

# DOES JOHN'S VISION OF A NEW CREATION ENCOURAGE OR DISCOURAGE ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY?

EDWARD ADAMS



Edward Adams is Senior Lecturer in New Testament at King's College London. He has specific research interests in Paul and Pauline Christianity, New Testament cosmology and eschatology and the use of linguistics in New Testament interpretation.

**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

*'The kingdom has come, yet not in its fullness, but what we have is the real thing and not a substitute'*

#### TAKING IT FURTHER:

RT France, *Divine Government: God's Kingship in the Gospel of Mark* (London: SPCK, 1990)

RT France, 'Kingdom of God', in KJ Vanhoozer (ed.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (London: SPCK, 2005), pp. 420–2

G Goldsworthy, 'Kingdom of God', in TD Alexander and BS Rosner (ed.), *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), pp. 615–20

B Witherington III, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992)

NT Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996)

► Jacob. One way of expressing this relationship is in terms of a covenant or binding agreement between a suzerain and a vassal, with promises on both sides to keep the conditions of the agreement (Deut 5—6). Another way is to see the Jewish people as a nation ruled by their God, but for at least some of their history through the agency of a human king who acts on behalf of God (1 Sam 8; Ps 2). Especially during times when there was no Jewish king and they were under foreign rulers or other systems of government they began to look forward to a future time when God would deliver them from their enemies and set up a lasting era of peace and security under an ideal king (Is 11; Ezek 37). One might think of that era as coming at the end of ordinary history and being perfect in character. At the same time there developed the idea of resurrection and the sharing of the righteous people of former ages in this eternal Kingdom (Dan 12). So the Kingdom came to be thought of as a future realm on a renewed earth, in effect the realisation of the present rule of God in heaven (doubtless conceptualised as up above the earth) on earth.

The teaching of Jesus assumed this broad context and structure of thought. He spoke of the Kingdom of God, sometimes of the age to come, sometimes of eternal life, as this future rule and realm of God (Mk 10.17–31). Metaphorically it could be thought of as a house where people would dwell with God, with sinners excluded and pictured as gazing longingly at it through the windows (Lk 13.22–30) or being in a place of punishment (Mt 25.31–46) or simply being destroyed (Lk 19.27; Jn 3.16). Sometimes Jesus spoke of this future realm as being near in time; he saw himself as living towards the end of time and preparing people so that they would be qualified to enter it (Lk 12.35–40). So when the good news is summed up as 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the good news' (Mk 1.15), this could be appropriately understood in these terms. The Kingdom can be thought of as coming (Mk 9.1); it can also be thought of as like a building to be entered (Mt 7.21–23). The teaching of Jesus is a statement of entrance conditions.

However, the total picture is not so simple. 'The Kingdom of God is at hand' could also be understood to mean 'the Kingdom of God has drawn very close' or 'has arrived'. And there is a whole set of sayings by Jesus which suggest powerfully that he saw the Kingdom as somehow already happening in the course of his mission (Lk 17.20–21). Jesus accomplished

'mighty works', mostly healings of illnesses and disabilities and release from demon-possession, which were interpreted as the powerful deeds of God but also as signs of the Kingdom (Lk 11.14–20). There is a paradoxical juxtaposition of teaching about the Kingdom as future and about it being already here. Radical solutions to the situation generally consist either in denying that Jesus spoke in one way or the other (usually the 'present' sayings are denied to him) or in reinterpreting what he said (one solution being to argue that the 'future' sayings are really timeless and refer to God's present rule in heaven). Other ways include suggesting that the present sayings could be understood to refer to signs that the future Kingdom is near at hand, just as when a procession is preceded by outriders or we see a trailer for a forthcoming movie. The better way is to recognise that the phrase refers to the ongoing divine sovereign and gracious activity that is manifested both in the present Kingdom and the future Kingdom.

The early Church certainly recognised this ongoing activity. Jesus had brought people into a new situation in which they received special blessings from God that delivered them from the power of evil (i.e. their biggest enemy; Mt 6.9–13) and restored the covenant relationship that they had one-sidedly broken (Mt 26.27–29). They enjoyed a new status as the flock or children of God (Lk 12.31–32). In short, the blessings traditionally associated with the Kingdom of God were already happening (Lk 7.18–28). This had already been the case during the lifetime of Jesus. Thus messiahship had been transformed (as we have already noted); Jesus was the messiah, not just a messiah-designate, he was the monarch rather than the Prince of Wales; the blessings were real (the sick really were healed). What was absent was the establishment of a political realm coupled with the military defeat of its enemies (both external and internal; Mt 5.38–48). The death of Jesus could have seemed to destroy all such illusions about the Kingdom being present and powerful. But it was accompanied by the mightiest of acts, a resurrection which could only have come about by the hand of God; that confirmed that God had made Jesus both Messiah and Lord (Acts 2.22–36). Increasingly it was realised that Jesus was so closely related to their ancestral God, whom they increasingly came to understand (with Jesus to teach them) as God the Father, that he should be recognised as God the Son (Rom 1.1–4); and similarly they recognised the continuing spiritual power that was at work in their midst as the work of the Spirit of God. In other words,

*'a Kingdom-centred approach to theology and practice may act as a corrective to what can easily become a human-centred outlook'*

the kingly rule of God was continuing after the lifetime of Jesus, although it remained a spiritual phenomenon with visible results in the changed, godly and good lives of people and the growth of their communities or congregations (or churches). The present time could be seen as a period of overlap during which the Kingdom of God spreads over the world while the kingdom of evil coexists with it (Mt 13.24–30, 36–43); but this uneasy period of transition (Rev 1.9) will one day come to an end with the full establishment of the Kingdom of God and the resurrection of the dead and the transformation of the physical universe (1 Cor 15.20–28).

So the Kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus is the term to express this kingly, powerful intervention of God in the world through Jesus. His Kingdom does exist in the world and its evidence is seen in the groups of people who acknowledge his rule, however imperfectly they may do so. The Church is not to be identified as the Kingdom (a dangerous step taken in the middle ages that still survives in some areas!) but is the community created by the kingly rule of God. The Kingdom has come, yet not in its fullness, but what we have is the real thing and not a substitute.

Through all this the understanding of the concept changes. It is seen to be present and not just something awaited in the future or entered by death. It is not brought about and established by military force. Rather, it spreads in the loving, self-sacrificing way demonstrated by Jesus himself. It lacks the pomp and show and pride and other accoutrements of worldly kingdoms and is for the poor and needy, and its members seek nothing for themselves. True greatness lies in service, and indeed the idea of greatness has no place in it. It involves the great act of redemption and reconciliation brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Consequently, as the Church went about its mission the language shifted decisively. The very term 'Kingdom' was marginalised, and such terms as salvation and eternal life replaced it. Even the term 'messiah', which was a Jewish word, became a name by which Jesus was known, and its functional implications were expressed by terms like 'Lord' (which Jesus shared with God the Father and which ultimately was expressive of his divine identity).

The concept, however, remains theologically and practically significant. Granted that the biblical message is largely concerned with the plight of humankind and

God's gracious action to deliver them, we are reminded that the ultimate objective is the establishment of the rule of God and the overcoming of the evil opposition to him. The sovereign position of God is affirmed. The individualism that tends to creep into the perfectly correct recognition of our individual needs and of what the Lord has done for me personally (Ps 66.16–20) must not blind us to the way in which God is to be honoured and worshipped as king. To speak of his rule also emphasises that he is the lawgiver and that his purpose is to establish a society which is obedient to his commandments. The easily misunderstood formula 'love God and do what you like' must give way to an enquiry into the full implications of what it means in practice to love God: 'this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commandments' (2 Jn 6). The people of God are called to live by the laws of God: what does it mean in practice to live as citizens of his Kingdom in the midst of earthly kingdoms and the kingdom of Satan? How do we follow the example of Jesus who announced the arrival of the rule of God as a peaceable Kingdom and eschewed the path of violence? What might it mean to take the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7; cf. Lk 6.20–49) seriously as an exposition of Kingdom-living?

It may be that all of these points arise from time to time in the Bible without direct links to the concept of the Kingdom, but they are certainly integral to it as a central way of expressing the main concern of Scripture; a Kingdom-centred approach to theology and practice may act as a corrective to what can easily become a human-centred outlook and remind us of our chief end, 'to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever' (the *Shorter Catechism*).

And, finally, the practical question for communication in today's world: if the early Christians tended to move away from the vocabulary of 'Kingdom' (but without surrendering the concept itself), what do we need to do to communicate the concept in a situation where kingship is outmoded? 'The presidency of God'? Heaven forbid! But what are we to do to speak meaningfully today? ■