

THE NEW CREATION AS A PEOPLE AND CITY IN REVELATION 21:1-22:5: AN ALTERNATIVE TO DESPAIR

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Rev. 21:1-22:5 portrays God making all things new, symbolizing newness via the image of a city called the New Jerusalem in which faithful servants dwell. Yet, many people find it difficult to be hopeful regarding the future. Before interpreting Revelation, it is essential to consider three misreadings of the future to appreciate the hope that throbs within Revelation's vision of New Creation.¹

I. THREE MISREADINGS OF THE FUTURE.

A. *Despair and Cynicism*

Tracy Chapman, an American blues-folk singer born in 1964,² and Douglas John Hall, a retired Canadian Lutheran systematic theologian, both posit despair, or the inability to dream anymore, as a basic symptom of the Western cultural crisis. In "If These Are the Things,"³ Chapman repeats the refrain four times, "If these are the things that dreams are made of, Why don't I dream anymore?" She croons, "we lose old memories but dreams are what life's worth living for. I wish I could dream once more." Seven times in the short song she asks, "Why don't I dream anymore?" Her lament "Why?"⁴ exposes the injustice in the world.

Why do the babies starve when there's enough food to feed the world?
Why when there are so many of us are there people still alone?
Why are the missiles called peace keepers when they're armed to kill?
Why is a woman still not safe when she's in her home?

I like Chapman because she asks prophetic questions, as in "Why?" yet she leaves this listener with an awareness of the despair and cynicism which

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pervades life according to Hall.⁵ Those plagued by cynicism and despair cannot envision a New Creation, because it does not make sense to “dream anymore.” A reading of New Creation from Revelation must be cognizant of the pervasive despair that currently prevails.

B. It's Entirely Up to Us: No New Creation from God

Chapman's lyrics illustrate a second obstacle to speaking of New Creation. In “Heaven's Here On Earth,” Chapman sings

Look around
Believe in what you see
The kingdom is at hand
The promised land is at your feet
We can and will become what we aspire to be.

Heaven's here on earth
In our faith in humankind
In our respect for what is earthly
In our unflinching belief in peace and love and understanding.⁶

Many dismiss the viability, or even possibility, of believing in a New Jerusalem descending from heaven. Their world view denies any action of God, especially in the future. However, many who deny a future New Creation from heaven, work, as Chapman does, to make this world a better place.

C. The Future's an Escape Hatch and Revelation Is a Political Map

A third misreading of New Creation stems from those who interpret Revelation from a dispensational premillennial approach. Dispensational premillennialists, such as Jerry B. Jenkins and Tim LeHaye in their *Left Behind* series of novels,⁷ await the catastrophic end of the world when God will intervene in the final era of history to deliver the saved and damn the unsaved. Then God will establish a throne on the site of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem and reign in a millennial kingdom. Based on the teachings of John Nelson Darby and popularized in the *Schofield Reference Bible*, dispensationalists regard the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948 as a sign of the end of times. Dispensational premillennialism links the current state of Israel with biblical Israel and expects Christians to support Israel.⁸ Also, because they anticipate an imminent end, dispensationalists lack a biblical motivation to make the world a better place because it is doomed to destruction. Dispensational premillennialists regard Revelation as a map with directions pointing to future events. Their understanding of the future is deterministic. Dispensational premillennialism⁹ does not provide a social hope and in many ways parallels the despair verbalized at times by Chapman.

II. A METHODOLOGY FOR READING REVELATION: IT'S GOD AND US: RHETORICAL ANALYSIS, IMAGINATION AND NEW CREATION

In discerning the world behind the text and imagining the futures which the text allows, I am deeply influenced by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's methodology of rhetorical analysis. She notes that "Revelation functions neither as an accurate transcript of divine information nor as a factual prediction of future eschatological events."¹⁰ Schüssler Fiorenza studies Revelation to discern how the text liberates or oppresses first and twenty-first century readers. She traces "the power relations in the text."¹¹ It is necessary to explore the world behind the text to discern John's use of intertextuality as he reshapes prior texts in light of his stressful situation during Domitian's reign (80-96 C.E.). But with Schüssler Fiorenza, it is also essential to ask, "what does a reading of Revelation do to someone who submits to its world of vision?"¹² In a similar vein, Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart reject reading Rev. 19-22 as a literal prediction of how the world ends. Instead they portray Rev. 21-22 as using imaginative language because "meaningfulness is not . . . limited to the category of factual or empirically verifiable statements, and it is clear that eschatological statements achieve their goal, if they do, by some other means than straightforward description or factual reference."¹³ Elsewhere Bauckham submits "that one of the functions of Revelation was to purge and to refurbish the Christian imagination. It tackles people's imaginative response to the world, which is at least as deep and influential as their intellectual convictions."¹⁴ Likewise, John Wesley cautioned readers of Revelation, "in treating of all these things a deep reverence is necessary; and so is a measure of spiritual wisdom; that we may neither understand them too literally and grossly, nor go too far from the natural force of the words."¹⁵ This paper treats Rev. 21 1-22:5 as a vision which invites readers to imagine God's New Creation as a city filled with people who are faithful to God.

III. THE HISTORICAL SITUATION BEHIND THE TEXT OF REVELATION

The churches of Asia Minor to whom John wrote experienced stress. Revelation is a document of resistance literature that calls the church to resist the Roman Empire politically, socially, economically and religiously.¹⁶ Revelation "is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus" (14.12; also, 13 1 Oc).

On the political level, contrary to many contemporary exegetes,¹⁷ I believe Christians experienced occasional localized persecution by Rome.¹⁸ For instance, John was a political prisoner on Patmos and shared with the church "in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance" (1:9). He mentions Antipas as a "witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives" (2.13). Other references to martyrdom exist (7-14, 12.11). The Roman Empire was a violent, dominant power whose throne John perceived to be in conflict with the throne of God, thus accounting for the forty-six uses of "throne" in the Apocalypse. Revelation is a political tale of two thrones competing for the allegiance of humanity and the

church. John employed political language such as “power,” “war,” and “worship its throne” in Rev. 13:1-10. He referred to Christians as a “kingdom” (Rev. 1:6; 5:10). As Steven Friesen noted, “John considered the churches to be an alternative sovereignty, a polity resisting the imperialism of his time. It was not a choice between religion or politics; it was a choice between legitimate and illicit authority.”¹⁹ Revelation is a political text.

John knew some Christians in Asia Minor were experiencing social stress due to the pressure to assimilate into Roman culture. John’s exile to Patmos meant the churches lost his presence as a leader. His banishment would have caused others to wonder how much they should resist Roman culture and Domitian. Would they too be ostracized to Patmos? John criticized the church in Laodicea, “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. . . you are lukewarm” (Rev 3 15-16). John accused the Laodiceans of being blind to their true conditions (Rev 3:17-19). Lukewarmness signals compromise with the dominant culture due to social stress. The churches were experiencing circumstances which motivated John to claim that he shared their “patient endurance” (Rev. 1:8). Social stress was present.

Evidence of economic stress emerges in Rev. 13: 16-17 where “no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name.” Rev. 18 is a judgment against Babylon/Rome and several of the judgments stem from Roman materialism (18:3,9). Rev. 18:11-13 is a luxurious shopping list of the former affluent empire which used slave labor to import ivory, and “articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble,” spices and other goods. Not only were Christians tempted to measure their lives in light of Roman wealth, but some probably also felt a sense of status deprivation due to the stress they experienced, because they did not fully participate in the Roman economy, as evidenced by John’s critique of those who ate meat that had been sacrificed to idols (2.14). Some at Laodicea claimed to be rich, but John judged them as “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (3 17). These texts only begin to hint at the economic pressures upon the churches in Asia Minor.

First-century readers of Revelation suffered religious stress in two ways. First, Roman imperial religion permeated all of life and was centered in the state and emperor. Institutions including the family, trade unions, cities, and churches were to support the state and honor the emperor. Using recent archaeological finds, Friesen has described Roman imperial cults in detail. Friesen documents the significance of the emperors Augustus and Domitian and notes that in the cities of Asia Minor “the worship of the emperors was becoming one of the most important characteristics of civic and municipal identity.”²⁰ Consequently, Christians, when they claimed that Roman gods did not exist, that these pagan deities were evil demons, or when they refused to acknowledge the emperor as divine, experienced religious conflict with their neighbors who were loyal to the state and emperor. As a monotheistic faith, which confessed Jesus as Lord and conqueror (5:5), Christianity was in conflict with Roman religion. A second source of religious stress emerged when John’s readers wondered if Roman rule and the tension it caused would ever end. Friesen has shown that “the logic of imperial cults allowed for no termination of the world. These institutions were in fact dedicated to the prolongation of the current world.”²¹ No

wonder that one Roman historian, Aemilius Sura, used the symbol of four world empires from Daniel 2 and Daniel 7 to legitimate Rome as the final enduring world kingdom.²² In contrast to these Roman claims of supremacy and endurance, Revelation defines God as the one who truly “is and who was and who is to come” (1:4; also 1:8b; 4:8c; 11:17). John depicts the emperor as one of “seven kings, of whom five have fallen, one is living, and the other has not come; and when he comes, he must remain only a little while” (17:8-9). Likewise, John contrasts God’s eternal nature with Babylon/Rome, which falls in judgment (18:1-24). But more convincing rhetoric must have been needed, because, in addition to the fourfold emphasis on God’s coming in Rev. 1 and 4 (1:4; 1:7; 1:8b; 4:8c), Jesus announces three times in the final chapter, “I am coming soon” and the final promise has the accent of “*Surely* I am coming soon” (22:7, 12, 20b). Amid the Roman claim to be an eternal dynasty, some of John’s readers must have experienced religious anxiety as they wondered if they really could believe that “the time is near” (1.3, 22; 10). Would God act and would the Lamb be victorious?

John’s vision of a New Creation in Rev. 21:1-22:5 addresses the political, social, economic and religious stress his readers endured during the final years of Domitian’s reign.

IV GOD’S PEOPLE IN GOD’S RENEWED PLACE: JOHN’S VISION OF NEW CREATION IN REV 21:1-22:5

John’s vision of New Creation in Rev. 21:22-5 consists of a faithful people in a city. Rev 21:1-8 introduces the vision. The section throbs with the theme of newness. *Kainos*, “new,” appears in 21:1, 2 and 5 as John envisions a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem, as a holy city. John drives home the emphasis on newness by defining God as the one “making all things new” (21:5b), which recalls God’s announcement, “I am about to do a new thing,” in Isa. 43:19. Within the New Jerusalem dwells a faithful people.

A. *New Creation as Faithful People*

Ten references to the faithful people appear in the vision of New Creation.²³ Rev 21:7 captures the intent of John’s description of the New Creation as a faithful people. It reads, “those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.” John employs variants of the verb *nikao*, “to conquer,” and the noun “conqueror” seventeen times throughout the Apocalypse. Each of the letters to the seven churches in Rev. 2-3 contains a “conquering promise”, e.g., “to everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7b). John links six of these conquering promises with a reward in Rev. 20-22.²⁴ Rev. 5:5, one of the key texts of Revelation, claims Christ “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered.” Because Christ already has conquered, throughout the book John anticipates that the saints can participate in the victory won by Christ. John salutes martyrs who “have conquered him (i.e., the antagonist of Rev. 12:9 and 20:2) by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their

testimony, for they loved not their lives even until death" (Rev. 12:11, also 15:2-3). The faithful are those who resisted assimilation with Roman culture and who did not worship or surrender to the temptations of the antagonists symbolized as dragon, ancient serpent, Devil, Satan, beasts or false prophets.²⁵ New Creation as the people of God involves conquest over sin and sinful social systems such as the imperialism, materialism and the religious syncretism of the Roman Empire. Victory brings adoption as God's children, or as Rev. 21.7b puts it, "and I will be their God and they will be my children."

Rev. 21:8 stands in antithetical parallelism to the portrait of the faithful painted in Rev. 21.3-7.²⁶ Rev. 21:8 is a literary dualism reflecting the moral dualism confronting John's readers. Other evidences of this literary and moral dualism are built within the Apocalypse. As mentioned earlier, the eternal God "who is and who was and who is to come" (1:8) contrasts with the "seven kings, of whom five have fallen, one is living, and the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain only a little while" (17:9-10). Christ as Lamb and Lion is opposed by an antagonist symbolized by the names of dragon, ancient serpent, Devil, Satan, and "the deceiver of the whole world" (12:9; 20:2). Likewise, the eternal "kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah" (11:15) contrasts with the limited authority of the beast who only "was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months" (13:5). Babylon, a synonym for Rome,²⁷ is the antithesis of the new Jerusalem (Rev. 18 and 21 1-22:5). Additional moral contrasts appear in Rev. 21.26-27 and 22.3. These texts establish a boundary maintenance between honor and shame, as well as purity versus uncleanness and things "accursed." These literary and moral contrasts distinguish the New Creation as a pure people.

As a reward for their fidelity, using synonymous parallelism John announces three times in Rev. 21.3, "God will dwell with them as their God." Not only will God "be with them," but God "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" (21:4).²⁸ Residing within Rev. 21:4 are allusions to Isa. 51 11, 65 19; 42.18 and 65 17.²⁹ Likewise, Rev. 21:6c promises water to the thirsty with an intertextual reference to Isa. 55:1 John, like Isa. 65:23-24, writes of an existence as in Eden before sin left its stains of crying, death and, mourning. This promise of a painless life encouraged John's churches amid their sufferings.

Final indications of New Creation as a people of God are the residents and servants of 22:3-5 who need no light of lamp or sun. The Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign forever and ever, in contrast to the darkness that descended on doomed Babylon (18:23).

Woven within the texture of John's vision of New Creation are pictures depicting New Creation as a people whom God rewarded for their fidelity amid conflict with the Roman Empire and the temptation to assimilate into their surrounding culture. The New Creation includes the people of God. But even in a vision, people need a place to dwell, and John provided such an abode via the city called the New Jerusalem.

B. New Creation as New Jerusalem

Rev. 21 1-22:5 contains John's vision New Creation as "the holy city, the new

Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Rev 21:2a).³⁰ After the introduction to the total vision in 21:1-2 and the definition of God dwelling with the faithful conquerors (21:3-7), language in vv. 9-10 sets up a contrast with Rev. 17-18.

Rev 17:1 reads, "then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the judgment of the great whore who is seated on many waters' "

Rev. 22:9 reads, "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' "

Also, in Rev 17 the Spirit transported John into a wilderness because the vision of the coming judgment of the harlot was so gruesome, and in Rev. 22:10 the Spirit carried John away to a great mountain because the vision of the holy city was so grand. The holy city contrasts with the city of Babylon/Rome portrayed as a harlot in Rev. 17-18³¹ continuing the literary and moral dualism intrinsic to the Apocalypse.

Seven specific features of New Creation as New Jerusalem need comment. First, John envisages New Creation as a city. Friesen terms this as the "biggest surprise of the book. The goal of history is neither a return to primeval paradise nor transport to the heavenly realism. Once the victory of God is complete. . . the center of space and time relocates itself. The throne of God and of the Lamb descends to humanity with the new Jerusalem."³² Whereas sin in a garden marred the original creation story in Genesis, God's New Creation is a city, an urban place. Second, on the gates of the city "are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites" and on the twelve foundations of the wall of the city "are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (Rev. 22:12, 14). John posits a continuity between Israel and the church. Third, the size of the city staggers even an apocalyptic imagination. It is 1,500 miles in length, width, and height (Rev 22.16). John Wesley took these measurements "figuratively."³³ Fourth, John utilizes symbols of wealth such as pure gold, and jewels such as jasper, sapphires, emeralds, and twelve pearls. Again, the wealth of the New Jerusalem contrasts with the loss of wealth in doomed Babylon whose "wealth has been laid waste" (Rev. 18:17). Gold and jewels are God-given resources. They are not evil. Humans are judged by how they use natural resources. Fifth, the jewels adorning the foundation of the city (Rev. 21:19-20) are the stones of the Zodiac but in reverse order John probably reversed their order as a literary and theological device designating that life in the holy city differs radically from astrological religions which looked to the stars and nature to guide life.³⁴ Sixth, John "saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (Rev. 21.22). Revelation continues the anti-temple traditions found in the gospels and Paul. The gospels report that destruction of the Jerusalem temple needed to occur before the return of the Son of man (Mk. 11:21-21, 13:1-2). Although the Jerusalem Temple plays a prominent role in Luke 1-2, according to Luke, Stephen was stoned because he spoke against the temple and announced that God does not dwell in houses made by human hands

(Ac. 6:13-14; 7:48). Paul spoke of the bodies of Christians as temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19). In the Gospel of John, Jesus did not limit worship to a sacred space in Jerusalem (4:21-24). Throughout Revelation John has proclaimed Jesus as the transcendent Lord of all nations (Rev. 1:7; 11:15). Here, he continues to proclaim a universal message by changing the Old Testament traditions, which imparted special significance to the temple in Jerusalem, a fact that should confound dispensational premillennialists. Finally, purity prevails in God's home for the victorious conquerors (21:26-27; 22:3). John's vision of New Creation includes the New Jerusalem, a city for the faithful conquerors.

IV WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THE VISION OF NEW CREATION IN REV 21:1-22:5 MAKE?

What does reading the vision of New Creation as a faithful people dwelling in God's city do for readers? How does this reading of Revelation differ from the despair and inability to visualize God at work in shaping a new future voiced by Tracy Chapman, and the determinism of dispensational premillennialism? Rev. 21:1-22:5 offers three contributions.

A. Live by Faith Rather than Fatalism

Recently I led a weekend seminar on Revelation for young adults. Amid the intense discussions and searchings, three persons kept asking, "Is this realistic? Can we really look forward to a better life?" An environmentalist continually voiced warnings regarding ecological disaster. Although they were Christians, their difficulty in envisioning a positive consummation of history rivaled the despair in Tracy Chapman's "Why?" and the secularism in her "Heaven's Here on Earth." Eventually I stated my confessional approach to reading Revelation's vision of New Creation. I basically believe that just as by faith I affirm God's role in creating and sustaining the world, likewise I trust that God will bring creation to a healing consummation. My belief is a faith assumption consistent with Scripture but unverifiable. In a similar, though more sophisticated vein, Douglas Hall explains his faith in a New Creation.

Trusting in the God of life, the faithful regard with eyes wide open the destructive capabilities of the powers of death and profess, despite them, that the end toward which creation moves is not ultimate catastrophe but consummation. .. With the one who brought the cosmos into being, *ex nihilo*, there is also the possibility—for there is the will—to bring it to its intended perfection. .. biblical religion. .. is at pains to divulge what God is doing in the world, and why, God in this tradition manifests an abiding commitment to this world, and this commitment would be questionable from the start if it were not understood as the determination to see the cosmos through to the "very good" omega that is already implicit in the "very good" alpha.³⁵

Recognizing that Revelation abounds in imaginative, and at times fantastic, images in the New Creation vision—such as God supplying light rather than the solar system—

need not detract from the truth conveyed by the images. Daring to speak of a New Creation is an act of faith itself. We can choose to live by faith rather than fatalism.

B. New Creation Involves a Pure People.

Lyrics of Charles Wesley's "Love Divine All Loves Excelling" parallel Revelation's emphasis on New Creation as a pure, and even holy, people.

Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit into every troubled breast;
Let us all in thee inherit, Let us find thy promised rest;
Take away our bent to sinning; Alpha and Omega be;
End of faith, as its beginning, Set our hearts at liberty.

Come, almighty to deliver, Let us all thy life receive;
Suddenly return, and never, Nevermore thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing, Serve thee as thy hosts above,
Pray, and praise thee without ceasing, Glory in thy perfect love.

Finish then, thy New Creation; Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation, Perfectly restored in thee;
Changed from glory into glory, Till with thee we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee, Lost in wonder, love and praise.³⁶

Wesley parallels Revelation's New Creation as a people by mentioning an inheritance just as Revelation 21 1-22:5 contains fulfillment of the conquering promises of Rev. 2-3. "Nevermore thy temples leave" corresponds to Rev 21 10-22:5 where the saints dwell in the presence of God who has become the temple. The people "pray, and praise thee without ceasing" as they "reign forever and ever" with God (Rev. 22:5). "Take away our bent to sinning" correlates with "those who conquer will inherit these things" (Rev. 21.7a).

Those who overcome and conquer in Revelation are those who choose to be faithful to Christ the Lamb and seek the kingdom of God finally symbolized as New Jerusalem in contrast to those who follow the beasts and the evil quartet (Rev 20:2; 12:9) and reside in Babylon/Rome. The moral struggle in Revelation is The Choice Between Two Cities, as Barbara Rossing aptly titles her analysis of John's political and economic critique of the Roman Empire.³⁷ Friesen offers a non-violent reading of Revelation, claiming "apocalyptic personhood includes the renunciation of force. The saints were challenged to be victorious, but human victory was redefined as nonaggression."³⁸ Amid his documentation of the violence and arrogance of the Roman imperial hegemony, Friesen affirms the Apocalypse as "an important witness to humanity's struggles for the establishment of a just community in the context of humanity's record of ubiquitous oppression."³⁹ Today Revelation's New Creation calls for a counter-cultural people who commit themselves to the Lamb and conquer through a lifestyle that distances themselves, as far as possible, from the military-industrial complex, from nationalism, from consumerism, and from the religious

syncretism which pervades modern life. For instance, during the Persian Gulf War it was common for evangelical congregations in the United States to have military tanks on the church parking lot on July 4 and veterans were encouraged to wear their military uniforms to worship services. If John were writing to Christians in the United States he would instruct them not to recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag of the United States, because Christians are citizens of the kingdom of God more than any nation state. Such behavior, which combines church and state, violates the New Creation. Contrary to such civil religion, John Carroll understands that

human fidelity to covenant, persevering commitment to the ways of God, active resistance to powerful systems that oppress the needy—these are part and parcel of the moral vision commended by John and kindred visionaries. This moral vision was counter-cultural in John's day, and it is no less so in ours. One lives now in the light of, and toward the future world God is fashioning. Apocalyptic texts like Revelation exhort readers to that kind of faithful living, even if it means facing great personal risk, and assure and comfort those who do encounter danger and adversity because of their religious commitment.⁴⁰

Present day readers of Revelation can learn from Tracy Chapman's critique of contemporary society because she identifies the evils which cause many to toss out their idealism and settle for a fatalistic cynicism. However, the Apocalypse exhorts us to be a people who continually hope, pray, and sing, in the words of Charles Wesley, "visit us with thy salvation, enter every trembling heart. till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love and praise."⁴¹

C. *New Creation Involves Seeking the City of God*

It should not be a surprise that Revelation depicts New Creation as a city for the people of God. The New Testament mind thought in communal rather than individualistic terms. And as Paul Duff states, "it is important to note that virtually all of our sources tell us that the first-century Christianity in western Asia (Asia Minor) was an urban phenomena."⁴² Reading the New Creation as a city implores Christians to value cities as people places. Granted, as Carroll recognizes, that in Rev. 21:1-22:5 the New Jerusalem "comes as God's gracious gift. But who knows what crucial part we may yet play agents and partners of God in that work of recreation?"⁴³ Remembering Schüssler Fiorenza's injunction to ask "what does a reading of Revelation *do* to someone who submits to its vision?"⁴⁴ Wesleyan readers will understand themselves as co-workers with God who are building more just and humane cities here on earth as they and God usher in the New Creation as an urban dwelling place for the people of God.

The Wesleyan tradition has a history of valuing the city, as I describe elsewhere.⁴⁵ William Booth, co-founder of The Salvation Army, wrote *In Darkest England and the Way Out*⁴⁶ as a vision for restructuring London. Booth diagnosed London's maladies. He proposed solutions that provided food, regenerated criminals, and developed rescue homes for women trapped in prostitution for economic reasons. Booth

advocated banks, lawyers, and marriage counseling for the poor Booth was a nineteenth-century pillar anchoring a tradition that calls for mission in the cities.

Amid the urban riots in the United States during the 1960s, James Earl Massey preached, "it is time for our churches to take the city into a more definite concern. . . The challenge of the city demands a concern on the part of Christians for the lost. The challenge also demands a greater cohesion of Christians and churches to give a unified witness to Christ. God wants to have more influence in the city than He now has."⁴⁷

Many cities in the United States are currently experiencing a renaissance after decades of decline. During this renewal, churches need an urban theology that values the city, and Revelation's vision of New Creation is one element in such a theology.⁴⁸ Chapman may sing that "the world is our temple, the world is our church, heaven's here on earth" but John speaks of New Creation as a new city for the faithful people of God. John's imaginative vision not only creates hope but it bestows an obligation upon us to work with God in building just cities while we await the final city symbolized as New Creation.

NOTES

1 Originally presented at the 2002 Oxford Institute for Methodist Studies, this paper dialogues with contemporary culture, systematic theology, and the biblical text.

2. Thomas Poole, "Tracy Chapman: Jedermann, Prophet, or Cultural Narrator?" *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomus* 6 (Spring 1992): 253-261 For more on Chapman, see Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, "Justified, Sanctified, and Redeemed," *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation*. ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997),149-151; Robin Taylor, "Tracy Chapman: Vulnerable, Compelling, Honest Singer Helps Us See Ourselves Broken and Beautiful," *National Catholic Reporter* 36 (August 11, 2000), 17; Danny Duncan Collum, "Right Voice at The Right Time," *Sojourners* 17 (October 1988): 41-43.

3. Tracy Chapman, "If These Are the Things," *Matters of the Heart*. New York: Elektra, 1992. 61215-2.

4. Tracy Chapman, "Why?" *Tracy Chapman*. New York: Elektra, 1988. 60774-2.

5. Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 172-177 Jürgen Moltmann wrote of "The Sin of Despair" in *Theology of Hope: On the Grounds and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*. Translated by James W. Leith (New York: Harper, 1967),22-25.

6. Tracy Chapman, "Heaven's Here On Earth," *New Beginnings*. New York: Elektra, 1995. 61850-2. Although her songs vibrate with calls for social justice, Chapman seems to operate out of a secular perspective. She says, "I don't consider myself a religious person. I find religion interesting. I don't belong to any particular religious domination [sic]. But they deal with the Big questions [of life and death] so it's of interest to me," Tracy Chapman, "About Religion," n.p. (cited 18 June 2002). Online: <http://www.about-tracy-chapman.net/links.htm>.

7. John Yeatts offers a comprehensive critique of the *Left Behind* series in "The Fictionalizing of Fundamentalist Eschatology: the Left Behind Series (Review Essay)," *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 24 (April 2001), 109-126. For a popular treatment of the dispensational imagination, and a summary of Darby's approach, consult "Apocalypse Now," *Time* (July 1, 2002), 40-48.

8. See "Christians Call for United Jerusalem," *New York Times* (18, April 1997), A13. Signers of the advertisement included Jerry Falwell, Ralph Reed, Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson

and E. V. Hill. Deanne Stillman reports, "recently, Pat Robertson remarked that George [W.] Bush is 'tom,' referring to his demand for Israel to withdraw troops from Palestinian refugee camps, an act that evangelical Christians regard as anti-Scripture," "Onward Christian Soldiers: In Anticipation of the Second Coming, Evangelicals Leap to Israel's Defense," *The Nation* 274 (June 2, 2002), 29.

For a critique of dispensationalism, see Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 19-26 and John E. Stanley, "The Old Testament Promise of a New Age," *The Spirit and the New Age*. eds. Alex R. G. Deasley and R. Larry Shelton (Anderson, IN: Warner, 1986), 532-535.

9. Evidently Charles Wesley was a premillennialist who expected "the great day of God's wrath about the year 1794," "Letter of Charles Wesley to an Unknown Correspondent," 25 April, 1754. The letter is an Appendix in Kenneth G. C. Newport, "Charles Wesley: Prophetic Interpreter," *Apocalypse and Millennium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 148. Newport examines the role of millennia thought in early Methodists including John Wesley, Thomas Coke, John Fletcher, Walter Churchey, George Bell, Joseph Sutcliffe, James Kershaw and Thomas Taylor, 91-115.

10. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 72.

11. *Ibid.*, 21.

12. *Ibid.*, 4. Schüssler Fiorenza's understanding of rhetorical analysis differs from the methodology of rhetorical criticism as employed by others because Schüssler Fiorenza combines her rhetorical analysis with a liberation and feminist hermeneutic. For a survey of other approaches to rhetorical criticism, G. A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

13. Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 107; also, see 100.

14. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 159.

15. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (reprint ed., London: Epworth, 1950), 1045.

16. John E. Stanley, "The Use of the Symbol of Four World Empires to Inspire Resistance to Or Acceptance of Hellenism in Daniel 2, Daniel 7, 4 Ezra 11-12, Revelation 13, and Antiquities of the Jews" (Ph.D. dissertation, Iliff School of Theology/University of Denver, 1986). Greg Carey perceives Revelation as "an example of resistance literature, written in part to encourage Christians to withstand the demands of life within the Roman Empire," *Elusive Apocalypse: Reading Authority in the Revelation to John* (Macon, GA: Mercer

17. Leonard Thompson's *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) offered a positive reading of Domitian as emperor arguing that John "and his audience did not live in a world of conflict, tension, and crisis," 95; also, 146, 166, 175, 188-189, 191. Thompson maintains "the conflict and crisis in the Book of Revelation between Christian commitment and the social order derive from John's perspective on Roman society rather than from significant hostilities in the social environment," 175. Thompson suggests Suetonius gave Domitian a bad press. Recent scholars who follow Thompson's approach include Paul B. Duff, *Who Rides the Beast? Prophetic Rivalry and the Rhetoric of Crisis in the Churches of the Apocalypse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). For Duff, Revelation's conflict is "social conflict within the church... tied up with social mobility and economic mobility," 14-15. Rossing stresses conflict stemming the threat of economic assimilation, *The Choice Between the Two Cities* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity, 1999), 152. Steven Friesen states "Thompson's reading of the broader social setting of Revelation in Roman Asia is the best

available. There is no need to posit persecution or a widespread crisis in society to explain the hostility of Revelation toward Roman rule," *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 145. According to Friesen, John calls the churches to resist "an imperial way of life," 151 Friesen terms Revelation "a narrative of resistance to Roman hegemony," 213. Yet Friesen concludes "it is now clear that political executions in the imperial center increased late in Domitian's reign, but there is no support for a systematic campaign against Christians in Rome or elsewhere," 143. So he does acknowledge some persecution.

18. Others who still affirm sporadic persecution by Roman authorities include Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, 50, 54. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 38; Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 31 Those who deny physical persecution just because they cannot document John's claims in Roman history are placing Roman history above biblical history. Domitian exiled John, and others including Favilla Domitilla and Dio Chrysostom, to Patmos as political prisoners. I am not convinced he is as benevolent an emperor as Thompson makes him out to be.

19. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse*, 181

20. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse*, 33-55, 124.

21. *Ibid.*, 130.

22. Joseph Ward Swain has the quotation from Aemilius Sura, "The Theory of the Four Monarchies Opposition History Under the Roman Empire," *Classical Philology* 35 (1940), 2.

23. Robert H. Gundry correctly emphasizes the New Jerusalem as people, but he errs in saying "John is not describing the eternal dwelling places of the saints; he is describing them, and them alone," "The New Jerusalem: People as Place, Not Place for People," *Novum Testamentum XXIX* (1987), 256. The New Creation includes both people and place, as will become clear. Likewise, Robert W. Wall contends, "Christian hope is centered in the prospect not of a heavenly place but of transformed human existence...the new Jerusalem is the Lamb's Bride, the community of overcomers," *Revelation NIBC* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 242.

24. Rev 2:7 and 22:2,14; 2:11 and 21:8; 2:26-28 and 22:16; 3:5 and 21:27 and 22:4,19; 3:12 and 22:2,22; 3:21 and 20:4. The promise in 2:17 does not have a later reward connection.

25. See Rev 12:9; 20:2 and 13:1-18 for names of the antagonists.

26. Citing five other contemporary interpreters who agree with her, Rossing interprets 21:7-8 not as predictions of judgment or salvation but as exhortations to repent and remain faithful, *The Choice Between Two Cities*, 156. I suspect John read the text differently than Rossing at 21:7-8.

27. See 1 Peter 5:13.

28. Rossing shows the intertextuality between "no more" in 21:4 and the "closing cadences of the Babylon vision, where Babylon itself is pronounced to be 'found no more'" (Rev 18:21-23), *The Choice Between Two Cities*, 145.

29. Jan Fekkes III offers a detailed study of John's use of Isaiah in *Isaiah and Prophetic Tradition in the Book of Revelation: Visionary Antecedents and Their Development* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994). Rossing errs when she insinuates that Fekkes treats Revelation as "primarily exegesis of Isaiah," *The Choice Between Cities*, 5. Fekkes deals with other prophetic traditions as his title suggests.

30. R. H. Charles finds two descriptions of two distinct cities. First, Rev 21:9-22:2, 14-15, 17 "presupposes the existence of the present earth" and replaces Rome "as the metropolis of the world." But Charles finds another Heavenly City (21:1-4; 22:3-5) which "does not appear till the first heaven and the first earth have vanished and their place been taken by the new heaven and the new earth," *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, Vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920), 151. Contemporary scholars are aware of these complexities in reading Rev 21:1-22:5. Contrary to Charles, who specialized in source criticism, I conclude John envisions the same city in 21:2 and 21:9-22:5 which comes after the defeat of sin and

Satan which characterized the first heaven and the first earth. Repetition of the vision formula in 21:2 and 21:9-10 exemplify John's use of repetition and apocalyptic ambiguity.

31. This is the thesis of Rossing. She states, "the call to come out of Babylon in Rev 18:4 is the rhetorical key to the entire Babylon vision. Readers must come out of Babylon in order to enter into God's New Jerusalem," *The Choice Between Two Cities*, 120.

32. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse*, 163.

33. Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 1044.

34. Charles offers this possibility, *Revelation of St. John*, Vol 2, 167-168.

35. Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith*, 357, 358, 359. Jürgen Moltmann makes similar affirmations in *The Coming of God*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 132, xi, 24. For a more extended developed of this "confessional" approach, see John E. Stanley, "Two Futures: Jürgen Moltmann's Eschatology and Revelation's Apocalyptic," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 53 (Fall, 1998): 37-48.

36. Charles Wesley, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," *Hymnal of the Church of God* (Anderson, IN: Warner, 1971), 145.

37. Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities*; see note 17 for publication data.

38. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse*, 189.

39. *Ibid.*, 4.

40. John Carroll, "Creation and Apocalypse," *God Who Creates: Essays in Honor of Sibley Towner*, eds. William P. Brown and S. Dean McBride Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 260. Carroll offers an ecological reading of Revelation, and concludes, "for all the wrenching conflict and destruction of the previous visions, John composes a culminating vision marked by healing and restoration," 255.

41. Charles Wesley, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling."

42. Duff, *Who Rides The Beast?*, 18. Likewise, Wayne Meeks documents that Pauline Christianity "was entirely urban. In that respect it stood on the growing edge of the Christian movement, for it was in the cities of the Roman Empire that Christianity, though born in the village culture of Palestine, had its great successes until well after the time of Constantine," *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 8.

43. Carroll, "Creation and Apocalypse," 260.

44. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, 4.

45. John E. Stanley, "A Theology of Urban Ministry Based on the Wesleyan Quadrilateral," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 38 (Spring 2003): 138-159.

46. William Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (London: The Salvation Army, 1890).

47. James Earl Massey, "The Church and the City," *Sermons to the Church on Evangelism and Witness* (Anderson, IN: Board of Church Extensions & Home Missions of the Church of God, n.d.), 54, 58.

48. For a positive view of cities in the United States, see Paul S. Grogan and Tony Proscio, *Comeback Cities: A New Blueprint for Urban Neighborhood Revival* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000). Lyle Schaller affirms urban churches and claims "one of the most significant trends in American Christianity during the last third of the twentieth century has been the rediscovery of the third person of the Holy Trinity. while they did not monopolize it, center-city churches led in the rediscovery of the Holy Spirit," *Center City Churches: The New Urban Frontier* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 177 OXFORD TEXT