

## **A Holy People Worshipping in a Holy Land: The Importance of Creation for Salvation \***

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In recent decades, the issue of creation has become increasingly significant from a variety of perspectives. One of them has obviously been the environmental and ecological crisis. As Christian theologians in general, and biblical interpreters in particular, have been accused of being the cause or at least significant contributor to the Western destructive stance toward the natural order, firstly defensive and then increasingly productive and constructive studies of this aspect of Scripture have been undertaken.

Another approach to the topic has been from some aspects of biblical source criticism which claim that the story of the exodus is much older than and, in fact, influenced and formed the story of creation. The source of the creation accounts is often seen as from the monarchic or even exilic period and consequently relegated as of little significance for the theology of ancient Israel. Even in their more discriminating forms some of these studies have presented a further devaluation, or at least separation, of creation from redemption.

This paper does not purport to go down either of these two roads. Although ecological and environmental concerns are certainly recognised as important and significant, and must always in some way be the practical result and outflow of biblical or theological studies on creation, countless studies have contributed in this area already (though often without the necessary theological foundation). We tend to separate the doctrines of God, the Creator, from those of Christ, the Redeemer. Though we theoretically acknowledge that God is indeed the source of all that is, we are far more comfortable speaking about our personal relationship with God through Christ. The core of our faith is conveniently expressed in our own plight of Hamartiology and the successful solution in Soteriology. Thus, much of Evangelical faith remains extremely Christocentric to the point of becoming Christomonistic. Yet, we wish to affirm against Marcion, and modern versions of the same, that the God of Abraham and Isaac is still the God who acted in Christ, and that what Christ accomplished on the cross is

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still valid for us now and will continue to be so in the future. This continuity, however, is only possible if our theology consistently spells out that what God does is a reflection of who he is. From creation to eschaton God's acts and purposes are reflective of his personhood. This presentation seeks to argue that God is not schizophrenic in his creative and redemptive acts, but that, indeed, they all drive toward the same purpose: that a holy people may worship a holy God in a holy land.

Two significant aspects of the topic emerge clearly in the Old Testament. As the title of the presentation implies, the concept of the promised land was extremely important for the Israelite community, God's holy people. Their formative event, the exodus from Egypt, had as its very goal the entering and occupation of the land. It is clear from many OT passages that the land played an integral part in Yahweh's relationship with his people.<sup>1</sup> The land is, in fact, Yahweh's personal possession and he looks after it (Deut. 11:12). Before they enter the land, the Israelites are reminded that it is Yahweh's gift to them and that they are only to live on it, as they live in right relationship with him.<sup>2</sup> Heaven and earth are called upon as witnesses to the covenant (Deut. 4:26).<sup>3</sup> When its inhabitants disobey his word, the land suffers as much as the people. At times, the sin of the people is visited upon the land (Isaiah 6:11-13). It is polluted by their sin (Jer. 3:2,9). Often the land is personified (e.g. Hosea 4:3). In some instances, the land literally "vomits out" the disobedient people (e.g. Lev. 18:24-30). The land is holy, because Yahweh dwells within it.<sup>4</sup> Many prophets express Israel's disobedience, fate, and even redemption in terms of the land. The sign of true repentance is a return to the land from captivity (1 Kgs 8:46-53). Clearly, the land is vital to their relationship with God. Often it is assumed that God can rightfully be worshipped only in the promised land. Even in captivity, renewed

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<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth study of the significance of this issue and its various aspects, see: Christopher J.H. Wright, *Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Davies even traces back the gift of the land to the divine promises made to Abraham. W.D. Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism: With a Symposium and Further Reflections* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Simkins argues that the creation can witness the terms of the covenant because the covenant is grounded in the order of creation. Ronald A. Simkins, *Creator and Creation: Nature in the Worldview of Ancient Israel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 159.

<sup>4</sup> Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism*, 12.

relationship with Yahweh is closely linked to a return to the land. Redemption is expressed in the restoration to Zion. Especially during captivity, yet at any time that boundaries become fuzzy, the 'holy city' Jerusalem, or the term 'Zion' becomes a short-hand way of referring to the land. Still, it is the physical, material space in which God is worshipped which is most holy, and where it is most right to meet Yahweh.

Secondly, it has recently been argued that OT redemption accounts (and especially the Exodus narrative) are informed by and pictured in creation imagery. As Elohim brings *cosmos* to the original chaos of creation, so Yahweh restores Israel from the chaos of Egyptian slavery to the *cosmos* of the promised land.<sup>5</sup> As the waters of the flood inundate the world and return it to the original chaos of creation which is then restored to *cosmos* in the promise of the rainbow, so does the Babylonian Captivity return Israel to the chaos of Egypt with eschatological hope becoming expressed in the imagery of re-creation and a new covenant.<sup>6</sup> Simkins points out that even in various psalms, God's activity in creation is employed as a paradigm for awaited redemption from suffering.<sup>7</sup> He explains that "God was able to redeem Israel in the past because God was and continues to be the creator. Consequently, there is hope for the psalmist that God will also redeem him."<sup>8</sup> Terence Fretheim maintains that the entire OT must be read with Genesis in mind. He argues that "God was at work in this world, even in and through the earliest glimmerings of what later became Israel, on behalf of the divine creational purposes."<sup>9</sup>

The terminology is consistently that of destruction and new beginning which in reality depicts a renewal and restoration to the original redemptive purpose. Fretheim asserts that "the objective of God's work in redemption is to free people to what they were created to be. It is a deliverance, not from the world, but to true life in the world."<sup>10</sup> Pictures of the coming reign of peace (*shalom*) are depicted in paradisiac images,

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the detailed study of this issue in Terence Fretheim's article: "The Reclamation of Creation: Redemption and Law in Exodus," *Interpretation* (July 1996), 357ff and "'Because the Whole Earth is Mine': Theme and Narrative in Exodus," *Interpretation* (Jan. 1996), 237f.

<sup>6</sup> Simkins, *Creator and Creation*, 204, 211ff.

<sup>7</sup> Simkins, *Creator and Creation*, 113.

<sup>8</sup> Simkins, *Creator and Creation*, 117.

<sup>9</sup> Fretheim, "The Reclamation of Creation", 356.

<sup>10</sup> Fretheim, "The Reclamation of Creation," 359.

pictures of a redeemed people in the midst of a redeemed creation: lion and lamb, child and otter. Simkins finds that “God’s activity in creation, the exodus, and the people’s future redemption is viewed according to a single paradigm: God’s defeat of chaos...God’s activity in creation served as the paradigm by which Israel was redeemed from bondage at the exodus, and in the same way God will redeem his people from exile.”<sup>11</sup> He depicts the new covenant and return from the wilderness imagery of the prophets as replete with creation imagery. As God’s righteousness will fill the earth and people will be enabled to live accordingly, the creation is redeemed and safeguarded because human “actions correspond to the ways of God.”<sup>12</sup>

Simkins also asserts that creation is given further significance by God’s endowment of it with a special share of his presence. It is, indeed, creation within which God appears and through which he speaks to his people: “God appears at springs, rivers, trees, and especially mountains, and by doing so endows the natural world with sacredness. The natural world serves as a symbol of God’s presence.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, this provides the foundation for designating a particular land holy: “The land is holy because it is the land of God’s dwelling, the land where God is experienced. The holy land is the land flowing with milk and honey, the land of creation. It is the land of the living and the only place where *real* life is possible.”<sup>14</sup> The promised land, then, is the place which has become holy through God’s ordering and creating presence within it. As the people live as a holy nation within the land, they are enabled to achieve true worship of the holy God and fulfilment of creation purposes. Only thus can the holy people become a nation of priests who invite all of creation to worship the holy God whom they portray.

It appears, however, that this larger focus on all the earth in Jewish eschatological thinking became increasingly relegated to the distant future, while the immediate survival of the Hebrew and Jewish community itself was at stake. Under Greeks and Romans, Maccabees and Zealots increasingly (and understandably so) fight for the survival of

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<sup>11</sup> Simkins, *Creator and Creation*, 115.

<sup>12</sup> Simkins, *Creator and Creation*, 224.

<sup>13</sup> Simkins, *Creator and Creation*, 130.

<sup>14</sup> Simkins, *Creator and Creation*, 137.

the Jewish community as such and salvation becomes again the exclusive property of the elect people.<sup>15</sup>

The extreme emphasis on the land seems almost non-existent in the NT.<sup>16</sup> The term “creation” itself is rarely used. And, although Christ is clearly acknowledged to have come for the redemption of the world (lit. the cosmos), that is generally acknowledged to mean ‘all people’, (not necessarily animals and plants). I would argue, however, that creation does indeed still occupy an important place in NT thought, even if less explicitly expressed. Furthermore, I would want to maintain that the redemption in Christ is not a completely new act, thoroughly disconnected from the original purpose of creation, but, in fact, serves to fulfil that very same purpose. The new creation for the new ecclesial community parallels in significance that of the land for Israel. As the promised land, Canaan, was the ‘holy place’ where rightful and true worship of Yahweh was not only possible but most preferred for the holy people of God – the Jewish community – in the same sense a renewed creation now becomes the ‘holy place’ for the new holy people, the church, which may include all people from all nations. The imagery of the church as the new Israel, is a familiar one, employed even by the NT writers themselves, and increasingly so by the early church. Yet, what support is there for depicting all of creation as the new ‘holy land’ and for giving it equal significance to the promised land in OT thought?

First, both Paul and the evangelists argue continually for continuity with the OT by maintaining that the same God, Yahweh, has now spoken in and through Christ. The quick acknowledgement of Christ’s pre-existence as the eternal word, as the *logos* through whom creation came into being, as the one who was before Abraham and all time, and as the one who left the Father and took on flesh, bears proof not just to the need for acknowledging Father and Son as of the same source but also for the firm belief that it was the eternal Creator who met his creation in the incarnate Son.<sup>17</sup> Part of this same seeking for continuity are also the

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<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed argument, see Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism*, 44ff.

<sup>16</sup> An interesting suggestion is put forth by Wright who argues that the fellowship of the early Christian church replaces the importance of the possession of the land by the family unit in the OT. Wright, *God’s People in God’s Land*, 112ff.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Colin E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation* (Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1992), 18, 22.

countless references to OT messianic prophecies. There is a good point to recent scholarship that sees the Gospel writers especially, but also Paul, presenting Christ as appealing to the larger story of the OT prophets.<sup>18</sup> We can see this most vividly in the countless quotations from the OT prophets, especially from Isaiah, in the Gospels. Clearly, the evangelists view Christ as fulfilling messianic prophecies. Christ was bringing, or at least inaugurating, the promised reign of God on earth. Jesus himself is claimed to have introduced his ministry with messianic words from Isaiah (Luke 4:18-19). Yet, he was not doing so according to most messianic expectations at the time (including those of the disciples). He was not fulfilling the narrow Jewish nationalistic hopes, but indeed beginning to restore *shalom* to all the earth, in all the aspects envisioned by the OT prophets: healing, restoration, reconciliation, stilling of natural elements, etc. In that sense, direct continuity with the OT, if not with the Jewish expectations of his day, can be claimed for Jesus' ministry.

Jesus' concern with bodily sufferings often makes the modern biblical scholar uncomfortable. To much of Western thinking (still heavily Platonic and Cartesian) the mind is far superior to the body in quality and importance. We tend to value Jesus' spiritual sayings and ignore the stories of restoration of the body. We have no problem with his forgiveness of sins, but are uncomfortable with the miracles. Jesus' inauguration of *shalom* clearly had an extremely 'physical' and 'material' aspect to it. He came in flesh, healed, and touched, and interacted. If the body was so insignificant and the spiritual so important, the *logos*, the divine word, could have taken on the form of a book instead of the shape of a human body.

A second essential aspect is the major turning point of the redemption story, the resurrection. Especially significant for the present discussion are Paul's arguments regarding it. Not only does he affirm the bodily resurrection of Christ, but more importantly, he deduces from it and argues vehemently for the bodily resurrection of believers. Not only does this clearly affirm the significance of the body, not only for life here on earth but for the continued worship of God after the resurrection, but it

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<sup>18</sup> E.g. an argument is made, that such is indeed the reason for the enmity leading to his death, that he was circumventing the exclusive, small story of contemporary Judaism and appealing to the larger story which had been largely forgotten or at least ignored, and was certainly neither desired nor popular.

also has significant implications for the continuity and connection of life after death with our present life on earth.<sup>19</sup>

Actually, most of the time the eschatological coming of Christ or the *parousia* is mentioned (especially in the Gospels) the future of the believers is put in terms of eternal life. Nothing is said concerning their removal from this earth or the destruction of the world. The future of unbelievers is usually depicted in some imagery of fire which may stand for either annihilation or purification (or both. Considering the words ‘eternal’ are at times also applied to it, the latter may, in fact, be the more likely). The term ‘life’ is a prominent one in the NT. The same term is used frequently in the OT to designate the possibility of obedient and faithful covenant behaviour. In these passages, ‘life’ is always associated with material promises or references to the land. Although the same interpretation cannot necessarily be assumed in the NT, one could certainly suggest such a connection. What else should expressions like ‘eternal life’, ‘abundant life’, ‘overflowing life’ refer to? Much of the imagery is certainly physical to a great extent, and Jesus’ listeners seem to have understood it as such. Although we may maintain that true enjoyment is the presence of God (as even the OT already does, e.g. Ps. 16:11), that does not appear to deny that such enjoyment may be expressed through physical bodies in a material universe with ‘sens[e]-ual’ pleasures.

Regardless of what is made of this parallel terminology (and eschatological passages are traditionally difficult to interpret), it appears that eschatological images are predominantly ‘earthy’. The future reign of peace (*shalom*) is depicted in similar imagery as in the OT. There is no indication that it is not taking place on earth. Christ called it “the renewal of all things” (Matt. 19:20). Simkins again employs the chaos mythology of creation to argue that it included the symbolic destruction of the created order before the creation could be reconstituted.<sup>20</sup> The new Jerusalem (quite obviously alluding to the old) comes from heaven to the people, they do not ascend to it. And even if passages referring to a new heaven and new earth are to be taken absolutely literally (and it is

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<sup>19</sup> Colin Gunton argues here that Christ “as the one who has returned to the Father, becomes the eternal source of salvation to those who believe but *as the one who is still on the side of the creation.*” Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, 32.

<sup>20</sup> This may well apply to both OT and NT eschatological imagery. Simkins, *Creator and Creation*, 148.

questionable that such is the best interpretation), there is no indication that the new heaven and earth are to be significantly different from the old (excepting of course the non-existence of sin and its dire consequences). In fact, it very much appears like a re-creation, a renewal of things. As Paul speaks of the comparison between present and resurrection body in the imagery of seed and plant, one might see the old and new world related. It is qualitatively different, yet the old is transformed not annihilated. C.S. Lewis points this out repeatedly, not just in his imaginary picture of heaven in Narnia, but even in his more allegorical portrayal in *The Great Divorce*, and his strictly rhetorical passages in *Mere Christianity*. In fact, metaphors and pictures seem to give us the closest access to a biblically and theologically consistent hunch of what “heaven” might be like. The new Narnia, depicted in *The Last Battle*, is essentially the same as the old, only much more grand and more real, like reality compared to the image in a mirror.<sup>21</sup> Stephen Lawhead’s powerful description of the transformation of Albion after the voluntary death of the king gives us a glimpse of what a recreation of earth might mean that is much greater than most of our narrow conceptions of heaven.<sup>22</sup> The new world is renewed and different in appearance, yet has complete continuity with the old. Eschatological thought, indeed, occupies an important place in New Testament thinking. The new reign of peace, already begun in Christ, finds its culmination in the recreation of all things when the people of God will again fulfil their original creaturely purpose: to worship a holy God in a holy land.

Significant theological considerations both bear on these thoughts and flow from them. For one, God is a God of continuity and not of waste.

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<sup>21</sup> “The difference between the old Narnia and the new Narnia was like that. The new one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more.” C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1956), 171.

<sup>22</sup> “Nothing escaped the refining fire of his irresistible will: all imperfection, all ugliness, all weakness and deformity, all frailty, infirmity, disease, deficiency and defect, every fault and failing, every blight and blemish, every flaw effaced, purged, and purified. And when the last scar had been removed, the cleansing flames diminished and faded away. . . when the fire at last subsided, Tir Aflan had been consumed and its elements transmuted in a finer, more noble conception: recreated with a grandeur as far surpassing its former degradation as if an old garment had been stripped away and not merely restored, but replaced with raiment of unrivalled splendor. It was not a change, but a transformation; not a conversion, but a transfiguration.” Stephen Lawhead, *The Endless Knot* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1993), 394.



In the OT supremely, Yahweh is presented as the one who is unchangeably faithful (*hesed*). Although his approaches and interactions change from person to person and situation to situation, he is always faithful to his people, his creation, and his purposes. It simply does not fit the nature of our God to depict him as the one who will burn up and destroy everything when he has finally redeemed his people. To redeem the creation with the people of God (as indeed Paul seems to imply in Rom. 8:18-25) appears far more consistent with God's ultimate purposes than a destruction of the created order. Thus, our theological convictions about God should influence our interpretation of specific texts, even more so when those are of a genre notoriously difficult to interpret anyway.

As seems clear both from the emphasis on the physicality of the resurrection body and the materiality of the future heaven and earth (whether this specific universe in a redeemed status, or another heaven and earth similar to this but without the destructive factors), materiality and physicality are essential to our worship of God. If the supreme goal of 'heaven' is to worship and enjoy God forever and be in right relationship with him and each other, clearly bodies and a material world of some kind are necessary. Worship in a spiritualised manner with souls floating about a non-material atmosphere seems not only impossible to imagine but clearly undesirable even from God's standpoint. Some kind of embodied existence is apparently necessary for worship and meaningful interaction of any kind.<sup>23</sup>

We affirm God as eternal love expressed in the loving interaction of the community of persons in the divine Triunity. This love is revealed in his desire to interact with creatures and draw them into ever closer communion with him, patterned in their interaction as creatures on the same loving communion they observe in their Creator. Such was the purpose from the beginning, as the creation story and especially Eastern Fathers, like Irenaeus, maintain. Such is still the purpose when Israel is being carried as with eagle's wings to become a nation of priests and when God becomes incarnate in Christ to shape himself a new people through the Spirit. Sin did not alter God's original purpose. Rather, as Simkins asserts, "sin deteriorates the order of creation which must be

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<sup>23</sup> In fact, the function of the non-human creation in the relationship between God and human beings has been compared to the role of the Holy Spirit in the relationship between Father and Son. This seems an intriguing hypothesis, though it assumes an essentially Western conception of the Triune relationships.

reconstituted. Human sin ultimately destroys the creation itself. As a result, human redemption depends upon the recreation of the world.”<sup>24</sup> The creation still longs to be perfected as was its original purpose through the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>25</sup> This perfection has begun through the Spirit in Christ and is now continued through the Spirit in the Church. Gunton asserts that “though directed to an end which is perfection for the glory of God, the creation has, unaccountably but undoubtedly, fallen into disorder ...(Christ) offers to God the Father, through the Spirit, a renewed and cleansed sample of the life in the flesh in which human being consists.”<sup>26</sup> He finds that “God the Father, through the work of the Son and the Spirit, maintains and resolves creation’s directedness to perfection.”<sup>27</sup>

I strongly believe we need to recover the biblical significance of creation as the holy place in which the holy God can be truly worshipped by a holy people. Not only do ecological and environmental crises call us to such reconsideration, but our theological reflection ought to demand it. Most of our spirituality has been disconnected from our physical existence in a most detrimental manner. With much of the materialistic worldview resulting from the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, a great disregard for the book of nature or the revelation of God in creation has resulted.<sup>28</sup> Usually, monasticism is blamed for a depreciation of the physical body. Yet, we may be in dire need of recovering its awareness of God’s presence in the natural order and its ability to connect with him in adoration and worship through observing the majestic flight of an eagle, enjoying the glory of a sunrise, and inhaling the sweet fragrance of a rose.

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<sup>24</sup> Simkins, *Creator and Creation*, 250.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, 50.

<sup>26</sup> Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, 57-59.

<sup>27</sup> Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, 78.

<sup>28</sup> In fact, the demise of many Enlightenment assumptions ought to enable more creative thinking in that direction.