

# Paradise Lost and Paradise Promised.

## The New Testament View of Creation

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### The *Finale Furioso* of Biblical Creation Theology

The Christian Bible ends with a glorious picture of hope. “A great city is created and descends from heaven to earth” – this is the picture painted in a hymn of praise written by Silja Walter in 1966 and put to music by Josef Anton Saladin in 1972. The hymn became so popular that it found its way into Germany’s Roman Catholic prayer book and hymnal *Neues Gotteslob* (no. 479). The words pick up the spectacularly joyful conclusion of the history of salvation which is depicted so daringly in the Book of Revelation: At the very end, after all the turmoil of history with its fighting, civil wars, famines, plagues, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis, everything on earth will be well again – and indeed infinitely better than anything we have ever dreamt of or hoped for.<sup>115</sup> This “great city” is the Heavenly Jerusalem – the place where God’s people long to be. Jerusalem is the most important place in Israel, the site of the Temple, the scene of major victories and defeats and the city where Jesus was crucified and then appeared to His disciples. It is profoundly significant that this new City of God should be the heavenly Jerusalem. Nothing that has ever happened in history since before the creation of the world will be lost. Everything will reach its fulfilment, everything will be caught up in God’s power and love, and everything will be well again: “Look, here God lives among human beings. He will make his home among them; they will be his people, and he will be their God, God-with-them. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness or pain. The world of the past has gone.” (Rev 21:3-4)

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<sup>115</sup> Cf. Wick, Peter, “Das Paradies in der Stadt: Das himmlische Jerusalem als Ziel der Offenbarung des Johannes”, in: von Bendemann, Reinhard/Tiwald, Markus (eds.), *Das frühe Christentum und die Stadt* (BWANT 198), Stuttgart 2012, 238–250.

The heavenly City will open its gates to the entire world. Sin and impurity will remain outside these gates, and so a broad global horizon will open up: “The nations will come to its light and the kings of the earth will bring it their treasures. Its gates will never be closed by day – and there will be no night there.” (Rev 21:24-25) The Heavenly City will be continually as bright as day, because God himself will have His dwelling place there, radiating His everlasting light.

Upon entering the city through numerous open gates in its walls, the nations will find themselves in a new Paradise. John writes: “Then the angel showed me the river of life, rising from the throne of God and of the Lamb and flowing crystal-clear. Down the middle of the city street, on either bank of the river were the trees of life, which bear twelve crops of fruit in a year, one in each month, and the leaves of which are the cure for the nations.” (Rev 22:1-2). This heavenly place is the promised Paradise, yet it has changed since the first one that was lost. Its location is not just anywhere, but within the heavenly City. The four streams of the earlier Paradise have now been united into a single broad river. Instead of a single tree of life whose fruit was forbidden, we can now see entire avenues of such trees bearing fruit throughout the year – fruit that is not just nourishment but which also brings healing. There is even peace among the beasts, following the picture of the future painted by Isaiah (Isa. 11), as there is now no longer any need to breed and slaughter any of the animals (see Gen 9:3-4).

This Paradise is not untouched nature as conjured up by Jean-Jacques Rousseau who saw Paradise as something which could only be found among the “savages” – the only truly good and undefiled people.<sup>116</sup> Rather, it is a garden that will be managed by God Himself and cultivated by man. This is why the early Paradise, which was lost by Adam and Eve (see Gen 3), always had a specific location in the history of Israel: in its Temple – a Temple which was built, destroyed and then longed for.<sup>117</sup>

This hope comes to life in Revelation, not as a copy of an older version, but as a new original which bears the imprint of Jesus Christ,

<sup>116</sup> Rousseau, Jean Jacques, *Emile ou de l'éducation* (Amsterdam 1762), Paris 2009.

<sup>117</sup> Cf. Keel, Othmar/Zenger, Erich, *Gottesstadt und Gottesgarten: Zur Geschichte und Theologie des Jerusalemer Tempels* (QD, No. 191), Freiburg im Breisgau 2002.

the Lamb of God.<sup>118</sup> This Christological perspective shows the characteristics of a New Testament creation theology which is based on the Old Testament and shares its premises but which goes further in that it also transforms its models.<sup>119</sup>

### **The *Sinfonia Concertante* of the New Testament View of Creation**

Creation theology in the New Testament can be characterised by three fields of tension which reconcile creation and redemption, immanence and transcendence, lament and praise. All three are directly related to Jesus.

### ***Allegro: Creation of the World and the History of Fulfillment***

In the Letter to the Colossians<sup>120</sup> (written by the Apostle Paul or one of his students) the author criticises an esoteric “philosophy” (Col 2:8-23) which apparently had a major impact on the Church at the time. This “philosophy” sought to reconcile faith in Christ and creation spirituality, but did so on the basis of false premises. It assumed a contemporary worldview which saw the universe as being in a sensitive and continually vulnerable balance between the “universal elements” of fire, water, earth and air. In ancient – and indeed also philosophical – mythology these elements were regarded as divine powers which had to be served in order to lead a good life and to maintain harmony with those supernatural forces. In Colossae’s world of Christian “philosophy” – which was very much in vogue at the time – those elemental forces were apparently perceived as metaphysical dimensions which threatened to disrupt any relationship with God. It followed that, for religious reasons, one had to be on good terms with them, and they had to be worshipped as angels (Col 2:18). So asceticism was required with regard to eating, drinking and sexuality, at least during specific religious festivals (Col 2:16): “Do not pick up this, do not eat that, do not touch the other” (Col 2:21). The idea was to practise Christianity in a way that was humble, yet superior and in harmony with nature.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. Backhaus, Knut, *Theologie als Vision: Studien zur Johannesapokalypse* (SBS, No. 191), Stuttgart 2001.

<sup>119</sup> Cf. Janowski, Bernd/Scholtissek, Klaus, Art. “Schöpfung”, in: Bjerkelund, Angelika/Frevel, Christian (eds.), *Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe zum Alten und Neuen Testament*, Darmstadt 2015, 385-387.

<sup>120</sup> Cf. Bormann, Lukas, *Der Brief an die Kolosser* (Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament, No. 10/1), Leipzig 2012.

The author of Colossians did not think much of this model at all. He felt that the significance of baptism and of faith was being undermined by a belief in mythological concepts and so he emphasised the importance of a direct line to God. If someone wants to come to God, there is no need to take a detour, since he can be approached directly through Jesus Christ. This is the Good News. Any confusion on this point is born out of fear, and although such fear is humanly understandable, it is theologically fatal.

To spread this message, the author pulled no punches, using the full force of his Pauline theology which, in turn, was deeply rooted in the biblical view of creation. The key sentence in his theological critique of that “philosophy” sums up this entire chapter of New Testament religious criticism: “In him, in bodily form, lives divinity in all its fullness” (Col 2:9). To gain a better understanding of these words it is helpful to look at the author’s meditation in the previous chapter, where he uses a canticle from a liturgy that was probably sung by Early Christians at the time and where we can hear a recurring theme reverberating like a refrain (Col 1:15-20): “For in him [...] all things were created through him and for him” (Col 1:16), all God’s fullness dwells “in him”, through him he reconciled all things “to himself”, and he has made peace through his blood, shed on the cross (Col 1:19-20). The canticle centres around a sense of connectedness that characterises God’s presence: “He exists before all things and in him all things hold together” (Col 1:17).

In this prayer Jesus Christ is described as a figure not just of the past, but also of the present and the future, and indeed as more than a human being among humans, but as the central figure of creation as a whole. One of the insights of Old Testament wisdom theology is that man and animal can only find their bearings in this world because God Himself has given meaning to His creation. It is in His wisdom that God designed a masterplan which holds the world together in its innermost being. And if God called the world into being, it cannot be His will for the world to vanish into nothingness. There has to be a future for the world that lies beyond all futures, as otherwise God would have contradicted Himself.

In Colossians we can see God’s wisdom being given a name, a face and a narrative – the name, face and story of Jesus. It is Jesus who shows that the world is God’s creation, that it is held together by

God’s will and that this will find its fulfilment in God’s own fullness. Yet at the same time the cosmic width of the canticle also shows that the story of Jesus as God’s Son did not have a beginning. If that were the case, it would also end after a certain period of time. Rather, it is God’s story in the midst of creation; it started before all time and it will continue throughout all time and into eternity. Jesus Christ is the “first-born” (Col 1:15), not so that He could remain alone, but so that all God’s children might enter into fulfilment through Him, with Him and in Him, and so that mankind might not stay alone but experience God’s peace as His creatures and therefore as part of His one and only creation.

The New Testament has various ways of expressing the connection between creation and redemption, starting with Jesus’ parables and finishing with the apocalyptic imagery in the Book of Revelation. The Christian hope of fulfilment is fed by two roots. One is the existence of so much suffering, distress and guilt in the world: distress and misery which cannot possibly have the final word if God is merciful in His judgement. In fact, our Christian hope of fulfilment is a serious expression of faith in the God who is love (1 John 4:18, 16). The other root is the very existence of life on earth: if it was created by God, then the best is still to come – necessarily, as otherwise God would be unfaithful to Himself.

In our everyday world this hope is continually contested and regarded as illusory. It requires celebration, liturgy and prayer to praise God as the one who leads His creation towards fulfilment and who therefore changes the world even now, starting in the hearts of believers.

### ***Adagio: The Ruler of the Universe in the Midst of Creation***

The Bible begins with the words: “In the beginning God created heaven and earth” (Gen 1:1). This makes all the difference: God is the Creator, He is not part of the world; the world is His creation. None of His creatures are divinities. This fundamental monotheistic difference is a core tenet of biblical theology. The Early Christians wholeheartedly shared this view.

Looking at Jesus, the New Testament shows that God is not just outside the world, but that he has entered it. This Christological concept is reflected most clearly in the prologue of John’s Gospel

(John 1:1-18).<sup>121</sup> These words, too, are a prayer. They form the introduction to the fourth Gospel which contains a different perspective from the other three in talking about Jesus' teachings, suffering and resurrection. What distinguishes John's Gospel is that it presents a special focus on Jesus' oneness with God and His people. "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30), says Jesus at the climax of His sermon about the Good Shepherd (John 10) in which He picks up the theme of Psalm 23. "Here is the man", says Pontius Pilate as he parades the tortured King of the Jews with a crown of thorns and addresses the masses who clamour for Jesus' crucifixion (John 19:5).<sup>122</sup>

There is no contradiction here as, according to John, Jesus not only proclaimed God's Word, but also embodied it. We can also see this reflected in the prologue: "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1) – the *logos* in Greek, a word which expressed a concept in Jewish wisdom literature: "Through Him all things came into being" (John 1:3), "What has come into being in him was life, life that was the light of men" (John 1:4). But what follows is very clearly Christological in character: "The Word (the *logos*) became flesh, He lived among us" (John 1:14). So is the incarnation a major breach? Or is it the ultimate consequence of Jesus' role as a mediator within creation?

Marcion, who – in the second century – saw an irreconcilable contrast between the creation and redemption, did indeed tend to see it as a breach and refused to include John's Gospel in his biblical canon. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Adolf von Harnack attempted to reinstate Marcion. He saw John's prologue as a great sin in that it had led to the Hellenisation of Christianity and should be reversed in the modern age by returning to the (supposedly) simple teachings of Jesus.<sup>123</sup> However, Marcionism puts a *caesura* into the very heart of the Bible, mutilating the New Testament and turning creation into a world without God.

John takes a different route. The incarnation has a double edge. Firstly, it is a response to a situation in which God's Word was proclaimed to mankind but was not heard by the vast majority

<sup>121</sup> Cf. Kruck, Günter, Der Johannesprolog, Darmstadt 2009.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, Joseph (Pope Benedict XVI.), Jesus von Nazareth: Zweiter Teil: Vom Einzug in Jerusalem bis zur Auferstehung, Freiburg im Breisgau 2011, 233.

<sup>123</sup> Cf. von Harnack, Adolf, Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott (1921, 21924), Darmstadt 1985.

(John 1:10f.) – a situation which required a final act on God's part. Secondly, however, the incarnation of the *logos* is more than an emergency solution. It is the strongest intensification of affection that God could ever show the world. He called it into being through His Word, He spoke His Word over it through the history of His people (John 1:6-13), and He gave His Son and thus His greatest gift of love (John 3:16).

When it says in verse 14, as a confession of faith, that God's eternal Word became "flesh", then this expresses the closest imaginable link between creation and redemption. After all, according to the biblical view of man,<sup>124</sup> the "flesh" is precisely the side of man that specifies him as part of creation:

Man is born and will die, he has sensory organs, he is capable of passion and suffering, he is beautiful and ugly, he is weak, and he is finite. In Jesus, God's Word became nothing more and nothing less than a mortal human being, and this could not be expressed more clearly than through the incarnation. The Christology of John's Gospel starts right at the top – and arrives right at the bottom. It spans the full width of the universe – and it goes even further because it is based on God's perspective. The same, therefore, is also true in reverse: God Himself has entered His own creation through Jesus. This is the ultimate form of showing esteem and, indeed, the most intensive form of love.

Such a theology of God's real presence lets God be God and lets creation be creation, yet it also shows how infinitely close God comes to humanity and the entire world through Jesus. Seeing this means seeing God's glory – in a man who greatly influences those who put their faith in him.<sup>125</sup> By stating "I am", Jesus turned specific creational and cultural elements into divine symbols in the midst of this world: water, wine, bread, the way, the shepherd, light and the door. This perspective of the hope of salvation is expressed particularly clearly in Jesus's high priestly prayer (John 17): Those who put their faith in him become partakers of that love between the Father and the Son, a love that is older than creation itself (John 17:24) and which overcomes

<sup>124</sup> Cf. Frevel, Christian/Wischmeyer, Oda, Menschsein: Perspektiven des Alten und des Neuen Testaments (NEB, Themen 11), Würzburg 2003.

<sup>125</sup> Cf. Söding, Thomas, Der Gottessohn aus Nazaret: Das Menschsein Jesu im Neuen Testament, Freiburg im Breisgau 2008.

the gulf between God and the world, not by secularising God, but by trusting that God will deify the world and bring it to its fulfilment.

What John presents in such a condensed form is part of the fundamental structure of New Testament theology. In the Book of Revelation we can see the fulfilment of the heavenly Jerusalem and thus the fulfilment of God's covenant with His people: that He will live among them and be with them forever (Rev 21:3). The Second Epistle of Peter promises Christians that they will "share the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Paul sees Jesus' divine sonship not as an exclusive relationship with God, but as a chance for humans to enter fully into their status as God's children by becoming brothers and sisters of Jesus. According to Colossians, God's entire fullness lives in Jesus "in bodily form" (Col 2:9): It is man who becomes its vessel and who is then defined by it. What is central here is a theology of love that overcomes the world, yet does not despise it. Rather, it affirms the world, and indeed so much that it becomes transformed.

### ***Presto: All Creation crying out with the Voice of Hope***

As Jesus and Christians are so closely connected with creation, this also affects their spirituality and ethics. This is expressed most clearly in Paul's Letter to the Romans in which he formulates a theology of righteousness (Rom 1:16f.), showing that God's grace is not random. Rather, it follows from His will as the Creator and expresses His faithfulness to His promises. Moreover, it does not tie people to their sinfulness but lets them live in their status as God's children and thus in their true identity.<sup>126</sup>

This theology of righteousness creates a sound bridge between preaching salvation and practical ethics (Rom 6:12-21, 12:1f. and 9-21), and it also builds a bridge between salvation and spirituality. As soon as Paul reaches the climax of his reasoning on justification by faith, he widens the panorama to include the whole of creation. There is a profound point of identification – both in suffering and in hope –

<sup>126</sup> On this doctrine of justification see: *Biblische Grundlagen der Rechtfertigungslehre – Eine ökumenische Studie zur Gemeinsamen Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre*. The study was commissioned by the Lutheran World Federation, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the World Communion of Reformed Churches and the World Methodist Council and then submitted by a workgroup of Old Testament, New Testament and systematic theologians. Ed. by Klaiber, Walter, Leipzig/Paderborn 2012.

between Christians and all of creation. On the dark side, Paul points out the sensitive awareness of Christians that "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth" – a side which is also reflected in Christian suffering (Rom 8:22). Yet creation is unable to express its lament – just as Christians are speechless in the face of affliction (Rom 8:26).

However, it is Christians who have received the Holy Spirit, so that they have access to God in prayer, crying *Abba* in the words of Jesus' native language (Rom 8:14-15) and in the theme-setting first line of the Lord's Prayer. By praying in this way, Christians do more than express their own distress before God, asking for relief. They also intercede on behalf of the entire world which has no voice of its own.

This has its equivalent on the bright side, as hope of fulfilment is available not only for Christians, but for the whole of creation. A believer is well aware "that the whole creation itself might be freed from its slavery to corruption and brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God" (Rom 8:21). This hope finds expression when Christians cry out to God as "Father". We can see this particularly clearly in the Lord's Prayer as the background to Paul's reasoning. After all, God's name is that of the Creator, God's Kingdom transforms the world, God's will claims universal validity "on earth as it is in heaven", the daily bread we need is the "fruit of the earth and of human hands", our guilt has wounded creation, and deliverance from evil encompasses the entire universe, as otherwise its impact would be halved.

Believers are blessed in that they already have this hope. Prayer creates fellowship not only among humans, but with all of creation. In 1843/44 Karl Marx said in his introduction to his "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law": "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the soul of soulless conditions."<sup>127</sup> These words, which might well have been copied from Paul, appear to ignore two important aspects. First of all, the focus is on humans alone, while Paul looks at creation in its entirety; secondly, God is left out, thus foregoing the thought that there might be inspiration in

<sup>127</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/df-jahrbucher/law-abs.htm> (05.07.2017): "Abstract from The Introduction to Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" [sic].

the face of all our affliction and that all earthly happiness – even in the most equitable of societies – is merely a shadow of the heavenly fulfilment which God will eventually open up to the entire universe. This is the main theme of the symphony of creation which we hear in the New Testament. Jesus put it into words when he gave his Sermon on the Mount. The canticle that is presented in Colossians sheds light on the bright side, i.e. the joy of those who know that they have their place within the rhythm of creation and that, together with creation, they are destined for fulfilment. The Book of Revelation goes to great lengths in emphasising man's culpability in poisoning the water and air and in destroying nature prior to the rise of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1, Isa 65:17 and 66:22).

### The *cantus firmus* of Christian Creation Spirituality

The première of Joseph Haydn's oratorio *The Creation* took place in Vienna in 1798 and it finished with a sentence for the choir and soloists: "Sing the Lord, ye voices all, / Magnify His Name through all creation, Celebrate His power and glory, / Let His Name resound on high. Jehovah's praise for ever shall endure. Amen!" (No. 37). Apart from the Bible, the most important source was Milton's *Paradise Lost*. At the time of Isaac Newton, Haydn did not stubbornly defend a biblical belief in creation against science but celebrated God's unseen presence in a world that follows the laws of nature. He put to music the calling that rests on all creatures to praise God – creatures that are not divinities, but living beings and things at this time and in this place in the universe.<sup>128</sup> Physics is very much in tune with such music – just as the Bible with its creation theology has not become obsolete, but has gained several new aspects: the distinction between faith and knowledge as a basis for dialogue, the specific quality of this world without which there would be no dialogue with God and the finiteness of creation surrounded by God's infinity.<sup>129</sup>

Christian creation spirituality follows from the theological theme of creation that resounds like a symphony in the Old and New Testaments. Silja Walter's hymn of the "great city" that "descends from heaven to earth" (German Roman Catholic hymnal *Gotteslob*, 479),

continues with a description borrowed from the Book of Revelation where it primarily refers to God Himself (Rev 22:5): "They will not need lamplight or sunlight, because the Lord God will be shining on them." There are two sides to this apocalyptic image: firstly, our natural light can never be bright enough to illuminate eternal life and, secondly, God's everlasting light shines brighter than a thousand suns and moons. It follows that the light of the sun and the moon can already give us a glimpse of God's light. The whole of creation points to the Creator and serves as a signpost to that final fulfilment. This hope should not be destroyed by the disasters of this world. Instead, they should inspire us with hope because God can never be resigned to them.

This hope is also expressed at the very end of the Book of Revelation, concluding the entire Bible. First the risen Lord Jesus Himself says: "I am indeed coming soon" (Rev 22:20a), words which are then echoed by the Church: "Amen; come, Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20B), and finally we hear the words of the prophet who knows himself to be inspired by God: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all. Amen." (Rev 22:21). This universality of salvation is the other side of creation theology, and it is the heartbeat of biblical creation spirituality that we should pray for Jesus' return when He will bring life to all.

<sup>128</sup> Cf. Rohls, Jan, "Haydn's 'Schöpfung' und ihr theologischer Hintergrund", in: *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie*, No. 55 (2013), 465–494.

<sup>129</sup> Cf. Schmidt, Konrad, *Schöpfung* (UTB), Stuttgart 2012.