

Where Is It All Going? The Redemption of the Cosmos

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Biology and the Christian Tradition Lectures

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1. I have given my presentation the title “Where Is It All Going: The Redemption of the Cosmos.” My task is consider the world, universe, cosmos at the other end of the continuum that begins with creation. I do so as a biblical scholar who has a deeply embedded theological orientation and outlook. I approach my own discipline of Biblical Studies scientifically and rationally, yet simultaneously artistically, imaginatively, theologically, rhetorically and confessionally. I think that it is right to do it in these ways. The other end of that continuum that began with creation is, in the mind of many, particularly of Christians, imagined as “heaven.”
2. We began with Genesis and creation. We went on to consider biology and evolution, with evolution as a reality of creation and *the* creation that has and continues to occur. There is by now no question about this reality despite denials from the inhabitants of some spaces. This reality should be joyfully studied and learned well as something God has brought about.
3. It might be anticipated that I would, as a biblical scholar, begin by reading or at least referring to a passage or two from the Bible. I will do that shortly. What I begin with is a passage from Joseph Heller’s famous—though perhaps beginning to fade from view—book from 1961, *Catch-22*. Those of you familiar with the book or perhaps the film will recall that there are a variety of characters involved in the story, set during World War Two, who are caught up in Catch-22 “no-win” or “double bind” situations. No matter what one does it will be wrong. One of the characters is the chaplain, described in one passage as follows:

...the chaplain was ready now to capitulate to despair entirely but was restrained by the memory of his wife, whom he loved and missed so pathetically with such sensual and exalted ardor, and by the lifelong trust he had placed in the wisdom and justice of an immortal, omnipotent, omniscient, humane, universal, anthropomorphic, English-speaking, Anglo-Saxon, pro-American God, which had begun to waver. So many things were testing his faith. There was the Bible, of course, but the Bible was a book, and so were *Bleak House*, *Treasure Island*, *Ethan Frome* and *The Last of the Mohicans*. Did it

then seem probable...that the answers to the riddles of creation would be supplied by people too ignorant to understand the mechanics of rainfall? Had Almighty God, in all His infinite wisdom, really been afraid that men six thousand years ago would succeed in building a tower to heaven? Where the devil was heaven? Was it up? Down? There was no up or down in a finite but expanding universe in which even the vast, burning, dazzling, majestic sun was in a state of progressive decay that would eventually destroy the earth too. There were no miracles; prayers went unanswered, and misfortune tramped with equal brutality on the virtuous and the corrupt; and the chaplain, who had conscience and character, would have yielded to reason and relinquished his belief in the God of his fathers, would truly have resigned both his calling and his commission and taken his chances as a private in the infantry or field artillery, or even, perhaps, as a corporal in the paratroopers—had it not been for such successive mystic phenomena as the naked man in the tree at that poor sergeant's funeral weeks before and the cryptic, haunting, encouraging promise of the prophet...in the forest only that afternoon: [who said] 'Tell them I'll be back when winter comes.'

This reasonably sets up, I think, some important and suggestive questions. Where is heaven, anyway? Or is there a heaven? Where is this cosmos, world, physical, biological creation going? Is there any good end in sight? What can Christians, believers in God and in Jesus Christ, expect? Is heaven real or is it some ephemeral construct, a merely imagined, sentimentalized, spiritualized space to which people we have loved—who were not necessarily really good people—have gone at the time of death? Or is the earth, in spite of evolution and some amount of forward or progressive (according to Dawkins, a progressive evolutionist) movement, heading for an inevitable and catastrophic end? Or is matter and life and thought and love eternal? Why is it that, like the chaplain in *Catch-22*, humans can't give up on hope for some better world, some future? Are there some "mystic phenomena" that press humans toward the hope of heaven or toward some renewed, perhaps restored cosmos?

4. The question of where to start is always to be considered critically. There are all sorts of wrong places to begin and people tend, almost characteristically, to begin in them. Christians and the church, however, begin in an unlikely, rather counterintuitive yet logical and correct place. It is not with the Bible, not with creation and Genesis and not, perhaps surprisingly, with the cross or death of Christ. Christians begin with resurrection. Jesus Christ is alive even though he was most assuredly dead. It is the resurrection of this now living Christ that is the presupposition of Christianity and of the NT. Resurrection without death/cross is, of course,

incoherent, but it is the raised Jesus Christ who *reveals, shows* or, to make up a verb based on a noun that does not have a verb form in English, *apocalypses* the future. A major idea here, then, is that death—and its cousins decay, damage, pollution, evil, etc.—whether biological or moral or spiritual, is not final. Jesus is alive. How do you know? Evidence; testimony.

5. What do we have if we come from the starting point of resurrection? What does resurrection tell us or *apocalypse* to us about the meaning and future of the cosmos? Consider the magnificent vision of Revelation 21:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.’

And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ Then he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.’

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. It has a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites; on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

The angel who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal. He also measured its wall, one hundred and forty-four cubits by human measurement, which the angel was using. The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth cornelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the

eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass.

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practises abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

This is, of course, *apocalyptic*, that is, by definition metaphorical language, not to be understood literally, and the city described parallels *both* the holy Jerusalem and the ancient Roman Empire which was the political world power of the time of writing. But resurrection revealed here in the form of the raised, exalted, living Jesus Christ, the Lamb who shares God's throne (22:3) indicates hope for a future cosmos or city or earth—also described here in mixed apocalyptic imagery as the bride of the lamb dressed in her wedding gown—that is “new,” where things are good, where evil of all kinds is not present and where death and darkness and “the first things” of the present like grief, mourning, pain, and suffering no longer exist. Notice that this new city comes “down out of heaven” (which is up in the imagery) to be located on the new earth.

6. What the NT, particularly the letters of Paul the Apostle, envisages is new creation already in the present:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Cor 5:17).

To be “in” Christ is to be in the raised, living Christ. This entire notion is foundational to Paul's understanding of reality. The action of Jesus Christ in dying and being raised sets humans free from the enslaving, binding nature of life affected by evil.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen (Gal 1:4-5).

We live in the world and in the present where we live with evil. Biological evolution has and continues to occur. But that does not mean that humans are getting better morally, politically, socially, or religiously. Humans remain, individually and collectively, guilty creatures who can

do nothing to remove their own guilt, much less remove their feelings of guilt by their own efforts. We humans are guilty. We also suffer. Evolution does not mean that humans or the cosmos are free from pain, disease, injury, depression, worry about where it all ends and, most significantly, death. Evolving biological life, development, does not offer an answer to, or even an escape from, these common circumstances. There is no naturalistic, evolutionary hope of the forgiveness of sins, the removal of guilt and its consequences, eternal life or of resurrection.

According to Paul it is only God in the raised living Christ who can and actually does do this.

7. Yet Paul and the NT, looking beyond this new creation life that is free from the present evil time, anticipate some future time of change, of renewal, of re-created physical and biological space and existence where the differences already experienced in Christ will be finally and completely fulfilled:

What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’

‘Where, O death, is your victory?’

‘Where, O death, is your sting?’

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:50-56).

What exactly does this anticipated resurrection life look like? Answer: I don’t know. But perishable bodies are described as then being “imperishable,” that is, no longer susceptible to the ordinary things of biological existence like aging, disease, injury and death.

8. What does this mean and where is it located? Now we come to a central NT Pauline text that addresses this question, like the chaplain in *Catch-22*: “Where the Devil is heaven? Is it up? Down?” The notion of heaven being “up,” perhaps comes from ancient notions that the divine is not of the earth (γῆ) since the earth is created hence not the natural realm of the divine. Heaven is οὐρανός, a higher, transcendent realm inhabited by god(s). The possibly surprising answer is

actually given clearly by Paul. It's right here. It's the earth. Not simply "on the earth" but the renewed, restored, re-created, "good" (Gen 1) earth.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies [corrected fr Gk to be "our body" sg; τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν τοῦ σώματος ἡμῶν]. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (Rom 8:18-23).

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified [aorist verbs: οὐς δὲ ἐδικαίωσεν, τούτους καὶ ἐδόξασεν] (Rom 8:28-30).

The body (σῶμα) that is the earth or creation (κτίσις) is anthropomorphically described by Paul as anticipating, longing for, its release from slavery to the corruption, decay caused by human unfaithfulness, disobedience, sin, of which all of us are guilty. Together with the creation, we humans groan and suffer agony, having already the firstfruit of the Spirit in having been made new creations and freed from the present evil age, yet awaiting "the redemption of our body" (τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν τοῦ σώματος ἡμῶν, singular, collective, created body, 8:23). The natural result or movement from these thoughts is seen in the exalted and highly rhetoricized language of Rom 8:32-39.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

‘For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.’

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in [the resurrected, now living] Christ Jesus our Lord.

9. Redemption of the world, then, means not only the redemption, renewal, restoration and reconciliation (note the alliteration) of humans who have lived, will live or live now in the present, but with them (not “in addition to them”) the physical creation. The redemption of the created order, claims then imaginative Paul, is a feature of the apocalyptic work of God in Christ anticipated for some future moment. In a practical sense, the earth will become the eschatological and blessed home—with all of its life and beauty and diversity—of humans and God will live here among us.

10. When visualizing this grand, imaginative, Pauline vision, it is a mistake to think that God and the Bible and, consequently, Christian theology, are concerned only with individual salvation and individual spirituality and some perceived pie-in-the-sky heaven where only personal comfort is to be imagined. They are distinctly concerned with things like politics, economics, kingdom, knowledge, intellect, the earth, science and environmentalism. Rather than being about the salvation of our souls, as it is frequently imagined, redemption is about the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles in one body and about the redemption of the cosmos. In other words, the gospel is the “good news” that in Jesus Christ humans and indeed the physical creation is freed, rectified (made correct, just). The fullness of what God has done in Christ in correcting/rectifying humans and the creation is anticipated in the gospel. Since the earth is anthropomorphically groaning, awaiting with we humans the fullness of its redemption, it is to be inferred that Christians must be, in modern terms, environmentalists who care for the created order that they have been consistently damaging. We must obediently aim to avoid stressing the earth (I am thinking here of things like air, water and noise pollution). We should live our lives “light” in the world. Christians must aim to live the life of the renewed, heavenly earth already in the present.

11. A leading problem of our time, in fact of every era of human history, is that nations and the people who live in them imagine that they are their own saviours. This self-salvation is visualized as being brought about by military, political, economic, and even scientific, evolutionary power. Humans and nations imagine that they have the power and strength to protect themselves from their enemies, from those who want to harm them. They forget that God is the only saviour, as always indicated in the biblical story. Christians frequently become caught up in this same question. Who is God? Who will be God? Who will be the saviour? Will it be the Pharaoh of Egypt or will it be Yahweh who sends Moses with the message to “let my people go”? Will it be Caesar or will it be Christ? Will it be...?—insert the names of any world powers or leaders you wish. Who or what will bring about the redemption of the cosmos? Are humans up for the task? Or will it be naturalistic, mechanistic, chemical, physical and biological forces that bring about the redemption of the cosmos?

12. I end with one more reading from the Bible about the resurrected Jesus Christ.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel (Col 1:15-23).

I became servant [of the church] according to God’s commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me (Col 1:25-29).

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority (Col 2:8-10).

This makes, I suggest, the main ideas clear. It is the resurrected Christ and only the resurrected Christ who will bring the creation and us in it to its intended full goal, to fulfillment and fullness.

13. A main question: what does God's creation, of the cosmos and biology and evolution have ultimately and inevitably in mind? Answer: the salvation of Jews and Gentiles and "all things." Creation and evolution, which I take to be a created feature of the cosmos, are aimed toward the eventual and inevitable renewal and restoration of the cosmos.

14. If resurrection, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is real—and it is—then heaven is as equally real and it is located right here in a renewed, resurrected earth, brought out of the death of human bondage and human damage and human sin and guilt into the fullness of the kingdom of God where reconciled Jews and Gentiles—the people of God, the children of Abraham (Gal 3:25-29)—live in goodness and fullness of life along with and in the cosmos/creation, apart from all that we humans have brought into it by our own flesh. This is where it's all going.