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The President's

DESK

Tom Shepherd

Focus

As I write, I am near Utrecht, Netherlands, for an international symposium of the Netherlands Adventist Theological Society dealing with the subject of creation and evolution. Randy Younker and I are the speakers, he dealing with Old Testament and science areas, and I with creation in the books of Revelation, James, and 1 and 2 Peter. It is a joy to meet with fellow believers and share the profound biblical message of our creation heritage—made in the image of God, made of a combination of the dust of the earth and God's own breath of life to form a living, breathing individual whole.

I've been searching lately for ways to simplify my life. It's easy to become busy in the work I do—meetings in various locations (like the Netherlands), classes with my wonderful students, directing the Ph.D. in religion and Th.D. programs at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, local church duties. These are all very good things, all a joy to do, but they make life pretty busy, as you can guess.

Maybe your life is like that, too. Getting too busy? I discovered something about focus in my study of creation in the Book of Revelation. Perhaps it can help you, too.

The Book of Revelation is a series of seven visions—seven churches (Revelation 1–3), seven seals (4–8), seven trumpets (8–11), the Great Controversy vision (12–14), seven plagues (15–16), the fall of Babylon (17–19), and the New Jerusalem (19–22). Scholars disagree on exactly how many visions Revelation has and how they should be divided or organized. The source of the biggest disputes appears in chapters 17–20 regarding whether they represent one or two visions.

But I have become convinced for some time that these visions are shaped in a chiastic structure centering on the fourth vision, the Great Controversy depiction of the woman, dragon, two beasts, the three angels, and the return of Jesus Christ. Signs of this chiasm are numerous. The set of promises to the churches are all repeated in the vision of the New Jerusalem/new earth (first and last visions); the seven trumpets clearly parallel the seven plagues (third and fifth visions), the sanctuary scenes move inward before

the Great Controversy vision (fourth vision) and outward after it, and the first six visions contain 3+4 or 4+3 patterns which center on the Great Controversy vision (the last vision's number is not 7 but 12, which is 4x3).

A chiasm focuses attention on the middle term or, in this case, the middle set of stories. If this is true, we would expect in the Apocalypse to find the most important terms, the greatest theological issues, the focus, in the central vision. What we see in Revelation 12–14 is a great battle between good and evil. It begins with a woman clothed with the Sun and stars and standing on the Moon.

She is pregnant, about to give birth, but threatening her delivery is a huge red dragon waiting not to help her or care for the child, but rather to devour it once it is born! God snatches up the baby to His throne, but the dragon doesn't give up. He fights Michael and His angels and pursues the woman into the desert and then pursues her other children.

It sounds so harsh and threatening, but it only gets worse. In chapter 13, the two beasts force as many people as possible on Earth to worship an idol. With a glance heavenward at the beginning of Revelation 14 with the Lamb and 144,000 on Mount Zion, the rest of the chapter depicts a worldwide warning message embodied in the three angels' messages, followed by a depiction of the return of Christ in glory to bring about the harvest of the righteous and the harvest of the damned.

Does this amazing central story of Revelation say anything about creation? Indeed, it does. Its central focus on worship hinges on the two great reasons given throughout Scripture as to why we as people are to worship God. He is Creator and He is Redeemer. The first angel's message is a God-centered gospel: Fear God; glorify God; worship God. Singular focus. Nothing else—no one else—takes center stage or arrests the attention of those who take this message seriously. Counter to the evil beasts and dragon of Revelation 12–13 that call on people to worship an idol, the first angel tells us we must worship God. Worship is the central issue of the entire book. Who is your God? Whom will you worship? Revelation's central message is focused simply: Worship God, not the beast.

But this is not the only place where creation appears in the Apocalypse. Revelation 12 is built on Genesis 3, where a woman, a snake, and a child play a central role in each. The sea beast in Revelation 13 receives a deadly wound, another allusion to Genesis 3: 15 similar to the pattern in Revelation 12.

And creation runs through the rest of Revelation like a golden thread. In chapter 3, Jesus is called "the Beginning [origin, ruler, first cause] of the creation" (vs. 14)¹ in His message to Laodicea. The church of the Last Days is addressed from the perspective of the beginning of our world—a broad, Great Controversy, a cosmic sweep—as though to get their vision healed, the Laodiceans needed to get the perspective of their life from the beginning, from the perspective of creation, the first causes found in God.

In Revelation 4, the Creator is worshiped as the transcendent Maker of all the universe—separate from us, above us, beyond us. This is most clearly displayed in Revelation 4:9-11 where God is worshiped as the One who lives forever and ever, who created all things. His eternal nature is fundamental to His role as Creator. He is eternal, though the universe has a beginning. He is separate from the universe, standing above and beyond it. Worship involves the recognition of this difference and focuses our minds beyond ourselves to the Almighty.

Richard Bauckham, in his *Theology of the Book of Revelation*, indicates the eschatological implications of rejecting the Creator role of our God: "Reducing the real transcendence of the Creator reduces the

openness of his creation to the eschatologically new. A God who is not the transcendent origin of all things but a way of speaking of the immanent creative possibilities of the universe itself cannot be the ground of ultimate hope for the future of creation. Where faith in God the Creator wanes, so inevitably does hope for resurrection, let alone the new creation of all things. It is the God who is the Alpha who will also be the Omega."²

One more picture from Creation appears in two places in Revelation: the tree of life found in Revelation 2:7; 22:2, 14. The first of the seven churches, Ephesus, is promised the right to the tree of life, and this is fulfilled in Revelation 22:2, 14 with the description of this tree in the New Jerusalem. It is interesting that creation plays a role in the promise to the first church (Ephesus) and in the description of Jesus in the last church (Laodicea), suggesting that this beautiful teaching of creation encompasses and focuses our attention throughout all seven of the churches.

The doctrine of creation reminds us that we are not God. We have limits and need to stop, to pause, to take inventory. One of the big problems that has resulted from evolutionary theory, including theistic evolution, is the positivistic view, held by some, of what we can do and where we are headed. In this view, we in essence become God. The creation doctrine of the Bible teaches me otherwise: I am limited; I am a creature, not the Creator.

Now there is focus. Worship brings me balance, rest, recovery. "'Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water'" (Rev. 14:7). Focus.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this column are quoted from the *New King James Version* of the Bible.
2. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 50, 51.

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