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God's story and the Earth's story: grounding our concern for the environment in the biblical metanarrative

Christian concern for the environment and the Earth is often grounded in the notion of stewardship of God's creation and so based primarily on the opening chapters of the Bible. Here the aim is to broaden the basis of Christian environmental ethics by considering the full sweep of the biblical metanarrative, and to develop a Christocentric approach that takes account of the whole Bible – both Old and New Testaments. By doing this we situate the Earth's story within the context of God's story and thereby provide motivation for our participation in God's mission to redeem his creation.

Keywords: creation, Earth, environment, ethics, eschatology, metanarrative, story

Introduction

In thinking about issues such as global warming, environmental change and ecology it soon becomes clear that a dominant (*sic*) approach adopted by Christians is that as human beings we are called by God to be stewards of the Earth.¹ The biblical basis is commonly developed from Genesis 1 and, in particular, from verses 28-30 – where God gives dominion (rule) over the Earth to man and woman.² Much of the literature is devoted to showing how that dominion is to be exercised: as stewardship on behalf of God for the benefit of all creation, including human beings, rather than for selfish human ends (so countering the arguments of White).³ While this is a biblical approach, it often

1 See e.g. Osborn, L. *Guardians of creation: nature in theology and the Christian life*, Leicester: Apollos (1993); Van Dyke, F., Mahan, D.C., Sheldon, J.K. & Brand, R.H. *Redeeming creation: the biblical basis for environmental stewardship*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP (1996); Berry, R.J. (ed.) *Environmental stewardship: critical perspectives – past and present*, London: T&T Clark (2006); Berry, R.J. (ed.) 2007 *When enough is enough: a Christian framework for environmental sustainability*, Nottingham: Apollos (2007); for criticisms of this approach, see chapter 8 of Southgate, C. (ed.) *God, humanity and the cosmos: a companion to the religion and science debate*, 2nd edn, London: T&T Clark (2005).

2 For recent theological thinking on this topic see Middleton, R.J. *The liberating image: the imago dei in Genesis 1*, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press (2005).

3 White, L. 'The historical roots of our ecological crisis', *Science* (1967) 155, 1203-1207.

lacks any significant reference to Jesus and the New Testament.⁴ It could just as easily have been developed in the context of Judaism or Islam, as both faiths accept the Old Testament.⁵

Therefore, the question posed here is: is it possible to develop an approach to the environment⁶ that is Christocentric and takes full account of both the New and Old Testaments? To attempt to do this may seem overambitious in a short paper. However, recent work in theology has provided some resources to help in the task and this paper will seek to build on these. In particular, the narrative approach to understanding the Bible developed by N. T. Wright and C.J.H. Wright⁷ will underpin the attempt. Rather than focusing on a few verses in Genesis, or elsewhere, the aim will be to take in the whole scope of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation – God’s story – and to explore where this takes us when considering the Earth’s environment – the Earth’s story.

From creation to new creation – God’s story and the Earth’s story

One of the positive outcomes of postmodernism has been the recognition of the importance of story (narrative) in understanding both the Bible and human culture.⁸ Of course, Lyotard’s definition of ‘*postmodern*’ as incredulity towards metanarratives⁹ means that postmodernism per se is unacceptable to those who see the Bible as depicting *the* metanarrative – God’s story.¹⁰ Nevertheless, this insight into the importance of narrative can help in placing the story of the Earth’s environment, and of human beings’ part in that story, in the context of God’s story.¹¹

Key elements of the biblical metanarrative can be summarised as follows:

creation – Genesis 1 & 2

fall – Genesis 3 – fallen man (generic; Adam; *imago Dei*) excluded from

4 A notable exception is DeWitt, C.B. (ed.) *The environment and the Christian: what can we learn from the New Testament?*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House (1991). See too some of the contributions in Berry *op. cit.* (1) 2006 and Northcott, M.S. ‘Ecology and Christian ethics’, ch.15 in Gill, R. (ed.) *The Cambridge companion to Christian ethics*, Cambridge: CUP (2001).

5 The Qur’an speaks of stewardship too, as noted in Berry *op. cit.*, (1) 2006, p.12, n.1.

6 From now on I will use the term environment as shorthand to cover issues such as global warming, environmental change, ecology, sustainability, etc...

7 As this paper will throughout refer to both Wrights it will distinguish them as Wright, N and Wright, C.

8 See e.g. Middleton, R.J. & Walsh, B.J. *Truth is stranger than it used to be: biblical faith in a post-modern age*, London: SPCK (1995).

9 *ibid.* p.70.

10 See Wright, C.J.H. *The mission of God: unlocking the Bible’s grand narrative*, Nottingham: IVP (2006), pp.45-47.

11 As noted by Wright, N.T. *The New Testament and the people of God*, London: SPCK (1992) and Hays, R.B. *The moral vision of the New Testament*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark (1997), the concept of story (narrative) is fundamental to understanding the New Testament and, more generally, the Bible as a whole.

garden

Israel – God's people (Old Testament)

Jesus – incarnation, death and resurrection

church – God's people (New Testament)

parousia – Revelation 19 & 20 – true man (Jesus; new Adam;¹² *imago Dei*)
returns to Earth

new creation (eschaton) – Rev. 21 & 22

Here I have modified Middleton & Walsh's schema¹³ rather than use the original one provided by Wright, N,¹⁴ who combines church and eschaton, or that of Wright, C¹⁵ who has creation, fall, redemption and future hope as the key elements. Additionally, I have included *parousia* as a counterpoint to the fall. This is to distinguish more clearly between the 'now' and the 'not yet,' which will help in considering how to respond later. At the centre and climax of the story stands Jesus, emphasising the Christocentric nature of the narrative. His death and resurrection change everything, although we do not yet experience the consequences fully.¹⁶ The biblical story is a metanarrative that is truth for all, a coherent story with a universal claim,¹⁷ and a story of the world that is 'public truth'.¹⁸

God's story encompasses both the human story and, specifically, the Earth's story beginning with creation (Gen. 1 & 2) and ending in the new creation, when there will be a new heaven and a new Earth (Rev. 21 & 22). Here we see the trajectory through scripture from Genesis to Revelation, with the resurrection of Jesus as the guarantee that the now fallen creation¹⁹ will one day be redeemed fully, along with God's people (Rom. 8:19-23). As Yordy²⁰ states, Jesus Christ is the redeemer of the world not just of human 'souls'. Human beings were present in the garden of Eden on the original created Earth (Gen. 2) and will be present in the garden city of God on the new Earth (Rev. 21). The Christian hope is not simply for 'going to heaven when we die' but for 'new heavens

12 On Jesus as the second Adam and the environment see DeWitt *op. cit.*, (4), ch. 2.

13 Middleton & Walsh *op. cit.*, (8) p.182, see also n.30.

14 Wright, N. *op. cit.*, (11), p.141.

15 Wright, C. *op. cit.*, (10), p.64.

16 See O'Donovan, O. *Resurrection and the moral order: an outline for evangelical ethics*, 2nd edn, Leicester: Apollos (1994).

17 Wright, C. *op. cit.*, (10), p.47.

18 Wright, N. *op. cit.*, (11), p.42.

19 Whether the whole of creation should be regarded as fallen (a 'cosmic fall') or the extent to which the world has been affected by the fall of humanity is an open question theologically; see Bimson, J.J. 'Reconsidering a "cosmic fall"', *Science & Christian Belief* (2006) 18, 63-81; cf. discussion in Yordy, L. 2005 *Ecology, Eschatology, and Christian Ethics*, Ph.D. thesis, Divinity School, Duke University, Durham, NC., pp.87-97. From the perspective of this paper whether or not the fall was cosmic in dimension is secondary. It is undoubtedly the case that the environment is seriously and negatively affected by the fall of humanity either directly or indirectly – the evidence is there for all to see (global warming, pollution, extinction of species being a few examples).

20 Yordy *op. cit.*, (19), p.195.

and a new Earth'.²¹ This insight enables us to avoid the dualistic tendency, evident in some quarters, to think that what we do to the Earth doesn't matter because, as Christians, we will escape to heaven when we die.²²

God's story is also the story of God's mission, of his involvement with his creation and with human beings. Wright, C²³ presents God's mission as his purposes being worked out through creation, fall, redemption and future hope. Note that mission is not synonymous with evangelism.²⁴ Our mission as Christians, means our committed participation as God's people at God's invitation and command in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation.²⁵ This encompasses both evangelism and social justice/action, and clearly includes our interactions with the environment.

Through his mission God aims to redeem his whole creation so that it might become all that he intended it to be, ruled over by a redeemed humanity, giving praise and glory to him.²⁶ At the centre of both the biblical metanarrative and God's mission stands Jesus. It is Jesus who redeems and restores both humanity and the whole of creation (Col. 1:15-23; Rom. 8:18-23). Jesus' death and resurrection are the victory of God over all that is wrong/evil – whether individual sin or the fallen aspects of creation.²⁷ The apostle Paul captures the breadth of the victory in his creational Christology in Colossians 1:15-20.²⁸ This is also succinctly stated in 2 Corinthians 5:19 – 'God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ'. The cross makes it possible for God to heal and reconcile the whole of his creation and the resurrection is the guarantee of a healed creation to come. Therefore, the gospel is not good news just for individuals, but also for the whole creation.²⁹ Furthermore, the church is a sign of what is to come here on Earth. 'Although immersed in this world, the church by her way of being represents the promise of another world, which is not somewhere else but is to come here.'³⁰

On the basis of this metanarrative, it is now possible to put into a broader context the stewardship approach to the environment. Stewardship expresses one aspect of how God's people should deal with the Earth's environment. Unfortunately, the term tends to conjure up images of limited resources that

21 See Wright, N.T. *New heavens, new Earth: the biblical picture of Christian hope*, Biblical Series B11, Cambridge: Grove Books (1999), p.5.

22 This is sometimes related to a pre-millennialist eschatology, which expects things to get much worse before the return of Jesus. On this see Northcott, M. *An angel directs the storm*, London: SCM Press (2007).

23 Wright, C. *op. cit.*, (10), p.64.

24 *ibid*, p.61.

25 *ibid*, p.23.

26 *ibid*, p.165.

27 See Wright, N.T. *Jesus and the victory of God*, London: SPCK (1996) and *The resurrection of the son of God*, London: SPCK (2003).

28 Wright, C. *op. cit.*, (10), p.112, describes this as the summit of Paul's creational Christology.

29 *ibid*, pp.313-314.

30 Yoder, quoted by Hays *op. cit.*, (11), p.253.

need to be conserved and carefully managed, with some overtones of doomsday³¹ scenarios if we fail. It misses the aspect of the abundance of God's creation and our ability to enhance and enjoy all God has created (through being co-workers or even co-creators with God).³² The trajectory through scripture from the garden of Eden to the garden city of God means we have a part to play in creating the environment that God intends. This is not to deny that the Earth possesses limited resources, nor that we are to make wise use of all God has given (Matt. 25:14-30). Rather it is to emphasise that we can joyfully work together with God to fulfil his purposes for the Earth; redemption is more than mere restoration.³³ We are seeking to see his kingdom come on Earth (Matt. 6:10).³⁴ How this might be worked out will be explored in the next section. However, in God's story there is the tension of 'now and not yet' – we can work in the 'now' and expect to see something of the goodness of God impact our world. We know that we will only fully see God's purposes achieved with the new heavens and new Earth, so 'not yet.' This allows us to work for the coming kingdom without falling prey to inaction (the problem is too big) or despair (nothing seems to work or make any difference), because there is hope for the future.

Living in the light of the future – our story

Given the theological insights of the previous section, how should we respond? As noted by Wright, C,³⁵ it is not possible to be God's people unless we are living ethically – our ethical response is a measure of our relationship with God. Becker³⁶ makes the same point, 'it is existentially impossible to believe in God's coming triumph and to claim His Holy Spirit without a lifestyle that conforms to that faith.'

A naïve but not uncommon approach to the environment is that the replacement of the existing Earth by a new Earth somehow lessens our responsibility for the environment in the present, as God will fix it all in the future. Evangelism should be the priority and focus for God's people and that is where our effort should be expended. This misses the breadth of the metanarrative – God's story encompasses the whole of creation – people and planet.

Another misconception arises from reading 2 Peter 3:10 as referring to the destruction of the present Earth, therefore lessening our need to look after it now. However, it is more likely that this is speaking of the purging of the sin-

31 Apocalyptic in the popular sense.

32 See Waters, B. 1995 'Christian theological resources for environmental ethics', *Biodiversity & Conservation* (1995) 4, 849-856.

33 O'Donovan *op. cit.*, (16) p.55.

34 Note, in passing, that this is a political prayer, God's kingdom has political implications – why else was Jesus crucified? See Wright, N. *op. cit.*, (27).

35 Wright, C. *op. cit.*, (10), p. 403.

36 Quoted pp.296-297 in Bridger, F. 'Ecology and eschatology: a neglected dimension', *Tyndale Bull* (1990) 41, 290-301.

ful world order in which we now live, rather than the obliteration of the cosmos.³⁷ This is indicated by 2 Peter 3:6-7, in which the flood is seen as purging the world of evil rather than completely destroying it. Romans 8 suggests that there is both continuity and discontinuity between the present creation and the new creation, just as there is between our present bodies and our resurrection bodies.³⁸ The latter is exemplified in Jesus, whose resurrection body was clearly both different from, yet similar to, his mortal body (Luke 24:13-49; John 20:19-29). Therefore, it seems likely that how we treat the Earth now will somehow determine its future state, just as evidence of Jesus' wounds remained on his resurrection body (John 20:19-29).³⁹

In contrast to these approaches, knowing where we are situated and headed – the big story (metanarrative) – allows us to determine our ethical response to the environment in the present. Some actions are clearly incompatible with the destination that God intends both for the Earth and for his people. This allows us to approach the whole Bible from a new perspective; including the teaching of Jesus, most of which may not appear to have any immediate relevance to environmental issues. Here I will take one of the themes of the Bible – love – and briefly examine how the biblical metanarrative allows us to develop some insights into environmental ethics.⁴⁰ The choice of love is not accidental, but based on 1 Corinthians 13:3 which says that faith, hope and love persist, and that the greatest of these is love. So, in the new creation, love and its fruit will persist.

The two great commandments spoken by Jesus – to love God and to love your neighbour (Matt. 22: 34-40) – are rooted in the Old Testament (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18) and reflect the very nature of God, who is love (1 John 4:8). We know too that God's love leads him to action.⁴¹ He so loved the world (*kosmos* John 3:16) that he sent Jesus to redeem it. As Barrett⁴² notes, 'The world as a whole is the object of God's love...' but in John's gospel 'in general the *kosmos* is not the totality of creation...but the world of men and human affairs.'⁴³ However,

37 See Wright, C. *op. cit.*, (10), p.409 and Bauckham, R. *Jude, 2 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary 50, Waco, Texas: Word (1983), pp.314-322; cf. Berry R.J. 'Eden and ecology: evolution and eschatology', *Science & Christian Belief* (2007) 19, 15-35, pp.32-33.

38 Wright, N. *op. cit.*, (27) 2003.

39 Yordy *op. cit.*, (19), p. 196, notes: 'The wounds of Christ do not disappear after the resurrection, nor do the scars on the face of the earth. For Christians, the past, present and future are brought together in Christ.'

40 More generally on love in the Bible see Morris, L. *Testaments of love*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (1981). On love as the basis for environmental ethics see Bratton, S.P. 'Loving nature: agape or eros?' *Environmental Ethics* (1992) 14, 3-25. Other major themes that could have been considered here are kingdom (on which see DeWitt, *op. cit.*, (4), ch.4) and covenant (starting with the Noachic covenant Gen.9:9-11 with every living creature).

41 In fact, it can be argued that he created the world *ex amore* as well as *ex nihilo*. See Groppe, E.T. 'Creation *ex nihilo* and *ex amore*: ontological freedom in the theologies of John Zizioulas and Catherine Mowry LaCugna', *Mod. Theo.* (2005), 25, 463-496.

42 See Barrett, C.K. *The gospel according to St John*, 2nd edn, London: SPCK (1978), p.216.

43 *ibid.*, p. 161 on John 1:10.

there is a creation motif in John 1. Green et al.⁴⁴ state that, 'John's prologue (1:1-18) provides a detailed reinterpretation of the Genesis creation story' and 'here *kosmos* is first the universe, the totality of the creation'. Therefore, Jesus' mission was an expression of God's love for the world (John 3:16). Wright, N.⁴⁵ also notes that John's gospel is a reprise of Genesis, with Jesus – the true man – 'resting' on the seventh day (in the tomb) and on the first day of the new week rising again, a new creation. So God's mission and Jesus' mission express love for creation and Jesus' resurrection anticipates the new creation.

Consider next how Jesus' commands to love God and love our neighbour translate into our response to the environment. Clearly the Earth is a gift from God to us as human beings.⁴⁶ It is then reasonable to ask whether we truly love God if we are in the process of wreaking destruction on the gift that he has given us. It is clear that 'trashing someone else's property is incompatible with any claim to love the other person,'⁴⁷ and that 'our treatment of the earth will be... a measure of our own relationship with the creator'.⁴⁸

With regard to loving our neighbour, a challenging question is: are our actions causing harm to others elsewhere on the planet? Our western lifestyle requires high levels of consumption, not least of energy, with the consequent release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. This causes global warming and will lead to sea level rise over the next century.⁴⁹ In turn sea level rise will impact human populations living in low-lying areas,⁵⁰ generally in the poorer parts of the world. Therefore, do we love our neighbour if that neighbour will be displaced from their home and means of livelihood by our actions? Inevitably some of the people impacted will be our brothers and sisters in Christ, so if we do not respond we go against the clear commands of scripture (1 John 3:17). While our response can be on an individual level, the biblical metanarrative makes clear that God wants his people together to demonstrate his character in and to the world.⁵¹ Most of the issues of environmental concern will require God's people together to demonstrate love for God and love for our neighbour.

44 See Green, J.B., McKnight, S. & Marshall, I.H. (eds.) *Dictionary of Jesus and the gospels*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP (1992), p.890.

45 Wright, N.T. talks given at *The future of the people of God* conference, 2004, available at <http://www.opensourcetheology.net/talks>. cf. Rae, M. 'To render praise: humanity in God's world', ch. 25 in Berry *op. cit.*, (1), 2006, who develops the idea of stewardship with reference to John's gospel (pp.305-309).

46 Note the Old Testament parallel with the land being a gift to Israel; on which see Brueggemann, W. *The Land*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press (1977); Wright, C. *op. cit.*, (10), pp.395-397.

47 Wright, C. *op. cit.*, (10), p.414.

48 *ibid*, p.403.

49 IPCC *Climate change 2007: The physical basis for climate change, WG1 Summary for policy makers*, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 4th Assessment Report (2007), (available from <http://www.ipcc.ch/>).

50 IPCC *Climate change 2007: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability, WG2 Summary for policy makers*, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 4th Assessment Report (2007), (available from <http://www.ipcc.ch/>).

51 Wright, C. *op. cit.*, (10), p.247.

In thinking through these issues we need to remember that God's overall purpose is to have a redeemed creation, inhabited by a redeemed people consisting of redeemed individuals. Too often we start at the individual end of God's purposes – a result of Western Enlightenment autonomous human thinking perhaps – and so miss out on the larger story that God intends us to inhabit. We need to think about our impact on the whole of God's creation if we are to love God and love our neighbour. Yordy⁵² expresses it well when she says that 'ecological discipleship is rooted in the past – in God's act of creation, incarnation and resurrection – and in the future. It anticipates the New Jerusalem, where the River of Life flows through the city, the trees grow heavy with fruits, and all creatures in heaven and earth sing praises to God'.

Eschatology, ecclesiology and the environment

While the approach to the environment as part of God's story proposed here is based on some recent theological developments, others have addressed the issue from a related basis by looking at the relevance of our understanding of eschatology to our (corporate – hence ecclesiological) response to the environment.⁵³ Here some of these related approaches are discussed briefly.⁵⁴

The relevance of a Christian understanding of eschatology to the environment was pointed out as long ago as the 1970s.⁵⁵ Schwarz⁵⁶ noted then that the eschatological dimension of ecology is often neglected and that the Christian understanding of the anticipatory power of eschatology can provide the incentive not to exploit the environment. More recently, Bridger⁵⁷ saw eschatology as the 'neglected dimension' of the discussion of a Christian response to the environment. He noted that focusing on the ultimate end produces an ethical re-evaluation in the here and now, as it holds forth a picture of a future reality which has already begun (the 'now and not yet' aspect, noted above). Therefore, it would be inconsistent for believers to continue acting as if this had no present relevance. Bridger⁵⁸ states that the two key passages Romans 8:18-20 and

52 Yordy *op. cit.*, (19), p.153.

53 The fact that we should be responding corporately, and that the church as been slow to do so in general, does not lessen our individual responsibility with regard to the environment.

54 There is no intention here to be comprehensive in examining the literature on Christian environmental ethics, which is vast and would require book-length treatment! I have been deliberately selective and focused on those works that take an eschatological perspective consonant with the metanarrative approach taken here. Finger, T. *Evangelicals, eschatology and the environment*, The Scholars Circle monograph no.2, Philadelphia: Evangelical Environmental Network (1998), discusses the varieties of eschatological views prevalent in the US evangelical world. See Southgate *op. cit.*, (1), ch. 8, for a discussion of some other approaches.

55 See, e.g., Schaeffer, F.A. *Pollution and the death of man*, London: Hodder & Stoughton (1970), and Schwarz, H. 'The eschatological dimension of ecology', *Zygon* (1974) 9, 323-338. Note that Schaeffer's view of a redeemed creation is a return to Eden, but redemption is more than mere restoration, as noted by O'Donovan *op. cit.*, (16), p.55.

56 Schwarz *op. cit.*, (55).

57 Bridger *op. cit.*, (36).

58 Bridger *op. cit.*, (36), p.298.

Colossians 1:15-20 can be read as ecological statements, consistent with the approach here.

In a paper examining Christian theological resources for environmental ethics, Waters⁵⁹ focuses on the doctrines of creation, redemption and eschatology – all aspects of the biblical metanarrative. Based on these doctrines he develops three ethical models – dominion, stewardship, co-creatorship – that need to be held in tension in order to be ecologically sustaining. He is doubtful that his theological resources and ethical models will have much influence on the church as it has been too influenced by modernity – in this he appears to have been prophetic. Our (western) church practices have been little impacted by environmental concerns, even more than a decade after his paper was published.⁶⁰ Wright, C.⁶¹ comments that, 'It is still a sad indictment of so many Christian people and churches that they can claim to worship the Creator and yet have no concerns for the needs and suffering of his created world.' Waters' challenge⁶² that 'it is incumbent upon Christian communities to become visible signs of properly tending God's creation' is still very relevant.

How Christian communities can witness to the kingdom of heaven, which encompasses the redemption of all God's creation, is the subject of a recent Ph.D. thesis.⁶³ Yordy notes that the ecclesiological aspects of environmental ethics are usually neglected and aims to encourage the church to be more faithful in this aspect of its witness.⁶⁴ Witness is an inclusive category, covering environmental ethics, and not just limited to outreach or evangelism.⁶⁵ In dealing with environmental issues we need to exercise the virtue of patience, being hopefully alert to signs of the Spirit and awaiting the coming of Christ, which she regards as crucial to our ability to continue eco-discipleship in the face of apparent failure.⁶⁶ The point is not whether what we do works (it doesn't all the time, as we live in a world affected by the fall); rather it is that we are faithful in doing what God requires.⁶⁷ She concludes by noting that 'understanding the creation... requires understanding not only its beginning, but its consummation in the Kingdom of God',⁶⁸ that is, its place in the biblical metanarrative, as outlined in this paper.

59 Waters *op. cit.*, (32).

60 For a recent study of the link between religious beliefs and environmental concern in the USA see Sherkat, D.E. & Ellison, C. G. 'Structuring the religion-environment connection: identifying religious influence on environmental concern and activism', *J. Sci. Study of Religion* (2007) 46, 71-85. I am unaware of any similar study of the situation in the U.K.

61 See Wright, C.J.H. *The message of Ezekiel*, The Bible Speaks Today, Leicester: IVP (2001), p.107, n.33.

62 Waters *op. cit.*, (32), p.855.

63 Yordy *op. cit.*, (19).

64 *ibid*, p.50.

65 *ibid*, p.173.

66 *ibid*, p.186.

67 *ibid*, p.140.

68 *ibid*, p.201.

Perhaps the closest approach to the one adopted here is that of Alexander & White.⁶⁹ They note the flow of scripture from an original perfect created order to a recreated perfect order in the world to come.⁷⁰ They emphasise the need to care for the environment because of the continuity between this world and the future one.⁷¹ Unfortunately, although they base some of what they say on Wright, N.,⁷² they support their argument by making reference to the 'biblical description of heaven',⁷³ whereas the whole point of Wright, N.'s approach is that it is the hope of a new Earth that is critical for how we approach life in the here and now. There appears to be some potential for confusion in how they express this. The majority of their description would seem to apply to life on the new, restored and redeemed Earth (Rev. 21 & 22), which would gel better with Wright, N.'s approach.⁷⁴

All these different approaches are, to a large extent, encompassed by the one proposed here. In particular, the metanarrative approach recognises the importance of the eschaton (and of eschatology) and the role of God's people (ecclesiology) in how we deal with God's Earth. All of this forms part of the 'big story,' that is the biblical depiction of God's story, and within that context the Earth's story.

Conclusions

The key message of this paper is that our concern for the environment (the Earth) should be situated in the context of the overarching biblical story of God. This allows the integration of a variety of biblical concerns into a coherent whole.⁷⁵ Thus our ethical response is not just grounded in a few scattered verses, rather we see that God's purposes encompass the whole of His creation and that the Earth's story is integral to God's story. This demands a response from us as we seek to 'walk in God's ways' because it moves environmental ethics from the periphery of the Christian life to being an integral part of our participation in God's story. This approach is Christocentric and eschatological (future oriented). Jesus' resurrection and gift of the Spirit guarantee the new creation; we have the first fruits of the Spirit (Rom. 8:23) and the Spirit is the down payment guaranteeing what is to come (Eph. 1:14). We are not looking back trying to restore what was lost (the garden of Eden) – an impossible task in any case. Instead we are looking forward knowing that the return of Jesus will bring with it the renewal of the whole Earth. Believing this we can work

69 See chapter 8 in Alexander, D. & White, R.S. *Beyond belief: science, faith and ethical challenges*, Oxford: Lion Publishing (2004).

70 *ibid*, p.170.

71 *ibid*, p.171.

72 Wright, N. *op. cit.*, (11).

73 Alexander & White *op. cit.*, (69), p.171.

74 Wright, N. *op. cit.*, (11).

75 Such as: the centrality of Jesus death and resurrection, kingdom, covenant, the importance of love, stewardship, eschatology, ecclesiology, and so on.

now to see the future make an impact in the present – anticipating the fullness of the kingdom of God that will come at the eschaton. This is an antidote to the discouragement that can be found in some Christian circles regarding the environment – the problem is too big so it is easier give up. Not so! Even in the little and seemingly ineffective things we do we witness to and anticipate the fullness of the coming kingdom.⁷⁶

What this paper has not done is work through the detailed implications of this approach. Therefore, a few pointers are given as to how the approach adopted here could be developed further. For example, we can re-read the Old Testament teaching regarding the land God gave to Israel⁷⁷ and appropriate it for ourselves in the twenty-first century as relevant to how we should care for the Earth in all its aspects – human and non-human. Thus the concept of Jubilee (Lev. 25) can be tied to Jesus' 'Nazareth manifesto' (Luke 4:14-21) and applied to how we care for the poor and needy of this world.⁷⁸ Similarly, we can look at the Old Testament texts that talk about the care of animals (e.g. Deut. 25:4), animals as part of God's creation (e.g. Ps. 104) and of the new creation (e.g. Is. 11:6-9; 65:25), together with some of Jesus' sayings that peripherally address this issue (e.g. Matt. 6:26; 10:29), and re-examine how we should care for this non-human (animal) part of God's creation.⁷⁹ As a final example, consider the issue of the development of cities. There is clearly a tension in scripture between cities as places built in rebellion against God (e.g. Gen. 4:17, 11:1-9), containing violence (e.g. Ps. 55:9-11), and as the dwelling place of God (e.g. 2 Chron. 6:5-6, Rev. 21:2-3). How do we bring together such biblical insights into the built environment? In all these cases we should seek to discern the trajectory of scripture from creation through to new creation regarding the issue, allowing the whole of the Bible to speak to our environmental concerns in the context of the metanarrative.

I can do no better to conclude this article than to quote Wright, C.'s⁸⁰ challenge regarding our response (environmental ethics) to an understanding of the big story (metanarrative):

We wonder whether and how the care of creation, for example, might fit into *our* concept and practice of mission, when *this* Story challenges us to ask whether our lives, lived on God's earth and under God's gaze, are aligned with, or horrendously misaligned with, God's mission that stretches from

76 Our labour in the Lord is not vain; 1 Cor 15:58. As Yordy comments, 'Christians cannot "save the earth", but they can exhibit in small ways what a "saved" earth might look like.' Yordy *op. cit.*, (19), p.175.

77 Brueggemann *op. cit.*, (46).

78 cf. Yoder, J.H. *The politics of Jesus*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (1972).

79 In this context, as an oceanographer, I found Susan Bratton's essay 'Sea sabbaths for sea stewards: rest and restoration for marine ecosystems', ch. 17 in Berry *op. cit.*, (1), 2006 particularly thought provoking. Our environmental thinking is so often dominated by terrestrial ecosystems, yet 70% of the Earth's surface is covered by ocean!

80 Wright, C. *op. cit.*, (10), p.534.

creation to cosmic transformation and the arrival of a new heaven and new earth.

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