21:2 and more extensively described in 21:9-22:9, “coming down out of heaven from God.” In creative tension with the new heaven and new earth, is this picture of the habitation of God descending *from* heaven *to* earth, and the declaration

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples,

Heaven, the dwelling place of God, has come to earth. And the longer vision describes the New Jerusalem as integrating both the wealth and variety of urban human culture with the restored and revalorized Garden of Eden – humanity restored in its restored environment. This is the Christian hope.

Cosmic conflagration

And so we return to 2 Peter 3. This is the only NT passage to speak of a cosmic cataclysm of fire, although the idea is a development from several OT passages (see e.g. Deut 32:22; Ps 97:3; Isa 30:30; 66:15–16; Ezek 38:22; Amos 7:4; Zeph 1:18; Mal 3:19/4.1) in which God judges the wicked with fire. These passages do not speak of a total destruction of the physical world – but this idea developed in connection with idea of a universal final judgment.³ For the author of 2 Peter, this idea is a parallel to the universal flood, which in the ancient world view was a reversal of creation into chaos.

Although this is a very difficult passage and one whose interpretation is considerably controversial, several things should be clearly borne in mind. Firstly the author’s aim is to counter scepticism arising from the delay of the Parousia. Secondly, his method is to assure the sceptics that judgment is coming. And so it is the judgment of all human beings which is for him the main defining characteristic of the end. Thirdly, the author is probably

³ See R. Bauckham, *2 Peter and Jude*, WBC Vol 50, Dallas: Word, 2002, p. 300.

dependent here on a Jewish apocalyptic writing which is more nearly quoted in *1 & 2 Clement*. Thus the concept of universal conflagration is part of the context, the common understanding of author and audience, and is taken over from the source rather than independently argued. Fourthly, the passage nowhere describes the destruction of the physical earth. There are both textual and translational difficulties in these verses, which should make anyone cautious in using them as the basis for an eschatological world view. It is the heavens and the heavenly bodies (stoichea, sometimes translated “elements” – just possibly also referring to the spirit powers thought to control the stars and planets) which are to melt and burn. Following this “the earth and the works on it will be disclosed” (not burnt up or destroyed), once again underlining the author’s concern for discerning judgment, which is further strengthened in the lessons he takes from these declarations – that a particular ethical response is called for from Christians. And it is an ethical imperative based precisely on the coming judgment of God and the expectation of the new/renewed heaven and earth.

¹¹ Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, ¹² waiting 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? ¹³ But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

Finally we should note that although within the author’s understanding of the structure of the universe, it is conceivable that the destruction by fire of the “heavens” and the celestial bodies could lead to the earth and the work on it being “found”, disclosed, or exposed, such is not possible from ours. Should our descendants be still on the planet in another 5 billion years time, the predicted expansion of the sun into a red giant before its final collapse will indeed consume the earth along with the other inner planets, but not the sun itself, or the stars! It will be a fairly minor catastrophe on the scale of the universe. So it doesn’t really help to try to reinterpret the predictions in terms of modern cosmology. (In just a similar way we cannot share the assumptions which see a flood, of whatever dimensions, as a truly cosmic catastrophe.) We do better to allow the metaphor of judgment (of the wicked) and purification (of the righteous) by fire to guide our understanding of this passage and to take heed to its encouragement to live lives marked by God’s righteousness.

Conclusions

Glenn Scherrer, in the “Grist” article I have already mentioned, quotes historian Paul S. Boyer as saying:

A kind of secular apocalyptic sensibility pervades much contemporary writing about our current world. Many books about environmental dangers, whether it be the ozone layer, or global warming or pollution of the air or water, or population explosion, are cast in an apocalyptic mold.

Several commentators on the Boxing Day tsunami described the devastation caused as either “apocalyptic” or “of biblical proportions”. Apocalyptic language may turn out to find new and valuable service in the cause of environmental awareness, but such use is very far removed from the world of John’s visions. In the book of Revelation, damage to the earth is all part of the “apocalyptic” package – by this time a standardized set of calamities which are associated with the end of the age. They are NOT the action, approved or otherwise, of human beings on the planet. In the first century and before, and for many centuries afterwards, there could be no concept of human activity producing such devastation on the earth. The earth itself is so great and its resources so limitless. Dimensions of the earth

are the dimensions of unspeakable magnitude. "as many as the grains of sand on the seashore, or the stars in the heaven" is a metaphoric expression of an uncountably large number. We cannot and should not try to make out that first century Christians were environmentally aware and active. Anthropogenic stress on the environment, on a global level, was simply inconceivable and the apocalyptic signs of the end of the age are clear evidence of GOD's intervention.

We live in a different age from John the visionary. In our day, it is not the action of God but the actions of humans that seem to threaten the fabric of our world. But even this brief examination of John's Apocalypse is enough to demolish the argument that waiting for the intervention of God, and hoping for an alternative place in the universe, means that we can ignore, collude with, or contribute to the devastations wreaked on the planet by boundless greed. In common with the rest of the canon of scripture, Revelation sees this world as God's world – stressed and threatened but nevertheless the locus of God's redeeming activity and the object of his renewing purposes. Richard Hays, in his seminal study *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, identifies three themes common to the NT's ethical stance – cross, community and new creation. And John's Apocalypse stands aligned with these common themes. Christ, the slaughtered lamb, is both the focus of the book and the paradigm for Christian discipleship. God will exact justice from those who destroy the earth in pursuit of their luxury. Ultimately God will come to live with us in paradise on earth. And in the meantime, "godliness" – reflecting the character of God, including his care for the world he has created and sustains - is to characterize the lives of Christians and the Christian community.