

# Apocalypse Now? The Book of Revelation and the Environmental Crisis

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## Images of environmental judgment

The scenes of environmental destruction found in the Book of Revelation form part of the broader picture of the author's representation of divine judgment on evil. The various images of judgment which he utilises serve a double purpose: On the one hand, they demonstrate that evil in all its forms will not be allowed to continue into eternity (cf. 19.20; 20.10, 14), while on the other hand they serve as warnings intended to provoke repentance on the part of the nations of the earth (cf. 9.20-21; 11.13; 16.9-11). The images of final judgment offer John's audience an assurance that, however powerful the forces currently opposing their faithful witness, these satanic systems will ultimately be called to account for their opposition to God's in-breaking kingdom.

However, it is in the images of warning judgment that John depicts the desolation of the created order along with humanity itself. Environmental damage and human suffering are presented as inseparable partners. In the sequences of seals, trumpets and bowls, John depicts scenes of environmental devastation with increasing intensity. The opening of the sixth seal triggers the shaking of the entire cosmos, with a great earthquake, the darkening of sun and moon, stars falling to the earth, the sky being rolled away, and every mountain and island being displaced (Rev. 6.12-14). The sounding of the trumpets leads to the burning away of a third of the earth, trees, and all green grass, the death of a third of all sea creatures, the poisoning of the earth's waters, and the darkening of a third of the sun, moon and stars (Rev. 8.7-12). The pouring out of the bowls triggers the death of every living thing in the sea, the poisoning of all waters, burning from an intensified sun, and a time of darkness (Rev. 16.2-12). These visions of environmental destruction are interspersed with scenes of

judgment on humanity, with the entire created order depicted as suffering the effects of humanity's rejection of God.

John's intent in constructing these images of warning judgment, encompassing the entire creation in their scope, was to provide his audience with an alternative perspective on their current earthly situation. From the perspective of those in the seven cities of Asia Minor to whom John was writing, the unbridled expansion of the Graeco-Roman cultural, economic and military empire could appear a noble and beneficent project. However, when viewed through John's visionary lens, the imperial machine is seen as a corrupting whore and a violent beast (chapters 13, 17-18), demeaning or destroying all those who come into contact with it.<sup>1</sup> The series of judgments on the earth thus represent John's vision of the inevitable end-result of the human obsession with empire. Whether it be the death of a third of humankind through war (Rev. 9.15, 18), or environmental devastation on a global scale, these are to be seen as the direct consequences of human imperial aspiration.

In his subversive portrayal of empire as a violent and destructive system, John provides a powerful critique of all such systems which seek to centralise wealth and privilege at the expense of exploitation at the margins.

## The call to repentance

Simply portraying the effects of empire through images of suffering and destruction is however not sufficient for John. He also offers a theological commentary on the globally catastrophic results of empire, lamenting that those who have experienced the judgments

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Theology Of The Book Of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 17-18, 35-36.

still 'did not repent' (Rev. 9.20, 21; 16.9, 11). Within John's scheme, the judgments are not personally targeted punishments aimed at those who have denied the lordship of Christ, neither are they God punishing the earth for its opposition to the kingdom of Christ. Rather, they are presented as warnings to the nations of the effects of their ongoing investment in empire, in the hope that the nations of the earth will 'repent' and turn from their exploitative and destructive practices.

The tragedy of John's presentation is that the nations remain unrepentant in the face of the warning judgments. He portrays the imperial aspirations of the nations as so all-pervasive that, even when faced with increasing levels of human and environmental catastrophe, still they remain committed to the exploitative practices of empire. In this way, kings, merchants and seafarers are heard mourning the destruction of Babylon, because they have so invested themselves in the economic systems of empire that they are unable to comprehend its ending as anything other than disaster (Rev. 18.9-19). This is in contrast to the response which John expects of those who have entered with him into his visionary world to gain heaven's perspective on empire. They are invited to, 'Rejoice over her, O heaven, you saints and apostles and prophets! For God has given judgment for you against her' (Rev. 18.20).

If the nations fail to heed the warnings, John offers a bleak assessment of the future of the empire in which they are investing themselves. It is portrayed as an ultimately self-destructive system, which begets violence, suffering and environmental catastrophe. Against this background John offers his theological assertion that systems of oppression and destruction will themselves ultimately face judgment, something which he vividly depicts in the vision of the destruction of the great whore and the great city (Revelation 17-18). As Boxall comments: 'Evil and injustice bear within themselves the seeds of their own destruction, and ultimately the whole edifice will come tumbling down.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St John*, ed. Morna Hooker, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Continuum, 2006), 249.

## **The extent of environmental judgment**

One could be forgiven for thinking at this point that, from an environmental perspective, all is lost. After all, if the nations remain unrepentant in the face of the increasingly severe and catastrophic results of their actions, surely the end result will be the breakdown of the entire created order? However, John does not leave his audience with a scenario of ecological despair. From John's perspective, God has not yet written off creation as irredeemably tainted by human sin and therefore destined for destruction.

The judgments against the environment which John describes are not total, and it is ultimately Babylon, the satanic empire, which is destroyed rather than the earth. In this way, the results of imperial ecological devastation are seen to be limited rather than limitless: The four angels who have power to damage earth and sea are restrained from harming the sea and the trees (Rev. 7.3); at the sounding of the trumpets it is only a *third* of the earth which is destroyed (Rev. 8.7-12; 9.15-18); and the locusts from the bottomless pit are told not to damage the grass or any green growth or any tree (Rev. 9.4).

The warning judgments of environmental destruction which John describes are thus severe, but restricted. Rather than depicting a downward spiral resulting in the end of the world, John rather presents the effects of imperial ecological violence as warnings to be heard alongside his repeated call for 'repentance' (cf. Rev. 2.5, 16, 21-22; 3.3, 19). John's scheme thus finds clear echoes in the contemporary prophetic call for imperial environmental 'repentance', that 'there is still time to avoid the worst impacts of climate change if we act now'.<sup>3</sup>

## **The end of environmental exploitation**

The hope which John presents is not restricted to mere divine limitation of the extent of environmental damage. Rather, John points to divine judgment on those very systems which oppress and destroy creation. Following the seventh trumpet, the twenty-four elders sing that the time has come, 'for destroying those

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<sup>3</sup> Sir Nicholas Stern, author of the Stern Report into climate change.

who destroy the earth' (Rev. 11.18). The destruction of Babylon represents, for John, the final and fitting judgment on empire. Those systems which have placed themselves in opposition to the peace and stability of creation are, it seems, not eternal.

John also presents a positive role for creation. As a counterpart to his negative vision of the destruction of the ecologically destructive empire, John evokes the Noahic covenant, recalling God's promise to remain faithful to creation in his description of the rainbow around the divine throne (Rev. 4.3; cf. Ezek. 1.28; Gen. 9.13-16). The earth itself is seen playing an active part in the rescue of humanity from the attack of the satanic beast, swallowing the river sent from the mouth of the dragon (Rev. 12.15), while the whole of creation participates in the offering of worship to the one seated on the divine throne (Rev. 5.13; cf. Phil. 2.10). The four living creatures before the heavenly throne (Rev. 4.6ff) depict the created order offering a united song of worship before the throne. It is significant that only one of the four living creatures has a human face (Rev. 4.7), indicating that the worship offered by those on the earth is merely one facet of the totality of worship offered to God by the whole of creation.

Through these images, creation is seen as having a hopeful future. Rather than facing eventual destruction at the hands of human imperial exploitation, creation rather has a role in drawing all things towards unity with the creator. The violence which the environment endures at the hands of humanity points the way to a new future beyond slavery to the forces of empire. Once released from the tyranny of the satanic powers which oppress and destroy, creation is freed to fulfil its function as the context for a renewed relationship between humanity and God.

### **A new heaven and a new earth**

John's image of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21.1-5; cf. Isa. 65.17-25) represents his vision of what it means for humanity to finally 'repent' of their obsession with empire, learning to live in a new relationship with both creation and creator. The transition to the new heaven and new earth is not one which involves the total destruction of the existing

created order before re-creation can occur. Rather, the new creation is brought into being as the oppressive powers of the satanic empire are destroyed. The picture which John draws of the new earth is therefore one which encompasses redeemed aspects of the present earth.

The vision of the new heaven and the new earth, with the new Jerusalem at their centre, is primarily a vision for the here-and-now of John's audience. It presents them with a challenge that they are to be those who give testimony to the in-breaking kingdom of God, those who live as citizens of new Jerusalem rather than as citizens of Babylon. The renewal of the created order is therefore not solely something to be anticipated at some decisive point in the future, as the divine answer to the environmental destructions wrought by empire. Rather, it is to be found in the present as the idolatrous claims of the satanic empire are exposed, opposed and rejected, and as humanity responds to the prophetic witness to the existence of an alternative to slavish devotion to the beast of empire.

### **The prophetic call**

By this reading of the book of Revelation, the hope for creation-under-empire lies in John's prophetic challenge to the destructive ideology of empire. It is only once the idolatrous claims of Babylon are rejected that a new relationship between humanity and creation becomes possible.

Within John's scheme, it is when God is named as lord of creation that the idolatrous powers of empire are challenged (Rev. 3.14; 10.6; 11.4; 14.7). In this way, the many worship scenes of Revelation acquire distinctly political overtones, as they challenge the dominant oppressive and destructive powers in the world. Worship in Revelation is therefore not about making God feel good about himself, it is about reversing the effects of the fall. As God is named lord of creation, the idolatrous imperial aspirations of humanity are challenged, and the way is cleared for humanity, God and creation to recover that which was lost at Eden. The new song which only the 144,000 can sing (Rev. 14.3) therefore becomes a song of prophetic

challenge, with those who recognize the lordship of the one on the throne in heaven challenging the nations of the earth to join them in resisting the seductive yet destructive call of the satanic empire.

The sequences of warning judgments, calling the nations to repentance of their imperial idolatry, pave the way for the ultimate judgment on those satanic systems which oppress and destroy. Creation is finally and fully freed from satanic oppression as the forces of empire are destroyed at the great battle of Harmagedon. The armies of the kings of the earth are defeated by the sword that comes from the mouth of the rider on the white horse, with the word of God from the mouth of the messiah victorious over the satanic deceptions of the beast (19.21). The imperial forces which destroy the created order, oppress humanity, and violently suppress opposition are ironically seen to be themselves destroyed by nothing other than the 'gospel' itself.

Though John's own antidote to imperial idolatry involves an acknowledgement of the lordship of the divine figure on the heavenly throne as a precursor to the redemption of creation, his work also makes a powerful environmental critique of empire available to a wider humanity. Although John was writing to those within the Christian congregations of first century Asia Minor, nonetheless his prophetic call to the church, to enact a faithful witness to a non-exploitative view of humanity

and the earth, retains a clear challenge to the contemporary world. John's call to 'come out' of Babylon (Rev. 18.4), coupled with his presentation of empire as a destructive, and ultimately self-destructive, system present a persistent challenge to those who want to combine life-under-empire with environmental justice. Harnessing the strengths of empire in the search for solutions to pressing environmental concerns may or may not solve imminent problems; but in the long-term, those who dance with empire still end up embracing Babylon. John's core question thus remains as pertinent as ever: If you do not serve the Emperor, just whom do you serve?



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