

## From Beginning to the End: Humans as Caretakers and Co-creators of Nature

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**Followers of the Christian faith ought to reconsider their role as being created in the ‘image of God,’ their interpretation of the Apocalyptic literature, and the relationship between the two. Different interpretations of these two narratives in Biblical literature (the Creation and the End Times) can create and support the view of humans as care-takers of Earth. A different perspective of the Creation story and Apocalyptic literature can lead to a different view of humans and their role in nature. By realizing their equivalence with nature and nature’s true ownership by God, humans are demoted from nature’s tyrannical kings to helpful gardeners. By observing the God-given power of decision-making, these helpful gardeners realize their power and influence over the quality of the earth. By realizing the true meaning for the Apocalypse, these gardeners use their powers to establish the dwelling place for God’s kingdom. The call for humans to become caretakers for the earth, rather than ‘flying away’ from it starts in Genesis when God formed the Creation, and continues until the end in Revelation when God will form God’s new kingdom on a renewed and restored heaven and earth.**

Within the Christian context, there exists a duality in the views and attitudes exhibited towards creation. On one hand lies the *anthropocentric perspective* of dominion and separation from nature, which, taken to an extreme, leads to a passive acceptance of the degradation of creation. On the other lies the ecological focus of humanity’s God-given role as caretakers or, essentially ‘co-creators’ in nature. Society’s current biblical interpretations of creation and Apocalyptic literature lead many to the *eschatological perspective*. In turn, this leads to a population that focuses more on the questionable doctrine of a destroyed creation in the eschaton than the call for preservation and care-taking of God’s creation. Through research and analysis of theological perspectives, it can be argued that followers of the Christian faith ought to reconsider their role as the ‘image of God,’ their interpretation of the Apocalyptic literature, and the relationship between the two.

Ultimately, different interpretations on two popular aspects of Biblical literature, the Creation and the End Times, can create and support the view of humans as care-takers of the earth.

### Two Focuses

The behavior and perception of individuals towards the whole of creation can basically be summarized into two different focuses within the biblical texts. The first is a focus on the Creation stories and the second is a focus on the Apocalyptic stories. While both of these contain important spiritual lessons and truths, mostly revolving around the greatness and immanence of God, each have certain aspects that can be misinterpreted by contemporary society. These misinterpretations effectively develop the adverse attitudes towards nature seen today.

The Creation stories fully demonstrate the great power, creativity, and

knowledge of God, but portray the role of humans in a variety of ways. Cas Lambuschagne is quoted as saying, “one of the most deplorable misconceptions with regard to the biblical doctrine of creation, that creation is usually considered to be anthropocentric . . . [it] is *theocentric*.”<sup>1</sup> Society’s perception of God is not the issue. It is the perception of humanity and its role in creation that is the issue. All too often, Christians hear the command to “rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground,” but miss the instruction to tend to the garden and to the earth.<sup>2</sup> The innate selfishness within the human race has caused readers to interpret the Bible, as Lambuschagne put it, anthropocentrically. Readers note the emphasis on the ‘very good’ day that man was made, believing it to be a sign of their superiority over creation. The Bible’s continued emphasis on God’s role in the life of humans enhanced this belief.

The view of humans as superior over nature is problematic in the fact that it causes society to become selfish in its control of the earth. Philip Hefner states, “It is human culture that builds bridges and dams, but it is iron ore and clay and lumber that supply the material for them, and it is the terrain with its flora and fauna that are affected by these structures.”<sup>3</sup> Humanity takes from the earth as it sees fit because it is supposedly theirs to take. However, no reason is seen to give back to the earth, and nature suffers for it. This interpretation of the human role in creation is a parasitic one, with humans as the parasite. Holmes Rolston, III, declares that, “Human desires for maximum development drive population increases, escalate exploitation of the environment, and fuel the forces of war.” In

addition, he claims, “nature today is in crisis, a crisis generated by human culture.”<sup>4</sup> It is strange that in taking advantage of God’s gift to humans, the earth must suffer so much. It is possible that humans have once again misunderstood the directions of God. A different interpretation and its connection to the care-taking role will be discussed at a later point.

The Apocalyptic stories are essential in offering a sense of hope and purpose to the followers of Christ, particularly in the social and evangelical aspects. However, it does just the opposite for them in regard to nature. Due to the common perception that the world will end in fire and that the true believers will be taken from this world, many Christians simply accept the continual degradation of nature. As Smith and Brannan put it, “The danger with the apocalyptic fundamentalists, who see climate change as ‘God’s will,’ is that they fail to accept the human causes of global warming and, consequently, refuse to be culpable for the very human habits and practices that actually cause climate change.”<sup>5</sup> Whether or not an individual realizes the data showing climate change is a fact, the fundamentalist believer in the apocalyptic interpretation will not feel the need to take up the reins as a caretaker of the earth because of his selfish exploitative desire. In extreme cases, he may even welcome the destruction of nature simply because, he thinks, it is a sign of Christ’s return.

A contributing factor to this type of thinking is the interpretation of heaven connected to the vulgar eschatological view. The word *heaven* is said and images of pearly gates located above the clouds ‘up there’ are conjured up in one’s mind. Malcolm Jeeves and Robert Berry explain

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<sup>1</sup> Jeeves & Berry, 1988, pg. 221

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:28, NIV

<sup>3</sup> Hefner, 1993, pgs. 47-48

<sup>4</sup> Rolston, 1994, pg. 225

<sup>5</sup> Smith & Brannan, 2013, pg. 172

the effect of belief in this kind of heaven. They declare, “To believe man’s true citizenship is in heaven and that his true identity lies beyond space and time enables him both to be involved in this world and yet to have a measure of detachment from it that permits radical changes such as would be scarcely possible if all his hopes were centered on this world.”<sup>6</sup> The detachment stemming from this belief results in an indifference towards nature. Ultimately, this eschatological view results in an indifferent caretaker, or a Christian who cares only for the human world and not for the whole world.

### Alternate Interpretations

Paul Santmire clearly details two potential views towards the Creation stories held by Christians, one being the ‘spiritual motif.’ Through the story of Creation, we see God create the universe, designating us to ‘rule’ over all of his creation. We notice that he says his creation was ‘very good’ after he creates man. We note his clear involvement in the lives of the human race. Christians today have taken all of this and produced the thought that humans are, by divine right, the superior species.<sup>7</sup> However, it is more likely that biologically-derived selfishness has caused humans to misinterpret scripture simply to benefit themselves.

Santmire’s second view is referred to as the ‘ecological motif.’ Essentially, humans are rooted in nature with the rest of creation and are called to a life of obedience with the rest of the ‘biophysical order.’<sup>8</sup> This second view places us as equals with creation rather than above it. The way Hefner puts it, “For humans to be created means also that they exist within, and for the sake of, the matrix of creation in which they

have emerged.”<sup>9</sup> To put it simply, we were also created. Looking just through the lens of evolution, we are on the same field as every other organism, every other part of nature. Hefner adds to this by saying, “Since humans cannot credit themselves for their role in the process and their capabilities, they cannot be said to be morally superior or inferior to any other species or entity in the same ecosystem.”<sup>10</sup> This can be taken both scientifically and theologically. We were created through biological means and our roles are biologically similar to all other organisms. Also, God created all things and has divine intentions for all things, not just us. This change in perception is helpful in realizing God’s true role for humans.

Seeing the human race as a part of nature and not above it allows for a better understanding of how humanity interacts with and affects nature. Furthermore, it helps Christians understand God’s designation for us as care-takers of the world. This view is enhanced even more when one considers other insights made by Philip Hefner. In considering evolutionary differences between humans and the rest of creation, we have one significant difference from that of nature: the ability of decision-making.<sup>11</sup> Humans are the only sentient creatures of which we are aware who can see the world, its flaws and possibilities, and truly consider the effects of their actions. Humans hold the strange capacity to comprehend and take responsibility for their actions. Rolston reaches the same conclusion, stating, “But sentience does more than permit observation of the world. It rather evolves to awaken some concern for it. Sentience coevolves with a capacity to separate the helps from the hurts in the

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<sup>6</sup> Op. cit. ref. 1, p. 234

<sup>7</sup> Santmire, 1985, pgs. 9-10

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit. ref. 3, p. 36

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit. ref. 3, pp.. 30-31

world.”<sup>12</sup> This provides the strongest support of God’s calling for humans as care-takers.

It is interesting that God’s process of evolution culminated in the creation of an organism, just as much a part of nature as the rest of creation, but with a freedom to understand and make choices in the world. Christians who understand their place in nature and their God-given power would likely pay more attention to the instructions to tend to the Garden, that is, the earth. Essentially, seeing that humans are the only part of creation that can truly help creation, it is sensible that humans would be responsible over creation. With this in mind, it is much easier to see the Creation stories as a call from God rather than a status placement. This call for humans to act as care-takers of the earth is strengthened when alternate interpretations of Apocalyptic literature are taken into account.

As alluded to earlier, it is a commonly accepted belief that, in the days of Christ’s return, the world will end in flames. Destruction will fall upon the Creation and the true followers of Christ will be taken to a heaven that is separate from the earth. However, theological thinking on this ‘common man’ idea indicates it is likely not the correct interpretation of the apocalypse and heaven. For starters, God is mentioned several times throughout the Bible as having loved creation. This is seen very clearly in the creation event, but also several times throughout the Old Testament. Santmire discusses how the topic of land as a blessing is seen throughout all of the Old Testament, along with the theme of fertility. Perhaps His benevolence drove him to promise things humans desired, but other Biblical stories suggest that that is not how He works. Clearly, there is some emphasis or value being placed on land.<sup>13</sup> It is

questionable why God would utterly destroy the entire creation if He loves it.

One argument for this point is that He does save part of creation; He saves His followers. However, if we take the new interpretation of the Creation story to be true, then the rest of creation deserves a place at the end of time, too. Santmire asserts that, “The prophets, especially the apocalyptic writers, proclaimed the hope of a renewed land and indeed a universally renewed earth, often with lavish images of overflowing fecundity.”<sup>14</sup> The prophets emphasized a *renewed* earth, not an entirely new location. This brings up some confusion. The earth is renewed, and yet it is prophesied to be consumed in flames. How can the two be reconciled? A new eschatological interpretation discussed by John Mark Hicks defines the consummation by fire as a purification rather than utter destruction.<sup>15</sup>

With this new perspective, a different interpretation of heaven is also required. Contrary to popular belief, it is possible that heaven is not located on some spiritual plane separate from the earth, but is actually destined to be placed on the earth after it is renewed by fire. The importance of this eschatological viewpoint is that it brings into light the importance of nature. Rather than being indifferent towards nature, humans should be working on making nature perfect. If the kingdom of God is to make its home on the earth, the whole of the earth needs to be ready. The powerful role humans play in nature is now even more critical. Rather than simply being called to care for nature as we live out our existence, we are called to make ready the kingdom of God.

### Call for Caretakers

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<sup>12</sup> Op. cit. ref. 4, p. 217

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit. ref. 7, pp. 190-192

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 199

<sup>15</sup> Hicks, 2016, pp. 17-28

By reinterpreting the Creation stories and Apocalyptic literature, there is a much clearer sense of what humans are and where they reside in relation to creation. They are made as part of a whole, an equal part of nature. “Furthermore,” as Jeeves and Berry assert, “this world belongs to God by creation and by Christ’s reconciling death; we are tenants or managers, not owners.”<sup>16</sup> The role of humans as caretakers is made clearer in light of the fact that they are God’s servants, not only to carry out His plan for loving neighbors, but for nurturing all of His wonderful creation. They add to this claim by saying, “The command to ‘have dominion’ was made in the context of men and women ‘made in God’s image,’ which must involve a strong element of reliability and responsibility, whatever else it includes.”<sup>17</sup> Rather than ruling over the earth as selfish tyrants, humans are called to rule over the earth in the *likeness* of a caring and loving God. By caring for the earth with compassion we go beyond mere image and finally begin achieving true *likeness*: part of our journey toward *theosis*.

Despite being made with equal material to the rest of creation (mere dust), there is a small yet significant difference within the human species. The difference lies in the power of choice. As discussed earlier, humans were given the gift of awareness, understanding, and decision-making so that they could live out God’s will. Humans are capable of observing the world, considering the possibilities, and making the conscious decision to follow God’s plan and care for the earth. The

realization of an earthbound kingdom of God emphasizes the need for humans to take up the reigns as God’s earthly caretakers. Not only is the current world within the control of human will, but it is possible that God intends for the current world to be turned into the dwelling place of God’s kingdom through the hands of God’s followers. The new interpretations complement each other and emphasize the new perception of humans as caretakers. Rather than forming a story of creation that eventually leads to destruction, this view shows a creation that is continuously cared for and has an end purpose of becoming the Kingdom of God.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, the changing perception of the Creation story and Apocalyptic literature leads to a different view of humans and their role in nature. By realizing their equivalence with nature and nature’s true ownership by God, humans are demoted from nature’s tyrannical kings to helpful gardeners. By observing the God-given power of decision-making, these helpful gardeners realize their power and influence over the quality of the earth. By realizing the true meaning for the Apocalypse, these gardeners use their powers to establish the dwelling place for God’s kingdom. The call for humans to become caretakers for the earth began from the beginning in Genesis when God formed the Creation, and will continue until the end in Revelations when God will form God’s new kingdom on a renewed and restored heaven and earth.

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<sup>16</sup> Op. cit. ref. 1, pg. 221

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