

Pentecostal Reflections on Revelation and the “New Creation”

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Introduction

Discussions about the environment and the believers’ responsibilities in creation care appear to be at an all-time high. From the melting, and consequent receding, of the polar icecaps and glaciers, to cases of the pollution of water supplies and the air we breathe, it is clear that creation as we know it is not what it used to be.¹ Alongside these physical global changes, the church has become increasingly aware and appreciative of the biblical mandates to be guardians and caretakers of the creation that has been entrusted to us.

As it happens the Book of Revelation is frequently drawn into these discussions by interpreters who often reach diametrically opposite conclusions, who, nonetheless, appeal to the book for biblical support for their interpretive positions. More times than not, such appeals draw on one specific aspect of the book’s relevance for this topic. However, the book’s witness on this issue is thicker and more complicated than a one-dimensional approach is able to appreciate. In what follows, I offer some reflections on this challenging issue as a Pentecostal who has devoted a fair amount of attention to the Book of Revelation over the course of the last couple of decades.² I offer these reflections not as a final word in any sense, but as a testimony of sorts to be discerned and perhaps to initiate continued thought and engagement by those working within the Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions on such topics.

1. Explicit Creation Language in the Apocalypse

Perhaps an appropriate starting point for this reflection is to review creation related language that actually appears in the Book of Revelation. A brief survey reveals that, somewhat surprisingly, explicit creation language is confined to Revelation 3-10, appearing on only six occasions.

¹ This change was driven home to me on a recent, once-in-a-lifetime trip to Alaska, as I stood near a visitor’s center located at a considerable distance from the famed Mendenhall Glacier. I had mistakenly thought that the visitor’s center had been constructed at some distance from the glacier as a safety precaution. But one of my fellow travelers informed me that the visitor’s center had originally been built quite close to the glacier and that the current distance was owing to the glacier’s continual receding. My conversation partner, in fact, pointed out to me where the glacier stood, much closer to hand, when she had first visited it some two decades earlier.

² Cf. especially J.C. Thomas, *The Apocalypse: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Cleveland: CPT Press, 2012) which informs these reflections.

The first occurrence, in 3:14, is the book's sole reference to "creation" (κτίσις) as such in the words of the resurrected Jesus who self-identifies as the "origin (ἀρχή) of God's creation." This phrase would no doubt remind the hearers of the Logos' existence "in beginning" (ἐν ἀρχῇ) with God in the prologue of the Gospel according to John (Jn 1:1) and the fact that it was through him that all things were created (Jn 1:3)—both verses that tie Jesus' work as creator closely to the work of God as creator. Such shared identity is characteristic of the relationship that exists between God and the Lamb throughout a variety of activities in the Apocalypse.

The next two occurrences of explicit creation language appear in Rev. 4:11, where in praise of God, those gathered around the throne give glory to him owing to the fact that "you created (ἔκτισας) all things and by your will they are and they have been created (ἐκτίσθησαν)." Clearly, in this verse God's role as creator is underscored, a role that is all the clearer when the words are set out chiasmatically as follows:

You created (ἔκτισας) all things
 and on account of your will they are
 and they have been created (ἐκτίσθησαν).

What is clear in the Greek text is the way in which a form of the word "create" (κτίζω) appears at the beginning and the end of the statement, enfolding the middle phrase that underscores God's will to create.

The next two appearances of explicit creation language have reference to the "creatures" of God's creation.³ If God's activity of creation is justification for his praise in 4:11, in 5:13 "every creature (κτίσμα)" joins in the praise of the One who sits on the throne and the Lamb. Despite the fact that there is opposition to God and the Lamb—evident in the prophetic messages to the seven churches, here there appear to be no exclusions with regard to those who offer praise, for John writes that it is "every creature that is in the heavens and upon the earth and under the earth and upon the sea and all the things in them" who sing "the blessing and the honour and the glory and the power for ever and ever." All of God's creatures or "created ones" appear to be part of this universal worship. And yet, in the other reference to creatures in the Apocalypse that occurs in 8:9, mention is made of "a third of the creatures (κτισμάτων) who have life in the sea" that die as a result of a third of the sea being turned to blood when the second angel trumpets his trumpet. Thus, despite the prospect of every creature having the opportunity to worship and sing praises to the Creator, a portion of these very creatures appears to experience the judgement of God, though in a somewhat limited fashion—as only a third of them taste death in this redemptive judgement.

³ Readers of the English version of the Apocalypse may be forgiven if they are under the impression that this term would include the four living creatures to which reference is made in Revelation 4 and elsewhere. However, as the Greek text makes clear these beings are not called creatures at all, but rather the four ζῶα which is better translated as the "four living beings."

The final occurrence of explicit creation language to appear in the Book of Revelation is found in 10:6, where once again the verbal form occurs and the comprehensiveness of God as creator is underscored. In this verse, the mighty angel who is seen standing on the sea and on the earth, with his hand raised to heaven, “swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created (ἔκτισεν) the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it ...” Reminiscent of the appearance of the verbal form in 4:11, the significance of God as Creator could hardly be missed.

Before concluding this portion of these reflections, it should be observed that after 10:6, there is no explicit creation language in the rest of the Apocalypse. This is perhaps surprising owing to our expectations, especially with regard to the new heaven and new earth. Whilst too much should not be read into this lexical distribution, it might at the least temper our language with regard to “new creation” when in reference to portions of the contents of the Apocalypse.

2. Implicit Creation Language in the Apocalypse

Although explicit creation language is limited to these six appearances, there is a fair amount of implicit vocabulary found in the Apocalypse of relevance to the issue of creation. This section highlights a few of them.

Chief amongst the somewhat more implicit references to God as creator is the comment in 14:7, when the “other angel flying in midair,” who had the everlasting gospel to preach to all those who live on the earth, says with a great voice, “Fear God and give to him glory, because the hour of his judgement has come and worship the one who made the heaven and the earth and sea and wells of water.” Whilst this verse lacks explicit creation language, the reaffirmation of God as creator is quite clear.

Similarly, on two occasions reference is made to the Lamb’s book of life, the Lamb who had been slaughtered from the foundation (καταβολῆς) of the world (13:8; 17:8). For Johannine hearers such language would not only remind of Jesus’ self-identification as “the origin (ἀρχή) of God’s creation” (3:14), but also of the Logos’ existence before creation (Jn 1:1-3), further underscoring Jesus’ participation in creation. Placed in its Johannine context, the meaning of “foundation” (καταβολῆς) would not be lost on the hearers.

On seven occasions reference is made to God as “the one who lives for ever and ever” (Rev. 4:9, 10; 5:13; 7:12; 10:6; 11:5; and 15:7; cf. also references to Jesus in 1:6, 18; and one shared reference in 5:13).⁴ In two of these texts explicit connection is made with God’s activity of creation (4:10; 10:6), indicating that this phrase would be a potent reminder for the hearers of God’s creative activity.⁵

⁴ In the New Jerusalem the people of God are told that they will “reign for ever and ever” 22:5.

⁵ Conversely, the smoke of destruction can be said to rise for ever and ever as a sign of the permanence of the destruction (14:11; 19:3) and the unending nature of torment for those who oppose God (20:10).

In addition to these texts, several terms and/or titles appear in the Apocalypse that, while not making explicit claims with regard to creation, certainly dovetail nicely with the more explicit creation texts. On three occasions God is referred to as “the one who is and who was and who is coming” (1:4, 8; 4:8) and once as “the one who is and was”—implying that he has already come (11:17) by this point. Amongst other things, such language at the least suggests that God encompasses all of temporal existence. God’s self-identification as “Alpha and Omega” (1:8), a title which Jesus’ uses for himself later in the book (21:6; 22:13), also sits nicely with this understanding. Jesus’ self-identification as the “First and the Last” (1:17; 2:8; 21:6; 22:13) as well as “Beginning and End” (22:13) make such all-encompassing claims difficult to miss. Neither would the hearers likely miss the fact that on nine occasions God is referred to as “the All Powerful One” (ὁ παντοκράτωρ), once as God’s self-identification (1:8), several times on the lips of worshippers (4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 19:6), and on a few occasions in narrative description (16:14; 19:15; 21:22). Whilst not explicit creation language, such a title, which is distributed throughout the narrative (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22), clearly connects with the theme of God as Creator—though the title is not limited to that theme.

3. Eschatological Promises and their Fulfillment

Another aspect of the Apocalypse that is of some relevance for this short study concerns the eschatological promises that are made to the hearers by Jesus in the seven prophetic messages (2:1-3:2) that stand within the first major “in the Spirit” section of the book (1:9-3:22). Amongst other things Jesus informs the one who overcomes that he will give such a one to “eat from the tree of life in the paradise of God” (2:7), “the crown of life” (2:10), that such a one will “not be hurt at all by the second death” (2:11), that such a one will be given “some of the hidden manna” and “a white stone with a new name written on it” (2:17), “authority over the nations” (2:27) and “the morning star” (2:28), will “be dressed in white,” whose name will never be erased from “the book of life,” and whose name Jesus “will acknowledge ... before my Father and his angels” (3:5), will be “a pillar in the temple of my God,” upon whom Jesus will “write the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven” (3:12), and will be given “the right to sit with me on my throne as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne” (3:21). The majority of these promises are actually described as being fulfilled within the narrative of the Apocalypse, whilst the hearers are left with an expectancy of the others’ fulfillment—at some point not yet described. Some of these promises appear to be fulfilled in the thousand year reign—they are not hurt by the second death (20:6, 14), and they have authority and are seated on thrones (20:4) —whilst other promises are described as being fulfilled in New Jerusalem—they have access to and are the New Jerusalem (21:2, 10), their names are in the book of life (21:27), they have access to the tree of life in the paradise of God (22:2), the name of God has been written on their foreheads (22:4), and they have access to the Morning Star (22:16).

The fact that these eschatological promises are described as being fulfilled in both the millennium and New Jerusalem suggest that these two periods are understood to function as two eschatological entities, which whilst clearly exhibiting some overlap of function just as clearly are distinct from one another in terms of function and purpose. Significantly, it would appear that a failure to identify the overlap of these periods and at the same time a failure to appreciate their distinctive roles has led to some confusion on the part of a variety of interpreters attempting to make sense of these eschatological periods.

4. The Meaning and Function of the Millennium

Though often maligned as not being of theological significance, owing to the fact that a period like this is not always thought to be clearly present in other portions of Scripture, the millennium is an essential part of the narrative in the Book of Revelation, being neither dispensable nor unimportant. Rather, in many ways the millennium offers a fitting and necessary conclusion to the redemptive drama that is the Apocalypse, as the earth—which has been under the sway of the dragon, the beast, and the second beast (the false prophet), as well as suffering from the judgements of God—is itself redeemed, so it seems. For in this thousand-year period, a period of time that dwarfs all other periods of time in the book, the earth and its inhabitants are not subject to the deceiver, but rather are in the company of Jesus, better yet, they are “with Christ” for a thousand years.

Within the internal logic of the book, the millennium is the longest reign recorded within the Apocalypse. It is an unimaginably long reign—making insignificant by comparison the reign of the kings who reign for one hour or even the beast who reigns for 42 months. This thousand-year period would impress the hearers as being virtually unending! And though being an almost unimaginably long period of time, its context within the book suggests that it must be understood by means of a comparison to other periods of time within the book. Further, the tempter is absent, the believers are reigning with Jesus, they are resurrected, the second death has no power over them, and they are priests of God and Christ. Yet aside from these phenomenal details, the description of the thousand-year reign is somewhat barren and devoid of any number of details the hearers might have expected to find owing to an exposure to numerous OT eschatological texts. For example, one might have expected reference to texts like Isa. 11:6-7 which describes an idyllic time when “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” Strikingly, no such texts appear here in Revelation 20.

But if earlier in the Apocalypse, the time had come “for destroying those who destroy the earth” (Rev. 11:18), by the time the hearers make their way to the Millennium, the earth seems miraculously to have been restored, despite (or because of) the victory fought and won by the rider on the white horse and his conquest of the beast and the false prophet. Though understated, the focus of the millennium is not so much on the fulfilment of a variety of eschatological promises but rather on reigning with Christ for a thousand years. It is only after

this idyllic period, in which it appears that creation has functioned as it was created to function, that the earth is once again the scene of deception, rebellion, and battle, which gives way to the ultimate victory over Satan. Thus, in this final, almost fail-safe opportunity for belief in Jesus and its resulting faithful witness, much of humanity is found to be as susceptible as ever to the deception of Satan and ultimately experiences the judgement of God. And with this, it appears that the earth, created so very long ago, has served its purpose and gives way to the very presence of the One who sits on the throne. Everything flees, including the earth and heaven—as wonderful as it is—as there is no longer any place for them.

The force of this language, found within the scene of the final judgement, is quite striking and drives home the point that earth will function according to its created intention, but when it has served its purpose, it will vanish as quickly as it began—so it seems. And though there is a tendency in certain interpretive approaches to explain these events as a rehabilitation of the earth so that it *becomes* the new heaven and new earth, the text of the Apocalypse does not seem to cooperate with that line of interpretation, but rather appears to subvert it.

5. The New Jerusalem as Place and People

Hearers of the Apocalypse might be forgiven if they thought that they had encountered a description of the end of all things by the end of chapter 20, but the beginning of the next chapter reveals that much more awaits them, “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had departed, and there is no more sea.” The prospect of a new heaven and a new earth is not an altogether unexpected development, for heaven and earth have earlier fled from the presence of the One who sits on the great white throne in 20:11. It is significant for this study that the Greek word which describes the newness of this heaven and earth (καινὸν) is a term that designates something new in kind, not just a new thing of the same kind.⁶ Rather, the term indicates a newness hitherto unknown.⁷ Unfortunately, this philological evidence is not always fully appreciated by interpreters seeking to understand the relationship between the first heaven and first earth and the new heaven and new earth. Not only is the newness, thus distinctiveness, driven home by the philological evidence, but also by means of a statement that the first heaven and first earth had passed away, reminding of the way in which they are described as having fled from the face of the One who sits upon the great white throne and that there was no place found for them (20:11). Such an explicit reference would suggest that their fleeing was a part of the last judgement, that the first heaven and first earth had served their purpose. While the language of first heaven and first earth may suggest some continuity between them and the new heaven and new earth, the disappearance of the former and the radical newness of the latter would lead the hearers to put pride of place on the latter. At the same time, this new heaven and new earth stand in remarkable discontinuity as seen in one specific example—though there are

⁶ J. Sweet, *Revelation* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 297.

⁷ S.S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), 524.

many others, for “there was no more sea.”⁸ Such a discovery might well come as a bit of a shock, for the hearers know that both in the first heaven (4:6) and the first earth (12:12; 13:1) reference is made to the sea. This explicit mention suggests that just as the first heaven and first earth had served their purpose, so the sea had served its purpose and that as part of the last judgement, its place too has been exhausted. The numerous associations of the sea with evil in the Apocalypse—as well as the broader biblical tradition—indicates that evil itself has no place in the new creation.⁹ Just as the first reference to the sea in the Apocalypse (4:6) indicates that the glory of God is reflected even in those objects that have negative associations, so now in the last reference to the sea in the Apocalypse the hearers learn that the purpose of this mixed image has passed.¹⁰ There is no more sea, for there is no more evil.¹¹ Moreover, these words may even suggest that there is no longer any need for the glory of God to be reflected or mediated, perhaps indicating that in this new heaven and new earth, the glory of God is experienced more immediately and directly.¹²

The next words, found in 21:2, extend this thought further, “And the holy city New Jerusalem I saw coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” How is this holy city, this New Jerusalem to be understood? The first hint comes early in the book where the people of God have metaphorically been called the holy city (11:2), providing some degree of continuity between this holy city and the people of God in 21:2. At the same time, this is the second time that the name New Jerusalem appears in the Apocalypse, the first occurrence coming in the prophetic message to the church in Philadelphia in the form of a promise from the resurrected Jesus to the one who overcomes— “I will write upon him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem” (3:12),¹³ thus further underscoring the identity of the city as closely connected, if not identical, to the people of God. The fact that in both references to this point in the Apocalypse New Jerusalem is identified as “coming down out of heaven from God” leads to the understanding of this phrase as a defining attribute of the city, underscoring its ongoing divine origin. That this holy city, New Jerusalem, is closely identified with the people of God, is made clearer in the last phrase in 21.2, for she is “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” The description of New Jerusalem as a bride indicates the radical difference between this city, described as a bride, and the fallen Babylon in which the voice (or sound) of the bride will be heard no longer (18:23), contrasting the impotency of the Great Whore with the promise of the Bride. Significantly, this is not another Jerusalem of the same kind as the first, rather it is a New Jerusalem.

The next words of consequence for this study occur in 21:5, “And the One who sits upon the throne said, ‘Behold I make all things new’.” These divinely spoken words stand in close

⁸ G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 07.

⁹ E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 110.

¹⁰ G.D. Fee, *Revelation* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 291.

¹¹ P. Lee, *The New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation: A Study of Revelation 21-22 in the Light of its Background in Jewish Tradition* (Berlin: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 269.

¹² M. Kiddle, *The Revelation of St John* (New York: Harper, 1941), 411.

¹³ R.H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 370.

continuity with what has preceded in 21:4. The emphasis of this sentence in the Greek text is on the newness of all things, as “new” (καινὰ) stands first in the sentence immediately after the word “behold.” The fact that this is the same word that occurs earlier to describe the radical newness of the new heaven and the new earth makes clear that the “all things” made new are not new things of a previous kind but new things that are hitherto unknown. These words also imply that it is the One who sits on the throne that is the One who creates the new heaven and new earth, New Jerusalem, and all things associated with it.¹⁴ The present tense verb “make” suggests that God is even now making all things new, that he continues to be active in his work of what might be called “new creation.”

These verses in Revelation suggest that the New Jerusalem, the new heavens, and new earth are distinct from the first heaven and first earth. Despite the limited continuity that exists, the text would appear to make clear that the new is not a reconfiguration or transformation of the first heaven and first earth. Rather, New Jerusalem appears to a different kind of new heaven and new earth. Its newness is not a new kind of the same thing, but a new thing hitherto unknown.

Perhaps the way forward for Pentecostals in attempting to navigate the interpretive waters of the Millennium and New Jerusalem in the Apocalypse is to refuse to force fit the one into the other or to force the Apocalypse into agreement with interpretive trends that seek to honour the current creation in a somewhat overstated way. Rather, perhaps the way forward is to allow both texts to have their say; in the first instance the radical redemption of creation in the Millennium and in the second instance the radically discontinuous New Jerusalem, a place and people in which there is no longer any need for mediation between God and humankind; God’s presence is unmediated. For God and the Lamb *is* (ἐστιν) the temple (21:22). “The one who overcomes will inherit these things and I will be to him God and he will be to me son” (Rev. 21:7).¹⁵ Significantly, this is the only place in the Johannine literature where this particular word for “son” (υἱός) is used with reference to the believer rather than the unique Son of God, Jesus. Such a shift in vocabulary is clearly not without significance, but indicates something of the extent of the unmediated access believers have to God in New Jerusalem, underscoring the fact that New Jerusalem is not only a place but a people; God’s place and God’s people.

6. Final Thoughts

If my reflections on this theme in the Book of Revelation are anywhere near the mark, then perhaps the following ideas might be raised as worthy of additional reflection and discernment by others within our tradition interested in such issues.

¹⁴ Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 540.

¹⁵ Thomas, *The Apocalypse*, 629-30.

First, for the Apocalypse, there is no question as to the exclusive and comprehensive role played by God as the creator of the heavens and earth and everything in them. This observation appears to be true even though Jesus may be spoken of as the “origin of God’s creation” and assigned a role alongside that of God in the act of creating, observations that are quite at home with Johannine thought.

Second, the fulfilment of the eschatological promises given by Jesus to “the one who overcomes,” in Jesus’ seven prophetic messages, is scattered across the Millennium and in the New Jerusalem. These narrative descriptions of fulfilment indicate that there is some degree of continuity between the first earth and first heaven, on the one hand, and the new heaven and new earth, on the other hand.

Third, there appears to be a transformation or healing of the first earth during the thousand-year reign of Jesus on earth. During this time, earth appears to fulfill its created purpose and seems to be an idyllic time which focuses on “being with” Jesus. Such a redemption of earth suggests that our own efforts at creation care are not in vain but are in keeping with God’s own ultimate intentions and actions.

Fourth, despite this transformation and redemption of the earth, Revelation seems to make clear that when the earth has served its purpose and function, it along with heaven will flee from the presence of God and cease to exist in the sense of its present reality.

Fifth, a new heaven and new earth of divine origins will come into existence which, though bearing some semblances of continuity with the first earth and first heaven, will be a new creation hitherto unknown, suitable for those who overcome to have access to the unmediated presence of God, a new order of things that are mind boggling and almost incomprehensible.

Perhaps it would be wise as Pentecostal believers to allow the Book of Revelation to have its say, on its own terms, with regard to our attempts to understand the end of all things, as we join our voices with that of John to say, “Amen, come Lord Jesus!”

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