
A Biblical Basis for Facing Environmental Catastrophe

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I'd like to focus my response to Barbara Rossing's address on what she's done to build a biblical basis for action. Barbara has given us one of the strongest biblical images that the world matters and that it's part of God's plan for our future. That's the vision of the New Jerusalem at the end of the Book of Revelation, which she describes in her book *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*.¹ At the end of time, when all will be resolved, we will not leave the earth. The New Jerusalem will descend to earth and God will take up residence in it to dwell with us. This is an earth-centered vision. It's rapture in reverse. Our earth becomes the locus of redemption and the place of God's eternal rule. "The whole message of the Bible," Barbara writes, "is that God loves the world so much that God comes to earth to dwell with us."²

I want to point out how radical this is, how opposite it is to our usual theology of going to heaven to live with God. How drastically it centers the earth in God's plan. How suddenly it makes the earth matter. If this were all Barbara had done for us, it would be enough.

We find this same earth-centered approach to the world in the Old Testament. Contrary to the "salvation history" approach of the twentieth century, which saw the world of nature as secondary to human experience, the world is central to Old Testament writers. Everywhere and always, Old Testament writers take their agricultural landscape as the center of the world, the material out of which they were created, the object of their vocation as farmers, the source of the seasons of their religious calendar, and the medium by which God appeared to them, primarily in the thunderstorm.

The Bible's God is not the God of classical theism, separate from creation, the transcendent God. Old Testament writers did not split the world into two worlds with its binaries: the material and the spiritual, the natural and the supernatural, the secular and the sacred. They described an imminent God, the God Marshall Sahlins describes in *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe: An Anthropology of Most of Humanity*.³ This God not only creates

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the world but animates it by indwelling it and inspiring it. In this enchanted universe, everything is full of God and motivated by God. Barbara herself talks about a world full of God's life and spirit in the New Testament, where animals have souls and the whole cosmos sings in praise.

We have in the Bible a worldview up to the challenge that Barbara describes, but it has been weakened by anthropocentric assumptions, and by classical theism that has divided the world between spirit and matter. These assumptions and this theism must be abandoned. The earth at the center must be retrieved and the God who inspires the world must be found again. It is that kind of a Kairos moment.

Some years ago, while designing a class on Religious Leadership for an Ecological Age with Clare Butterfield, then the director of Faith in Place, I, the biblical scholar, argued that we should begin with the environmental crisis and then bring the Bible to bear on it. Clare, the practitioner, proposed the opposite: we should begin with the Bible, because, if it valued the world as we said it did, we should be living by it whether we were facing a crisis or not. She was right, of course. But then, as the class went on, we learned something else about the power of the Bible. As we

1. Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

2. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, 148.

3. Marshall Sahlins, *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe: An Anthropology of Most of Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University

Press, 2022).

became overwhelmed by the size of the crisis and as we began to deal with the emotions of despair and helplessness, we discovered an unanticipated benefit in grounding our course in the sources of our faith. We found that biblical values and their vision for a flourishing world gave us the anchor and foundation we needed for not giving up. Biblical values gave us a reason for faithfulness even when things looked impossibly bleak. And Barbara's interpretation of the New Jerusalem in her book was one of those biblical anchors.

I'd like to close with a thought about hope and perseverance against all odds. These are the emotions we're left with after all the information Barbara has described. But there is something we can do. In order to have hope, we must be able to imagine what the future could look like. And Barbara offers us a way to do this at the end of her book. She asks us to name our city and then rephrase the vision of the New Jerusalem in terms of our own city's renewal: "I saw the holy city, God's new *Chicago*, coming down out of heaven..." What would our new city look like? How would it be the renewal of creation that God intends? What would it require of us? That's the question Barbara leaves us with.

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